## A Study of Communication Strategies Employed by Radfan College EFL Students in their Classroom Interactions

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## Abstract

*The focus of this study is to examine the communication strategies employed by Radfan College EFL students in their classroom interactions. In its theoretical part, the study shows the significance of CSs as a component of EFL learner's communicative competence and its significance in foreign language learning and communication. The data of this study were collected through classroom observations. Results revealed that though Radfan College EFL students' oral English proficiency is pretty low, most students tend to stop communication or switch into their mother tongue rather than utilizing effective CSs that may help them in communicating and developing their communication proficiency. The study showed that only a few students (high linguistic ability students) use some effective strategies; such as, paraphrasing of meaning, asking interlocutor's for help, time fillers and nonverbal signals while the majority (low linguistic ability students) prefer to keep silent and whenever they participate and encounter linguistic difficulties, they usually tend to shift into mother tongue or abandon their messages. The main reasons behind that are: (a) students were not well trained to use such communication strategies, and (b) teachers do not force students to use English in their classroom interactions. The study recommends teaching students of this*

*college CSs in the first year of their college education and creating opportunities for meaningful communication in the classroom to enable students to use and develop their CSs.*

**Keywords:** Communication strategies (CSs), foreign language learning, Radfan College of Education, linguistic insufficiency

**1-Introduction:**

Strategic competence or 'communication strategies' has become an important element of the communicative competence that a second or foreign language learner needs in order to communicate effectively ( Canale & Swain, 1980; Savignon 1983; Canale 1983; Bachman 1990; Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei & Thurrell,1995; Ahmed & Pawar, 2018). Some educators think that it is not necessary to teach strategic competence as a part of the language syllabus as learners already have acquired these strategies of communication from their mother tongue. However, the situation with a foreign language is completely different as learners need such strategies not only for making further meanings that are more sophisticated and diplomatic but to compensate for lack of linguistic or sociolinguistic competencies.

In 1970s, the strategic competence was introduced as a main part of the competence that foreign language learners need develop for communication. It has appeared as an element in each of the communicative competence models that have emerged during the second half of the last centuries. Though there has been a debate on what strategic competence includes as some consider learning strategies as a part of CSs, it has remained there as a main component of learners' communication competence in all models and refers to the coping strategies that one uses to compensate for insufficiency of linguistic competence. Communication strategies are often more needed by those learners who are at earlier stages of their language learning as they struggle to get meanings across due to their linguistic deficiency. It is for this reason that research in communication strategies has been growing up during the last decades and more attention was paid to developing learners' strategic competence as a part of their language learning.

CSs not only help speakers to compensate for language deficiency but also play a big role in encouraging language learning and mastering communication competence. Communicative approach urges for learning language through using it for communication and such activities designed for that purpose cannot be fulfilled by beginners as they lack their linguistic competence. So utilizing CSs in such activities motivates and enhances language learning.  For students who are not aware of CSs, they stop these activities whenever they find difficulties due to their lack of their linguistic knowledge and this will hinder their acquisition of the target language.

### 1-1: Statement of the Problem

EFL students of Radfan College of education are of low English communication proficiency. Only few students who try to use English in their classroom interactions while others keep silent or speak in Arabic. There can be various problems that students encounter in their communication which prevent them from participating in classroom discussions. Surely, lack of linguistic knowledge and poor skills in using such knowledge for communication can be among the major problems students encounter. As these students usually come from rural areas where neither professional English institutions nor English medium schools are available, they are seen as beginners who severely lack various aspects of their language system. So CSs should be among the effective tools that usually help beginners in compensating for linguistic deficiency and in keeping communication channel ongoing while participating in classroom discussions. It is for this reason that this study is devoted to surveying major CSs that Radfan College EFL students utilize in their classroom interactions.

### 1-2: Objectives of the study

This paper aims at achieving the following objectives:

- To review the various definitions of communication strategies.
- To highlight the significance of communication strategies for EFL learners.
- To examine the communication strategies employed by Radfan College EFL students in their classroom interactions.

### 2-Literature Review

In this section, the study is to survey the previous research on communication strategies. It attempts to go through the various definitions of communication strategies, categories of communication strategies, their significance in communication and language learning and providing some examples of most common communication strategies.

### 2-1: Communication Strategies

The term *communication strategies* refers to both linguistic and non-linguistic strategies that a speaker calls upon to compensate insufficiency in his/her knowledge while communicating. Boxer and Cohen (2004) defined CSs as "a systematic attempt by the speakers or the learners to deliver or give the exact meaning that is not proportionate with the

rules of the target language". Tarone (1981) has defied communication strategy is an attempt by two speakers to agree on a meaning in the target language. Learners usually use these CSs to compensate the insufficiency of knowledge. These strategies will help the speaker to pass his/her message effectively.

Dörnyei and Scott (1997) have emphasized that this term in applied linguistics is usually debatable and researchers are not in a consensus on its definition nor on the various examples of communication strategies:

> *CS research does not lack controversies. There is no universally accepted definition of CSs; as a result, several competing taxonomies of CSs exist, including different ranges of language devices, from paraphrase to filled pauses, from code-switching to interactional meaning-negotiation mechanisms (such as clarification requests). In fact, in view of the widespread use of the term "communication strategy" in applied linguistics —its coverage has by now become "compulsory" in any overview of L2 acquisition and use—it is surprising how little CS researchers agree about what exactly these devices are. (P:174)*

Dornyei (1995) has defined communication strategy as "a systematic technique employed by a speaker to express his or her meaning when faced with some difficulty"(p. 56). Anyway, from the discussions above we find that researchers have viewed communication strategies as verbal and non-verbal devices that are used to compensate the insufficiency of knowledge in our target language communication. I will conclude my discussion on the definitions of communication strategies by quoting these two definitions from Tarrone (1977) and Farch and Kasper (1983):

> *Conscious communication strategies are used by an individual to overcome the crisis which occurs when language structures are inadequate to convey the individual's thought.* (Tarone, 1977, p. 195)

> *CSs are potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal.* (Færch & Kasper, 1983, p. 36)

**2-2: Research on communication strategies**

During the last decades, communication strategies have become a field of research for many scholars in the field of English as second or foreign language (Poulisse, 1990; Dörnyei & Thurrell, 1991 ; Leki, 1995; Dörnyei & Scott, 1997; Ownie, 2010; Mariani & Kay, 2012; Rodríguez & Roux, 2012; Hoesny, 2016; Martínez-Adrián, Gallardo-del-Puerto & Basterrechea (2017); Palmer & Christison, 2018). According to Dörnyei and Scott (1997),

Selinker (1972) has coined the term "communication strategy" in his seminal paper on 'interlanguage', discussing 'strategies of second language communication' as one of the five central processes involved in L2 learning. Then Savignon (1972) has published a paper in which she showed the importance of 'coping strategies' for FL learners. She considered coping strategies (communication strategies) as a major part of communicative language learning and testing that both teachers and learners should pay attention to.

The most important development of communication strategies was in the 1980s, when Canale and Swain (1980); Canale (1983) have presented strategic competence as a major part of the communicative competence. They introduced a model of communicative competence comprising four main subcomponents which are: linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, pragmatic competence and strategic competence. Their perspective is interactional and highlights the role of meaning rather than linguistic structure.

Paribakht (1982, 1983) suggests that the term "strategic competence should be broadened to include all language—related strategies. e.g. learning strategies used to expand the speaker's competence and CS used to *exploit* it" (as cited in Paribakht, 1985: 142).

In 1990, there are some other studies have dealt with communication strategies in its discussion of language learning such as Bachman (1990); Bialystok (1990) and Dörnyei & Scott (1995) and Dörnyei & Scott (1997). All these studies gave more details about communication strategies and showed its importance in target language communication and its place as a sub-component of the communicative competence of the learners. Based on these studies and some practical studies we come to a conclusion that communication strategies are very important for communication and they should be taught to the learners of the target language as they are very useful for building up their communication competence and enabling them to communicate.

## 2-3: CSs Use and Speakers' Level of Language Proficiency

When foreign language learners are engaged in oral communication, sometimes they have communicative intentions that they cannot express through the language they have  as they are still in early stages of learning the foreign language and their linguistic system is limited. In such a case, they should look for alternative ways to pass their message across and agree one meaning. The use of communication strategies usually depends on the communicative needs and level of proficiency as those students with low proficiency are more in need for CSs to communicate and those students with high proficiency are more able to use it as they have developed their strategic competence simultaneously with their communicative competence. A study by Rosas (2016) has shown that learners with low oral proficiency usually use communication strategies more than advanced learners. This can be

explained by the fact that advanced learners usually have the linguistic system that enables them to communicate and depend less on CSs. Another study by Si-Qing (1990) has shown that there is a positive correlation between strategic competence and communicative competence; while a study by Chuanchaisit, S. & Prapphal, K. (2009) has shown that the use the CSs by Thai university students is determined by their level of proficiency. They found out that the high-ability students prefer risk-taking strategies, such as social-affective, fluency-oriented, help-seeking, and circumlocution strategies, whereas the low-ability students tended to employ more risk-avoidance strategies, like time-gaining strategies. This means that students usually need CSs in their communication. As students with low ability employ avoidance strategies, high ability learners usually employ achievement strategies.

**2-4: Major Types of Communication Strategies:**

Tarone (1980) has categorized CSs into three categories: *avoidance strategies, paraphrasing strategies* and *borrowing or transferring strategies*. *Avoidance strategies* refer to strategies that a speaker uses to avoid language difficulties such as topic avoiding, message abandonment. *Paraphrasing strategies* refer to strategies employed by a speaker in order to compensate the linguistic insufficiency such as approximation, word coinage and circumlocution. The third category *transferring strategies* refers to strategies such as miming, language switching and appealing for assistance.

Dornyei and Scott (1997) have categorized the communication strategies into three main categories: *direct strategies* (strategies used by a speaker who faces problems during communication process and attempts to directly avoid it or use other devices that help him to get the meaning across; such as paraphrasing or switching into native language), *indirect strategies* (strategies used by a speaker to provide the conditions that lead to the mutual understanding or strategies that help the speaker to gain time and keep communication channel open; such as, using time fillers) and *interactional strategies* (strategies which refer to the mutual cooperation between the speakers who mutually help each other to get the meaning across; such as, appealing the listener for help or asking for clarification.(pp 177-180)

According to Putri (2013: 130-131) Bialystok (1990) has adapted a taxonomy of CSs from Varidi (1973), Tarone (1977) and Faerch and Kasper (1983) in which he has categorized CSs in three types: *avoidance and reduction strategies* (leaving a message unfinished or avoiding the topic because of linguistic difficulties), *achievement compensatory strategies* ( strategies used to compensate for lack of linguistic knowledge such as approximation, paraphrasing, circumlocution, appeal for help…etc.), and *time gaining strategies* (use of filler or hesitation devices to gain time in recalling linguistic system).

Willems (1987) has categorized the communication strategies into positive (achievement/compensatory strategies) and negative (reduction strategies), they may be mother-tongue-based or based on another foreign language the speaker happens to have (some or full) command of, they may contain an implicit or explicit request for help and they may be non-verbal (paralinguistic strategies).They cannot always be identified unambiguously. (P: 352)

Based on the discussion above-mentioned and other studies, communication strategies can be categorized into the following:

1- **Paraphrasing Strategies**: strategies used by the speaker when s/he faces some difficulties to express himself or herself with some specific structures or vocabulary as he lacks such linguistic knowledge, then he paraphrases the meaning with the words and structures that he has. Examples for these strategies are: approximation, word coinage, circumlocution…etc.

2- **Avoidance strategies:** refer to speakers' attempts to avoid talking about concepts s/he doesn't know about their structures in the target language. The speaker here avoids talking about specific concepts or abandons his message as he realizes that he is unable to manage communication due to his language insufficiency. Examples of these strategies are: topic avoidance and message abandonment.

3- **Switching into native language:** When the two speakers share the same mother tongue, they usually depend on switching into mother tongue so much when they find it difficult to express themselves in the target language.

4- **Seeking help or asking for clarification**: a strategy by which a speaker seeks help from the listener he interacts with. Here the speaker feels that he is unable to pass the message due to his limited linguistic knowledge, then he will ask the listener about specific meanings he lacks so that he can continue his interaction and pass his message.

5- **Nonverbal strategies**: It is one of the most commonly used communication strategies by the speakers. We find that most speakers when they face some difficulties to get the meaning across, they use non-verbal signals to get the message across. There are various types of these non-verbal strategies such as: facial expressions, body languages, acting, using pictures…etc. These non-verbal signals play an effective role in getting meanings across while communicating orally.

6- **Time fillers:** It is one of the communication strategies that help the speaker to gain time, restore knowledge and keep the communication channel ongoing. There

are various time fillers that speakers use to fill gab in communication; such as, "well I mean", "what I mean", "actually", …etc.

## 3- The Methodology of the Study

### 3-1: Participants:

The participants of this study are second and third year EFL students of Radfan College of Education. They are about 120 male and female students and their ages range from 19-24. 70 students of them belong to the second year and 50 to the third year. Their mother tongue is Arabic and they learn English as a foreign language.

### 3-2: Instruments

The instrument used for collecting data for this study is the observation. The researcher has observed students' use of CSs during their interactions in English classes. As he was working as a teacher at this college, he gave special focus to the CSs that students use in order to assess which types of CSs they use, how such strategies help them to communicate and learn. He also tried to keep a record of the most common CSs used by third year high linguistic ability students during their interaction in three classes while they were presenting lessons and interact with each other under researcher's supervision.

## 4- The findings

### 4-1: Data Presentation

This section presents and analyzes the findings of observations of how Radfan College EFL students employ communication strategies in their classroom interactions and the reasons behind their lack of use of effective communication strategies.

Most students under this study are not good English communicators as they lack many aspects of their communicative competence and oral performance skills. Only few students in each class who try to use English for classroom interactions while others spend most of their classroom time silent or interacting in Arabic. As students' linguistic knowledge is limited, they should employ communication strategies that help them to pass their messages across. Unfortunately, few students have been observed using some of the communication strategies while majority of them prefer stopping communication and keeping silent.

Observations revealed that the most used communication strategies by low ability students are 'avoiding the topic, message abandonment and switching into mother tongue, respectively. These students usually avoid the topic of discussion when they feel that they don't have the linguistic ability to deal with. Most of them rejected to present lessons or participate in discussion when they were required to participate. Only few of them

participated when they feel that they can speak about a particular topic. I also found that whenever they get in a linguistic trouble in their interaction, the most common strategy they used was to abandon their message or switch into mother tongue in some cases. They found 'language switch' so easy and effective strategy in communicating their messages as teachers and students share the same mother tongue (Arabic). Anyway, those low ability students, who constitute the majority of the classes, rarely participated in classroom discussions as they prefer to stay as passive listeners in their classroom.

So far as high ability students are concerned, observations during English classes with the second and third year students generally, and records of observations of three classes held with third year students particularly (as shown in table no.1), showed that the most common communication strategies employed by them are the paraphrasing of meaning, switching into mother tongue, nonverbal signals and avoidance; respectively. These students seem to have some linguistic competence that allows them to paraphrase the meaning (as shown in table no. 2) and get the messages across even if they don't have the exact words or expressions. They also find language switching useful especially as students and teachers share the same mother tongue. They use nonverbal signals such as body language, eye contact and indicating to things they talk about to pass their messages and make meaning clear.

| CSs used by high ability students during classroom discussions in three classes | Its frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Paraphrasing | 55 | 32.35% |
| Switching into Mother tongue | 30 | 17.64% |
| Non-verbal signals (miming and body language) | 28 | 16.47% |
| Time fillers | 23 | 13.52% |
| Avoidance Strategies | 20 | 11.76% |
| Asking interlocutor for help | 14 | 8.23% |
| **Total** | **170** | **100%** |

**Table no**. 1 shows CSs used by third year high linguistic ability EFL students during three classes supervised by the researcher

High ability students also use time fillers and hesitation devices to fill the gap during their communication. Whenever they encounter linguistic difficulties or difficulties in recalling ideas they want to express, they use time fillers to gain time till they recall their linguistic system or recall another strategy that may help in passing their message across. Most students were observed in many situations during the three classes and the other classes using expressions such as '*what I mean*', '*you know*', '*well*', '*mmm*'…, '*actually*' etc.

Avoiding strategies such as avoiding participation in discussions when lacking language knowledge or abandoning messages are rarely observed in the case high linguistic ability students in comparison with low linguistic ability students.

Observations also showed that a few of high ability students ask their interlocutors (teachers or classmates) for help when they lack the language during classroom interactions while the majority prefer switching into Arabic rather than asking an interlocutor for help if there is no other possible strategy.

| Expressions students want to say | How they say it with the help of paraphrasing strategies |
|---|---|
| Nice to meet you! | I am feeling happy that I meet you. |
| I need a quiet place for reading | I need to read in a room that is very silent |
| A: Where are you going?<br>B: I am going the library. | A: Where are you going?<br>B: I am going to that bookshop. |
| When I lost my wallet, I borrowed some money from Ahmed. | When I lost my wallet, I asked Ahmed to give me money and he gave me. |
| What is your monthly salary? | How much money the university gives you per month? |
| My father travelled by a ship. | My father travelled by a boat. |
| It is difficult for us to participate in classroom discussions, so we prefer to keep silent. | We can't ask and answer questions in class. It is very difficult and we stop speaking in classroom. |
| Is it a male or female?<br>(When inquiring about the sex of a rabbit) | Is it a boy or girl? |
| T: Why are you late?<br>S: Because our bus got a flat tyre or puncture. | T: Why are you late?<br>S: Because the wheel of our bus was cut on the road. |

**Table no. 2** shows some examples of the paraphrasing strategies utilized by Radfan College high ability EFL students

### 4-2: Interpretation of the findings

The results showed that only few students who use some effective communication strategies while the majority (low language ability students) don't use or use only avoidance and message abandonment strategies. The main reason behind that is that those students were

not well trained to use the various types of communication strategies and have not yet built their strategic competence. Though some students are aware of some of these strategies when I asked them about, they were neither trained nor pushed to use them in their actual interactions. Teaching students such strategies requires training them to use them in meaningful communication.

The study showed that only few students (high ability students) are able to use some of the CSs (as shown in fig.1) while the rest (the majority) only abandon their messages or switch into Arabic whenever they encounter communication difficulties. These findings about high language ability and low ability students' use of CSs obtained in this study go in line with Chuanchaisit, S. & Prapphal, K. (2009) where they found out that high language ability of Thai students use more effective CSs while low ability students use avoidance strategies and switching into mother tongue. The difference can be in the fact that the low ability students of this study constitute the majority of the sample and only few of them who try to speak and use language switching and message abandonment strategies while the majority of this low ability students don't speak at all and prefer to be silent.

The researchers really see a huge need for teaching and training students of this college to use communication strategies as CSs are helpful in encouraging students to learn and develop their spoken English. As the students of this college are usually rural students who have no access to professional English institutions or English medium schools and their public schools hardly teach them grammar and vocabulary, they are really in need for such trainings of using communication strategies in their first year of their college education to help them in compensating for their limited linguistic knowledge and motivating them to pursue their learning, and break their silence.

The study, based on its findings collected from researcher's personal experiences during his teaching of second and third year students and his records of three particular classes, came to a conclusion that students of the concerned college are in need for training in communication strategies as their linguistic knowledge is limited and performance skills are very poor. Allowing students to be silent as they lack knowledge will demotivate them and lead to their graduation with very poor English. It is for this reason advisable to train them on CSs at their first year of college education and to push them to use English regardless of their knowledge as this will help in their learning.

**5-Conclusion:**

Communication strategies have been recognized as techniques that help speakers to compensate for their linguistic insufficiency and keep communication channel open when they are involved in oral communication. Studies have revealed that these strategies are more

significant for beginners than advanced learners and advocated teaching such strategies within the language syllabus. These strategies are of different types: direct strategies (the strategies that help a speaker to compensate for insufficient knowledge); indirect strategies (the strategies that help the speaker to gain time and keep communication channels open) and the interactional strategies which refer to the speakers' mutual help and request for clarification.

In its practical part, this study showed that though Radfan College EFL students' oral English proficiency is pretty low, most students tend to avoid communication or switch into their mother tongue rather than utilizing effective compensatory communication strategies that may help them to communicate and to develop their language acquisition. The study showed that a majority of the students (low linguistic ability students) usually avoid topic, abandon their messages, switch into Arabic or stop talking whenever they encounter language communication problems. Only few students (high language ability students) who try to use some effective strategies such as paraphrasing the meaning, asking interlocutor's for help and nonverbal signals to get their messages across. The main reasons behind that are that students were not well trained to use such communication strategies and teachers do not force them to use English in classroom interactions. So this study recommends teaching and training students to use CSs in their first year of their college education and forcing them to interact in English so that they find ways for using such strategies in their communication. This will lead at the end to developing their communication competence generally and their strategic competence in particular.

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