

*An Assessment of Oral English
Communication Strategies Employed
by Iraqi EFL College Students*

تقييم استراتيجيات التواصل الشفوي المستخدمة
من قبل طلبة الجامعة العراقية لدارسي اللغة الانكليزية
(لغة أجنبية)

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Abstract

This present study reports on an investigation into the oral communication strategies (henceforth OCSs) used by EFL College English students in Iraq. These students are a large group who are studying in English and need to use OCSs to facilitate their communication because they do not have sufficient exposure to English in daily life. All of the subjects are first-year bachelor students from College of Education Ibn Rushd. The data were collected by mean of questionnaire.

The results indicate that students of first year employed the following strategies: Approximation, circumlocution, word coinage, mime, literal translation, language switch, and appeal for assistance. While they do not employ avoidance strategies like: topic avoidance and message abandonment. Other finding which is that females use more strategies than males, females use seven strategies out of nine namely: approximation, word coinage, circumlocution, literal translation, language switch, appeal for assistance, and mime. While males use only six strategies out of nine namely: approximation, word coinage, circumlocution, literal translation, language switch, and appeal for assistance.

These findings suggested that OCSs help students overcome difficulties in oral English communication. By enhancing students' strategic competence, their communicative competence could be improved.

The results of this study could be great help in the teaching of English to Iraqi EFL learners by making them aware of CSs already in their repertoire and by encouraging them to use OCSs more frequently.

المستخلص:

الدراسة الحالية هي محاولة لمعرفة ستراتيجيات التواصل الشفهي المستعملة من قبل طلبة الجامعة العراقيين دارسي اللغة الانكليزية (لغة اجنبية). وهؤلاء الطلبة

يعدون شريحة واسعة ممن يستخدمون تلك الاستراتيجيات والذين يحتاجونها في تواصلهم كونهم لا يملكون التعرض الكافي لاستخدام اللغة في حياتهم اليومية. جميع افراد العينة هم طلبة المرحلة الاولى في كلية التربية ابن رشد. وقد تم جمع البيانات من خلال استخدام اداة الاستبيان.

النتائج اظهرت بان طلبة المرحلة الاولى يستخدمون الاستراتيجيات الاتية: التقريب، اعادة الصياغة وتكوين الكلمات والاشارة والترجمة الحرفية وتغيير اللغة وطلب المساعدة. بينما لم يستخدموا استراتيجيات التجنب مثل: التجنب وترك الرسالة. وكذلك توصلت الدراسة الى ان الاناث يستخدمن استراتيجيات التواصل اكثر من الذكور، في حين استخدمت الاناث سبع استراتيجيات من اصل تسع.

ان هذه النتائج اوضحت بان استخدام استراتيجيات التواصل يمكنها ان تساعد الطلبة على تجاوز صعوبات التواصل الشفهي كونها تسهم وبشكل كبير في تطوير كفاءة اللغة والكفاءة التواصلية. وتعد تلك النتائج ذات فائدة كبيرة في تدريس اللغة الانكليزية في العراق من خلال زيادة الوعي بتلك الاستراتيجيات والتي تشجعهم على التواصل الشفهي بشكل افضل.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background to the Study

Success in language communication relies on what is called communicative competence. As described by Canale and Swain (1980), communicative competence includes: (1) knowledge and ability regarding vocabulary, pronunciation, grammatical structures and word forms; (2) sociocultural rules for using language appropriately; (3) discourse rules for linking parts of a language text coherently and cohesively; and (4) verbal and non-verbal strategies which can compensate for communication breakdowns due to a lack of linguistic resources. Similar to

Canale and Swain, Færch et al. (1984) proposed a model of communicative competence in which the most important component is pragmatic competence, i.e., the ability to carry out a broad range of speech acts. This competence includes linguistic competence, covering pronunciation, syntax and lexis. Whenever the learner experiences a problem because of restricted linguistic resources, he/she may use his/her strategic competence. When a speech act is automatized, it is delivered with a certain degree of fluency (Chanawong, 2007: 7)

However, in carrying out communication, there seems to be no perfect language repertoire for an individual speaker. To make communication smooth, a speaker must find some effective ways to communicate their thoughts. Both non-native and native speakers, as Faucette (2001) mentioned, sometimes struggle to communicate their thoughts by trying to find appropriate expressions or grammatical constructions to convey their intended meaning. This is probably because of a lack of linguistic, sociolinguistic, or strategic competence in a language. The ways in which an individual speaker manages to compensate for the gaps (Bialystok, 1990) between what he/she wishes to communicate and his / her competence in the target language are known as "OCSs." The term "OCSs" has been defined in different ways. Some researchers (e.g., Tarone, 1980; Tarone and Yule, 1989) consider OCSs to include all attempts at meaning-negotiation, whereas other researchers (e.g., Cook, 1993; Færch and Kasper, 1984) restrict their definitions to cases in which a speaker attempts to overcome a difficulty due to a lack of linguistic resources (Rababah, 2002: 15).

Even though researchers are still not in complete agreement about the definition of OCSs,

one widely accepted definition is “OCSs are potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual present itself as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal” (Færch and Kasper, 1984, p. 47). This definition is influential in the field of communication strategy studies because it provides an adequate coverage for relevant phenomena in an individual’s communication (Bialystok, 1990; Canale, 1983; and Dörnyei, 1995). Although the use of OCSs occurs naturally in the first language, second language (L2) learners do not necessarily transfer these strategies to L2 communication. This is because of linguistic and affective constraints (Si-Qing, 1990). With a deficiency in the target language, L2 learners find L2 communication problematic. OCSs are, therefore, used as devices to deal with difficulties and breakdowns in communication. These verbal and non-verbal strategies include, for example, using simple explanations, paraphrases, cognates from their first language, gestures, and mime. Sometimes, learners solve communication difficulties by asking for interlocutors’ help or by avoiding topics if they cannot find any way to cope with these difficulties (Tarone, 1977: 23).

However, each L2 learner may employ different types of OCSs. Tarone (1977) suggested that the choice of OCSs is related to the level of target language proficiency. The possible differences between the uses of OCSs by learners at different proficiency levels can be summarized into two main aspects (Ellis, 1984: 23). First, fewer OCSs are used in performance that is fluent, situationally appropriate, economic, and elegant than in performance that is not. That is, when speakers have substantial linguistic resources, they need to compensate less than when they have few. Therefore,

learners at a low proficiency level may employ OCSs more frequently than those at a high proficiency level do. This implies that there are quantitative differences between OCSs used by learners at different proficiency levels. Second, low proficiency learners may also differ from high proficiency learners in terms of the types of OCSs employed. In particular, it seems possible that learners at a high proficiency level employ more 'achievement strategies' (Færch and Kasper, 1983), such as paraphrase, and fewer 'reduction strategies' (Færch and Kasper, 1983), such as avoidance than learners at a low proficiency level do. Thus, the second possibility is that there are qualitative differences between the uses of OCSs by learners at different proficiency levels. A study of L2 learners' use of OCSs provides enormous practical implications for understanding problem-management in L2 communication and trends in L2 learners' communication phenomena. These phenomena reveal facts about L2 learners' ability to use their restricted inter language (Selinker, 1972: 34) in such a way as to transcend its limitations. Importantly, an investigation of L2 learners' OCSs seems to be useful for L2 teaching and learning in terms of helping refine models of L2 learning and use (Dörnyei and Scott, 1997; Si-Qing, 1990).

Some studies have been carried out on the OCSs of L2 learners (e.g., Bongaerts and Poullisse, 1989; Ellis, 1984; Si-Qing, 1990; and Ton, 1989); however, there are still gaps in those previous studies. That is because most studies have just examined some types of OCSs using one single method (e.g., a concrete picture description task, a concept-identification task, or a story-telling task). The evidence from this study is useful for making

pedagogical decisions and developing curricula to help Iraqi learners become more skillful in oral English communication.

2- Study Objectives

This study has two aims:

- 1) to identify CSs used by first year students,
- 2) to identify differences in OCSs between male and female of first year students

3- Review of Related literature

3-1 Definitions of CSs

For most people, the main goal of learning a foreign language is to be able to communicate. It is through communication that people send and receive messages effectively and negotiate meaning. Nowadays, how to communicate effectively in Foreign Language Learning becomes much more important than reading and writing. As a result, OCSs have turned into a crucial topic for all foreign language learners and teachers (Rubin & Thompson, 1994: 30).

Considerable research has been done on OCSs, for example, Bialystok (1990), who comprehensively analyzes OCSs for second language use; and Dornyei (1995 cited in Brown, 2000), who outlines an explicit classification of OCSs. According to Bialystok (1990: 1), “the familiar ease and fluency with which we sail from one idea to the next in our first language is constantly shattered by some gap in our knowledge of a second language”. The forms of these gaps can be a word, a structure, a phrase, a tense marker or an idiom. The attempts to overcome these gaps are described as OCSs. Wenden and Rubin (1987: 109) state that learners who emphasize the importance of using the language often utilize OCSs. Besides, O’Malley and Chamot (1990: 43) assert that OCSs are particularly important “in negotiating

meaning where either linguistic structures or sociolinguistic rules are not shared between a second language learner and a speaker of the target language". For this reason, OCSs, which involve both listening and speaking, can contribute greatly to FLL.

In Bialystok's book OCSs, she cites four definitions relating to the strategies of second-language learners (Bialystok, 1990: 3):

- (1) a systematic technique employed by a speaker to express his meaning when faced with some difficulty; (Corder, 1977)
- (2) a mutual attempt of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in situations where requisite meaning structures are not shared; (Tarone, 1980)
- (3) potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal; (Faerch & Kasper, 1983a)
- (4) techniques of coping with difficulties in communicating in an imperfectly known second language. (Stern, 1983)

All the above definitions reveal the same purpose of CSs, namely, to solve an emerged communication problem by applying some kinds of techniques. Among these, Corder's (1977) explanation seem to be more visual and pellucid from the viewpoint of a non-native speaker of English. The definitions from Faerch and Kasper (1983a) and Stern (1983) also provide us specific and precise descriptions for CSs, which refer to the employed techniques when speakers have problems in expressing themselves.

3-2 Taxonomies of CSs and Foreign Language Learning

Having considered definitions of OCSs, the next section will examine Dornyei's Taxonomy (1997) and Tarone's (1977) of OCSs, which is also cited by Brown (2000:128) as good

examples. The two branches given by Dornyei (1997) reveal two opposite directions in communication. One is avoiding and the other is compensating. Avoidance strategies can be further broken down into several subtypes, such as phonological avoidance, syntactic or lexical avoidance and topic avoidance (Brown, 2000: 128). These strategies may be an effective way but not a beneficial way for FLL students to learn a foreign language. Among these, topic avoidance may be the most frequent means that students have ever employed. When asked a specific question, the student who does not know the answer will just keep silent about it and lead to the occurrence of topic avoidance. In my experience, most students can hardly express their ideas or answers in a flexible way; that is to say, they presumably have not learned to think over a foreign language simultaneously while they are speaking it. The reason tends to be that they have not acquired basic knowledge of English and they seldom practice it.

Compensatory strategies, on the other hand, involve “compensation for missing knowledge” (Brown, 2000: 129). Dornyei outlines eleven types of compensatory strategies in a very comprehensive way, which include circumlocution, word coinage, prefabricated patterns, appealing for help and stalling or time-gaining strategies, etc (Dornyei, 1995 cited in Brown, 2000: 128). Some of them happen in a high frequency, while others may seldom occur. Consider the example of “foreignizing”, which refers to “using a L1 word by adjusting it to L2 phonology and/or morphology” Brown, 2000: 128. Whereas, many other types of compensatory strategies are perceived to be commonly applied. When students are taking an oral examination, the most popular compensatory strategy is to “use fillers or hesitation devices to fill pauses and to gain time to think” (Brown, 2000: 130). By using

fillers such as “well” or “let me think”, students can gain a little time to think before they speak. Thus, they will appear to be more fluent instead of stammering and as a result, a higher mark is expected to be given. Another common type is appealing for help. Dornyei states that people can ask for help directly or indirectly, such as using a rising intonation or a pause (Brown, 2000: 129). Learners will directly ask the native speaker about an unknown word, for example, “What do you call this...? With respect to circumlocution, it can be ranged to paraphrase strategy because it indicates “describing or exemplifying the target object of action” (Brown, 2000: 128). Non linguistic signals apparently mean using sound imitation and postures, such as mime, gesture, and facial expression. On occasion, speakers will adopt circumlocution as well as non linguistic signals at the same time. Word coinage is usually produced unwittingly. Dornyei claims that a speaker will simply create a non-existing L2 word when he does not know the exact one. A learner could use phrase “electrical line” instead of “electrical wire” to express his meaning. The coinage of a single word may not be as common as the invention of a phrase by the speaker. Through the combination of two possible words which can jointly create a new meaning, a non-existing phrase can be invented. Lastly, prefabricated patterns are described as the memorized stock phrases or sentences for survival purposes. They are generally adopted by those studious and diligent language learners. It is very common to notice that students rehearse typical sentences on a bus or in a park. Prefabricated patterns can assist learners to reach their basic communication goal, such as asking for directions or shopping (Nakatani, 2006: 78).

This description supports the idea that CSs can be viewed from two perspectives. According to Færch & Kasper (1983),

cited as a central source in Kasper and Kellerman (1997) CSs are “potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal.” This “intra-individual view” locates CSs in models of speech production (e.g. Dechert, 1983; Færch & Kasper, 1983) or cognitive organization and processing (Bialystok, 1990). In early work, most notions of CSs restricted the concept to problem-solving activity. Færch & Kasper’s definition of CSs relates to the learner, or more precisely, to the problems experienced by the learner, in speech reception and in the planning and execution of speech production. The definition conceives of CSs as mental plans implemented by the L2 learner in response to an internal signal of an imminent problem, a form of self-help that did not have to engage the interlocutor’s support for resolution. This implies that the learner may make use of a communication strategy without signaling to his interlocutor that he is experiencing a communication problem and consequently, that the presence of a repair on the part of the interlocutor is not a necessary condition for the identification of a OCSs (Færch & Kasper, 1983: 36).

From an interactional view or social strategies, Tarone (1977) provides three main categories of CSs: paraphrase, avoidance, and conscious transfer.

With paraphrase, the learner uses these strategies to compensate for an L2/FL word that is known by three subcategories: approximation, word coinage and circumlocution. According to Tarone (1980), approximation occurs when the learner uses “a single target language vocabulary item or structure, which the learner knows, is not correct, but shares enough semantic features in common with the desired item to satisfy the

speaker.” Word coinage is employed when “the learner makes up a new word in order to communicate a desired concept.” For circumlocution, “the learner describes the characteristics or elements of the object or an action instead of using the appropriate target language structure” (Tarone, 1977: 429). Conscious transfer involves literal translation, language switch, appeal for assistance and mime. For literal translation, the learner translates word by word from the native language. With language switch, the learner uses the native language term without bothering to translate. In appeal for assistance, the learner asks for the correct term or structure. The next strategy is mime which occurs when the learner uses nonverbal strategies in place of a meaning structure. In avoidance strategies, the learner avoids the communication by using topic avoidance or message abandonment. Topic avoidance occurs “when the learner simply does not talk about concepts for which the vocabulary or other meaning structure is not known” while message abandonment occurs “when the learner begins to talk about a concept but is unable to continue due to lack of meaning structure, and stops in mid-utterance” (Kongsom, 2009: 35-37).

Table 1: Definitions of OCSs
(Based on Tarone's Taxonomy)

<i>Name of Strategy</i>		<i>Description</i>
Paraphrase	Approximation	Use of single target language vocabulary item or structure, which the learner knows is not correct, but which shares enough semantic features in common with the desired item to satisfy the speaker (e.g, pipe for water pipe)
	Word coinage	The learner makes up a new word in order to communicate a desired concept (e.g. airball for balloon)
	Circumlocution	The learner describes the characteristics or elements of the object or action instead of using the appropriate target language item or structure
Conscious transfer	Literal translation	The learner translation word for from the native language (e.g. He invites him to drink, for they toast one another)
	Language switch	The learner uses the native language (NL) term without bothering to translate (e.g. balon for balloon,)
	Appeal for assistance	The learner asks for the correct term (e.g. What is this ? what called ?)
	Mime	The learner uses non-verbal strategies in place of lexical item or action (e.g. clapping one's hands to illustrate applause)
Avoidance	Topic avoidance	The learner simply tries not to talk about concepts for which the TL item or structure is not known.
	Message abandonment	The learner begins to talk about concept but is unable to continue and stops in mid-utterance.

4- Research Design

The subjects of the present study include 50EFL college students, first year from College of Education Ibn Rushd in Baghdad University. They were 25 of males and 25 of females. The researcher selects a randomly samples to meet the purpose of the present research. The sample represents 25% of the population of students in first year which is 200 students.

The present study used a questionnaire, as an instrument of research, is one of the inquiring forms that “*includes data gathering instruments through which respondents answer questions or respond to statements in writing* (Best 1981: 167).

The type of questionnaire used in the present study is to elicit OCSs of students is restricted or closed form which calls for ticking.

The present questionnaire items have been constructed depending on several literature and studies such as Nakatani, (2006); Lam, (2006); Chang, (2005) and Kongsom (2009).

The form of question naire is divided into two parts, listening and speaking. Items of listening strategies include 18 items while items of speaking strategies include 20 items. Items in questionnaire are also related to a strategy of OCSs based on taxonomy of Tarone(1977) because of its more practical, easy to administer and its boundaries are clear. Students were asked to tick one out of five options (always, sometimes, often, rarely and never) (see appendixI).

5- Results and Discussions

In order to identify the OCSs used by first year, a questionnaire has been built and administered to the sample of the present study. The results are computed in respect to the two specified parts of the questionnaire.

5-1 Results Related to the First Aim

In order to identify the OCSs used by first year college students, a questionnaire has been built and administered to the sample of the present study. The results computed in respect to the two specified parts of the questionnaire (listening and speaking).

The weighted mean of listening is 2.68, while the weighted percentile is 53.70 with a standard deviation of 19.61. This shows that listening part gets rank number one. The weighted mean of speaking is 2.52, while the weighted percentile is 50.41 with standard deviation 22.62 (see table 2).

Table 2: Weighted Mean, Weighted Percentile, and Rank Order of the Two Parts of the Questionnaire.

<i>Part</i>	<i>Weighted Mean</i>	<i>Weighted Percentile</i>	<i>s.d.</i>	<i>Rank</i>
Listening	2.78	54.70	18.72	1
Speaking	2.62	51.41	23.59	2

Table 3: Weighted Mean & Weighted Percentile of OCSs Used by Students

<i>No.</i>	<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Weighted Mean</i>	<i>Weighted Percentile</i>
1	Approximation	2.85	57
2	Language switch	2.83	56.5
3	Mime	2.77	55.4
4	Word coinage	2.76	55.2
5	Literal translation	2.64	52.8

6	Circumlocution	2.60	52.1
7	Appeal for Assistance	2.53	50.6
8	Topic Avoidance	2.28	45.6
9	Message Abandonment	1.92	38.4

Table 3 shows that the strategy of Approximation gets the highest weighted percentile of 57, with weighted mean of 2.53. The second strategy is Language Switch with 56.5 weighted percentile and 2.83 weighted mean. The third strategy is Mime with 55.4 weighted percentile and 2.77 weighted mean. The fourth strategy is Word Coinage with 55.2 weighted percentile and 2.76 weighted mean. The fifth strategy is Literal Translation with 52.8 weighted percentile and 2.64 weighted mean. The sixth strategy is Circumlocution with 52.1 weighted percentile and 2.60 weighted mean. The seventh strategy is Appeal for Assistance with 50.6 weighted percentile and 2.53 weighted mean. The eighth strategy is Topic Avoidance with 45.6 weighted percentile and 2.28 weighted mean. The last strategy, which is the ninth one, is Message Abandonment with 38.4 weighted percentile and 1.92 weighted mean.

5-2 Results Related to Second Aim

Table 4: Weighted Mean, Weighted Percentile, and Rank Order of the Males and Females of the Questionnaire.

Gender	Weighted Mean	Weighted Percentile	s.d.	Rank
Female	3.44	41.11	17.89	1
Male	2.26	32.75	16.51	2

Table 4 shows that the weighted mean of female is 3.44, while the weighted percentile is 41.11 with a standard deviation of 17.89. This shows that female gets rank number one. The weighted mean of male is 2.26, while the weighted percentile is 32.75 with standard deviation 16.51.

Results of question naire regarding answers of both genders (males and females) show that females use more OCSs strategies than do males, they use seven strategies out of nine namely: approximation, word coinage, circumlocution, literal translation, language switch, appeal for assistance, and mime, while the strategies of topic avoidance and message abandonment are not employed. While males use only six strategies out of nine namely: approximation, word coinage, circumlocution, literal translation, language switch, and appeal for assistance, while strategies of mime, topic avoidance, and message abandonment are not employed by males.

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