Enhancing English Speaking Skills: The Role of Learning Strategies among English Majors

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ABSTRACTS

This study investigates the learning strategies employed by English majors to enhance their English-speaking skills, with a focus on potential differences among sophomores, juniors, and seniors. A total of 220 participants completed a thirty-item five-point Likert scale questionnaire. The results revealed that metacognitive, cognitive, and social strategies were utilized more frequently than affective and memory strategies. Notably, the least used strategies included initiating conversations in natural settings and self-evaluating speech performance. These findings highlight a preference for strategies that facilitate structured learning and alleviate communication anxiety, while also indicating variability in strategy use throughout different stages of speaking development.

Keywords: EFL, English majors, learning strategies, SILL, speaking skills

INTRODUCTION

With the rapid acceleration of globalization, English has become an essential component of the "21st-century skill set" and a prerequisite for participation in the global knowledge economy. This trend has led to a significant increase in the demand for English language learning. However, achieving proficiency in English, particularly in speaking, can be a challenging endeavor. Speaking is often regarded as the most difficult of the four language skills due to the cognitive demands of real-time language processing and the pressure of oral interaction (Bygate, 2001). Although teacher support is crucial, numerous studies have highlighted the importance of learners taking an active role in managing their own speaking development through strategic behaviors (Chamot, 2004; Wenden, 1991).

Students exhibit considerable differences in how they absorb and process information when learning a new language; some may prefer visual input, while others may respond better to auditory or kinesthetic experiences. These differences can significantly impact learning outcomes (Reid, 1987; Oxford, 2003). In contemporary language education, learning strategies are vital tools that enable learners to enhance their language proficiency by effectively managing their learning processes. Oxford (1990) defines these strategies as specific actions or techniques employed by learners to make language learning more effective, efficient, and enjoyable. Similarly, Weinstein and Mayer (1983) describe language learning strategies (LLS) as “behaviors and thoughts in which a learner engages, and which are intended to influence the learners’ encoding process” (p. 3). O’Malley and Chamot (1990) also refer to learning strategies as “thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information” (p. 1). The proper selection and application of these strategies have been shown to significantly enhance learners’ speaking proficiency, particularly in EFL contexts where opportunities for authentic communication are often limited (Oxford, 1990; Cohen, 1998).

Numerous studies have explored how learners employ various learning strategies, such as cognitive, metacognitive, social, and compensatory strategies to develop specific language skills, including speaking (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990; Cohen, 1998). Specifically, the use of learning strategies has been found to improve learners' speaking fluency, accuracy, and confidence by aiding them in planning, practicing, and self-evaluating their oral language use.

In Vietnam, various studies have investigated the challenges faced by English majors in developing their speaking skills. For example, Nguyen and Tran (2015) explored factors affecting students' speaking performance at Le Thanh Hien High School, identifying issues such as limited vocabulary and a lack of confidence. Similarly, Vu and Nguyen (2024) shed light on psychological barriers, such as shyness and fear of judgment, alongside structural constraints like inadequate classroom time devoted to speaking practice. While these studies provide valuable insights into the obstacles learners encounter, there is a pressing need for research focusing specifically on the learning strategies employed by English majors to overcome these challenges and enhance their speaking skills. Therefore, this research aims to identify the learning strategies that English majors utilize to improve their speaking performance.

To that end, this study seeks to address the following research question: What learning strategies do English majors use to develop their English-speaking skills?

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive method with a quantitative approach. The population consisted of 220 Vietnamese L1 English majors, categorized as follows: English Studies (55%), English Studies (High Quality Program, 14.55%), English Interpretation and Translation (27.27%), and English Language Teacher Education (3.18%). Participants ranged from sophomores to seniors. A convenience sampling technique was applied, selecting students based on their availability and participation in courses during the data collection period. Specifically, nearly half of the sample comprised seniors (103 students), followed by sophomores (27.7%, 61 students), while juniors represented the smallest group (25.5%, 56 students). A questionnaire was utilized to gather information from respondents.

The questionnaire was adapted from Bouaassria (2016), who employed the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) version 7.0 originally designed by Oxford (1990). The SILL is recognized as an effective diagnostic tool for assessing the specific language learning strategies that students use in learning a foreign language. It has been widely utilized by scholars and researchers worldwide (e.g., Riazi & Rahimi, 2005; Shakarami & Abdullah, 2010; Ruba, Habiba, Amir, Aslam & Kiran, 2014). The thirty-item questionnaire implemented in this research utilized a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ("never true for me") to 5 ("always true for me").

The learning strategies included in the questionnaire were classified into six main categories: memory strategies (items 1, 2) for storing and recalling information, cognitive strategies (items 3, 4, 5, 6) focused on processing language through activities such as summarizing, compensation strategies (items 7, 8, 9) to overcome knowledge gaps using guessing or gestures, metacognitive strategies (items 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17) involving planning and evaluating learning, affective strategies (items 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23) that manage emotions and motivation, and social strategies (items 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30)) that promote learning through interaction (Soliman & Gorospe, 2024).

Closed questionnaire data were statistically analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS version 26) to identify the strategies frequently used by English majors to develop their speaking skills. Descriptive statistics, including frequency counts, means, and percentages, were computed for all questionnaire items. Although the questionnaire was adapted, its validity and reliability were confirmed to some extent. Minor adjustments were made to fit the research context, particularly in replacing the phrase "speaking routines" with "expressions" in item 2. Additionally, a Vietnamese translation of all 30 items was provided to enhance the content validity of the measuring instrument. To ensure the appropriateness of the instrument, a pilot test of the questionnaire was conducted with 50 English majors.

The reliability of the questionnaire data was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha (α) coefficient. According to George and Mallery (2003), Cronbach's Alpha coefficients are categorized as excellent if $\alpha > 0.9$, good if $\alpha > 0.8$, acceptable if $\alpha > 0.7$, questionable if $\alpha > 0.6$, poor if $\alpha > 0.5$, and unacceptable if $\alpha < 0.5$. The pilot test yielded a reliability statistic of 0.88, indicating good reliability for the 30 items.

Following Oxford's (1990) guidelines, the five-point Likert scale used in the questionnaire was interpreted as follows: mean values ranging from 1.0 to 1.4 indicate "never true," 1.5 to 2.4 indicate "generally not true," 2.5

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to 3.4 indicate "somewhat true," 3.5 to 4.4 indicate "generally true," and 4.5 to 5.0 indicate "always true." For analytical purposes, Oxford (1990) further recommended collapsing these five levels into three broader categories of strategy use: low use (1.0–2.4), medium use (2.5–3.4), and high use (3.5–5.0). These classifications were utilized in this study to interpret the participants' reported frequency of strategy use across the six categories.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the percentage of students using each strategy and the mean scores for two key memory strategies.

Table 1. English majors' use of memory strategies

Item	Statement	Percentage (%)					Mean
		1	2	3	4	5	
1	I memorize new words so that I can use them while I am speaking.	0	6.4	30	40.9	22.7	3.80
2	I often review new words, idioms and expressions.	1.8	13.6	37.3	35.9	11.4	3.41

As indicated in Table 1, a significant portion of the total sample reported frequently memorizing new words for use during speaking (item 1), with 40.9% stating this was usually true and 22.7% indicating it was always true. The mean score for this strategy was 3.80, which falls within the high use range. Similarly, nearly half of the participants reported often reviewing new words, idioms, and expressions (item 2), with 35.9% stating this was usually true and 11.4% indicating it was always true. The mean score for this strategy was 3.41, indicating a medium level of use.

Table 2 presents the percentage of students using each cognitive strategy and the corresponding mean scores.

Table 2. English majors' use of cognitive strategies

Item	Statement	Percentage (%)					Mean
		1	2	3	4	5	
3	I say new expressions repeatedly to practice them.	1.4	8.6	25.9	38.2	25.9	3.79
4	I imitate the way native speakers talk.	0.5	6.4	19.5	36.8	36.8	4.03
5	If in natural settings, I tend to initiate conversations in the new language.	10	28.6	30.5	21.4	9.5	2.92
6	When I cannot think of the correct expression to say, I find a different way to express the idea; for example, I use a synonym or describe the idea.	0	2.7	17.7	35.5	44.1	4.21

As shown in Table 2, more than half of the participants reported repeating new expressions to practice them (item 3), with 38.2% stating this was usually true and 25.9% indicating it was always true. Nearly three-quarters of the students imitated the speech patterns of native speakers (item 4), with 36.8% saying this was usually true and another 36.8% indicating it was always true. Additionally, over three-quarters of the respondents found alternative ways to express ideas, such as using synonyms or describing concepts when they couldn't recall the correct expression (item 6), with 35.5% stating this was usually true and 41.1% indicating it was always true. Overall, these three strategies had mean scores ranging from 3.79 to 4.21, reflecting high usage.

In contrast, item 5 revealed that over half of the respondents did not usually initiate conversations in the new language in natural settings, with 28.6% indicating this was usually not true and 30.5% stating it was somewhat true. The mean score of 2.92 for this strategy indicated a medium level of use.

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Table 3 shows the percentage of students employing each compensation strategy and the corresponding mean scores.

Table 3. English majors' use of compensation strategies

Item	Statement	Percentage (%)					Mean
		1	2	3	4	5	
7	If I am speaking and cannot think of the right expression, I use gestures or switch back to my own language momentarily.	2.7	12.7	21.8	33.6	29.1	3.74
8	I ask the other person to tell me the right word if I cannot think of it in conversation.	3.2	11.4	29.5	38.2	17.7	3.56
9	I make up new words if I do not know the right ones.	25.5	25.9	25.9	19.1	3.6	2.50

As shown in Table 3, well over half of the students reported frequently using gestures or temporarily switching back to their native language when they couldn't find the right expression (item 7), with 33.6% indicating this was usually true and 29.1% stating it was always true. Similarly, more than half of the participants reported asking others for the correct word during conversations when they couldn't recall it (item 8), with 38.2% saying this was usually true and 17.7% indicating it was always true. The mean scores for these two strategies were 3.74 and 3.56, respectively, indicating a high level of usage.

In contrast, item 9 revealed that students generally did not create new words when they lacked the appropriate ones, with 25.5% stating this was never or almost never true, 25.9% indicating it was usually not true, and 25.9% saying it was somewhat true. The mean score of 2.50 for this strategy indicated a medium level of usage.

In sum, the strategies in the compensation category demonstrated a range of usage, with items 7 and 8 reflecting high levels and item 9 reflecting a medium level. This suggests that respondents frequently employed these strategies to minimize communication breakdowns.

Table 4 presents the percentage of students using each strategy and the corresponding mean scores.

Table 4. English majors' use of metacognitive strategies

Item	Statement	Percentage (%)					Mean
		1	2	3	4	5	
10		I plan my goals for speaking proficiency, how proficient I want to become or how I might want to use the language in the long run.	1.8	10	30.9	40.9	16.4
11		I plan what I am going to accomplish in a speaking activity.	1.8	11.8	30.9	40	15.5
12		I prepare for an upcoming language speaking task by considering the nature of the task, what I have to know and my current language skills.	2.3	6.4	25.9	40.5	25
13		I clearly identify the purpose of a speaking activity.	1.4	7.3	23.2	40	28.2
14		I try to notice my speaking errors and find out the reasons for them.	0.5	7.3	15.5	42.3	34.3
15		I learn from my mistakes in using the new language.	0.9	3.2	12.7	44.1	39.1	4.17
16	I evaluate the general progress I have made in speaking by recording my own speech and listening to the recording to find out how I sound compared to native speakers.	7.3	27.3	25	25	15.5	3.14	16

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17	I evaluate the general progress I have made in speaking by counting the number of times I am asked to repeat something.	13.2	30.5	30.9	18.6	6.8	2.75	17

As shown in Table 4, a majority of participants reported frequently engaging in various metacognitive strategies. More than half usually set goals for their speaking proficiency (item 10), planned what they wanted to achieve in speaking activities (item 11), and prepared for upcoming speaking tasks (item 12), with mean scores between 3.55 and 3.86. Additionally, over two-thirds often identified the purpose of a speaking activity (item 13).

Most notably, a large proportion of students tried to notice their speaking errors and learn from them, as reflected by the high mean scores for items 14 and 15 (4.03 and 4.17). In contrast, self-evaluation strategies such as recording their own speech or counting repetition requests (items 16 and 17) were used less often, with mean scores of 3.14 and 2.75, indicating medium use.

In sum, the data suggest that English majors frequently utilized most metacognitive strategies, though self-assessment practices were less common.

Table 5 summarizes the percentage of students employing each strategy and their corresponding mean scores.

Table 5. English majors' use of affective strategies

Item	**Statement**	**Percentage (%)**					**Mean**
		1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	
18	I try to relax whenever I feel anxious about speaking English.	2.3	5.5	21.8	39.5	30.9	3.91
19	I make encouraging statements to myself so that I will continue to try hard and do my best while speaking English.	1.4	4.1	15	37.7	41.8	4.15
20	I give myself a tangible reward when I feel that I speak perfectly.	21.8	21.8	25	21.4	10	2.76
21	I pay attention to physical signs of stress that might influence my performance while speaking.	4.1	12.3	28.6	33.6	21.4	3.56
22	I keep a private diary or journal where I write my feelings about speaking English.	45.5	24.5	15.5	9.1	5.5	2.05
23	I talk to someone I trust about my attitudes and feelings concerning speaking English.	10.9	20	17.3	27.3	24.5	3.35

As Table 5 shows, a large proportion of students reported using affective strategies to manage their feelings while speaking English. Nearly 70% often tried to relax when feeling anxious, and close to 80% made encouraging statements to themselves to maintain motivation (items 18 and 19, both with high mean scores). About half of the participants paid attention to physical signs of stress (item 21), and a similar number considered talking to someone they trust about their feelings (item 23).

On the other hand, almost half of the students rarely gave themselves tangible rewards for successful speaking (item 20), and very few kept a diary or journal to reflect on their feelings (item 22), as reflected in the lower mean scores for these items.

In sum, the use of affective strategies ranged from medium to high, with most students relying on relaxation and self-encouragement to cope with the challenges of speaking English

Table 6 presents the percentage of students using each social strategy and the corresponding mean scores.

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Table 6. English majors' use of social strategies

Item	Statement	Percentage (%)					Mean
		1	2	3	4	5	
24	I ask other people to verify that I have said something correctly.	1.8	7.7	21.8	38.2	30.5	3.88
25	I ask other people to correct my pronunciation.	2.7	10.9	19.5	36.8	30	3.8
26	I work with other language learners to practice speaking English.	4.5	9.5	21.4	34.5	30	3.76
27	I have a regular language learning partner with whom I speak English regularly.	20.5	25	21.4	19.1	14.1	2.81
28	In conversation with others in the new language, I ask questions in order to be as involved as possible.	5.9	21.4	35	25.9	11.8	3.16
29	I try to learn about the culture of the place where English is spoken.	1.8	17.7	30	32.3	18.2	3.47
30	I pay close attention to the thoughts and feelings of other people with whom I interact in English.	0.9	5.5	19.1	45	29.5	3.97

As can be seen in Table 6, a substantial proportion of students reported actively engaging with others to improve their English-speaking skills. Specifically, most frequently asked others to verify their speech and correct their pronunciation, and over half regularly worked with peers to practice speaking. Additionally, more than three quarters paid close attention to the thoughts and feelings of their conversation partners. These strategies were all rated highly, with mean scores ranging from 3.76 to 3.97.

On the other hand, nearly half of the students indicated they did not have a regular language learning partner, and many expressed hesitancy or fear about making mistakes in front of others. A moderate proportion also reported only sometimes asking questions to stay involved in conversations or trying to learn more about the culture where English is spoken, reflected in medium mean scores (2.81–3.47) for these items.

In sum, these findings suggest that while English majors commonly use social strategies that involve direct interaction and support, strategies involving regular partnerships or deeper cultural engagement were less frequently used.

Table 7. English majors' most frequently used strategies for Speaking skills

No.	Learning strategies	Mean
1	Cognitive strategies	3.74
2	Metacognitive strategies	3.61
3	Memory strategies	3.6
4	Social strategies	3.55
5	Affective strategies	3.3
6	Compensation strategies	3.27

As shown in Table 7, among the six strategy categories, cognitive strategies were the most frequently employed, with a mean score of 3.74. They were followed closely by metacognitive strategies (M = 3.61) and memory strategies (M = 3.60). Social strategies were also used at a relatively high level (M = 3.55). In contrast, affective strategies (M = 3.30) and compensation strategies (M = 3.27) were employed less frequently, though still within the medium-use range.

In sum, these results indicate that students exhibited a balanced use of both direct and indirect learning strategies, leaning slightly more towards those involving mental processing and self-regulation. While the mean scores reflect regular engagement with these strategies, the variation across categories suggests that not all aspects of strategic learning were utilized equally, particularly those related to emotional control and communication repair.

In addition, to compare the use of learning strategies among English-majored sophomores, juniors, and seniors using Levene's test for equality of variances followed by ANOVA for most strategy types.

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Table 8. Levene and ANOVA test of the strategies used

Strategy use	Sig. level of Levene's test	Sig. level of ANOVA test
Memory strategies	0.509	0.346
Cognitive strategies	0.060	0.185
Compensation strategies	0.107	0.026
Metacognitive strategies	0.013	-
Affective strategies	0.145	0.077
Social strategies	0.160	0.820

For memory, cognitive, affective, and social strategies, the Levene's test results indicated equal variances across groups, making ANOVA appropriate. However, in each case, the ANOVA yielded significance values greater than 0.05, indicating no statistically significant differences among the year groups.

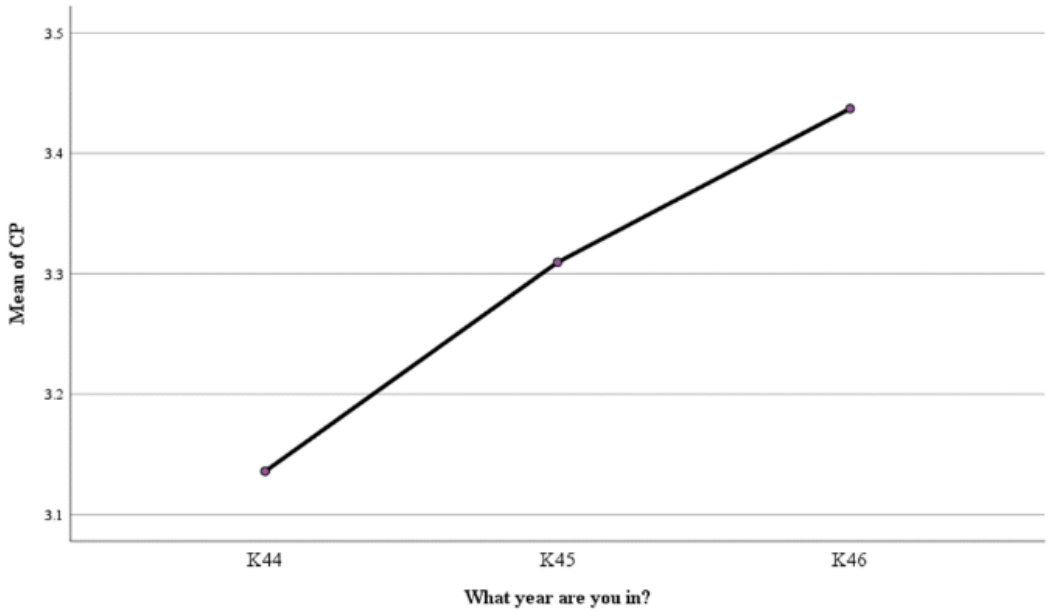
For metacognitive strategies, Levene's test showed unequal variances, so the Tamhane's T2 post hoc test was applied. The results again showed no significant differences among the three groups.

Table 9. Tamhane's T2 test of metacognitive strategies

(I) Group	(J) Group	Sig. level of Tamhane's test
Sophomores	Juniors	0.992
	Seniors	0.203
Juniors	Sophomores	0.992
	Seniors	0.599
Seniors	Sophomores	0.203
	Juniors	0.599

In contrast, for compensation strategies, both Levene's test and ANOVA were suitable, and the ANOVA revealed a significant difference (sig = 0.026 < 0.05). Further analysis (Figure 1) indicated that sophomores reported the highest use of compensation strategies (K46), followed by juniors (K45), with seniors reporting the lowest use (K44).

Figure 1. Differences in the use of compensation strategies among the English-majored sophomores, juniors and seniors



In summary, the only significant difference by year of study was found in compensation strategy use, while other strategy types showed similar usage across all groups.

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DISCUSSION

Internal strategy use: Memory, cognitive and metacognitive strategies

The quantitative results of this study revealed that most participants primarily employed memory strategies in their English-speaking learning, with a mean score of 3.74. These strategies facilitate the transfer of information into long-term memory, aiding recall for communication (Bölükbaş, 2013). While some participants rated these strategies positively, over 30% expressed a neutral stance (M = 3), indicating varied perceptions regarding their effectiveness in supporting speaking development. This neutral response may reflect unfamiliarity with memory techniques or a preference for alternative strategies, such as metacognitive or social approaches (Colombo et al., 2024). Indeed, Colombo et al. found that although memory strategies assist in vocabulary acquisition, many learners prioritize interactive methods that better simulate communicative situations. Similarly, Girma, Tesema, and Berhanu (2025) argue that memory strategies are most beneficial when integrated into communicative tasks rather than taught in isolation. Thus, the mixed perceptions in this study underscore the significance of contextual application; learners may appreciate memory strategies more when embedded in meaningful speaking practices rather than through rote memorization.

Constructivist theories emphasize that memory strategies (e.g., rehearsal, organization) are most effective when embedded in communicative contexts rather than rote drills. This aligns with research on mnemonic and cognitive learning methods, such as auto-generated keyword mnemonic systems for vocabulary, which demonstrate improved memory retention when used within meaningful tasks (Lee & Lan, 2023). Additionally, young emergent bilinguals show enhanced use of metacognitive strategies in translanguaging settings, supporting deeper internal processing of input (Leonet et al., 2024).

Cognitive strategies were actively employed by the majority of students, particularly techniques like repeating new expressions, imitating native speakers, and paraphrasing ideas using synonyms. These items received high mean scores (ranging from 3.79 to 4.21), suggesting that learners engage in rehearsal-based strategies to internalize linguistic patterns. However, a notable contrast emerged in that over half the participants indicated they do not typically initiate conversations in natural settings, leading to a lower mean score for this item (M = 2.92), indicating medium usage. This discrepancy between internal cognitive strategies and external communicative application raises a significant pedagogical concern. Although learners may possess tools for effective language processing, their reluctance to use English spontaneously suggests the presence of affective barriers such as anxiety, self-consciousness, and fear of negative evaluation (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Oxford, 2003). Recent studies support the notion that internal processing alone is insufficient without real-world practice and affective support. As Suseno (2023) highlights, EFL students often struggle with oral expression due to anxiety, limited vocabulary, and fear of making mistakes. His research demonstrated that integrating peer paraphrasing and mimicry techniques in a structured, supportive learning environment can help students gradually build fluency and confidence. By paraphrasing peers' utterances and participating in presentations and Q&A sessions, learners practiced language production while feeling safer experimenting with spontaneous speech. Therefore, confidence and communicative interaction are deeply interconnected, and fluency can be cultivated when students have the opportunity to reflect, mimic, and rephrase without fear of making errors.

As for metacognitive strategies, the evaluation of eight items in this category revealed varying levels of usage, with medium (items 16 and 17) and high usage (items 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15). This indicates that students frequently employed these strategies for autonomous learning. Forbes and Fisher (2015) support this finding, noting that participants showed increased valuing and utilization of metacognitive strategies. This suggests that English majors actively engage in their learning processes by setting goals and planning accordingly, which provides clear direction for their progress. Additionally, students exhibited a high level of metacognitive awareness, especially in recognizing their mistakes and leveraging them for improvement. As highlighted by Oxford (1990), metacognitive strategies enhance students' speaking activities through planning and monitoring, ultimately improving their performance over time through self-evaluation. Gani et al. (2015) share a similar view, emphasizing that metacognitive strategies help learners regulate cognitive abilities and assess their speaking progress toward achieving communicative competence. Encouraging planning and organizing

strategies is essential for successful learning, as they influence motivation and achievement (Shannon, 2008). Moreover, Tan and Tan (2010) found that successful students dedicate more time to monitoring and evaluating their learning, contributing to academic achievement and lifelong learning. Those who engage in self-evaluation tend to demonstrate greater confidence in using a second language (Chu, 2008).

Students frequently rely on memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies reflecting strong internal regulation of their language learning. This is in line with a study by Domínguez et al. (2025) who found cognitive and metacognitive strategies were the strongest predictors of English proficiency. Metacognitive strategies such as planning, monitoring, and evaluating were particularly impactful, as validated by Teng and Mizumoto (2024), who developed and confirmed a robust metacognitive vocabulary-learning scale with 776 Chinese EFL students.

External strategy use: Social and affective strategies

In the affective category, nearly half of the sample reported that they almost never rewarded themselves for speaking perfectly (item 20), and only a small fraction maintained a private diary or journal to express their feelings about speaking English (item 23). This suggests that, to some extent, English majors do not find these strategies appropriate or useful for managing emotional challenges in speaking. Generally, the utilization of strategies in the affective group ranged from medium (items 20, 22, and 23) to high (items 18, 19, and 21), illustrating that students largely approved of using affective strategies to manage their negative feelings and psychological states. This contrasts with Yunus (2014), who found that affective strategies were the least utilized among respondents. According to Lavasani and Faryadres (2011), Oxford classified these strategies as essential for fostering self-esteem and creating positive values in language learning (as cited in Zakaria, Hashim, Yunus, 2019). English learners are encouraged to incorporate this strategy category, as it aids in developing self-confidence (Gani et al., 2015) and helps control feelings, motivation, and attitudes related to learning (Bölükbaş, 2013). Research shows affective strategies such as self-encouragement and stress management are used more when classrooms provide emotional support. Learners report a higher use of positive self-talk, peer encouragement, and teacher facilitation in environments where supportive social norms are present (Nguyen & Vu, 2024). Constructivist approaches emphasize that teacher empathy, scaffolding, and modeling of affect regulation are essential for building learners' motivation and willingness to communicate.

In the social category, almost half of the students reported not having a regular language partner to practice English with (item 27). While this data does not directly indicate the reasons for this behavior, it may be related to their reluctance to initiate conversations, as reflected in item 5, where more than half of the participants rarely initiated speaking in natural settings. This suggests a potential pattern of limited social interaction for English practice. Although the study did not explicitly measure affective variables such as shyness or anxiety, previous research has shown that EFL learners often avoid social language use due to fear of making mistakes or being negatively evaluated (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Therefore, affective factors may have played a role in students' reluctance to engage in regular speaking partnerships. In summary, the strategies in the social category exhibited medium to high utilization, indicating that many students leveraged these strategies to enhance their speaking performance. This is understandable, as speaking typically involves interaction between individuals—speakers and listeners—which aligns with the social function of conversation. The emphasis is on the speakers and their self-presentation, rather than solely on the message (Richards, 2008). This finding is consistent with Yunus (2014) and Lourdunathan and Menon (2017), who reported significant use of interaction strategies among learners.

According to Oxford (1990), social strategies promote mutual understanding among speakers, highlighting the need for regular practice of these strategies. The moderate to high use of social strategies underscores the interactive essence of speaking and aligns with sociolinguistic views that see language as a tool for social participation and identity negotiation (Zhou & Wei, 2022). However, learners often hesitate to initiate authentic conversation due to anxiety, perceived lack of proficiency, or limited opportunities, an insight confirmed by phenomenological research with Vietnamese learners who cited constrained vocabulary, low confidence, and anxiety as main barriers (Nguyen & Vu, 2024). From a constructivist perspective, these findings point to the importance of creating supportive learning communities where experimentation and negotiation of meaning are encouraged.

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Regarding compensation strategies, they represent both internal problem-solving, such as mentally searching for synonyms and external interaction, including gestures or requesting help from interlocutors. In the context of spoken communication, these strategies often bridge the individual and social dimensions of language use, underscoring their central role in managing real-time communicative challenges. Students rarely created new words when they did not know the appropriate ones (see item 9). This is understandable, as many EFL learners find it challenging to coin new terms for conversation. Instead, they typically utilize available resources, such as looking up synonyms or describing ideas to convey their points, which aligns with the strategies commonly employed by English majors (see item 6). As noted by Ruswandi and Aprilianti (2024), university students often avoid generative compensation methods unless they possess a strong command of the language or feel socially comfortable in their speaking environments. Similarly, Salini (2024) highlights that compensation strategies like code-switching and gestural support are more frequently employed when learners lack immediate access to target vocabulary but wish to maintain interactional flow. This supports Oxford's (2003) assertion that learners gravitate toward compensation strategies that alleviate anxiety and cognitive load during real-time communication. The underuse of creative or generative compensation (e.g., coining new words) may also reflect learners' limited metalinguistic awareness and fear of negative evaluation (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994).

Year-Level Differences in Strategy Use

The finding that compensation strategy use significantly differed by year of study (being highest among sophomores and lowest among seniors) invites meaningful interpretation through the lens of established and contemporary language learning theories, further reinforced by recent empirical research.

First, sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) provides a compelling lens for understanding these differences. Compensation strategies function as mediational tools that allow less proficient learners to bridge gaps in their language knowledge, facilitating participation in the target language community and real-time communication. Sophomores, who are typically earlier in their language development, are still operating within their Zone of Proximal Development and therefore depend more heavily on such strategies to scaffold their communicative competence. As learners progress through their academic years, their accumulated experience and increased proficiency naturally lead to less reliance on compensatory techniques, a pattern supported by Nash and Contreras (2025), who found that explicit compensation strategy instruction improved fluency and reduced anxiety in adult EFL learners but was especially beneficial for those with lower proficiency.

Second, cognitive theories such as Anderson's Information Processing Model (1983) suggest that early-stage learners require conscious, effortful strategies, including compensation to cope with communication breakdowns. Over time, repeated exposure leads to the automatization of language processing. Rachmawati (2013) found compensation strategies to be the most frequently used by all learners, but more varied and flexible among high performers, reflecting a developmental trajectory from strategy reliance toward automatic, internalized language use. Similarly, Feng and Shirvani (2021) observed that while EFL learners commonly used compensation strategies in authentic oral communication, the frequency and flexibility of strategy use tended to decrease as proficiency increased.

Kesen Mutlu et al. (2019) further reported that non-verbal signals and circumlocution were the most frequent compensation strategies among university EFL students, while avoidance and word coinage were least used; they also noted that self-efficacy did not significantly affect overall strategy use, suggesting that the need for compensation is closely tied to proficiency and communication demands rather than just confidence. Mistar et al. (2014) and Safari and Fitriati (2016) confirm that compensation strategies are a mainstay for lower-level learners but give way to more advanced strategies as learners' skills and confidence grow.

Constructivist learning perspectives also reinforce these findings, suggesting learners in earlier years are actively constructing their communicative competence, experimenting with compensation as they test hypotheses and negotiate meaning. As students mature academically, they consolidate their knowledge, gain confidence, and become less reliant on compensatory tactics, a shift documented in the literature as a move from "survival" strategies to more sophisticated, direct, and metacognitive approaches.

In sum, the significant year-of-study difference in compensation strategy use reflects a well-documented developmental process in second language acquisition. Sophomores' higher usage of compensation strategies can be attributed to their ongoing need for scaffolding as they consolidate foundational skills. As students progress to junior and senior years, increased proficiency and confidence allow for more direct engagement with the language, reducing reliance on compensatory mechanisms. This pattern suggests that language programs should emphasize the teaching and flexible use of compensation strategies at lower levels, while fostering the internalization of linguistic knowledge and the development of advanced, self-regulated strategies as learners advance.

CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that a majority of participants in this study actively utilized a variety of learning strategies in their EFL speaking, contributing positively to their speaking fluency and accuracy. Given the crucial role of learning strategies in language acquisition, English majors are encouraged to enhance their use of these strategies to effectively develop their English-speaking skills. Not all reported strategies fell within the high-use range, suggesting that consistent practice of these strategies is needed for language learners' success. It is important to recognize that learners have diverse styles and methods when acquiring a foreign language. Therefore, students should identify the strategies that best align with their learning styles to maximize their effectiveness.

Additionally, the study revealed that most students did not engage in self-evaluation after speaking, highlighting a need for teachers to guide students in assessing or reflecting on their own performances. This practice can help students address weaknesses and build on their strengths. Furthermore, teachers should reinforce existing strategies used in English speaking tasks, introduce new strategies with explanations of their appropriate contexts, and provide opportunities for students to practice them. Encouraging students to select strategies that align with their individual characteristics and learning styles can also enhance their learning experience.

Regarding the ten strategies that fell into the medium-use range, it is recommended that students use them more frequently, as they are beneficial for developing speaking abilities. Specifically, the findings indicated that students often hesitate to initiate conversations in English in natural settings, such as interacting with foreigners. This may be due to a lack of topical knowledge. Therefore, it is suggested that students broaden their knowledge base to make conversations more engaging and realistic.

This study is subject to several limitations. The reliance on self-reported questionnaire data may introduce social desirability bias, and the absence of qualitative triangulation, such as interviews, limits the depth of interpretive insight. Furthermore, differences in instructional approach across courses were not controlled for, which may have influenced strategy use. Future research should employ mixed methods and account for instructional variation to yield a more comprehensive understanding.

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