

Identifying EFL Learners' Perceptions on the Effectiveness of Strategies for Improving English Language Skills

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Abstract: The purpose of the study is to analyse the perceptions of EFL learners on the effectiveness of strategies they use for improving their English language skills. In the era of globalization, good language skills i.e. Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing (LSRW) are the keys to open the doors to success. The communication skills help to build a strong relationship and better understanding which are so vital not only in our personal but also in professional life. Professionals having a strong hold on communication skills are considered as an asset for any organization. Professionals who are proficient in communication skills have a considerable edge over those who have not. Lack of communication skills will certainly make them deficient in resources. Job aspirants face several tough challenges in the global job market if their communication skills are not up to the mark. Inadequate proficiency in English language, lack of exposure, low level of confidence and weak soft skills do not let them uphold in the global marketplace. Communication skills are considered as a salient feature in the making of a global professional.

Keywords: English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing (LSRW), Strategies.

1. INTRODUCTION

Communication Skills are extremely important to survive in the global job market. The primary aim of the study is to understand which strategy college and university students often adopt in EFL context to improve their integrated skills of language. To improve integrated language skills, everyday practice is really important. The challenge of learning and improving a language becomes easier for the learners once they use suitable strategies and techniques to improve their language skills. A variety of language strategies has been discussed in this research paper. The study is based on the survey where 200 EFL students gave their responses for each skill as to which strategy they use and follow for improving the language skills.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

English language skills can be improved by following and practicing a variety of strategies. It greatly depends on the individual learning styles. Some students are introvert and some are extrovert. Introverts prefer a more individual, private approach to learning and improve language skills whereas extroverts are outgoing and learn and acquire language by experiencing and experimenting in real life situations. A learning strategy can be defined as “a person's approach to **learning** and using information. Students who do not know or use good **learning strategies** often **learn** passively and ultimately fail in school” [1]

The phrase ‘learning style’ refers to a person’s general approach to learning and is dependent upon that person’s cognitive, affective and behavioural characteristics (Oxford, “The Role of Styles and Strategies in Second Language Learning”, 1989). The phrase ‘learning strategies’ refers to the actions and behaviours a person uses to learn (Oxford, 1989.) All learners use strategies to help them succeed, but not all are aware of the strategies they use. As Rebecca

Oxford states: "...the most successful learners tend to use learning strategies that are appropriate to the material, to the task, and to their own goals, needs, and stage of learning," (Oxford, 1989). [2]

The strategies are extremely important for learning and improving language skills i.e. Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing. For each skill, there are some strategies followed and practiced by the learners to improve their language. Some of the strategies are discussed below:

2.1 Listening Skill:

"Effective listening skills are the ability to actively understand the information provided by the speaker, and display interest in the topic discussed. It can also include providing the speaker with feedback, such as the asking of pertinent questions; so the speaker knows the message is being understood" [3]

Some of the strategies to improve listening skill are as follows:

- a. Listening for general content
- b. Listening to fill up information
- c. Intensive listening
- d. Listening for specific information

2.2 Speaking Skill:

Speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing *and* receiving and processing information (Brown, 1994; Burns & Joyce, 1997). Its form and meaning are dependent on the context in which it occurs, including the participants themselves, their collective experiences, the physical environment, and the purposes for speaking. It is often spontaneous, open-ended, and evolving. However, speech is not always unpredictable. Language functions (or patterns) that tend to recur in certain discourse situations (e.g., declining an invitation or requesting time off from work), can be identified and charted (Burns & Joyce, 1997). For example, when a salesperson asks "May I help you?" the expected discourse sequence includes a statement of need, response to the need, offer of appreciation, acknowledgement of the appreciation, and a leave-taking exchange. Speaking requires that learners not only know how to produce specific points of language such as grammar, pronunciation, or vocabulary (*linguistic competence*), but also that they understand when, why, and in what ways to produce language (*sociolinguistic competence*). Finally, speech has its own skills, structures, and conventions different from written language (Burns & Joyce, 1997; Carter & McCarthy, 1995; Cohen, 1996). A good speaker synthesizes this array of skills and knowledge to succeed in a given speech act. [4]

Some of the strategies to improve speaking skill are as follows:

- a. Understanding paralinguistic (voice quality, volume, pace, voice modulation, articulation, pronunciation, etc.) attributes
- b. Oral practice
- c. Describing objects/situations/people
- d. Individual/Group activities
- e. Extempore, debate, group discussion,
- f. Role play, public speaking
- g. Just a Minute (JAM) Sessions

2.3 Reading Skill:

"Reading is a complex cognitive process of decoding symbols in order to construct or derive meaning (reading comprehension). Reading is a means of language acquisition, of communication, and of sharing information and ideas. Like all languages, it is a complex interaction between the text and the reader which is shaped by the reader's prior knowledge, experiences, attitude, and language community which is culturally and socially situated. The reading process requires continuous practice, development, and refinement. In addition, reading requires creativity and critical analysis." [5].

Some of the strategies to improve reading skill are as follows:

- a. Skimming the text
- b. Reading and understanding of textual materials
- c. Understanding the gist of an argument
- d. Identifying the topic sentence
- e. Inferring lexical (Use of Dictionary/Glossary/ Listing Jargons) and contextual meaning
- f. Recognizing unity, coherence and emphasis of sentences and paragraphs

2.4 Writing Skill:

“Writing is a form of communication that allows students to put their feelings and ideas on paper, to organize their knowledge and beliefs into convincing arguments, and to convey meaning through well-constructed text. In its most advanced form, written expression can be as vivid as a work of art. As students learn the steps of writing, and as they build new skills upon old, writing evolves from the first simple sentences to elaborate stories and essays. Spelling, vocabulary, grammar, and organization come together and grow together to help the student demonstrate more advanced writing skills each year.”[6]

Some of the strategies to improve reading skill are as follows:

- a. Basic skills of simple and short composition
- b. Writing sentences
- c. Techniques of creative and critical writing
- d. Use of appropriate vocabulary
- e. Paragraph, essay and précis writing
- f. Coherence and cohesiveness
- g. Narration / description
- h. Note Making
- i. Formal and informal letter writing
- j. Editing a passage

3. METHODOLOGY

A survey was conducted and total 200 EFL learners participated in response to the following research questions;

1. What strategy is useful to improve listening skill?
2. What strategy is useful to improve speaking skill?
3. What strategy is useful to improve reading skill?
4. What strategy is useful to improve writing skill?

The learners shared their perceptions on the strategies which help them to improve integrated skills of language (LSRW). Results are discussed based on the survey conducted (See Appendix-1- Questionnaire).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Listening is one of the important skills of language. ‘**listening for general content**’ the study shows that 75% respondents often follow this strategy to improve their listening skill whereas only 25 % learners sometimes use it and 0% respondents never follow this strategy to improve listening skill. 50 % respondents sometimes follow ‘**listening to fill up information**’ whereas only 37.5% respondents often follow and 12.5 % never follow this strategy for improvement in listening skill as shown in Fig.1. 75 % respondents sometimes follow ‘**intensive listening**’ as a strategy and only 12.5% respondents often follow this strategy for enhancing their listening skills whereas 12.5% respondents never follow this

strategy to improve listening. **'Listening for specific information'** is often followed by 50% respondents and 37.5% respondents sometimes follow this strategy but 12.5% respondents never follow listening for specific information as a strategy to improve their listening skill.

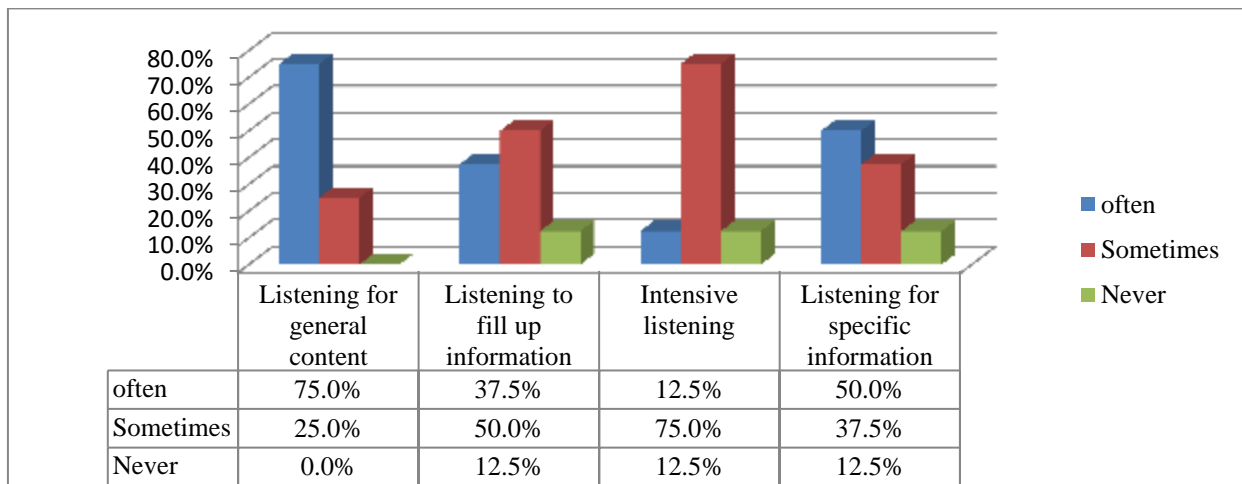


Fig. 1

To improve speaking skills, 62.5% respondents follow **'understanding paralinguistic'** as a strategy and only 25 % respondents sometimes follow it. 12.5% respondents never follow this strategy. **'Oral practice'** is another very important strategy to improve speaking skill. 62.5 % respondents often follow the oral practice to improve speaking skills and 37.5% sometimes follow it for improvement of speaking skill whereas 0 % respondents never follow this strategy. **'Objects/situation/people'** is often, sometimes and never followed by 50%, 50%, and 0% respondents respectively as shown in the fig.2. 62.5% respondents sometimes follow **'individual and group activities'** as a strategy to improve speaking skill. 25 % respondents often follow this strategy. 12.5% respondents never follow this strategy to improve speaking skills. On the other hand, **'extempore, debate and group discussion'** is another very important strategy to improve speaking skill which is sometimes followed by 50% respondents and often by 37.5% respondents. 12.5% respondents never follow this strategy. Moreover, **'role play and public speaking'** is followed by 50 % respondents whereas 37.5% often follow this strategy. But 12.5% respondents never follow this strategy for speaking skill. Finally, **'just a minute session'** is sometimes followed by 87.5% respondents and 0% respondents often follow this strategy. 12.5% respondents never follow this strategy to improve speaking skills as shown in Fig.2

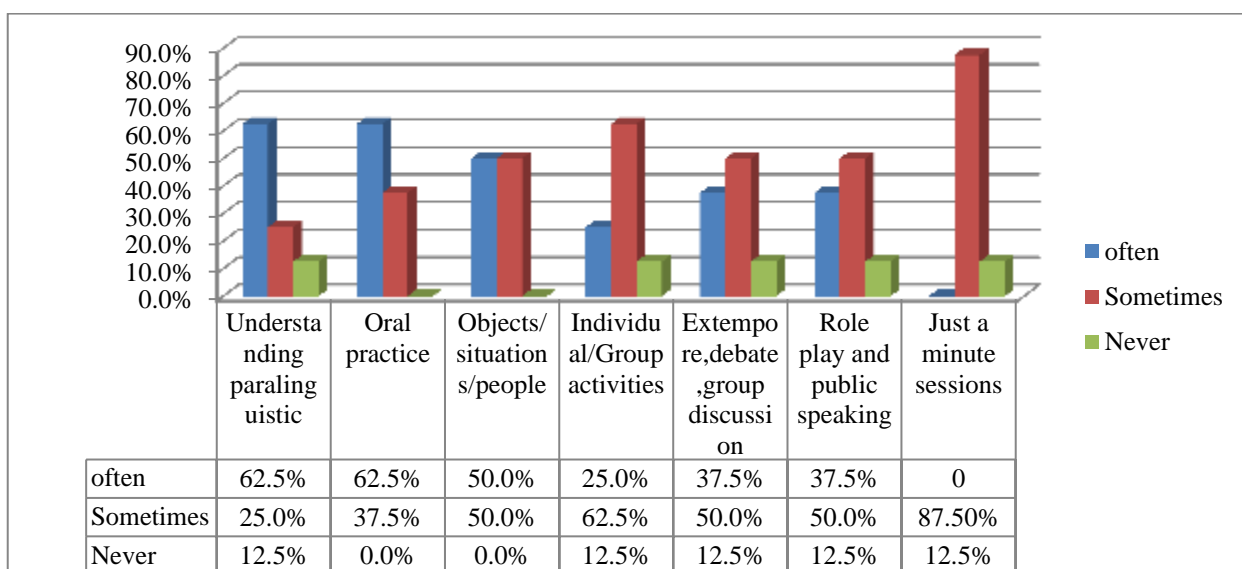


Fig. 2

To improve reading skill 62.5% respondents often follow **'skimming the text'** as a strategy and this strategy is sometimes followed by 25 % respondents. Only 12.5% respondents never follow this strategy for reading skill. **'Reading and understanding of textual material'** is often followed by 75% respondents. 25% respondents sometimes follow this strategy where 0% never follows this strategy for improving reading skill. **'Understanding the gist of an argument'** is often followed by 50% of respondents as a strategy to improve their reading skill. It is sometimes followed by 50% respondents and 0% respondents never follow this strategy. Moreover, **'identifying the topic sentence'** often followed by 37.5% respondents whereas 62.5% respondents sometimes follow this strategy for improving reading skill. 0% respondents never follow this strategy. **'Inferring lexical and contextual meaning'** is often followed only by 37.5% but 50% respondents sometimes follow this strategy for reading skill. 12.5% respondents never follow this strategy. Finally, **'recognizing unity, coherence and emphasis on sentences and paragraph'** is often followed by 12.5% respondents but 75% respondents sometimes follow this strategy and 12.5% respondents never follow the same to improve reading skill as shown in Fig.3.

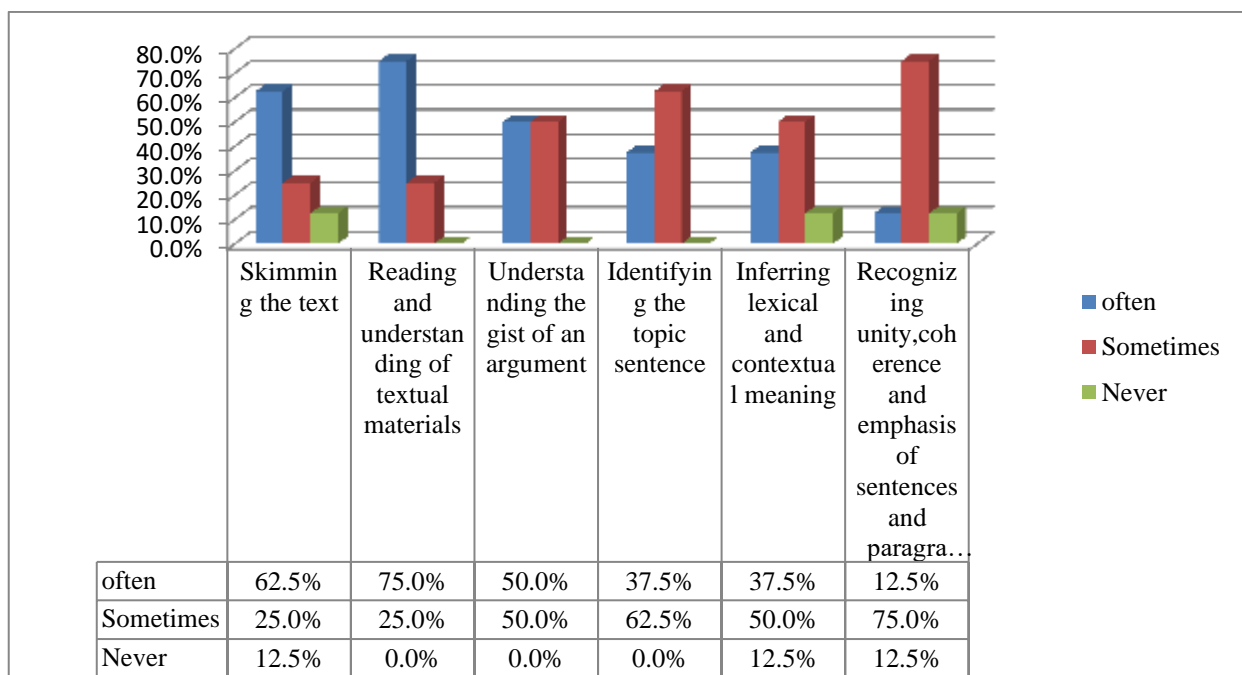


Fig. 3

For writing skill, 87.5% respondents often follow **'basic skills of simple and short composition'** as a strategy. 12.5% respondents sometimes and 0% respondents never follow this strategy to improve writing skill. **'Writing sentences'** is often followed by 75% of the total respondents and 25% respondents follow this strategy to improve writing skill. 0% respondents never follow this strategy. Another strategy is **'techniques of creative and technical writing'** which is followed by 25% respondents. This strategy is sometimes followed by 62.5% respondents and 12.5% respondents never follow this strategy. **'Use of appropriate vocabulary'** 37.5% respondents often follow this strategy for better writing skill whereas 62.5% respondents sometimes follow this strategy. 0% respondents never follow this strategy for their writing skill. **'Paragraph, essay and précis writing'** is also one of the important strategies that often followed by 50% respondents. 37.5% respondents sometimes follow this strategy. 12.5% respondents never follow this strategy as for as improving writing skill is the concern. Moreover, **'coherence and cohesiveness'** is often followed by 37.5% and 0% respondents never follow this strategy for writing skill. 25% often follow **'narration or description'** as a strategy to improve writing skill whereas 62.5% sometimes follow this strategy and 12.5% never follow. **'Note making'** is very common that is often followed by 62.5% of the total respondents, 37.5% sometimes follow this strategy and 0% never follow the strategy. On the contrary, **'formal and informal letter writing'** is often followed by 37.5% but sometimes by 62.5% respondents whereas 0% never follows this strategy for improving writing skills. Finally, **'editing a passage'** is also very much important strategy for writing skills where 12.5% respondents often follow this strategy and 62.5% sometimes follow this strategy whereas 25% respondents never follow this strategy to improve writing skill as shown in Fig. N.

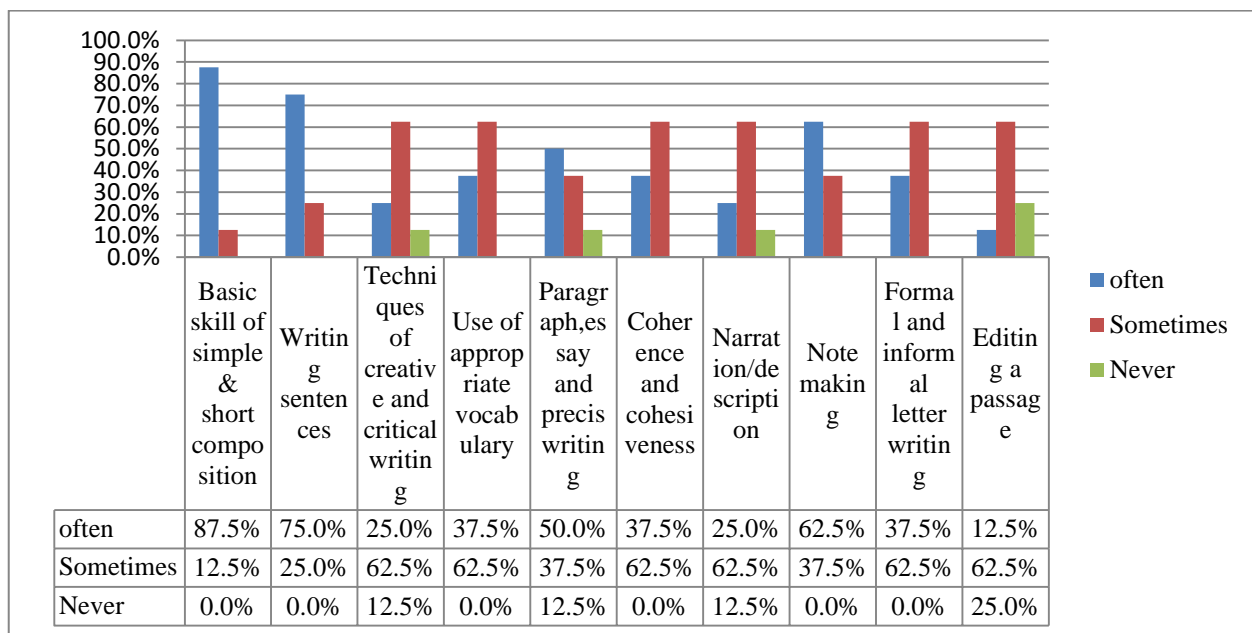


Fig. N

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the present scenario professionals certainly need effective and impressive LSRW (listening, Speaking, reading, Writing) skills. There is a great need to frame course materials and develop methods and strategies so as to enhance LSRW skills of the students. Students require LSRW skills to express and share their experience, knowledge, ideas and thoughts in an effective manner and to harness a better understanding and harmony for the common benefit of the society. LSRW skills thus can be developed by rigorous training programs and a lot of practice work. It requires persistent efforts. It is possible by applying various methods discussion in the classes, studying famous speeches, mastering the art of oral presentation and by active participation in presentations, seminars, workshops, conferences, group discussions, etc. As it is observed in the study that some strategies are often used, some are used sometimes, and some strategies are never used by the learners to improve language skills. In order to become proficient in these skills, learners' must focus more on the strategies which they often follow. Everyday practice on these skills by following effective strategies will enable the learners in getting command over LSRW.

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