What Do Language Learners Actually Do to Improve Their Speaking Proficiency?

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1. Introduction

An old proverb says, "Practice makes perfect." It tells us that nothing is more important than practice when one tries to accomplish something. In fact, we often hear athletes say that it is practice that enabled them to break the record. Is this, however, valid when it comes to learning a second or a foreign language? What do learners do who succeed in improving their proficiency? Do they simply practice as an athlete does, or is there anything that language learners in particular do to succeed? This study was one attempt to investigate what learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) actually do in order to improve their oral proficiency. The results showed that those learners who improved their oral proficiency tended to try functional practice more actively than those who failed to improve it. In this sense, the key to success in the learning process seems to be the same as in other fields involving the development of physical skills.

2. Literature Review

Research that explores what successful learners actually do is found in the series of "good language learner" studies that started in 1970s. These studies

investigated learning strategies that good language learners use. Learning strategies are defined as "steps taken by students to enhance their own learning," and are thought to be "essential for developing communicative competence," and it is said that "appropriate language learning strategies result in improved proficiency" (Oxford, 1990, p. 1).

Among the studies that revealed learning strategies used by good language learners is that of Rubin (1975) who states that good language learners guess, willingly attempt to communicate, take risks, attend to form and meaning, practice, and monitor. Other researchers such as Naiman et al. (1978) noted that good language learners actively involve themselves in the language learning task, develop or exploit an awareness of language as a system, develop and exploit an awareness of language as a means of communication and interaction, realize initially or with time that they must cope with the affective demands made upon them by language learning (and succeed in doing so), and constantly revise their L2 systems. In addition, according to Gillette (1987), good language learners are not likely to use low-order, conscious strategies such as mnemonic devices, but likely to focus on meaning, not form, develop grammar knowledge through trial and error, demonstrate tolerance of uncertainty, and expand their learning activities outside the classroom.

Some of the good language learner studies focused on the relationship between the learning strategies that good language learners adopted to improve their oral proficiency. These studies made attempts to examine what learning strategies good language learners use in order to have a positive outcome in increasing their oral proficiency. According to them, successful learners engaged themselves in functional practice more frequently and in more various situations. Huang and Naerssen (1987) stressed the following learning strategies that learners at a high oral proficiency level use: speaking with other students, teacher, and native speakers; participation in group oral communicative

activities; attending lectures, watching films and TV programs; and thinking or talking to themselves in English. Green and Oxford (1995) postulated that successful learners who improve their oral proficiency look for people to talk to in English, practice English with other students, seek many ways to use English, and try to talk like native English speakers.

In addition to more frequent and various attempts at functional practice, previous studies argued that learners at a high level of oral proficiency pay attention to form as well as meaning. For example, Politzer and McGroarty (1985) pointed out the following learning strategies that learners at a high level oral proficiency use: asking the teacher when and by whom an expression may be used, asking confirmation of grammatical correctness, and asking the teacher to repeat a phrase or word which the student has not understood. Generally, oral proficiency at a high level does not exist without accuracy in form. Thus, it is quite natural that learners are careful of not only meaning but also form.

3. Problem Statement

As seen in the literature review, good language learner studies revealed learning strategies that successful learners use. Further, learning strategies used by learners who succeed in improving oral proficiency were also found. However, it does not mean that there are no problems in these studies.

First, the number of studies that prove the findings is not large enough. Especially, studies that explored what resources successful learners used in order to improve their oral proficiency are scarce. Resources are defined as learning materials including human beings such as teachers and friends as well as materials like TV or radio programs, books, magazines, and so on (Kikuchi, 2004). These are not exactly the same as learning strategies, but rather, are considered as a concrete object that learners actually use as a result of exercise of a learning strategy. No doubt it is meaningful to gain a good knowledge about

learning strategies, but sometimes they are so abstract that teachers and learners may want to know what kind of materials or programs good language learners actually make use of. There are few studies that examined this issue.

Second, most of the studies of successful learners were conducted in the context of English as a second language in the United States and Europe, and few studies on the same issue were conducted in Asian EFL settings. In fact, EFL learners in Asia are often said to be quiet and not risk-taking. Whether such learners are also engaged in functional practice if they want to improve oral proficiency is a topic that should collect more scholarly interest.

In order to solve these problems, a study should be conducted in the following environment. In an Asian EFL setting, the school offers a self-access facility where learners can visit to perform functional practice and use learning materials such as books, magazines, CDs, DVDs, and so on. Under these circumstances, if general characteristics of behavior that successful learners take in order to improve their oral proficiency can be ascertained, the information will shed new light in the studies of successful learners in the field of foreign language education.

4. Research Question

In order to respond to the problems above, the following research question was formulated:

Research Question: Are there differences in resources that successful and unsuccessful EFL learners use in order to improve oral proficiency?

This research question focuses on learners' use of resources that are available around them. Important is to explore what learners actually do, not what learners believe effective.

5. Method

5.1 Statistical Analyses

To answer the research question, a factor analysis was employed with the data obtained from the questionnaires students answered to indicate what they actually do to improve their speaking proficiency. The maximum-likelihood method was used to extract the factors, which was followed by promax rotations.

After the data were subjected to factor analysis, t tests were conducted to compare the factor scores that successful and unsuccessful learners obtained for each factor. If the t test found statistically significant difference, the factor was concluded to be the difference in resources between successful and unsuccessful learners.

5.2 Subjects

Subjects were obtained from a private university in Tokyo, Japan, where the researcher is an EFL instructor. Out of the courses the researcher taught in 2005, 36 students in English communication courses at the basic level were the subjects. This course was offered for students whose scores ranged from the lowest to 380 on Institutional Testing Program. Students' major varied: 4 in law, 1 in economics, 16 in business administration, 9 in letters, and 6 in engineering. Among them were 22 freshmen, 7 sophomores, 3 juniors, and 4 seniors. These 36 students registered for the courses in both spring and fall semester and took a speaking assessment at the beginning of the spring and the end of fall semester.

5.3 Questionnaire

Subjects were asked to fill out the questionnaire containing 12 items regarding resources: to each of which the subjects indicated how intensely they attempted to utilize the resource in question from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very positively). The researcher wrote the questionnaire choosing the resources that

were available to the students in the self-access center of the university. Out of a wide variety of resources, the researcher selected the items that students were likely to use. Those were chosen based on the researcher's observation and experience as coordinator of the self-access center. The questionnaire used in this study is attached as an appendix at the end of this article.

5.4 Speaking Assessment

A speaking assessment was conducted at the beginning of the spring and the end of the fall semester in 2005. The test was a one-to-one interview test in English for 5 minutes. The test consisted of three phases which were first warm-up, then, an extended speaking opportunity about a topic, and finally, more complex tasks in speech. The interviewer assessed speaking proficiency of a subject integrating three components—fluency and coherence, vocabulary, and grammar. The score was decided using a band scale ranging from 0 to 10. It was possible to give a subject a half point such as 3.5 when it was felt that the student's proficiency fall between 3 and 4. In this study, the interviewer was the researcher, who was trained as an interviewer and rater in a workshop held by the language center of the university that is in charge of its English education.[1]

5.5 Distinguishing successful and unsuccessful learners

In this study, successful and unsuccessful learners were distinguished by comparing the score increases between pre- and post- speaking assessments. Subjects who obtained at least 1.0 increase on the post-assessment from the pre-assessment were considered as successful learners. Subjects who obtained 0.5 increases on the post-assessment from the pre-assessment, obtained no increase, or decreased the score were all considered as unsuccessful learners. It may be legitimate to say that those who increased the score at least 1.0 improved their speaking proficiency. According to the band scale of the speaking test, it is obvious that if learners at a certain level go up one level higher, which means they earn 1.0 higher than the previous score, they are able to perform skills which are new or difficult for them to conduct at the previous stage.

5.6 Self-access center

The self-access center at the university, where this study was conducted, has various facilities to support students learning foreign languages outside classroom. These are an AV Library, a writing center, and conversation practice facilities for English and other foreign languages.

Among these, the English conversation practice facilities offer two separate programs for the lower and higher level students. Subjects in this study who were at the basic level were qualified as visitors to the lower level program called Chit Chat Club. It was open from 10:30 to 6:05 which corresponded to the beginning of the second period and the end of the fifth period of weekday class schedule of the university. Students can join any 45-minute session out of eight sessions by making an online reservation.

An international student whose native language is English or who speaks in fluent English as a second or a foreign language sits at a table as a staff member with about five Japanese students. The groups of the staff and students interact by talking about a variety of topics carefully chosen as suitable for students at the basic level. All staff members were required to attend a training session once a month to learn suggested topics, manners as a staff member, and how to facilitate conversation among the students.

5.7 Procedures

In the second week of the spring and the last week of the fall semester in 2005, the speaking assessment was conducted for each of the students in English communication class at the basic level. Spending one class hour, the researcher

interviewed all the students and evaluated each one's speaking proficiency level following the procedures of the regular speaking assessment of the institute.

During the semester, no specific directions about study methods were given to the students except for the visits to self-access center for extracurricular English conversation practice. It was suggested that students go there seven times or more in the semester. If they fulfilled the minimum load, it was counted as 10% toward their final course grade.

In the last class of the fall semester when students took the speaking assessment, they answered the questionnaire while they were waiting for their turn. Before they answered the questionnaire, it was stressed that their answers to the questions would not affect their final course grade at all, and their privacy would be completely protected even if the results of the questionnaire were reported in a paper by the researcher. The time allotted for this was 90 minutes, which was long enough for the students to answer the questionnaire. All the questionnaires were collected at the end of the class.

6. Results

Table 1 contains the descriptive statistics of the results of the survey. The mean score for Question 1 "Are you taking a communication class?" was the highest (3.69).[2] The rest of the mean scores were somewhere between 2.06 for Question 10 "Listening to a CD in a magazine to practice saying the expression" to 2.97 for Question 6 "Watching a video/DVD and practice the expressions," except for those for Question 4 "Making the opportunity to talk to a native speaker one on one" (1.69) and Question 9 "Listening to an NHK radio English program" (1.59). In contrast to mean scores beyond 2.0, low mean scores for Question 4 and 9 implied that there were few opportunities for students to talk to a native speaker of English individually, and they did not make a habit of listening to a radio English conversation program.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of the Results of the Questionnaire

Question	N	M	SD
1. Taking an English communication class.	35	3.69	0.80
2. Going to Chit Chat Club.	35	2.74	1.56
3. Combination of English communication class and going to Chit Chat Club.	34	2.65	1.41
4. Making the opportunity to talk to a native speaker one on one.	32	1.69	0.93
5. Taking every opportunity to speak in English to yourself in daily life.	33	2.24	1.06
6. Watching a video/DVD and practice the expressions.	33	2.97	1.31
7. Translating from Japanese to English and from English to Japanese.	32	2.56	1.32
8. Memorizing expressions in a conversation practice book.	31	2.10	0.94
9. Listening to an NHK radio English program.	32	1.59	1.07
10. Listening to a CD in a magazine to practice saying the expressions.	32	2.06	1.24
11. Studying grammar.	30	2.63	1.45
12. Memorizing vocabulary.	32	2.84	1.44

Table 2 shows the results of factor analysis with the data obtained from the subjects' responses to the questionnaire. Four factors were extracted, each of which was named as functional (the first factor), formal (the second factor), auditory (the third factor), and formulaic (the fourth factor). Questions 1 "Taking

an English communication class" and 6 "Watching a video/DVD and practice the expressions" were excluded because neither of them indicated loadings large enough to be categorized into any one of the four factors.

Table 2

Factor Analysis for Actual Behavior of EFL Learners to Improve Oral Proficiency

Item number	Functional	Formal	Auditory	Formulaic
2	**.917**	.019	.028	-.113
3	**.895**	.079	.124	-.205
4	**.731**	-.236	-.171	.323
12	-.069	**.996**	.043	.029
11	.018	**.755**	-.082	.085
7	-.096	**.491**	-.022	.293
10	-.049	-.143	**.881**	.351
9	.118	.179	**.760**	-.109
5	.075	.309	-.053	**.637**
8	-.113	.030	.163	**.512**
1	.173	.257	-.417	.131
6	.201	.055	.294	.268
% of variance explained by each factor	46.2	6.2	5.0	11.4

The following tables demonstrate the results of *t* tests to examine if there was a statistically significant difference between factor scores that successful learners (SL) obtained and those that unsuccessful learners (UL) obtained in each of four extracted factors.

Table 3

A Comparison of Factor Scores between Successful and Unsuccessful Learners for the First Factor: Functional

Learner Type	N	M	SD	t	DF	p
UL	17	-0.240	1.071	-1.689	26.936	.103
SL	12	0.341	0.784			

Table 4

A Comparison of Factor Scores between Successful and Unsuccessful Learners for the Second Factor: Formal

Learner Type	N	M	SD	t	DF	p
UL	17	-0.164	1.052	-1.050	27	.303
SL	12	0.232	0.912			

Table 5

A Comparison of Factor Scores between Successful and Unsuccessful Learners for the Third Factor: Auditory

Learner Type	N	M	SD	t	DF	p
UL	17	-0.202	0.581	-1.256	14.351	.229
SL	12	0.286	1.255			

Table 6

A Comparison of Factor Scores between Successful and Unsuccessful Learners for the Fourth Factor: Formulaic

Learner Type	N	M	SD	t	DF	p
UL	17	0.003	0.873	0.021	27	.983
SL	12	-0.004	0.896			

None of the *t* tests detected a statistically significant difference between factor scores that successful and unsuccessful learners obtained for any of four factors. The *p* value in the comparison for the first factor: Functional was .103, which was the smallest, and those in the comparisons for the second factor: Formal and third factor Auditory were .303 and .229, respectively. The *p* value in the comparison for the fourth factor: Formulaic was .983, which was almost meaningless to attempt to find any significant relationship. However, it may be worth taking into consideration the comparison of the first factor: Functional as a difference in terms of resources between successful and unsuccessful learners to improve oral proficiency although the *p* value was not statistically significant.

6. Discussion and Implications

Although a statistically significant difference was not found in the *t* test to compare the factor scores that successful and unsuccessful learners obtained for the first factor: Functional, it was found a tendency for successful learners to engage themselves in functional practices to improve their oral proficiency. This finding corresponds to what the previous studies revealed, but moreover, it provides additional information on the behavior of EFL learners in Asia. EFL learners in Asia are often said to be introverted. However, the current study showed that the EFL learners in Asia also try functional practice in order to improve their oral proficiency, and this functional practice will encourage learners to be more risk-taking.

The behavior that the successful learners took in this study for the functional practice included the following: Going to Chit Chat Club (Question 2), Combination of an English communication class and going to Chit Chat Club (Question 3), and Making the opportunity to talk to a native speaker one on one (Question 4). These results suggest that it may be effective to increase the amount of time for speaking both inside and outside the classroom. The school

in the current study would be advised to take every measure in order to secure the amount of time dedicated to students engaging in speaking tasks. Encouraging students to visit a self-access facility for oral skill practice more often may be effective.

However, this study does not reveal at all what motivated the learners to attempt such functional practice. The subjects in this study who improved their oral proficiency seemed to work on self-regulated study more actively than those who were unable to improve their proficiency. In fact, this self-regulated behavior seemed to differentiate successful from unsuccessful learners. In this sense, the successful learners appeared to be more autonomous than unsuccessful learners. The question is what made them autonomous.

Previous studies of learner autonomy indicated that metacognitive strategies play a crucial role in autonomy. Oxford (1990) states metacognitive strategies "provide a way for learners to coordinate their own learning process" and are "essential for successful language learning" (p. 136). The successful learners in this study might have recognized the importance of functional practice to improve their oral proficiency, and controlled their own learning to create the opportunity to increase the amount of practice. This is just a possibility and it is necessary to conduct another study to investigate whether successful learners actually utilize metacognitive strategies. Furthermore, if successful learners are found to make use of those strategies, it is important to explore whether it is possible to train learners to use them.

7. Conclusion

The successful learners in this study who improved their oral proficiency showed a tendency to work on functional practice more actively than unsuccessful learners. This result corresponded to the findings in previous studies that investigated the strategies used by successful learners to improve

their oral proficiency.

It is suggested that teachers and program coordinators encourage students to be engaged in more functional practice both inside and outside the classroom. At the same time, if facilities where students can practice oral skills are not offered, it is strongly recommended to establish them, or to promote improvement in oral proficiency through the creation of other programs that could support functional practice.

The next step for the study exploring the characteristics of successful learners will be to examine what motivates successful learners to work on functional practice. One possibility is that successful learners may use metacognitive strategies to increase their autonomy, but convincing evidence should be explored more.

At any rate, if the mechanism can be pinpointed, the knowledge gained should be applied to strategy training to see if learners can be trained to use those strategies. Such studies will surely provide useful information to those involved in language teaching and learning to create more successful learners.

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Notes

[1]The inter-tater reliability analysis conducted at the university in 2006 indicated that there was no statistically significant difference among faculty members including the resercher in terms of ratings of five videotaped students' speeches ($p < .01$). This result supports the reliability of the resercher's ratings.

[2]It seems meaningless to ask this question to the students who were already in a communication class. However, the questionnaire in this study was just recycled after it was used in another study to investigate the same topic with the students at a higher level. In that study, the researcher was not sure if those higher level students were taking a communication class or not; thus, it was appropriate to include the question. In addition, the researcher could compare the results from the students at the both higher and lower levels. Therefore, exactly the same questionnaire was used for both studies. At any rate, it is not appropriate to assume that a number of learners at this level take a communication class to improve their oral proficiency just by looking at the high mean score to Question 1.

Appendix

The questionnaire used in this study was written in Japanese. This is the English version translated from the Japanese version.

Questionnaire

Please answer to the questions below about how to study English to improve your speaking skills. Circle the number that best describes the level of your agreement with each question.

For the questions asking you if the item is useful to improve your speaking skills, each number means: 5-very useful, 4- useful, 3-neutral, 2-not so useful, and 1-not useful at all.

For the questions asking you if you are actually doing it, each number means: 5-very actively, 4- actively, 3-neutral, 2- not very much, and 1- not at all.

For both questions, please provide the reason that you circle the number. Please remember that your responses will not affect the course grade in any manner.

1. Taking an English communication class.
   Do you think it is useful? (5 4 3 2 1)
   Why? _____
   Are you doing it? (5 4 3 2 1)
   Why? _____
2. Going to Chit Chat Club.
   Do you think it is useful? (5 4 3 2 1)
   Why? _____
   Are you doing it? (5 4 3 2 1)
   Why? _____
3. Combination of English communication class and going to Chit Chat Club.
   Do you think it is useful? (5 4 3 2 1)
   Why? _____
   Are you doing it? (5 4 3 2 1)
   Why? _____
4. Making the opportunity to talk to a native speaker one on one.
   Do you think it is useful? (5 4 3 2 1)
   Why? _____
   Are you doing it? (5 4 3 2 1)
   Why? _____
5. Taking every opportunity to speak in English in daily life.
   Do you think it is useful? (5 4 3 2 1)
   Why? _____
   Are you doing it? (5 4 3 2 1)
   Why? _____
6. Watching a video/DVD and practice the expressions.
   Do you think it is useful? (5 4 3 2 1)
   Why? _____
   Are you doing it? (5 4 3 2 1)
   Why? _____

7. Translating from Japanese to English and from English to Japanese.
   Do you think it is useful? (5 4 3 2 1)
   Why? _____
   Are you doing it? (5 4 3 2 1)
   Why? _____
8. Memorizing expressions in a conversation practice book.
   Do you think it is useful? (5 4 3 2 1)
   Why? _____
   Are you doing it? (5 4 3 2 1)
   Why? _____
9. Listening to an NHK radio English program.
   Do you think it is useful? (5 4 3 2 1)
   Why? _____
   Are you doing it? (5 4 3 2 1)
   Why? _____
10. Listening to a CD in a magazine to practice saying the expressions.
   Do you think it is useful? (5 4 3 2 1)
   Why? _____
   Are you doing it? (5 4 3 2 1)
   Why? _____
11. Studying grammar.
   Do you think it is useful? (5 4 3 2 1)
   Why? _____
   Are you doing it? (5 4 3 2 1)
   Why? _____
12. Memorizing vocabulary.
   Do you think it is useful? (5 4 3 2 1)
   Why? _____
   Are you doing it? (5 4 3 2 1)
   Why? _____