

# A SOCIAL STRATEGY OF UNIVERSITY LEARNERS OF LOW-LEVEL SPEAKING PROFICIENCY

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## **Abstrak**

This study is to investigate the learning strategies applied by low-level learners (LLs), the results of which can be used as the basis for placing them in an English language speaking class. Specifically this study is to find an answer ‘To what extent do low-level learners use social strategies in learning to speak English?’ Observation and an in-depth interview were used to collect the data which were in the form of the subjects’ spoken utterances (verbal behavior) and their accompanying actions (non-verbal behavior). The data were analyzed using the social language learning strategies (SLLS) proposed by Rebecca Oxford. Three university learners from the third semester who are of the same level of proficiency were selected as the subjects of the study. Results of the data analysis show that the LLs do not use all social strategies in speaking activities. Based on what has been shown by this study, it is suggested that supportive teacher behaviors, i.e., building learners’ confident, giving motivation during the teaching, listening attentively to students while speaking, giving hints and encouragement, being responsive to student questions, creating natural setting and showing students empathy need to be provided in speaking class activities to explore learners social strategies.

Key words: Social Strategies, Learning, Speaking

The engagement of learning strategies is one of the most-extensively discussed issues in Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Some findings of research outside of the L2 field have also shown the powerful role of learning strategies in improving students’ learning outcome. O’Malley and Chamot (1990:139) classify the learning strategies into metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, social and affective strategies. Almost all learning strategies categorized by Oxford (1990:135), i.e., direct strategies-memory, cognitive, affective, and social strategies are employed by successful learners. These three strategies are important in language learning strategies. Although, cognitive strategies often become the focus of research than the other strategies, social strategies are also of research interest considering its big influence in students’ communication. As stated by Dansereau (in Oxford, 1993), some of the best learners use affective and social strategies to control their emotional

state, to keep themselves motivated and on-task, and to get help when they need it. Different students, use different social strategies to develop their speaking skill. A study of the differences between effective and ineffective students in both the Russian and the Spanish were reflected in the range of strategies used and the way individual strategies were used (O’Malley and Chamot, 1990). A teacher who teaches speaking in a private university in east Java has reported that her low-level students tend to be passive in all speaking class activities class, while students who are categorized as having a highly- speaking skill in speaking tend to be active and dominate the class activities. Thus, poor-learners have not yet used their learning strategies fully, that is, by applying a social strategy in developing their speaking ability. It is therefore a must for the teachers to know in depth the strategies of low-level students in a speaking class so that an appropriate strategy can be applied to help them solve their speaking

difficulties. The class is thus conducted not only for competent students.

O'Malley and Chamot (1990:139) classify social and affective strategies into questioning for clarification, cooperation, self-task, and self-reinforcement to assist a learning task. Oxford (1990:144) divided social strategies into three, i.e., asking questions for clarification or verification and for correction, cooperating with others which covers cooperating with peers and cooperating with proficient users of the new language, and emphathizing with others that includes developing cultural understanding and becoming aware of others' thought and feelings.

Social strategies are activities which afford learners opportunities to be exposed to the target language and practise their knowledge. Although these strategies provide exposure to the target language, they contribute indirectly to learning since they do not lead directly to the obtaining, storing, retrieving, and using of language (Rubin and Wenden 1987:23-27). The examples of social strategies are asking question to get verification, asking for clarification of a confusing point, asking for help in doing a language work task, talking with a native speaking conversation partner, and exploring cultural and social norms to help the learner work with others and understand the target cultural as well as the language.

The way learners use those factors influence the way they can develop their speaking skill. These illustration has brought the researcher to investigate the social strategies used by low-level learners: To what extent do low-level students use social strategies in learning to speak English?

## **Method**

As mentioned before, this study is designed to investigate students of a private university in using social strategies in learning to speak English. A descriptive qualitative approach is applied since the data collected are in the form of words, not numbers, and since the primary aim is to identify and describe social strategies used

naturally by students in a speaking class. Qualitative research is the type of educational research in which the researcher relies on the views of participants, asks broad, general questions, collects the data consisting largely of words (or text) from participants, describes and analyzes these words for themes, and conducts the inquiry in a subjective, based manner (Creswel, 2002:46).

There were three steps in collecting the data in this study: observing and noting down the way the learners use social strategies verbally and non-verbally, recording their speaking and their non-verbal language behavior, and analyzing them by a non-statistical method. The last step was describing the data using narrative sentences. Dornyei (2007:24) states that qualitative research involves data collection procedure that results primarily in open-ended, non-numerical data which is then analyzed primarily by non-statistical methods.

In gathering the data, the researcher observed the social factors used by the subjects under study during their speaking activity and wrote down every relevant phenomenon that happened in the form of fieldnotes. To support it, the subjects' spoken languages were recorded and then transcribed. The data in this research were the subjects' social strategies which were in the forms of verbal and nonverbal behavior. Susanto (2010:78) states that the focus of observation is collecting verbal and nonverbal behavior data. In this study, the verbal data were in the form of words, phrases, and sentences uttered by the subjects during the dialogue or the subjects' utterances in the dialogue, while the non-verbal data were identified from the subjects' facial-expression, eye contacts, and gestures.

In addition, an interview was conducted to get supplementary data. This technique was done to capture the phenomenon of students' social strategies in learning as seen from their perspectives. This technique was necessary for triangulation, that is, the data obtained from

observation were validated with the data obtained through the interview.

The data were analyzed using social language learning strategies (SLLS) proposed by Rebecca Oxford. The data analysis was carried out by first sorting out similar information, then categorizing information, and last interpreting the information/data as attempt to give answers to the research questions.

## Results and Discussion

The analysis of data elicited from the three subjects were mainly based on the Oxford's framework and variables. The data analysis lead into results that need to be described in depth in order to give deeper description of the social strategies used by three subjects under study and, at the same time, resolve the research questions of the present study.

### *(1) Social Strategies Applied in an English Speaking Class*

Social strategies are categorized into three broad terms: asking questions, cooperating with others, and empathizing with others. Particularly, each strategy is differentiated into smaller units. The aspect of asking questions involves asking for clarification and asking for correction. The aspect of cooperating with others includes cooperating with peers and cooperating with proficient users of the new language. Meanwhile, empathizing with others involves developing cultural understanding and becoming aware of others' thoughts and feeling. In this section, the three social strategies as they are used by low-level learners are presented and discussed.

The teaching learning process was conducted by the teacher by assigning the students to divide the class into two groups. Each group was given a different topic. The topic for group A was 'Plagiarism' and the topic for group B was 'Using a hand phone in a working place'. Afterward, both groups were asked to discuss the topic within 45 minutes facilitated by the moderator. During the discussion, the researcher observed the whole processes and made notes about the activities of the

discussion, especially on the way how the students used social strategies

In the following section, the social strategies observed and found are reported and discussed in greater depth. In particular, the aforementioned social strategies, both in the form of verbal and non-verbal language employed by the learners during the speaking activities, are highlighted respectively in the following subheadings.

### *(2) Asking Questions*

The result of data analysis showed that the low-level learners (LLs) felt worried in a speaking class. The LLs only spoke around five until seven times during the discussion. They tended to be passive to engage themselves in the discussion. To make it worse, their utterances were relatively short and unclear and spoken in a weak voice.

The LLs also seemed to be reluctant to communicate with others during the process of discussion. They tended to keep silent during the discussion. For instance, when the moderator posted questions, the LLs just kept silent (1). They never asked for clarification although they did not understand the moderator's question. They also did not ask for correction when facing difficulties with difficult words. Moreover, they tended to use Indonesian if they could not say the words in English. The LLs seemed to have poor willingness to ask for what one wants with openness to any response and did not attach to any particular outcome. Briefly, it can be said that LLs could not use social strategies, especially when asking a question in the discussion session.

- (1) Moderator : How about you, (LLL1) what do you think about plagiarism?  
LLL1 : I think about the plagiarism is the focus...yes the person who take from another...yes another

property and iya itu  
ambil tulisan karya  
another people ...

- Moderator : Other a opinion?  
Please tell something  
( LLL3)  
LLL3 : Ehhhh, eee....eee....  
no...no

When it was checked in the interview, it was found that LLLs did not understand the moderator's question but LLLs were afraid and shy to ask. The LLLs also said that they were unconfident enough to ask something so they decided to keep silent. The results from the interview also indicated that LLLs never asked for correction when they talked to the teacher or other classmates. Hence, the LLLs argued that they never received any comments or correction. Therefore, they did not know what to do in the classroom.

The following statements provide the information that LLLs often feel afraid to ask for clarification and correction (2).

- (2) LLL1 : I am shy to ask if *saya gak ngerti ma pertanyaan moderator, saya diam, lebih baik saya diam, daripada salah ditertawakan, I really really can not speak English madam.*  
LLL2 : *Saya takut untuk bertanya.*  
LLL3 : *Saya malu dengan teman dan takut sama dosen kalau salah karena bahasa Inggris saya jelek mom.*

Those statements imply that LLLs feel underestimated for their own capability. They also indicated that LLLs do not have any capability in speaking. As a result, the LLLs were observed not to use questioning behaviors in the discussion to clarify or ask for correction because they

were afraid, shy, and uncomfortable to the class situation.

Furthermore, the absence of use of asking question as one of social strategies in learning was also found in the following activity. The following excerpt illustrates the extent to which the LLLs could not ask a question as well. It happened when the teacher asked the students to work in pairs to share and discuss the topic of "police" (3).

- (3) Student : Hi (LLL2)...ok..i want to ask you...what do you think about police?  
LLL2 : Police ..eee.. I think ..ee..yes ... I love a police...  
Student : Don't you think about the police that they...they...ever..make arrange in the street and they..they usually try to search our mistake about our motor cycle or our license card?  
LLL2 : Of course... so?...heheeee  
Student : Yes..what are you think about police in the street?  
LLL2 : Ooh Police? I think police can e...e....e...e make me...make me...dicipline.  
Student : Dicipline about?  
LLL2 : Right...dicipline about e... ee..for example we must e use e jacket, helm dan lain lainnya e gituuuu hehhehehe

This activity is part of the conversation between the LLL2 and her pair. Both students talked about the topic of "police" given by the teacher. During the discussion with the pair, the LLL2 often misunderstood her pair questions. Both

students were seen to bring a piece of paper and pen to help them write everything about the result of discussion. However, it was observed that only LLL2 who often made notes during the conversation. The LLL2 tended to get difficulties to understand her pair's question. Hence, the LLL2 made an attempt to write down the information needed and pretended to read the notes on her paper when talking to the pair.

During the discussion with the pair, it showed that LLL2 kept silent many times when her friend gave questions. Mostly, she only gave a very short statement and spoke unconfidently. She did not feel free during in the conversation. The LLL2 always touched her nose and closed her face with her fingers when she could not answer the question or could not ask a question. In accord to this, LLL2's pair pretended to simplify the questions and make self-repetition to make the LLL2 easily understand her and able to speak. However, the LLL2 still got difficulties to catch her pair's opinion and was not able to answer the questions well.

When this situation was crosschecked out to LLL2, she admitted that she was worried and nervous to say something. In answer to this situation, she said: "In conversation e.e... I am very worry, afraid and ehm...confuse. *Mending saya perhatikan saja teman ngomong...terus kalo bisa ya jawab mom, kalo ndak ya diam. Ehm..Paling saya jawab "yes" or "no"*. These statements supported the result of the observation that LLL2 tended to be inactive during the conversation and almost never tried to ask a question and to ask for clarification or correction to others in the discussion. The same question also was given to two other LLLs in the interview session and the the same responds were given. They were inactive because their speaking ability was poor. As they were weak in English, she did not understand her peer's question and, hence, they preferred to keep silent.

### (3) Cooperating with Others

Two factors of cooperating with peers and cooperating with proficient users

of the new language were not used as well by the LLLs in the discussion session as illustrated in the discussion above. When the other students discussed about this topic and how to solve it, the LLLs seemed reluctant to be involved in those discussion (4).

- (4) Moderator : How about you (LLL2), what is your solution?  
 LLL2 : Eh, aku?...he he  
 Student : Ya you, what is your opinion to cover up this problem  
 LLL2 : ..... (kept silent and smile)  
 All students : You don't have idea, do you?  
 LLL2 : Yes....eh no  
 Moderator : What do you mean with yes and no, explain to us please....  
 LLL2 : .....no, enough

She just saw her friends talking each other. As the example, when one of her friend was getting difficulties in uttering some words, the other friends try to help her finding those words. But, the LLL2 did not show that she wanted to help her friends. It seemed that she was really reluctant to make any cooperating with her peers in that discussion. It also happen to two other LLLs. This matter was in line with the data revealed from the interview.

The interview indicated that LLLs did not like having cooperation with others, such as with friends, lecturer and other proficient users. During the interview, the LLLs were so cooperative to answer the questions, although they used Indonesia. Thus, indicated that they were not definitely an introvert student. It can be said that formerly they were active students. However, in formal situation, they did not like to speak much because they had insufficient knowledge and English skills. In relation to above statement, they claimed that their English was poor. That was why

they only kept silent as it was comfort and better for them.

The following statements contain their anxiety about speaking English publicly, fear of making mistakes in grammar and shame of making speech. The words underlined display one of LLLs pattern of anxiety: *'honest, I am tertekan if ngomong sama teman, I am nervous, my English bad, sangat bad, I am afraid and confused kalo ngomong with friends and my dosen. Saya tahu my English before saya masuk this university'*. Those statements imply that she feels uncomfortable to speak with others because she cannot understand what other people say and cannot precede the conversation with them. Hence, it was possible to say that her self-confidence seems to be affected by the attitude of the other speakers to her.

This fact was also in line with the condition of another subject. When the teacher asked her to work in pair to discuss the topic of "police", the LLL3 tended to keep silent and did not show any effort to cooperate with her peer to discuss the topic given optimally (4).

(4) Student : Sometimes, I don't like with police because I think the police...cannot make me feel comfort everytime in my everywhere yeaaa something like that...

LLL3 : oooo.....

Student : What about you?

LLL3 : I?...I don't know (smile and confused)

Student : Eeh...by the way do you know police...Calo..i don't know how to say in english..yea do you know about that?

LLL3 : Oh yes yes...

It was discussed previously that LLL3 pretended to be inactive during the discussion. She could not cooperate with other learner to discuss the topic and share

the opinion. The above excerpt supported the previous finding that LLLs tended to be reluctant to cooperate, share ideas, and practice her language in pairs. It was observed that when their friend gave ideas about the police, they looked confused and did not provide any response.

It was seen that LLL3 was thinking about the subject matter but it was hard for them to say something. She only nodded her head up and down and spoke little word "ooo...". This empty response indicated that actually she knew what was said by the friend, but she was not eager to contribute her ideas in the discussion. In other words, LLL3 only wanted to hear her friend's ideas, but she was reluctant to learn speaking with the pair and discuss the topic together.

Moreover, the LLL3 seemed to be afraid to make any mistakes in her speaking. Hence, she just gave little response to the pair. This phenomenon happened when the pair asked her ideas about the topic and asked for clarification about the difficult term. However, she gave no ideas and spoke little sentence unconfidently "Me...I don't know". This statement implied that she was not confidence to work with the pair and practice the language. The same attitudes were also performed by LLL1 and LLL2. This condition was validated by their statement in the interview that they almost never said a word during the discussion and gave group contribution. It was confirmed that they were afraid to say something in English because of lack of vocabulary and grammar. In short, it could be said that the lack of English skills made the LLLs inconvenience to share the ideas with the partner and feel afraid in practicing the target language.

#### (4) Empathizing with others

The data also indicated that the LLLs cannot develop cultural understanding. It can be seen when the moderator asked their opinion about plagiarism, one of LLLs just said *'I think about the plagiarism is the focus...yes the person who take from another...yes another*

*property and iya itu ambil tulisan karya another people*'. Another case, when the moderator asked one of LLLs' opinion to solve the problem, one of them just smiled and kept silent (5).

- (5) Moderator : How about you (LLL2), what is your solution?  
 LLL2 : Eh, aku?...he he  
 Student : Ya you, what is your opinion to cover up this problem  
 LLL2 : (smile and kept silent)  
 All students : You don't have idea, do you?  
 LLL2 : Yes....eh no  
 Moderator : What do you mean with yes and no, explain to us please....  
 LLL2 : .....no, enough

The last session (6), the moderator also asked one of LLLs to conclude the discussion, but she just said that she has opinion with other friends as following example.

- 6) Moderator : last, give your conclusion to this discussion?,  
 LLL1 : You  
 : No  
 Other student : No, Ervina, just give your conclusion, you know conclusion?  
 All students : yes  
 Other student : So, tell to us your kesimpulanmu ini loooooo.....  
 Other student : Ngomongo, kesimpulane opo vin?  
 LLL1 : Oh...I same with my friends, that's right plagiarism....ehm

is wrong activity, hehehe

This data indicates that LLLs do not have adequate ability to develop their thought. The analysis showed that LLLs had two possible problems. The LLLs had low ability in speaking and got difficulties to think critically to develop the topic given. These two problems resulted in their low performance to empathize with others.

The LLLs were also observed not to be aware with others' thoughts and feeling. This condition is as illustrated in the following example (7).

- (7) Other student : ....so if the musicians have the same arrangement from the other musicians, it will..ee it will..ee they will...I mean they can be called plagiarism..eh sorry plagiator?  
 Moderator : Yaa it can be...  
 All students : Yes...yes...I do agree...  
 Moderator : what do you think, Lisa (LLL2)?  
 LLL2 : .....heheee

Other student attempted to express his opinion and the other friends also tried to be aware on her friend's thought by posting her opinion (7). When the moderator asked for the LLL2, she just gave smiles, 'he he he', and did not say anything. It means that she did not explore making aware of someone's thought and feeling in the discussion session. LLL 1 and LLL3 also performed the same attitudes. When it was crosschecked with the interview, they claimed that they did not know anything with the topic given. they did not have a good understanding with the definition of plagiarism. they stated that they were unconfident to discuss something with other friends using English.

Additionally, the LLLs confirmed they were afraid to see other friends as the way to be aware of others' thought and feeling. Their statements were in line with the finding from observation in which it was recognized that they did not use any body-movements, such as gesture, facial expression, and eye contact with the others. They could not show that they were aware when their friends were talking to them. It can be pointed out that they had low confident to practice their English with others in the classroom. The following statement from one of LLLs reveals that she has low self-confidence when speaking with other friends such as "I am not confident madam", "my English is bad", "I am not understand with yang diomongkan", "I am afraid with my friends when my friends speak to me madam".

In line with above finding, the LLLs also showed similar result. The two factors in empathizing with others such as developing cultural understanding and becoming aware of others' thoughts and feeling were observed not applied by them. The following data illustrated the way how one of LLLs could not occupy the empathizing with others in the conversation (8).

- (8) LLL3 : Right...right...
- Other student : Right? U mean...so u like using *calo* when u make driving license?
- LLL3 : ????? (seems confused and keep silent)
- Other student : Do you like *calo*?
- LLL3 : Yes eh no no no...
- Other student : Oalah vin bingung aku ma kamu kiiii....ok ok ehm...sometimes I feel afraid with police in the street, You

know what I mean?

- LLL3 : No...
- Other student : Ok..I mean sometimes there is inspection in the street by policeman...yeaa about driving license, our property like helmet, the physic of our motorcycle like that...and it will me afraid if I don't bring or use it. Get it?
- : ( just keep silent)

The activity above was happened when the teacher assigned the students to work in pairs to discuss the topic of police. It showed that the pairs shared their own opinion about the role of '*calo*' in making driving license. After one of students shared his opinion, she asked one of LLLs' response whether she agreed or disagreed with the use of '*calo*'. From the data, it was observed that LLL3 was not able to share opinion with other students. As a result of this, the other student felt confused and tried to think the way how to proceed the conversation "*Oalah vin bingung aku ma kamu kiiii....ok ok ehm...sometimes I feel afraid with police...*". However, the LLL3 still kept silent and smiled at her friend without responding the request. Seeing this condition, her friend became more confused because she received no response and the conversation broke down.

It was seen that LLL3 did not know what to do with her friend's request for clarification. From the activities above, it was possible to say that LLL3 had no ability to empathize with other. She did not aware of her pair's thought and feeling in the discussion. The result of this observation was in line with her statement

in the interview. She said "I am difficult to speak, I am not confidence, I am English is bad, bingungnya itu lo mau a...jawab teman tapi ... gimana ya bahasa Inggrisnya". LLL1 and LLL2 also gave the same answers when they were interviewed.

The above statement implied that LLLs could not give any response to their friend's ideas because they were unconfident to discuss something using English. They realized that they were not responsive to other's opinion, but it was hard for them to say anything due to their lack of speaking. From the result of observation and interview, it could be pointed out that LLLs did not use empathizing with others as one of factors in social strategy to learn speaking.

## CONCLUSION

This research has investigated on how low-level learners use social strategies in learning speaking. Oxford's framework is used to investigate how the learners employ the social strategies. It is categorized into three broad terms. They are asking questions, cooperating with others, and empathizing with others each of which is then differentiated into smaller factors. Asking questions involves asking for clarification and asking for correction, cooperating with others involves cooperating with peers and cooperating with proficient users of the new language, and empathizing with others involves developing cultural understanding and becoming aware of others of thoughts and feelings.

Analyses of the data have indicated that low-level learners are less in using their social strategies; asking questions, cooperating with others, and empathizing with others. In other words, Low-level learners (LLLs) did not explore all the social strategies. From several activities organized by the teacher in a speaking class, they never showed the social strategies when speaking. LLLs have poor academic performance as indicated from their speaking activities. Accordingly, they also did not use the social strategies. The findings also indicate that the LLLs' low

self-efficacy, low motivation, and less confidence influence them not to use the social strategies. They behave as if they were not the class members. Building their confidence and motivation is a good way that may support them to use social strategies for the development of their speaking ability. In this way, the process of language learning will be facilitated and improved due to the higher frequency of use of appropriate social strategies. In addition, since generally people have a fundamental need to feel connected or related to other people in an academic environment, it is suggested that the teacher provides students with warmth and openness in the classroom in order that the students have the feeling of belonging to the class, feel confident to speak, and are encouraged to use social strategies. Supportive teacher behaviors, which need to be provided in speaking activities, include listening, giving hints and encouragement, being responsive to student questions, and showing students empathy. Creating an atmosphere that is open and positive can help students, especially low learners, find personal meaning to decrease their anxiety. It can also help them feel that they are valued as members of a learning community.

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