Improving EFL Learners' Oral Proficiency Through Metacognitive Strategy Instruction

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Abstract

The present study adopts the perspective that metacognitive strategy instruction is bound to occur inside the classroom especially on oral tasks. Accordingly, the researchers investigated whether metacognitive strategy instruction prior to oral tasks was more successful than conventional ways in improving EFL learners' oral proficiency. To this end, 56 participants studying in a language school in Tehran were selected based on their performance on the Preliminary English Test, an interview, and the Strategy Inventory of Language Learning (SILL). The participants were assigned into control and experimental groups. The control group practiced oral tasks following a warm-up. The experimental group, however, practiced oral tasks after receiving metacognitive strategy instruction. A MANOVA comparison of the mean ratings of the two groups on the posttest interviews and the posttest SILL demonstrated a significant difference between the oral proficiency and metacognitive strategy use of the two groups. This result indicated that the experimental group outperformed the control group leading to the conclusion that instruction on metacognitive strategy use prior to oral tasks had a significantly higher impact on EFL learners' oral proficiency and metacognitive strategy use as compared to the only warm-up preceding oral tasks.

Keywords: language learning strategies, metacognitive strategies instruction, self-regulated learning, self-directed learning, oral proficiency

Introduction

There has been a great shift within the field of language learning and teaching over the last 30 years with greater emphasis being put on learners and learning rather than on teachers and teaching. The way learners process new information and the kinds of strategies they employ to understand, learn, or remember the information has been the primary concern of many

researchers (e.g., Cohen, 1998; Lam, 2009; Liu, 2004) dealing with the area of foreign language learning and teaching.

Language Learning Strategies

The role of learning strategies in second language acquisition has drawn great attention from language researchers and teachers. Teachers try to help learners develop the concept that learning is a lifetime process, and learners need to be equipped with "self-directed learning skills" (Oxford, 1990, p. 8) or "self-regulated learning skills" (Lam, 2009, p. 10). Thus, it could be argued that language learning itself is a lifelong task, and the strategies that are employed by language learners make this learning easier, more enjoyable, and, at the same time, effective.

Research into learning strategies started in the 1960s (Phothongsunan, 2006) and developments in cognitive psychology influenced much of the research done on language learning strategies (Williams & Burden, 1997). The first focus for learning strategy research was on identifying the characteristics of effective learners. Rubin (1975) studied the language learning strategies used by good language learners with the assumption that, once identified, such strategies could be imparted to less successful learners. Since then, the research interests on learners' language learning behaviors and the language they produce have been increasing substantially (Oxford, 1989; Oxford & Ehrman, 1995; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Wharton, 2000).

According to Oxford's (1990) definition, language learning strategies refer to the specific actions, behaviors, steps or techniques that students use to improve apprehending, internalizing, and using the second language. Cohen (1998) defines language learning and language use strategies as "those processes which are consciously selected by learners and which may result in action taken to enhance the learning or use of a second or foreign language, through the storage, retention, recall, and application of information about that language" (p. 4).

Bremner (1999) believes that second language proficiency is related to language learning strategies. All language learners use various types of language learning strategies to a certain level, but there are diversities in the frequency and choice of use among different learners. It appears that successful language learners have the ability to orchestrate and combine particular types of language learning strategies in effective ways according to

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their own learning needs. Thus, to facilitate learners' language learning and to promote learner autonomy, instructors can benefit from language learning strategies.

Metacognitive Strategies

Among the strategies found and recognized, the metacognitive-like processes are used everywhere but mostly subconsciously; especially, when it comes to the discussion of self-regulated learning. Being involved in metacognitive strategies is one of the most noticeable features of a gaining language learner. According to Lam (2009), metacognition is fixed in that learners' initial decisions derive from the relevant fact about their cognition through years of learning experience. Simultaneously, it is also based on the sense that it depends on learners' familiarity with the task, motivation, emotion, and so forth.

Individuals need to regulate their thoughts about the strategy they are using and adjust it based on the situation to which the strategy is being applied. The application of this notion to the study of foreign or second language learning has been very much initiated by Flavell (1979) who attempted to elaborate on the notion of metacognition within a theoretical framework; learner metacognition is defined and investigated by examining their personal knowledge, task knowledge, and strategy knowledge. The framework was then proposed and utilized by Wenden (1991) as well as Yang (1992) who investigated second language learners' metacognition or metacognitive knowledge. Their efforts were aimed at developing learner autonomy, independence, and self-regulation.

Metacognition helps people to perform cognitive tasks more effectively. Strategies for promoting metacognition include self-questioning (e.g., "What do I already know about this topic? How have I solved problems like this before?"), thinking aloud while performing a task, and making graphic representations (e.g., concept maps, flow charts, semantic webs) of one's thoughts and knowledge.

According to Chamot (as cited in Brown, 2006), explicit instruction on strategies is much more effective than simply asking the learners to use and combine whatever they know. Based on Chamot's account (as cited in Lessard-Clouston, 1997), teaching students how to learn on their own, find

the most effective way to learn, and raise their own interest and motivation in learning are very important issues that require special attention.

Oral Proficiency

A wide percentage of the world's language learners study English in order to develop proficiency in speaking; however, the ability to fluently speak a second or a foreign language is a very complex task. As Lazaraton (2001) believes, "for most people, the ability to speak a language is synonymous with knowing that language since speech is the most basic means of human communication" (p. 103). Chastain (1988) maintains that in the field of language teaching and learning, the purpose is the establishment of communication skills in language learners. In other words, the general goal of language learning is fluent and accurate use of the target language (Ellis, 2003).

According to Shumin (2002, p. 204), "Learning to speak a foreign language requires more than knowing grammatical and semantic roles". Learners should also, Shumin continues, "acquire the knowledge of how native speakers use the language in the context of structured interpersonal exchange in which many factors interact. Therefore, it is difficult for EFL learners, especially adults, to speak the target language fluently and appropriately" (p. 204).

Brown (2006) argues that speakers should first anticipate and then produce the expected patterns of any given discourse situation. They should also manage discrete elements such as turn-taking, refreshing, providing feedback, or repaying attention to the success of the interaction and adjusting components of speech such as vocabulary, rate of speech, and complexity of grammar structures to maximize listener comprehension and involvement (Ellis, 2003; Hedge, 2000).

Speaking proficiency is a part of language proficiency which can be developed through using learning strategies. Since fluency and accuracy are two essential factors in speaking, the choice of teaching strategy helps language learners become competent speakers. In this study the researchers intended to analyze the effect of metacognitive strategy instruction on learners' oral proficiency.

Based on the issues discussed above, this study was designed to answer whether instruction on metacognitive strategies lead to the improvement of Iranian EFL learners' oral proficiency and greater use of learning strategies.

Method

Participants

The participants of this study were 56 (32 males and 24 females) intermediate adult Iranian EFL learners with no age restriction who were to take conversation courses in two different classes at a language school in Tehran. These students had already passed the language school's placement tests and were assigned to sit at the same level. Furthermore, as the researchers did not have the luxury of random selection and had to work with intact groups, they had to conduct the experiment with the participants available.

To make sure, however, that both groups were homogeneous in terms of the two attributes under study (oral proficiency and metacognitive strategy use), the researchers conducted an oral interview and a pertinent questionnaire among the 56 participants and ran certain statistical procedures (described in the results section) on the mean scores of both groups prior to the treatment thus demonstrating that they were homogeneous.

Instrumentation

Three different instruments were used in this study. First, to have a homogenous group of learners in terms of their oral proficiency, the researchers conducted the speaking section of a sample PET among the 56 participants. These interviews were transcribed and rated by two raters using the General Mark Scheme speaking band descriptors.

Second, for the exploration of the participants' metacognitive strategy use, the Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory of Language Learning (SILL) for speakers of other languages learning English was used which is a language learning strategy instrument that has been extensively field-tested for

reliability (ranging from 0.85 to 0.96 within a sample of 1200 university students) and validated in multiple ways (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995). It has been used in studies that correlated strategy use with variables such as learning style, gender, and proficiency level (Oxford, 1998; Oxford & Ehrman, 1995; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989).

The questionnaire consists of 50 close-ended Likert-type questions ranging from one to five in six parts based on Oxford's classification of learning strategies, that is, memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies. In this study, the participants only answered the questions which were related to metacognitive strategies, and were asked to indicate their use of metacognitive strategies on a five-point scale, that is: Never: 1; Seldom: 2; Sometimes: 3; Usually: 4; and Always: 5. Since an interval scale was necessary for identifying the relationship between variables, numerical values were given to each option.

The questionnaire used in this study was translated into the learners' mother tongue (Farsi) to ascertain its comprehensibility by the participants of the study. The Farsi version was reviewed by two experts a priori and then administered to 20 learners whose language proficiency was identical to the participants of this study. They were asked to give their comments and pose questions on its clarity and workability (according to the criteria discussed by Gillham, 2002). Based upon the comments of the two experts and the respondents' answers and feedback, the researchers modified the Farsi version of the SILL and computed its reliability (r = 0.87) after administering it to 30 learners who were studying at the same language school with the same level of language proficiency. The SILL was used both at the outset and at the end of the instruction period.

Finally, another PET speaking test was used as the third instrument after the treatment. Again, the interviews were transcribed and rated by the same two raters whose inter-rater reliability had been established.

Procedure

Participant Selection

As described above, the researchers only had 56 participants at their disposal and so they conducted the two oral interviews and SILL described

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above making sure that the two groups of 28 bore no significant difference with one another concerning these two attributes.

Treatment

The participants in both groups underwent a two-month instruction period three times a week (an overall of 24 sessions) with each session lasting for two hours. The learners in both experimental and control groups practiced oral production tasks such as conversations, discussions, role plays, lectures, and surveys done individually, in pairs or in groups. Topics for the class activities were selected from daily life subjects such as *meeting new people, the effect of modern technology on our lives, the outcome of poverty, the movie industry, how to reduce pollution,* and *ways to prevent crimes.*

The difference between the two groups, however, was that those in the control group were not provided with any kind of explanation on the type of the strategy they should use when performing the tasks. They were given a warm-up on the topic of the class and were spot checked after task completion.

The seven metacognitive strategies selected from among Oxford's (1990) classification for the experimental group included:

1. Paying attention
2. Organizing
3. Setting goals and objectives
4. Identifying the purpose of a language task (purposeful listening, reading, speaking, and writing)
5. Planning for the language task
6. Self-monitoring
7. Self-evaluating

In the experimental group, each of the strategies was taught every session of the course before a speaking task in the following manner:

Step 1: The target strategy was described and explained, sometimes in the mother tongue, and modeled and exemplified by the teacher (one of the researchers).

Step 2: Additional examples were elicited from students based on their own learning experiences.

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Step 3: There was a small-group/whole-class discussion on the rationale behind the use of each of the strategies. Also, the participants were asked to make judgments upon the effectiveness of the chosen strategies.

Step 4: The students were encouraged to experiment the covered strategies.

Step 5: Strategies were integrated into everyday speaking class tasks, especially into discussions, role plays, and surveys which included oral production.

Step 6: Again after applying the strategy to speaking tasks, there was a small-group/whole-class discussion on the practiced strategies. The students were strongly encouraged to provide some feedback on what they thought and how they felt when applying the strategies.

Posttest

At the end of the course, the participants were interviewed and asked to answer the SILL. The purpose was to measure their oral proficiency and strategy use, respectively. The data were collected and analyzed through the pertinent statistical procedures.

Results

Selecting the Participants

At the onset of the study, the PET speaking section was administered to the participants of the study in the two groups to examine their homogeneity. Table 1 below shows the descriptive statistics of this administration.

Table 1 – Descriptive statistics of the two groups' scores on the oral interview

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error of Measurement	Skewness ratio
Experimental	28	5.45	1.10	.21	-.62
Control	28	5.19	1.52	.28	.31

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As discussed earlier, the interviews were scored by two raters. To make sure that both raters enjoyed inter-rater consistency, the researchers conducted a correlation between the scores given by the two raters. As the two sets of scores enjoyed normality of distribution (with the skewness ratios of both falling within the acceptable range of ±1.96), running a Pearson correlation test was legitimized. Table 2 below shows that the correlation between the two sets of scores was significant (r = 0.88 at the 0.01 level, two-tailed).

Table 2 – Inter-rater consistency of the two raters scoring the oral interviews

		Rater 2
	Pearson Correlation	.880**
Rater 1	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	28
**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).		

The next step was to make sure that the two groups bore no significant difference in terms of their oral proficiency before the treatment. In order to establish this homogeneity, the researchers ran an independent samples *t*-test on the mean scores of the two groups (which – as shown above – enjoyed normality of distribution).

Table 3 – Independent samples *t*-test on the means of the two groups in the oral interview

	Levene's test for equality of variances		*t*-test for Equality of Means			
	F	Sig.	*t*	df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Equal variances assumed	2.40	.12	.72	54	.47	.25

As Table 3 indicates, with the *F* value of 2.40 at the significance level of 0.12 being greater than 0.05, the variances between the two groups were not significantly different. Therefore, the results of the *t*-test with the assumption of homogeneity of the variances are reported here. With the *t* = 0.72, *p* = 0.47 > 0.05, the researchers could rest assured that the two experimental and control groups manifested no significant difference in their oral proficiency prior to the treatment.

The next step was to assure that the participants in both groups were also homogeneous in terms of their metacognitive strategy use prior to the treatment; thence, the SILL was administered. Table 4 below displays the descriptive statistics of this administration.

Table 4 – Descriptive statistics of the SILL used for homogenization

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error of Measurement	Skewness Ratio
Experimental	28	145.71	27.54	5.20	.50
Control	28	143.21	24.19	4.57	.473

With the skewness ratios of both groups falling within the acceptable range (0.50 and 0.47), running a *t*-test was legitimized. As is shown in Table 5 below, the two groups turned out to have homogeneous variances, *F* = 0.27, *p* = 0.87 (two-tailed) being smaller than 0.05. Therefore, with equal variances assumed, the *t*-test results indicated that there was no significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups on the SILL, *t* = 0.36, *p* = 0.72 > 0.05; therefore, the two groups belonged to the same population in terms of their metacognitive strategy use.

Table 5 – Independent samples *t*-test on the SILL

	Levene's test for equality of variances		*t*-test for Equality of Means			
	F	Sig.	*t*	df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Equal variances assumed	.27	.87	.36	54	.72	2.5

Posttest

Once the treatment was over, the researchers conducted the posttest oral interview and the SILL once again. The descriptive statistics of these two tests together with the administrations at the outset stage are presented in one table below for easier reference.

Table 6 – Descriptive statistics of the oral interview and the SILL before and after the treatment

Groups	N	Mean	Std Deviation	Skewness Ratio

Interview: Pre
  Control
  Experimental
  Total
	28
	28
	56
		5.20
		5.45
		5.33
			1.50
			1.10
			1.31
				.31
				-.62

Interview: Post
  Control
  Experimental
  Total
	28
	28
	56
		5.16
		6.65
		5.91
			1.54
			1.18
			1.55
				-.24
				-.23

SILL: Pre
  Control
  Experimental
  Total
	28
	28
	56
		145.71
		143.21
		144.46
			27.54
			24.19
			25.72
				.47
				.50

SILL: Post
  Control
  Experimental
  Total
	28
	28
	56
		142.85
		216.07
		179.46
			24.62
			24.84
			24.33
				.59
				-.14

Previous calculations proved that the two groups bore no significant difference in terms of oral proficiency and strategy use prior to the treatment. Nevertheless, there was a difference between the oral proficiency and strategy use of both groups at the posttest level with the experimental group outperforming the control group in both factors.

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Responding to the Research Question

In order to be able to answer the research question proposed in this study, the researchers had to compare the performance of the participants in the control and experimental groups on the interviews and SILL. For this purpose, a test of Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was run between the performances of both of the groups on the interviews and the strategy questionnaire. This was of course made possible with all the sets of scores enjoying normality of distribution as displayed in Table 7 above.

To begin with, Table 7 shows the within-subjects factors which include the dependent variables; that is, the learners' oral proficiency and strategy use.

Table 7 – Within-subjects factors

Factor 1	Dependent Variable
1 2 3 4	Interview. Pre Interview. Post Strategy. Post Strategy. Pre

Furthermore, the between-subjects factors are shown in Table 8 below.

Table 8 – Between-subjects factors

	Value Label	N
Groups 1.00 2.00	Control Experimental	28 28

It was necessary to check for the homogeneity of intercorrelations to see if for each of the levels of the between-subject variable (i.e., type of treatment) the pattern of intercorrelation among the levels of within-subjects variables (i.e., oral proficiency and strategy use) were the same.

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To test this assumption, Box's M statistic with the more conservative alpha level of 0.001 was used. In other words, Box's M statistic tested the null hypothesis that the observed covariance matrices of the dependent variables were equal across groups. Table 9 displays the result and indicates that this assumption was met ($p = 0.023 > 0.001$).

Table 9 – Box's test of equality of covariance matrices

Box's M	22.517
F	2.071
df1	10
df2	13941.036
Sig.	.023

Table 10 below demonstrates the Multivariate test.

Table 10 – Multivariate tests

Effect	Value	*F*	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Factor 1				
Pillai's Trace	.98	1161.37	.000	.985
Wilks' Lambada	.15	1161.37	.000	.985
Hotelling's Trace	67.00	1161.37	.000	.985
Roy's Largest Root	67.00	1161.37	.000	.985
Factor 1* Groups				
Pillai's Trace	.788	64.489	.000	.788
Wilks' Lambda	.212	64.489	.000	.788
Hotelling's Trace	3.720	64.489	.000	.788
Roy's Largest Root	3.720	64.489	.000	.788

According to Table 10 above, the result of the Pillai's Trace Test specified that $F = 64.489$ and $p < 0.001$; it could thus be concluded that the treatment

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was effective between the groups and there was a statistically significant difference between the experimental and control groups. Moreover, with the partial Eta square coming out to be 0.79, the treatment accounted for 79% of the overall variance in the scores.

Table 11 below demonstrates the test of between-subjects effects as part of the MANOVA output. As illustrated in Table 11 below, the two groups turned out to have a statistically significant difference in the interview posttest, $F_{(1,54)}$ = 16.25 and p = 0.0005 < 0.05. The effect size, using Eta squared was 0.23, indicating a relatively large effect size, which means that the oral proficiency by itself accounted for 23% of the overall variance.

Furthermore, Table 11 specifies that there is a statistically significant difference in both experimental and control groups in the SILL posttest: $F_{(1,54)}$ = 122.65 and p = 0.0005 < 0.05. The effect size, again using Eta squared was 0.694, indicating a large effect size, which means that metacognitive strategy instruction by itself accounted for 69% of the overall variance.

Table 11 – Tests of between-subjects effects

Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Sq.
Corrected Model						
Interview .Pre	.875	1	.875	.499	.48	.009
Interview Post	30.75	1	30.75	16.25	.000	.231
SILL Post	75044.6	1	75044.64	122.6	.000	.694
SILL Pre	87.5	1	87.5	.130	.720	.002
Intercept						
Interview Pre	1591.11	1	1591.11	907.9	.000	.944
Interview Post	1956.45	1	1956.45	1034	.000	.950
SILL Post	803616.1	1	1803616.1	2947.8	.000	.982
SILL Pre	168716.1	1	1168716.1	1738.8	.000	.970
Groups						
Interview Pre	.875	1	.875	.499	.483	.009
Interview Post	30.75	1	30.75	16.254	.000	.231
SILL Post	75044.64	1	75044.64	122.65	.000	.694
SILL Pre	87.5	1	87.500	.130	.720	.002

Error Interview Pre Interview Post SILL Post SILL Pre	94.64 102.17 33039.29 36296.43	5 4 5 4 5 4 5 4	1.75 1.89 611.84 672.16	
Total Interview Pre Interview Post SILL Post SILL Pre	1686.63 2089.38 911700.0 205100.0	5 6 5 6 5 6 5 6		
Corrected Total Interview Pre Interview Post SILL Pre SILL Post	95.51 132.93 108083.93 36383.93	5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5		

However, in order to specifically locate the differences and determine which of the two dependent variables was more influenced, pairwise comparison was carried out. Table 12 demonstrates this comparison between the control and experimental groups' oral proficiency and learning strategy use.

Table 12 – Pair-wise comparisons of control and experimental groups

Dependent Variable	(I) Groups	(J) Groups	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig. a	95% Confidence Interval for Difference	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Rater.pre	Control	Experimental	-.250	.354	.483	-.959	.459
	Experimental	Control	.250	.354	.483	-.459	.959
Rater.post	Control	Experimental	-1.482*	.368	.000	-2.219	-.745
	Experimental	Control	1.482*	.368	.000	.745	2.219
Stategy.post	Control	Experimental	-73.214*	6.611	.000	-86.468	-59.960
	Experimental	Control	73.214*	6.611	.000	59.960	86.468
Strategy.pre	Control	Experimental	2.500	6.929	.720	-11.392	16.392
	Experimental	Control	-2.500	6.929	.720	-16.392	11.392

Based on estimated marginal means

* The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

a Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Least Significant Difference (equivalent to no adjustments).

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Table 12 demonstrates that there was no significant difference between the control and experimental groups prior to the treatment on their oral proficiency ($p = 0.48 > 0.05$) and their learning strategy use ($p = 0.72 > 0.05$). Bearing no significant difference at the onset, the two groups demonstrated a significant difference after the treatment on both oral proficiency and learning strategy use ($p = 0.0005$).
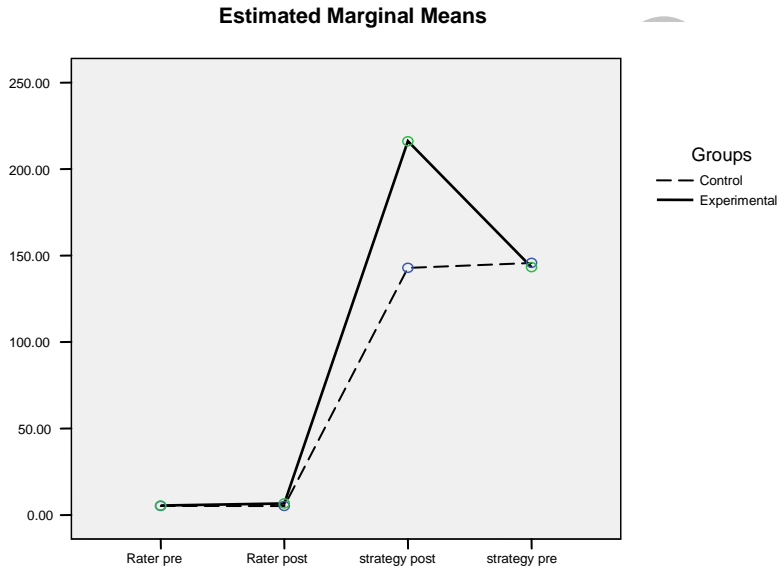

Figure 1 – Mean difference between the control and experimental groups on the tests before and after the treatment

Figure 1 illustrates the finding explained above plus the fact that the participants in the experimental group gained a higher mean on the SILL posttest compared to that of the interview posttest; this fact thus demonstrates that the treatment of metacognitive strategy instruction indeed influenced the EFL learners' learning strategy use to a greater extent compared to the oral proficiency.

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Discussion and Conclusion

The present study recommends the use of metacognitive strategy instruction in EFL speaking classes. The instruction is an interactive process through which the teacher can negotiate the most effective way of performing a task with the students. The instruction helps the learners develop an autonomous learning, promote their oral proficiency, and encounter difficult or unknown tasks. As Lam (2009) argues, the instruction helps the learners develop an autonomous learning, promote their oral proficiency, and encounter difficult or unknown tasks.

Additionally, the result of the present study shows that the inclusion of metacognitive strategy instruction in syllabus can be an integral program in EFL courses. One reason for this inclusion could be the fact that nowadays, there is an urgent need to implement speaking English in both high schools and universities in many educational settings.

One of the difficulties of EFL learners lies in planning what they are supposed to talk about. According to the results of this study, teaching metacognitive strategies by offering different topics and working on them through using these strategies can provide the needed basis for speaking. Implementing this instruction in classes can solve one of the deficiencies of speaking classes; that is, lack of interaction, which results in poor communicative skills.

Students can benefit from the strategy instruction prior to the commencement of practice on speaking the result of which can be improvement of their oral proficiency. As Oxford (1990) maintains, strategies "are important for language learning because they are tools for active, self-directed involvement, which is essential for developing communicative competence" (p. 1).

Training these strategies should be the goal of any language teaching center as language learning is a dynamic process which necessitates the training of autonomous learners who can manage their own learning. This instruction will require learners to think more deeply, plan what they are going to say, and evaluate themselves, all leading to expanded oral proficiency. Being aware of the strategies language learners use, as O'Malley and Chamot (as cited in Lessard-Clouston, 1997) argue, helps learners become good language learners who are able to complete learning tasks successfully (Vann & Abraham, 1990).

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Another advantage of using metacognitive instruction is making the students aware of these strategies since such strategies involve conscious thoughts and actions that learners take in order to achieve a learning goal. Students should have metacognitive knowledge about their own thinking and actions which can only be achieved through strategy instruction. In other words, language instructors and learners should understand both language learning strategies and the relationships between language learning strategies and speaking proficiency. They need to confront the importance of language learning strategies in improving oral proficiency. Moreover, to make language instruction more effective, language instructors should focus on teaching the language as well as the appropriate strategies helpful in language learning.

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