Communication Strategies Used in Oral and Written Performances of EFL Learners from Different Proficiency Levels: The Case of Iranian EFL University Students

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Abstract

Being able to communicate effectively is the optimal goal of all language learners; therefore, despite difficulties they face and restrictions they have while expressing themselves, they rely on employing diverse communication strategies (CSs). This descriptive study was set to analyze Iranian EFL learners' use of CSs in oral and written performances at two levels of proficiency. To this end, 60 university students of EFL were selected and assigned to two distinct groups. The participants' oral and written performances were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively using Dornyei's (1995) taxonomy of CSs. The results of the study revealed that the context of communication plays a significant role in the use of communication strategies. The use of CSs by participants' significantly varied by their level of proficiency. The most frequent problem areas were 'lexical gaps', 'problems in discourse management', and 'uncertainty in conveying the message', which can be considered by language teachers and material designers.

Key words: Interlanguage, communication strategies, communica-tive competence, strategic competence, oral performance, written performance

Introduction

People communicate with others from the first moment of their birth, by crying, touching, and later on by use of words. However, there are always some deficiencies; gaps exist between what the speakers have in mind and their linguistic performances. Corder (1981) asserts that due to their willingness to communicate, speakers try to find ways for solving

problems. The ways which help people communicate in the presence of such deficiencies are called communication strategies (CSs).

Theoretical antecedents of CSs can be traced back to interlanguage studies and learner errors in early 1970s when Selinker (1972) introduced the notion of second language communication strategies in his seminal article entitled "Interlanguage". He argued that learners' insufficient knowledge of language and at the same time willingness to communicate leads to the use of CSs. Later, Corder (1981, p.103) suggested a working definition for CSs as: "systematic techniques employed by the speaker to express his meaning when faced with some difficulty".

Studies on CSs enjoy a four-decade history. Different studies have been conducted considering such variables in the use of CSs as communication medium, language proficiency level, ethnic and sociolinguistic factors, psycholinguistic factors, and cognitive factors. Varadi (1973) was the first scholar who studied CSs empirically. He asserted that in order to study CSs a learner should interact with a native speaker. Tarone (1977) adopted an interactional approach and contended that CSs are used when two speakers do not share the same meaning systems; therefore, to study CSs, interaction between a native and a nonnative speaker is not necessary (as cited in Ellis, 1994).

Speaking is the most basic means of communication; therefore, for most people knowing a language means being able to speak it. However, speaking appears to be demanding for foreign language learners (Lazarton, 2001). In order to speak, one should not only know the language, but also social and pragmatic rules to perform appropriate structures of the language (Martinez-Flor, Uso-Juan & Alcon-Soler, 2006). CSs are inevitable in oral communication for language learners. These strategies keep speakers flexible, and confident, and make their communication more effective. Therefore, the use of CSs in oral communication has been investigated in various studies (Nakatani, 2005; Phothongsunan, 2010; Puffer, 2006; and Wannaruk, 2003, to name a few).

Writing also plays a crucial role in communication. In the past, writing was thought to be noninteractive and decontextualized. Today, however, it is believed to be an interactive process since the writer, reader, and the text are all involved in the process of writing (Massi, 2001). Therefore, studying CSs in written communication is of great

significance. Aliakbari and Karimi (2009) investigated the use of CSs in the written performances of EFL learners at different proficiency levels. They found that the higher the proficiency level, the more reconceptualization strategies and the less substitution strategies were used. They also noted that the use of lexical CSs varied by the participants' language proficiency. Chimbganda (2000) investigated the use of CSs by university students of Biology. He found that students were eager to use L2-based strategies like 'circumlocution', 'paraphrase', and 'generalization' and concluded that those who took the risk of applying resource expansion strategies irrespective of grammatical problems were more successful in achieving their goal of communication.

Another factor which has been of great concern in CSs research is language proficiency. Paribakht (1985) explored the use of CSs by ESL students at two levels of language proficiency and compared them with native speakers of English. Analyzing the data, she concluded that more proficient students used L2-based strategies more frequently. Considering the same variable, Tajjedin and Alemi (2010), who were interested in learners' use of kinds of CSs in their communication, concluded that as learners' proficiency level increases, they move from using linguistic clues and guesses to using L2-based resources in order to compensate for their linguistic deficiencies. Nevertheless, Kaivanpanah, Yamouty, and Karami (2012) found no statistically significant relation between language proficiency and the use of CSs.

Lots of studies have been conducted to investigate CSs considering different variables; however, the existing literature shows that there is still room for researchers to investigate the use of CSs by language learners. For instance, some studies can be found in which both oral and written performances are compared (e.g., Lai, 2010, Yarmohaamdi & Seif, 1992); however, we still need to create a more comprehensive view of learners' performances beyond just the differences in these two mediums. With regard to proficiency level as a variable in CSs research, there are still some inconsistencies in the findings of different studies, particularly in Iranian contexts, which create room for more investigation. The present study was thus set to find out more about the use of CSs by EFL learners from different proficiency levels in their oral and written performances.

Methodology

Participants

One hundred and fifteen, 21 male and 94 female, Persian speaking university students aged between19-25 were randomly selected and asked to take a placement test. In order to have a homogenous group of participants to be assigned to two proficiency groups, measures of central tendency were used. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the participants' performance on the placement test.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics of placement test

Descriptive Statistics				
N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD.
115	16.00	53.00	33.26	8.40

To assign the participants to two distinct groups, those whose scores were between -0.5 and -1.5 standard deviations were considered as the participants in Group I (Low Level), and the ones whose scores were between 0.5 and 1.5 standard deviations were assigned to Group II (High Level). The results turned out to be 33 participants, whose scores were between 20.66-29.06, in G I and 37 participants, whose scores were between 37.42- 45.86, in G II. Then 30 from each group were randomly selected as the final participants of the study.

Material

To collect data, in this study two tasks, one for oral and one for written data elicitation, were designed by the researchers. Nunan (2004, p. 58) based on an analysis of communicative use of language contends that "Many communication activities can be stimulated through the use of pictures". In order to check the comparability of oral and written performances in both tasks, pictures were used as visual aids to elicit data. An important reason for choosing pictures was that they displayed the intended point; deviations from the suggested topics were thus prevented.

Procedure

After assigning the participants to two distinct groups of language proficiency, they were asked to perform one task for oral, and one for written data elicitation. To avoid misunderstandings, before performing the tasks, participants were briefed on the process they had to undergo in Persian (their mother tongue). Since appeal for help was eliminated in written performances due to manageability purposes, participants were informed that during the writing sessions they were not allowed to ask any questions. After completing the written task, participants of each proficiency level were assigned to groups of five to attend group discussion sessions. The purpose behind holding group discussion was to reduce participants' anxiety and also to make the situation as authentic as possible. All the discussion sessions were sound recorded and transcribed, and all paralinguistic strategies were jotted down at the moment for later analysis. In order to ensure that paralinguistic strategies were not neglected, all the group discussion sessions were observed by the researchers and a graduate TEFL student who had been briefed on the process and aim of the study to record the paralinguistic strategies. Finally, the performances were analyzed based on Dornyei's (1995) taxonomy of CSs.

Results

Analyzing the data based on Dornyei's taxonomy (1995), the researchers found 1934 instances of the twelve CSs defined by Dornyei. Moreover, 176 of the sentences which the participants had used to compensate for their communication needs could not be accommodated within the existing taxonomy. Close examination of those sentences revealed that some techniques had been employed systematically which led the researchers to suggest the following four new strategies:

Appeal for approval: in oral communication, sometimes compensating for the linguistic gaps, the participants stopped talking and asked if they were understood. In fact, when they were not sure if they had conveyed the message, they sought for approval; for example, "he can search for other information as well. *Do you know what I'm saying*?"

Use of redundant notes: in both oral and written performances some participants used some excessive notes. Examination of 'redundant use of language' revealed that the participants used this strategy to make sure

that the interlocutor understood them; for example, “you can take a *trip or travel* to another country*”.

Use of nonlinguistic means along with other communication strategies: in this strategy the participants, while adopting a CS, tried to express the meaning by using nonlinguistic means too; for example, “you can see *whole (using hands to show all of the people)* the people*”.

Paraphrasing: using this strategy, the participants tried to paraphrase the sentence to convey a message; for example, “we can know about their ideas and share the ideas about ……. *We can know how they think about it*.”

This way, in this study the performances were analyzed based on a sixteen item taxonomy as presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Extension of Dornyei's taxonomy of CSs (1995)

Strategy		Definition
1	Message abandonment	leaving a message unfinished because of language difficulties.
2	Topic avoidance	avoiding topic areas or concepts which pose language difficulties
3	Circumlocution	describing or exemplifying the target object or action
4	Approximation	using an alternative term which expresses the meaning of the target lexical item as closely as possible
5	Use of all purpose words	extending a general, empty lexical item to contexts where specific words are lacking
6	Word coinage	creating a nonexisting L2 word based on a supposed rule
7	Use of nonlinguistic means	mime, gesture, facial expression, or sound imitation
8	Literal translation	translating literally a lexical item, an idiom, a compound word or structure from L1 to L2
9	Foreingizing	using a L1 word by adjusting it to L2 phonologically and/or morphologically
10	Code switching	using a L1 word with L1 pronunciation or a L3 word with L3 pronunciation in L2.
11	Appeal for help	turning to the conversation partner for help either directly or indirectly
12	Time gaining	using filling words or gambits to fill pauses and to gain time to think
13	Appeal for approval*	seeking for the interlocutor confirmation to continue the utterance
14	Use of redundant notes*	using redundant notes to fill the possible existing gaps
15	Use of nonlinguistic means along with other CSs*	accompanying the use of mime and facial expression with the use of other CSs
16	Paraphrasing*	using the sentences with the same meaning

Note * strategy added to Dornyei's taxonomy

Since the researchers aimed at figuring out the differences between performances by different mediums, each and every sentence was closely examined and the use of each CS was identified and counted. In order to find out whether the differences between the use of each strategy in oral and written performances were statistically significant at $p < .05$, chi-square tests were applied, the results of which are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Results of chi-square tests for the use of CSs in oral and written performances

		Oral performances	Written performances	χ^2	Df	Sig.
1	Topic avoidance	366	208	43.491	1	.000
2	Time gaining	326	-	-	1	-
3	Literal translation	250	202	5.097	1	.024
4	Approximation	176	137	4.859	1	.027
5	Use of nonlinguistic means along with other CSs	75	-	-	1	-
6	Paraphrasing	64	0	-	1	-
7	Use of all purpose words	57	10	32.970	1	.000
8	Use of nonlinguistic means	52	-	-	1	-
9	Message abandonment	50	2	44.308	1	.000
10	Code switching	33	11	11.000	1	.001
11	Use of redundant notes	25	8	8.758	1	.003
12	Circumlocution	18	14	.500	1	.480
13	Appeal for approval	14	-	-	1	-
14	Appeal for help	10	-	-	1	-
15	Word coinage	5	5	.000	1	1.000
16	Foreingizing	2	0	-	1	-

As shown in Table 3, for strategies which could not be used in written performances chi- square tests were not applicable. The differences between the use of all CSs, except for *word coinage* and *circumlocution*, in oral and written performances were statistically significant ($p < .05$). The researchers also noticed that all the 16 strategy types were applied in oral performances; whereas, in written performances only 9 types were used. By comparing the frequencies of CSs used in oral and written performances, it was revealed that more strategies were used in oral

performances than written performances (72% of the strategies were used in oral and only 28% in written performances). In Figure 1, the distribution of CSs in the oral and written performances is illustrated.

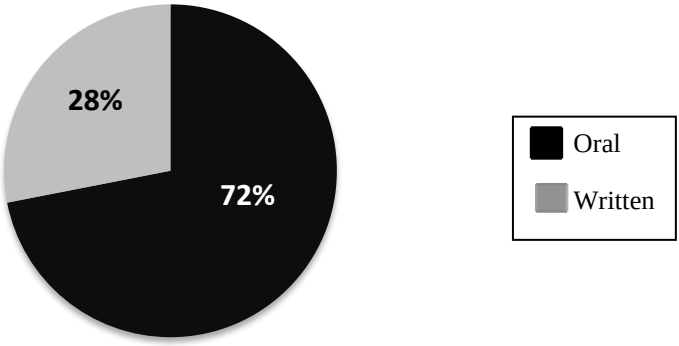

Figure 1. CSs used in oral and written performances

To examine whether the observed differences between the use of CSs in terms of medium of communication were statistically significant, a chi-square test was performed whose result is presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Results of chi-square test for the use of CSs in different mediums of communication

	Oral performances	Written performances	χ^2	Df.	Sig.
Total	1523	597	4040.470	1	.000

The value obtained from the chi-square test was indicative of the fact that the difference between the use of CSs in oral and written performances was statistically significant ($p < .05$).

Attempts were also made to find out whether there were any significant differences between the use of CSs at the two distinct language proficiency levels; therefore, the data were closely examined

and total frequencies of the participants' use of each CS in each group were identified and counted.

In order to find out whether the differences between the use of strategies in high and low language proficiency levels were significantly different at $p < .05$, chi-square tests were performed for each CS, the results of which are presented in Table 5.

Table 5.

Results of chi- square tests for the use of CSs at distinct language proficiency levels

		High Level	Low Level	χ^2	Df.	Sig.
1	Topic avoidance	284	290	.063	1	.802
2	Literal translation	168	284	29.770	1	.000
3	Time gaining	161	165	.049	1	.825
4	Approximation	152	161	.259	1	.611
5	Use of all purpose words	35	32	.134	1	.714
6	Use of nonlinguistic means along with other CSs	33	42	5.554	1	.018
7	Paraphrasing	31	33	.063	1	.803
8	Message abandonment	27	25	.077	1	.782
9	Use of redundant notes	24	9	6.818	1	.009
10	Use of nonlinguistic means	21	31	1.923	1	.166
11	Code switching	19	25	.818	1	.366
12	Circumlocution	16	16	.000	1	1.000
13	Word coinage	5	5	.000	1	1.000
14	Appeal for approval	5	9	1.143	1	.285
15	Appeal for help	3	7	1.600	1	.206
16	Foreingizing	0	2	-	1	-

As shown in Table 5, literal *translation, use of redundant notes, and use of nonlinguistic means along with other CSs* were employed significantly differently by the participants from the two levels of language proficiency.

Regarding the different strategy types used by the participants at different language proficiency levels, it was found that except *foreingizing*, all CS types were used by participants at both language proficiency levels. Nevertheless, by comparing the frequencies in each group, it was noticed that participants from the low level of language

proficiency used CSs more frequently (54%) compared to participants at the high proficiency group (46%) as presented in Figure 2.

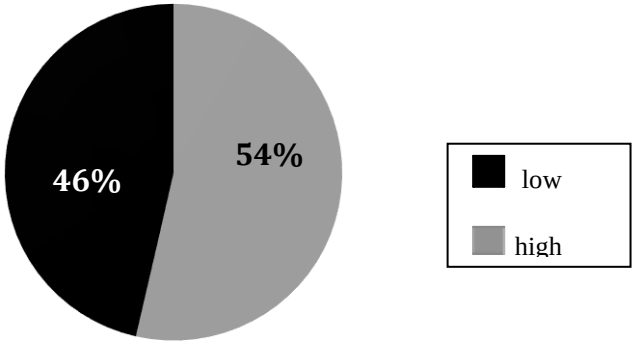

Figure 2. CSs used at distinct language proficiency levels

By performing a chi-square test it was concluded that, generally, there was a significant difference between the use of CSs in high and low language proficiency levels ($p < .05$). Table 6 represents results of the related chi-square test.

Table 6.

Result of the chi- square test for the use of CSs by participants from different levels of language proficiency

	High Level	Low Level	χ^2	Df.	Sig.
Total	984	1136	10.898	1	.001

Based on all statistical analyses mentioned above, the researchers found out that there was a significant difference between the use of CSs in oral and written performances; moreover, learners at different language proficiency levels applied CSs in significantly different manners in their performances. A detailed discussion of all the numerical analyses is presented in the following.

Discussion

Based on the statistical analyses mentioned above, it can be inferred that the use of CSs significantly vary by the medium of communication and foreign language learners level of proficiency.

Although some strategy types were obviously not applicable in written communication (*use of nonlinguistic means*), and some were eliminated in written performances due to manageability purposes (*appeal for help, appeal for approval*, and *time gaining*), in oral performances more strategy types were used than in written performances. Consequently, the total number of CSs used in oral performances was more than written performances, as shown in Figure 1. This is related to fundamental features of personal involvement in oral and written communication. Findings of this study confirm the findings of many previous studies (García, 2011; Khamis, 2010; Warschauer, 1996; Yarmohammadi & Seif, 1992; and Zhao, 2010, to name a few) that argue CSs are used distinctively in different mediums of communication.

Moreover, the results of the study revealed that the use of CSs is influenced by the learners' level of language proficiency; there is a negative relation between the proficiency level and the use of CSs. This is in agreement with the findings of Aliakbari and Karimi (2009), Bialystok and Frohlich (1980), Mei and Nathalang (2010), Paribakht (1985), Si- Qing (1990), and Wannaruk (2003). It is however not in accord with Kaivanpanah, Yamouty, and Karami (2012) who found no significant relation between the use of CSs and language proficiency level. With regard to strategy types used by the participants' level of language proficiency, compared to the differences between use of strategy types by medium of communication, fewer significant differences were observed.

Analysis of the data also revealed that, participants employed CSs to compensate for three main gaps: 'lexical deficiency', 'problems in discourse management', and 'uncertainty in conveying the message'.

To compensate for lexical deficiencies, the participants used *time gaining, approximation, code switching, circumlocution, word coinage, appeal for help, use of all purpose words,* and *foreignizing.* These CSs comprised 40.12% of the total number of CSs used by the participants.

Discourse management, which indicates management of available resources in interaction, includes the strategies learners adopt to convey the message they have in mind to meet their communicative goals in different environments (Schegloff, 1968; Schegloff & Sacks, 1973 as cited in Condon & Cech, 2010). One of the problems participants encountered in this study was 'deficiencies in discourse management', for which they adopted *paraphrasing, use of nonlinguistic means,* and *message abandonment*.

Goodboy and Myers (2008) argue that participants are sometimes not sure whether they can convey the message; therefore, they need to be confirmed; they may also employ a strategy to make sure that their interlocutor will understand them. Moreover, participants employed '*appeal for approval', 'use of redundant notes',* and *'use of nonlinguistic means'* along with other CSs in order to make sure that their interlocutor understood them.

It should also be noted that finding out about the strategies used by foreign language learners provides a more comprehensive view of interlanguage communication, which can help language teachers, and material designers to understand the problem areas which should be catered for in the classroom.

Conclusion

This descriptive study aimed to investigate the use of CSs in different mediums of communication by participants from different language proficiency levels. The findings of the study suggest that language learners significantly vary in using CSs by their level of language proficiency in different mediums of communication.

CSs are used to tackle communication problems; therefore, studying CSs leads to finding out problem areas. Knowing the problem areas, language teachers are recommended to design class activities in ways which help learners overcome such communication problems. Since strategic competence plays a crucial role in successful communication, foreign language teachers and material designers are expected to improve students' strategic competence in order to enable them to communicate effectively.

Although the research has reached its goal, there were some unavoidable limitations. A notable shortcoming was that due to

manageability purposes, some strategies like *time gaining, appeal for help,* and *appeal for approval* were not considered in written performances. Moreover, in this study data obtained in one shot design; therefore, some affective factors like motivation, anxiety, etc. played some role. If there were opportunity to collect data in time series design the researchers could generalize the findings more confidently.

For further research, researchers may take gender, age, and task variability into account. Moreover, following the performances with think aloud sessions, the researchers will find out what were the mind processes the learners underwent before choosing a CS.

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