

Original Paper

Language Learning Strategies Employed by Yemeni EFL
Learners in Developing Their Spoken English: A Case Study of
Aden University EFL Learners

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Abstract

Language learning is not a spoon-fed process in which learners get everything from their teachers. It is a student-centered process in which learners should play active roles and employ various learning strategies that help them enhance their target foreign language. For this reason, this study was designed to investigate the language learning strategies employed by the Yemeni EFL learners in developing their spoken English. Data were collected through a questionnaire that targeted 120 fourth-year EFL students of three faculties of Aden University. The results showed that the majority of the concerned students do not make a balance among their language learning strategies and they depend heavily on memory strategies. A correlation was found between students' spoken English proficiency and the learning strategies they use in developing their spoken English in the favor of the students who make use of various types of language learning strategies. As per these findings, this study recommends Yemeni EFL learners to employ various effective language learning strategies to enhance their spoken English and not to limit their spoken English development to memory strategies. It also recommends Yemeni EFL teachers to guide their students to the effective language learning strategies that help them enhance their English.

Keywords

Aden University, Yemeni EFL learners, language learning strategies, spoken English

1. Introduction

Language learning strategies play a crucial role in developing learners' language proficiency. It helps learners to self-learn and proceed in their language learning without depending heavily on their teachers.

Classroom learning is limited to a few hours per week and learners should continue learning and using their target language inside and outside classroom to develop their language proficiency. It is for this reason that research on learning strategies is growing up and scholars as well as teachers try to investigate what strategies their students use and they also motivate their students to employ various strategies in their learning. Due to such an importance language learning strategies play in language learning, this research was designed to investigate what strategies Aden University EFL learners use to develop their spoken English. It aimed at answering these two questions:

- What language learning strategies do Aden University EFL students employ in developing their spoken English?
- Is there any correlation between the language learning strategies employed by the students and their spoken communication proficiency?

2. Literature Review

Language learning strategies, according to Oxford (1990), are “steps taken by students to enhance their own learning” (p. 1). In other words, they are tools employed by learners for active and self-directed language learning which results in enhancing their language proficiency and building up their self-confidence. As classroom language learning is limited to a few hours per day or per week in some contexts, it is the responsibility of the learners to develop varied strategies that help them enhance their target language proficiency. To this end, Oxford argued how the various types of learning strategies are used to develop students’ language proficiency:

Metacognitive (“beyond cognitive”) strategies help learners to regulate their own cognition and to focus, plan, and evaluate their progress as they move towards communicative competence. Affective strategies develop the self-confidence and perseverance needed for learners to involve themselves actively in language learning, a requirement of attaining communicative competence. Social strategies provide increased interaction and more empathetic understanding, two qualities necessary to reach communicative competence. Certain cognitive strategies, such as analyzing, and particular memory strategies, like keyword technique, are highly useful for understanding and recalling new information - important functions in the process of becoming competent in using new language. Compensation strategies aid learners in overcoming knowledge gaps and continuing to communicate authentically; these strategies help communicative competence to blossom. (pp. 8-9)

It seems from the discussion above that language learning strategies employed by foreign language learners are keys towards their success in developing their language proficiency while their lack or inappropriate use of learning strategies affects their language acquisition. Oxford (1990, p. 10) also argued that many language students, owing to conditioning by culture and educational system, are passive and accustomed to spoon-fed learning where teachers have to do everything for them while they just follow what their teachers instruct to get grades and pass examinations. These students will not be able to develop good language proficiency unless they themselves struggle to change this behavior and

work hard in developing effective learning strategies. Classroom teaching, as said earlier, is limited to a few hours per week and hence there is a big role that should be played by the students themselves in their classroom learning and outside classroom to develop their foreign language proficiency. Several studies in this regard have shown that the students who employ various effective strategies in their learning of English usually achieve higher English proficiency than their counterparts who do not employ such strategies or use inappropriate strategies (Bremner, 1999; Gani, Fajrina, & Hanifa, 2015; Gharbavi & Mousavi, 2012; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Vann & Abraham, 1990). Since language learning strategies play a crucial role in language learning, this study was designed to investigate the language learning strategies employed by the Yemeni EFL learners in developing their spoken English with a reference to three rural faculties of education at Aden University.

3. Research Design

This study employed a quantitative descriptive approach in its data collection and analysis. It collected the data through a questionnaire that targeted 120 fourth-year EFL students of Aden University during the academic year 2017/2018. The questionnaire was assessed for its validity and reliability before its implementation in the field. It contains closed items which investigate how often the concerned students employ some of the most common strategies in developing their spoken English, in addition to an open question which provides the students with an opportunity to elaborate on any other language learning strategies they employ in developing their spoken English. The questionnaire was distributed approximately to all fourth-year EFL students of Radfan Faculty of Education, Al-Dhala Faculty of Education and Toor Al-Baha Faculty of Education, and the researcher could get back 120 valid response copies. The researcher has used SPSS, especially ANOVA test, to analyze the collected data.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

After computing the data collected through the questionnaire, it has been shown that the total valid responses to the questionnaire were 120. The results will be presented and discussed here as follows:

4.1 Students' self-evaluation of Their Spoken English

Table 1. Students' Self-evaluation of Their Performance in Spoken English Skills

Skill	Its evaluation					Means	Total Grade
	Excellent 5	Good 4	Satis-factory 3	Poor 2	Very Poor 1		
Listening	8	26	48	31	7	2.9750	<i>Satis-factory</i>
	6.7%	21.7%	40%	25.8%	5.8%		
Speaking	5	12	25	63	15	2.4083	<i>Poor</i>
	4.2%	10%	20.8%	52.5%	12.5%		

The above Table 1 revealed that the students' speaking skill is poor. There are only a few student 35% whose speaking skill is satisfactory, good or excellent while the rest of the students are poor and very poor in speaking skills. There are also 31.6% of the students who are poor and very poor in listening skills. These results reflect that the majority of the students have not yet achieved the required level of spoken English though they have learned English for several years and they are about to graduate from their B.A. & Ed. programs. Though there may be various factors that contributed to such a problem, this research paper will pay its focus to students' language learning strategies and its relation to students' acquisition of spoken English.

4.2 Students' Language Learning Strategies Employed in Developing Their Spoken English

4.2.1 Students' Affective Strategies

Table 2. Students' Strategy to Reduce Language Anxiety and Participate in Classroom

Strategy	Its frequency					Mean
	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	
During my B.A. & Ed. spoken English classes, I was trying to reduce my anxiety and participate in English even if I know that I might commit mistakes.	3 2.5%	22 18.3%	33 27.5%	51 42.5%	11 9.2%	2.6250

It can be seen from the above table that only 20.8% of the participants who were often and very often trying to reduce their language anxiety and participate whatever they have in mind even if they might commit mistakes while the majority of the participants 51.7% were rarely or never trying to do so. The rest of the participants (27.5%) were sometimes trying to reduce their anxiety and speak whatever they have in mind and some other times not. These results reveal that the majority of the concerned students were extrovert and anxious to participate in spoken classes and this for sure contributed to their low acquisition of spoken communication proficiency. Studies in this field such as MacIntyre's, (1994), Ur (1996), MacIntyre, Clement, Dornyei, and Noels (1998), and Mahdi (2014) showed that personality traits such as language anxiety and introversion affect students' willingness to communicate in a second or foreign language and interrupt students' development of their spoken communication proficiency.

When correlating students' use of this affective strategy to students' self-evaluation of their speaking skill, the results revealed a significant correlation in the favor of the students who often and very often try to reduce their anxiety and participate in spoken interaction. That is, the students who were often and very often trying to reduce their anxiety and speak English could overcome their affective difficulties and achieve higher speaking proficiency in comparison to their counterparts who were rarely or never trying to do so (p value < 0.05). These results go in line with the studies mentioned earlier and support Lightbown and Spada's (2001) argument that "extroverted learners who interact without inhibition in

their second language and find many opportunities to practice language skills will be the most successful learners” (p. 28). These results led the researcher to consider students’ lack of affective strategies as one of the factors that have contributed to students’ low acquisition of spoken communication proficiency.

Table 3. Students’ Affective Strategy Use in Relation to Speaking Skill Evaluation

During my B.A. & Ed. spoken English classes I was trying to reduce anxiety and participate in English whatever I have in mind even if I know that I might commit some mistakes.	N	Students’ self-evaluation of their speaking skill		P. value
Never	11	1.5455	(Very poor)	0.000
Rarely	51	1.9608	(Poor)	
Sometimes	33	2.3636	(Poor)	
Often	22	3.5909	(Good)	
Very often	3	5.0000	(Excellent)	
Total	120	2.4083	(Poor)	

4.2.2 Students’ Cognitive Strategies

a. Students’ use of ICTs

The students were also asked how they use the ICTs in developing their spoken skills since ICTs play a crucial role in language learning. The results as shown in the table below revealed that students’ use of ICTs in their spoken English learning is pretty low.

Table 4. Students’ Use of ICTs in Developing Spoken English

Strategy	Its frequency					Means
	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	
I employ ICTs and internet in learning and practicing spoken English.	0	0	9	46	65	1.3750
	0%	0%	7.5%	38.3%	54.2%	

It could be seen from the above Table 4 that the majority of the participants 54.2% never ever employed ICTs and internet in developing their spoken English skills while only 7.5% who sometimes use it. The rest of the participants rarely use it in their learning of spoken skills. The use of ICTs in EFL learning and teaching is usually low in the Yemeni context due to several reasons such as lack of ICT tools, poor internet service, power shortage, high internet cost, and students’ lack of ICT competence as shown in some previous studies (Ahmed, Qasem, & Pawar, 2020; Qasem, Ahmed, & Pawar, 2019).

Table 5. Students' ICTs Use in Comparison to Students' Self-evaluation of Their Spoken Skills

I employ ICTs and internet in learning and practicing spoken English.		Listening skill Evaluation	Speaking skill Evaluation
	N		
Never	65	2.6000 (Poor)	1.8769 (Poor)
Rarely	46	3.1957 (Satisfactory)	2.7826 (Satisfactory)
Sometimes	9	4.5556 (Excellent)	4.3333 (Excellent)
Total	120	2.9750 (Satisfactory)	2.4083 (Poor)
	P. value (Sig.)	0.000	0.000

The above Table 5 shows that those students who sometimes use ICTs and internet in their learning of spoken English skills rated their spoken skills higher than their counterparts who rarely or never use ICTs in developing their spoken English. For sure, ICTs play a crucial role in developing students' English generally and spoken English particularly and several studies in this regard have highlighted the effective role of the ICTs in developing students' communication proficiency (Ahmed, 2019; Fekih, 2015; Idayani & Sailun, 2017; Nasser, Bin-Hady, & Ahmed, 2020).

b. Students' self-practice of English

Table 6. Students' Self-practice of Spoken English

Strategy	Its frequency					Mean
	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	
I speak to myself in English	6 5%	4 3.3%	50 41.7%	60 50%	0	2.6333

The Table 6 above shows that half of the participants 50% rarely speak English to themselves as a way to practice spoken English while 41.7% of the participants sometimes use this strategy for developing their English and 8.3% who often and very often use it. It has also been noticed that those students who practice speaking to themselves in English rated their speaking skill higher than their counterparts who rarely practice it as shown in the Table 7 below.

Table 7. Student's Self-practice of Spoken English in Relation to Their Speaking Skill Evaluation

I speak to myself in English	Students' evaluation in speaking skill	N	Grade	Sig.
Rarely	1.8333	60	Poor	0.0000
Sometimes	2.7800	50	Satisfactory	
Often	4.2500	4	Excellent	
Very often	3.8333	6	Good	
Total	2.4083	120		

c. Students' listening to English movies, songs and dialogues and imitating it

Table 8. Students' Use of Movies, Songs and Dialogues to Develop Their English

Strategy	Its frequency					Mean
	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	
I watch/listen to English movies, songs and dialogues and attempt to imitate it.	4 3.3%	4 3.3%	24 20%	30 25%	58 48.3%	1.8833

The above Table 8 shows that approximately half of the students (48.3%) never watch/ listen to movies, songs or dialogues and attempt to imitate it as a way to develop their spoken English proficiency and 25% of the students rarely attempt to do so. On the other hand, only 6.6% who often and very often use this strategy to develop their spoken proficiency and 20% who sometimes use it. The results also revealed that the students who often and very often use this strategy have rated their spoken skills higher than those who rarely or never use it as shown in the Table 9 below.

Table 9. Students' Use of English Movies, Songs or Dialogues in Comparison to Their Self-evaluation of Their Listening and Speaking Skills

I watch/ listen to English speech, songs or dialogues and attempt to imitate it.	Students' listening skill evaluation	Students' speaking Skill Evaluation
	N	
Never	58	2.5862 (Poor)
Rarely	30	2.8000 (Satisfactory)
Sometimes	24	3.5833 (Good)
Often	4	4.5000 (Excellent)

Very often	4	4.7500 (Excellent)	4.7500 (Excellent)
Total	12	2.9750	2.4083
	p. value (sig.)	0.000	0.000

The students were also requested to mention if there are any other language learning strategies that they use to develop their spoken communication proficiency and many of them listed some more strategies which have been counted and classified based on their types and in relation to the students' assessment of their speaking skill as shown in the following Table 10 below.

4.2.3 Students' Social Strategies

Table 10. Students' Practice of Spoken English

Strategy	Its frequency					Mean
	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	
I practice speaking English with my classmates and friends.	0 0%	12 10%	30 25%	72 60%	6 5%	2.4000

The above Table 10 shows that only 10% of the participants who often practice spoken English with classmates and friends and 25% sometimes practice it while the majority of the participants 60% rarely practice speaking with friends and classmates and 5% never practice it at all. These results reveal that one of the most effective strategies for developing spoken communication proficiency in these rural areas is rarely employed by the concerned students. This is absolutely one of the major factors leading to students' graduation without achieving an adequate level of spoken English proficiency.

Table 11. Students' Practice of Spoken English and Their Self-evaluation of Spoken Skills – Comparison of Means

I practice speaking English with my classmates and friends	Students' listening skill evaluation	Students' speaking Skill Evaluation
N		
Never	6 2.8333 (Satisfactory)	1.1667 (Very poor)
Rarely	72 2.5694 (Poor)	1.9167 (Poor)
Sometimes	30 3.5000 (Good)	3.1333 (Satisfactory)

Often	12	4.1667	4.1667
		(Good)	(Good)
Total	120	2.9750	2.4083
	P. value (Sig.)	0.000	0.000

When comparing students' practice of spoken English to their self-evaluation of spoken skills, the results, as can be seen in the above table, reveal that the students who often or sometimes practice spoken English with friends and classmates have rated their spoken skills higher than their counterparts who rarely or never practice it. This indicates that students' lack of practicing spoken English is one of the factors responsible for their poor oral communication proficiency.

4.2.4 Students' Metastrategies

Table 12. Students' Metastrategy to Develop Spoken English

Strategy	Its frequency					Mean
	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	
I try to find as many ways as possible to interact orally in English.	1 .8%	10 8.3	28 23.3%	73 60.8%	8 6.7%	2.3583

It can be seen from the above Table 12 that the majority of the students rarely try to find opportunities for interaction in English to develop their spoken skills. In these rural areas, spoken English is almost of no use out of the classroom and if the student does not spend efforts to find opportunities to interact in English with classmates, teachers and friends who can speak English or with English speakers visiting the country, s/he will grow up unable to speak English regardless of the grammatical and lexical knowledge s/he has mastered. The table shows that only few students, approximately 32% of the participants, who often or sometimes try to get interaction opportunities. When comparing students' metastrategy of trying to get exposure opportunities to develop their spoken English to their self-evaluation of spoken skills, the results revealed that those students who often or sometimes try to get interaction opportunities could develop better spoken communication skills than their counterparts who rarely or never try to do so. (see the Table 13 below)

Table 13. Students' Metastrategy to Get Interaction Opportunities and Their Spoken Skills Self-evaluation – Comparison of Means

Student's attempt to get opportunities to interact orally in English.	N	Students' listening skill evaluation	Students' speaking Skill Evaluation
Never	8	2.7500 (Satisfactory)	1.3750 (Very poor)
Rarely	73	2.5890 (Poor)	1.9452 (Poor)
Sometimes	28	3.5357 (Good)	3.1786 (Satisfactory)
Often	10	4.2000 (Good)	4.2000 (Good)
Very often	1	5.0000 (Excellent)	5.0000 (Excellent)
Total	120	2.9750	2.4083
	P. value (Sig.)	0.000	0.000

4.2.5 Other Language Learning Strategies Used by the Fourth-year EFL Students in Developing Their Spoken English

Table 14. Other Language Learning Strategies Used by the Students to Develop Their Spoken Communication Proficiency

Language learning Strategy	Its frequency	Its frequency among students with excellent, good and satisfactory speaking skill	Its frequency among students with poor and very poor speaking skill
Consulting mobile/computer dictionaries to learn meaning and pronunciation of English words.	28		21
Consulting teachers or friends how words are pronounced.	17		13
Visiting places where I can meet native or second speakers of English.	3		0
Singing English lyrics to get my tongue used to English.	9		0
Memorizing more vocabulary.	24		48
Memorizing English formulaic expressions.	17		18

Imitating native speakers while speaking.	21	1
Applying new words I come across in conversation with my friends.	19	2
Watching / Listening to speakers of English on YouTube, cassettes or TVs.	34	5
Reading stories and narrating it to myself or friends.	22	9
Memorizing stories/ and narrating it to myself or classmates.	6	35

It can be noticed from the above table and the earlier ones that most of students with poor and very poor speaking skills depend heavily on memorizing and cognitive strategies to develop their language proficiency and rarely use some other effective strategies. On the other hand, the students with excellent, good and satisfactory speaking proficiency tend to make a balance among the various types of language learning strategies.

4.2.6 Students' Strategies to Pass Speaking Skill Examinations

The students were also requested what strategies they use when preparing themselves for speaking skill examinations and their responses showed that most of them depend on memorizing strategy rather than social interaction strategies as shown in the Table 15 below.

Table 15. Students' Strategies for Preparing Themselves for Speaking Examinations

Strategy	Frequency					Mean
	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	
Memorizing some ready-made dialogues and practicing it with my classmates. (Memory strategy)	0 0%	8 6.7%	58 48.3%	54 45%	0 0%	2.6167
Memorizing stories or some descriptions of some places and narrating it to self or classmates. (Memory strategy)	8 6.7%	58 48.3%	54 45%	0 0%	0 0%	3.6167
Spending time practicing spoken English to myself. (Cognitive Strategy)	5 4.2%	16 13.3%	50 41.7%	49 40.8%	0 0%	2.8083
Spending time practicing speaking in English with my classmates and friends. (Social strategy)	2 1.7%	14 11.7%	39 32.5%	61 50.8%	4 3.3%	2.5750

It could be seen from the above table that the majority of the participants depend heavily on memorization and cognitive strategies when preparing themselves for spoken English examinations

rather than depending on social interaction strategies. This may reflect the traditional way of learning, teaching and testing. It seems that with memorizing some descriptions or dialogues, the students can pass the examinations and this surely de-motivates and discourages students' efforts for practicing and developing their spoken English. It has also been noticed that the students who rated themselves as good and excellent in speaking skill usually employ social interaction strategies in their preparation for speaking examinations while those who are poor and very poor (the majority of the participants) depend heavily on memory strategies to pass the examinations.

4.2.7 Students' Compensating Strategies

Communication strategies play a crucial role in communication and in language learning as well. They do not only help learners to pass meaning in their communication but also help them to participate in classroom interaction and activities regardless of their linguistic background. Ahmed and Pawar (2018) argued for teaching these communication strategies to EFL students and train them to use it in their interaction and learning to help them improve their English. For this reason, some common compensatory communication strategies were provided to the concerned students and they were requested to what extent they use these strategies to compensate the linguistic deficiency while communicating or participating in classroom activities. Their responses are to be presented in the following Table 16.

Table 16. Students' Use of Compensatory Strategies

Strategy	Its frequency					Means
	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	
Paraphrasing.	0 0%	13 10.8%	32 26.7%	40 33.3%	35 29.2%	2.1917
Avoiding interaction and switching into mother tongue.	14 11.7%	34 28.3%	37 30.8%	35 29.2%	0 0%	3.2250
Body language.	0 0%	0 0%	19 15.8%	85 70.8%	16 13.3%	2.0250
Asking your interlocutors for help.	0 0%	1 .8%	32 16.7%	42 35%	45 37.5%	1.9083
Using time fillers.	0 0%	2 1.7%	27 22.5%	39 32.5%	52 43.3%	1.8250
Asking interlocutor for repetition or clarification.	0 0%	3 2.5%	35 29.2%	42 35%	40 34.2%	2.0083

The above Table 16 shows that the majority of the students were not well practicing the use of compensatory strategies whenever they have difficulties in conveying or receiving the meaning during

their classroom interactions. It shows that the most compensatory strategies used by the students were “avoiding interaction and switching into Arabic”. Only some students, less than one third of the participants, who often or sometimes use effective compensatory strategies for overcoming communication breakdowns such as paraphrasing, body language, asking interlocutor for repetition or clarification, asking interlocutor for help and using time fillers. Again, it has also been found through the SPSS software cross-tabulations that those students who often or sometimes use effective strategies to pass meaning and keep communication channel ongoing during their classroom activities and communication generally have rated their spoken skills higher and showed a lower level of difficulties in using communication strategies in their present communication in comparison to their counterparts who were rarely using effective communication strategies and most often avoiding English interaction or switching into Arabic. These results highlight the importance of the communication strategies not merely as an element of students’ spoken communication proficiency but also as an influencing factor in developing the spoken communication proficiency and EFL learning generally.

To summarize this section concerning students’ language learning strategies, the results presented in the tables of this section have shown that only some students who usually try to use varied effective language learning strategies to develop their spoken communication proficiency while the majority of the students rarely or never use most of the effective language learning strategies and they depend heavily on memorization strategies in their learning of English. It has also been noticed from the statistics that there is a specific number of students, approximately no more than one third of the sample and they belong to all the three faculties, who often use most or all of these strategies given in this section for developing their spoken communication proficiency while the rest of the students do not make a balance among these language learning strategies and they mainly depend on memory and cognitive strategies. Even when preparing themselves for speaking skill examinations, the majority of the participants employ memory strategies rather than social interaction strategies. This group of students who were found using various language learning strategies could achieve a higher proficiency in spoken English skills (speaking & listening) and could overcome their communication difficulties better in comparison to those students who rarely or never use such effective language learning strategies. These results support O’Malley and Chamot’s (1990) claim that high proficiency students usually employ various types of effective strategies in their learning of their target language while low proficiency students rarely employ few strategies or frequently use inappropriate strategies. Therefore, based on the results obtained from this section, I can conclude that students’ lack of effective language learning strategies is one of the factors that have contributed to the concerned students’ graduation with such communication difficulties or poor spoken communication proficiency. This practical conclusion has its root theoretically in Oxford’s (1990) and O’Malley and Chamot’s (1990) arguments concerning the effective role that language learning strategies play in developing learners’ language proficiency.

5. Conclusion

This study has investigated the language learning strategies employed by Aden University EFL learners in enhancing their spoken English. It revealed that only a few students make a balance among various language learning strategies while the majority depend heavily on memory strategies to develop their spoken English and to pass spoken English examinations. The results also showed a correlation between students' use of language learning strategies and their performance in spoken English in the favor of those students who make a balance among the various types of language learning strategies. As per these findings, this study highlights that language learning is not a spoon-fed process in which learners get everything from their teachers but it is a student-centered process in which learners should play active roles in their learning and employ various learning strategies that help them enhance their target language whether in classroom or outside classroom. It recommends Yemeni EFL learners to employ various effective language learning strategies to enhance their spoken English. It also recommends Yemeni EFL teachers to guide their students to effective language learning strategies that help them to develop their spoken English particularly and English generally.

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