

The impact of expanding A Level students' awareness and use of metacognitive learning strategies on confidence and proficiency in foreign language speaking skills.

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Abstract

In an increasingly multilingual world, the question of how to improve foreign language speaking skills of pupils in British schools is of paramount importance to language teachers and policy makers today. This paper examines how an explicit focus on metacognitive strategy use within secondary school foreign language lessons impacts pupils' confidence and proficiency in speaking. The small-scale action research study was conducted with a class of five Year Twelve (age 16-17) Advanced Level learners of French in a secondary school in England. While all of the pupils generally achieved well in the reading, writing and listening aspects of the course, they performed considerably less well in speaking tasks. The primary aim of this study was therefore to introduce the students to a range of metacognitive learning strategies with a view to improving their confidence and proficiency in speaking. Data was collected from questionnaires, interviews, strategy checklists and assessment marks collected both before and after a six-week period of strategy instruction. The findings indicate that the use of learning strategies seems to have had a positive impact on pupils' confidence and proficiency in speaking and after the intervention the participants reported an increase in how much they both valued and used a range of metacognitive strategies.

Keywords: language learning strategies, metacognition, modern foreign language education, secondary school

Introduction

For teachers of Modern Foreign Languages (MFL), the development of pupils'

confidence and proficiency in speaking skills is undeniably paramount to their success in language learning, both in and out of the classroom. However this can be a daunting task for learners and one where teachers often seek strategies to offer to their students. Strategy use in language learning is an important field which has been researched since the 1970s, and there is much evidence to suggest that effective strategy use can be of great benefit to language learners (Cohen 2011; Graham 2007; Grenfell & Harris 1999; Macaro 2001; O'Malley & Chamot 1990; Oxford 1990). Such studies have focused on defining and classifying strategies as well as empirical studies centered on an intervention of awareness-raising and Strategy-Based Instruction (SBI). This paper provides a brief summary of some of the key research studies in the field and reports the findings of an intervention of SBI conducted with a class of Advanced Level learners of French in a secondary school in England.

Literature Review

Language learning strategies are generally considered as a means of ensuring that language is stored, retained and able to be produced when necessary; that is, they affect *learning* directly. They are 'optional' (Bialystok 1978: 69), 'consciously selected by the learners' (Cohen 1998: 4), and aim to 'enhance comprehension, learning, or retention of new information' (O'Malley & Chamot 1990: 1). Another key characteristic of learning strategies emphasised by Wenden and Rubin (1987), Oxford (1990) and Cohen (1998), is their close link with increasing learner autonomy, which has become a significant concern in modern classrooms.

Classification of strategies

During the early period of strategy research in the 1970s and early 1980s, studies had a tendency to only describe the general approach of 'good' language learners (Rubin

1975; Stern 1975; Naiman et al. 1975). Admittedly there had been tentative attempts to begin to classify strategies, however it was not until the late 1980s and early 1990s that the considerable variation in strategy type was fully acknowledged, and a need was identified for a clear theoretical framework.

One of the most widely used taxonomies of language learner strategies is that of O'Malley & Chamot (1990), who uniquely brought together research in second language acquisition and the cognitive psychology of John Anderson. Following a series of studies they classified strategies into three groups: cognitive, metacognitive and social-affective strategies. Cognitive strategies are related to the processing of information, social-affective strategies are concerned with interaction with others, and metacognitive strategies, which form the focus of the present study, 'involve thinking about the learning process, planning for learning, monitoring of comprehension or production while it is taking place, and self-evaluation after the learning activity has been completed' (O'Malley & Chamot 1990: 8). In relation to speaking skills such strategies could include predicting vocabulary to use in advance, paying attention to pronunciation while speaking and using feedback to create targets for future tasks.

A contemporary and equally influential taxonomy of language learning strategies was developed by Oxford (1990) who also distinguished between cognitive, metacognitive, affective and social strategies, yet categorised them as direct or indirect strategies. Oxford (2011) later presented a revised taxonomy identified as the Strategic Self-Regulation (S₂R) model of language learning. Here she argued that the term *metacognitive*, as it had previously been defined, had therefore confusingly also applied to the control of strategies in the social and affective realms, not just to the control of strategies within the cognitive dimension, and so coined the terms 'meta-

affective' and 'meta-sociocultural interactive' strategies to fill this gap. Whereas this model is perhaps effective in refining the meaning and purpose of metacognitive strategies, it also appears to be difficult to delineate the boundaries between each of the 'metastrategies'.

Focus on metacognitive strategies

In spite of the difficulties incurred in classifying and defining strategies, this research has been instrumental in furthering understanding of strategy use and indeed in situating the current study. The decision to focus this study primarily on metacognitive strategies has been influenced by three main factors. Firstly, it is important to note that O'Malley & Chamot (1990: 6) discovered a correlation between learners' success and the use of metacognitive strategies, stating that 'students without metacognitive approaches are essentially learners without direction and ability to review their progress, accomplishments and future learning directions', a link which has also been acknowledged by Macaro (2001), Graham (2006) and Cohen (2011).

Secondly, metacognitive strategies have been identified as a vital form of any form of strategy use (Cohen 2007). It is the metacognitive element which helps maintain strategy use over time and helps in transferring strategies to new tasks (O'Malley & Chamot 1990), an important objective of strategy instruction within the classroom. There has also been a recent shift in interest from the frequency or quantity of strategy use, to the quality of strategy use. Research has shown that success depends not just on the use of one individual strategy, but on the combination and effective management of a repertoire of strategies (Grenfell & Harris 1999; Oxford 2011), sometimes referred to as strategy clusters or strategy chains. This has

resulted in 'an increasing interest in metacognition as the orchestrating mechanism for combining strategies effectively in any given situation' (Grenfell & Macaro 2007: 23).

Finally, practical concerns also contributed to the decision to focus primarily on metacognitive strategies. From existing research, (Macaro 2001) it is evident that metacognitive strategies are more conscious and easier to articulate than purely cognitive or indirect strategies, and in terms of conducting empirical research with secondary school aged pupils this is an important consideration. Similarly, Macaro (2001) makes an interesting distinction between 'natural' and 'taught' strategies, which, although indirectly alluded to in previous taxonomies, had not been directly addressed. The implication here is that the metacognitive strategies lend themselves more easily to classroom-based strategy instruction.

Intervention studies

After many years of concentrating on the identification, description and classification of language learner strategies, the focus of research gradually started to shift to the way in which strategies can be used and taught within a classroom environment to improve students' linguistic performance, confidence and motivation. Yet in spite of the substantial body of research in this area, there is surprisingly little empirically based research which focuses on the impact of implementing explicit strategy use for learners of foreign languages within secondary schools in the UK. The majority of existing research has been conducted with adults, or at tertiary level and on the whole deals with the learning of English as a foreign language.

Cohen, Weaver and Li (1998) for example, focused on the impact of strategies-based instruction on speaking a foreign language among undergraduate learners at a university in America, one of the few studies to focus on the link

between predominantly metacognitive learning strategies and speaking skills. O'Malley (1987) similarly dealt with the effects of training in the use of learning strategies, however in this case the participants are high school ESL students, also in America. Lam (2002) focused on helping secondary school ESL students in Hong Kong to participate effectively in speaking tasks through the use of strategy training. Interesting studies were also conducted by de Saint Lèger (2009) on the self-assessment of speaking skills, and by Stillwell et al. (2010) on the use of transcribing tasks to improve fluency, accuracy and complexity in speaking. In spite of the fact that neither of these studies situated their work explicitly within the context of learning strategy use, both explore valid and practical examples of evaluative metacognitive strategies.

From the results of the above intervention studies, indications are that the teaching of metacognitive learning strategies has a significant positive impact on developing speaking skills. This led to the development of the present study on the impact of expanding the awareness and use of metacognitive learning strategies on the confidence and proficiency in speaking of a class of Advanced Level learners of French in a secondary school in England.

Research Questions

- (1) To what extent does a focus on metacognitive learning strategies improve students' confidence in speaking?
- (2) To what extent does a focus on metacognitive learning strategies improve students' proficiency in speaking?
- (3) What strategies did the students incorporate and value?

Context

A concern over the development of foreign language speaking skills in England has been repeatedly highlighted in recent years on a national level by OFSTED (2008, 2011), the UK schools' inspectorate, who have observed that 'across all phases, speaking is the least well developed of all the skills. Students' inability to be able to say what they want to say in a new language has a negative impact on their confidence and enthusiasm'. (OFSTED 2008: 1). Similar concerns have been expressed in empirical studies; Graham (2002), for example, found that very few of her 16-18 year old participants identified speaking in French as an area of strength and many of those who cited it as an area of weakness mentioned a lack of confidence in oral work.

This was certainly the case for the participants involved in this study; a class of five Year Twelve (age 16-17) Advanced Level (A Level) learners of French, four girls and one boy, in a secondary school in England where one of the researchers was a teacher of French and Spanish. They had all completed five to six years of French learning at school, had performed well in their GCSE examinations the year before and had all chosen to continue the language to A Level. The students received seven 40-minute lessons of French per week, three of which were taught by one of the researchers, however it became clear during the first term of A Level teaching that they were struggling with some aspects of the course, particularly the speaking element.

Research design

The main aim of the action research intervention was therefore to improve learners' proficiency and confidence in speaking skills by introducing instruction in a range of metacognitive learning strategies. A programme of SBI was designed which would be

integrated into the existing scheme of work. The following seven-stage research design was used, as illustrated in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1. RESEARCH DESIGN

Data collection methods

It was felt that a mixed methods approach, using quantitative methods in the form of questionnaires, strategy checklists and student assessment data, and qualitative interviews, was the most appropriate for this study, as although a positivistic approach alone would have provided useful data such as frequency of strategy use, it would have given little or no indication as to *why* students selected particular strategies or *how* they felt this impacted upon their speaking skills.

Questionnaires

A short questionnaire was completed by the learners both before and after the period of strategy instruction. The aim of the initial questionnaire was to gather information on their attitudes towards the skill of speaking and beliefs about their ability in this area. Students were asked to rate their confidence and their perception of their ability in each of the skill areas, and to rate their perception of their performance in different aspects of speaking: participation in class, fluency, pronunciation, accuracy and complexity. These particular areas were chosen primarily as they reflected the criteria on which they would be examined at the end of the year. The same questionnaire was given to the learners at the end of the action research cycle, in order to examine whether their confidence and perception of their ability and performance in speaking had changed over the course of the strategy instruction.

Interviews

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the learners both before and after the intervention of SBI. The aim of the interview was primarily to allow the students to explain and develop their responses to the questionnaire, but also to try and elicit what strategies they were aware of or used when speaking in French. Due to the inherent difficulty in observing such internal processes it was felt that the most effective way to find out what strategies students were already using was to ask them (Rubin et al. 2007: 144). While the first part of the interview focused on asking the learners to explain their responses to the questionnaire, the second part was dedicated to trying to elicit what strategies they used before, during and after speaking activities and what actions they took to try and improve their speaking.

Strategy checklists

It is widely recognised that an important step in any form of strategy research or SBI is to help learners recognise which strategies they already use (Cohen 1998: 69). Having suspected that students may have difficulty in talking about these strategies during the interview and considering the acknowledgement by Rubin et al. that 'learners may need prompting to access their strategies' (2007: 152), a strategy checklist consisting of 28 items was created to aid with this process. The speaking strategies were grouped into preparation, monitoring and evaluation strategies and were based on those identified in the literature, particularly by Cohen (1998) and Zhang and Goh (2006). This was given to the learners at the end of the interview, while the audio-recording continued in order to collect think-aloud data to capture their thoughts and explanations while completing the checklist. The participants were asked to indicate how valuable they considered each strategy to be and also how often

they used each particular strategy.

Student assessment data

While the questionnaires, interviews and strategy checklists produced valuable data about students' perceptions of their strategy use, it is important to remember that these are indeed just *perceptions* or beliefs. In order to examine whether or not the SBI had an impact on students' *proficiency* in speaking, it was necessary to also examine assessment data. As shown in Figure 1, Stages Three and Five of the research design involved a presentation and transcription task, which was based on a similar task administered in the study by Stillwell et al. (2010). Students gave a short verbal presentation based on a topic they were studying at that time, and then were asked to listen back and transcribe their speech verbatim. They then self-assessed their performance against the mark scheme and set a series of targets for themselves. All presentations were also marked by the teacher. This process introduced students to the metacognitive strategy of evaluation, which to some extent was something they had not previously experienced in relation to speaking tasks. Whereas most students will re-read a piece of writing, or double-check answers in a reading exercise, the intangible and transient nature of the spoken word often does not allow for such a process. The act of listening back to and transcribing the presentation therefore gave students an opportunity to look critically at their work. The targets they set after the first task also helped to shape the programme of SBI.

Intervention

As stated by Wenden (1987: 166), 'training in metacognition should include both awareness raising or reflection on the nature of learning *and* training in the skills necessary to plan, monitor and evaluate learning activities'. This was the aim of the

period of classroom-based intervention, which took place over a six-week period during Stage Four of the action research process. Explicit strategy instruction was integrated into normal classroom teaching, as research has indicated that this is the most effective method (Cohen 2011; O'Malley & Chamot 1990; Oxford 2011; Wenden 1987). The stages of instruction were loosely based on the following steps proposed by O'Malley and Chamot (1990):

- (1) Students identify their current strategies
- (2) Teacher explains additional strategies
- (3) Teacher provides opportunities for practice
- (4) Teacher assists in evaluating their success with the new strategies

Due to limitations of time it was not feasible to cover all strategies related to speaking, therefore a selection was chosen based on the findings from the strategy checklist and students' own targets set after the first transcription task. These were loosely categorised as preparation strategies (for example, predicting vocabulary and grammatical structures required before a speaking task, organisation of thoughts and ideas), monitoring strategies (for example, paying attention to pronunciation, effective use of notes, self-correcting), and evaluation strategies (for example, self-assessment of speaking tasks, using feedback to create targets for future tasks, reflection on strategy use).

The presentation and practice of these strategies centered around preparation for, participation in and evaluation of speaking tasks in class such as short oral presentations, whole-class and pair discussions of examination-style questions and the development of individual contributions in class in the target language. Opportunities were built in for discussions in English before and after each speaking activity to

encourage pupils to explicitly plan and reflect on their strategy use and to suggest ways in which they could transfer them to other tasks and activities.

Method of analysis

Data was routinely analysed as an on-going part of the action research cycle to ensure that the learning strategies implemented were appropriate to the needs and targets of the students. The values assigned to the Likert scales of the questionnaires and the strategy checklists, along with the results from the assessments were used to compare pre- and post-intervention responses on both a cross-case and individual basis. The qualitative interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded in order to link them to a specific research question and in turn, to the corresponding quantitative data in order to allow for methodological triangulation.

Results

The findings from the study are summarized below:

1) To what extent does a focus on metacognitive learning strategies improve students' confidence in speaking?

Table 1 outlines the results for confidence in speaking as indicated by each of the students on both questionnaires on a scale of 1-4, with '1' being 'not confident at all' and '4' being 'very confident'. This has been combined with interview data to further explore how the students felt about their confidence in speaking French as indicated on the initial questionnaire, and similarly to explain any changes which may have occurred on the final questionnaire.

TABLE 1. CONFIDENCE IN SPEAKING

It is interesting to note that although only two of the students (S2 & S5) actually increased their confidence rating on the questionnaire, the remaining three students admitted in the interview that they did in fact feel more confident in their speaking after the intervention. In the initial interview, the students appear to put their lack of confidence down to either nerves (S1, S5), or to being under pressure and not having enough time to think (S2, S3, S4), however in the final interviews none of these concerns are mentioned. Through their comments we can clearly see that over the course of the intervention period there has been some improvement in their confidence, however it is difficult to say for certain whether or not this is a direct result of the SBI. It would be expected that over the course of several months students would naturally gain in skills and confidence, even without a specific intervention, yet it is interesting to note that in the final interviews several of the students explain their increase in confidence by referring either directly or indirectly to strategies put in place during the intervention. For example, S1 and S4 cited practising their spoken French as improving confidence, S3 said that she found it easier to come up with ideas which would imply more thorough preparation before an activity, and S5 said that her improvement in confidence was due to more participation in class and taking on board marks and feedback from teachers.

Perception of ability

Table 2 outlines the results for ability in speaking as indicated by each of the students. As with Table 1, it combines responses from the questionnaire and interview data.

TABLE 2. ABILITY IN SPEAKING

As with the question on confidence, only two students have actually increased the rating of their ability in the final questionnaire (S1, S2). Two students (S3, S4)

maintained the same rating, yet on the whole the comments in the final interviews seem to be more positive than in the initial interviews. However S5 has lowered her rating which is perhaps surprising, particularly in light of an increase in confidence indicated above. This student does however indicate that this rating was influenced a lot by the results from a recent speaking exam, and would perhaps have been more positive were it based solely on progression in class.

Students were also asked to rate how they perceived their ability in the following areas both before and after the intervention: participation in class, fluency, pronunciation, accuracy and complexity of language. All of the students either maintained, or in two cases increased, their ratings after the intervention. As with confidence levels, it is difficult to say whether any of these changes or improvements are a direct result of the SBI, however when speaking about what they thought helped in terms of ability and performance, they cited strategies such as practising in pairs, focusing on grammar and vocabulary to improve complexity of language, preparation for discussions and increasing participation in class as having been useful. This would suggest that these strategies have perhaps had a positive effect on their perception of their ability in speaking French.

It seems therefore that increasing students' awareness and use of metacognitive learning strategies has had a positive effect on their confidence. Even though it is not possible to conclude definitively that any changes are a direct result of the implementation of strategies, the qualitative data provides some evidence to support this claim.

2) To what extent does a focus on metacognitive learning strategies improve students' proficiency in speaking?

The pre- and post-intervention presentation tasks completed by the students were

marked out of a total of 40 according to the A Level mark scheme by both the class teacher and moderated by the Head of Department. The pre- and post-intervention results are shown in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2. PRESENTATION TASK SCORES

Undoubtedly the most striking feature of these results is the fact that all of the students increased their mark in the second presentation task. It could be argued that the results of the second presentation task should be higher, due to the fact that it took place several weeks after the first task and the students' language should have progressed naturally during this time. However both tasks were on different topic areas and were completed at the same stage of teaching within the corresponding topic. Therefore even though the students may have gained more practice with grammatical structures, they were at no extra advantage in the second task in terms of topic-specific vocabulary or content. Students were also familiar with the presentation style of the task long before the start of the action research cycle, therefore they are unlikely to have improved simply as a result of being more aware of the format of the task. It is necessary therefore to turn to other sources of data to determine if the use of metacognitive learning strategies could have led to this increase in proficiency. After the first task, the students were asked to self-assess their work and set themselves targets to work on. During the six-week period between the two tasks, SBI was integrated into the scheme of work in order to help students actively address these targets. This exercise in itself was intended as an evaluative metacognitive strategy and as such it is important to consider what targets the students set and whether or not they then proceeded to improve in these areas.

It is interesting to note that all of the students directly addressed at least one, and in most cases several, of their targets using the strategies introduced in class. The

most common targets for improvement after the first task related to improving fluency and increasing the complexity of grammar and vocabulary. Interestingly these areas were also the most identified areas of improvement after the second presentation, closely followed by better preparation and less reliance on notes. Some of the comments after the second presentation also refer specifically to strategies practised in class, such as 'preparing more effective notes' (S1, S2) 'monitoring hesitation' while speaking (S2, S3, S5) and planning a 'mental checklist' of grammar points to include based on feedback from previous tasks. (S3).

The overall impression therefore seems to be a positive one; all of the students increased their proficiency in the second presentation task. Although the assessment data alone is not sufficient to make any significant conclusions about the impact of learning strategies, when combined with the qualitative data provided by students during the evaluation phase of each task, there seems to be some evidence that the students used the target setting process and some of the strategies introduced in class in order to actively improve some areas of their speaking.

3. What strategies did the students incorporate and value?

As outlined above, it seems that overall the strategy intervention had a positive impact on students' confidence and proficiency in speaking. However data was also collected from the strategy checklists on which particular strategies they valued most and which strategies they made use of. The strategies on the checklist were grouped according to three sections: preparation strategies (PS), monitoring strategies (MS) and evaluation strategies (ES). The students were asked to rate how much they valued and used each strategy on a scale of 1 (not valuable / never use) - 3 (very valuable / often use).

Figure 3 below shows the average rating for value and use of each category of

strategies. Even though the sample size is small, it was felt that calculating an average rating would provide a useful overview of the types of strategies used by the students.

FIGURE 3. AVERAGE RATING FOR VALUE AND USE FOR STRATEGIES

Preparation strategies

Out of the three categories, the preparation strategies were the least valued before the intervention with an overall average rating of 2.61, yet were the most valued after with an overall average rating of 2.8. This was also the category with the biggest increase in terms of use, from an average rating of 1.85 before, to 2.33 after. Several of the preparation strategies stood out as being of particular significance. The idea of thinking in French what to say initially caused some uncertainty and was viewed as 'hard to do' (S4) as 'I don't always know exactly what it is in French' (S1). However afterwards ratings for both the value and use for this strategy increased and S3 found it of particular benefit as 'when you're in there you don't hesitate so much, cause you're already in the right language'. There was also a noteworthy increase in the ratings for both value and use of the strategy of organising thoughts and ideas and encouraging participation in class. Similarly the strategy of looking for opportunities to practise spoken French with others maintained its high rating for value in the final checklist and increased dramatically in terms of use. Whereas S3 and S4 had practised a bit with each other beforehand, afterwards 'we practised a lot more with those little questions... it helped loads' (S4).

Monitoring Strategies

Out of the three categories, the monitoring strategies were indicated as being the most used in the initial checklist with an average rating of 2.29 and remained the most used after the intervention with an average rating of 2.42. The most noticeable increase in

terms of value and use was for the strategy of paying attention to grammar while speaking. Initially students made comments like: 'I never do that, I think that's my downfall' (S3) and 'I just kind of blurt it all out' (S4), however in the final interviews they showed more of an awareness of monitoring their use of language when speaking. Preparation strategies also seemed to play a role here, as some students recognised the value of planning how to use certain grammatical structures in advance. Asking for clarification or help when necessary was also a strategy which increased in ratings for use and value, as was the strategy of self-correcting when they make a mistake. Likewise, several students (S3, S4, S5) pointed out in the interviews that they sometimes mentally correct the errors of others and use this as a means to avoid making the mistakes themselves, or would perhaps be able to recognise the mistake and self-correct more quickly if they do make it.

Evaluation strategies

The evaluation strategies were initially the most valued category of strategies with an average rating of 2.71. However this rating remained the same in the final checklist, making them the least valued category by the end. Similarly, even though the use of these strategies showed a slight increase from an average of 2.20 to 2.29, they also remained the least used category by the end. This was surprising, as the evaluation of speaking activities is something which is overlooked to a large extent, especially in comparison with the concrete feedback students are used to receiving from written work. S2 for example, commented that: 'I don't normally do it, I just think of it as finished and move on rather than look back', a common reaction. It seems therefore that the students did not necessarily appreciate the opportunity to reflect more on their speaking. The strategy of evaluating how well the activity went decreased in value,

yet there were some positive comments from students on this, for example in the final interview S1 said: 'I thought that was really good... because you probably don't notice how many times you say "um" or mispronunciation mistakes... and when I missed out tiny little words that I thought I'd said but I hadn't'. Other students made similar comments on how they noticed mistakes they had not realised at the time, however did not necessarily enjoy listening to a recording of themselves speak, which could perhaps partly account for the lower rating here. Using this evaluation to identify problem areas however received a more positive response from students and was regarded as valuable, however S1 and S4 referred to the danger of 'focusing too much on what went wrong last time, then you forget all the good things and don't do them again'.

Overall it seems as though the preparation strategies made the greatest impact. It was the category for which the ratings for both value and use increased most after the intervention. However on the whole the students revealed an increase in both value and use of many strategies across the three categories after the intervention.

Discussion

The analysis highlighted the following key findings:

(1) Increasing students' awareness and use of metacognitive learning strategies seems to have had a positive impact on confidence and perception of ability in speaking skills.

(2) There is evidence to support the claim that the use of metacognitive learning strategies has had a positive impact on students' proficiency in speaking French.

(3) After a period of SBI the students on the whole reported an increase in both how much they valued and used a range of metacognitive learning strategies.

As a small-scale action research project, this study does not claim that the above findings are in any way generalisable, the aim was rather to address a specific need for this particular group, and to endeavour to shed some light on existing theories. The overall positive results of the training in metacognitive learning strategies are in line with previous studies which have similarly established a link between strategy use and proficiency in speaking (O'Malley 1987; Cohen, Weaver & Li 1998). However in order to determine improvement in proficiency, O'Malley (1987) looked solely at students' results and did not take into account their report of strategy use. From the present study it became evident that strategy use cannot necessarily be determined by examination of quantitative assessment data alone; beneficial though it is to consider *if* there is a change in proficiency, it is also valuable to focus on the reasons *why*.

The complex and individual nature of strategy use

One particular theme of interest which emerged from the current study, is the complex and individual nature of strategy use and the importance of ensuring that strategies are appropriate to the nature of the task. In spite of the fact that attempts were made in this study to draw some cross-case conclusions about the general trends of strategy use within the class, it is also essential to recognise that the strategies that each student chose depended very much on their individual personality and learning style, an important consideration also addressed by Coyle (2007) and Harris (2007).

This was highlighted during the interviews, for example, S5 described herself as being 'naturally shy' and as a result found some aspects of speaking, particularly

class discussion as being intimidating: 'I'd rather be speaking one on one rather than just speaking altogether as a group'. S1 on the other hand, liked discussing in groups and felt that this was a helpful exercise rather than a daunting one. S3 stated that she remembered phrases and presentations by saying them aloud, whereas others relied more on notes and prompts. These are just some examples of how individual personality traits and learning styles can affect which strategies students felt comfortable with. It was also encouraging to see throughout the interviews that the students demonstrated an instinctive awareness of which strategies they felt would be more appropriate or helpful for them. As stated by Grenfell and Macaro, strategies are 'not in themselves good or bad, but are used either effectively or ineffectively by individuals' (2007: 24). With this in mind it seems as though the best approach is to supply students with a range of strategies and enable them to select those which best fit their needs and learning style.

Different strategies for different tasks

Just as it is important for strategies to be compatible with students' learning style and personality, it also became evident that they similarly need to be appropriate to the specific skill area or task in question. For example, students felt that some tasks merited evaluation more than others; S4 stated that some form of reflection was beneficial 'if it was an exam or something, or on a presentation... probably not if it was general conversation'. Similar findings also emerged from the study by Cohen, Weaver & Li (1998), which found that the success or failure of certain strategies can be dependent, not only on the instruction given, but also on the specific task in question. In addition, it emerged from the present study that certain strategies were associated with some skill areas more than others. For example, in relation to

predicting useful vocabulary, S1 said 'I only do it in writing, I don't do it in my speaking'. This highlights the importance in instructing students not only in effective strategy use, but also in the transferability of some strategies between skill areas.

Conclusion

The findings from the present study have therefore indicated that although instructing students in the use of metacognitive learning strategies can have a positive impact on their confidence and proficiency levels in speaking, strategy use also must be recognised as a complex phenomenon which needs to consider students' individual personality and learning styles and the particular task or skill at hand. These findings could have implications for both teachers and learners of MFL. For teachers it highlights a range of strategies which can be introduced to students to improve both their confidence and proficiency levels in speaking, and which can be easily integrated into existing schemes of work. In turn, if students have a range of metacognitive strategies at their disposal, they should become more aware of their own learning and better equipped to become more autonomous and successful learners. As such, this raises the issue of the need for training in strategy instruction for teachers in order to enable them to effectively disseminate and maximise the benefits for students. As highlighted by Cohen (1998: 93), 'if the goal is to provide the greatest number of students with individualised, contextualised strategy training, the teachers must also be trained'.

As a small-scale action research study, it is not possible to make sweeping generalisations from the above findings, nor was it the aim of this study to do so, however it is hoped that this study contributes in some way to the understanding of the impact of expanding students' awareness and use of metacognitive learning

strategies in foreign language speaking skills. Given the positive impact that strategy instruction can have, further research is required into how this can be more effectively and explicitly integrated into foreign language lessons in British schools. If we can help students to progress, and become more confident, proficient and autonomous language learners, then we will have given them the tools they need to continue to develop their language skills, both in and out of the classroom.

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Figures

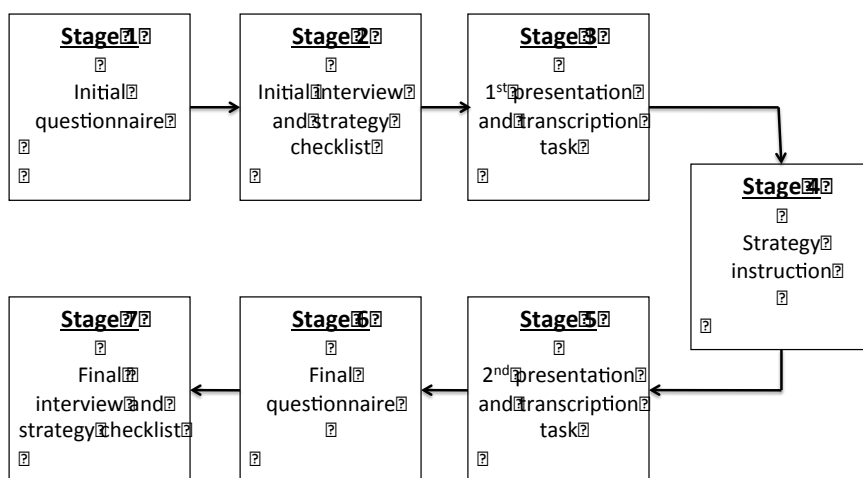


Figure 1. Research Design

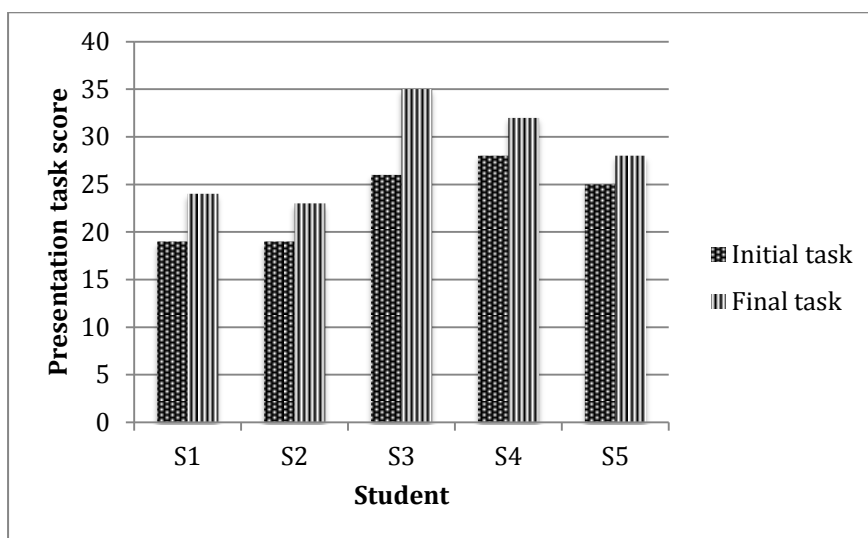


Figure 2. Presentation task scores

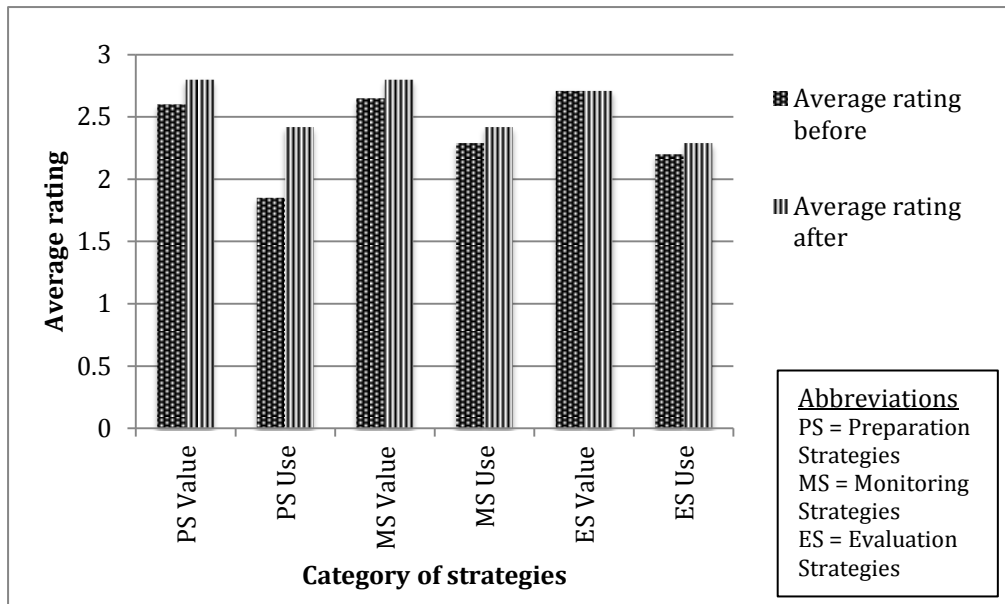


Figure 3. Average rating for value and use of strategies

Tables

	Initial Questionnaire and Interview		Final Questionnaire and Interview	
	Score	Quote	Score	Quote
S1	2	“I’m not confident at all because I just hesitate because I’m really nervous so I forget everything I’m trying to say”.	2	“Yeah, it’s got better... because we had to do loads of speaking, so it wasn’t so bad to do it”.
S2	2	Speaking “I haven’t been too confident with... on the speaking sometimes it can just be one word that can mess you up”.	3	“So, I mustn’t have been too confident till I realised... and now it’s gone up. That’s pretty much it... Just being able to think on my feet really”.
S3	2	“Cause you have to like, do it straight away... obviously in essays and stuff you can sit there and think of the best vocab, but you can’t really sit there and think when you’re speaking”.	2	“I should have put a ‘3’ really... yeah, I’m more confident I suppose... I think it’s coming up with ideas I’m better at. Before I just got stuck for ideas. It’s not the language, it’s the ideas”.
S4	2	Speaking is harder “because there’s quite a lot of pressure on, like, at that point to say something”.	2	“Yeah. I think I’ve got a bit more confident at speaking... probably because we practised a lot more with those little questions”.
S5	1	“Because I’m like naturally shy anyway and cause, you know when you’re speaking you have other people there as well and I find that quite, like a bit intimidating as well”.	2	“Yeah, I think I did [improve], like I started participating in class a bit more as well. I think that helped. And also when I found out my mock result as well... so I thought maybe I’m not as bad as I think I am”.

Table 1. Confidence in speaking

	Initial Questionnaire and Interview		Final Questionnaire and Interview	
	Score	Quote	Score	Quote
S1	1	Speaking “I’ve always been bad with, at GCSE and before... because I can’t pronounce things and obviously I just, I don’t know why, I just get really nervous and that kind of thing”.	2	“The oral booklet and just revising and just doing it in class with pairs... I think it helped loads... and more detail into grammar that I didn’t know, and more complex vocab”.
S2	1	“I don’t know... I’m just not very good at like, talking to people... and pronunciation... I keep doing ‘ent’ instead of like... not pronouncing the end of the word”.	2	“I didn’t know until I really tried to be honest. Like, I always thought I was worse than I was... I participate in class a bit more, and I think I get most of the words more accurately... cause I actually sat down and learnt them”.
S3	2	“I think it’s the time, and I don’t think about what I’m saying, so it’s either not as good, like, plain boring vocab and stuff, and the structures I don’t think about it and stuff”.	2	“I think the participation in class bit is linked to the ability. Like, because I always remember what I’ve said in class and if I’ve got it wrong then I remember it”.
S4	2	“I think the writing and speaking have got a lot harder”.	2	“I got better closer to the exam... I think just learning some more structures better... I thought when we sat in class and asked each other questions working in pairs that helped”.
S5	2	“With my speaking I think that’s just one area I’m weaker at”.	1	“Even though my confidence has gone up I still think I say things wrong and stuff. Um, with my oral I really don’t think I did very well... I think that’s why I sort of marked it down because I just based it on that exam”.

Table 2. Ability in speaking