

Uncovering Strategies: Exploring How Proficient Learners Master English as a Foreign Language

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Abstract: This study delves into the strategies employed by ten Algerian proficient students in the process of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at high school. Through in-depth exploration and analysis, the research aims to unveil the nuanced approaches and techniques adopted by these proficient students. Thus, this study is a qualitative research which uses two data gathering tools, namely: the four skills language portrait and a semi-structured interview. The results revealed the predominant visual preference and remarkable proficiency in receptive skills, coupled with reflective and intrinsically motivated tendencies. The insights gained extend beyond the classroom, providing valuable guidance for parents in supporting their children’s language acquisition journey. Additionally, peers seeking effective language learning strategies can benefit from understanding the methods employed by proficient students. Besides, teachers, equipped with a deeper understanding of these strategies, can enhance their instructional methods to cater to diverse learner needs. The findings can offer practical implications for language education, empowering both teachers and parents to play supportive roles in fostering language proficiency.

Keywords: proficiency; skill; strategy; language skills portrait.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the dynamic landscape of language education, understanding the strategies employed by proficient students studying English as a Foreign Language (EFL) becomes imperative. As language educators, researchers, and policymakers strive to optimise language learning experiences, insights into the effective methods employed by proficient students can pave the way for more targeted and impactful language instruction. Teaching EFL in the Algerian context has witnessed radical changes mainly at primary schools and universities. The English language is competing with the French language for dominance in the educational sector as a response to its significant presence in the economic sector. Thus, Algeria is opting for more competent students who can communicate openly in diverse cultural and professional background contexts.

The strategic behaviour of proficient EFL students has been widely acknowledged as pivotal to language mastery. Globally, research reveals that higher proficiency students extensively employ metacognitive strategies (Habók et al., 2022). These self-regulatory practices, encompassing cognitive, affective, social, and motivational dimensions, strongly reflect improvement in performance and autonomy in language learning. Locally speaking, Fodil-Cherif (2023) investigates the strategies used by the EFL Algerian students to overcome listening difficulties. She concludes, after questioning and interviewing some students and conducting a listening comprehension tests, that these students do use five metacognitive strategies namely: problem-solving, planning and evaluation, mental translation, personal knowledge, and direct attention. However, they use them haphazardly and lack real awareness of their use.

As far as speaking skills are concerned, case studies demonstrate that proficient students systematically adopt varied strategies, mainly at the planning and evaluation stages (Azizi & Yusuf, 2023). Similarly, in writing instruction, the application of strategy-based instruction methods has led to measurable improvements in students' writing proficiency, organisation, and self-assessment capabilities (Sabria, 2016).

Focusing on Algeria, the question that many teachers, parents, and even low-level students keep asking all the time is about why there exist mixed abilities in a given classroom (Djerouane & Bensafi, 2022; Bellour, 2017). Why do certain students improve their level in English in a remarkable way than others and may reach advanced levels while they are still high school students? Despite efforts to improve English teaching, students continue to struggle, particularly with listening skills due to a lack of strategic instruction (Fodil-Cherif, 2023). Research indicates that explicit metacognitive strategy training significantly enhances Algerian students' ability to process aural input and fosters transferability across other language

skills (Fodil-Cherif, 2023). Consequently, a shift towards strategy-focused pedagogy, rather than mere performance testing, is recommended to cultivate more autonomous and confident EFL learners within the Algerian educational system (Fodil-Cherif, 2023; Sabria, 2016).

Based on what we have discussed so far, mastering EFL is closely tied to strategic learning behaviours. Global findings and Algerian research alike highlight the need for explicit strategy training to empower students as active, self-directed agents in their linguistic development. This study is an attempt to reveal the strategies used by these nerd students as some call them. It attempts to delve into the diverse array of strategies utilized by Algerian high school students to enhance their proficiency across the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. By uncovering the preferences and practices of these students, this study seeks to contribute valuable information to the ongoing discourse on language acquisition strategies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

By the early twentieth century, teaching languages rose as an active area of debate (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Linguists sought to develop principles for designing teaching methods and materials depending on the research results derived from linguistics and psychology. This led to the emergence of multiple language teaching methods. The social and political factors play a significant role in shaping the type of methods which suit the learners.

It is worth differentiating between approach, method and technique as Edward Anthony in 1963 identified them (as cited in Richards & Rodgers, 2014):

...An approach is a set of correlative assumptions dealing with the nature of language teaching and learning. An approach is axiomatic. It describes the nature of the subject matter to be taught...

...Method is an overall plan for the orderly presentation of language material, no part of which contradicts, and all of which is based upon, the selected approach. An approach is axiomatic, a method is procedural.

...A technique is implementational-that which actually takes place in a classroom. It is a particular trick, stratagem, or contrivance used to accomplish an immediate objective. Techniques must be consistent with a method, and therefore in harmony with an approach as well. (p. 21)

According to these definitions, an approach is the abstract aspect of the teaching learning process. A method is the sequential realisation of the approach. A technique is the concrete practices through the process of realising the overall principles of an approach. Thus, the three terms are highly related to one another and work in harmony to achieve the final objectives.

It is also worth to distinguish between the two terms: skill and strategy. A strategy used to be a military term referring to a set of procedures for implementing an operation. The specific steps for the implementation of the procedure are called tactics (Schmeck, 1988). A learning strategy is a set of procedures to fulfil certain objectives, and the specific procedure within the overall one is called a learning tactic. On the other hand, a skill is the capacity that can be manifested in behaviour at any time because it is developed through practice. A skill can be used intentionally or automatically. However, strategies are conscious and intentional. Skills are things we can do, whereas a strategy involves the conscious decision to implement these skills. They differ from one individual to another (Brown, 2007).

If an individual has an inclination to use the same strategy in varied situations, we can suspect the presence of the style. The latter refers to the stability and consistency in learners' orientation in learning. Learning styles can be noticed in the way students think, being reflective or impulsive (Schmeck, 1988; Brown, 2007), or even in the physical senses they use, being visual, auditory, or kinesthetic (Brown, 2007). It can be seen in the way students interact, whether independently working, individually, or dependently working in groups. "Different learners have different preferred learning styles" (Tomlinson, 2011, p. 18). As explained earlier, learning styles reflect the dominant strategy used by learners. They are determined according to the purpose of learning, its context, and the content supposed to be presented. Tomlinson (2011) introduces nine learning styles and recommends that teachers cater to:

- 1- Visual: learners prefer to see the language written down.
- 2- Auditory: learners prefer to hear the language.
- 3- Kinesthetic: learners prefer to do something physical, such as following instructions for a game.
- 4- Studial: learners like to pay conscious attention to the linguistic features of the language and want to be correct.
- 5- Experiential: learners like to use the language and are more concerned with communication than with correctness.
- 6- Analytic: learners prefer to focus on discrete bits of the language and to learn them one by one.
- 7- Global: learners are happy to respond to whole chunks of language at a time and to pick up from them whatever language they can.
- 8- Dependent: learners prefer to learn from a teacher and from a book.
- 9- Independent: learners are happy to learn from their own experience of the language and to use autonomous learning strategies. (p. 18)

Bergmann (2023), in turn, highlights the limitations of ‘one-size-fits-all’ teaching. He advocates giving students opportunities based on these learning styles to master certain knowledge and develop the four skills.

Harmer (1998) highlights how students need to acquire the four skills in learning a foreign language namely: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Reading requires, according to him, the ability of the students to skim and scan through the text, reading for pleasure or reading for details. Similarly, listening demands listener’s engagement that means taking into consideration the age, the interest, and the level of the student. Writing skill requires taking into account the previously mentioned factors to decide what suits them to write. In speaking, students should use all the language at their command to perform some kind of oral tasks.

It is worth mentioning the role of motivation in learning foreign languages. Ryan and Deci (Ryan & Deci, 2000) present Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as a framework for understanding human motivation. They distinguish between intrinsic motivation, which is the students’ engagement in activities for inherent satisfaction and extrinsic motivation, driven by external rewards. The authors argue that the quality of motivation depends on the extent to which individuals’ psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fulfilled. When the social environment supports these needs, intrinsic motivation and internalisation of extrinsic motivation are enhanced, leading to greater psychological growth and creativity. Conversely, controlling or neglectful environments undermine motivation and self-regulation. Fostering autonomy-supportive contexts in education is essential for optimal student functioning and sustained motivation.

3. METHODS

This study is an exploratory qualitative research that explores the strategies and techniques used by ten proficient students in EFL, aiming at answering two main questions:

- 1- What are the predominant learning styles among Algerian proficient high school students studying EFL?
- 2- What specific strategies Algerian proficient students employ to enhance their four skills in learning EFL, namely: reading, listening, speaking, and writing?

3.1. Participants

This study involved ten Algerian high school students who were identified as proficient learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Participants were selected through purposive sampling, as the research specifically targeted students demonstrating advanced language proficiency and consistent academic achievement in English. The criteria for selection included high performance in English courses, teachers’ recommendations, and observable communicative competence in both spoken and written forms.

The participants represented different grades and academic streams within the same educational context, providing a diverse yet focused sample of proficient EFL learners. To ensure ethical considerations, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their consent was obtained prior to participation.

3.2. Data Gathering Procedure

Given the qualitative nature of this research, two complementary instruments were employed to collect in-depth and authentic data: the four skills language portrait and a semi-structured interview. First, participants completed the four skills language portrait, a reflective tool designed to elicit information about their personal learning preferences and self-perceived strengths and weaknesses across the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. This visual and introspective task encouraged students to express their linguistic identities and learning styles creatively and meaningfully.

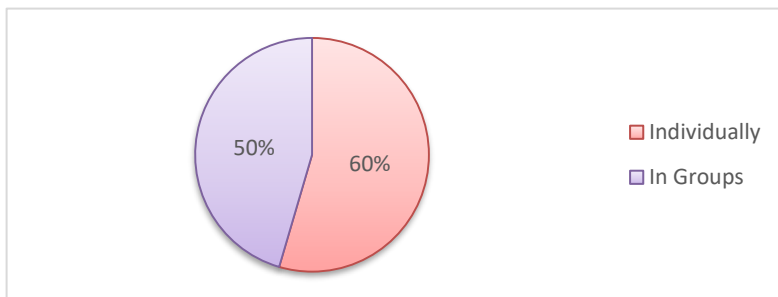
Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with each participant. The interviews were guided by open-ended questions that explored the students' specific strategies, motivations, and attitudes toward EFL learning. Each interview lasted approximately 20-30 minutes and was conducted in a relaxed and familiar setting to foster openness and authenticity. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

3.2. Treatment

The collected data from interviews were subjected to a qualitative descriptive analysis. Initially, the transcribed interview data were organised and coded manually, with recurrent patterns and emerging themes identified in relation to learning strategies, preferences, and motivational orientations. The four skills language portraits and the structured questions in the interviews were analysed using Microsoft Excel to assist in the organisation and management of the data and quantifying the frequency of certain preferences among participants. This facilitated systematic comparison and identification of predominant trends. The integration of both data sources ensured a rich understanding of the participants' approaches to EFL learning, thereby enhancing the validity and reliability of the findings.

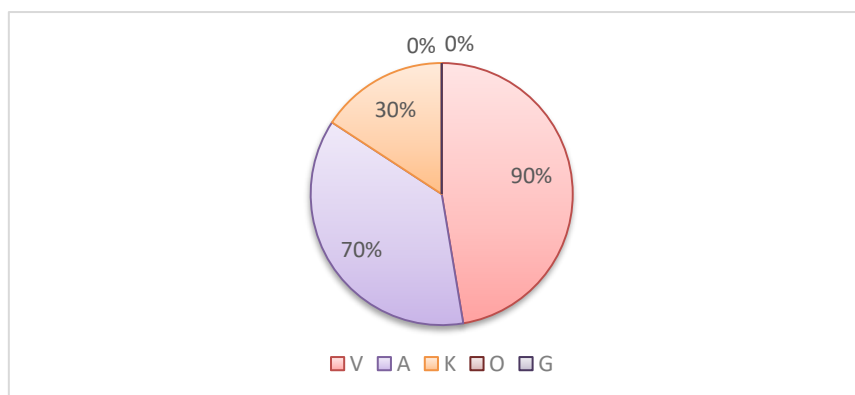
4. RESULTS

Fig.1. Learning Styles Based on the Physical Senses of Students



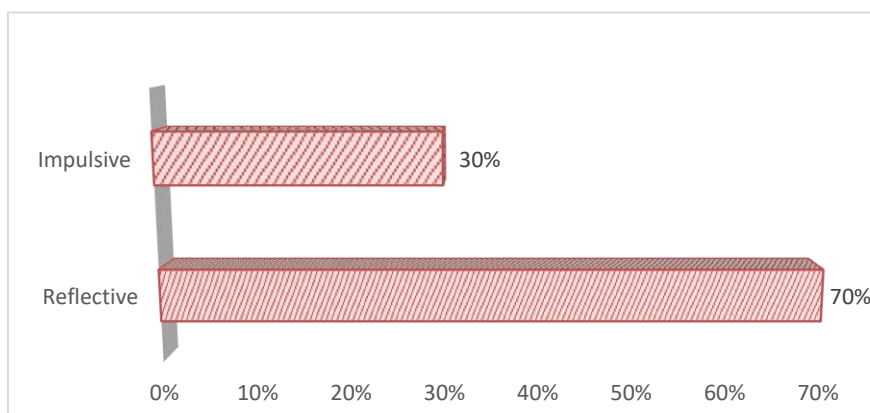
These are the results about the preferences to learning EFL among proficient students based on different sensory modalities. The majority of students are visual learners with 90%. They likely benefit from materials such as charts, diagrams, videos, and written instructions. Incorporating visual aids into teaching methods would likely enhance the learning experience for this group. The second large group with 70 % are audio learners. They prefer the learning environment that emphasizes listening, speaking, and audio resources. Incorporating audio materials, lectures, and discussions could be effective for this group. Kinesthetic learners with 30% favour hands-on and experiential learning. They benefit from physical activities, interactive tasks, and real-world implications. Incorporating movement, role-playing, and practical exercises may enhance the learning experience for kinesthetic learners. It is worth mentioning that seven students have chosen more than one style. Understanding and catering to these diverse learning styles can create a more inclusive and effective learning environment for individuals.

Fig.2. Learning Styles Based on Students' Ways of Interaction



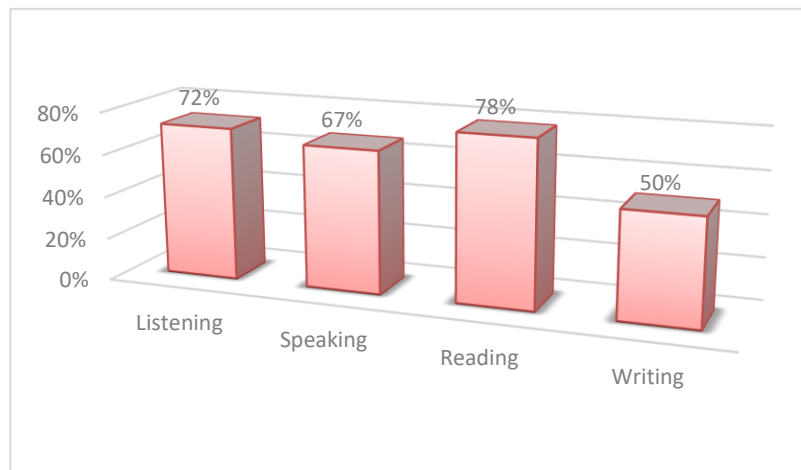
As far as the ways of interaction are concerned, a significant portion of the learners 60% prefer individual interaction. This suggests that these learners feel comfortable and effective when engaging with the learning material on a one-on-one basis. They might benefit from personalized attention, self-paced activities, and individualized feedback. Half of the learners 50% express a preference for interacting in group settings. This indicates an inclination towards collaborative learning, discussion, and group activities. These learners likely thrive in environments that foster peer interaction, and shared exploration on language concepts. It is worth mentioning that student 5 chose both ways recognizing the value of a balanced approach. Respecting these preferences for interaction styles can contribute to a more student-centered and effective language learning environment.

Fig.3. Learning Styles Based on Students' Styles of Thinking



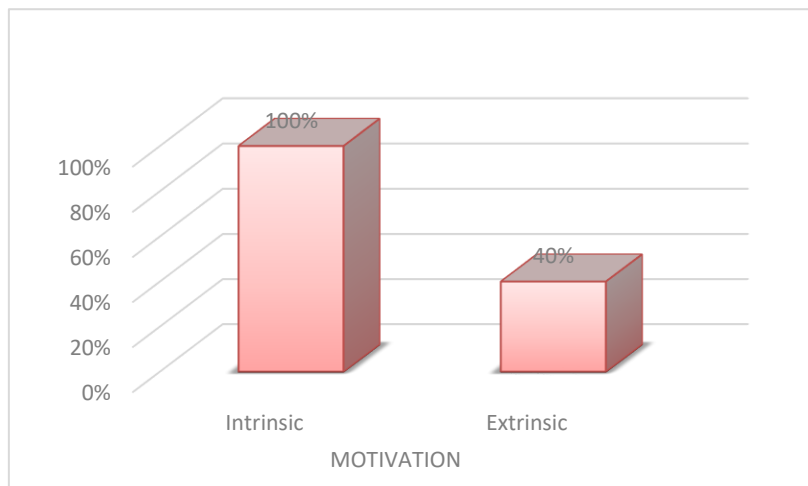
Concerning the thinking tendencies, a significant majority of learners 70% exhibit reflective learning styles, indicating that they prefer to consider information before actively engaging with it. These learners may benefit from well- structured lessons, opportunities for in- depth analysis, and reflective exercises that allow them to connect new information with existing knowledge. The 30% of learners with impulsive tendencies prefer more spontaneous and immediate approach to learning. They may thrive in dynamic and interactive environments, enjoying activities that allow for quick decision- making and on- the- spot engagement. These learners might benefit from activities that involve rapid responses, discussions, and real- time problem- solving. Understanding these differences contributes to creating a more inclusive and motivating learning environment.

Fig.4. Learning Styles Based on Students' Motivation



Surprisingly, all learners 100 % in the sample derive their drive to learn English from internal factors. This could include personal interest, enjoyment of the learning process, or a genuine curiosity about the language. Learners with intrinsic motivation are likely to be self- motivated, finding fulfillment in the learning journey itself. Despite the predominant intrinsic motivation, 40 % of learners also demonstrate an extrinsic motivational orientation. These subset learners are motivated by external factors such as rewards, grades, or recognition. It is worth mentioning here that these extrinsic students have chosen both motivational modes. This means they are both intrinsic and extrinsic motivated. The interplay between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation allows instructors to tailor their teaching strategies to align with the motivational preferences of learners, fostering a positive and supportive learning environment.

Fig.5. Students Proficiency Based on English Language Skills



Regarding students' proficiency in different language skills, figure.5. provide insights into their strengths and areas of improvement. A significant majority of students 78% demonstrate strength in reading. This suggests that they are proficient in comprehending written text, understanding vocabulary, and extracting meaning from written materials. These learners may benefit from activities that further enhance their reading comprehension skills and expand their vocabulary. A considerable portion of students 72% excel in listening skill. This indicates proficiency in understanding spoken language, including audio materials, conversation, such as audio exercises and discussions, can continue to support this strength. In terms of speaking, 67% of students feel strong, implying a good command of verbal communication. However, there is a noticeable decrease when it comes to writing, where only 50% of students manifest a relative weakness in expressing themselves in written form. In summary, the students excel in receptive skills such as reading and listening, while there is a room for improvement in productive skills like speaking and writing. This information can guide educators to tailor language learning strategies to address specific areas of need.

Fig.6. EFL Students' Listening Strategies

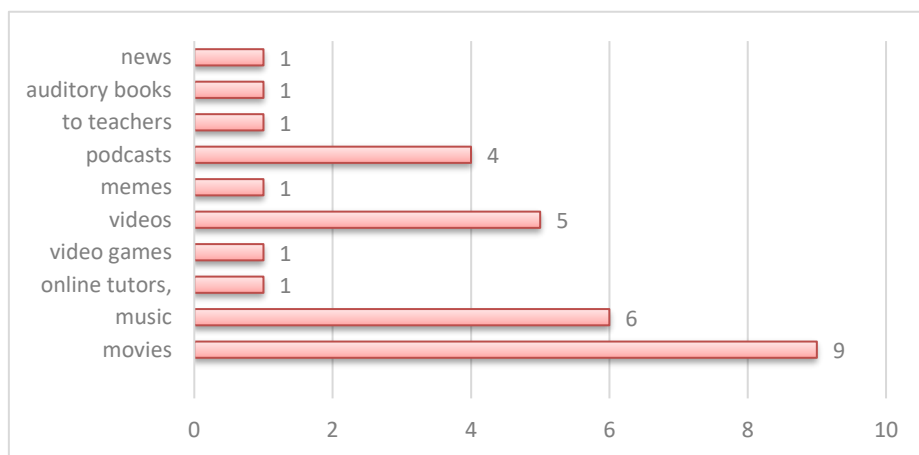
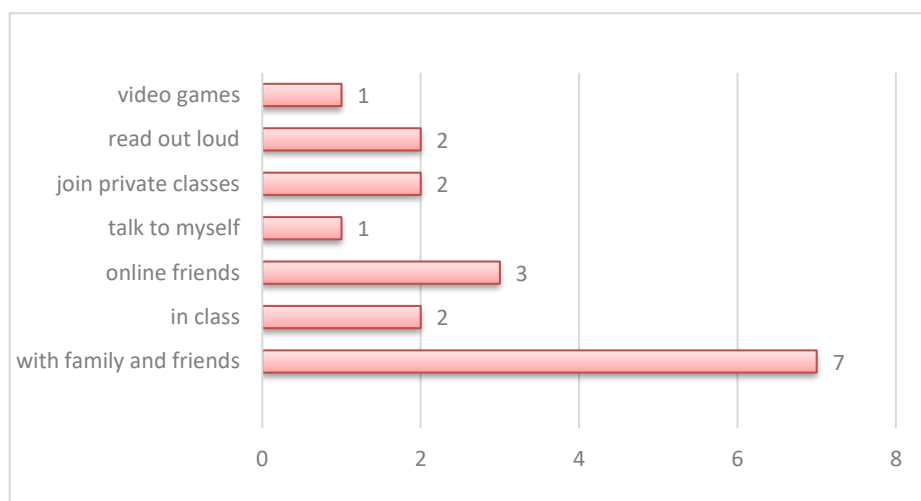


Figure.6. displays the varied strategies used by students to improve their listening skill. Nine out of ten agreed on the importance of watching movies without translation at first and then activate captions. They choose the type of movie according to the language they prefer either American English or British one or even formal or informal English. Movies help them widen their vocabulary repertoire. Listening to music is also an effective strategy as six students proved that. They find it of great benefit to improve their pronunciation. Videos as five students state can improve listening skill especially those which are not designed for educational purposes. One of them explains that she turns the volume high and listens twice to grasp the meaning and capture the right pronunciation. It is worth mentioning that this student speaks English eloquently. Podcasts on their part are popular among

four students, random discussions by random people. This can help students to learn about variety of topics that interest them, as well as improve their comprehension of spoken English. Other strategies mentioned by students are listening to news in order to learn vocabulary related to current events, listening to audiobooks to learn vocabulary and grammar in context, listening to their teachers at class, playing video games and improving their listening skills in a fun and engaging way, memes and online tutors.

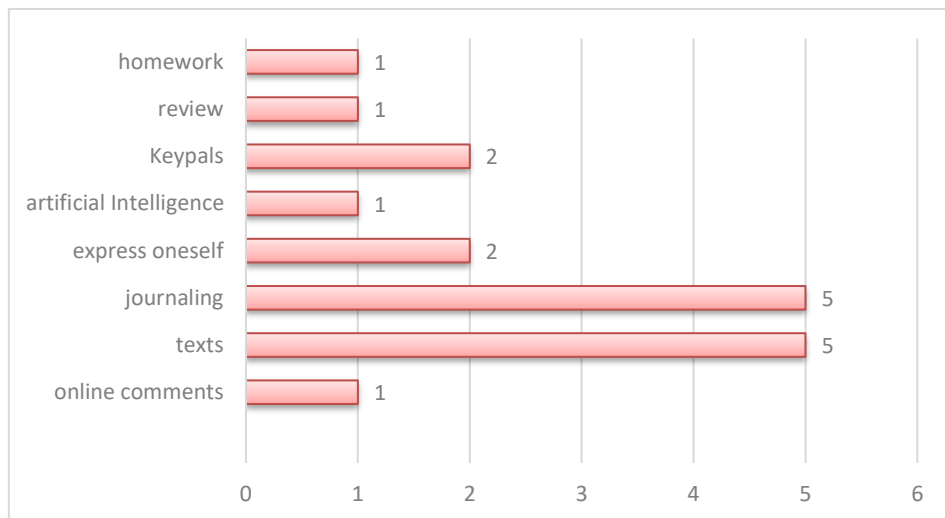
Fig.7. EFL Students’ Speaking Strategies



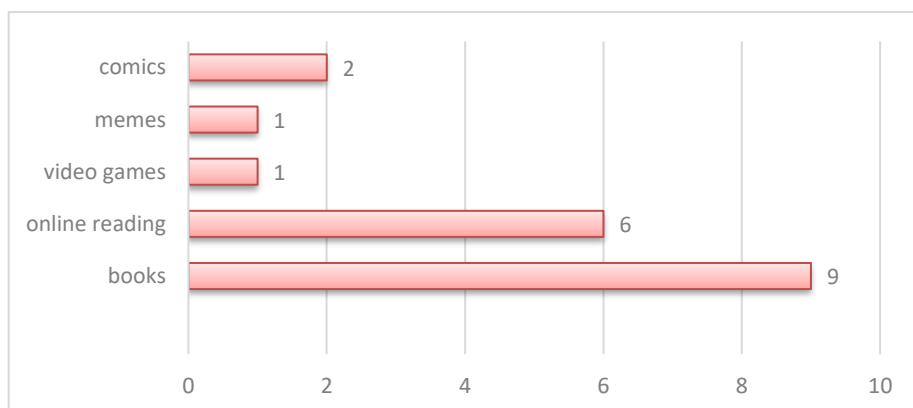
As far as speaking is concerned, seven students out of ten agreed on the assistance provided by their family members and friends in practicing this skill. They have named some members such as a mother, a sister, an uncle living abroad and cousins. Besides, they have not denied the role of their friends be them real or online ones in improving speaking. The school be, it public or private, is mentioned by few students as a healthy atmosphere to improve their speaking. Video games is likely to be one of the favourite students’ strategies to practise speaking. Noticeably, one student explains that she has no one to talk to; as a result, she talks to herself. She creates situations and plays roles.

Fig.8. EFL Students' Reading Strategies

Figure.8. lists five reading strategies namely respectively: reading books, online reading, comics, video games, and memes. The majority reveal that they read varied books like adventurous or detective novels, stories, and



scientific books. They explain that they learn new vocabulary from these books which they will use later in writing or speaking. Online reading, as six students state, is effective especially when relaxing and trying to learn something new. They read captions on YouTube, quotes on Facebook, articles, and newspapers especially crosswords and headlines. Memes, video games and comics especially Manga are mentioned by students while interviewing them.

Fig.9. EFL Students' Writing Strategies

Writing which is supposed to be of great value to students since they are tested just in reading and writing in formal exams; however, the majority

proved the opposite. They consider speaking as a priority and writing comes last. At the top of the writing strategies, five out of ten manifest that they use the new vocabulary and grammar structures to write texts about anything and journaling on a regular basis. Two students reveal that they sometimes chat with key- pals on varied social media and even while playing video games online. They also explain that expressing oneself through writing can be of great importance. One of them highlights the role the school assignments plays in improving the writing skill and encourage them to do huge efforts. Interestingly, one of the students explains how writing comments and reviewing books and movies to others help both the writer and the reader; the writer to write more and the reader to read the book or watch the movie. Another student shows his new technique in writing using Artificial Intelligence. He writes descriptive texts in order to turn them to images or videos and the more the text is well- written the fruitful the results.

5. DISCUSSION

The prevalence of multiple learning styles, particularly the dominance of visual learning, suggests a diverse approach to language acquisition among Algerian proficient high school students studying EFL. The inclination towards individual and group work highlights their adaptability to different learning environments catering to both independent study and collaborative efforts (Boudersa & Hamada, 2015; Boukhentache, 2020). The majority being reflective students indicates a thoughtful and introspective learning approach, possibly contributing to their success in reading and listening skills (Fodil-Cherif, 2023). Intrinsic motivation among these students suggests a genuine interest in language learning, likely playing a crucial role in their overall proficiency (Habók et al., 2022).

There is a remarkable interest in acquiring receptive skills and neglecting, to some extent, productive skills (Sabria, 2016). What the interviewed students manifested is the different strategies they used without being explicitly guided through EFL syllabi to the different and efficient strategies they may use (Gasmi & Zaghar, 2023; Missoum, 2024). Students developed new strategies according to what is available in their environment, be it people around or tools. Noticeably, they used technology in a positive way to get acquainted with the native speakers. They even realised their strengths and weaknesses and worked on improving them. Family and friends are of great support to them in their journey to proficiency.

The sociocultural context in which Algerian EFL learners operate plays an effective role in shaping both their motivation and strategic engagement with the language. The observed intrinsic motivation among proficient students can be partly attributed to the broader societal perception of English as a language of global communication and academic opportunity (Habók et al., 2022; Hamlaoui & Haddouche, 2013). Within Algerian society, English increasingly represents access to international education, digital culture, and career advancement, all of which contribute to learners'

internalised goals and sustained motivation. Additionally, the strong support systems offered by family and peers reinforce a collaborative interaction for improvement that aligns with Vygotskian perspectives on the social nature of learning. Students not only benefit from emotional encouragement but also draw upon their social environment as a resource for practice, feedback, and exposure to English, often integrating informal conversations and peer-led discussions into their learning routines.

Moreover, the strategic use of technology reflects the learners' positive responsiveness to their sociocultural surroundings (Boussebha, 2023). In a context where formal pedagogical support may be limited, learners leverage digital platforms-such as YouTube, language exchange applications, and social media platforms-to simulate immersion and connect with native or proficient speakers. These practices indicate a form of self-orienting learning. The evolving digital literacy among Algerian youth thus not only facilitates linguistic input but also shapes metacognitive awareness, as students learn to assess and refine their approaches in real time.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this study may well be of great benefits to the previously mentioned the concerned stakeholders: educators, parents, policy makers, and even students. The ten students interviewed in this study explained in details their strategies and tactics they use to improve their English and reach certain advanced level compared to their peers. These strategies worked for them; however, as mentioned before, a strategy differs from one student to another. Yet, knowing them will give an opportunity to students to try them, and teachers to take them into consideration while planning a lesson, and to parents to provide certain atmosphere at home and specific aid to their children, and to policy makers to include them in the textbook design.

This table sums up the above mentioned strategies:

Table 1. Strategies Implemented by English Proficient Students

Listening Skill	Speaking Skill	Reading Skill	Writing Skill
1- movies	1- With family	1- Books	1-Journaling
2- music	and friends	2- Online	2-Texts
3- videos	2- Online	reading	3-To key- pals
4- Podcasts	friends	3- Comics	4-Express oneself
5- News	3- Join private	4- Memes	5-Homework
6- Auditory books	classes	5- Video games	6-Online
7- To teachers	4- Read out		comments
8- Memes	loud		7-Review
9- Video games	5- In class		8-Using AI
10- Online	6- Video games		
tutors	7- Talk to		
	oneself		

7. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, proficient high school students studying EFL demonstrate a variety of learning styles, with a predominant visual preference. Their proficiency in reading and listening, coupled with reflective and intrinsically motivated tendencies, underscores their commitment to language learning. However, the identified weaknesses in speaking and writing skills highlight areas for targeted improvement. Educators could tailor teaching strategies to accommodate visual learning preferences and incorporate interactive methods to enhance speaking and writing proficiency. Understanding these nuances in learning styles and addressing specific skill deficiencies can contribute to a more comprehensive and effective language learning experience for these students.

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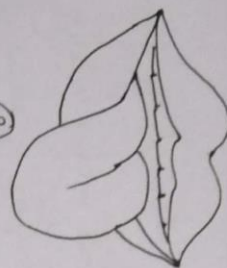
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9. Appendix

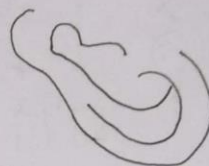
Language Skills Portrait and a semi- structured interview

Learning Styles:		Name:	Class:
		Age:	
→ ① Physical sense:	→ ② Way of interaction:		
☐ + a. Visual (look / see)	☐ + a. working individually.		
☐ + b. Auditory (hear / listen)	☐ + b. working in groups.		
☐ + c. Kinaesthetic (movement)			
☐ + d. Olfactory (smell)			
☐ + e. Gustatory (taste)			
→ ③ Style of thinking:			
☐ + a. Reflective (avoid risks) (consider choices)			
☐ + b. Impulsive (take risks) (immediate response)			
→ ④ Motivation: I study for:			
☐ + a. myself, knowing other cultures ...etc			
☐ + b. my family, a Diploma, an exam ...etc			

English Language Skills



②



①



④



③

A Student's Strategies:

① Listening:

② Speaking:

③ Reading:

④ Writing:



① Listening:

- Listening to music.
- Listening Podcasts
- Developing hearing skills

② Speaking:

- Talking to people who are fluent and master the language.
- Benefiting from the internet by reading new news and articles

③ Reading:

- Reading books such as novels, scientific books and detective novels.
- Trying to read slowly than fast.
- Set aside time daily to read.

④ Writing:

- Writing expressions
- Learning writing skills and arts.
- Enriching the linguistic balance