Strategic Competence in Virtual Classrooms: An Exploration of Compensation Strategies of Non-native Adult Speakers of English

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Abstract

Compensation strategies, a crucial aspect of strategic competence, are playing a decisive role in effective communication and, used in communication by interlocutors to compensate for their deficiency in the target language. The use of compensation strategies is anticipated to vary depending on the context, due to their context-specific nature. Thus, this descriptive study aims to explore the types and frequencies of compensation strategy use by an international group of graduate students. The data were collected through observation of video-recorded class sessions from nine graduate students studying at a foundation university in Turkey. The results showed that the strategies of "keeping the floor," "self-rephrasing," and "appeal to authority" were most frequently utilized. Conversely, strategies like word coinage and non-verbal signs were not employed at all. This research offers insight into the compensation strategies used in online settings, where communication dynamics are notably distinct.

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Sanal Sınıflarda Stratejik Yeterlilik: Ana Dili İngilizce Olmayan Yetişkin Konuşmacıların Telafi Stratejilerinin Araştırılması

Özet

Stratejik yeterliliğin önemli bir yönü olan telafi stratejileri, etkili iletişimde belirleyici bir rol oynar ve iletişimde muhataplar tarafından hedef dildeki eksikliklerini telafi etmek için kullanılır. Telafi stratejilerinin kullanımının, bağlama özgü doğası nedeniyle bağlama bağlı olarak değişiklik göstermesi beklenmektedir. Bu nedenle, bu betimsel çalışma, uluslararası bir grup yüksek lisans öğrencisi tarafından telafi stratejisi kullanım türlerini ve sıklıklarını keşfetmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Veriler, Türkiye'deki bir vakıf üniversitesinde öğrenim gören dokuz yüksek lisans öğrencisinin video kaydı yapılan sınıf oturumlarının gözlemlenmesi yoluyla toplanmıştır. Sonuçlar, "sözü tutma", "kendini yeniden ifade etme" ve "otoriteye başvurma" stratejilerinin en sık kullanılan stratejiler olduğunu göstermiştir. Buna karşılık, kelime uydurma ve sözel olmayan işaretler gibi stratejiler hiç kullanılmamıştır. Bu araştırma, iletişim dinamiklerinin oldukça farklı olduğu çevrimiçi ortamlarda kullanılan telafi stratejileri hakkında fikir vermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dil öğrenme stratejileri, telafi stratejileri, telafi edici strateji kullanımı

Introduction

Communication dynamics in online environments are different from those in face-to-face interactions. This variety leads to increased communication problems for language speakers, stemming either from a lack of linguistic resources or from the nature of the online environment. These communication problems, or communication breakdowns, are compensated for by means of various compensatory strategies to reach a shared understanding (Rababah, 2004). Compensation strategies employed by non-native speakers were generally investigated in face-to-face contexts. However, to our knowledge, no prior studies have investigated compensatory strategy use in an online learning environment in Turkish context. Hence, the current study aims to identify the

types and frequencies of compensatory strategies used by non-native speakers of English in a synchronous online learning environment.

Literature review

Language Learning Strategies

Learning strategy is defined as "an attempt to develop linguistic and sociolinguistic competence in the target language -- to incorporate these into one's interlanguage competence" (Tarone, 1983, p. 67). These strategies include "any sets of operations, steps, plan, routines used by the learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval and use of information" (Wenden & Rubin, 1987).

Learning strategies are generally categorized into two groups: direct and indirect strategies. Direct strategies are solely associated with mental processing of the target language (i.e., memory, cognitive and compensation strategies), and indirect strategies (i.e., metacognitive, affective, and social strategies) "support and manage language learning without directly involving the target language" (Oxford, 1990, p. 135).

Compensation Strategies

Compensation strategies, or communication strategies as Hymes (1972) suggests, are the strategies "needed to overcome any gaps in knowledge of the language" (Oxford, 1990, p. 71). Language learners attempt to compensate for their limited linguistic and non-linguistic abilities in the target language by employing compensation strategies, which might be crucial in enhancing their communicative competence.

With the concept of "language for communication" gaining more attention after the 1970s, when Hymes (1972) introduced the concept of communicative competence, greater interest was directed towards "communication strategies," a term first introduced by Selinker (1972) in his discussion of the five central processes of the interlanguage system. Studies on communication strategies led Canale and Swain (1980) to explore strategic competence as an important element in their model of communicative competence. Strategic competence is defined as the "verbal and non-verbal strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or insufficient competence" (p. 30). Canale and Swain (1980) refined Hymes' definition and identified four components of communicative competence (See Table 1).

Table 1. Definition of Communicative Competence by Canale and Swain (1980).

Communicative Competence			
Grammatical Competence	Discourse Competence	Sociolinguistic Competence	Strategic Competence

Building on the work of Canale and Swain (1980), Dörnyei and Scott (1997) also categorized strategic competence as a subset of communication strategies. They noted that these strategies are employed to achieve communicative goals between speakers and to address their oral communication deficiencies.

Compensatory strategies, considered as either communication strategies (Canale & Swain, 1980) or language learning strategies (Oxford, 1990), garnered increased attention in the 1990s. This focus aimed to assist speakers in achieving successful communication when they encounter difficulties due to a mismatch between their communicative intentions and their current linguistic capabilities. Despite the increased scholarly attention since the 1990s, the definition of compensatory strategies has remained somewhat vague. The literature defines compensatory strategies through two distinct approaches: the interactional approach and the psycholinguistic approach (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997). Tarone's (1980) study, which influenced the interactional approach, emphasized the negotiation of meaning between speakers. Consequently, compensatory strategies are recognized as "tools used in a joint negotiation of meaning where both interlocutors are attempting to agree as to a communicative goal" (Tarone, 1980, p. 420).

Most of the research conducted on compensation strategies has focused on the concerns of definitions and classifications of compensation strategies (Faerch & Kasper, 1983; Tarone, 1977). Various definitions for compensation strategies have been offered in the literature over the course of years, but several of these definitions are concerned with the "problematicity" concept (Kasper & Kellerman, 1997). For instance, Tarone (1977) defined compensatory strategies as "conscious communication strategies that are used by an individual to overcome the crisis which occurs when language structures are inadequate to convey the individual's thought" (p. 195). Furthermore, Poulisse et al. (1984) indicate that "compensatory strategies are 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" (p. 72). As Rababah (2004) also explains:

Language learners attempt to solve their communication problems when they lack adequate resources in the target language by resorting to compensatory strategies. Most researchers agree that compensation strategies are used to

bridge the gap that exists between the non-native speakers' linguistic competence in the target language and their communicative needs. (p. 148)

The concept of compensation strategies has been considered as one of the five domains of Oxford's Strategy Inventory Language Learning (SILL) (1990). The concept of compensation strategies refers to the use of avoidance, circumlocution, approximation, word coinage, non-verbal signals, prefabricated patterns, code-switching, appeal to authority, and keeping the floor (Brown & Lee, 2015). The use of compensation strategies is not limited to either native or non-native speakers, however, due to the lack of sufficient competence in the target language, non-native speakers employ these strategies more frequently than native speakers.

Studies on Compensation Strategies in EFL Contexts

A study by Yılmaz (2010) and Demirel (2012) revealed that compensation strategies are the most frequently used learning strategies. Green and Oxford (1995), on the other hand, observed a critical parallel between proficiency and compensatory strategy use. In addition to the proficiency aspect, Margolis (2001) found that language learners have used a variety of techniques, particularly requesting more input or clarification, to mitigate shortcomings in the listening and communication abilities of their target language. Liskin-Gasparro (1996) analyzed the use of compensation strategies in terms of its relation to proficiency levels and found that advanced speakers rely more on a range of compensation strategies compared to upper-intermediate speakers of the same target language.

Compensation strategies have not received sufficient attention in the relevant field, and much of the research has primarily focused on defining, pinpointing, and categorizing compensation strategies. The remainder of the research has mostly examined the impact of various factors on the use of compensation strategies and concerns related to teachability (Bialystok, 1983; Faerch & Kasper 1983; Taheri & Davoudi, 2016; Tarone, 1977). Even though compensation strategies in virtual environments were investigated (Feng & Shirvani, 2021), this has not been a point of focus in Turkish context. Thus, this study aims to identify the types and frequencies of compensation strategy use by non-native speakers of English in a synchronous online learning environment in Turkish context. The research questions guiding the study are as follows:

1) What is the prevalence of various compensation strategy types employed by non-native English speakers?

2) Which strategies are utilized with the highest and lowest frequencies?

Methodology

Research Design

The current study employs an observational descriptive design to capture the real-time use of compensation strategies by non-native speakers, as it allows for a naturalistic and detailed examination of their communication behaviors (Rezigalla, 2020). This design utilizes quantification of observations through "a simple tally sheet" with the aim of recording the frequency of compensatory strategy use (Mertler, 2016, p. 112). Unlike experimental designs, the observational approach allowed for a more authentic capture of communicative strategies, free from the artificial constraints of a controlled experimental setting.

Setting and Participants

This study involved 9 graduate, non-native English-speaking students, aged between 22 and 30, to explore a diverse range of linguistic backgrounds and experiences. The research was conducted during the spring term of the 2017-2018 academic year at a foundation university in Istanbul. The sample was intentionally international, with participants hailing from Turkey, Canada, South Korea, the USA, and Palestine, reflecting the global nature of online learning environments and the varied linguistic challenges faced by non-native speakers. Moreover, all non-Turkish participants were multilingual, proficient in at least three languages, including Italian, Turkish, and French.

All participants were enrolled in the 'Intercultural Pragmatics and Language Teaching' course, which was delivered remotely via video-conferencing software. As part of the course requirements, they gave weekly presentations on topics such as cross-cultural interaction, intercultural communicative competence, and sociopragmatics.

All the participants took the Intercultural Pragmatics and Language Teaching course remotely via video-conferencing software, and they were required to give presentations on cross-cultural interaction, intercultural communicative competence, and sociopragmatics every week.

Data Collection

Data were meticulously collected over a 12-week period from synchronous online sessions to ensure a comprehensive analysis of communication strategies employed by the participants in a naturalistic virtual learning environment. These recordings were securely stored in accordance with the university's data protection policies, ensuring confidentiality and ethical compliance. After obtaining the permission letter from the Educational Sciences Faculty and the con-

sent form from the participants, researchers began transcribing the online video sessions. Each online presentation video lasted between 30 and 50 minutes.

Data Analysis

The transcription of online presentations was undertaken with utmost diligence. Each researcher independently reviewed the video sessions to minimize transcription discrepancies, ensuring the accuracy and reliability of the data for subsequent analysis. Subsequently, the researchers collectively examined the transcripts, paying close attention to the parts related to the use of compensation strategies. For data analysis, Brown and Lee's Compensation Strategy categorization (2015) was used as the primary classification source. As the process unfolded, researchers noticed that Brown and Lee's taxonomy missed a few aspects of compensatory strategy use, prompting them to include "self-repetition, self-rephrasing, and self-repair" strategies from the Inventory of Strategic Language Devices developed by Dörnyei and Scott (1997). The researchers agreed on 186 instances of compensation strategy use in these online presentations.

In the first review of the transcripts, potential parts were identified. In the second review, types of compensation strategies were highlighted and noted down. In the last phase of reviewing the transcripts, researchers ensured consistency among the detected strategy types. The compensation strategy types were then counted and classified for data analysis. Due to the small number of participants, researchers did not feel the need to include variables such as gender, age, and proficiency. In the final step, frequencies were calculated by counting the occurrences of each compensation strategy, and percentages were derived by dividing these counts by the total number of communicative acts observed, providing a clearer picture of their relative usage.

Findings

Frequency counts and percentages were calculated to determine which compensation strategies were used most frequently by the participants. Researchers focused on and investigated 12 compensation strategies during this process. The most widely used strategies were "Keeping the floor" (87 instances) and "Appeal to authority" (16 instances). The least frequently used strategies in the participants' online presentations were non-verbal signs, word coinage, and self-repetition (see Table 2).

Table 2. Compensation Strategies

Compensation Strategy Type	Frequency	Percent
Keeping the Floor	92	49.5
Self-Rephrasing	17	9.1
Appeal to Authority	16	8.6
Self-Repair	13	7.0
Avoidance	10	5.4
Code-Switching	10	5.4
Approximation	9	4.8
Prefabricated Patterns	9	4.8
Circumlocution	6	3.1
Self-Repetition	2	1.1
Word Coinage	1	.5
Nonverbal Signs	1	.5

The most frequently used strategies identified in this study are discussed individually, and evidence from the data is extensively provided for a deeper understanding.

Keeping the Floor

The "Keeping the floor" strategy refers to the use of fillers or hesitation tools to compensate for long pauses and to buy some time to think (e.g., well, so, uh, like, as a matter of fact). This strategy was the most frequently used compensatory strategy, with 92 instances. Since "Keeping the floor" involves using fillers or hesitation tools to compensate for pauses and is a way to gain time to think, it is evident that the need for using it primarily arises from deficiencies in the target language. The researchers of this study observed that some students were reading from ready-made materials in front of them, which makes it easier to avoid resorting to compensation strategies. The following excerpts taken from the data illustrate the use of the "Keeping the floor" strategy in an online context:

(1) "Self-reflection **or, uh, uh,** (long pause) or, calling for their, **uh**, previous information, or their previous thoughts, **uh**" (P4)

(2) "What we do in the classroom...**like** what we do... **Like .... Like** ...materials **or...**? (long pause)" (P6)

(3) **"So, uh,** the beliefs of the people... and society, **uh**." (P1)

Students appeared to be quite anxious at times when they were not speaking, and they attempted to fill these gaps by adding sounds such as "uhhm, mmm, errr," which are examples of the "Keeping the floor" strategy. It was also evident that students encountered difficulties when conveying their knowledge or thoughts in their second language. During such moments, they unconsciously tended to employ compensation strategies.

Self-Rephrasing

The second most commonly used strategy in the present study was "Self-Rephrasing," with a total of 17 instances. "Self-Rephrasing" refers to a type of repetition that falls between self-repetition and self-repair; the speaker repeats the word, adding something or using paraphrasing with the aim of clarifying it for the audience. The following excerpts demonstrate the use of "Self-Rephrasing" in action:

(1) **"This does not mean; this does not necessarily mean** that ...." (P3)

(2) **"For the conclusion, to conclude** despite the findings of ELF research, English language policies around the world still premised on the need for all to use native academic English" (P2)

(3) **"In your minds, in your opinions**, any ideas about what situation in low PDR used?" (P5)

Appeal to Authority

"Appeal to Authority," which refers to directly asking for help (e.g., "What do you call...?") or indirectly seeking assistance (e.g., rising intonation, pause, eye contact, puzzled expression), is the third most frequently preferred compensation strategy, with a total of 16 instances. The following examples demonstrate the use of "Appeal to Authority" in action.

(1) "The first one is called "savoir", I don't know how it is pronounced.**???"** (pausing and waiting for confirmation from the professor) (P9)

(2) "As a matter of fact . . . I couldn't understand that, I mean a requirement rule...**so, if you could give me a** you know..." (waiting for help from the professor) (P7)

(3) **"Should I go on?** Okay...**so** ?" (waiting for the professor's confirmation to move forward) (P1)

(4) **"Is that gonna be alright?"** (asking for confirmation) (P3)

A total of 186 instances of compensation strategies were identified in the online presentations. Non-verbal signs are the least used compensation strategy in online presentations, a finding that is supported by this study. The reason for the low frequency is that non-verbal signs are not visible in online sessions. Word coinage, defined as "making up new words to communicate the desired idea," is also among the least used compensation strategies, as corroborated by the findings of this study (Oxford, 1990, p. 50).

Discussion and Conclusion

This study aims to address the gap in the literature concerning the use of compensatory strategies in virtual classrooms. While there are numerous studies on strategy use, research specifically focused on compensatory strategy use in an online environment is quite limited. The findings revealed that the most frequently used compensation strategies by the participants were "keeping the floor," "self-rephrasing," and "appeal to authority." This aligns with the findings of (Broadbent & Poon, 2015), which demonstrated positive relationships between the use of self-regulated learning strategies and academic outcomes in online higher education environments (Broadbent & Poon, 2015). Furthermore, the significance of compensation strategies in ESL online classes resonates with our findings. Ragab et al. (2021) emphasized the positive effect of these strategies in enhancing media translational skills, a crucial aspect in online learning environments. The use of non-verbal communication, such as gestures, to convey meaning when the specific words are not accessible, is particularly relevant. This aligns with our observation of participants' inclination to validate information with peers, suggesting a reliance on alternative forms of communication to supplement verbal interactions.

Costley (2020) highlighted the relationship between cognitive strategies and cognitive load in online learning environments, providing further insight into the cognitive aspects of compensatory strategies. This is complemented by the work of Pasumbu and Macora (2020), who noted that ESL learners often adopt gestures and similar words or phrases when they lack the right vocabulary. This behavior underscores the importance of compensation strategies in maintaining the flow of conversation and understanding in an online learning context.

A comparative analysis with previous research, such as the study by Rababah and Bulut (2007), reveals a commonality in the infrequent use of the "word coinage" strategy. This aligns with the findings of Syafryadin et al. (2020), which noted a higher preference for word coinage among less proficient En-

glish speakers. Given that the participants in the current study are established EFL educators, the limited use of word coinage aligns with expectations.

Another noteworthy observation from this study was participants' inclination to validate information with their peers before escalating queries to professors. Due to the scarcity of studies on the types and frequencies of compensation strategies in online environments, our findings are not strongly supported by existing literature. The findings shed light on the nuanced choices of compensatory strategies by non-native English speakers in online learning environments, emphasizing the need for further research to validate and expand upon these observations.

Limitations and Recommendations

The study faced certain constraints, including a restricted sample size and time limitations, which led to the exclusion of factors such as gender, age, language proficiency, and native vs. non-native speaker distinctions. Future research could benefit from a more expansive participant pool to provide a more comprehensive understanding of compensatory strategies. Additionally, the study observed a discrepancy in strategy usage between participants who prepared their responses and those who spoke spontaneously. To ensure consistency in future studies, educators facilitating online sessions may require students to enable their webcams. While the researchers chose not to disclose the analytical nature of the study to prevent participant anxiety, some apprehension was still evident due to the recording of presentations. Subsequent studies could explore learners across various proficiency levels and draw comparisons between native and non-native speakers. An examination of compensatory strategies in both formal and informal settings could further contribute to the existing body of knowledge.

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