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Research Article

## EFL Speaking Acquisition: Identifying Problems, Suggesting Learning Strategies and Examining Their Effect on Students' Speaking Fluency

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**ABSTRACT:** Qualitatively speaking this study aims at discovering, identifying and sorting out the most difficult EFL speaking problems Jordanian students encounter and the most effective speaking acquisition strategies that can overcome these speaking problems. A representative sample of 100 male students is interviewed. This sample is randomly chosen from students who recently graduated their secondary school and started their first year in the different faculties at Yarmouk University in Irbid, Jordan. The problems are classified into a set of three major groups: (1) lack of lexis, (2) lack of listening and practicing and (3) psychological problems. Related strategies to face each problem are suggested. To quantitatively investigate the effect of the suggested strategies on the speaking fluency, a pretest-posttest is implemented. Two sections of 20 male students each are assigned for the investigational and control group. The investigational group is exposed to these strategies and the control group is taught the same material and exposed to different strategies. The t-test results demonstrates a significant difference between the two groups mean scores in the pretest-posttest on students' speaking fluency in favor of the investigational group.

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**Index Terms-**EFL acquisition, learning strategies, speaking fluency, difficulties, problems

### I. INTRODUCTION

#### A. Statement of the Problem

Developing productive skills (writing and speaking) seems to be more difficult than developing receptive skills (reading and listening) because the learner of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) needs to transform the language competence into an actual performance when dealing with the productive skills. And speaking seems to be more difficult than writing because EFL speakers need to communicate and use language faster than writers do; the time factor is vital in putting speaking into application. Speakers are not allowed enough time to produce their utterance whereas in case of writing writers have enough time to build their sentences, can consult the dictionary if necessary and revise the written text more than once.

Because of the difficult nature of the speaking skill, it is a neglected skill in the classroom and EFL learners are given insufficient and inadequate exposure to it. Teachers find it uncomfortable to teach curricular speaking activities because students usually do not respond to teachers' instructions. And very little research has been done on EFL speaking difficulties and strategies. This is a real problem which needs more and more study and research.

#### B. Significance and Aim of the Study

This study aims at not only identifying and sorting out EFL speaking problems and difficulties EFL learners run into, but also accordingly suggesting learning strategies that can overcome these speaking problems and difficulties. This study gains its significance from the way it follows to identify and discover these difficulties, namely interviewing EFL students themselves in an attempt to go deep in their minds and hearts to discover the real and actual problems they encounter. More significance is gained because the suggested strategies reflect the sufferings of those students as these strategies emerge from the interview made with those students. In addition, this study aims to implement a

quasi-experimental design to examine the effect of the suggested strategies on EFL learners' speaking fluency. Implementing such investigation represents an additional tool to reach reliable results and conclusions. Combining the qualitative part with the quantitative part adds more significance and strength to this study.

#### C. Research Questions

To qualitatively explore, discover and identify the most difficult EFL speaking problems students encounter and the most effective speaking acquisition strategies that can overcome these speaking problems and difficulties, and to quantitatively investigate the effect of the suggested strategies on the speaking fluency, the following three questions are addressed.

1- What are the most difficult problems that make most Jordanian EFL learners fail to effectively improve their English speaking skill?

2- What are the most effective speaking strategies that can help Jordanian students overcome these problems and difficulties?

3- Is there any statistically significant difference between the investigational group mean scores who used the revealed speaking strategies and the control group mean scores who used the speaking strategies introduced in the Headway Plus textbook on speaking fluency at ( $\alpha=0.05$ )?

### II. RELATED LITERATURE REVIEW

In this part of the study I try to introduce an intensive related literature review. This review is divided into two parts. The first part focuses on the speaking problems and difficulties EFL learners encounter. And the second part deals with the speaking strategies EFL learners use so that they can prevail over these difficulties and problems.

### A. EFL Speaking Difficulties and Problems

Here some previous studies relating to this research are reviewed. These studies are carried out to identify the factors affecting EFL students' speaking performance and EFL students' speaking problems and difficulties such as self-confidence, anxiety, nervousness, stress, mother tongue interference, etc.

Spoken language production by EFL learners is often considered fundamental to communication and one of the most difficult aspects and major challenges of language learning (Al Hosni, 2014; Brown & Yule, 1983; Riyaz & Mullick, 2016; Pathan, Aldersi, & Alsout, 2014) because it is held back by many factors (Pathan, Aldersi, & Alsout, 2014; Al-Jamal, & Al-Jamal, 2014). In reality, many language learners find it difficult to express themselves in spoken language in the target language. Each student has his/her own problems. As Nunan (1991) states, "success is measured in terms of the ability to carry out a conversation in the (target) language." So students could get de-motivated and have no interest if they do not use speaking strategies to practice speaking in the classroom. However, if students are given enough chances to practice speaking using the right strategies, they will be interested and motivated.

MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels (1998) study the effects of self-confidence on oral performance. Their study shows that the EFL learners' willingness to communicate is determined partly by their self-confidence. Park & Lee (2005) investigate the relationships between EFL learners' nervousness and self-confidence and oral performance. They reach a conclusion that self-confidence significantly affects EFL learners' oral performance. They state that if the learners are more confident, they would have better oral performance. They also find out that anxiety negatively affects students' speaking fluency. Tanveer (2007) investigates the influence of anxiety on learning EFL speaking skill and his result is similar to what Park & Lee (2005) figure out. The findings suggest that learners' feeling of anxiety, stress or nervousness may hinder their speaking abilities. He cites that "the higher the anxiety, the lower the performance". According to Lukitasari (2003) study, EFL students face some speaking problems including psychological problems (anxiety, fear, shyness, inhibition, and lack of motivation). His study and Sarudin, Zubairi & Ali's study (2009) also reveal that students' speaking performance is not good because of linguistic problems (lack of vocabulary, mispronunciation and grammatical mistakes).

Pathan, Aldersi, & Alsout (2014) and Lukitasari (2003) say that mastering speaking skill is not an easy task especially for Arab EFL students because of the mother tongue interference difficulty. Both Feyten (1991) and Bozorgian (2012) find out that there is a considerable correlation between the listening ability and the foreign language speaking ability. They state that the better the listening ability, the higher the speaking proficiency. Al-Jamal & Miqdadi (2013) conclude that at an EFL setting speaking disability refers to problems such as mother tongue communication, big classes, and shortage of time.

### B. EFL Speaking Strategies

The past four decades have seen an increasing amount of

research into foreign language learning strategies. However, the correlation between understanding learning strategies and strategy classroom application in EFL speaking setting has rarely been investigated. Below are three previous studies that deal with the speaking strategies EFL learners use so that they can overcome some of the problems and difficulties reviewed in the previous section.

Zhang & Goh (2006) investigate EFL learners' understanding and use of speaking and listening strategies, and the correlation between these two variables. Differences are done between use-focused and form focused learning strategies, and understanding and communication strategies. The outcomes demonstrate that learners have a tendency to trust the effectiveness of all four groups of strategies but appear more often to apply use-focused ones. The results also indicate that while learners are generally conscious of the effectiveness of the strategies, they are not yet mindful and self-assured strategy users.

In a paper presented by the National Capital Language Center (2004) three speaking strategies are suggested: using minimal replies, identifying scripts, and using language to speak about language. Learners can use a stock of minimal responses to specify agreement, doubt, understanding and other responses to what another speaker is stating. Teachers can help learners improve speaking skill by making them responsive to scripts for different settings such as invitations, apologies, compliments and greetings so that they can expect what they will hear and what they will want to say in response. Teachers can also help learners prevail over silence by telling them that misinterpretation and the need for explanation can happen in any type of communication, whatever the learners' language skill levels. By encouraging learners to use explanation phrases in class when misinterpretation happens, teachers can generate a genuine practice setting within the classroom itself and help students gain confidence to manage the various communication situations outside the classroom.

**Ddeubel (2009) summarizes some speaking strategies that foster oral interpersonal communication in the EFL classroom.** These strategies are as follows: **A. Dealing with the psychological factor.** The fear many learners have must be decreased by making learners feel relaxed and learning environment safe. **B. Focusing on performance.** Teacher should *focus on the objective of learning* and help students practice that. **C. Taking turns.** Instructor should explicitly teach learners *how to take turns* in a talk. **D. Using tasks.** Learners should be assigned speaking tasks. A two way task could offer a motivational environment. **E. Providing topics that learners are interested in.** Teacher can use authentic texts such as hot topics, news items etc... *and keep it about students' lives.* **F) Tolerating silences.** *Waiting longer after questions* provides students with ample time to work out the conversation in their heads. **G) Getting students on their feet!** Teacher should encourage students to stand up and walk around while speaking so that they can feel it is natural not artificial.

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### A. Informants and Subjects of the Study

To qualitatively discover, identify and sort out the most difficult EFL speaking problems Jordanian students encounter and the most effective speaking acquisition strategies that can overcome these speaking problems and difficulties, a representative sample of 100 male students was interviewed. This sample was randomly chosen from students who recently graduated their secondary school and started their first year in the different faculties at Yarmouk University in Irbid, Jordan. To quantitatively investigate the effect of the suggested strategies on the speaking fluency, a pretest-posttest was implemented. An intensive tutorial course was announced in the second term of the scholastic year 2015/2016 and a sample of 40 male students who had a strong desire to develop their English language registered for it. This sample was randomly divided into two groups, control and experimental. The two sections were taught the New Headway Plus textbook, Elementary level and Pre-Intermediate level (14 units each), which is rich in speaking activities, by two randomly chosen teachers. The teacher of the experimental group was asked to discuss the revealed speaking problems and difficulties with his students and to repeatedly encourage them to adopt the suggested strategies, whereas students in the control group were taught the speaking activities using the strategies introduced in the textbook. The experiment under examination went on for 14 weeks.

#### B. Data Collection and Analysis

In an attempt to achieve strong and reliable results, the researcher used a two method approach: interviews (qualitative) and pretest-posttest (quantitative). The informants of the interviews were a group of 100 students, whereas the subjects of the pretest-posttest were another group of 40 students.

##### B.1. The Interviews

The basic information for this study was gained from an essential source of social, interactive and interpersonal communication method (interview). Interviewing is one of the most recognized and significant methods of understanding human thoughts and emotions. The semi-structured interview was chosen as it is not closed and allows students to express themselves and innovate new ideas. This can help interviewers adjust their questions to the interview situation, and to the people they are meeting. The semi-structured interview usually classifies in advance a definite subject matter to be investigated (Edwards and Holland, 2013). The researcher used the interview because it can go deep into the minds and feelings of learners, which cannot be achieved by applying a questionnaire simply because when constructing a questionnaire specific strategies, problems and difficulties are to be prepared in advance.

To answer the first two questions of the study, 4 interviewers were appointed and the following areas were covered:

- The difficulties and problems that make most Jordanian EFL students fail to effectively improve EFL speaking skill, and

- The learning strategies that can help overcoming these problems and difficulties.

##### B.1.1. Interviews Analysis

To analyze and investigate the raw data emerged from the interviewees' thoughts and ideas, a system of sorting out and classifying categories was used (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990; Struass and Corbin, 1990).

The speaking acquisition strategies were the independent variable of the study and the subjects' EFL speaking fluency as calculated by the speaking proficiency test built by the researcher was the dependent variable. The quasi-experimental design was used to answer the third question of the study. This design consisted of an experimental group and a control group with a pretest and a posttest. The pretest (out of 100 marks) was used as a posttest and given to the two groups.

To control the differences between the two groups of the study a test validity and reliability was established and used as a pretest at the beginning of the experiment.

##### B.2.1. Pretest-posttest Validity and Reliability

A method of content validity was used to set up the validity of the test. A table of specifications and test items were prepared and given them to a group of 5 experts. Their comments and recommendations concerning the speaking feasibility components, the speaking objectives, the speaking questions types, the items number and the weight of each objective were taken into account. Then the test was given to an intermediate section of students<sup>20</sup>. Finally, their papers were corrected and an item analysis was used and the most difficult and the easiest items which were most likely under or above students' level were deleted.

Another intermediate section of 20 students were given the test to set up the reliability of the test. They were given the same test after 2 weeks. Then their papers were corrected. Finally, Kuder Richardson 20 formula was used and the test reliability was set up by calculating its internal consistency. The test overall reliability was (0.90).

##### B.2.2. Pretest-posttest Analysis

A t-test was used to analyze the pretest-posttest data. The percentages, means, coefficient correlations and standard deviations were used as the main statistical tools to investigate the results of the pretest-posttest.

### IV. RESULTS

This section of the study was divided into two parts: the qualitative part (the interviews results) and the quantitative part (the pretest-posttest results).

#### A. Interviews Results

The interviews results were divided into two parts: problems and difficulties results and speaking strategies results.

##### A.1. Problems and Difficulties Results

With regard to the first question, "What are the most difficult problems that make most Jordanian EFL learners

fail to effectively improve their English speaking skill?", the interviews results were classified into three main groups (difficulties): (1) Lack of lexis; (2) Lack of listening and practicing; and (3) Psychological problems. The interview raised two main psychological problems, namely 1- Thinking in Arabic while speaking in English and 2- Lack of self-confidence because of feeling afraid of mistakes.

Concerning the first difficulty, lack of lexis, most students (72 out of 100) stated that this lack of lexis hindered their EFL speaking fluency. They believed that vocabulary was the cornerstone of EFL acquisition in general and speaking fluency in particular. They explained that English words were to be available in mind for quick use, otherwise an EFL speaker would find himself in a trouble of losing utterance and stopping talking or to make a shift to Arabic to continue conveying his message. One student said, *"In my opinion acquiring vocabulary is the most important factor that can help us improve our ability of speaking. But frankly speaking we have a very limited vocabulary."*

Another student complained, *"When I fail to find the word I need to express myself, I have a trouble continuing my talk."*

A third student explained, *"I usually try to quickly recall the words I need to convey my ideas, but I feel obliged to use my native language when I fail."*

Regarding the second difficulty, lack of listening and practicing, more than half of the interviewees (57 out of 100) directly mentioned this difficulty. They emphasized the importance of listening to English conversations as a good solution to solve this problem and considered practicing retelling these conversations the other side of the coin to fully deal with the problem. They thought that practicing listening and saying English conversations could help them recycle their personal dictionaries and as a result overcome the first problem, namely lack of vocabulary. Moreover, such authentic conversations, especially video tapped ones, were recommended because they could strongly help EFL students store their English vocabulary in their long term memories and use them in the right contexts and as a result improve English speaking fluency. One student suggested, *"Actually listening more and more to English conversations is essential for improving English fluency."*

Another student added, *"Yes, it is essential to listen to English conversations as much as possible, but what is more necessary is to practice saying these conversations with peers and friends."*

A third student explained, *"Repeatedly listening to and practicing conversations can help me improve my speaking skill and remind me of the vocabulary I may forget because of rare use."*

One more student proposed, *"I always advise my classmates to follow the way I followed if they want to speak English fluently, to watch English films. These films introduce English in real life situations and this helps the listener store words for long time and put them in the right language context."*

With reference to the third difficulty, psychological problems, roughly one third of the interviewees (30 out of 100) suffered from thinking in Arabic while speaking English. They felt that their minds were almost occupied by

Arabic and they found it difficult to get rid of this problem. Some of them thought this was because of lack of practice and believed that more and more practice would result in disappearing this problem. Approximately two thirds of the interviewees (63 out of 100) stated that they lacked self-confidence because of feeling afraid of mistakes. They complained about the cultural habits that allow people to laugh at those who make mistakes. Some of them admitted that they hesitated and felt reluctant to participate in class activities because of this problem. One student complained, *"I try to speak in English but find it difficult because I think in Arabic, what can I do to solve this problem!"*

Another student suggested, *"I think to overcome the problem of thinking in Arabic when trying to speak in English, we need to practice speaking English everyday."*

A third student complained, *"I really feel afraid of making mistakes and hesitate to speak English with others because they sometimes laugh at me."*

One more student admitted, *"I don't participate in class activities not because I am weak, but because I lack self-confidence. I don't like to make mistakes in front of others."*

#### A.2. Speaking Strategies Results

Regarding the second question, "What are the most effective speaking strategies that can help Jordanian students overcome these problems and difficulties?", two learning strategies were suggested to deal with the first problem, lack of lexis. They were as follows: 1- To add a new word to your own dictionary, you should learn how to: say it, how to spell it and how to use it meaningfully. Use "Instant Words: 1,000 Most Frequently Used Words in English"; **learn five words a day**. 2- Observe the words that usually hinder your speaking fluency and learn them. **Learn three words a day**. One student suggested, *"To learn a new word we should focus on three things: pronunciation, spelling and use."*

Another student added, *"Why don't we study five words a day so that we can enrich our vocabulary and improve speaking fluency. This doesn't take more than 15 minutes."*

A third student proposed, *"Why don't we start studying the 1,000 most frequently used words. This list should be given priority."*

A fourth student created a good idea, *"There are some frequent words a person needs to make speaking fluency easy. I will try to observe the words I need and learn three words a day."*

Concerning the second problem, lack of listening and practicing, three learning strategies were proposed. They were as follows: 1- Listen more and more. A good listener is a good speaker. **Repeat listening to each conversation you study in class three times at home**. 2- Use the back chaining technique (repeating the meaningful units of the sentence starting from the last unit and returning backwards and simultaneously combining these units till repeating the whole sentence) to practice and practice retelling sentences. **Practice retelling five simple sentences a day**. 3- Looking at yourself in the mirror **give a two-minute presentation about a topic you are interested in twice a week**. One student stated, *"I once heard that "A good listener is a good speaker." and I believe it's right and can help us enhance*

our speaking ability."

Another student suggested, "Let's listen to the conversations we study in class three times at home and practice retelling some simple sentences."

A third student innovated a new idea, "We can use the back chaining method to practice retelling sentences. Last year our teacher used it and it made difference."

A fourth student proposed, "We can prepare and give short presentations about topics we are interested in twice a week. It is a good idea to practice telling such presentations in front of the mirror before coming to class."

Referring to the third problem (Psychological problems: thinking in Arabic while speaking in English and lack of self-confidence because of feeling afraid of mistakes), one learning strategy was recommended to deal with the inner translation: 1- Try to think and speak directly in English. **Avoid making some kind of inner translation from Arabic into English**, and two learning strategies to deal with the lack of self-confidence caused by being afraid of mistakes: 1- Don't worry about errors and mistakes; they are inevitable. You are not the only one who makes mistakes; all EFL speakers and even native speakers make mistakes. Observe your mistakes and **correct three mistakes a day**. Words learnt from mistakes will never be forgotten. 2- Be a bit more confident in yourself! To do so: **Don't hesitate, just start talking and things will get easier. You won't be interrupted because of grammatical or vocabulary mistakes. You will be given help when you lose articulation**. One student explained and proposed, "What hinders my speaking fluency is I first think in Arabic and then translate my thoughts into English. This of course takes time and sometimes I don't find the English words I need. From now on I will try my best to think and directly speak in English."

Another student suggested, "Why should we feel shy because of mistakes? All of us make mistakes. Let's learn from our mistakes instead."

A third student Added, "We can observe our mistakes and correct three mistakes a day. This can help us remember the corrected sentences and never forget them."

A fourth student suggested, "We would be grateful if teachers don't interrupt us because of mistakes and give us help when we lose articulation instead."

One more student added, "The most difficult point is to start speaking. Just break the ice and things will go on smoothly."

#### B. Pretest-posttest Results

Table 1 shows the two groups results on the pretest.

**Table (1): The Two Groups T-Test Results on the Pretest**

Group	N	Means	S	SD	T	P (Significance)
Experimental	20	34.6	5.61	76	-0.931	0.360
Control	20	33.1	7.01			

The pretest obviously showed that no statistically significant difference between the two groups in their speaking fluency was found ( $t(76) = -0.931$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ). Speaking fluency score

of experimental group before treatment (Mean = 34.6) was higher than control group's score (Mean = 33.1), but to the 95% confidence gap this difference was not significant. Accordingly, the two groups were equal.

To answer the third question of this study, the t-test results for the experimental group who used the revealed speaking strategies and the control group who used the speaking strategies introduced in the Headway Plus textbook are shown in Table 2 below.

**Table (2): The Two Groups T-Test Results of on the Posttest**

Group	N	Means	S	SD	T	P (Significance)
Experimental	20	38.2	5.04	76	-3.302	0.001
Control	20	33.4	7.47			

As shown in Table 2, there was a significant difference between the post-test speaking fluency scores of the control and experimental group ( $t(76) = -3.302$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). The experimental group mean score (Mean = 38.2) was higher than the control group mean score (Mean = 33.4). This result showed that the treatment used on the experimental group improved students' speaking fluency.

#### V. DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

First of all, discovering, identifying and sorting out EFL speaking problems and difficulties is the first step that should be followed by introducing innovative and definite learning solutions and strategies. In this study the researcher tries to move in this direction depending on students themselves who suffer from deficiency in the speaking skill. This study consists of three sequential stages. It starts with discovering and sorting out the most difficult EFL speaking problems students encounter. Then it moves to suggesting effective speaking acquisition strategies that can overcome these problems. Finally, it ends up with investigating the effect of the suggested strategies on the students' speaking fluency. The study results show three keystone problems which could be believed the most dominant difficulties learners face on their way of acquiring EFL speaking skill: (1) **Lack of lexis**. Two learning strategies are suggested to deal with this problem: **Learning how to say, spell and use five frequently used words a day** and **Noticing and learning three words that hinder speaking fluency a day**. (2) **Lack of listening and practicing**. Three learning strategies are proposed to face this problem: **Repeating listening to each class conversation three times at home, Practicing retelling five simple sentences a day using the back chaining technique** and **Giving a two-minute presentation about an interesting topic twice a week**. (3) **Psychological problems**: A- **Thinking in Arabic while speaking in English** and B- **Lack of self-confidence because of feeling afraid of mistakes**. The strategy of **Avoiding making inner translation from Arabic into English** is suggested to deal with **Mother tongue interference** and two learning strategies are proposed to deal with the **Lack of self-confidence caused by being afraid of mistakes**: **Correcting three noticeable mistakes a day** and **Getting rid of hesitation when talking**. The t-

test results demonstrate a significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups in the pretest-posttest on students' speaking fluency in favor of the experimental group.

It is noticeable that the above problems and learning strategies are of comprehensive nature. They cover the cognitive, meta-cognitive and psychological human dimensions. This is possibly refers to the interview conducted with the students which allows them to express their feelings, concerns and thoughts. It is insufficient to deal with one aspect and to ignore the others. Taking into account the multi-dimensional nature of human beings while dealing of problems and solutions is a big advantage that can help researchers innovate and create comprehensive and effective solutions.

This study is completely in agreement with what is stated in the literature review concerning the importance of self-confidence for EFL learners to improve their speaking fluency and overcome the difficulties they face in learning this skill. There is almost a consensus among researchers on the importance of this factor and its positive effect on speaking fluency. However, the interviews in this study finds out one of the reasons that causes this problem, namely being afraid of making mistakes. Stopping at the limits of problems is not enough. Researchers need to dive into these problems and find what causes them. Feeling afraid of making mistakes as a reason and more reasons should be investigated so that researchers can reach an effective solution for the problem of lack of self-confidence which in a way or another has a relationship to the other mentioned problems such as anxiety and nervousness.

This study is also in agreement with Sarudin, Zubairi & Ali's study (2009) which reveals that speaking performance is negatively affected by the lack of vocabulary and mispronunciation. However, this study does not stop at this point, but tries to proceed with the solution that enables students to overcome this problem; two suggested strategies are proposed in this concern. Focusing on learning new words from different possible angles (pronunciation, spelling and using meaningfully) and noticing and learning words that hinder speaking fluency could reduce students' mistakes and release their tongues in the target language and as a result enhance their self-confidence and help them get rid of thinking in Arabic while speaking English. Five more strategies could lead to the same results, repeating listening to each class conversation at home, practicing retelling sentences using the back chaining technique, giving short presentations about interesting topics, correcting three noticeable mistakes a day and getting rid of hesitation when talking. It could be concluded from the above discussion and from what **Ddeubel (2009) summarizes about speaking strategies that** students mainly need more practice in listening as a receptive skill and in speaking as a productive skill.

In conclusion, it could be the reciprocal relationship these suggested learning strategies have is the factor that stands behind the speaking fluency improvement the experimental

group achieves. As the learning process is a complicated process, each strategy could directly or indirectly advocate the other strategies and participate in solving the other problems. One the on hand as the suggested strategies are practical learning actions, it could be these strategies are the main factor that results in the statistical difference between the two groups of the study. On the other hand this difference could obviously prove that these strategies have a positive effect on students' speaking fluency.

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