

Chapter VII

Learning strategies for the strengthening of communication skills in Spanish learners

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Introduction

The teaching of foreign languages in the People's Republic of China has been historically very complex due to the country's political, economic, and social events. According to Martínez and Lee (2010), it was only after 1978, when political and economic liberalization took place, that there was also "an educational liberalization at all curricular levels: methodology, content, and objectives" (p. 5). After this, many languages, including Spanish, began to be incorporated into the Chinese educational system. It is currently taught in many universities and students choose to learn it because of the opportunities it will provide them in the workplace and in cultural spheres. Furthermore, *strengthening* political, economic, and diplomatic relations with the Spanish-speaking world requires, and will require, professionals who are competent in Spanish and capable of communicating effectively to be part of the global and labor field that is being built in this nation. Zhai and Jin (2024) also mention the importance of this language and the increasing interest in it during the last decade, due to socio-economic policies of the country.

There are different studies related to teaching and learning Spanish as a foreign language. Sanabria (2023) developed a qualitative study at the Hebei International Studies University. Her study aimed at analyzing the cultural contents and language that are included in the learning materials. The findings revealed that, although there are a lot of technical vocabulary words in the textbooks, it is necessary to connect it with real communication situations. An interesting fact that can be concluded from this study is the need to include communicative activities in the Spanish classroom.

Another study that explains the general principles of teaching and learning Spanish in China is Zhang's (2024). His study shows that interest in learning Spanish has increased; however, the resources and

number of teachers are not enough to accomplish the goals. It also explains that students in China need more communication activities in the classroom to develop their fluency. In addition, the study shows that different teaching strategies must be implemented, as the grammar-oriented approach has been prevalent in universities for a long time. The study concludes that there are challenges and opportunities in the field of Spanish as a foreign language in China, and that it is expected to have more resources to strengthen the learning and teaching of Spanish in the Chinese educational system.

One study related to oral skills in language students in China was carried out by Corderi and García (2022). Their study was experimental research that considered the performative language teaching approach. With one group, they included different strategies like picture description, monologue, and improvised speaking. With the second group, they developed the regular lessons using the textbook that was part of the course. The findings showed that students in the group that was taught using different activities developed greater fluency, comprehension and oral production skills.

In the context of this study, at Hebei University of Foreign Studies in Shijiazhuang, China, it was identified that students had poor Spanish language proficiency. This was evident when listening to the students' interactions in class. Moreover, in informal talks with students, they also said that it is difficult for them to express their ideas verbally. Many of them choose to study Spanish with the goal of entering the business world and finding good job opportunities, which makes it challenging. Because of this, the university seeks to develop the skills necessary for its graduates to be competitive in the various career fields available in the country. It should also be noted that the students' conversational level is a concern for the institution, and this would be the first time that a project related to learning strategies has been developed. Therefore, this study is innovative and seeks to fulfill the university's objective of developing learners' oral skills. It is worth mentioning that this university, as well as the other ones in China, have had a path notably marked by the traditional education in schools, especially in the teaching of languages (Xiaoxu et al., 2022).

Another issue related to the identified problem is that students are not familiar with language learning strategies (LLS), which are very necessary to learn and practice the target language. LLS are essential for learners' success, as they enable learners to become more independent and autonomous. Learners who use LLS also demonstrate more positive learning outcomes and enjoy a high level of self-efficacy (Allwright, 1990; Oxford, 2003). Studies such as the one by Ramón and Cáceres (2019) show that learners use various strategies in their learning process, particularly metacognitive strategies, which are responsible for regulating the learning process and which characterize the adult learner. Similarly, it indicates that "students value learning through interaction with others, developing their communication skills" (p. 19).

Now then, since this topic has been scarcely explored in the Chinese context and given the growing popularity of Spanish language teaching in the country, the main objective of this project is to describe how learning strategies can be used to strengthen oral skills in the classroom. The specific objective of this study is to determine the importance of helping students to become aware of their own learning, and to encourage them to use different types of strategies in their learning and interaction processes. This could help learners to overcome communication barriers, remember and use vocabulary more easily and create appropriate environments for interaction and communication. In order to guide the project, the questions that is stated is: What is the role of language learning strategies instruction in the development of communication skills in Spanish learners at Hebei University of Foreign Studies, China?

In the following paragraphs, the reader will find some theoretical considerations that underpin this project. These considerations define language learning strategies, their classification and a brief definition of communication skills, as well as teaching Spanish as a foreign language. Besides, a description of the methodology is included in which aspects like the context, instruments for data collection, and other relevant ones are mentioned. The findings are presented in two categories with some examples taken from the students' artifacts,

teacher's field notes and transcripts of conversations. Finally, some insights are presented in the section of discussion and the conclusions about the implementation of this study.

Theoretical Considerations: Learning strategies

The first theoretical construct to consider is Language Learning Strategies, which are defined as "conscious thoughts and actions that students take to achieve a learning goal" (Chamot, 2004, p. 14); therefore, they are actions that learners perform when they have a clear understanding of their goals and their learning style. Zare (2012) defines them as "special ways of processing information to improve comprehension or retention of information" (p. 163). Likewise, Cohen (1990) states that learning strategies are processes "consciously selected by students (...) to improve the learning or use of a second or foreign language through the storage, retention, retrieval, and application of information about that language" (p. 4). These definitions consider the learning processes, student decision-making, thinking and information processing, processes that are particular to each student since, as Dumford et al. (2016) state, "there are a variety of methods that students can use when they are studying and learning, and these self-regulated behaviors contribute to student success in a variety of ways" (p. 72).

Classification of Learning Strategies

Learning strategies have been classified into different groups according to studies by different authors; their classification "helps link them to a variety of cognitive processing phases during language learning, but also helps create instructional frameworks" (Zare, 2012 p. 164). This author also summarizes the taxonomies of different authors such as O'Malley's (1985), Rubin's (1987), Sterns (1992), all of them with similar characteristics and some differences related to the names and functions that each strategy plays; however, for the purposes of this project, the taxonomy proposed by Oxford (1990) will be considered.

This taxonomy is the most inclusive, since there are aspects of the language learning process that are included by Oxford and that may not appear in the other studies and approaches (Zare, 2012). Oxford (1990) classifies learning strategies into two main groups: direct and indirect. The former are related to the language learning process and "require mental processing of the language" (Oxford 1990, p. 37). These are divided into memorization strategies, cognitive strategies, and compensatory strategies. On the other hand, indirect strategies include metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Oxford (1990) clarifies that these strategies can provide indirect support to language learning using different resources such as focusing, organizing, evaluating, seeking opportunities, and reducing anxiety. This study focuses on direct strategies, since a subgroup of them has more to do with communicative skills and the use of vocabulary for language practice, receiving and sending messages, and using the language despite communication failures (Oxford, 1990).

Communication Skills

A first vision about communicative competences is Manaj's (2015), who emphasizes the importance of developing listening and speaking skills. The author highlights the importance of mastering the four skills since there is a strong relation among them. On the other hand, Adsuaara (2014) mentions that "good personal, professional, and social relations are the result of good oral competence" (p. 1). He also mentions that due to the demands of today's society, teaching and improving oral communication is "imperative."

People are considered competent in a language when they can "put into practice skills, procedures and strategies in order to understand and use linguistic elements appropriately in a given context" (Adsuaara, 2014, p. 4). These contexts can be formal or informal, but ultimately, they require an individual to demonstrate knowledge of, and mastery over, the elements that constitute. The Common Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2020) states that communicative competence requires the speaker to have knowledge and mastery

of three clearly differentiated dimensions, namely: the linguistic components, which include knowledge of the phonetic, lexical, and grammatical systems and the formal aspects of the language. The sociolinguistic component, related to "the sociocultural conditions of language use" (p. 8); and the pragmatic one that refers to the "functional use of linguistic resources" (p. 8), which gives the speaker the ability to identify the cultural aspects that, together with the coherence and cohesion that are also part of this dimension, will allow him to carry out an effective communication process.

Teaching Spanish as a Foreign Language

In the book "El mundo estudia español " (The World Studies Spanish) by the Ministry of Education and Teacher Training of the Government of Spain (2018), the various efforts that have been made to recognize the importance of the Spanish language in the world at a general level are mentioned, since this language is recognized as the second most important language by native speakers in the world. It is mentioned that in countries and areas such as the United States, Brazil, Europe and Asian, the number of Spanish students is increasing due to different political, economic, migratory circumstances, or simply due to the interest in the language, culture, films, and people of the Spanish-speaking world that is part of it. Of course, China, the country where this study is carried out, is mentioned in this case.

According to the official document of the Ministry of Education of Spain (2018), "between 2017 and 2018, it is estimated that there were more than 40,000 Spanish students in China at all levels of formal education," that is, from primary to university levels. As it is evident, Spanish language learning in this country is in a growth phase with significant potential for expansion and strengthening, as people perceive Spanish as a means of conducting business, boosting tourism, and other activities.

Methodology

This project follows a *qualitative research paradigm*, as it aims to describe the behaviors or actions of a group of individuals in their context, in this case the educational context in the process of learning, practicing and strengthening their skills in a foreign language (Mackey & Gass, 2005). Since this is a qualitative study, no hypothesis was stated to be proved or discarded. On the contrary, as stated by Dörnyei (2007), we are open to analyze "opinions, experiences, and feelings of individuals (...) and thus the explicit goal of research is to explore the participants' views of the situation being studied" (p. 38).

The principles of the *descriptive case study approach* are followed, as this allows for a "detailed description of specific individuals in their learning context" (Mackey & Gass, 2005, p. 171). Case studies enable the analysis of a specific group or institution with a clear and defined objective (Dörnyei, 2007). For the case of this study, the main objective is to describe the role of language learning strategies instruction in the development of communication skills in Spanish learners at Hebei University of Foreign Studies, China.

With regard to research ethics, it is important to mention that the real names of the students were not used; instead, pseudonyms were assigned to each participant. This was done to respect their privacy and anonymity. Students were also asked to sign a consent form to confirm that their participation was voluntary and that it would not affect their grades if they chose not to take part in the project.

Context

The University of Foreign Studies is located in Shijiazhuang, capital of Hebei Province, about three hours from Beijing, the nation's capital. The university welcomes approximately 20,000 students from different regions of China, especially rural areas. Approximately 71 foreign languages are taught by professors from around the world, including Colombia, Cuba, Hungary, Sweden, Brazil, Portugal, Egypt, and others. Students must study for four years and complete a thesis

upon completion to qualify for a degree. There are various majors, such as music, medicine, and business administration, but the most notable programs are those related to languages, as this is the university that offers instruction in more languages than any other in the region.

Population

The students who participated in this study are third-year Spanish students who have also received instruction in Portuguese and English. Their average age is between 19 and 22 years old. The group is predominantly female. The students do not have a high level of conversational Spanish; however, they study complex topics related to the historical and cultural landscape of Spain and Latin America. The students' motivations for learning Spanish are related to culture, movies, learning about the Spanish-speaking world, and job opportunities.

Instruments

Questionnaires

Two questionnaires were administered, one at the beginning of the process following Oxford's SILL model (1990), to determine the learning strategies students used and their frequency. A survey, with open questions, was conducted at the end to determine students' perceptions of the experience.

Observation and Field Notes

Mason (1996), as cited in Mackey and Gass (2005), suggests that observation techniques can help to perceive the "dimensions of context, interactions, relationships, actions, events, etc." (p. 60). Field notes were taken to record everything that occurred in the classroom, which helped to determine the role of learning strategies in the communication process.

Audio Recording

This enabled presentations and interactions made by students in class to be recorded and analyzed to establish the use of learning strategies.

Procedure

This study was developed in the following stages: 1) exploration; 2) design and implementation; 3) data collection; and 4) data analysis. In the exploration phase, the characteristics of the context were observed and described. To this end, discussions were held with the Dean of the Faculty of the Language Department at the University. Interactions were also conducted with students in class, and their language proficiency was observed. It was possible to determine and delimit the problem to be addressed, namely, the improvement of communication skills through learning strategies. A fundamental part of this stage was the implementation of an initial survey adapted from version 7.0 (ESL/EFL), designed by Oxford (1990). This questionnaire was applied in English, a language that students are slightly more fluent compared to Spanish, in order to avoid barriers when reading the questions. Its objective was to verify the knowledge and frequency of use of learning strategies in the Spanish classroom.

In the design and implementation phase, learning activities and the use of learning strategies were proposed. Students received theoretical and practical training in these strategies during class. This was done taking into account the topics covered in the students' curriculum. After this, in the data collection phase, the activities were implemented, and data was simultaneously collected using the aforementioned instruments. In the data analysis phase, the interactions between students and the teacher during oral activities were analyzed. The use of strategies by learners was identified and triangulated with data from surveys and notes taken by the researcher. This process ultimately led to the results, conclusions, and discussion.

Findings

This case study describes the role that learning strategies play in the communication skills of a group of Spanish students at Hebei University, China. The results show a varied use of strategies during oral activities, which positively affected the learners' communication processes. These strategies were determined based on the most common patterns found and grouped into two categories: 1) overcoming communication barriers and 2) images as support for oral production. Below, excerpts from conversations are analyzed as examples of communicative situations, as well as sections of the final survey and the researcher's notes.

To clarify for the reader some of the conventions used in the transcripts, the following is a list of the most commonly used ones found in the transcripts analyzed:

Long pause (---); short pause (...); laughter (☺); phrase or word not understood (--?); the student speaks in Chinese (CH); that's what the student said (*italics*).

Overcoming Communication Barriers

This category demonstrates how students used different strategies to overcome some of the barriers or challenges they encountered in the communication process. In the following transcript, the professor asks the students various questions about their opinions on a topic they had just presented. While their presentation was prepared and studied in advance, the professor's questions were not, and they seek to encourage students' spontaneous production and check their level of understanding of the topics.

Transcript # 5 (p.6)

Professor: What is the most important thing that happened in that period for Spain?

Ana: Oh, the whole city ... Spanish citizens over eighteen have the right to participate in elections because in China it's also important. Um ... because... ah... the Chinese when... when they're oh...

eighteen years old oh... no... uh... we don't elect the party ... party ah,... yes party... political party is the... we don't elect a present....

Teacher: a president.

Frida: Hmm ... president... for oh... for (CH) (---) For participation oh... in... (CH) oh... the people's congress. Mmm ... that's why... that's why... (CH) is the most important.

In this transcript, the professor asks a question to encourage the students to talk more about the topic, but from their own perspective and to discuss what they consider to be the most important aspects of the period they have just presented. Ana gives a very interesting answer in which the sentence construction processes are evident. With some hesitation but with precision, she expresses her idea of the importance of citizens being granted the right to vote. While this is a critical position on the issue, it also demonstrates her ability to adjust or approximate the message she wants to convey. This is part of the learning and communication strategies. Although her fluency is not the best, and she makes short pauses, the message is delivered successfully. On the other hand, Frida, a student, also expresses her opinion, albeit with slightly longer pauses and more complex sentence structures. However, what she wants to express is understandable. In this case, Frida uses an additional strategy to accommodate her ideas: code-switching into her native language. After using her native language, it can be observed that she continued with her sentence until she finished the idea she wanted to express. This strategy of switching languages during presentations was very common among this group of students.

Transcript #7

Professor: OK. And Blanca... What's better for you? That's another question. That's another question: what's better for you? Having a king or having elections?

Blanca: Juan Carlos, huh...

Professor: What's better? Having a king or people being able to vote and

choose. What's better? Blanca: What's better?

Belinda and Blanca: This one! This one! Blanca: This is the best.

Teacher: Why?

Blanca: (☺) Oh, I like Juan Carlos. (☺) (Laughter from classmates and the teacher) Teacher: Who is Juan Carlos? Why do you like Juan Carlos?

Blanca: Huh?

Professor: Why? Why do you prefer this system?

Blanca: (CH) Handsome (☺) Very handsome (☺)

Teacher: Him? Juan Carlos, yes? Do you think he's handsome? Blanca: Yes. (☺) (CH)

Teacher: Okay. We're done. Thank you.

On this occasion, a group of three students was describing the transition from a monarchical to a democratic government in Spain. The teacher, aiming to generate discussion and interaction with the students, asks the question: "What is better for you? Having a king or having elections?" Blanca repeats the question with the intention of rectifying it and giving herself some time to think, then she mentions a name, Juan Carlos. The teacher repeats the question, ignoring Blanca's response. Blanca reiterates her response. This is where the teacher grasps the message they are trying to convey, amidst the laughter of her classmates: Blanca says she likes Juan Carlos. The teacher, to corroborate the information, asks why; she again, amid laughter and whispers in her native language, says in Spanish, "Bonito" (handsome), "Very beautiful." It is not clear to what extent the students understood the teacher's question. What is clear is that the students used the vocabulary they knew to make themselves understood and to express ideas that were difficult for them at that moment.

Compensation strategies include different situations in which speakers either avoid communication completely or partially or adjust or approximate the message for the other person. In this case, we can see a combination of these two strategies. Blanca, without many linguistic resources, successfully answers her teacher's question with a sentence in which she expresses her like and opinion about a figure from Spanish

history. Although it was not a very eloquent response, it satisfied the teacher, who ended the discussion with an "OK. We're done. Thank you."

In the professor's notes we can read the following section about this experience and in particular about this group of students:

"This group of students is especially shy. They are girls who work together and who, apparently, lack confidence when it comes to speaking. They express this by laughing, speaking Chinese, whispering, looking around when asked a question, thinking, gesturing while thinking of an answer and, especially, laughing when they don't know something." (Teacher's notes #4).

The way this group expresses itself is very interesting, since, without being fully aware of it, its members use various learning strategies, which in this case are related to indirect strategies, specifically affective strategies, whereby students reduce their anxiety through laughter. Although they are not very fluent when speaking, they take risks and rely on their relaxed way of experiencing communication. These strategies are very important because, in the long or short term, they can acquire the confidence they need to express their ideas more fluently and effectively.

The results described in this section are similar to those found in a study conducted by Salam et al. (2020) who explored the strategies and learning styles of successful learners and found that in the communication process they use compensation strategies, specifically when speaking they perform linguistic code switching (*code switching*) or phrases to adjust or approximate the message. As observed in the previous example, Chinese students often use their mother tongue in the process of communication.

Images as Support in Oral Production

This category showcases how students can support their communication process by using memory strategies and designing their own images.

Transcript #10

Ana: (CH) ... ah... ah ... like Spain has a constitutional monarchy and a par... lia ... r... parliamentary democ... racy. Oh... like king and parliament.

Teacher: Uh-huh ... there is a king and a parliament.

Ana: Ah... yes.

Teacher: What does this image mean? Ana: oh... parliament.

Professor: Parliament. Ah, yes, those are the... the chairs.

Ana: due, the chairs and umm ... (☺) present ... ah... present ... president. And oh... and then this...tutes and autonomy and compe ... tencies and the laws and reg ... reg... regulations of each state. Autonomous state ca ... will change a little on the basis of the constitution.

Professor: Yes, on the basis.

Ana: Yes. Just like in China, there are autonomous regions like Tibet and Xinjiang. Teacher: Are they autonomous?

Anita: Ah, yes.

Teacher: And are they different? Ana: mmm, yes.

Teacher: In what ways are they different?

Ana: Oh... they have... their own... their own laws and... and... mmm... eh economically they have a lot... to help... to help you.

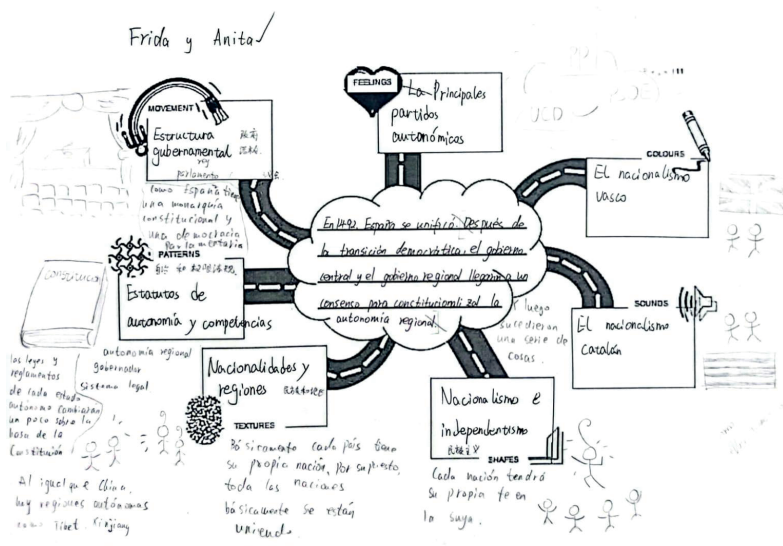
Teacher: Help?

Ana: Help. Ah...

In this conversation, we see student Ana giving a presentation about the types of government in Spain at a specific time in its history. She mentions the existence of a king and a parliament. During her presentation, the professor asks her some questions about the graphics she is using (see Figure 1). The student uses drawings to represent the parliament, the president, and the statutes, laws, and regulations of each state. Although she lacks fluency in describing what her drawings represent, she manages to do so clearly and concisely. This is a clear example of how, through the memory strategies the students used, they were able to recall important aspects of Spanish history and mention them in their report. Furthermore, by following the conversation, the

student was able to establish a relationship between the autonomous states of Spain and the autonomous states of her own country, resulting in a significant gain in her relationship and communication skills. This also demonstrates a strong understanding of the topic, allowing her to speak and comment on her own country. Although the grammar used is not the best, the student was able to interact naturally in the target language.

Figure 1. Photo of the graphic representation made by students using a Google template



Further evidence that the use of memory strategies helped students to understand texts, organize their ideas, and improve their oral skills was provided by the comments written in the final survey, specifically in question 3, which asked them to indicate the strategy that had helped them most improve their learning and oral skills in Spanish. Their responses read:

"Using images. This way I can better understand what I need. I can better remember what the teacher says." (John)

"I think it's the use of images, which are very intuitive and can help us understand the history of Spain" (Isabel)

"Mind maps, using images and keywords. It's easier to remember because you can speak words and images." (Natalia)

These responses clearly demonstrate the positive impact of using images in both the learning and communication processes. A lack of vocabulary is often one of the factors that limits students' oral production; however, students said that using images made it easier for them to remember what they needed to say, which improved their oral skills.

Discussion

The first point to note about this study is that the research question was answered and the stated objectives were accomplished. The findings section presented the roles that language learning strategies play in strengthening students' communication skills. This demonstrates that an appropriate research method was followed and that the activities had a positive impact in the students' learning process. Language learning strategies proved to be a remarkable tool to enhance students' skills and help them become more aware of their possibilities when learning a language.

The goal of any foreign language education process is to support and guide students in developing the skills they need to communicate and express their ideas, interests and tastes, and to become proficient in the language they are learning. Any effort made is very important; however, it must be recognized that if we help students understand their own learning processes and find their own ways of learning, the educational experience will be more beneficial for them in the long run. In this sense, teachers must play a role as guides.

Alnufaie (2022) states that nearly all studies related to LLS instruction are successful and have a positive impact on students' performance. Therefore, providing instruction in learning strategies enables students to recognize a variety of learning opportunities and access different resources. The more aware students are of their own learning process,

the more tools they will find to answer their questions and overcome the challenges they encounter. In this case, learning strategies proved to be very useful in the process of organizing, retaining, and recalling information in the communicative situations presented in the classroom. The results highlight the most relevant and recurring aspects of the experience relating to compensation and memory strategies. However, it is important to recognize that students do not use strategies in isolation; rather, there may use multiple strategies simultaneously in the learning process. This aspect could be explored in future research studies.

Many students are not aware of their abilities or their own learning strategies; here is where the teacher plays a fundamental role; as Morales et al. (2020) express, teachers "need...to transform their educational practices to adapt them to the models required by the institution in which they work, and to their personal criteria as they see fit to improve teaching" (p. 533). Thus, teachers can become guides that adjust processes and planning in order to provide guidance to students on how to discover and use learning strategies and become more successful learners. This idea is supported by González-Peiteado and Pino-Juste (2016) who state that the "teacher must create the appropriate conditions to make the postulates of an active teaching style a reality, taking into account both the uniqueness and diversity of the students" (p. 1178).

Conclusions

This study showed that students most frequently used compensatory strategies to overcome communication limitations. It was observed that students seek to adjust or approximate the message when they did not fully understand a question, use their native language as a strategy to remember the words they need in the target language, or divert the topic when they did not understand a specific question. Despite a lack of fluency, grammatical errors, or understanding of the questions asked during communicative activities, students effectively maintained a bridge of communication. These strategies are of great help to learners who want to succeed in their communicative experiences. "(...) they can contribute to successful conversations and also to good exam results" (Liangqiu & Zhengqiu, 2019).

The importance of memory strategies was evident, as they enabled students to familiarize themselves with vocabulary and phrases related to the discussion topics, helping them to express their ideas more fluently and accurately. This aspect is related to a study conducted by Wael et al. (2018) at the University of Muhammadiyah Sorong, who concluded that one of the strategies most frequently used by students in their oral performance was memory strategies. This study shows that students use images and "visual connections in their learning" (p. 70). This demonstrates the fundamental role that these strategies play in learning and oral production.

This study reaffirms the importance of considering instruction in learning strategies in language teaching settings, as it has been shown that students can better organize their ideas if they use appropriate strategies to better recall information. This helps them to perform better in oral activities by resolving problems such as a lack of vocabulary or a lack of understanding of the topics studied. Teng (2023) states that when learning problems are diagnosed and undertaken through language learning strategies, the linguistic gaps are bridged. This is

something necessary in the context of language learning teaching, as we seek to strengthen the learning and teaching processes. This author also stated LLS can give us a lot of ideas on how to develop specific tasks or strengthen a specific aspect of the language.

This study also showed that students used indirect strategies, such as affective and metacognitive strategies, which positively impacted their learning and interaction during the experience and development of the communicative exercises. In their conversations, it was evident that they maintained a very relaxed attitude through laughter, as oral exercises are often tense and stressful moments for them. It is worth exploring these aspects of indirect strategies in more depth in future research and uncovering the role they play in communication and learning processes.

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