

Communication Strategies among EFL Learners: Frequency of Use and Type of Strategies

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Abstract

The present study aims at investigating the type of speaking communication strategies and their frequency of use by 107 second year EFL undergraduates at Al Bachir Al Ibrahim University, Bordj Bou Arreridj. The participants were asked to fill in Nakatani's Oral Communication Strategy Inventory questionnaire, which consists of two parts and the students were just concerned with its first part, to collect the quantitative data. The results showed the students' use of achievement strategies, such as accuracy-based strategies, social affective strategies and fluency-oriented strategies, to overcome the difficulties they coped with when performing speaking tasks.

Keywords: communication strategies, achievement strategies, speaking tasks, difficulties.

Résumé

Le présent travail a pour objectif d'examiner la stratégie de la communication orale et sa fréquence d'utilisation par 107 étudiants inscrits en deuxième année, langue et littérature anglaises à l'Université AlBachir AlIbrahimi, province de Bordj Bou Arreridj. Il a été demandé aux participants de remplir la première partie du questionnaire seulement pour collecter les données quantitatives. Les résultats montrent que les étudiants ont utilisé des stratégies de réalisation telles basées sur la précision, des stratégies sociales affectives et des stratégies axées sur la fluidité afin de surmonter les difficultés qu'ils rencontraient lorsqu'ils exécutaient des tâches d'expression.

Mots-clés : stratégies de communication, stratégies de réalisation, tâches d'expression, difficultés.

المخلص

تهدف الدراسة إلى معرفة تواتر استعمال استراتيجيات التواصل الناطقة من قبل 107 طلبة في السنة الثانية للغة الإنجليزية كلفة أجنبية في جامعة محمد البشير الإبراهيمي. حيث طلب من المشاركين ملء استبيان إستراتيجية الاتصالات الشفهية، في جزئه الأول فقط لجمع البيانات الكمية. تبين النتائج استخدام الطلاب لاستراتيجيات الإنجاز، مثل: استراتيجيات الدقة، والاستراتيجيات الاجتماعية العاطفية، واستراتيجيات الطلاقة، للتغلب على الصعوبات التي يواجهونها عند ممارسة تمرين شفهي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: استراتيجيات التواصل، استراتيجيات الإنجاز، تمارين شفهية، الصعوبات

Introduction

Oral language is regarded as the centerpiece of language learning in the classroom. Learners consider that to be able to speak in English means to know the language. Many students, however, face communicative problems when they interact in a foreign language. One way to cope with this kind of breakdowns is to rely on communication strategies. Grenfell and Harris, in their book *Modern Languages and Learning Strategies*, define communication strategies as “the means which learners have at their disposal to make sense in face-to-face exchanges and cope with breakdowns in communication” (2002,p.39).

This article starts with the ample definitions given to communication strategies. Then, it tackles different taxonomies of this type of strategies.

Researchers proposed different definitions for the term “communication strategies”. Tarone, Cohen and Dumas (1976, in Rastegar and Gohari, 2016,p.402) view them as systematic attempts by the learner to express or decode meaning in the target language, in situations where the appropriate systematic target language rules have not been formed. Faerch and Kasper (1983,p.36, in Dornyei and Scott, 1997,p.177) say that “Communicative strategies are potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal”. Dornyei and Scott (1997,p.177) criticize both definitions and consider them as traditional ones because they discuss only strategies used at the planning stage of a language production problems and not those strategies that involve meaning negotiation and repair mechanisms.

Tarone (1980,p.420) offered another conceptualization of communication strategies and saw them as a mutual attempt of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in situations where the required meaning structures are not shared. This definition involves an interactional perspective. Corder (1977, in Bialystok, 1990,p.3) considers communication strategies as a systematic tool used by a speaker to express his meaning when he/she

faces some difficulties. For Stern, (1983, in Bialystok,1990,p.03) these strategies are “techniques of coping with difficulties in communicating in an imperfectly known second language”. Canale (1983, in Dornyei and Scott, 1997,p.179) suggests that communication strategies include any attempt to enhance the effectiveness of communication. Cohen, Weaver and Li (1998, in Yaman, Irgin and Kavasogly,2013,p.256) believe that the use of strategies in communication raises Learners’ language awareness and solves the interlocutors’ potential communication problems. Nakatani (2010,p.118,in Frewan,2015,p.14) considers communication strategies as an attempt by learners to overcome their difficulties and generate the target language to achieve communicative goals in actual interaction. For him, these tools are relied on when the linguistic or sociolinguistic information are not shared between the interlocutors. Dornyei and Scott’s definition, which is a covering of all L2 communication strategies discussed in literature, talks about speaker’s intentional attempt to cope with any language related problem during the course of communication(1997,p.179).

The next point will pull together the main language devices mentioned in literature as communication strategies classification.

Taxonomies of communication strategies

A variety of taxonomies were offered by different researchers in an attempt to define and clarify communication strategies.

1. *Tarone’s taxonomy 1977.* Tarone classifies communication strategies into five categories: 1. Avoidance (a. Topic avoidance b. Message abandonment)2. Paraphrase (a. Approximation b. Word coinage c. Circumlocution)3. Conscious Transfer (a. Literal translation b. Language switch)4. Appeal for assistance 5. Mime (Tarone 1977, in Delamare1998,p.9)

2. *Faerch & Kasper’s taxonomy 1983.* The researchers (1983,pp.38-53) view that non-native speakers make call of reduction and achievement strategies in order to eliminate the

communication difficulties caused by linguistic limitations in pronunciation, grammar structure, vocabulary, and inter-cultural knowledge. The first type is used to avoid problems; whereas the second one is about the learners' attempt to achieve solutions. They can either solve problems in communication by "Adopting avoidance behavior, trying to do away with the problem, normally by changing the communicative goal, or by relying on achievement behavior, attempting to tackle the problem directly by developing an alternative plan" (1983, p.36).

3. **Bialystok's taxonomy 1983.** Bialystok classification is based on strategies that learners use when they lack the needed vocabulary (Abunawas, 2012, p.181). The strategies are divided into: L1-based strategies (a. "language switch"; b. "foreignizing native language items"; c. "transliteration"). Under L2-based strategies, Bialystok lists a. "semantic contiguity"; b. "description"; and c. "word coinage". The third type of strategies is known as non-linguistic strategies. Bialystok (1990) further divided communicative strategies into Analysis-based strategies and Control-based strategies. The first type is about learner's attempts "to convey the structure of the intended concept by making explicit the relational defining features" (1990, p.133). Control-based strategies involve "choosing a representational system that is possible to convey and that makes explicit information relevant to the identity of the intended concept" (1990, p.134).

4. **Nijmegen's Taxonomy.** In the latter half of the 1980s, researchers at Nijmegen University (Netherlands) claimed that previous taxonomies of communication strategies tried to highlight the product rather than the process. In other words, they work solely on the linguistic form that results from a strategy and neglect the process that leads up to it (Dornyei, 1995, p.57). They proposed a process-oriented classification as an alternative to the preceding taxonomies. The taxonomy is based on two main strategies which Bongaerts, Kellerman and Poulisse refer to as archistrategies: 1 conceptual - the learner decides to compensate for a missing

word by exploiting conceptual knowledge. 2 linguistic - the learner attempts to compensate for a missing word through linguistic knowledge.

5. **Dornyei & Scott's taxonomy.** Dornyei and Scott based their classification of communication strategies on the manner of problems' management. Their taxonomy includes direct, indirect, and interactional strategies. They are described as follows:

Direct strategies provide an alternative, manageable and self-contained means of getting the (sometimes modified) meaning across. [...] Indirect strategies, on the other hand are not strictly problem-solving devices. They do not provide alternative meaning structures, but rather facilitate the conveyance of meaning indirectly by creating the conditions for achieving mutual understanding: preventing breakdowns and keeping the communication channel open.[...] Interactional strategies involve a third approach, whereby participants carry out trouble-shooting exchanges cooperatively. (1997, pp.198-199)

The above taxonomies differ in the terminology they use to name the strategies (Bialystok, 1990, p.61) and show many similarities in the types of strategies proposed by each researcher individually.

The notion of problematicity. A review of the communication strategies literature shows that one of the key defining criterion for communication strategies is 'problematicity'. All the aforementioned definitions support the claim that communication strategies are employed when L2 learners encounter a problem in communication, or as Varadi (1992, p.437) puts it "the original insight into CSs was based on a mismatch between communicative intention and linguistic resources". The term "problematicity" was used by Bialystok (1984, 1990), and "problem-orientedness" by Dornyei and Scott (1997). It reflects the idea that communication strategies are the suitable way that second language learners may rely on to minimize any possibility of failure or total avoidance of communication. Dornyei & Scott (1997, p. 183) argue that

communication strategies are used to handle three different types of problems: Own-performance problems (are about the speaker's realization that something is incorrect and associated by some forms of self-repair, self-rephrasing and self-editing mechanisms), other-performance problems (something perceived as problematic in the interlocutor's speech, due to lack of understanding; associated with meaning negotiation strategies), and processing-time pressure (the L2 speaker's frequent need for more time to process and plan L2 speech; associated with the use of fillers, hesitation devices and self-repetition).

It is worth noting that this article approaches communication strategies from an interactional point of view and unlike earlier studies which tried to identify and classify communication strategies, this study is more empirical in nature and seeks to explore and to study the relationship between communication strategies and proficiency level in particular. The paper highlights two main types of strategies: achievement strategies and reduction ones. The first is used mainly by high-level learners, and the second by low-level students.

The main contention of this paper is to pave the path for a better understanding of the communicative abilities of Al Bachir Al Ibrahim University students in the Department of Foreign Languages, English. Many of the participants, being our learners, suffer from inabilities to communicate freely in the target language. This fact pushes us to check and look for the main strategies they use. When we learn how students use communication strategies, it is possible to help improve the way lecturers teach communicative classes and so assist students with limited oral proficiency to communicate better in English.

Research design. The present study aims to investigate the frequency of use of oral communication strategies by EFL students studying

at the Foreign Languages Department, English branch, Al Bachir Al Ibrahim University, BBA. More specifically, the study seeks to find answers to the following research question:

What types of oral communication strategies do English Department students studying at BBA University employ most frequently?

Participants. The participants of this study were 107 second year EFL undergraduates at Al Bachir Al Ibrahim University.

Instrumentation.

To obtain the required data for the present study, a quantitative approach was followed using The Oral Communication Strategy Inventory questionnaire. This latter (see Appendix 1), which was designed by Nakatani in 2006 and which is widely used nowadays as a tool for statistical analysis to identify the learners' general perceptions of strategies for oral interaction, consists of 32 items of 8 categories for coping with speaking problems on a five-point Likert type scale, ranging from 1 (never or almost never true of me) to 5 (always or almost always true of me). The participants were asked to circle the response which indicated how often they used the strategy described. In order to determine the most frequently and the least frequently used oral communication strategies, descriptive statistics was used.

Results and discussion. To identify the frequency and range of strategies used by the subjects to overcome the difficulties they coped with when performing speaking tasks, descriptive data, namely Mean (to get the average use of strategies) are used. The whole work is divided into two parts: first, each category of Nakatani's communication strategies is discussed separately to know the average use of each strategy. Second, the overall communication strategies used by 2nd year students of English are presented by mean and rank.

Analysis of each category.

a. Social affective strategies.

Number of CS	Never true for me	Generally not true of me	Somewhat true of me	Generally true of me	Always true of me
23	12.2	13.1	32.7	28	14
24	7.6	9.4	16.8	35.2	30.8
25	14	18.7	18.7	29	19.6
26	3.8	3.7	13.1	32.7	46.7
28	4.7	11.2	16.8	34.6	32.7
29	5.6	3.7	14	27.2	49.5

Table1: Student's use of social affective strategies. (Prepared by the researcher)

The first category of strategies is concerned with learners' affective factors in social context. 32.7% of the participants claim to use fillers regularly to avoid silence during interaction. A large number of the students (35.2%) make efforts to give a good impression to the listener. Learners too show a high willingness to risk making mistakes (29%). 46.7% strongly enjoy the process of oral communication and 34.6% try to control their own anxiety by relaxing, whereas 49.5% of the students state that they always encourage themselves to use English. Nakatani (2006,p.155) sees that these strategies are similar to O'Malley and Chamot's social affective strategies which include:

1. Questioning for clarification: Asking for explanation, verification, rephrasing, or examples about the material; asking for clarification or verification about the task; posing questions to the self.

2. Cooperation: Working together with peers to solve a problem.

3. Self-talk: Reducing anxiety by using mental techniques that make one feels competent to do the learning task.

4. Self-reinforcement: Providing personal motivation by arranging rewards for oneself when a language learning activity has been completed.

(O'Malley & Chamot, 1990,p.139)

b. Fluency-Oriented strategies.

Number of CS	Never true	Generally not true	Somewhat true	Generally true	Always true
8	7.5	10.3	23.4	33.6	25.2
9	1.9	9.3	18.7	29	41.1
10	4.7	12.1	20.6	24.3	38.3
11	2.8	7.6	22.4	36.4	30.8
12	10.3	18.7	36.4	16.8	17.7
13	5.6	14	30.8	22.4	26.2

Table2: Students' use of fluency-oriented strategies.

For this type of strategies, the students reported their consideration of the speaking context (33.6%) and their attention to take full time to avoid misinterpretations by the interlocutor (41.1% strongly agree). Besides, the learners show a high tendency to the speaking fluency criteria, with 38.3% saying that it's always true of them to pay attention to pronunciation, 36.4% focus on the clarity of their speech, 36.4% and 30.8% somewhat claim to pay

attention to rhythm, intonation and conversation flow respectively.

c. Negotiation for meaning while speaking.

Number of strategy	Never true	Generally not true	Somewhat true	Generally true	Always true
19	13.1	6.5	14	26.2	40.2
20	8.4	8.4	20.7	37.4	25.2
21	17.8	10.3	17.3	33.6	20.6
22	8.4	15	25.2	34.6	16.8

Table3: Students’ use of negotiation for meaning strategies.

The learners seemed to be aware of their interactional role and tried to make themselves understood while speaking, by giving examples (37.4%), if the idea is vague for the interlocutor, repetition (33.6%), and making comprehension checks (34.6%). 40.2% said that it is always true of them to pay attention to the reaction of the interlocutor to see if they can understand each other.

Nakahama, Tyler,&Lier (2001,p.379) explain the procedure of clarifying an utterance (or utterance part) that the interlocutor feels as problematic or perceives as not mutually understood, as repair negotiation and argue that comprehensible input, learner’s attention and output are important factors in interaction and acquisition. Long (1996,pp.451-452) says:”I would like to suggest

that negotiation, and especially negotiation work that triggers interactional adjustments by the native speaker or more competent interlocutor, facilitates acquisition because it connects input, internal learner capabilities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways”. (pp. 451–452).

Pica, Holliday, Lewis, Berducci, and Newman (1990,p.60) used the terms “trigger” and “signal” to differentiate between the interlocutor’s perception of unclear messages and his/ her use of clarification request, confirmation check, or comprehension check to clarify this type of ambiguity. In other words, the first (the trigger) is about confused utterances made by the speaker and the second (signal) refers to utterances or nonverbal indicators made in response to this problematic.

d. Accuracy-based.

Number of strategy	Never true	Generally not true	Somewhat true	Generally true	Always true
6	1.9	11.2	23.4	26.2	37.4
7	2.8	11.2	26.2	39.3	19.6
17	0.9	5.6	12.1	34.6	46.7
18	7.5	8.4	21.5	34.6	28
30	1.9	8.4	22.4	29	38.3

Table4: Students’ use of accuracy strategies.

Second year students believed in the importance of speaking accurately. 37.4% pay attention to their grammar during conversation, 39.3% claim that they emphasize both the subject and verb of the utterances they use. Grammatical accuracy is controlled by almost all students (46.7%

strongly agree and 34.6% agree). Also, 38.3% of the learners make efforts to speak like native speakers. Thus, communication strategies can be used to overcome any deficiencies of language knowledge. Jamshidnejad (2011,p.535) views that the use of communication strategies in a friendly, co-

constructed environment enables participants to promote accuracy of their produced utterances in L2 oral communication. Promoting the accuracy of the target language is one of the most frequent functions of communication strategies through which

participants collaboratively repair, negotiate and discuss both lexical items and grammatical forms in their L2 interaction.

e. Message reduction or alteration.

Number of strategy	Never true	Generally not true	Somewhat true	Generally true	Always true
3	0.9	5.6	11.2	47.7	34.6
4	0.9	10.3	13.1	38.3	37.4
5	22.4	17.7	36.4	14	9.3

Table5: Students' use of reduction strategies.

Learners avoid communication breakdowns by relying on words and expressions which they can use confidently (47.7% agree), reducing the original

message (38.3% agree), and simplifying it (36.4% somewhat agree).

f. Message abandonment.

Number of strategy	Never true	Generally not true	Somewhat true	Generally true	Always true
16	17.7	25.3	24.3	20.6	12.2
27	32.7	18.7	18.7	17.8	12.2
31	15.9	12.2	20.6	30.8	20.6
32	42.1	17.8	9.3	14	16.8

Table6: Students' use of abandonment strategies.

A small number of second year EFL learners seem to use abandonment strategies when they fail to communicate. 16.8% tend to give up their attempt to communicate, while 12.2% of the students leave the message unfinished. 30.8% of the learners, however, tend to ask for help when they encounter difficulties to interact.

themselves in a given topic, tend to avoid discussing it. Abandonment strategies, however, are used during the interactional phase, where learners may prefer to leave communication either partially or totally. (Abunawas, 2012, p.181). Tarone (1980, p.429) too talks about avoidance strategies and divide them into: Topic avoidance (the learner does not talk about concepts for which the vocabulary or other meaning structure is not known) and message abandonment (the learner begins to talk about a concept but is unable to continue due to lack of meaning structure, and stops in mid-utterance).

These strategies are parallel to Faerch & Kasper's functional reduction strategies which involve "topic avoidance" and "message abandonment". Topic avoidance means that L2 learners, when they feel unable to express

g. Non-verbal strategies.

Number of strategy	Never true	Generally not true	Somewhat true	Generally true	Always true
14	14	16.8	22.4	27.1	19.6
15	5.6	21.5	25.3	26.2	21.5

Table7: Students' use of non-verbal strategies.

Non-verbal strategies are not widely used by second year learners of English. Only 27.1% make

eye-contact when talking and 26.2% use gestures or facial expressions to give hints and help the listener

guess what they want to say. To compensate for the unavailable lexical items, language learners tend to use nonverbal means to communicate the meaning of their intended message as effective and successful face-to-face oral communication encompasses both

verbal and nonverbal strategies. The table below shows non-verbal strategies incorporated by different researchers in their communication strategies taxonomies.

Table8: Non-verbal strategies in communication strategies taxonomies

Scholars	Non-verbal strategy	Description
Tarone (1977,pp.197- 199)	Mime	The learner uses a nonverbal device to refer to an object or event (e.g. and everybody says (clap hands)
Faerch and Kasper (1983,pp.52- 3)	Non-linguistic compensatory strategy as achievement strategies	The learner attempts to solve a communicative problem by expanding their communicative resources.
Poullisse (1993,pp.180- 183)	Reconceptualization strategies	The speaker may opt for gestures rather than speech or a combination of speech and gestures.
Dornyei and Kormos, (1998,pp.359- 361)	Indirect appeal for help	Trying to elicit help from the interlocutor indirectly by expressing lack of a needed L2 item either verbally or nonverbally (e.g. I don't know the name ... ' rising intonation, pause, eye contact)

h. Attempt to think in English.

Number of strategy	Never true	Generally not true	Somewhat true	Generally true	Always true
1	11.2	20.6	17.7	39.3	11.2
2	4.7	11.2	38.3	33.6	12.1

Table9: Students' use of attempt to think strategies.

A rate of 39.3% of the students tend to think in their native language and then construct the English sentence. 33.6% make a link between their prior knowledge and the new one to interact correctly. Oxford (1990,pp.82-85) calls these strategies analyzing and reasoning strategies which may help learners to use logical thinking to understand and use the grammar rules and vocabulary of the new language. The EFL student can use deductive reasoning to derive hypothesis from his prior knowledge and apply it in the new language. Sometimes the use of this strategy may

result in overgeneralization errors and thus lead to inaccuracy. Translating strategy, which occurs mainly among beginners, can provide the wrong interpretation of target language material if word-for word (verbatim) translation is used.

4.2 Analysis of the overall strategies. Based on the outcomes of the data analysis, the overall communication strategies used by the students are presented using mean and rank as shown in Figure below

Category name	Number of participants	Mean	Rank
Social affective strategies	107	3.69	2
Fluency-oriented strategies	107	3.63	3
Negotiation for meaning strategies	107	3.49	5
Accuracy-based strategies	107	3.84	1
Message reduction strategies	107	3.59	4
Non-verbal strategies	107	3.28	6
Message abandonment	107	2.78	8
Attempt to think in English	107	3.27	7

Table10: The overall speaking strategies.

As illustrated in the above table, the most used strategies while speaking with others is

'accuracy-based strategies' (I correct myself when I notice that I have made a mistake) with the average

of 3.84%, followed by 'social affective strategies' (I try to enjoy the conversation) ($X = 3.69$), and 'fluency-oriented strategies' (I take my time to express what I want to say) (mean =3.63). In this regard, the least used strategies as reported by respondents is 'message abandonment strategies' ($X = 2.78$), where only few of them agreed that they abandon the verbal plan or give up when they fail to make themselves understood. This type of negative strategies is common among low-proficiency level speakers of foreign language. Those learners lack strategic competence and have no choice but to end the interaction.

Conclusion.

The results of this research show that learners are aware of the importance of achievement

strategies and try to use them to achieve the intended level of proficiency. Learners vary between social affective strategies, accuracy strategies and fluency oriented strategies to cope with their speaking deficiencies. In contrast, avoidance strategies mainly message abandonment ones are significantly reported by a small number of participants, who may be the low proficiency learners.

Based on the results of this study, we recommend the teachability of communication strategies. EFL teachers should raise learners' awareness of these strategies, include them as part of their teaching curriculum, and design classroom activities that had better promote the activation of such strategies.

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APPENDIX 1

Direction: Please read the following items and choose a response.

Strategies for coping with speaking problems

Questions	Never or almost never true for me	Generally not true of me	Somewhat true of	Generally true of	Always or almost always true of me
1. I think first of what I want to say in my native language and then construct the English sentence.					
2. I think first of a sentence I already know in English and then try to change it to fit the situation.					
3. I use words which are familiar to me.					
4. I reduce the message and use simple expressions.					
5. I replace the original message with another message because of feeling incapable of executing my original intent.					
6. I pay attention to grammar and word order during conversation.					
7. I try to emphasize the subject and the verb of the sentence.					
8. I change my way of saying things according to the context.					
9. I take my time to express what I want to say.					
10. I pay attention to my pronunciation.					
11. I try to speak clearly and loudly to make myself heard.					
12. I pay attention to my rhythm and intonation.					
13. I pay attention to the conversation flow.					
14. I try to make eye-contact when I am talking.					
15. I use gestures and facial expressions if I cannot communicate how to express myself.					
16. I abandon the execution of a verbal plan and just say some words when I do not know what to say.					
17. I correct myself when I notice that I have made a mistake.					
18. I notice myself using an expression which fits a rule that I have learned.					
19. While speaking, I pay attention to the listener's reaction to my speech.					
20. I give examples if the listener Does not understand what I am saying.					
21. I repeat what I want to say until the listener understands.					
22. I make <u>comprehension checks</u> to ensure that the listener understands what I want to say.					
23. I try to use fillers when I cannot think of what to say.					
24. I try to give a good impression to the listener.					
25. I do not mind taking risks even though I might make mistakes.					
26. I try to enjoy the conversation					
27. I leave a message unfinished because of some language difficulties.					
28. I try to relax when I feel anxious.					
29. I actively encourage myself to express what I want to say.					
30. I try to talk like a native speaker.					
31. I ask other people to help when I can't communicate well.					
32. I give up when I cannot make my message understood.					