



Teaching Strategies Based on Learning Styles: Promoting Communicative Competence in Speaking Skills

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Abstract

This article summarizes the process carried out to promote communicative competence in speaking skills; it was developed through the implementation of teaching strategies based on the learning styles proposed by Kolb in his model of the Experiential Learning Theory of 1984. This case study was carried out during the last semester (July to December), in 2014; in fact, four beginner EFL students were the research participants. To collect data, three instruments were administered: a checklist, a scoring sheet and a questionnaire. The data gathered was analyzed and triangulated through three pre-established categories of analysis: participants' learning styles, learners' oral performance before conducting the research, and students' communicative competence in speaking skills after the implementation of teaching strategies specifically based on the identified learning styles from Kolb's model of the Experiential Learning Theory of 1984. Generally, the findings obtained show the effectiveness of the teaching strategies implemented in regards to the identified learning types; these strategies aimed to help students improve their communicative competence in speaking skills.

Key words: Teaching strategies; learning styles; Kolb's Model of the Experiential Learning Theory of 1984; communicative competence; speaking skill.

Resumen

Estrategias de enseñanza basadas en estilos de aprendizaje: promoviendo competencia comunicativa en la habilidad oral

Este artículo resume el proceso llevado a cabo para promover la competencia comunicativa en la habilidad oral; el mismo fue desarrollado a través de la implementación de estrategias de enseñanza basadas en los estilos de aprendizaje propuestos por Kolb en su modelo de la Teoría del Aprendizaje Experimental de 1984. Este estudio de caso fue llevado a cabo durante el último semestre (julio a diciembre) del 2014; de hecho, cuatro estudiantes principiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera fueron los participantes de la investigación. Para recolectar la información tres instrumentos fueron utilizados: una lista de verificación, una rúbrica de evaluación y un cuestionario. Los datos recolectados fueron analizados y triangulados mediante tres categorías de análisis previamente establecidas: estilos de aprendizaje de cada participante, su desempeño oral antes de llevar a cabo esta investigación, y su competencia comunicativa en la habilidad oral después de la implementación de estrategias de enseñanza específicamente basadas en los estilos de aprendizaje identificados, los cuales estaban fundamentados en el modelo de la Teoría del Aprendizaje Experimental de Kolb de 1984. En general, los resultados obtenidos muestran la efectividad de las estrategias de enseñanza implementadas en relación con los estilos de aprendizaje identificados, las mismas tenían como propósito principal ayudar al estudiantado a mejorar su competencia comunicativa en la habilidad oral.

Palabras clave: Estrategias de enseñanza; estilos de aprendizaje; Teoría del Modelo de Aprendizaje Experimental de 1984 de Kolb; competencia comunicativa; habilidad oral.



INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, people live in a globalized, ever-changing world where diverse situations must be faced to catch up and adapt to daily challenges. Today, the world is linked through a variety of sources that allow communication between individuals from different countries, who have distinct backgrounds, cultures, lifestyles, ways of living and languages. As a result, to be able to communicate, people need a common language to share their ideas, opinions, perspectives and thoughts regarding business, culture, education and political interests; to do that, some languages have been established as *lingua francas*. In fact, Eibel (2005) defines this term as a language used worldwide between people from different countries to communicate. An example of that is English, which Seidlhofer (2005) pointed out, is universally used every day to exchange information of various kinds. This language is taught and learned globally; for instance, Costa Rica is one of the countries where English is taught as a Foreign Language (EFL) in public and private schools.

Also, in this country, for most job positions, people who speak EFL are required; this has created a national phenomenon where individuals need to learn the language to communicate. Actually, in Costa Rica, the *Ministerio de Educación Pública* (Ministry of Public Education) is the institution in charge of establishing the benchmarks and objectives for the public educational system. In addition, private schools and language institutes have established their own programs for teaching and promoting the learning of English as a Foreign Language.

When teaching and learning English many factors interfere with the language learning process, and how students are approached in the class is one of them; therefore, this article presents detailed information on a case study developed during the last semester (July to December), in 2014. It focused on implementing teaching strategies based on the learning styles proposed by Kolb in his model of the Experiential Learning Theory of 1984. In fact, the main purpose of the research was to promote the participants' communicative competence in speaking skills; these individuals were a group of four beginner EFL students from a private institution. To do that, the participants' learning styles were identified and data on their communicative competence in speaking skills before and after the implementation of teaching strategies was gathered.

Speaking Skill

According to Lightbown & Spada (1999), communicative competence is defined as the learners' capacity to proficiently express what they want, need, and mean in the target language; it is also defined as the ability to achieve communication in real-life situations effectively. However, to reach an EFL proficient level and to communicate successfully, learners need to be constantly exposed to the target language. In this scenario, the teacher's job should be focused on giving students the essential input to learn the language through the application of activities and exercises based on each student's learning style or styles. Nunan (2003) pointed out that speaking is a productive verbal skill that is the hardest ability to learn since it occurs in real time. Moreover, communicating in the target language requires individuals to convey actual meanings through a process of building, expressing, interacting and sharing information that occurs in varied contexts; that is why, the speaking skill becomes the most important ability to acquire due to the fact that people, who are knowledgeable of it, are known as competent speakers of the language.

Furthermore, speaking is the most required skill when talking about communication, so to be able to reach communicative competence in such skill, input is necessary to learn, to acquire the knowledge and to gain the insights that lead to speaking a language. Actually, Nunan (2003) stated that to be considered

a highly proficient speaker in a language, it is crucial to be competent in some specific aspects, such as producing connected and coherent speech, interacting, speaking in diverse contexts and having a balance between accuracy and fluency. The speaking skill is addressed in this research as the focal point to relate the students' communicative competence to Kolb's model of the Experiential Learning Theory of 1984. Richards (2008) made clear that "courses in listening and speaking skills have a prominent place in language programs around the world today" (p. 5). In fact, there is an ever-growing need for fluency in English worldwide because of its role as the world's international language.

The nature of speaking has changed considerably throughout the years; therefore, the usage of learning styles to assist students in their EFL learning process has revealed its significance. In using speaking class activities for teaching, it is essential to be constantly assessing the learners' performance when communicating. From this perspective, today's English teacher needs to be well versed in current approaches, and the teaching process has to be particularly adapted to the students' needs, learning styles, etc.

Learning Styles

When teaching and learning a language, it is extremely relevant to take into consideration a variety of aspects that may positively or negatively affect and influence the language learning process. Learning styles are a significant feature since experts in this field such as Dunn & Dunn (1978), Honey & Mumford (1992), Kolb (1984) among others, stated that all people learn in different ways. More precisely, the increased concern for improving the process of English Language Teaching (ELT) is related to students' types of learning, which led to a variety of works on the field of learning styles. For instance, Honey and Mumford's *Manual of Learning Styles* (1992) is based upon Kolb's work where four different learning styles are identified: activist, theorist, pragmatist and reflector; the Dunn & Dunn's model, *Teaching Students through their Individual Learning Styles: a Practical Approach* (1978) describes the learning styles as composed of integrated elements, which are activated through distinct types of stimulations to activate the person's skills to learn new information, and the already mentioned work of Kolb on the Experiential Learning Theory of 1984.

What caused an increased interest in experiential learning? One of the major concerns of the authors and experts previously mentioned was to develop a model or theory that could explain the distinct learning styles as a way of responding to the questions: what are learning styles? How can teachers approach students by using their learning types? Moreover, how can these models or theories improve the English Language Teaching (ELT) process? Also, a growing concentration on the limitations that the teacher-centered pedagogy presented, directed the attention towards the creation, implementation, and fostering of models based upon theories related to the students' individual learning differences to promote language learning in English. Actually, Kolb & Kolb (2005) pointed out that this common perception has prompted many educators and institutions to embrace experiential learning as a practical model to design and implement programs and curricula based on maximizing the students' learning and more experiential modes of teaching; based on this fact, the importance of taking into account learning styles when teaching EFL increases.

Kolb's Model of the Experiential Learning Theory of 1984: Learning Styles

The term learning style can be defined as the customary, usual or preferred form of an individual to learn, acquire, process and transform knowledge. In fact, Lefever (1995) stated that:

A learning style is the way in which a person sees or perceives things best and then processes or uses what was seen. Each person's individual learning style is as unique as signature. When a person has something difficult to learn, that student learns faster and enjoys learning more if his or her unique learning style is strengthened by the way the teacher teaches (p. 17).

To be more specific, each of the favorite or customary practices carried out by an individual to acquire knowledge is tightly linked to a learning style. Generally, most people learn through a combination of learning types even though students usually have a clear inclination towards one or two. In 1984, Kolb developed his learning style model and inventory, in which he presented his Experiential Learning Theory by stating a four-stage cycle and the definition of four different learning types. Also, Kolb (1984) pointed out that "learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 38), which clearly refers to the four-stage cycle every learner goes through and to the definition of each learning style.

McLeod (2010) summarized Kolb's four-stage learning cycle of the Experiential Learning Theory of 1984 by stating the following aspects:

- a. Concrete experience: It is concerned with experiencing a new situation or with the re-interpretation of a previous experience.
- b. Reflective observation: It is linked to the new experience and to the process of experiencing and understanding.
- c. Abstract conceptualization: Through reflection, a new idea rises or an existing one is modified.
- d. Active experimentation: The knowledge is applied in different contexts and situations to see how it works (par. 5).

As a result, a concrete experience involves the process of experimentation. Subsequently, reflective observation encompasses reviewing or reflecting on the concrete experience, which leads to the abstract conceptualization stage that includes reaching conclusions about what was learned from the experience. Finally, active experimentation relates to planning and putting into practice what was studied. Effective ELT and EFL learning definitely involves the four-stage cycle, where the process of learning moves smoothly from one phase to the other one. This cycle can be seen as experiencing, reflecting, conceptualizing and applying new knowledge. In fact, Kolb (1984) conceived learning as a process where every stage is supported by the previous one and helps moving forward to the next one. However, it is necessary to clarify that it is possible to enter the four-stage cycle at any step and to continue following the sequence.

Kolb (1984) also proposed four different learning styles, which are based on the four-stage cycle previously described. Thus, this author stated that the learning style preference is in fact the result of two variables, which are called *lines of axis*; McLeod (2010) defined each variable as follows:

A typical presentation of Kolb's two continuums is that the east-west axis is called the **Processing Continuum** (how we approach a task), and the north-south axis is called the **Perception Continuum** (our emotional response, or how we think or feel about it) (par. 11).

The two lines of axis, the east-west or Processing Continuum and the north-south or Perception Continuum, go across two stages of the four-stage cycle and mark four areas of Kolb's model of the Experiential Learning Theory (1984). In regards to the classification of learning styles according to Kolb's model of the Experiential Learning Theory (1984), there are four distinct types:

- a. Accommodator: This learning style relies highly on intuition. Actually, this type of learners prefers experiential and “hands-on” tasks, is attracted to new experiences and challenges, likes to carry out plans, and relies on developed analysis.
- b. Diverger: This type refers to people who can see and perceive things from distinct perspectives, is sensitive, prefers to observe rather than do, gathers information and uses imagination for problem-solving situations. Also, these learners perform precisely and accurately in situations where generating ideas is required.
- c. Assimilator: This learning type involves the importance of understanding ideas and concepts; clear explanations are required and organizing information in logical patterns is necessary. Learners of this type prefer to analyze, explore and read to think and reflect carefully about new ideas.
- d. Converger: Finding solutions, solving situations and technical tasks are aspects that involve this learning style. People, who prefer this learning type, can perform appropriately when putting into practice theories to see how they work (pp. 77-78).

The four-stage cycle, the two lines of axis, and the four different learning styles of Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory (1984) are the components of the model. Besides, when teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL), it is extremely relevant to provide learners with the necessary input to help them learn the language and achieve communicative competence in speaking skills.

Teaching Strategies and Learning Styles

As mentioned before, this research aimed to promote communicative competence in speaking skills by implementing the learning styles presented by Kolb in his model of the Experiential Learning Theory of 1984. However, first, it was necessary to identify the learning style or styles each participant of the target population presented in regards to this model. The second step was to apply teaching strategies related to the identified learning styles, but, specifically, focused on practicing speaking skills.

In this regard, Herrel & Jordan (2008) defined teaching strategies as approaches that are used across curricular areas to support the learning of a student. Equally important, these authors stated the main goal of teaching strategies as enhancing the language learning process to promote effective language teaching and to provide students with a class environment that can help them in their learning process. As a result, knowing and understanding the learning style or styles a student possesses helps to determine the possible activities and exercises that may help the person acquire and process information in a more effective way. Moreover, learning a language implies being able to communicate, which requires individuals to perform properly and proficiently in all the language skills; however, this research emphasized exclusively the speaking ability.

When teaching EFL, the instructor and his/her students do need to know their learning style or styles to focus on tasks that may help learners acquire the language. Also, it is relevant to carry out a learning style recognition process, which can actually be done by asking students to brainstorm the type of tasks they prefer to work on. Trevisol & Hining (2010) pointed out that

In order to teach in a balanced fashion, teachers should primarily detect which learning style is more favored by each of their learners. Thus, as a promising step towards enhancing the learning process, teachers can apply questionnaires to “help learners to identify their own learning styles and to recognize the power of understanding their language learning styles for making learning more effective” (pp. 5-6).

In short, being aware of the preferred learning type may lead students to learn more successfully by concentrating on activities, exercises or tasks that match their likes and preferences. Knowing the learning style helps to take advantage of the more developed areas and to target areas of improvement; as a final point, to be conscious of the learning style aids learners to benefit from their inclinations and innate skills as well as to gain insight from their strengths, areas of improvement and habits when learning a language.

METHODOLOGY

Type of Study

This research was a case study; it was a detailed and rigorous analysis of four EFL individuals, who were beginner students and belonged to the first English level of a private institution located in Heredia, Costa Rica. This case study encompassed documented information of a definite real-life situation experienced in an EFL context, where two main aspects were studied: learning styles according to Kolb's model of the Experiential Learning Theory of 1984, and the implementation of teaching strategies to increase the students' communicative competence in speaking skills.

Context and Participants

This research took place in a private institution located in Heredia downtown, Costa Rica. This language institute offers EFL courses that take around two to three years; students take four levels, which are divided into beginner, beginner-intermediate, intermediate and advanced. Each EFL course takes from six to eight months to finish and students have four hours of class per week. In every EFL course, the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) are studied and practiced. However, the speaking skill, as mentioned before, is the focus of this research. Four people were the participants of this study; they were two females and two males between 18 and 29 years old. All of them were beginner EFL students and wanted to learn the language for business purposes. The group of participants of this research study was randomly selected; the only aspects taken into account were their English level (beginner), their interest in becoming participants of this research and the schedule in which they were taking lessons; on the other hand, gender was not considered a variable of interest for this research.

Instruments

To collect the information three different instruments were applied; each of them was specifically generated based on the main purpose of this research. Furthermore, these instruments were validated by two researchers in the field of English teaching, who made sure the information clearly matched the teaching strategies described and the learning styles proposed by Kolb in his model of the Experiential Learning Theory of 1984. Finally, the validation process was also focused on language use, so the prompts and questions were specific, grammatically correct and understandable. The instruments are described as follows:

Checklist

It was generated from Kolb's description of his four learning styles: diverging, assimilating, converging and accommodating. This checklist included different statements related to learning activities specifically linked to a learning style proposed by Kolb in his model of the Experiential Learning Theory of 1984.

Scoring sheet

It was taken from the institution's scoring sheets since it was the instrument regularly used to grade students on speaking skills. It was used to identify each participant's oral performance before conducting this research and after the teaching strategies were implemented according to every student's learning style or styles. This scoring sheet was created and designed by Richards (2005, p. 193), and graded comprehension, fluency, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation for a total of twenty-five points (five points per each aspect), and it is based on five levels that are: excellent, very good, good, fair and poor.

Questionnaire

It comprised four open questions focused on gathering information on the learners' feelings and self-perception in regards to any possible change in his/her communicative competence in speaking skills; this instrument was administered after the implementation of the teaching strategies based on the identified learning style or styles in regards to Kolb's model of the Experiential Learning Theory of 1984.

Categories of Analysis

The data analysis was carried out through a triangulation process in which information from three different instruments: a checklist, a scoring sheet and a questionnaire were analyzed, compared and contrasted. There were three predetermined categories of analysis:

Participants' learning styles: it refers to the identification of each participant's learning style or styles in regards to Kolb's model of the Experiential Learning Theory of 1984.

Students' communicative competence in speaking skills before: data on each student's oral performance was collected before conducting this study.

Students' communicative competence in speaking skills after: this was done after the implementation of teaching strategies according to the identified learning styles, which were based upon Kolb's model of the Experiential Learning Theory of 1984.

Implementation of the Teaching Strategies

Before implementing the teaching strategies, first, every participant's learning style was identified. Then, the teaching strategies associated to each learning type were applied during eight two-hour EFL lessons. These strategies are shown as follows:

TABLE 1
Teaching strategies preferred by the research participants

| Four-stage Cycle | Learning Style | Teaching Strategy Associated | |
|---|----------------|------------------------------|---|
| Active Experimentation-Concrete Experience | Accommodator | Group Work | Role play |
| Concrete Experience -Reflective Observation | Diverger | Circle Talk | Brainstorming ideas Giving opinions |
| Reflective Observation - Abstract Conceptualization | Assimilator | Gap Filling | Asking questions Completing charts Organizing information |
| Abstract Conceptualization -Active Experimentation | Converger | Oral Presentations | Creating conversations / dialogues Designing posters |

Source: Own elaboration.

Likewise, it is essential to mention that the scoring sheet was applied before and after the application of the teaching strategies; this was done to gather data in terms of the learners' communicative competence in speaking skills prior to the intervention process and once it ended. During the implementation of the strategies, the researcher, who was also the teacher of the participants, collected information on the students' oral performance. Finally, information based on the research participants' self-perception in terms of their communicative competence was gathered as well.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Identification of Learning Styles

After the application of the checklist, which collected information about each participant's learning style or styles and which belonged to the first category of analysis, participants' learning styles, the data gathered showed the following results:

TABLE 2
Learning styles

| Research participant | Identified learning style / styles |
|----------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1 | Diverger and converger |
| 2 | Accommodator, diverger and converger |
| 3 | Assimilator |
| 4 | Diverger |

Source: Own elaboration.

According to Kolb's model of the Experiential Learning Theory of 1984, research participant 1 has the diverger and converger learning styles. The first one refers to people, who perceive and see things from distinct perspectives and who prefer to observe rather than do; also, learners, who present this learning type, have a high inclination towards imagination and feeling-oriented learning activities, exercises and

tasks. On the other hand, the converger learning type is primarily characterized by knowledge acquired through the selection of possible solutions, making a decision and asking questions that have one single and correct answer. The divergent learning style belongs to the Concrete Experience and Reflective Observation quadrant of the four-stage cycle, which encompasses personal involvement in experiences and learning through observation. On the other hand, the converger type is part of the Abstract Conceptualization and Active Experimentation section of the cycle where decision-making and problem solving prevail. This learner answered positively to all the statements linked to these learning types, so the highest inclinations led to learning preferences associated with emotions and feelings as well as to experimenting and selecting solutions when learning EFL.

Participant 2 showed three high preferences when learning EFL; this student answered yes to all the statements related to the accommodator, diverger, and converger learning styles according to Kolb's model of the Experiential Learning Theory of 1984. The accommodator learning type is located between the Active Experimentation and Concrete Experience section; it mainly relies on hands-on activities and involvement in new experiences; the diverger belongs to the Concrete Experience and Reflective Observation area, where brainstorming to generate ideas is emphasized. The converger learning type is found in the Abstract Conceptualization and Active Experimentation quadrant of the four-stage cycle, which relates to dealing with people and to sensitiveness towards other's opinions.

The third research participant's learning style is assimilator, which refers to people who like to organize and build models based on the information learned; this learning type belongs to the Reflective Observation and Abstract Conceptualization quadrant of the four-stage cycle; it focuses on precise and sound logical theory for understanding the ideas and meanings. The information is comprehended by observing carefully and by developing a systematic organization. Finally, in regards to Kolb's model of the Experiential Learning Theory of 1984, participant 4 showed an inclination towards different activities when learning EFL; however, the ones related to the diverger learning style are mostly preferred. This learning type is part of the Concrete Experience and Reflective Observation quadrant of the four-stage cycle; this student's learning preference focuses on involvement in learning activities that have to do with people and with carrying out a reflective and careful observation of the information.

Communicative Competence: Before

An individual interview was performed to collect data regarding each student's communicative competence in the speaking skill; this information was related to the second category of analysis: learners' oral performance before conducting this research, the data gathered is shown as follows:

TABLE 3
Communicative competence in the speaking skill before the implementation of teaching strategies

| Research participant | Obtained points (out of 25) |
|----------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1 | 14 |
| 2 | 15 |
| 3 | 17 |
| 4 | 14 |

Source: Own elaboration.

As Table 2 shows, before the implementation of teaching strategies based on the identified learning styles, according to Kolb's model of the Experiential Learning Theory of 1984, each participant's communicative competence in the speaking skill ranged between fourteen and seventeen points out of twenty-five, in which the lowest points obtained were in the fluency criteria. These results showed that even though most of the participants comprehended the information asked or requested orally, they had trouble communicating fluently and smoothly what they intended to express; this negatively affected their communicative competence in the speaking skill.

In fact, participant 1, besides obtaining a low score in the fluency criteria, also got three points in every remaining aspect of the scoring sheet: comprehension, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. Participant 2, as well as in the fluency aspect, obtained two points in the comprehension criteria and three in the grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation aspects. Participant 3, obtained two points in the fluency aspect, but contrary to the two previous participants, obtained four points in the comprehension, vocabulary and pronunciation criteria and three in the grammar section. Finally, participant 4 also obtained two points in the fluency aspect, but scored three in the comprehension, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation criteria. These results showed that even though most of the participants comprehended the information asked or requested, they had trouble communicating fluently and smoothly what they intended to express, which negatively affected their communicative competence in the speaking skill.

Communicative Competence: After

After the implementation of the teaching strategies, the scoring sheet was applied again to gather data about the students' communicative competence in the speaking skill, and the results obtained were the following:

TABLE 4
Communicative competence in the speaking skill after the implementation of teaching strategies

| Research participant | Obtained points (out of 25) |
|----------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1 | 22 |
| 2 | 22 |
| 3 | 23 |
| 4 | 22 |

Source: Own elaboration.

The information gathered about each student's communicative competence in the speaking skill showed that all participants significantly improved in every aspect of the scoring sheet, and that their initial scores, which ranged from fourteen to seventeen points, went up after the application of the teaching strategies. Also, the lowest grade every student obtained was four, and every participant even reached five points in some of the criteria (comprehension, grammar and vocabulary), which showed a positive improvement in the learners' communicative competence in the speaking skill. Finally, once the teaching strategies were implemented, students also scored higher in the fluency and pronunciation aspects, which were clearly evident through their performance in the oral skill.

In addition, a questionnaire was administered to each research participant to collect data about their feelings, self-perception or accomplishments in regards to any possible changes in their communicative competence in the speaking skill. In terms of the first question: how have you felt during the last English lessons in regards to the speaking skill? The data collected showed that all learners felt more comfortable when talking, more satisfied, and more confident since they thought their oral interventions were more fluent and adequate to their current language level.

Also, based on the second question: have you felt any specific change in regards to the speaking skill recently? (If so, describe that change and some of its characteristics. If not, indicate why) all learners indicated that they experienced a positive change in their speaking ability due to their speed, fluency and accuracy in terms of pronunciation and vocabulary. The third question: Do you consider that during the last English lessons you have spoken more fluently? (If so, justify that personal perception. If not, indicate why) showed that every research participant considered he or she had improved his or her fluency in English since they were now able to start and keep a conversation, to practice the language outside the classroom context, to speak faster and to be more comfortable when talking.

The last question gathered information related to any recommendations that students would suggest to the English teacher as a way of helping them improve in the speaking skill; learners suggested implementing activities that are more conversational and to generate oral practices particularly based on pronunciation. The students truly believed those dynamics, plus the promotion of reading aloud, as a teaching strategy, may truly help them improve in the oral skill. From the information gathered in the questionnaire, it can be concluded that the information collected, when the checklist was applied for the second time, matches the students' self-perception and feelings in regards to their communicative competence in the speaking skill. Actually, all students felt they had improved in the speaking skill, particularly, in fluency, pronunciation and vocabulary. In the same way, students stated they gained insights in regards to vocabulary and confidence when speaking in English, and they recommended the English instructor practice more this skill thorough varied oral activities.

In short, all the research participants felt their communicative competence in the speaking skill certainly improved; they indicated they felt more confident and satisfied when speaking in English due to the application of teaching strategies, specifically, based on their learning styles and designed to practice the oral ability. In this regard, the students also stated that this process made them feel closer to their goal of developing their speaking skill to be able to use the language beyond the academic context. In fact, the participants pointed out the importance of developing oral strategies particularly linked to their learning styles since this process helps them learn in a more effective way. Finally, students referred positively towards the application of teaching strategies to work on their communicative competence given the fact that this process aids them improve in aspects such as vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency.

CONCLUSIONS

Today's world certainly demands people catch up with the current changes and trends in terms of communication and technology. In this regard, individuals are forced to build up and improve their skills in order to have more academic and work opportunities available, as it is the case in the Costa Rican context. In this same perspective, the educational setting has to respond to the students' needs by helping them attain their goals in terms of their English language learning process. As a result, teachers may help their learners become communicatively competent in the target language by basing their teaching process on strategies that match their students' learning styles. This process certainly guides instructors towards the implementation of appealing, catchy, and engaging strategies for teaching, which, in turn, supports and benefits students in the class.

Consequently, throughout the development of this research study and based on the results obtained, it can be concluded that all the research participants improved their communicative competence in the speaking skill, especially, in terms of fluency, vocabulary, and pronunciation, which were the specific changes the research participants pointed out. These improvements were evident in comparison to the data gathered before the application of the teaching strategies, in which learners scored deficiently. Also, the students indicated that now they are able to initiate a conversation since they have more knowledge related to vocabulary, speed, and confidence when speaking in English; the participants also recommended the teacher emphasize more on the oral ability as well as to focus more on pronunciation, which is a crucial and relevant element when communicating.

The results obtained show that using teaching strategies specifically based upon Kolb's model of the Experiential Learning Theory of 1984 was effective to promote communicative competence in the speaking skill. Finally, from all the information collected, it was concluded that the implementation of teaching strategies particularly based on the students' learning styles was useful to help them improve in their oral ability.

Finally, two main aspects limited this study; first, the number of research participants of the group since it was a small one. If there had been more students in the class, more varied information could have been gathered in terms of the learning styles based upon Kolb's model of the Experiential Learning Theory of 1984 and of the learners' communicative competence in the speaking skill. Also, it would have been useful to have some other beginner groups of learners to develop a comparative study among them. As a result, for further research, it is recommended to have a larger amount of research participants per class as well as more groups taking the same English level. In this way, more data may be gathered to establish and test the correlation between the learning styles and the communicative competence in the speaking skill with a larger population.

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