

Exploring Student's Communication Strategies Through Different Learning Styles

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Abstract

Being able to communicate effectively is the aim of every language learner. This is determined by various factors, and one of them is the learning style employed by the learners. Learners may adopt different strategies in communicating based on their learning styles to help them achieve successful interaction. Hence, the study aims to investigate the influence of different learning styles used by students on their communication strategies. This quantitative study adapted a survey on oral communication strategies. The survey consists of six sections with a total of 26 items. A total of 171 respondents from a public university responded to the survey which was administered using a Google Form. The data gathered were analyzed descriptively using SPSS. The results revealed that learners who use different learning styles are more inclined to use certain strategies in oral communication to be more confident in speaking. The findings imply interesting implications on the use of oral communication strategies in the ESL classrooms.

Keywords: Oral Communication Strategies, Learning Style, ESL classroom, ESL Learners

Introduction

Background of Study

Communication is deemed as crucial in every aspect of life. It involves an exchange of information between at least two interlocutors through various mediums of communication, such as speaking, writing, listening or reading. In Malaysia, speaking is regarded as one of the difficult skills to acquire (Nadesan & Shah, 2020). Even though English has been taught as early as in primary school years, the acquisition of the language is still considered low. In learning to communicate effectively, learners may face difficulties in conveying what they want to say. These difficulties can be caused by several factors such as limited vocabulary, anxiety,

embarrassment and even lack of confidence in speaking (Aziz & Kashinathan, 2021). This is especially true when they need to speak in front of a large audience (Ibrahim et. al., 2022). Thus, learners employ various communication strategies to help them overcome the challenges. Oral communication strategies commonly employed include avoidance and compensatory strategies, as proposed by (Dornyei, 1995).

In the field of second language learning, an abundance of research has been conducted to explore various factors that can influence learners' ability to be confident in using the language (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017). Apart from external factors that can influence student mastery of the language, more attention has been given on student individual differences. In particular, student learning style is one variable that plays a prominent role in language teaching and learning. Each learner has preferences or inclinations on how to obtain knowledge. Kolb (1984) categorized learners into four basic learning styles, namely accommodative, assimilative, divergent and convergent. Thus, it is important to explore how these different learning styles affect students' use of communication strategies to avoid communication breakdown and achieve successful communication.

Statement of Problem

Researchers that study L2 education frequently investigate a range of variables that may influence or promote L2 learning. Individual learner variances have received increased focus in recent years. They have been considered as elements that may affect L2 learning. Individual differences in learning are traits that are particularly exclusive to each person (Roohani et. al., 2020). One of the affective elements associated with individual learner differences is emotional intelligence (EI) and has been deemed as an essential affective variable in L2 learning and teaching (Goleman, 1998). Researchers have linked emotional intelligence to learning foreign languages, pointing out its crucial role in fostering learners' cognitive processes, independence, and learning process (Pishghadam, 2009). As a result, EI has been seen by many academics as a predictor of success and achievement (e.g., Goleman, 1998). This is because EI is the confluence of a person's emotions and cognition and entails a set of abilities and skills that "encourage the assessment, management, and use of emotions in reasoning" (Mayer & Geher, 1996). In addition, learning style preferences is another key issue in the learner-centered pedagogical framework. Learners with diverse learning preferences may exhibit varying reactions to various L2 learning/teaching approaches, including classroom teaching strategies for learning ESL. At present, people are driven by a strong desire to accomplish something and to satisfy their needs, they openly share their thoughts and opinions with others. As a result, people must develop their communication abilities if they are to realise their aspirations, wishes, and objectives. The ability to communicate effectively is crucial in today's society, and success in one's chosen field depends on one's ability to do so. Speaking is therefore the most crucial language ability out of the four in order to effectively communicate in today's globalised society. Since English is spoken all around the world, learning its communication skills is essential for students who want to succeed in their chosen fields. So L2 learners need to utilise deliberate strategies to promote communication hence developing their communication skills. According to Roohani et.al (2020), L2 learners can enhance their communicative language skills by employing specific strategies and the strategies may vary based on the learners' preference of learning styles. L2 proficiency and achievement are tied to the appropriate employment of communication strategies (Mulyani, 2018). Students that enrol in the L2 class have a range of learning styles (Khany & Aliabadi,

2016). Therefore, mismatches between learners' learning preferences and the communication strategies employed in L2 classrooms may result in the learners' low learning quality, their negative attitudes toward the class, and their low L2 achievement (Dansieh et.al., 2021). Similarly, language learning techniques help second-language learners become independent and boost self-confidence to successfully accomplish a variety of language tasks (Rezaee et.al., 2018). Therefore, it makes sense to conduct a study in ESL context to find out how different learning styles employed by students influence their use of oral communication strategies. This investigation is done to answer the following questions:

- RQ1- How does diverging learning style influence students' communication strategies?
- RQ2- How does assimilating learning style influence students' communication strategies?
- RQ3- How does converging learning style influence students' communication strategies?
- RQ4- How does accommodating learning style influence students' communication strategies?

Literature Review

What are Communication Strategies

Beginning in the early 1970's, the idea of communication strategies (CSs) started to develop due to the problems faced by L2 speakers in communicating. The primary purpose of CSs is to deal with difficulties and communication breakdowns. Language learners use CSs to make up for their language deficiencies in order to accomplish a specific communication objective. The idea of CSs was initially presented and included as one of Selinker's (1972) five key processes of second language learners' interlanguage systems. From an inter-individual, interactional perspective, Tarone (1980) defines CSs as "the mutual attempts of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in a context where the necessary meaning structures appear to not be shared." Although there isn't complete consensus on what CSs are, many academics agree on a workable definition: "a systematic approach utilised by a speaker to explain his [or her] meaning when faced with some obstacles" (Corder, 1981). The research of strategic competence by Canale and Swain (1980) is one of the most significant following studies of CSs. Later research used their idea of strategic competence as a starting point for identifying and categorising CSs.

Challenges in Using Communication Strategies

Because of their imperfect command of the target language, L2 speakers sometimes struggle to express themselves (Hedge, 2000). They utilise CSs to assist them to get beyond some of the challenges they have in oral communication as a result of their limited language skills. Previous literature has shown that many have investigated and proposed challenges in using CSs.

According to Putri (2013), a given strategy's utilisation is influenced by the learners' attitudes about it. If the learners are positive about it, they have a higher chance of using the strategies and vice versa. Learners' level of proficiency is another challenge in using CSs. According to Nakatani (2005), with the aid of their linguistic expertise, students with high language proficiency were better able to select the communication strategies that would work best for them while speaking in the target language, but students with poor language proficiency were

unable to do the same tasks. Another prominent challenge in utilising communication strategies is the psychological barriers. Their use of CSs is hampered by their inherent shyness, reticent nature, and fear of embarrassment (Aziz & Kashinathan, 2021).

Past Studies

Past Studies of Successful Use of Communication Strategies

For most people, the main goal of learning a foreign language is to be able to communicate effectively. There has been a lot of research on communication techniques, including work by Bialystok (1990), who analyses them in depth for usage with second languages, and Dornyei (1995), mentioned in Brown (2000), who provides a clear taxonomy of them.

A study on the teachability of EFL communication strategies was carried out in a university in Taiwan. It aims to examine how communication strategy instruction actually works in the EFL classroom context. The participants were a senior class of 24 English majors where they took the oral test and then received explicit strategy instruction to help them effectively employ communication strategies. Participants took the post-test following a 15-week period of strategy instruction. The results of the oral test and the communication efficiency scale were analysed using a paired t-test. According to the research, systematic strategy education can help EFL learners communicate more effectively and employ their communication strategies more often.

Another study by Inkaew & Thumawongsa (2018) looks at how oral communication skills and strategic competency are affected by education in communication strategies for EFL students. The subjects were 89 Srinakharinwirot University first-year English majors, including 19 B.Ed. students and 70 B.A. students. The data were examined using Tarone's proposed framework for communication strategies (1977). The results showed that the CSs utilised by the various level students varied significantly. According to the study's findings, higher-level students favoured risk-taking techniques including circumlocution and clarification requests, whereas lower-level students tended to use topic avoidance and body language. In short, students of different levels use CSs differently.

Past Studies of Challenges in Using Communication Strategies

A sheer volume of studies have been conducted to investigate the challenges in using communication strategies. The study by Ahmed & Pawar (2018), revealed that the respondents' oral proficiency is weak as most of them tend to stop their speaking activity or change to their mother tongue rather than using useful communicative strategies. It indicates that students are not aware of the strategies in the communication that will help them in the speaking process. According to Jahbel (2019), Libyan students encounter many serious speaking problems in the target language. This is due to their anxiety, motivation, and lack of exposure to the target language. Thus, he suggested that teachers should expose the communication strategies to students in a language classroom in order to enhance their communicative competence. Hence, this study will explore students' communicative strategies through different learning styles.

Conceptual Framework



Figure 1- Conceptual Framework of the Study

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of the Study. This study is rooted from Kolb's (1976) learning styles. The styles are then mirrored to fit the strategies by Endler (1980) as well as Yaman and Kavasoglu (2013). Diverging learning styles learners are prone to use fluency oriented strategies. Next, assimilating styles learners focus on accuracy oriented strategies, Converging style learners use negotiation for meaning making and finally, accommodating styles learners use social affective and message reduction.

Diverging (Through Fluency Oriented Strategies)

Divergent learners perform best when they are able to view concrete situations from various perspectives (Kolb & Kolb, 2013). They tend to observe others and gather information to help them perform better at their tasks. Divergent learners who use fluency oriented strategies tend to be more aware of what they say to others and how they convey their intended meaning.

Assimilating (Through Accuracy Oriented Strategies)

According to Kolb (2013), Reflective Observation and Abstract Conceptualization are two skills that assimilators excel at. One of their major skills is the ability to comprehend and develop theoretical models. They tend to be less concerned with the practical applications of theories and are more interested in abstract concepts than in people. Those who work in math and the fundamental sciences are more likely to have this kind of learning style. Additionally, assimilators like jobs that require planning and investigation.

Converging (Through Negotiation for Meaning Strategies)

According to Kolb (1984), converging is one of the four quadrants of learning style. In converging, learners conceptualise information in an abstract way before acting on it (thinking

and doing). Those tasks that "demand true justified knowledge, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation" are referred to as convergent tasks (Skehan, 1996). Convergent tasks allow for negotiation of meaning strategies as they enable learners to come to an agreement so that a workable solution may be developed (Wegerif et al., 1999).

Accommodating (Through Social-Affective Strategies & Message Reduction

Accommodating is another strategy introduced by Kolb (1984) in his experiential learning theory. In accommodating, the learner processes knowledge by feeling and doing while perceiving it through tangible experience. In social-affective strategies, learners utilise this technique to address the emotional and sociocultural difficulties that they have in the communication process (Oxford, 1990). The use of social-affective strategies is in accordance with Kolb's accommodating learning style where learners who experience communication breakdowns know how to handle their emotions and interact with others.

Methodology

This quantitative study is done to investigate how students' learning styles affect their communication strategies. 171 participants were purposely chosen from a public university in Malaysia. The instrument (refer to table 1) used is a survey adapted from Endler (1980) as well as Yaman and Kavasoglu (2013). Apart from the demographic profile in Section A, Section B has 6 items on social-affective strategies. Section C has 6 items on fluency oriented strategies, Section D has 4 items on negotiation for meaning strategies, Section E has 5 items on accuracy oriented strategies and Section F has 5 items on message reduction, orientation and non-verbal strategies.

Table 1

Distribution of Items in Survey

SECTION	FACTORS	NO OF ITEMS
B	SOCIAL-AFFECTIVE STRATEGIES	6
C	FLUENCY ORIENTED STRATEGIES	6
D	NEGOTIATION FOR MEANING STRATEGIES	4
E	ACCURACY ORIENTED STRATEGIES	5
F	MESSAGE REDUCTION ,ORIENTATION AND NON-VERBAL STRATEGIES	5

Table 2

Reliability Statistics

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.922	26

Data is collected via a Google Form and analysed using SPSS version 26. With reference to Table 2, the SPSS analysis revealed a Cronbach analysis of .922, thus showing a high internal reliability for the instrument. Data is presented in terms of percentage for the demographic profile and mean scores to answer the research questions.

Findings

Findings for Demographic Profile

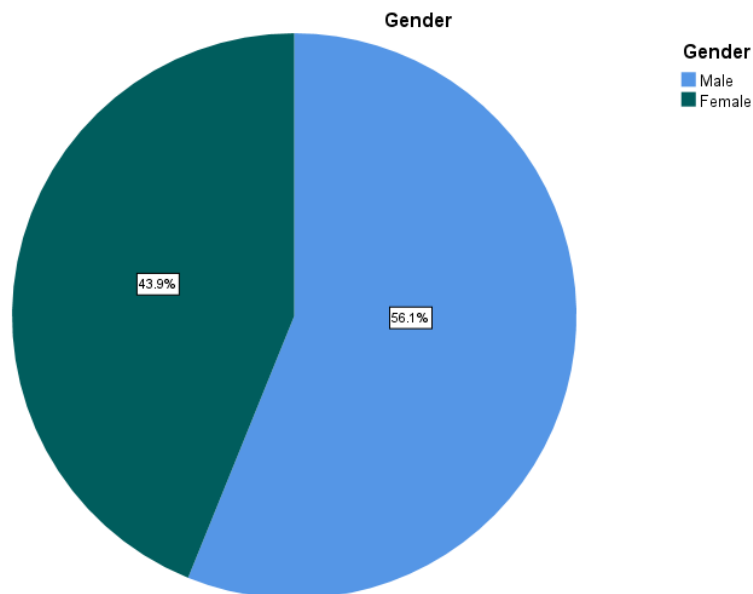


Figure 2: Percentage for Gender

This section presents the demographic profile of the respondents in the study. Figure 2 shows the distribution of gender of the respondents. Based on Figure 2, among 171 respondents, 56.1% were females and 43.9% were males.

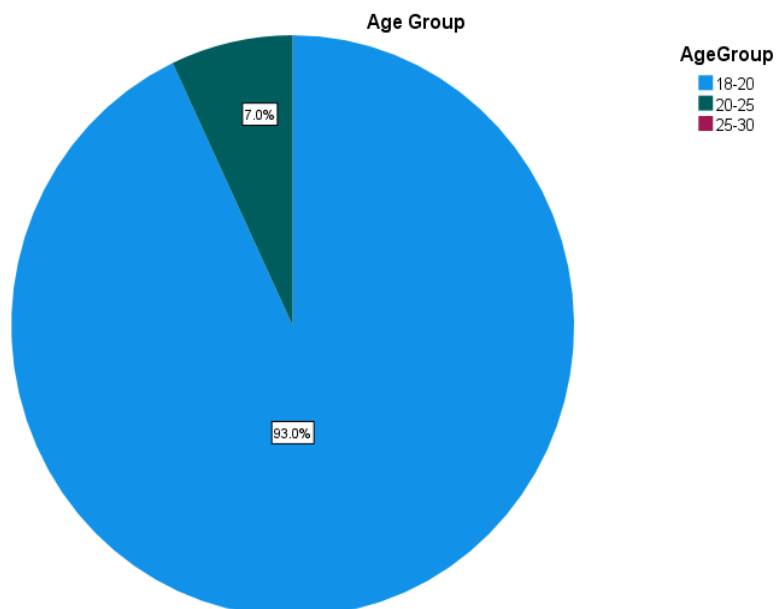


Figure 3: Percentage for Age Group

With reference to Figure 3, the vast majority of the respondents are between 18-20 years old (93%), while another 7% is between the ages of 20-25 years old.

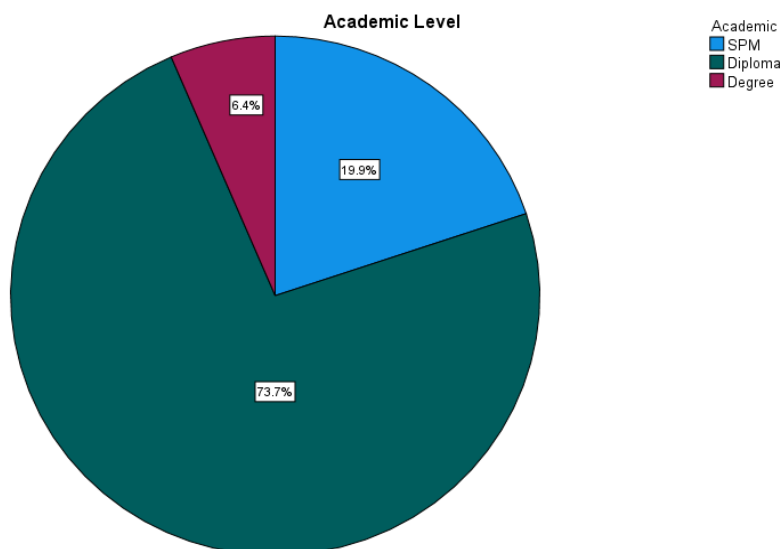


Figure 4: Percentage for Highest Academic Level

Figure 4 illustrates the percentage for Highest Academic Level. 6.4% of the respondents are Degree holders, followed by SPM holders with 19.9%. The biggest percentage is for Diploma holders with 73.7%.

Findings for Diverging Learning Style

This section presents data to answer the first research question which is to look into the influence of diverging learning style on students’ communication strategies. In the context of this study, learners displaying diverging learning styles depend on fluency oriented strategies.

Fluency Oriented Strategies

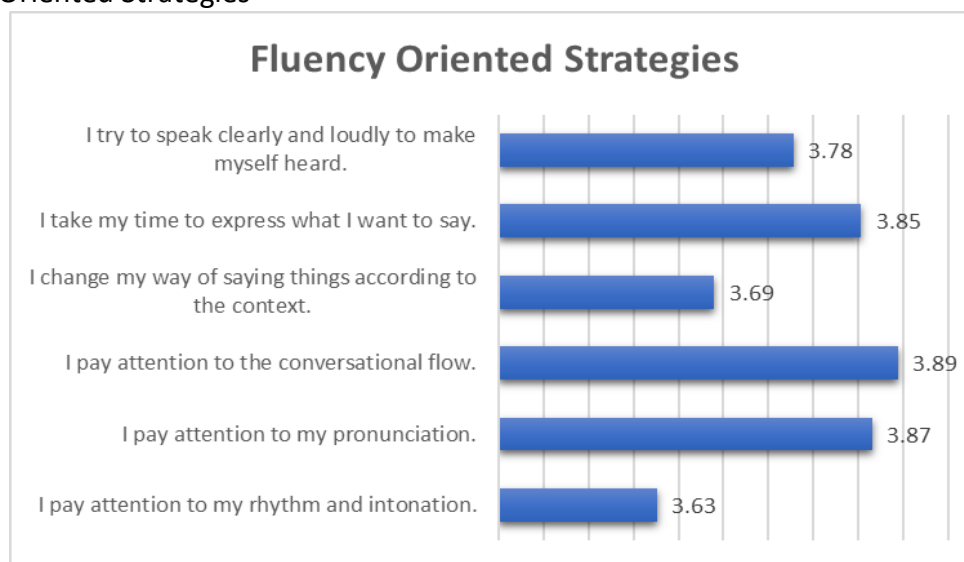


Figure 5: Mean for Fluency Oriented Strategies

Based on Figure 5, the mean score ranges from 3.63 to 3.89 for all the six items. The highest mean recorded was 3.89 (I pay attention to the conversational flow), followed by the second highest with a 3.87 mean score (I pay attention to my pronunciation). Both items show that participants agree on the importance of paying attention to conversation flow and

pronunciation. Next, the mean score of 3.78 for item 1 (I try to speak clearly and loudly to make myself heard) implies that the participants agree that self-monitoring of their own utterances provides benefits for them. Meanwhile, the lowest mean is for the last item with a mean score of 3.63, showing that the participants focus on rhythm and intonation the least as part of fluency oriented strategies.

Findings for Assimilating Learning Style

This section presents data to answer the second research question which is to explore how assimilating learning style influences students' communication strategies. In the context of this study, learners using this style use accuracy oriented strategies.

Accuracy Oriented Strategies

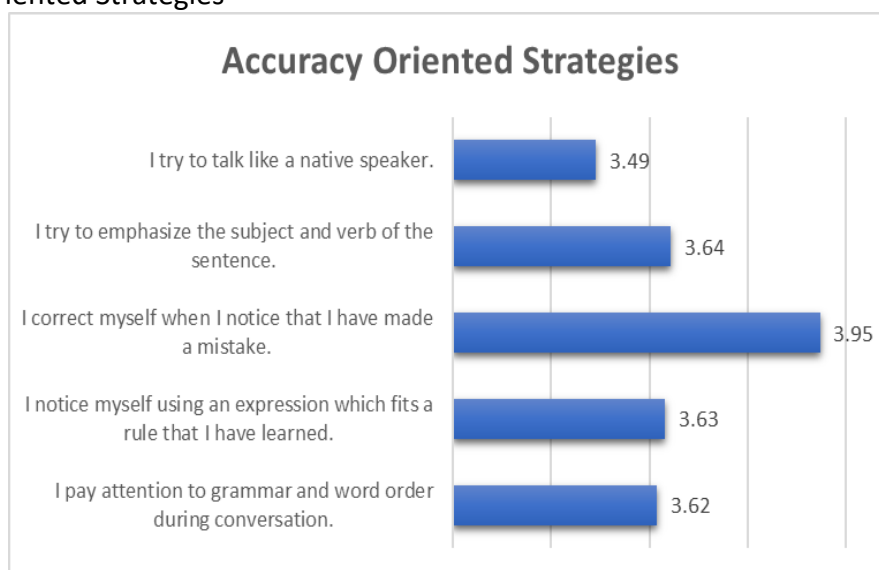


Figure 6: Mean for Accuracy Oriented Strategies

For assimilative learners, they used accuracy oriented strategies to assist them in communication. The most preferred strategy used was self-correction when they noticed any mistakes made ($M=3.95$). In contrast, trying to talk like a native speaker was the least strategy employed by assimilative learners when facing problems in communicating, as shown by the lowest mean score of 3.49 in Figure 6.

Findings for Converging Learning Style

This section presents data to answer the third research question which is related to the influence of converging learning style on students' use of communication strategies. In the context of this study, learners in this category depend on negotiation for meaning strategies.

Negotiation for Meaning Strategies

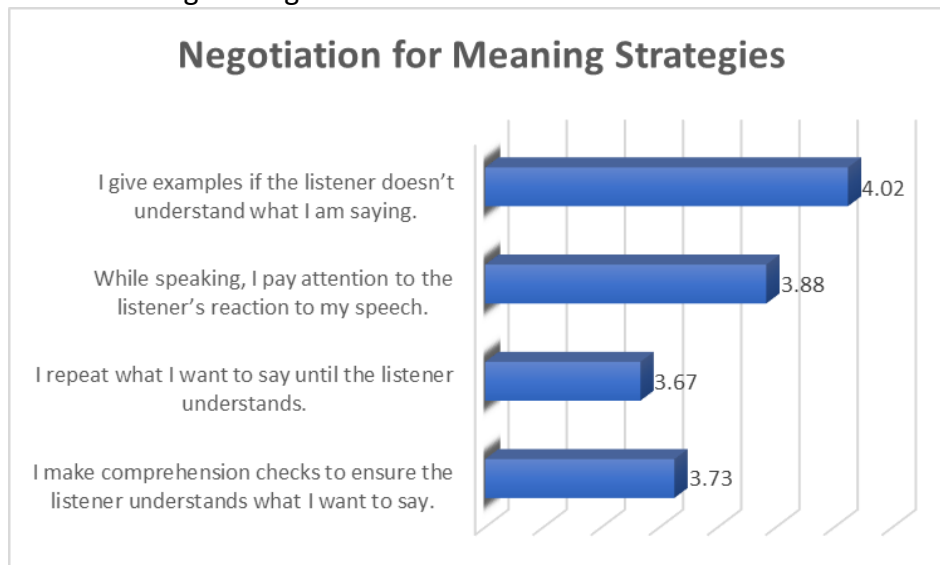


Figure 7: Mean for Negotiation for Meaning Strategies

Figure 7 shows the mean score for 4 negotiation for meaning strategies that contribute to how converging learning style influences respondents' communication strategies. Giving examples if the listener doesn't understand was reported to be the most significant strategy in communication strategies ($M = 4.02$). Paying attention to the listener's reaction is the second most significant strategy ($M = 3.88$). The finding also revealed that repeating what one wants to say until the listener understands is seen to be the least significant strategy employed by respondents in communicating strategies ($M = 3.67$).

Findings for Accommodating Learning Style

This section presents data to investigate how accommodating learning style influences students' communication strategies. In the context of this study, learners using this style use (a) social-affective strategies and (b) message reduction.

Social-Affective Strategies



Figure 8: Mean for Social Affective Strategies

Figure 8 shows the mean score for six social affective strategies used by accommodative learners. Trying to give a good impression to the listener was reported to be the most significant strategy by these learners ($M = 4.22$). Trying to relax when feeling anxious is the second most significant strategy ($M = 3.98$). With the lowest mean score recorded ($M = 3.45$), do not mind taking risk though might make mistakes is seen to be the least significant strategy employed by the respondents of accommodative learning style.

Message Reduction, Orientation and Non-Verbal Strategies

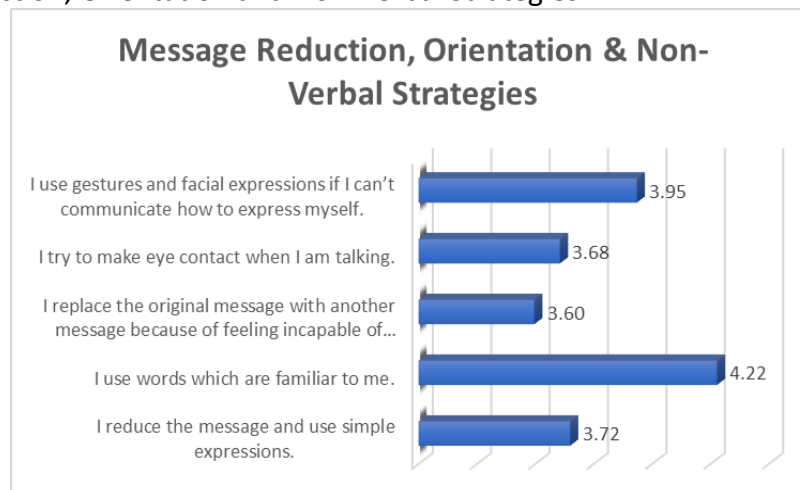


Figure 9: Mean for Message Reduction, Orientation and Non-Verbal Strategies

As shown in Figure 9, the highest mean score was recorded on the strategy of using familiar words ($M=4.22$) whenever accommodative learners faced communication challenges. This is followed by the strategy of using gestures and facial expressions ($M=3.95$) if they were having difficulty in expressing themselves. The least strategy used was replacing the original message with something else when they were unable to convey their original intention ($M=3.60$).

Conclusion

Summary of Findings and Discussion

This present study explores the influence of different learning styles on students' use of oral communication strategies. There are four learning styles as described by Kolb (1984), which are diverging, assimilating, converging and accommodating. From the findings presented above, it can be concluded that different learning styles employed by the students have an impact on the oral strategies used in communication. Based on the first research question, divergent learners tend to pay more attention to the flow of the conversation and their pronunciation while speaking. This matches their characteristic of being observant in situations where they need to evaluate from multiple perspectives before they actually attempt the task. This is not in accordance with the finding from Muniandy & Shuib (2016), where their visual learners preferred to use compensation strategies such as guessing and rephrasing to obtain new information. The difference may be attributed to the academic level of the participants. In the current study, more than half of the participants were still studying at Diploma level, whereas the participants in Muniandy & Shuib (2016) were at Degree level. Interestingly, learners who employ an assimilating learning style do not believe that talking like a native is the best way to make themselves understood. Instead, they focus on accuracy in which they correct themselves if they notice any mistakes made during the conversation. This is supported by Roohani et. al (2020) where they found that learners who had high EQ preferred to use accuracy-oriented strategies in dealing with communication problems.

Learners with high EQ share similar traits as assimilative learners as they have a high level of independence and self-awareness. This explains why they emphasize greatly on accuracy in developing their communication skills.

In response to the third research question, an individual with a converging learning style prefers to approach problems in a practical way. In situations where convergent learners struggle to get their meaning across, they give examples to help listeners understand them rather than using the same words repeatedly. This finding corresponds with Kozlova (2018) who found that convergent learners prefer technical tasks and like to experiment new ideas or theories.

Finally, accommodative learners emphasize interpersonal relationships as they try to portray a good impression on the listener. In addition, they also help listeners to understand them by using familiar words. Taheri et. al (2021) also found similar findings on 250 dental students in their study. It was reported that the dominant learning style of these dental students was the accommodating style and this was justified based on the nature of their field. Dentistry involves a lot of practical work or training and establishing a close relationship with patients is a need in this field. The same concept is also applied in language learning for accommodative learners in the current study as they use social-affective strategies and message reduction strategies. They try to maintain a good relationship with their listeners and use common words to clarify their message. In this way, they are able to engage in effective communication and avoid any communication breakdowns.

Pedagogical Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

The findings obtained from the present study have several implications for educators and ESL learners in the process of teaching and learning in ESL classrooms. As different learners use different strategies in communication, educators should be able to understand why some learners prefer to use certain types of oral communication strategies in helping them to communicate effectively. Thus, providing more support and training is essential for learners in L2 classrooms. With more exposure and support from the educator and environment, learners will be more aware of what and when to utilize these strategies to become successful learners. In addition, it is important for learners to be aware of their own learning styles and their preference of strategy use. They should know that they are not limited to using only the strategies that they are inclined to use and be more flexible to use other strategies that they find helpful to engage in effective communication.

The current study had several limitations in planning and conducting this research. Therefore, further researchers should address and take into account these limitations. First, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to the whole population of ESL learners as it is limited to the participants in this study. Hence, the researchers suggest that the future study should be carried out using a larger sample size in different institutions to represent the population of ESL learners and yield more interesting responses. Second, it is recommended that apart from using the questionnaire, other data collection procedures, such as interviews and observations, can be used to triangulate the data. Hence, a more detailed and thorough analysis can be done to further understand the relationship between learning styles and the use of oral communication strategies.

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