

The Relationship between EFL Students' Speaking Strategies Use and their Speaking Proficiency: A Study on Wolaita Sodo University English Major Students

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Abstract: Students' speaking strategy use and their speaking proficiency are perceived to be predictors of achievement in learning English and competency in future careers. The purpose of the study was to pinpoint the speaking strategies most frequently used by EFL students. The aim of this study was also to describe the correlation between students' speaking strategies and their speaking proficiency. The target population of this study was 70 students (33 from the second year and 37 from the third year) majoring in English at Wolaita Sodo University in the 2019 academic year. In order to achieve the purpose of this study, the researchers used a descriptive-correlational design. The data were collected using a questionnaire, IELTS speaking proficiency test and interview. In the process of data analysis, descriptive analysis, such as mean scores and linear regression analysis were used. The results denoted that students most frequently employed social and cognitive speaking strategies, but they did not actively use metacognitive, affective, memory and compensation speaking strategies to promote their oral communication skills. The findings also showed that students' speaking strategy use predicted their speaking proficiency levels. Linear regression analysis indicated that there was a significant and positive relationship between the use of speaking strategies and speaking proficiency ($\beta=0.820$). Therefore, this study suggested that EFL learners should continuously use different speaking strategies to exercise oral communication. In addition, teachers should train and encourage students to use different speaking strategies.

Keywords: Cognitive; Compensation; Social; Speaking proficiency; Speaking strategies

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1. Introduction

Since the 1970s, language learning strategies (LLSs) have not only attracted the attention of researchers, but also of educators in the fields of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL). Oxford (1990) noted problems with the over-emphasis on teaching methods, approaches, and non-transferable learners' strategies. It is the most extensively studied area of teaching and learning process. Many scholars indicated that using different LLSs develops learner autonomy and self-directed participation to learn and use the target language (Bouaassria, 2016; Chamot, 2004; Cohen, 2014; Kato, 2009; Kunasaraphan, 2015; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Stern, 1992). Oxford (1990) states that the shift from instructing to learning enhances students to develop their thinking, memorizing, practicing and reflecting on the language in more advanced ways. She also notes the problems spotlight on teaching language methods, approaches and non-transferable learners' strategies. As Ok (2003) claimed, foreign language teachers are concerned with finding the best method or with getting the right answer to their students' failure to focus on the learning process. However, the findings of many studies denote that most EFL learners cannot communicate efficiently through the target language; they have low exposure to the learning environment although they mainly focus on oral communication skills to improve their speaking proficiency (Gani, Fajrina, Hanifa, 2015; Ishikawa, 2018; Kustati, 2012; Lopez, 2011; Razmjoo and Ghasemi, 2011; Weyers, 2010). This may be consistent with focusing on students and their interest in learning speaking skills, how learners learn and how to guide them to better practise oral communication.

Speaking strategy is an artistic exercise or technique that can help learners to overcome their speaking problems in the target language. Speaking strategies are the methods, procedures and actions taken by individuals to exercise oral communication (Hendriani, 2013). The strategy that comes from students' intrinsic motivation is a pledge of their speaking proficiency. Hendriani asserts that identifying and using different speaking strategies can help learners to develop their confidence and become proficient speakers of the language. If students want to improve their speaking proficiency, they should use different strategies to practice speaking English (Lopez, 2011). Mendez pointed out that although students are afraid to speak English in front of people, they should invest time and energy in using the target language in and out of the classroom. The use of speaking strategy needs learners' mind readiness and physical involvement to solve their speaking problems (Bouaassria, 2016). Hence, speaking strategy is a real oral practice that students make decisions to realize the learning process, but we can fail to remember the mind's role in implementing speaking strategies to exercise oral communication. It is a cognitive learning model because the mind performs its role regularly in learning speaking skills. This shows that speaking strategy is associated with the mental process of learning oral communication skills.

The findings of some studies on the speaking strategies use of students indicated that the application of proper speaking strategies leads to solve their speaking problems (Lopez, 2011; Mahjoob, 2015; Saputra and Subekti, 2017; Tavallali and Marzban, 2015; Xu, 2016). These studies also support the use of different speaking strategies to help learners take responsibility and risk for their own learning through the development of learner autonomy and self-direction (Oxford, 1990). In this regard, it is indispensable that English language teachers should pinpoint and understand how the speaking strategies of their students are applied in varied language activities. Therefore, it is very important to show the widely used speaking strategies and their relationships with the speaking proficiency.

Speaking is one of the language skills that is difficult to develop because it requires the students' interest, due attention and real oral practises. Moreover, some scholars find that 'speaking' is the most complex zone because of its development in its interdisciplinary nature, the act of creativity, vulnerability to personal differences, psychological and social factors (Bouaassria, 2016; Kustati, 2012; Mirzaei and Heidari, 2012; Nakahama, Tyler and Van Lier, 2001; Weyers, 2010). These scholars suggest the individual's speaking skills should be judged through oral performance in real communication. The findings of Ur (1996) also reported that speaking is a means of conveying

information, emphasizing that learners should master good speaking skills. Therefore, speaking is a goal-oriented skill in which people speak words and sentences to express their thoughts for a specific purpose.

The development of speaking proficiency as a communication tool is essential to better interact with others in oral English. Some studies have found that proficient speakers use different speaking strategies to solve their speaking problems, while those who are not proficient speakers use fewer strategies and use less frequently (Gani *et al.*, 2015; Lopez, 2011; Xu, 2016). This is important now, because most EFL students show great interest and motivation to become competent English speakers since the ultimate goal of all students' is to be proficient English speakers. Likewise, using different speaking strategies can help learners improve their speaking proficiency (Ishikawa, 2018; Kustati, 2012). In reality, however, there is no room for complacency in action. The success of speaking proficiency can be influenced by the use of speaking strategies. Most students strive to use the target language for oral communication or conversation in order to improve their speaking proficiency. Speaking proficiency is an art, not just an additional reward, but a real oral performance (Yunus, 2014). Therefore, it is not easy for students to become proficient speakers and attain the best English proficiency level. It requires a lot of effort inside and outside the classroom and the support of other English language users.

Complaints are widely heard in Ethiopia that university students have lack of expected command of English language proficiency in general (Haregewain, 2008), and teachers are not satisfied with the speaking proficiency of their students in particular (Abda, 2017; Andualem, 2019; Tesfaye, 2007). The students are not competent English users because it is a foreign language in the country. University teachers always blame them for their poor English performance. This is because learners may not be able to express themselves in the target language. Berhane (2019) argues that the English language skills of the students is highly deteriorating in recent years without identifying the specific case of speaking skills. More specifically, Endale (2017) claims that EFL learners are not motivated to learn speaking because of the individual's ability to practise orally. However, it is internationally recognized that learning spoken English helps learners to develop their speaking proficiency, expand their understanding of language resources and oral discourses of the target language and be competent enough in the language to meet global needs (Xu, 2016; Zhou and Shen, 2020). It is, therefore, stressed that the learners should have a good mastery of speaking skill. This means that speaking proficiency is a self-evident problem which is related to the practice of speaking English.

From the researchers' teaching experience and observation, university students face some problems to learn speaking in English. They hesitate to interact even with one another and with the teacher orally in actual classroom. During oral presentations, introductions, group discussions, debates and public speeches, they lack the interest and ability to express their thoughts, ideas and feelings in the target language. Students' speaking proficiency is still a matter of alarm that needs special consideration to solve. Besides, most students are reluctant and self-conscious to practise in the language; they have fear of making mistakes and lack of interest as well as ridicule to speak in English. Furthermore, they do not use the right words in the right places. Their spoken English does not sound natural to convey messages better. Therefore, learners are not effective to negotiate the intended meanings in a real communication.

Based on the above facts, EFL students are not proficient speakers, which may be due to some reasons. For example, teachers may not train students on how to use different speaking strategies to exercise their oral English; many students do not know how to use different speaking strategies to master their speaking skills. In addition, they may have limited knowledge of language resources and the knowledge of how to use the target language to express themselves and interact with one another. Some scholars found that using different speaking strategies leads to developing learners' speaking proficiency levels and making them competent in their future careers (Hendriani, 2013; Lopez, 2011; Mirzaeiand Heidari, 2012). Speaking strategy has been the focus of a growing body of research over the past four decades. Studies suggest that learners should use different strategies to promote their oral

communication skills. Similarly, Weyers (2010) carried out a study entitled “Speaking strategies: Meeting NCATE oral proficiency standards.” The finding indicated that speaking strategy is a pledge of learners' speaking proficiency. When students use various oral communication strategies, they become successful English speakers. Bouaassria (2016) reported that students actively use memory and metacognitive strategies to promote their oral skills. Her findings revealed that speaking proficiency influences students' speaking strategies use. Moreover, when students use different speaking strategies based on their interests, they can develop their confidence and knowledge to negotiate meanings in real communication (Kustati, 2012). Her findings showed that learners' speaking proficiency will be high when they use different speaking strategies. Therefore, the findings of the studies denote that there is a significant relationship between the use of speaking strategies and speaking proficiency.

As the studies conducted above have shown, there are some limitations of the studies about the relationship between speaking strategies and speaking proficiency. For example, Weyers (2010) used only speaking proficiency test to decide the relationship between the two variables. The study did not address the speaking strategies used by students using tools such as questionnaires and thinking aloud protocols. On the other hand, Bouaassria(2016), used only 'Strategy Inventory for Language Learning' (SILL)to find out the correlation between the two variables, but she did not assess students' speaking proficiency through live oral performance. Kustati (2012), employed both speaking test and SILL for learning speaking skills to see the correlation between them, but she did not use a standardized test to determine students' speaking proficiency levels. In addition, the sample size of these studies may not be enough to generalize the correlation between the two variables.

In Ethiopia, a few researchers have studied the speaking strategies use of students. For instance, Tsegaye (1995) indicated that learners most frequently use affective and social speaking strategies to learn speaking; and yet they have problems of various categories of strategies contributing to promote their oral skills inside and outside a classroom. The study suggests that learners should use different speaking strategies inside and outside a classroom. Correspondingly, Bizuayehu and Getachew (2015) denoted using appropriate speaking strategies to solve the problems resulting from an insufficient knowledge of the target language orally. The finding showed that EFL learners most frequently use compensation, cognitive and memory speaking strategies to exercise oral communication. The findings of the study suggest that learners should take more courses related to speaking skills to promote their speaking ability.

As mentioned above, local researchers only addressed the speaking strategies that students use when learning to speak English. The designs of both studies were descriptive survey designs, and the target population of these studies was college students. However, the present study differs from previous studies in some respects. It aims to provide empirical substantiation towards the relationship between EFL students' speaking strategies use and their speaking proficiency. In addition, this study is different in its method and research design in that it is a descriptive correlational design. The sample size of this study would be large enough to generalize the findings of this study. Moreover, the use of students' speaking strategies in relation to speaking proficiency has been studied in the EFL context, but there seems a paucity of speaking strategies in improving their speaking proficiency in research in the Ethiopian context. Students are less proficient speakers of the target language to convey information. Based on our understanding, no study has addressed the relationship between EFL students' speaking strategies use and their speaking proficiency in the Ethiopian context. Therefore, the current study attempts to fill this knowledge gap. To this end, this research aims at answering the following two research questions:

1. What are the speaking strategies most frequently employed by EFL students?
2. What kind of relationship is there between students' speaking strategies use and their speaking proficiency?

2. Research Methods

2.1. Design of the Study

The main purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between EFL students' speaking strategies use and their speaking proficiency. The design of this study was descriptive correlational design. It was aimed at exploring the relationship between students' speaking strategies use and their speaking proficiency.

2.2. Participants

The participants of this study were second-year and third-year English major students at Wolaita Sodo University (WSU). The students had taken many courses such as advanced speech, spoken I and II to improve their oral communication skills. The data were collected from the students of WSU in October 2019. In total, the participants of this study were seventy (37 third-year and 33 second-year) English majors. The students are expected to learn and use the target language than other department students. They are also more aware of using different strategies to develop their speaking proficiency. Moreover, a convenient sampling technique was used to select WSU because they are close to the researchers' residence, working place, and easy for transportation. However, a comprehensive sampling technique was used to select second-year and third-year students for this study. All students majoring in English at this university participated in this study because the number of respondents at each level was insufficient to generalize the results of this study.

2.3. Instruments

2.3.1. Questionnaire

The questionnaire was one of the instruments employed to gather sufficient information for this study. It was used to measure the types and frequency of students' speaking strategies use. To ensure this, the researchers developed a questionnaire adapted from Nakatani's (2006) Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI) to pinpoint EFL students' speaking strategies use to learn speaking skills. This questionnaire consisted of 54 closed-ended items about students' speaking strategies use. Hence, the researchers found Nakatani's (2006) OCSI to be the preferable tool accepted by different scholars in terms of measuring EFL students' speaking strategy use. Among the 54 questionnaire items, 6 items were adopted, and 48 items were adapted from the original speaking strategies. Based on the adapted items, some changes were made at the levels of phrases, clauses, and sentences, and paraphrased to ensure the objectives of this study are met.

The adapted OCSI was a self-reported questionnaire. Because the organization, content, and language of this tool were suitable, it was easy to answer questions in a short time, and it was especially suitable for EFL learners at the Ethiopian university level. The questionnaire mainly focused on the use of students' speaking strategies. It became a self-report questionnaire that allows students to answer how often they use speaking strategies to solve their speaking problems. The questionnaire contained 54 closed-ended items which consisted of six categories. These include metacognitive (items 1-10), affective (items 11-18), cognitive (items 19-29), social (items 30-40), memory (items 41-47) and compensation (items 49-54). In this part, all students expressed the degree of their use of speaking strategies on a 5 point Likert scale from 1-5 based on the frequency of strategy use (i.e., 1='never' or 'almost never true of me', 2='generally not true of me', 3='somewhat true of me', 4='generally true of me', and 5='always' or 'almost always true of me'). The average scores of the groups of the strategies were interpreted based on the adjusted reporting scale (Nakatani, 2006).

2.3.2. Speaking proficiency test

The aim of this test was to measure learners' speaking proficiency levels. More specifically, the researchers used a standardized academic IELTS speaking proficiency test to assess students' oral communication skills. This provides a reliable measurement of the speaking proficiency of students using recognized criteria. Therefore, all second-year and third-year English majors (70) were the

participants in this study. The test items were developed considering the students' year of study levels and topics related to their interests.

The researchers adapted IELTS speaking proficiency test questions from Li (2019). The test contained three parts, enabling students to express their ideas orally. In this case, the participants who filled out the questionnaire must take the test to see the relationship between each individual's speaking strategies use and speaking proficiency. The first part focused on the general questions like introducing oneself, family, interests, and hobby time that would take 3-5 minutes. The second part is self-talk. It would take 3-4 minutes to speak verbally on familiar topics. The topic was given to each participant randomly on a piece of paper with a pen; he or she was asked to think about a topic just for a minute, and then talk on it for 1 to 2 minutes. The last part took 3-5 minutes and was a two-way discussion of the issues introduced in the second part. This helped the researchers to assess students' ability to express their ideas and give reasons and examples that support their ideas. The assessment technique of this test is a conversational language proficiency interview. Then, it was conducted directly in face-to-face communication with the interviewer/s.

The researchers adapted the checklists for each rating scale from University of Cambridge (2019) to assess students' speaking proficiency. The speaking proficiency test includes four scoring criteria, namely fluency and coherence, pronunciation, vocabulary resources, and grammatical range and accuracy to assess their speaking proficiency. More importantly, the researchers used IELTS9- band scale to measure students' proficiency levels. The researchers adopted 9 band scales to measure the students' speaking proficiency (Xu, 2016): 9 (expert user), 8 (very good user), 7 (good user), 6 (competent user), 5 (modest user), 4 limited user, 3 (extremely limited user), 2 (intermittent user), 1 (no user) and 0 (did not attempt the test).

Before collecting data, two raters were selected based on their teaching experience, academic status (two PhD teachers), and interests to minimize the subjectivity of the score. The raters are academic staffs who teach the English language and literature courses. They have more than twelve years of experience in teaching English in higher education. What is more, they also conducted research on oral communication skills. Then, the training was given for them on how to rate students' speaking proficiency through live oral performance. More importantly, the researchers acted as moderators and took extra notes during the test to help them.

2.3.3. Interview

In this study, the third data collection instrument was a semi-structured interview. The interview lasted 8-15 minutes for each participant, and the data were collected in the English language. The purpose of this interview was to substantiate the data obtained through the questionnaire survey and the speaking proficiency test. Among the 70 participants in this study, 17 students were purposely selected to participate in the interview based on their IELTS scores. The students with the highest IELTS scores were interviewed because they are most capable of communicating in English to provide in-depth information compared to others. The interviewees were asked to respond to three questions based on the results of the quantitative data. These questions include:

1. Which speaking strategies do you use most frequently? Why?
2. How do you evaluate your understanding of speaking strategies and your speaking proficiency level? What do you think is the major reason for your low level speaking proficiency?
3. What solutions do you suggest for improving your speaking proficiency?

2.4. Validity and Reliability of Instruments

Before collecting the data, the two experts reviewed the face validity, content validity and relevance of the data collection tools. The two experts (Ph.D. in TEFL instructors) who work at Wolkite University and Kotobe Metropolitan University validated the tools of this study. They have 14 and 16 years of work experience in teaching English in Ethiopian public universities, and have done a lot of research on language learning strategies. The researchers have got constructive insights from experts

about the content and face validity and the relevance of the items including wordings, language and coherence. Then, the pilot study was carried out to check the reliability of the data collection instruments. Finally, the researchers modified and rewrote some items based on the given feedback for the main study.

Moreover, the Cronbach's alpha was used to ensure the trustworthiness of the questionnaire items. The questionnaire reliability coefficient was 0.889 Cronbach's alpha. This implied that the questionnaire items are good or more reliable measure internal consistency and pinpoint the speaking strategies use of students.

To check the reliability of IELTS speaking proficiency test, the researchers selected two raters (English language instructors) based on their working experiences, academic status and interest to assess learners' speaking proficiency; especially to identify their levels of speaking proficiency. The purpose of this training was to aware the raters in preparation for rating students' oral performance. The researchers also shared with the raters their understanding of the criteria of the IELTS scale. Then, the training was also given for the participants about IELTS and its role in their future careers. Two assessors marked students' oral performance to minimize the doubt of subjectivity; their responses were recorded against their codes. Furthermore, the marks given by raters were computed using inter-rater reliability Cohen's Kappa to verify the consistency of the marks. Thus, the 'percent agreement' between the rater 1 and rater 2 was 0.731; it is found within 0.61-0.80 as substantial agreement (McHugh, 2012). This denotes that there was a high reliability of the items.

To ensure the reliability of the interview data, the researchers conducted face-to-face interviews with the participants. This supported them to get adequate information about students' speaking strategies use to learn speaking vis-à-vis their speaking proficiency. Finally, the researchers recorded the interviewees' responses and transcribed word for word.

2.5. Data Analysis

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23.0 was used to analyse the quantitative data. The data obtained through a questionnaire were calculated as follows. First, the number of questionnaire papers returned was systematically organized in a table. Second, the students' responses to the overall close-ended items were computed and analysed according to their thematic areas. Then, the descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation were used to find the most frequently used speaking strategies by students. To determine whether there is a relationship between speaking strategies and speaking proficiency in general, researchers used linear regression analysis. In addition, a linear regression analysis was calculated to describe the relationship between speaking strategies and speaking proficiency. In this regard, Beta (β) was used to determine the relationship between the speaking strategies use and speaking proficiency.

After collecting the qualitative data through the interview from the seventeen students, the interviewees' responses were recorded, coded and transcribed verbatim. This helped the researchers to describe each interviewee's response. Finally, the coded data were grouped by emerging themes, and qualitatively analysed.

3. Results

3.1. Questionnaire Results

Oxford (1990) underlined that the frequency of students' learning strategies is identified mainly through the mean (\bar{X}) values: mean scores ranging from 3.5 to 5.0 indicate a higher strategy user who usually or almost always uses strategies, while mean scores ranging from 2.5 to 3.4 indicate a medium strategy user who sometimes uses strategies, and mean scores ranging from 1.0 to 2.4 show a lower strategy user who does not usually use strategies. Since speaking strategies are a subset of LLSs, the following data were analysed by considering the mean (\bar{X}) scores of students' speaking strategies used. The students' responses to the questionnaire were categorized based on the above criteria.

Students' response to the first research question: What are the speaking strategies employed by students most frequently?

Table 1. The frequency of the categories of speaking strategies employed by students

Strategies	Mean (X)	SD	Level of strategy use	Frequency of use	Rank of use
Social	3.51	0.933	High	Usually	1 st
Cognitive	3.50	0.828	High	Usually	2 nd
Affective	2.38	1.085	Low	Not usually	3 rd
Compensation	2.24	1.045	Low	Not usually	4 th
Metacognitive	2.23	1.028	Low	Not usually	5 th
Memory	2.21	1.054	Low	Not usually	6 th
Grand total	2.68	0.995	Medium	Sometimes	

As shown in Table 1, students use some of their favourite speaking strategies to overcome speaking problems in English. In this regard, the descriptive statistics of the total score of the overall speaking strategy was at a medium level, with a mean score of 2.68 and a standard deviation of 0.995. Respondents replied that the level of use of affective strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, and memory strategies was low, with the mean scores 2.38, 2.24, 2.23, and 2.21, respectively. In contrast, the use of social strategies and cognitive strategies is relatively high, the of social strategies is 3.51, and the average score of cognitive strategies is 3.50. These results indicate that students most frequently use social and cognitive strategies to solve their speaking problems.

Students' response to the research question "What kind of a relationship is there between speaking strategies and speaking proficiency?" is given in Table 2. This part presents the results of the second research question obtained from the OCSI of the questionnaire related to students' speaking strategies use, and their speaking proficiency intended to explore the relationship between the two variables.

Table 2. Students' speaking proficiency test results

Students	IELTS speaking test scores	Students	IELTS speaking test scores
S1	3.25	S36	4.13
S2	3.38	S37	3.38
S3	2.75	S38	3.07
S4	2.63	S39	2.50
S5	2.38	S40	2.75
S6	2.75	S41	3.00
S7	2.50	S42	3.38
S8	3.25	S43	3.25
S9	3.75	S44	2.75
S10	3.38	S45	2.13
S11	2.75	S46	3.25
S12	3.25	S47	3.25
S13	3.38	S48	2.88
S14	2.63	S49	2.88
S15	3.38	S50	2.50
S16	2.88	S51	3.00
S17	2.63	S52	3.00
S18	4.00	S53	2.88
S19	3.50	S54	3.38
S20	3.75	S55	3.00
S21	3.63	S56	3.13
S22	4.38	S57	2.88
S23	3.25	S58	3.00
S24	3.50	S59	3.13
S25	4.13	S60	3.00
S26	4.00	S61	3.25
S27	3.25	S62	3.50
S28	3.50	S63	2.38
S29	2.75	S64	3.50
S30	2.88	S65	2.50
S31	4.25	S66	2.75
S32	4.00	S67	3.50
S33	4.38	S68	2.75
S34	2.50	S69	3.38
S35	3.25	S70	3.00

Table 2 depicts that all students were limited users (band 4), extremely limited users (band 3), and intermittent users (band 2). The results of this test indicated that students were not proficient speakers and incompetent English users. Therefore, the students' test result is below the requirement of the IELTS speaking proficiency test.

Table 3. Model summary of students' speaking strategies use and their speaking proficiency

Model	Sum of squares	Df	Mean square	F	Sig
Regression	13.404	1	13.404	139.536	.000 ^b
Residual	6.532	68	.096		
Total	19.936	69			

Table 3 shows the analysis of variance, which shows that the F value is 139.536, and the significance is $P=0.000$. These results indicated that the regression model of predicting speaking proficiency from the speaking strategy use of students was significant. In other words, speaking strategies can be used simultaneously to predict the speaking proficiency of students.

Table 4. Correlation coefficient between speaking strategies and speaking proficiency

Model	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
Constant	529	.227		2.326	.023
Strategy	.825	.070	.820	11.813	.000

Table 4 shows Beta coefficient ($\beta=0.820$, $t=11.813$, $p=0.023<0.05$). These results revealed that there was a significant and positive relationship between students' speaking strategies use and their speaking proficiency.

3.2. Interview Results

In this section, the findings of the data collected from students through an interview were presented. The interview questions were used to verify the results of a questionnaire and speaking proficiency test.

3.2.1. The speaking strategies most frequently employed by students

This part deals with the interviewees' responses to speaking strategies they use, and introduces the most frequently used strategies by students to learn speaking.

All interviewees explained at least their views on learning speaking and the speaking strategies they used. In their responses, 3 informants (S1, S7, and S14) reported that they most frequently use practising with their friends, talking on their familiar topics, cooperating with one another, speaking slowly, receiving and sending messages and watching movies and TV shows in English. These responses show that students extensively use cognitive and social strategies to learn speaking. S10 said, "I use social media like telegram and YouTube which are more related to my favourite topics and converse with English speakers. Moreover, I actively participate in English club, ELIC and imitate the speakers sound." Besides, S3 informant mentioned:

Sometimes, I use English dictionary to check the pronunciation of new words and ask questions for clarification. Also, I pay attention to listening to the instructor's lecture in a classroom and practice with my friends in the dorm and at entertainment places

When we took a closer look at the above responses, the interviewees explained that they used cognitive and compensatory speaking strategies most often.

Correspondingly, 10 interviewees (S4, S5, S8, S9, S11, S12, S11, 13, S15, and S16) also reported that they did not understand the different strategies that facilitate oral communication after class. The responses indicated that they have limited knowledge of pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar as well as the knowledge of how to use the language. In addition, the interviewees told us that they did not have language knowledge and oral discourses to practise speaking English. In this regard, informant S6 said that he did not have the confidence to convey information while speaking English

because he would not use various strategies to practise oral English. However, sometimes he said he uses cognitive speaking strategies to exercise oral communication. S2 said, “Although I want to develop my speaking proficiency, I do not use different strategies to learn speaking skills.” What is more, one informant mentioned:

In fact, it is difficult for me to list strategies I used to train conversations because I do not practise speaking English after a class. However, I ask questions, discuss with my classmates and cooperate with them in an actual classroom in Amharic (S17).

From the responses given, we noticed that students do not use different strategies to promote their speaking proficiency based on their interests. This means that most students have limited knowledge in using effective speaking strategies to develop their speaking proficiency, as well as the limitations of linguistic knowledge to convey information. Therefore, the interviewees were unable to mention their most widely used speaking strategies.

In general, the above responses show that a few students most frequently use social and cognitive speaking strategies. The results showed that the speaking strategy use of students developed as the strategies are included in the educational curriculum students use at different levels in their educational journey including higher education and practice of speaking after a class. These results are consistent with the findings in the questionnaire. In both cases, social and cognitive strategies were reported as the most frequently used. In both cases, social and cognitive strategies were reported as the most frequently used. This triangulation would have a great role in the reliability of the findings. However, in their responses, most students admitted that they lacked knowledge and clear understanding of speaking strategies for learning oral English; they did not have the opportunity to practise speaking English after class. This proves that students have language resources and oral discourse problems when using the language.

3.2.2. Use of speaking strategies and opinions related to speaking proficiency

In this part, students were asked to explain the frequency of using speaking strategies to improve their speaking proficiency. Related to this, informant (S12) told us that there is no relationship between his speaking strategy use and speaking proficiency. The interviewee has also denoted that he is not aware of using different speaking strategies to improve his speaking proficiency. Thus, speaking proficiency influences his speaking strategies use. What is more, two informants stated “I do not use different strategies in and out of the classroom, but I can speak the target language well. Therefore, I think that there is no relationship between my speaking strategies and speaking proficiency” (S6). “I use various strategies with my classmates in our dormitory and cafeteria, but I am still not a proficient speaker in the target language” (S16).

From the above discussion, the interviewees argue that they do not pay much attention to using speaking strategies according to their own interests to improve their speaking proficiency. In other words, they used different speaking strategies, but they did not name or mention them to improve their speaking proficiency. There is a mismatch between their level of speaking proficiency and speaking strategies to exercise oral communication. Hence, the interviewees did not realize that using different speaking strategies would help them master speaking skills. Therefore, the respondents have no awareness of using different speaking strategies would help them to have a good mastery of speaking skills.

In contrast, in their responses, 11 informants (S1, S2, S3, S4, S7, S8, S9, S11, S14, S15 and S17) reported that there is a good relationship between speaking strategies and speaking proficiency. They demonstrated that the two variables always go hand in hand. Their responses indicated that the awareness of using speaking strategies is a guarantee for their speaking proficiency. In fact, the results of this interview show that their speaking has become lower because they did not use different strategies to exercise oral communication. On the other hand, these informants suggested students should use different strategies to exercise oral communication and develop their speaking proficiency. Correspondingly, S5 proposed a series of reasons why he used speaking strategies to overcome

speaking problems. He also explained that because he often uses different speaking strategies to practise speaking English, his speaking proficiency is not bad. This response suggests that the perceived level of spoken English will affect his use of spoken English strategies. In addition, S10 informant, familiar with the matter, said:

To a certain extent, I use different strategies in and out of the classroom; therefore, compared to my friends, my speaking proficiency is relatively good. So for me, using various strategies and practising speaking English is a guaranty for my speaking proficiency.

Based on the above facts, it is possible to infer that speaking proficiency is a result of students' speaking strategies use. It was found that students' speaking strategies use to exercise oral communication or conversation is evidence of their speaking proficiency levels. This shows that the two variables have a strong relationship. This implied that when students use different strategies, they become proficient speakers of the target language. Therefore, the researchers strongly agree with the idea that speaking proficiency will be high if there is a good practice of using different strategies. This suggests students should develop their awareness of using different speaking strategies to solve their speaking problems.

3.2.3. Speaking proficiency

In this interview section, the interviewees were asked to rate their speaking proficiency levels using the rating scales, namely high, medium and low and give reasons. The purpose of this rating is to determine the proficiency of each student and find out the reasons behind her/his proficiency. Some interviewees gave similar ratings to their speaking proficiency. All informants reported that speaking proficiency is the ability to use English language to express one's ideas, opinions, and feelings smoothly in a comprehensible way. In their responses, 6 informants (S3, S5, S6, S8, S9 and S13) rated that their speaking proficiency is medium. The informants also informed us that they can convey information in context although they are not proficient speakers. Correspondingly, S10 rated her speaking proficiency as medium. She said, "After class, I use different strategies to improve my speaking proficiency. I have the opportunity to communicate with foreigners and use social media like Telegram and YouTube. Therefore, compared with others, my speaking proficiency is neither high nor bad."

In contrast, the interviewees stated that their speaking proficiency is very poor. Five informants (S1, S4, S11, S14 and S16) reported that they were not proficient speakers of the target language. They stated that speaking is the most challenging skill for learners due to their interest and the nature of the skill and oral performance. However, the informants told us that they joined the Department of English Language and Literature without their interest. As a result, they had a negative attitude towards learning English. They also explained that it is difficult to learn and be successful although they want to speak English fluently. They assume mastering the oral skill is the most difficult learning process or practice because it demands considering the linguistic knowledge and spoken discourse as well as the knowledge of how to use the language. Their responses confirmed that they are incompetent English users when compared to the native speakers. Likewise, S12 and S17 reflected that they are not proficient English speakers when compared to the language speakers because they have a problem of organizing their ideas and transferring messages orally. Also, the interviewees admitted that they were placed in the English language and literature department without their interest. Therefore, they are not happy with the department and less proficient speakers of the language. They are not aware of using different strategies to practice speaking in English.

In addition, S2 and S15 rated that their speaking proficiency is low. Their responses indicated that they have a problem of organizing their ideas and conveying messages in the target language. The responses also confirmed that it is difficult and painful for them to talk to native speakers due to their interest and lack of regular oral practice. Besides, informant S7 reasoned:

I only learned oral skills in textbooks and did not use real oral communication tasks in the lower grades to really practice oral communication skills. Moreover, I learned only English grammar rules and structures at elementary and secondary school; therefore, I am very poor in speaking English.

Judging from the answers above, students are neither skilled speakers nor competent in the international job market in their future careers. Although they are interested in learning how to use the knowledge of the target language, they have problems in using language resources and sociolinguistic knowledge to convey the intended meaning. They do not use different strategies based on their interests to improve their speaking proficiency. Related to this, most students admitted that they joined the English language and literature without their interest. These results are consistent with the survey results of the speaking strategy use questionnaire and the IELTS speaking proficiency test. Based on this, the researchers argue that the difficult nature of speaking is not exaggerated as they believe that using different speaking strategies to exercise oral communication or conversation can improve their speaking proficiency. They also suggest that the curriculum of the English language and literature should focus on promoting students' speaking proficiency.

3.2.4. Students' role and suggested solutions to improve their speaking proficiency

In the last part of this interview, the students reported the role and set of solutions to the problems mentioned in the previous section. All the informants told us that they should actively participate and take risks to improve their speaking proficiency. Their suggestions mainly emphasize on the issue that students, teachers, course designers, and material developers should consider students' learning preferences and interests as a way to solve the problems they find. In their responses, 6 respondents (S1, S2, S9, S10, S11 and S12) suggested that they should use different strategies to practise speaking English every day to improve their oral communication skills.

In addition, S4 and S13 suggest that they should develop an awareness of using different speaking strategies. Their responses indicated that they should have the opportunity to practise speaking English with friends and themselves, repeating what the speaker said (pronunciation and intonation) after class. Correspondingly, S8 suggested that learners should have a program to practise speaking in English as a self-directive. In her response, she suggested that more attention should be paid to the use of appropriate speaking strategies. S7 said, "I should be proactive, responsive, and willing to take risks to improve my speaking proficiency. To be honest, I must practise speaking English every day and develop my self-confidence to speak in front of people." In addition, two informants suggested:

I should use different strategies to develop my speaking skills according to my interests; the teacher should give us enough time to practise talking with each other in class. She/he should also encourage us to use various strategies to learn spoken English (S3).

I think we should mainly focus on the learner's attitude towards speaking proficiency. Likewise, the pedagogical implications that exist in the present language education should be revised. Teachers should also encourage learners to understand and use appropriate methods, approaches to teach spoken courses and use speaking strategies (S5).

These responses indicate that students should not be forced to learn English by someone; they must use different strategies according to their interests. They need to practise speaking English regularly after class. In other words, the students raised some problems that required emphasis in response to students' poor oral performance.

In their responses, 3 informants (S6, S14 and S17) proposed a series of possible solutions to the problems they stated in the previous section. Their suggestions mainly focus on things that students should consider when practising oral English. They should take responsibility and risk to improve their speaking skills. Likewise, informant S15 believes that he should develop the awareness of practising oral communication or conversation. In addition, S16 suggests that due consideration should be given to the level of course preparation for class tasks/activities. She recommended the curriculum be comprehensively designed and material designers fill the gaps. The speaking courses and lessons should be appropriately designed so as to can attract students' attention.

4. Discussion

The main objective of this study was to explore the relationship between EFL students' speaking strategies use and their speaking proficiency. The following is an explanation of the results of this study.

4.1. What Are the Most Frequently Employed Speaking Strategies by Students?

The results of this study denoted that students use different types of speaking strategies at different levels although they have limited understanding of speaking strategies when learning speaking English. The results of this study showed that students used social ($X=3.51$) and cognitive ($X=3.50$) speaking strategies at a high level (usually used), while they used affective ($X=2.38$), memory ($X=2.21$), metacognitive ($X=2.23$) and compensation speaking strategies ($X=2.24$) at low-level (not usually used). These results showed that the participants most frequently used social and cognitive speaking strategies to exercise oral communication or conversation. Similarly, interview data shows that the speaking strategies that few students use extensively, such as asking questions, working with friends, and practicing with each other in dormitories, canteens, and entertainment venues, are the most widely used. Although the results of this interview are consistent with the survey results of the Speaking Strategy Use Inventory, most students are not aware of using different speaking strategies to overcome their speaking problems. In addition, they have limited understanding of various strategies based on their interest to exercise oral communication. The results showed that students most frequently used social and cognitive speaking strategies to learn speaking.

Furthermore, this finding agrees with the previous studies' findings reported on the speaking strategies used by EFL students. For example, Ketabi and Mohammadi (2012) depicted that learners most frequently use different strategies like practising, repeating, asking questions and talking to oneself and discuss with their peers to learn speaking skills. The finding denoted that students most frequently used cognitive and social speaking strategies to promote their speaking skills. Likewise, Oxford (1990) indicated that 'Cognitive and social' learning strategies support students to develop their language proficiency in general, and speaking proficiency in particular. The finding denoted that students learn speaking English through practising, receiving and sending messages and asking questions. In addition, cognitive learning strategies enhance the ability of EFL learners to learn and use the language in real communication (Green and Oxford, 1995). Research results show that students use sending and receiving information, practising and analysing, and reasoning to promote their language proficiency. Kustati (2012) and Zhou and Shen (2020) also pointed out that using different speaking strategies helps to exercise oral communication. Likewise, the finding of this study indicates that EFL students develop their oral communication skills through practicing, questioning, and cooperating. Therefore, the results of this study are consistent with those of the previous studies. This implied that students actively use social and cognitive speaking strategies to learn speaking.

4.2. Students' Opinions about their Use of Speaking Strategies and Speaking Proficiency Levels

The results of this study showed that the respondents were not proficient speakers and incompetent English users. Therefore, the students' test scores were below the IELTS speaking proficiency test required. R^2 score 0.672 (67%) substantiated that speaking strategy was a good predictor of students' speaking proficiency. Likewise, the findings of this study demonstrated that there was a significant correlation between speaking strategies and speaking proficiency ($Beta=0.820$). Moreover, the interview responses ensured that speaking proficiency is a determinant factor influencing students' speaking strategies use. The findings also indicated most students joined the English language and literature out of their interest. The other factor is the educational system. Spoken language courses are not supported by various real activities. The interview results are consistent with the questionnaire's speaking strategy use inventory. When students' speaking strategies use increases, their speaking proficiency can also increase. Therefore, this study ensured that there was a significant correlation

between the speaking strategies use of students and their speaking proficiency. This implied that using different speaking strategies to learn speaking is a cornerstone for their speaking proficiency.

What is more, the results of this study agree with the findings of the earlier studies (Bouaassria, 2016; Kato, 2009; Kustati, 2012; Oxford, 1990; Sheu, Wang and Hsu, 2013; Zhou and Shen, 2020) reported on relationship between speaking strategies and speaking proficiency. The speaking proficiency has a strong relationship with speaking strategies. When students use different strategies, they become successful speakers of the language. According to Tavallali and Marzban (2015), EFL students become successful speakers of the target language when they use different speaking strategies based on their interest. The finding denoted that the choice and use of students' speaking strategies could decide their oral skills. Likewise, Xu (2016) pointed out that speaking proficiency is the result of applying different speaking strategies to train oral communication. The finding of this study showed that there were significant relationships between speaking strategies and students' IELTS speaking test performance ($r=0.650$, $p=0.000$, $p<0.05$). This implied that the use of speaking strategy is a good predictor of students' speaking proficiency. Besides, Mahjoob (2015) reported that students' self-evaluation strategy predicted their oral skills and decided their future careers. Mahjoob concluded that there is a significant relationship between speaking proficiency and speaking strategies use. Therefore, the findings of this study are consistent with previous studies on the correlation between the two variables. On the other hand, this suggests future researchers should use different instruments like think aloud protocols and focus group discussion in addition to IELTS to assess students' speaking proficiency because 11-14 minutes' interview is not enough to decide their speaking proficiency levels.

It was not surprising that the correlation between speaking strategy and speaking proficiency was positive, but weak. One of the possible reasons for the weak relationship between the two variables may be the limitations of proper speaking strategies use to overcome the students' speaking problems. This substantiated that using speaking strategy is explicitly related to the levels of students' speaking proficiency.

5. Conclusions

The finding of the current study showed that most students did not know how to use different speaking strategies to solve their speaking problems. The overall surveyed learners were medium users of speaking strategies, i.e. they do not have an innate understanding of what effective speakers do to solve their speaking problems. On the other hand, this study found that social and cognitive speaking strategies are the strategies most frequently used by EFL students, while metacognitive, affective, memory and compensation strategies were the least used.

The finding of this study revealed that there was a good correlation between speaking strategies use and speaking proficiency. Therefore, speaking strategy was a good predictor of learners' speaking proficiency. The results of the interview showed that the students lacked knowledge about the use of various strategies as a result of which their speaking proficiency was very low. They also joined the department of English language and literature without their interest. The responses indicated that when students used different speaking strategies based on their interests, they became successful speakers of the target language.

6. Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made.

The finding indicated that students did not actively use affective, metacognitive, memory and compensation strategies. This indicates that students should develop the awareness of using affective, metacognitive, memory and compensation strategies. It also suggests that teacher should train students how to use different strategies and help them balance the strategies used by students according to their interests.

Universities should give continuous training for English language teachers on the use of different methods, approaches and strategies of teaching speaking skill. Besides, it would be better to train some teachers to specialize in teaching speaking skills. This suggests teachers need to take many spoken courses in addition to the existing ones.

To find the speaking strategies that can help students to develop their speaking ability, teachers have to train students on using the strategies to improve their speaking proficiency. Furthermore, university students should join the Department of English Language and Literature according to their interests and achievements in the English language. This happens because the learners' language ability is difficult to change unless they have good background knowledge, language skills, and interest in a regular practise of the target language.

The present study was only conducted on students' speaking strategies use with respect to their speaking proficiency. Therefore, future researchers should conduct on students' speaking strategies use with respect to the variables like students' academic achievement, background experience, learning styles and motivation, and their speaking proficiency.

7. Pedagogical Implications

This study has certain pedagogical implications for the curriculum designers, students, teachers, and material developers to give due consideration to the use of students' speaking strategies while they develop authentic tasks. First, the present study can maximize learners' awareness of speaking strategies contributing to learning to speak as a key feature to mastering speaking skills. This can allow learners to become more autonomous and self-directed. Second, the results of this research can motivate English language teachers to seek more educational improvement opportunities to use new teaching methods and strategies to apply them to the classroom. Third, curriculum designers and course developers of the English language need to incorporate oral strategies into the syllabus, modules, oral tasks, or activities. Not only do they need different oral strategies, but they also need to provide more ways to use these strategies. More specifically, the curriculum developers at higher institutions should consider the goal of learning the speaking skills and their application in real-life use of the English language.

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