

The impact of expanding foreign language A Level pupils' awareness and use of metacognitive learning strategies on confidence and proficiency in speaking

Karen Forbes and Linda Fisher

Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge

Background

The question of how to improve the foreign language speaking skills of pupils in British schools is of paramount importance to language teachers and policy makers today. This small-scale action research project was carried out with a class of five Year 12 pupils of French, aged 16-17, in a Cambridgeshire secondary school, who struggled with speaking. Given the benefits of strategy instruction highlighted in previous studies (Cohen, 1998; Grenfell and Harris, 1999; Macaro, 2001; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990) the primary aim of this study was therefore to introduce the students to a range of metacognitive learning strategies with a view to improving their confidence and proficiency in speaking.

Research Questions

1. To what extent does a focus on metacognitive learning strategies improve students' *confidence* in speaking?
2. To what extent does a focus on metacognitive learning strategies improve students' *proficiency* in speaking?
3. What strategies did the students incorporate and value?

Research Design

The study was based on an action research design, the stages of which are illustrated in Figure 1 below, using a mixed methods approach. Data was collected from questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, strategy checklists and assessment results from two presentation tasks collected both before and after a six-week period of strategy instruction which focused on strategies for preparation, monitoring and evaluation.

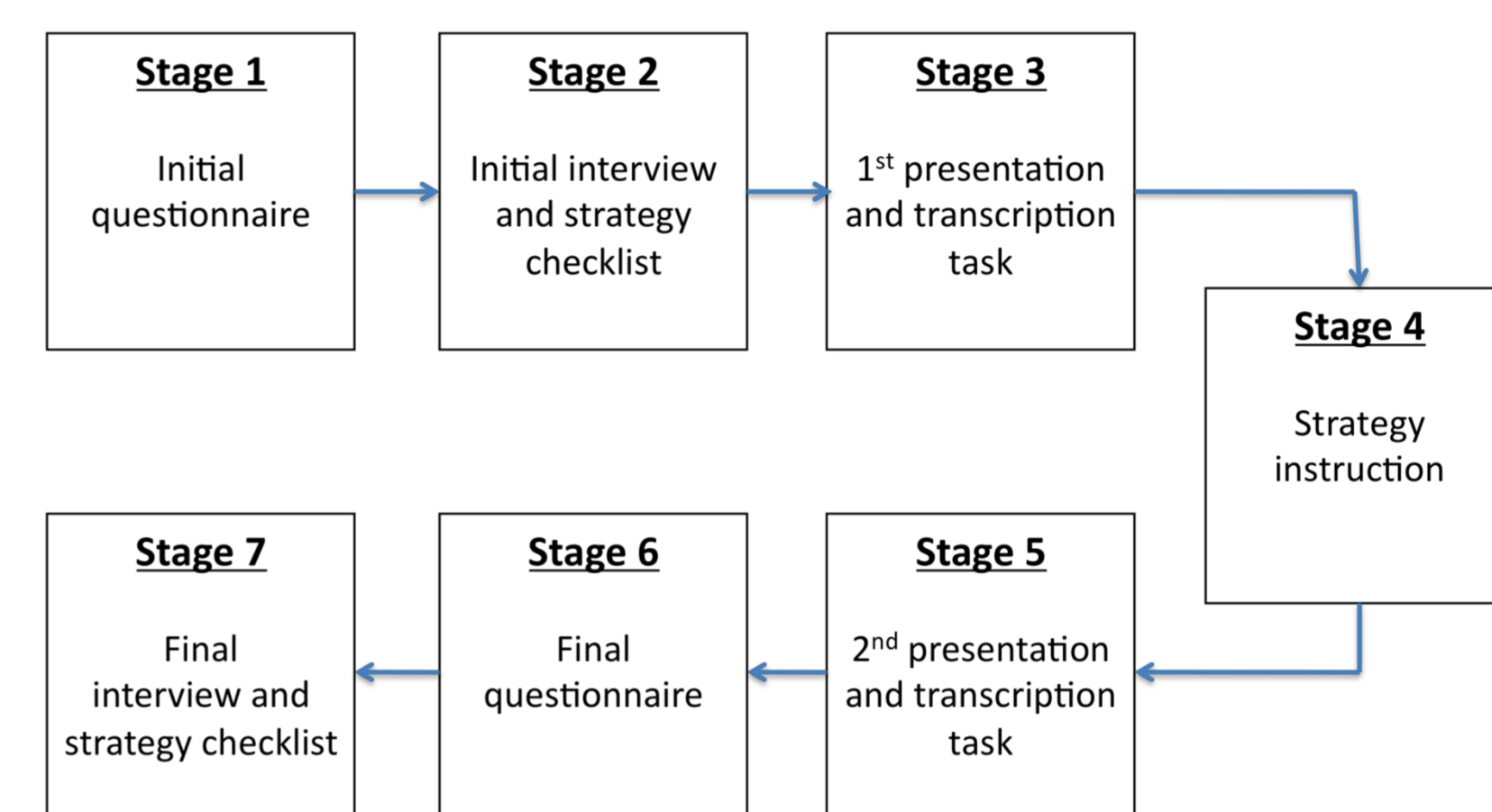


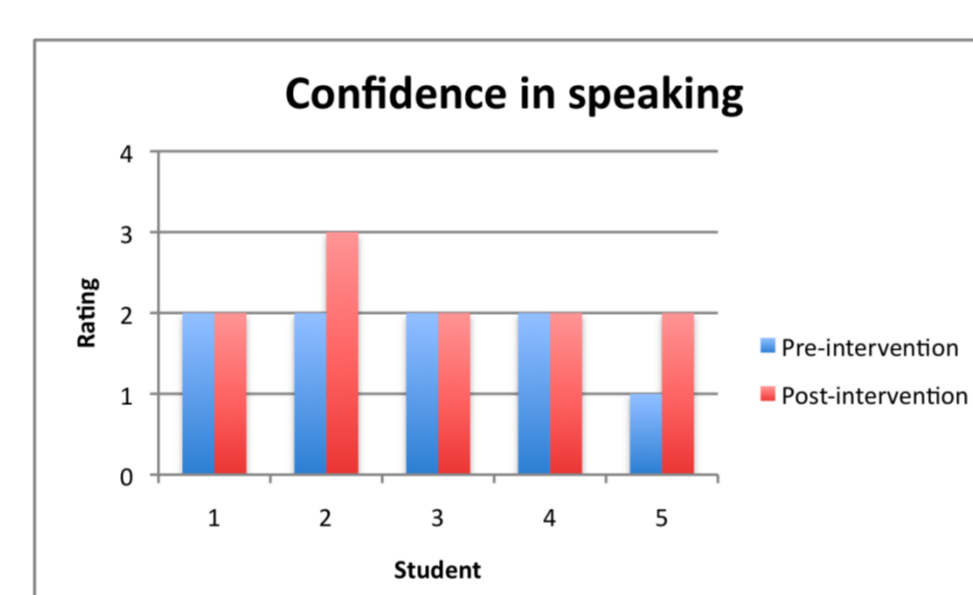
Figure 1: Seven-stage action research design

Results

Research Question 1: To what extent does a focus on metacognitive learning strategies improve students' confidence in speaking?

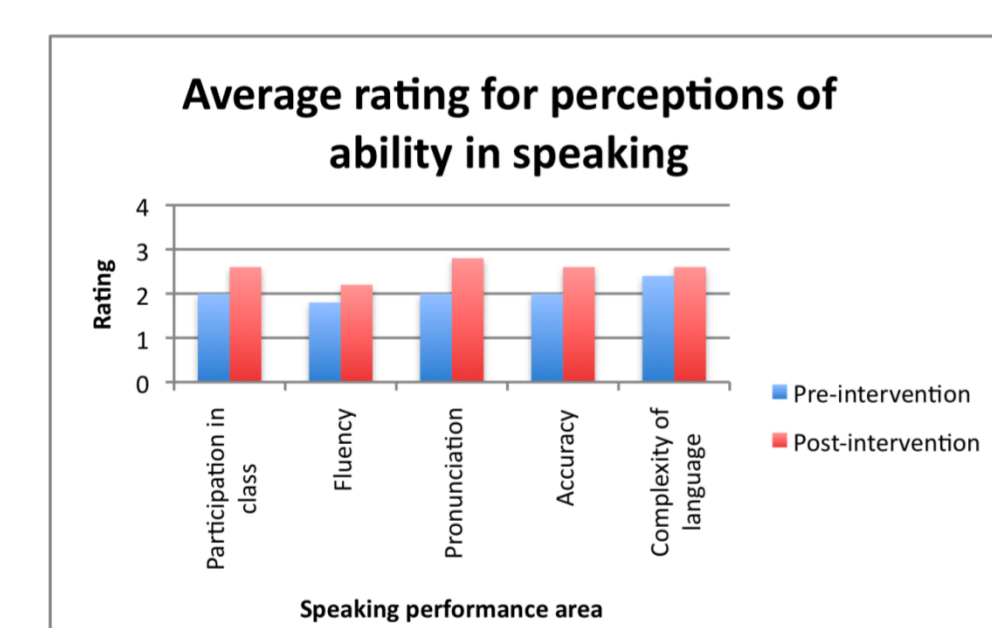
Graph 1 shows the confidence ratings given by each student on both the pre- and post-intervention questionnaire on a scale of 1 (not very confident at all) to 4 (very confident).

Although only two students rated their confidence higher in the post-intervention questionnaire compared to the pre-intervention questionnaire, all of them expressed in the interview that they felt more confident in their speaking: "it's got better" (Student 1), "I'm more confident" (Student 3), "I think I've got a bit more confident at speaking" (Student 4).



Graph 1: Confidence in speaking

Students were also asked to rate how they perceived their ability in different aspects of speaking. As illustrated in Graph 2, on average the students increased their ratings in each of the areas after the intervention.



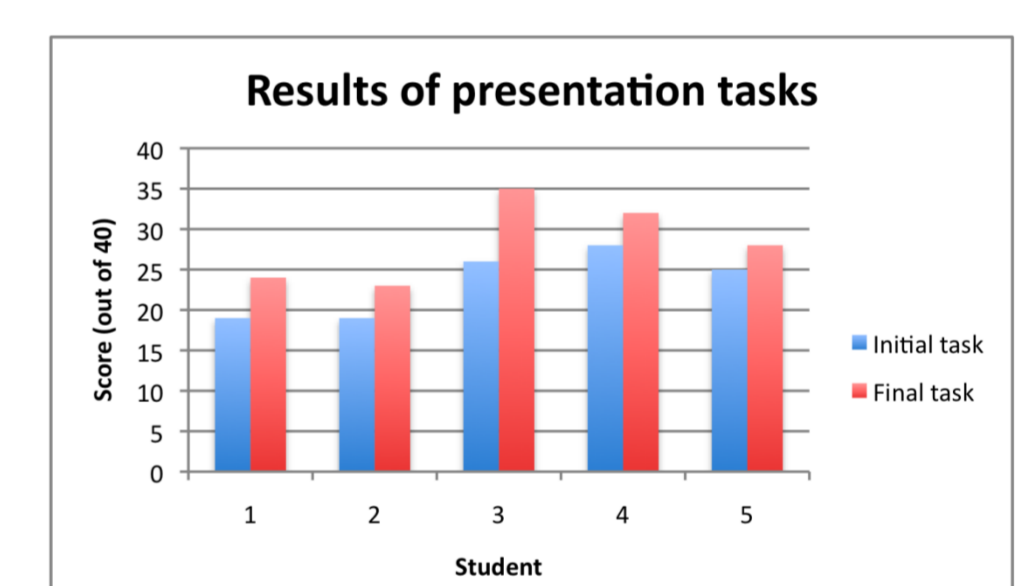
Graph 2: Average ratings for perception of ability in speaking

The overall impression is that increasing students' awareness and use of metacognitive learning strategies has had a positive impact on their confidence. Even though it is not possible to conclude definitively that any changes are a direct result of the implementation of strategies, the qualitative interview data provides some evidence to support this claim.

Research Question 2: To what extent does a focus on metacognitive learning strategies improve students' proficiency in speaking?

Graph 3 below illustrates the results for each student in the initial and final presentation tasks. All in all the effect of metacognitive learning strategies on students' proficiency in speaking seems to have been positive.

Although this data alone is not sufficient to make any significant conclusions about the impact of learning strategies, when combined with the qualitative data provided by students during the evaluation phase of each task, there seems to be some evidence that the students used a range of the strategies introduced in class to actively improve some aspects of their speaking.



Graph 3: Results of presentation tasks

Research Question 3: What strategies did the students incorporate and value?

The strategy checklists provided valuable data about which particular strategies the students valued most and which strategies they made use of. The strategies were grouped according to three categories: preparation, monitoring and evaluation strategies. The students were asked to rate how much they valued and used each strategy on a scale of 1-3.

After a period of strategy instruction the students on the whole reported an increase in both value and use of metacognitive learning strategies and it was the preparation strategies which seemed to have the most impact, for example, thinking in French what to say, organising thoughts and ideas and actively looking for opportunities to practise spoken French.

Key Findings

- There is evidence to support the claim that increasing students' awareness and use of metacognitive learning strategies has had a positive impact on their confidence and perception of their ability in speaking.
- In line with Cohen et al. (1998) and Macaro (2001), students' use of metacognitive learning strategies appears to have had a positive impact on their proficiency in speaking.
- Strategy use is a complex phenomenon and the strategies that a particular student chooses will depend to a large extent on their individual personality and learning style. With this in mind it seems as though the best approach is to supply students with a range of strategies and enable them to select those which best fit their needs and learning style. As emphasised by Cohen (1998), this may require teachers to be trained in strategy instruction.
- To be most effective, strategies need to be appropriate to the specific task or skill area in question. This highlights the importance of instructing students not only in effective strategy use, but also in the transferability of some strategies between skill areas.

These findings highlight the significant benefit of instructing students in effective strategy use and have implications for both learners and teachers of modern foreign languages.

References

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Contact Information

Karen Forbes, Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, 184 Hills Road, Cambridge, CB2 8PQ. Email: kf289@cam.ac.uk