

Analyzing Learning Strategies of Top-Performing Students in English Speaking Classes at Junior High School in Indonesia

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Abstract

This research aimed to investigate learning strategies used by Junior High school to enhance English speaking skill, with a particular focus on identifying the dominant strategy. To achieve this, a descriptive qualitative method was used to examine interaction patterns within the classroom. The participants were comprised of 5 at VIII Grade Junior High School students who achieved the highest scores and willingly provided essential data to address the research questions. Data were collected through multiple sources, including transcribed interviews and observation. The results showed that 1) Students improved their accents by rehearsing and mimicking speech sounds, listening to native speakers, engaging with music, watching English flicks, consulting Google Translate, reading English books, singing English songs, swapping written notes, as well as requesting for opportunities to converse with teacher and peers in English. 2) Students frequently asked for guidance from peers on proper sentence construction, practiced speaking regularly, learnt from English movies, and occasionally referenced a dictionary. These observations suggested a dominant use of cognitive learning strategy, characterized by repetition, summarization, and contextual imagery, and driven by students' personal preferences or available resources. Meanwhile, Socio-Affective strategy, including interaction with others to aid in learning, ranked second, as students actively collaborated with peers. This research could potentially assist teacher in enhancing student speaking skill by gaining insight into learning behaviors and preferences, facilitating the selection of appropriate teaching strategies.

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INTRODUCTION

Speaking, as a productive verbal skill, is the construction of structured words to convey meaning (Pham & Nguyen, 2021). Brown & Green, (2019) presented a slightly

different perspective, viewing it as a participatory process that included the production, reception, and processing of information, contributing to the creation of meaning. Students acquire the skill to manage thoughts, form sentences, and communicate audibly with appropriate pronunciation and understandable language when speaking. They can also learn how to present language meaningfully in various situational contexts. Speaking is an indispensable and crucial language skill to master when acquiring a new language.

Mastering speaking skill, as a significant aspect of acquiring a foreign language for a number of individuals, can be assessed by the capacity to engage in meaningful conversations (Ali Alghamdi et al., 2019). The fundamental purposes of language include self-expression, direct conversation, and cognitive engagement (Kurniawan et al., 2020), and its frequent usage shows the comprehensive understanding of students.

Students often consider speaking highly challenging, as it demands courage and careful planning to communicate effectively. Effective speaking includes aspects such as grammar, vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, and pronunciation (Brown & Green, 2019). For smooth and accurate communication, students need to have a clear idea of what they want to say before speaking, and also require a substantial vocabulary or the skill to construct words in a manner that ensures easy comprehension.

Learning strategies, which are activities undertaken by students to enhance learning, are essential for proficient speaking (Stander, 2020). These strategies can form a valuable toolkit for effective language learning (Dörnyei & Mercer, 2020). In high school, English learning strategies should be supported by adequate and accurate learning methodologies, student preparation, and suitable instructional resources (Sultana, 2021).

Gonzales, (2018) showed that students with higher language proficiency used a wide range of learning strategies in performing language tasks more effectively. Gonzales, (2018) & Ghalebi et al., (2021) also recorded the successful usage of various strategies. This was supported by Nhat & Y, (2021), where students with high proficiency in speaking used a greater number of strategies.

Oxford (1990) as cited in (Sardegna et al., 2018) believed that the proper adoption of language learning strategies was a significant step toward the development of communication competence, ultimately leading to the goal of

effective speaking. Therefore, strategies were crucial factors in assessing student success in acquiring a new language. (Sulistyaningrum, 2019) suggested that in learning to speak, students or teacher could also make use of ICT to enhance learning potential. This could include using smart televisions, projectors, laptops, Ms. Office applications, google classroom, web browsers, YouTube, VLC media player, or even devices such as smartphones, instead of relying solely on traditional methods.

In comparison with previous research focusing on Senior High Schools (SHS), the current research aimed to investigate various learning strategies used by students in improving speaking skill, specifically focusing on Junior High School (JHS). It also varied in terms of the selection of participants, school level, grade, and location. Consequently, this research was titled "Investigating learning strategies used by students in English speaking class," and the following questions were addressed: 1) What learning strategies for speaking were adopted by students with the highest score? 2) Which strategy was predominantly used?

The results provided valuable insights and support for future investigations, particularly in the context of English learning or speaking skill. It also addressed the gap in the existing literature, differentiating it from other research (Munfadlila, 2022; Pawlak et al., 2022; Chen & Yang, 2019; Smith et al, 2018).

METHOD

A descriptive qualitative method with a narrative framework was applied to determine learning strategies used by students in the classroom. Merriam & Grenier, (2018) defined qualitative research as an interpretative method that relied on words rather than measurable statistics or concepts to construct a comprehensive understanding of events. According to Sinaga & Hutahaean, (2020), this method is used to comprehend a phenomenon, process, or a specific point of view, particularly from the perspective of those directly included. It also focuses on assessing and observing phenomena (Cohen Miller & Elizabeth Pate, 2019). The qualitative narrative research was selected to provide a descriptive account of the phenomenon and the factors associated with it in a narrative form. This decision was influenced by the research objectives.

This research was conducted in one Junior High School and comprised 5 VIII Grade students who achieved the highest scores in English class and willingly participated. The limited number of participants were assumed as suitable sources of

data to achieve the research objectives due to the small class size of only 15 students. Data were collected through multiple sources, including interview transcripts focused on exploring strategies in learning speaking and observation (Creswell, 2018). The data were subsequently analyzed through four stages, beginning with coding, which was carried out manually. During this stage, interview transcripts were analyzed word by word. Subsequently, relevant data were obtained, and reduced to effectively address the research questions. This was followed by the presentation of data, analysis of results, and conclusion (Makhene, 2017; Esterberg, 2002; Wesley & Dewey, 2018; Sinaga & Hutahean, 2020).

This research transcribed recorded data into textual form, categorized based on student learning strategies. The observation included the monitoring of all situations and conditions during the action activities by referencing a prepared observation assessment table sheet. Subsequently, an observation checklist or field note was used to track learning strategies. The investigation also included identifying the degree to which specific behaviors were present, while a systematic process was established for identifying, categorizing, and documenting the behaviors in either a natural or controlled setting.

The analysis stage began with coding and categorization as well as the development of theories, where data were encoded and classified, moving from the specific to the universal through inference. This indicated the occurrence of a particular scenario could potentially apply to other similar settings, or patterns that might arise in other contexts.

In the subsequent stage, the results obtained from both observation and interviews were presented using Quirkos software and combined into three sub-headings representing the answers for the research questions. Due to the potential volume of scripture, tables, and transcriptions, the data were included in the appendices to avoid exceeding the page limit of this journal.

RESULT

1. Observation Result

The data analysis showed that various speaking strategies were applied, particularly in the English class. Students in the accelerated class significantly implemented various speaking skills compared to other strategies. Despite failing to use language appropriately, they exhibited an understanding of how it was spoken,

and often used speaking skill both inside and outside the classrooms to engage in everyday conversations.

During the initial observation session, classroom activities were identified, where students were tasked with reading specified vocabularies and articulating pronunciation effectively. These activities featured a higher degree of interaction between students and teacher, with inquiries related to speaking activities prevalent within the classroom. In the second observation session, teacher presented a story in the past tense and directed students to orally express the written text. Students tended to ask for assistance from both teacher and peers to ensure correct pronunciation and spelling of the text. In the third observation session, teacher revisited the parts of speech materials and instructed students to identify 20 regular and irregular verbs each. Students appeared to rely more on provided dictionaries and engaged in discussions with peers to confirm pronunciation and usage.

The results obtained from the observation checklist provided detailed insights into strategies used by students. Cognitive was considered the most commonly used learning strategy based on the preference of 5 students. The first student (S1) implemented several cognitive strategies, including resourcing translation, repetition, grouping, deduction, imagery, transfer, note-taking, and translation. Both the second (S2) and third (S3) students used resourcing translation, repetition, grouping, and note-taking. The fourth student (S4) implemented resourcing translation, repetition, grouping, and note-taking, while the fifth student (S5) used resourcing translation, grouping, transfer and note-taking.

Several students requested for advice from peers on how to appropriately enunciate terms, while some dedicated time to repetition of words, watching of English movies, focusing and reciting words pronounced by actors, and looking up words in dictionaries to enhance pronunciation. A few others paid close attention to how English teacher conversed.

Listening to English songs/audio, watching movies, reading English books/novels, reciting song lyrics, analyzing texts, reviewing materials, engaging in conversations with others, speaking to each other in English, using synonymous words, and reciting sentences were among the most commonly used methods. Students showed greater attentiveness and innovation in the application of these strategies, resulting in improved performance in language assignments.

Most students preferred memorization as the primary strategy for improving vocabulary, often encountering new terminology by watching English Films with subtitles. They frequently consulted dictionaries and attempted to learn by incorporating new vocabularies, while also engaging in systematic research or rehearsal of word lists. Some students, on the other hand, preferred a more contextual approach, memorizing terms by reading blogs, deducing meanings from texts, and relying on words encountered in their daily lives. Some even mentioned how they interacted with others on social networking sites and discovered new phrases. Listening to music and analyzing song lyrics also proved to be effective for vocabulary expansion. Reading books introduced students to new terms, where notes were taking and dictionaries were consulted to understand unfamiliar words.

In terms of grammar improvement, students used a variety of strategies, which included memorizing grammatical patterns, as well as the basic principles governing sentence construction. They actively participated in classroom lessons, asked and responded to questions from peers, paid attention and endeavored to emulate the writings and speeches of English speakers. Some students enjoyed reading English articles or novels and taking notes of grammatical structures, while others tuned to grammar manuals and oral resources, such as dictionaries, to find explanations to difficult terms from teacher. Students practiced the construction of sentences by reviewing the basic formulae they had learnt, and often revisited classroom lessons, honed the understanding of grammatical structures, and practiced pronunciation. Reading books also helped as a valuable resource for mastering grammar, where students often consulted with peers and learnt from mistakes when faced with challenges.

2. Interview Result

The interview showed that students used various strategies to address speaking challenges, including asking for assistance from teacher and peers, using translation, as well as watching English videos or music. The results showed that most students primarily implemented cognitive strategy compared to Metacognitive and Socio-Affective. However, Resourcing Translation, Repetition, Note Taking, and Paying Attention (from metacognitive) were considered the most frequently used sub-strategies for improving speaking skill. Some mentioned how they practiced by rehearsing and mimicking letter sounds, listening to native speakers communicate, particularly through music and English movies, in order to improve pronunciation. A

few others used dictionaries, both printed and digital such as Google Translate, to determine the correct pronunciation of expressions. Some students engaged with English literature, sang song lyrics, shared letters, and requested teacher and peers to converse with them in English. The following conclusions were drawn based on the explanation above:

A. Learning Strategies Used by Students in Improving English Speaking

#Finding 1

Most students tended to implement Cognitive more than other strategies. However, Resourcing Translation, Repetition, Note Taking, Paying Attention (from metacognitive), and Postponing speech output in order to concentrate on listening (from metacognitive), were considered the most frequently used sub-strategies for improving speaking skill.

#Finding 2

Cognitive was found to be the most predominantly used strategy, as evidenced by the preference of 5 students. S1 implemented resourcing translation, repetition, grouping, deduction, imagery, transfer, note-taking, and translation. Both S2 and S3 used resourcing translation, repetition, grouping, and note-taking. S4 implemented resourcing translation, repetition, grouping, and note-taking, while S5 used resourcing translation, grouping, transfer and note-taking.

B. Dominant Learning Strategies Used by Students in Learning Speaking

#Finding 3

The observation and interviews showed that most students predominantly implemented cognitive strategy. However, Resourcing Translation, Repetition, Note Taking, Paying Attention (from metacognitive), and Postponing speech output in order to concentrate on listening (from metacognitive) were considered the most frequently used sub-strategies for improving speaking skill. The interview further showed that other strategies, such as requesting for assistance from teacher and peers, translation, and engaging with English videos or music, were used to address speaking challenges.

#Finding 4

Observation data showed that S1 implemented resourcing translation, repetition, grouping, deduction, imagery, transfer, note-taking, and translation. Both S2 and S3 used resourcing translation, repetition, grouping, and note-taking. S4

implemented resourcing translation, repetition, grouping, and note-taking, while S5 used resourcing translation, grouping, transfer and note-taking.

#Finding 5

The majority of students implemented cognitive strategy in their language learning endeavors. However, an in-depth examination showed the consistent use of Resourcing Translation, Repetition, Note Taking, Paying Attention (from metacognitive), and Postponing speech output in order to concentrate on listening, by all students compared to other strategies.

#Finding 6

Students used a variety of strategies, including requesting assistance from teacher and peers, translation, and engaging with English videos or music, to address their speaking challenges.

DISCUSSION

The significance of this research was emphasized in order to reflect with previous results. The results showed several strategies used by students in addressing speaking challenges. Cognitive was found to be the most prevalent, while Resourcing Translation, Repetition, Note Taking, Paying Attention (from metacognitive), as well as postponing speech production to focus on listening (from metacognitive) were mostly preferred sub-strategies. Students used a variety of strategies, including requesting assistance from teacher and peers, translation, and engaging with English videos or music, to address speaking challenges. On the other hand, students with excellent communication skills demonstrated a greater use of learning strategies compared to those with lower proficiency in speaking. They also exhibited higher levels of attentiveness and innovation in applying these strategies, leading to enhanced performance in language assignments.

The dominance of cognitive strategy was related to some certain results, at it tended to be more task-specific and included a deeper engagement with the academic content. Some examples of the crucial sub-strategies were repetition, resourcing, translation, grouping, note-taking, reasoning, recombination, visuals, audio accountability, keyword, contextualization, clarification transfer, and inference.

This research was in line with Kemala (2014) cited by (Munfadlila, 2022), primarily focusing on learning strategies. Students typically used memory-based or memorization methods, categorized as cognitive strategy. This was supported by

Pawlak et al., (2022), which investigated children learning techniques in two privately owned institutions in Turkey. Other research investigating learning strategies in relation to age disparities (Chen & Yang, 2019) discovered the high preference for Rebecca Oxford concept, also relying on cognitive strategy.

According to Smith et al., (2018), cognitive strategy is comprised of a wide range of strategies, such as recalling novel terms and expressions, deducing grammar rules, applying previously learned principles, predicting the meaning of unidentified phrases, and implementing various methods to categorize new data while establishing connections with previously learned language. These could enable students to directly interact with incoming data, transforming it in ways that facilitated learning.

The discussion above indicated the coherence of this current research with previous investigation, where cognitive strategy was more prevalent in student learning process. However, there were certain limitations, particularly regarding the duration of observation and data collection, necessitating further improvisation. Teacher could benefit from this research by gaining a deeper understanding of how students learnt English speaking.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research aimed to investigate learning strategies used by Junior High School students to enhance English speaking skills, with a particular focus on identifying the dominant strategy and understanding the rationale behind the prevalence. The results provided valuable insights into the context of English learning, specifically speaking skill, serving as a foundational reference for future related investigations.

This research was limited by the restriction of data source to only one Junior High School in Bandung, specifically 5 VIII Grade students, and solely focused on describing strategies for improving speaking skill. The method used was primarily qualitative, relying on interview transcriptions and observation checklists for data analysis. Therefore, future research is recommended to broaden the scope by increasing the diversity of data sources to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the dominant learning strategies as well as the rationale behind the prevalent use of cognitive compared to other strategies.

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