



The impact of English proficiency on the use of communication strategies: An interaction-based study in Turkish EFL context

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Abstract

The present study investigated communication strategies employed by Turkish EFL learners and aimed at revealing the relationship between language proficiency and the use of communication strategies. An interaction-based methodology was used in which 17 pairs at different proficiency levels were asked to negotiate on two short movies and stimulated-recall interviews were implemented. The results of Kruskal-Wallis test illustrated that participants use particular strategies such as ‘use of fillers’, ‘self-repair’, and ‘self-repetition’. Proficiency level was not found as a factor influencing learners’ strategy choice but significant differences were found in three strategies: ‘message reduction’, ‘topic avoidance’, and ‘mime’. These findings allow for generating implications for issues to consider in designing classes.

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1. Introduction

There have been significant changes in the conceptualisation of language after Hymes (1972) proposed communicative competence which focuses on learners’ ability to use language effectively in communication. This view was expanded by Canale and Swain (1980) who introduced ‘strategic competence’ as one of the components of communicative competence (Kaivanpanah & Yamouty, 2009). Strategic competence is related to the use of communication strategies (CSs) (Chen, 1990; Thornbury, 2005) as it refers to “the ability to cope in an authentic communicative situation and to keep the communicative channel open” (Canale & Swain, 1980, p. 25). Therefore, investigating learners’ ability to use CSs indicates their strategic competence.

In addition to studies designed to introduce a systematic definition and classification of the concept, many studies were carried out in different contexts to explore the impact of different variables on the use of CSs such as proficiency level, gender, personality, cultural issues and strategy training. Studies focusing on the effects of proficiency are important, as they reveal how developing competencies in English influences learners’ ability to overcome communication problems. Despite this empirical tendency to investigate this problem, the relationship between language proficiency and the use of CSs is still questionable (Grenfell & Macaro, 2007). This is the main concern of the present study which is designed to investigate how Turkish EFL learners at university level deal with communication problems during conversations and reveal whether proficiency level has an impact on the use of CSs.

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2. Theoretical background

2.1. *Defining communication strategies*

There are two main approaches to conceptualise CSs: ‘psychological’ and ‘interactional’. The psychological view (e.g. Bialystok, 1990; Faerch & Kasper, 1983; Poulisse, 1987) underlines the individual’s communication behaviour with particular attention to their mental processes and regards CSs as “strategies which a language user employs in order to achieve his intended meaning on becoming aware of problems arising during the planning phase of an utterance due to (his own) linguistic shortcomings” (Poulisse, 1990, p. 88). In researching CSs, this view highlights the need for understanding the cognitive aspects. Conversely, interactional approach (e.g. Tarone, 1980) refers to the interactive nature of using CSs and draws attention to the role of ‘negotiation of meaning’ in communication (Nakatani, 2010). Within the social interactional perspective, interactionalists conceptualise CSs by focusing on the interaction process between the speaker and the interlocutor (Kongsom, 2009): “CSs are seen as tools used in a joint negotiation of meaning where both interlocutors are attempting to agree as to a communicative goal” (Tarone, 1983, p. 420). Research on CSs adopting interaction approach therefore seeks for identifying the interaction between speakers. Both of these approaches are worth considering in researching CSs because communication is both individual and interactive in nature. Instead of distinguishing these, CSs can be conceptualised as having both personal and mutual aspects. This is because, during communication, both speaker and the interlocutor experience cognitive processes and these are mainly modified through interaction. Therefore, the present study addresses both interactional and cognitive aspects of CSs.

Problem-solving function of CSs is one of the common aspects that is addressed in defining CSs (Yang, 2006). This is underpinned by the assumption that “strategies are used only when a speaker perceives that there is a problem which may interrupt communication” (Bialystok, 1990, p. 3). However, as pointed out by Canale (1983), CSs can also serve as non-problem-solving strategies and used as a means to “enhance the effectiveness of communication” (p. 11), in that speakers can employ CSs to clarify or elaborate on the intended message. This suggests that CSs could be regarded as message enhancers (Nakatani & Goh, 2007).

Consciousness is another common issue of debate in defining CSs and there are conflicting views in the literature concerning speaker’s consciousness level while using CSs. According to Dörnyei and Scott (1997), accepting CSs as conscious attempts may be problematic because communication is a complex and dynamic process that requires giving immediate responses. Hence, some strategies can be employed automatically, which may hinder speakers’ consciousness (Wiemann & Daly, 1994, cited in Dörnyei & Scott, 1997). They assert that, instead of relying on consciousness level, speaker’s ‘awareness of the communication problem’ and ‘intentionality’ should be concerned in investigating CSs.

2.2. *Classifying communication strategies*

The conflicting views about conceptualising CSs that are summarised above have led to different taxonomies (e.g. Bialystok, 1983, 1990; Dörnyei & Scott, 1997; Faerch & Kasper, 1983; Paribakht, 1986; Tarone, 1980). Before delving into the taxonomy adopted in the present study, it is worth discussing two substantial taxonomies. The first one has been introduced by Bialystok (1983) and refers to the ‘language source’ of CSs: She classified strategies related to speaker’s first language as L1-based strategies (e.g. language switch, foreignising, transliteration); strategies related to the target language as L2-based strategies (e.g. semantic contiguity, description, word coinage), and non-verbal strategies as non-linguistic strategies (e.g. gestures, mime).

Faerch and Kasper (1983) categorise CSs as ‘reduction’ and ‘achievement’ strategies. Reduction strategies indicate negative speaker performance (Willems, 1987) as they comprise strategies that are employed to avoid sending the intended message (e.g. topic avoidance, message abandonment, meaning replacement). Conversely, achievement strategies are speaker’s attempts to send the message by using different CSs such as ‘code switching’, ‘inter-/intralingual transfer’, ‘generalisation’, ‘paraphrase’, ‘word coinage’, and ‘restructuring’.

The present study adopts Dörnyei and Scott’s taxonomy (1997) as it introduces a comprehensible categorisation by taking into account both interactional and cognitive aspects CSs and addresses different functions of the concept with regard to their problem-, process-, and performance-orientated natures. The categories of this taxonomy are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Dörnyei and Scott’s taxonomy (1997)

Categories	Sub-Categories	Sample strategies
Direct Strategies	Resource deficit-related	Message reduction; circumlocution; approximation; code switching; mime
	Own performance problem related	Self-rephrasing; self repair
	Other performance problem related	Other repair
Interactional strategies	Resource deficit-related	Appeals for help
	Own-performance problem-related	Comprehension check; own-accuracy check
	Other-performance problem-related	Asking for repetition; guessing; responses
Indirect strategies	Processing time-pressure related	Use of fillers; repetitions
	Own-performance problem related	Verbal strategy markers
	Other performance problem related	Feigning understanding

As displayed in Table 1, the taxonomy comprises three main categories: ‘direct’, ‘indirect’, and ‘interactional strategies’. Direct strategies are problem-based in nature and involve strategies that are used “to provide an alternative, manageable, and self-contained means of getting the meaning across” (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997, p. 198). Secondly, indirect strategies are not particularly problem-oriented but play a facilitative role to achieve the conveyance of meaning by creating positive conditions for communication (e.g. use of fillers, repetitions). Thirdly, interactional strategies involve strategies that are used collaboratively by the speaker and the interlocutor (e.g. appeals for help, comprehension check, asking for repetition).

Each category comprises three sub-categories that are categorised according to the source of the problem: ‘own-performance problem’, ‘other performance problem’, ‘resource deficit’, and ‘processing time-pressure’ related strategies. While ‘own-performance’ problem-related strategies refer to the problems that the speaker experiences, ‘other-performance’ problem-related strategies are about the interlocutor’s communication problems. Resource deficit-related strategies are particularly related to the speaker’s lack of knowledge and employed as a means to compensate this gap. ‘Processing time-pressure’ related strategies involve strategies that are used to gain time in communication.

2.3. Research on communication strategies

Among the factors influencing the choice of CSs, the relationship between language proficiency and the use of CSs has been one of the major areas of investigation. Some argue that less proficient learners are likely to experience more communication problems, and hence, implement greater number

of CSs (Chen, 1990; Hua, Nor & Jaradat, 2012; Kaivanpanah, Yamouty & Karami, 2012; Nakatani, 2010). However, previous research studies have provided some conflicting findings.

Paribakth (1986) compared CS uses of intermediate and advanced English as a second language learners in Canada. Participants were asked to do a concept-identification task which required oral interaction with their native speaker interlocutors. The study found no differences between intermediate and advanced students in the choice and frequency of CSs. A study with a similar research procedure was conducted by Chen (1990) in Chinese context, in which high and low proficient EFL learners were asked to communicate two concrete and two abstract concepts with native speakers. The findings contradicted with Paribakth's study: while high proficient learners employed significantly greater CSs and linguistic-based CSs in particular (e.g. approximation, antonym, synonym, circumlocution); the knowledge-based CSs (e.g. exemplification, comparison) and repetitions were used more frequently by low proficient learners. A quantitative study carried out by Chuanchaisit and Prapphal (2009) at a university in Thailand also revealed differences between high and low proficient learners. The study concluded that low proficient students more frequently employed risk-avoidance strategies (e.g. time-gaining) and high proficient learners took risk by using strategies such as social-affective, fluency-oriented, help seeking, and circumlocution. Conversely, in Ting and Phan's study (2008), proficiency level was not found as a factor influencing the use of CSs: the strategy uses of high and low proficient learners did not vary in a simulated oral interaction task where they were asked to discuss a social issue. In Turkish context, Gümüş (2007) investigated strategy uses of high school students at different proficiency levels and no significant differences were found between high and low proficient learners.

These contradictory findings show that it is not clear whether language proficiency is a factor that influences the use of CSs. Hence, further research is needed to understand the relationship between proficiency level and the use of CSs. This was the main concern of the present study which was designed to reveal how CSs uses of EFL learners at different proficiency levels differ in an interaction-based communicative task. This study also attempts to portray strategy repertoires of Turkish EFL learners and seeks for answers to the following research questions:

1. Which CSs are used more frequently by Turkish EFL learners?
2. What is the difference between high and low proficient learners in CS use?

3. Methodology

In the last decade, there is a growing body of research that implements quantitative methods to investigate CSs. These studies mainly attempt to explore the relationships between different factors influencing the use of CSs (e.g. Kaivanpanah & Yamouty, 2009; Khan & Victori, 2011; Metcalfe & Noom-Ura, 2013; Nakatani, 2005). These studies are useful for revealing the statistical correlations between different variables influencing strategy choice. Nevertheless, the validity of studies within quantitative scope remains questionable as they investigate the strategy use within a limited perspective by solely relying on learners' self-reports. To avoid this, the present study implemented an interaction-based research methodology by providing a communicative research environment. This methodology focuses on learners' conversational interactions through "manipulating the kinds of interaction in which learners are involved ... in order to determine the relationship between the various components of interaction and second language learning" (Mackey & Gass, 2005, p. 65). Additionally, the present study seeks for understanding mental processes that participants undergo while using CSs, which makes it essential to implement an introspective study where participants are asked to elaborate on the cognitive and affective aspects of their consciousness (Brown & Rodgers,

2002). In doing so, stimulated recall interviews were implemented in which video records and transcripts were used and participants were asked to comment on their performances (Nunan, 1989).

Story-telling was utilised because it requires ‘mutual understanding’ which is one of the characteristics of everyday communication. Two short movies were selected from Viney and Viney’s (1987) video book. These movies were selected because they included basic daily events that speakers with low proficiency levels could talk about, namely, introduction of the main characters, getting prepared for a holiday, and events taking place in a campsite. The movies were muted so that the participants would avoid picking up particular utterances of the characters, which would hinder the authenticity of the communication. This study was not concerned with participants’ ability to describe movies and these stories were provided as a means to establish communication. No instruction was provided and participants were free to control the flow of communication.

46 students were invited to the introductory meeting which was held to give information about the research issues. Students were asked to read the consent letter in which ethical issues were addressed. They were assured that their confidentiality would be preserved and the data would be solely used for research purposes. 25 students volunteered to participate. Another meeting was held by different students and 34 students in seventeen pairs agreed to participate in the study. Before the main study, a pilot study was implemented to identify the strong and weak points of the research procedure and necessary changes were made in the design of the main study.

Participants were university students at English Language Teaching Department (ELT) at a university in Turkey. This department was selected because ELT Departments comprise students with different proficiency levels. The majority of students at ELT Departments are female and this made it difficult to have a homogenous sample in terms of gender and proficiency level. Therefore, all participants were female. Participants were divided into two groups considering their proficiency levels. High proficient (HP) learners were the final year students and low proficient (LP) students were the first year students. This was because there was a clear difference between these two groups in terms of language proficiency: while first year students were highly competent in structural aspects of English and less so in communication skills, final year students were highly proficient in communication skills. First year students were around eighteen years old and final year students were around 22 years old. Purposive sampling was used. LP participants were selected considering their exam scores for ‘Oral Communication Skills’ course. The testing procedure was observed by the researcher. HP participants were selected according to their presentation performances in different courses.

3.1. Data collection procedure

Participants were paired up randomly and asked to negotiate on two different stories. Each pair comprised one story teller and one interlocutor. All interlocutors were highly proficient as they were expected to control the flow of communication through asking relevant questions to story tellers. The story tellers of nine pairs were highly proficient and eight pairs comprised low proficient story tellers.

The data collection process comprised three parts which lasted two days. Part 1 and 2 had similar process, in which story tellers viewed two different movies and described them to their interlocutors. Only story tellers participated in Part 3 in which stimulated recall interviews were conducted. The research procedure is displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. Data collection procedure

1st Day	Part 1	Story teller views the first movie twice
		Preparation for describing the story
	Part 2	The interlocutor enters the room
		Communication
2nd Day	Part 3	The story teller leaves the room
		The interlocutor describes the story to the researcher

In Part 1 and 2, the story teller watched each movie twice. After the story teller felt ready to describe the movies, the interlocutor was invited in the room and they started to communicate. The story tellers were expected to describe the movies as fully as they could and the interlocutors were asked to understand the events as much as they could. When the story telling had ended, the story teller left the room and the interlocutor described the stories to the researcher. The researcher listened to the interlocutor without intervening or asking any question because this process was designed assuming that interlocutors might not carefully engage in conversations unless they were asked to explain what they understood to a third party.

Only story tellers participated in Part 3. As pointed out by Brown and Rodgers (2002, p. 55), in introspective research, “time intervening between mental operations and report is critical and should be minimized as much as possible”. Therefore, Part 3 was implemented on the following day. To be able to ask relevant questions to story tellers, before interviews, the researcher transcribed the communication verbatim and analysed the CSs used. Story tellers and the researcher watched the story-telling process together and the researcher asked story tellers to comment on their particular communication behaviour. Questions were asked such as ‘why did you say so?’, ‘why did you mean by this?’, ‘how did you feel here?’ in order to support the analyses of CSs and understand mental processes that participants experience in using CSs. Interviews were conducted in Turkish.

To ensure the inter-coder reliability of the data analysis, CS were analysed by two specialists and a high significant correlation coefficient was found between coders [Pearson’s $r = 0.92$, $p < 0.001$]. Content analysis was used to explore the similarities and differences between participants. The performances of participants at different proficiency levels were measured through Kruskal-Wallis test, which is the non-parametric equivalent of One Way ANOVA (Field, 2009). Non-parametric test was conducted because no assumptions and further statistical analysis were made regarding the distribution of the data.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. The frequency of the use of strategies

The descriptive analysis of the data illustrated that participants relied on particular strategy categories. More than half of the strategies employed in the study were direct strategies, followed by indirect and interactional strategies. The distribution of categories employed is displayed in Table 3.

Table 3. The use of strategy categories

Category	%	Sub-category	%
Direct Strategies	57.6	Resource deficit-related	34.1
		Own performance problem-related	23
		Other performance problem-related	0.5
Indirect Strategies	35.3	Processing time pressure-related	35.3
		Own performance problem-related	-
		Other performance problem-related	-
Interactional Strategies	7.1	Resource deficit-related strategies	0.5
		Own performance problem-related	1
		Other performance problem-related	5.6

The dependence on direct strategies shows that the main reason for implementing CSs was the lack of knowledge. This is because direct strategies involve strategies that enable speakers to compensate the gaps in knowledge. As displayed in Table 3, the majority of direct strategies employed in the present study were ‘resource deficit-related strategies’, which indicates that participants employed CSs because of deficient competence in the target language (Dörnyei & Kormos, 1998). ‘Own-performance problem-related strategies’ were the other popular category of direct strategies, which shows that it was not interlocutors’ but speakers’ lack of knowledge that led to the high frequent use of direct strategies in this study. Other popular category was ‘processing time pressure-related strategies’. This type of strategies involves stalling mechanisms which are employed to gain time in conversations (Dörnyei & Kormos, 1998). Van Hest (1996) points out that dependence on this type of strategies indicates speaker’s lack of fluency. The great majority of interactional strategies employed in the study were ‘other performance problem-related strategies’. This shows that participants mostly employed interactional strategies when there was a communication problem emerging from interlocutor’s performance or comprehension of the intended message.

Besides popular strategy categories, the use of individual CSs is also worth considering as they profile participants’ strategy repertoires. The frequency analysis of the communication strategies used by all participants in the study revealed that 1,516 CSs were employed in total. Interestingly, out of 40 different strategies, participants relied solely on six strategies and 76.7% of strategies employed in the study were these popular strategies. Learners’ reliance on particular strategies was also found by Paribakht (1986) who stated that learners essentially exploit the same CSs. The distribution of the frequencies of popular strategies is displayed in Table 4.

Table 4. The popular communication strategies

	Strategy	N	Freq.	%
1.	Use of Fillers	17	331	2.8
2.	Self repair	17	207	13.7
3.	Self repetition	17	204	13.5
4.	Self rephrase	17	147	9.7
5.	Mime	17	141	9.3
6.	Approximation	17	133	8.7
	SUBTOTAL	17	1.163	76.7%
	TOTAL	17	1.516	100%

‘Use of fillers’ was the most popular strategy in this study. Dörnyei (1995) discusses this type of strategies as ‘communication maintenance strategies’. These strategies are not related to speakers’ lack of competence but employed when speakers need to gain time in conversations. According to Canale (1983), these strategies are essential for developing strategic competence which is required to maintain conversation. In this study, participants mostly uttered ‘err’ to fill pauses in conversations:

“He is **err** [body language] **err** drinking.” (Student 1)

“... she is a very energetic woman **err** I think she is **err** she looks as if she is a doing some sports.” (Student 12)

Participants’ responses to interviews regarding reasons for uttering ‘err’ confirmed the function of ‘use of fillers’:

“I was trying to say that ‘she has just stopped doing sport’ but I could not say it. Therefore I utter err to gain time to think how to say that expression.” (Student 12)

Self-repetition has similar function to ‘use of fillers’. Instead of uttering non-lexicalised fillers, speakers repeat a word or a phrase in order to fill pauses in conversations (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997). Self-repetition was the third popular strategy in this study and participants frequently repeated their utterances:

“And also **while she is trying err while she is trying**.” (Student 14).

“**The first couple’s the first couple’s** man who sits in the restaurant couldn’t manage to play tennis.” (Student 13)

When asked about the reasons for repeating her utterances, Student 14 accepted that she “was thinking what to say next”. High dependence on ‘time-gaining’ strategies shows that developing fluency is participants’ one of the main communication needs. This is because fluent speakers do not make pauses, and hence, do not need to use stalling mechanisms to fill these pauses.

Self-repair was the second popular strategy. These strategies are self-initiated corrections (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997) and speakers use modified output (Nakatani, 2010) to correct their utterances:

“In fact there was a camping, **there were there was** a tent with them.” (Student 1)

“The girl **want to wants to** go on a holiday.” (Student 6)

As displayed above, having noticed the grammatical mistake, students repaired their utterance immediately:

“After uttering the sentence I realised that I made a grammatical mistake and I uttered the word again in correct form.” (Student 6)

Implementing self-repair indicates learners’ ability to monitor their performances. They seemed to be competent enough to identify their grammatical mistakes while speaking. However, high frequent use of self-repair also shows that students need to develop accuracy in speaking so that they can avoid incorrect utterances.

Self-rephrase, which is repeating a term by adding something or paraphrasing (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997), was also employed frequently in the study. Participants employed this strategy when they noticed ambiguous points in their explanations:

“Then **she the hairdresser** show her hairs new err her new hair style.” (Student 3)

“Later on we see that **man I mean the husband**.” (Student 2)

As seen in the quotes above, speakers felt that a clarification was needed and restructured their utterances. This was mentioned by Student 3:

“I thought that my partner might be confused. Therefore I thought that I should have clarified that she was the hairdresser.”

Mime was also one of the popular CSs. It involves the use of non-linguistic means that are implemented to support verbal expression (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997; Manchón, 2000). In this study, mime was mostly used when the speaker had difficulty in recalling lexical items and participants expressed the intended message by using their body language:

“The woman was a err [**showing her hair**] hair dresser.” (Student 5)

“... and he says what are you doing here and err look at his err [**showing watch**] [laugh] clock.” (Student 1)

As confirmed by the speaker in stimulated recall interview, Student 1 could not remember the target word ‘watch’ and overcame this problem by using her body language.

The final popular strategy was ‘approximation’. Similar to the use of mime in this study, the function of approximation is to provide alternate lexical items which have similar semantic features with the target word or structure (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997). Poulisse (1993) calls this as a ‘substitution strategy’ because speakers use an alternative vocabulary item that could serve the purpose of sending the intended message:

I: “What is his job”?

S: “**Wall drier**” (Student 10).

“And err the man err was trying to **make a tent**”. (Student 8)

“He **kicks** the ball wrongly and cannot **kick** the ball”. (Student 17).

The exchange between Student 10 and her interlocutor illustrates the function of approximation, in that Student 10 reported that she could not recall “wall painter” and instead she uttered “wall drier” as an alternative vocabulary item that may send the intended message to the interlocutor. Similarly, Student 8 and 17 used alternative vocabulary items instead of ‘put up’ and ‘hit’.

4.2. *The effects of proficiency level on the use of communication strategies*

As displayed in Table 5, no statistically significant differences were found between HP and LP participants in the use of communication strategies ($p > .05$). HP learners used more CSs ($f = 895$) than LP learners ($f = 623$). This contradicts the assertion that less proficient learners face more communication problems, and therefore, they use more CSs (Kaivanpanah et al., 2012; Paribakht, 1986) and parallel studies in which no significant difference was found in the frequency of CS use between LP and HP learners (e.g. Bialystok, 1983; Dörnyei, 1995; Kaivanpanah & Yamouty, 2009; Ting & Phan, 2008).

Although this study revealed no differences in overall strategy use, statistically significant differences were found in the use of three strategies. The results are displayed in Table 5.

Table 5. Strategies with significant differences

<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Group</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean rank</i>	<i>Chi-Square</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Mime	Low.	8	6.39	5.349	1	.021
	High	9	11.94			
Message reduction	Low.	8	11.44	5.418	1	.020
	High	9	6.25			
Topic avoidance	Low.	8	12.00	9.304	1	.002
	High	9	5.63			
Total	Low.	8	10.13	.750	1	.386
	High	9	8			

As displayed in Table 5, while HP participants employed ‘mime’ significantly greater than LP participants, ‘message reduction’ and ‘topic avoidance’ were used more frequently by LP students.

Identifying the natures of these three strategies indicates the communication needs of learners at different proficiency levels. Previous studies revealed conflicting findings concerning the connection between proficiency and using ‘mime’. Some studies concluded that LP learners resort to ‘mime’ more than HP learners (Nakatani, 2006; Paribakht, 1986). Conversely, Chen (1990) found that proficient learners were better at using visual aids in communication. According to Chen, this is related to learners’ confidence: as learners develop their proficiencies, they build confidence and this leads to feeling comfortable enough to use their body language in conversations. This was observed in the present study as well, in that LP participants rarely used their body language.

The fact that LP learners employed both ‘message reduction’ and ‘topic avoidance’ significantly greater than HP learners was probably the reason why HP learners employed more CSs in this study. This was because, HP learners endeavoured to describe the movies in detail, and hence, they dealt with more communication problems. Conversely, LP learners tended to avoid engaging in dialogues and summarised the main events. As a result, while the completion time of story-telling process of LP learners was 9 minutes on average, this was 13 minutes for HP learners.

The following extracts are samples of topic avoidance:

“And a man which is customer didn’t like his job. **Then** err couple decided to go somewhere to err stay and...” (Student 10)

“The painter man try to do err learn golf the small area and he is able to play. **That’s all.**” (Student 17)

Although both Student 10 and 17 knew that there were other events that they could talk about, they skipped these to avoid any possible communication problems. Their retrospective comments confirmed that they wanted to complete the conversation as soon as possible:

“I was feeling anxious and trying to keep the communication short. I was looking forward to completing the story-telling.”

LP learners’ reliance more on avoidance strategies was supported by the previous studies (e.g. Khanji, 1996; Mei & Nathalang, 2010; Nakatani, 2006). In Nakatani’s study, carried out in Japan, LP learners reported to use message abandonment strategies more than HP learners. A study carried out by Mei and Nathalang (2010) in a Chinese university revealed that LP learners rely on avoidance strategies significantly more than HP learners. This finding is also in line with Chuanchaisit and Prapphal’s study (2013), conducted in Thailand, in which HP learners were found to implement more risk-taking strategies compared to LP learners. As asserted by Nakatani, LP learners’ dependence on

avoidance strategies is related to their lack of sense of self-efficacy: “when realizing that they cannot achieve their communicative goal, the learner may choose to avoid the problem which leads to the use of reduction strategies” (Metcalf & Nook-Ura, 2013, p. 69). This was possibly the main reason why LP learners preferred not to go into detail in describing the movies in the present study.

5. Implications

This study revealed that Turkish EFL learners have limited repertoire of CSs and rely on particular strategies to overcome communication problems. This may be related to learners’ educational background, in that they may not find opportunity to practise using different CSs. To overcome this, appropriate classroom teaching procedures should be provided in which learners can build an awareness of the functions of different CSs and practise how to use CSs to overcome different communication problems. In doing so, as suggested by Chen (1990), teachers should avoid presenting highly structured activities but endeavour to provide authentic communicative environments so that students can experience communication problems. This will probably result in improving students’ ability to use CSs, which makes it possible to develop their strategic competence (Bialystok, 1983; Canale & Swain, 1980).

Popular strategies indicate learners’ communicative needs. The majority of strategies employed in the study concerned compensating speakers’ lack of competence in English and participants resorted to CSs especially when they needed to gain time in conversations. Additionally, participants frequently repaired their utterances and felt that further explanation was required to clarify their explanations. Addressing these issues should be one of the main concerns of curriculum designers and teachers and classes should be designed to improve learners’ accuracy and fluency in speaking.

This study showed that proficiency is not a factor influencing the choice of CSs. This supports Dörnyei’s suggestion (1995) that CSs can be taught not only to LP learners but also HP learners. This disconnection conflicts the assumption that less proficient learners experience more communication problems, and hence, they use more CSs. Conversely, LP learners avoid engaging in communication by using avoidance strategies, and hence, they resort to less CSs (Chen, 1990). On the other hand, HP learners take risk and this requires coping with more communication problems. Avoidance strategies are considered as negative speaker behaviour (Nakatani, 2010; Ya-ni, 2007) and resorting on this type of strategies hinder practising English. However, to improve their ability to use CSs, learners need to use strategies which enable them to remain in conversation (Nakatani, 2010). Therefore, instead of avoiding or reducing the intended message, learners should be encouraged to take risks to use English communicatively and exploit the opportunities to practise speaking English.

6. Conclusions

The objectives of the present study were twofold: (a) profiling CSs used by Turkish EFL learners, (b) revealing the role of proficiency level on the use of CSs. The overreliance on six individual strategies confirms that Turkish EFL learners have limited CS repertoires: they frequently use CSs to gain time during conversation, repair structural mistakes in their utterances, rephrase ambiguous points, exploit visual aids, and use alternative lexical item when they cannot recall the target vocabulary item. This study also revealed that proficiency does not affect the choice of CSs. However, significant differences were found in the use of three CSs: while LP learners rely more on avoidance strategies, HP learners use their body language more effectively.

Although it is not possible for a research study to provide authentic communicative environment, this study attempted to approximate it as closely to it as possible through designing communicative research environment. Nevertheless, the research design has some limitations that should be

addressed. The data collection process may have hindered the use of some CSs (e.g. code-switching, feigning understanding, mumbling). The less dependence on the interactional strategies may be because of participants' personal relationship with their interlocutors. This study was carried out at a particular university and included only female students. The participants were upper-intermediate and advanced learners of English. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalised to other contexts and to participants at different proficiency levels. The study has not dealt with the effectiveness of CS use. To better understand the concept, further research should be carried out in different contexts by focusing on different aspects of CSs such as strategy training and the effectiveness of CSs.

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İngilizce yeterliliğin iletişim stratejilerinin kullanımına etkisi: Türkiye’de yabancı dil olarak İngilizce bağlamında etkileşim odaklı bir çalışma

Öz

Bu çalışma, Türkiye’de İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen öğrencilerin kullandığı iletişim stratejilerini araştırmayı ve dil yeterliliği ile iletişim stratejilerinin kullanımı arasındaki ilişkiyi ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Farklı yeterlilik seviyelerindeki 17 çiftin iki kısa film üzerine müzakere etmeleri istenmiş ve anımsamayı sağlayan görüşmeler gerçekleştirilmiştir. Kruskal-Wallis test sonuçları katılımcıların ‘söze dolgu yapmak’, ‘öz tamir’ ve ‘öz tekrar’ gibi belirli stratejileri kullandıklarını göstermiştir. Yeterlilik seviyesi öğrencilerin strateji seçimlerini etkileyen bir faktör olarak bulunmamıştır ancak ‘ileti azaltma’, ‘konudan kaçınma’ ve ‘vücut dili’ stratejilerinin kullanımında anlamlı farklar bulunmuştur. Bu bulgular öğretim planlama konusunda göze alınacak hususlarla ilgili çıkarımlar yapmayı mümkün kılmıştır.

Anahtar sözcükler: İletişim stratejileri, dil yeterliliği, etkileşim-odaklı yöntem, yabancı dil olarak İngilizce

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