
Proficiency Level and Choice of Communication Strategies:

A Case of Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract

The main concern of this study was communication strategies (CSs) which are used to compensate for communication breakdown. The goals of this study were to examine whether proficiency level of Iranian students had any relationship with their choice of CSs. This research was descriptive in nature. The participants were 15 pre-intermediate and 14 intermediate EFL learners between 16 to 21 years old in a Language School in Shahrekord, Iran. 48 sessions were recorded and eight sessions of each level were randomly selected, transcribed and then coded. The coding categories included 22 types of CSs based on integrated model of taxonomies presented by Dornyei and Scott (1997), Tarone's (1980), Faerch and Kasper's (1983) taxonomies. In order to examine the relationship between learner's proficiency level and the choice of CSs, a chi-square test was conducted. The significance level of .297 ($p > 0.05$) indicated that there was no significant relationship between the use of CSs and the proficiency levels of Iranian EFL learners.

Key words: communication Strategies, circumlocution, approximation, Chi-square test

1. Introduction

Teaching to communicate effectively is probably the ultimate goal of every educational institution. But, first and foremost learners should actually learn how to cope with problems while trying to convey a message and what strategies they should use to achieve their communicative goals. Strategies, in general, and communication strategies (CSs), in particular are specific methods of approaching a problem or task, modes of operation for achieving a particular end, planned designs for controlling certain information (Brown, 2007) Some kinds of CSs are really helpful in bridging the gap of speaking deficiencies.

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But some of the Iranian learners do not even know these kinds of strategies exist. On the other hand, Iranian learners should be informed that there is a difference between having knowledge of a language and actually using that knowledge. Johnson and Morrow (1981) pointed out the large numbers of students in traditional grammar-based courses who are structurally competent but communicatively incompetent (as cited in Chastain, 1988). Learners become strategically competent when they do not give up easily in case of difficulty and do their best to communicate the message through applying CSs. According to Willems (1987), in real contexts, language learners are often unable to remember a word, to use or comprehend an idiomatic expression, or to grasp a topic; consequently, communication breaks down. Obviously, native speakers also encounter these kinds of problems. Therefore, Willems (1987), Faerch and Kasper (1983), Bialystok (1990), Dornyei (1995) maintained that learners must develop specific communication strategies that enable them to compensate for their target language deficiencies, enhance interaction in the target language, and eventually develop communicative competence (as cited in Huang, 2010).

Besides, researchers (e.g., Huang, 2010) explored factors which affected the choice of CSs. Investigating the relationship between the language learners' proficiency and their choice of CS is one of the issues to which more empirical research has been devoted. After more than two decades of research in this area, no decisive conclusions have yet been reached. Although it is now an accepted fact that proficiency level affects CS use, to what extent and in which specific ways are still open questions and a fruitful object of research (Dobao, 1999). The purpose of this study is to examine whether proficiency level of Iranian students had any relationship with their choice of CSs. As mentioned earlier, previous studies indicated that the use of CSs was greatly affected by proficiency level of learners. As suggested by Bialystok (1990), the most significant predictor of specific CSs use is language proficiency.

2. Review of the Literature

A brief analysis of second language oral discourse reveals the importance of CSs in learners' oral communication. Therefore, a considerable amount of research has been conducted on the nature of CSs, taxonomies of CSs, variation in CSs on the like (Dornyei & Scott, 1997). Since the mid-seventies, CSs have been the focus of increasing interest. Most of the early studies like Tarone, Cohen & Dumas (1976); Tarone (1977); Faerch & Kasper (1983) focused on defining CSs and developing methods of classifying them. Other studies like Bialystok & Frohlich (1980) tried to examine the relationship between CSs use and learner characteristics such as L2 proficiency level, L1 background, and personality (as cited in McCrohan & Batten, 2010).

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Huang (2010) explored factors which affected the choice of CSs. He investigated, in particular, the effect of five variables on students' CS use: gender, language proficiency, self-perceived oral proficiency, the frequency of speaking English outside the classroom, and motivation in speaking English. As mentioned before, although it is now an accepted fact that proficiency level affects CS use, to what extent and in which specific ways are still open questions and a fruitful object of research (Dobao, 1999). The findings of the available research suggest that lower level learners employ more CSs than more proficient ones. Hyde (1982) found that it is because they face more problems in communication because of their more limited knowledge of the target language (ibid). 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 high proficiency learners used more L2-based strategies (e.g., word coinage, paraphrase, restructuring and generalization). Considering the same variable, Tajjedin and Alemi (2010) concluded that as learners' proficiency level increases, they move from using linguistic clues and guesses to using L2-based strategies in order to compensate for their linguistic deficiencies (as cited in Moattarian & Tahririan, 2013). In Chen's study (1990, as cited in Huang, 2010) which investigated the relationship between L2 learners' target language proficiency and their strategic competence, findings revealed that high proficiency learners tended to choose linguistic-based strategies and low proficiency learners were more likely to use knowledge-based strategies and repetition CSs. Although all of the mentioned findings suggested that proficiency factor has a significant effect on the choice of CSs, there are a lot of studies that do not confirm this claim. During the late 1980s, the Nijmegen project was conducted on more than 4,000 instances of CS obtained from a total of 45 Dutch learners of English with three different levels of proficiency. Although a significant inverse relationship was found between the number of CSs used and the degree of proficiency of the speakers, the results suggested that the proficiency factor had a slightly limited influence on the choice of particular CS types (Dobao, 1999)

From above findings one can understand that the relationship between proficiency level and the use of CSs is not quite clear. Despite the idea that proficiency level can always influence choosing of CSs, there are some cases that show there is no statistically-significant difference between low proficient learners and high proficient ones. In order to clarify this issue, this study attempted to re-examine this theory.

Before closing this part, in what follows, the integrated taxonomy of the types of CSs presented by Dornyei and Scott (1997) Tarone's (1980), Faerch and Kasper's (1983) taxonomies will be briefly discussed.

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Table 1. Definitions of Communicative Strategies

Communication Strategy	Definition
1. Avoidance Strategies	
1.1 Topic avoidance	Reducing the message by avoiding certain language structures or topics considered problematic language or by leaving out some intended elements for a lack of linguistic resources.
1.2 Message abandonment	expressing a target concept and suddenly stopping in mid-sentence, chooses another topic and continues the conversation.
2. Compensatory strategies	
2.1 intra-actional strategies	Achievement or compensatory strategies help speakers to sustain their communication via alternative plans
2.1.1 Word coinage	By using intra-actional strategies learners try to solve problems by themselves, without seeking help from other people
2.1.2 Code switching	Coining words is a form of paraphrasing to make up a word to substitute for unknown word
2.1.3 Foreignizing	Including L1/L3 words with L1/L3 pronunciation in L2 speech. This may involve stretches of speech ranging from single words to whole chunks and even complete turns
2.1.4 Use of non-linguistic means	Using a L1 word by adjusting it to L2 phonology (i.e., with a L2 pronunciation) and/or morphology
2.1.5 Self-Repair	Describing whole concepts nonverbally, or accompanying a verbal strategy with a visual illustration
2.1.6 Mumbling	making self-initiated corrections in one's own speech
2.1.7 Use of all- purpose	Swallowing or muttering inaudibly a word (or part of a word) whose correct form the speaker is uncertain about
2.1.8 Approximation	Extending a general, empty lexical item to contexts where specific words are needed (e.g., the overuse of <i>thing, stuff, someone, something make, do, thingie, what-do-you-call-it</i>)
2.1.9 Circumlocution	Using a single target language vocabulary item that he/she may know is not correct but shares enough semantic features with the desired item to satisfy the speaker
2.1.10 Literal translation	Explaining the characteristics of the object or action he is describing instead of using the target language item
2.1.11 Use of fillers	Translating literally a lexical item, an idiom, a compound word or structure from L1/L3 to L2
2.1.12 Self-Repetition	Using various devices to facilitate the oral communication and to compensate when communication is unsuccessful.
	Repeating some speech segments to buy some more

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			time in order to retrieve the required speech segment, and maintain conversation.
2.1.13	Other-repetition		To repeat something the interlocutor said to gain time.
2.1.14	Omission		leaving a gap when not knowing a word and continue as if it had been said
2.2	interactional strategies		In the interactional view the main focus is on the mutual negotiation of meaning between the speakers.
2.2.1	Asking for repetition		It happens when learners do not hear or understanding something.
2.2.2	Appeal for help		Asking for help directly or indirectly
2.2.3	Clarification request		Requesting for more explanation to solve a comprehension difficulty
2.2.4	Asking for confirmation		Requesting confirmation that one heard or understood something correctly
2.2.5	Comprehension check		Asking questions to check that interlocutor can follow you
2.2.6	Expressing understanding	non	Expressing that one did not understand something properly either verbally or nonverbally

3. Methodology

3.1 Method and Design

This research is both descriptive and quantitative in nature as it was based on primary or original data. The researcher collected data qualitatively and analyzed it quantitatively from the transcriptions of learners' oral performance. As Nunan and Bailey (2009) mentioned qualitative data in second language classroom research can take many forms such as observers' notes about lessons; transcripts of lessons; lesson plans and teachers' notes; video or audio recording of classroom interaction and so on (p. 413).

3.2 Participants

The participants of this study were a total of 29 pre-intermediate and intermediate EFL learners. The age of students ranged from 16 to 21. All of the students were female and native speakers of Persian majoring at different subjects. The pre intermediate learners were 15 high school students who were 16 or 17 years old. The intermediate learners were 14 university students aged between 18 to 21. Intermediate students were of different majors but five of them were majoring in English.

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3.3 Procedure

SPECIFYING THE CONTEXT

This research was conducted in Ofogh Language School in Sharekord, Iran. Although the focus of this institution is on enhancing all four language skills (i.e., speaking, listening, reading and writing) equally, great attention was paid to practical communicative skills of language learning. Each course consisted of 25 sessions which were held three times a week, every other day. The duration of each session was one hour and thirty minutes.

SPESIFYING THE CLASSROOM CONTENT

In order to meet the goals of the language school, Four Corners Series written by Jack C. Richards and Bohelke (2012) was selected for pre-intermediate levels and Interchange series written by Jack C. Richards for intermediate levels.

SELECTING LEARNERS

In sample selection, the researcher first trusted the language schools' common policy. As newcomers enroll in a language school, they should pass a placement test developed by the EFL teachers in the language institute. Accordingly, they would be placed in different level classes. At the end of each course, students are supposed to pass a final exam to enter the next level. If they fail the exam, they have to pass that course again. To ensure the participants' proficiency level, the researcher used Nelson proficiency test.

RECORDING THE DATA

The researcher recorded each session to make a permanent record of the learners' oral performance for later analysis. For the purpose of this research about 48 sessions were recorded during 8 weeks.

TRANSCRIBING THE DATA

In the course of the current study, audio recordings were transferred into the computer and arranged in time order. The 8 sessions of each level were selected according to systematic randomization. The selected samples then were transcribed in order to document the strategies used by the students. So, 8 hours of each level and the total of 16 hours for both levels were transcribed. There are many variations on the transcription conventions that classroom researchers use. In this study the researcher employed transcription conventions from Duff (1996, as cited in Nunan & Bailey, 2009).

CODING OF THE DATA

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Transcripts can be analyzed through various means, including coding. In this study, CSs were identified and coded in order to answer both questions of the study. The coding categories included 22 types of CSs based on integrated model of taxonomies presented by Tarone (1980), Faerch and Kasper (1983), and Dornyei and Scott (1997). In this study, in order to improve the reliability of the coding, the analysis of the researcher was compared to the analysis of another teacher who helped in identifying strategies. There were two issues on which the two raters had to agree: frequency of CSs and types of CSs. Their inter-rater agreement was 90 % for frequency and 87 % for the types of CSs.

3.4 Data Analysis

The researcher employed descriptive statistics, i.e. frequency and means scores. The numbers of CSs in different segments were counted to determine the frequency use. Then, each strategy was calculated in terms of percentage and was presented in a tabular form. In order to investigate the relationship between learner's proficiency level and their choice of CSs, chi-square test was employed because the researcher wanted to know whether CSs used by learners in pre-intermediate level were significantly different from CSs used by intermediate learners.

4. Results and Discussion

In order to see if the subjects are in the right levels of proficiency, a Nelson English Language Test by Fowler and Coe (1976) (150 C) was administered to both groups of students. This test consisted of 50 questions which measured their knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. Table 2 illustrates the learners' performance on Nelson proficiency language test.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Learners' Performance on Proficiency Test

	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Nelson Test	1	14	34.5000	4.18330	1.11803
	2	15	26.9333	3.97252	1.02570

In the above table, N stands for the total number of the students which is 14 for intermediate level and 15 for pre-intermediate level. As it is shown, the estimated mean score of the students' level was 34.5 out of 50 in intermediate and 26.9 in pre-intermediate level. The standard deviation (SD) and standard Error mean score are also displayed in the table. In order to show the differences between two levels of learners, the results were analyzed using independent sample t-test method. The results are displayed in the following table.

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Table 3. Independent Sample T-Test on Nelson Proficiency Test

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.691	.413	4.996	27	.000	7.56667	1.51446	4.45926	10.67407

A brief look at the level of significance shows that there is a significant difference between the two groups of learners. Significance level of .000, which is much lower than that of 0.05 means that the difference between the two groups of intermediate and pre-intermediate levels, was significant. Thus these two groups of learners were appropriate choices for the purpose of this study.

Table 4. Comparison of the Use of CSs by Pre-intermediate and Intermediate Learners

Types of CSs	CSs	Pre-intermediate N=15		Intermediate N=14	
		F	%	F	%
Avoidance strategies	TA	10	0.91	16	1.6
	MA	53	4.8	36	3.7
Compensatory strategies inter-a-actional strategies	WC	1	0.09	3	0.31
	CS	186	17.1	128	13.34
	For	1	0.09	0	0
	UN	9	0.82	8	0.83
	SRepir	25	2.2	41	4.2
	Mum	33	3.03	24	2.5
	UA	17	1.5	36	3.7
	App	9	0.82	5	0.5
	Cir	6	0.55	20	2
	LT	25	2.2	15	1.5
	UF	286	26.3	217	22.6
	SRepe	102	9.3	75	7.8
	OR	81	7.4	62	6.4

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Interactional strategies	Omi	23	2.1	16	1.6
	AR	12	1.1	35	3.6
	AH	137	12.6	115	11.6
	CR	27	2.4	53	5.5
	AC	21	1.9	39	4
	CCh	1	0.09	۲	0.2
	EN	22	2.02	13	1.3

Although the chi-square test in previous table confirmed that there is not a statistically significant relationship between proficiency level and use of CSs, the two levels of proficiency in this study affected the use of CSs in two aspects; the frequency of use and the types of selected CSs. Table 4 presents a comparison of the use of communication strategies between intermediate and pre-intermediate learners. Statistics of each strategy is shown in terms of frequency and percentage.

4.1 Discussion

As mentioned before the purposes of this study was examining whether proficiency level of Iranian students had any relationship with their choice of CSs or not. Findings showed that the total number of the times Iranian EFL learners employed communicative strategies in 16 hours was 2046. Pre intermediate students resorted to using CSs in 959 cases while intermediate students used these strategies in 1087 cases. The results showed that learners resorted to compensatory strategies (94 %) more than avoidance strategies (6 %) in their oral communication. The number of avoidance strategies (topic avoidance and message abandonment) was 63 for pre-intermediate and 52 for intermediate groups. In compensatory strategies, intra-actional strategies were used 804 times for pre intermediate and 650 times for intermediate levels. Interactional strategies were used 220 and 257 times in pre-intermediate and intermediate levels, respectively. According to the results shown in table 4, the most frequently used strategy for both pre intermediate and intermediate levels were *use of fillers and hesitation devices, code switching and appeal for help*. Iranian learners through using *fillers and hesitation devices*, tried to maintain the control of the conversation and to gain more time to think, and in some situations these CSs were used for seeking help from the teacher or other students. It is worth mentioning that the *use of fillers* is a common strategy in Persian, so it is easy for Iranian learners to transfer this strategy to L2. With regard to *code switching*, it was revealed that as learners tried to keep the ball rolling,

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because of their L2 deficiencies, they switched to Persian to continue the conversation. Students often continued to speak in Persian until they were helped by the teacher, otherwise they abandoned the message. One possible reason for why learners switched to L1 is that it simply requires less planning time, i.e. it is the easiest way to keep the floor and convey the message. Appeal for help was mainly employed in direct form (mostly in Persian) by pre intermediate students, but intermediate students preferred to employ an indirect approach.

It was found that different levels of oral proficiency affect the use of CSs from two aspects: first, the frequency of use and second, the type of selected CSs. The results of this study which were displayed in tables 3 and 4 showed that the total number CSs employed by the pre-intermediate learners was more than the CSs employed by the learners with intermediate levels of oral proficiency. However, considering the results of chi-square test shown on the table 4, the significance level of .297 ($p > 0.05$) revealed that although the frequency of CSs employed by the pre intermediate group was more than intermediate (1087 vs. 959), there was not a statistically significant relationship between the employed CSs and the proficiency levels of the learners. These results do not agreed with those of previous research (Mollay, 2011; Dobao 1999) which concluded that there was an inverse relationship between learners' degree of proficiency and the frequency of CS use. Dobao (1999) who conducted her research on three proficiency groups of pre-intermediate, intermediate and advanced learners, found that pre-intermediate students, used a considerably larger number of strategies than intermediate and advanced learners but intermediate students used fewer CS than advanced students. Dobao (1999) explanation for these contradictory results was that advanced learners were expected to have a high level, near native-like command of English. So, they tried to produce more accurate and complex linguistic information, thus they encountered greater lexical difficulties.

With a quick look at table 4, one can find out that the frequency of use of some CSs in pre-intermediate level is more than the intermediate ones. This suggests that learners at different proficiency levels employ CSs in different quantities. The results of this study suggest that if learners were more equipped with more linguistic resources, they make less use of CSs than those who have less linguistic resources. In her study, Lam (2010) concluded that strategy training seemed to benefit low-proficiency students more than high-proficiency students. She stated two reasons for these differences. First, high proficient learners possess language competence that enables them to complete the tasks with relative ease. Low proficient learners are linguistically (and perhaps cognitively) weaker than high-proficient learners. Second, high-proficiency students may choose not to use or notice the strategies because strategy use may not be news to them as they already have a repertoire of preexisting strategies.

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With regard to the type of CSs, though the difference was not proved to be significant, the frequency of use of some strategies for pre intermediate learners was more than intermediate level. Pre- intermediate learners employed *fillers and hesitation device* (286 vs. 217), *code switching* (186 vs. 128), *self-repetition* (102 vs. 75), *other repetition* (81 vs. 62), *literal translation* (25 vs. 15), *appeal for help* (137 vs. 115), *mumbling* (33 vs. 24), *expressing non understanding* (22 vs. 13), *message abandonment* (53 vs. 36) more than intermediate learners. On the other hand, intermediate students used *topic avoidance* (16 vs. 10), *self-repair* (41 vs. 25), *use of all-purpose words* (36 vs. 17), *circumlocution* (20 vs. 6), *ask for confirmation* (39 vs. 21), *clarification request* (53 vs. 27), *comprehension check* (2 vs. 1), *ask for repetition* (35 vs. 12) and *word coinage* (3 vs. 1) more than pre intermediate learners.

It was found that students with a low level of oral proficiency used intra-actional CSs more than those with a high level of oral proficiency. Interactional strategies were employed more often by those with high proficiency level. It seems that intermediate learners were more confident asking questions about meaning and spelling and requesting for clarification, and asking for repetition. The high proficiency learner group was also found to use L2 based strategies such as *circumlocution* and *word coinage* more frequently than L1 based strategies (*code switching* and *literal translation*). One of the possible explanations for this difference is that intermediate learners tried to resort to strategies that made use of their target language competence and as a result they used CSs that would utilize their L1 knowledge less frequently.

5. Conclusion

The results of study allowed concluding that the more proficient a learner was, the less she needed to resort to CSs to make herself understood. Although the chi-square which was employed to examine the relationship between CSs and the proficiency level confirmed that the differences were not statistically significant, as the finding showed, the total number of strategies used by pre- intermediate group was more than that of the intermediate group (1087 and 959, respectively). Several explanations can be offered for this difference. One of the most undeniable facts is that more training in a foreign language affects the learners' foreign language competence and performance positively. For example, students gradually make progress in increasing their stock of words. In all the cases that the learners resorted to *circumlocution*, *approximation*, *literal translation*, *all-purpose words* or even *message abandonments* and *appeal for help*, if they had known the words they wanted to refer to, there would have probably be no need to employ CSs. But the problem of speaking fluently and communicating effectively among Iranian learners is not solely due to the lack of vocabulary knowledge as in some research (e.g., Dobao (1999)), it has been shown that advanced learners made more use

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of CSs in their speech. In Iran, as an English as a foreign language setting, there is little opportunity to learn English through natural interaction. Therefore, the only way to learn English is through formal instruction and in classrooms. In these situations, communication strategy training still seems to be an effective tool for helping learners compensate for their communicative deficiencies. More proficient learners, by learning different strategies and techniques become more successful and confident speakers, even if they does not fully understand all the language, or if the person they are communicating with does not understand them.

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