The Relationship between the Use of Communication Strategies and Oral Performance of ELT Students: Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University Case

Sabriye Şener[1]
Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University, Turkey

Nalan Bayraktar Balkır[2]
Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University, Turkey

Abstract

This article introduces the communication strategies employed by English Language Department (ELT) students of Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University. It also presents the strategies employed by the students in terms of gender, and prep and non-prep categories. Finally, it gives the relationship between their communication strategy use and success. To this end, 76 freshman students constitute the working group of the research. In this study, a hybrid research design was employed.The quantitative data were collected from the students by means of a "Communication Strategy Inventory" and the qualitative data were collected by means of an open-ended question. The most frequently used communication strategy sub-group was found to be approximation and the lowest communication strategy sub-group was foreignising. Besides, a significant difference in favour of the females only in the non-linguistic devices category was found. Finally, the students who employed modification strategies were found to be very successful.

Keywords:*Learning strategies, communication strategies, communication strategy use*

[1]Lecturer, Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University, Faculty of Education, Department of English Language and Teaching E-mail: sa.sener@yahoo.co.uk

[2] Lecturer, Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University, School of Foreign Languages E-mail: bayraktar6@yahoo.com

Introduction

One crucial goal of learning a foreign/second language is to be able to achieve effective communication. Effective communication involves sending and receiving messages effectively and negotiating meaning (Rubin&Thompson, 1994 cited in Ya-ni, 2007). In this respect, communication strategies that aid the maintenance of effective communication in a foreign language have become a significant concept both in the field of foreign language education and research. The studies focusing on the use of communication strategies by language learners and ways how to improve learners' use of communication strategies are of great importance in our field as it is assumed that their effective use leads to communicative competence which is considered to be the ultimate aim of foreign language learning. To put it more specifically, studies on communication strategy use might enable researchers to gain insights into the nature of learners' interlanguage development by dealing with how they cope with difficulties in conversation and foreign language teachers understand the nature of communication strategies and how they can motivate their learners to employ communication strategies.

Language Learning Strategies

Language learning strategies have occupied a large part of research into effective and autonomous language learning in recent years. Two common definitions of learning strategies are given by Oxford (1990: 8) as "operations employed by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of information" and as "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations". Brown (2001: 210) also defines strategies as "specific methods of approaching a problem or task, modes of operations for achieving a particular end, or planned designs for controlling and manipulating certain information". As can be inferred from these definitions, strategies are utilized by the learner to aid and facilitate learning.

Learning strategies constitute an important place in foreign language learning process since they have several features that serve more than one aim. Oxford (1990: 9) summarizes key features of language learning strategies in the following way: Language learning strategies contribute to the main goal, communicative competence; allow learners to become more self-directed; expand the role of teachers; are problem-oriented; are specific actions taken by the learner; involve many aspects of the learner, not just the cognitive; support learning both directly and indirectly; are not always observable; can be taught; are flexible; and are influenced by a variety of factors. As these features clearly indicate, language learning strategies are of great importance and worth to be employed by language learners.

Communication Strategies

Williams and Burden (2000: 150) define communication strategies (henceforth, CSs) as "strategies used by speakers when they come across a difficulty in their communication because of a lack of adequate knowledge of the language". In this sense, CSs improve learners' communication. Similarly, Wenden and Rubin (1987) state the importance of CSs by emphasizing that with successful communication, motivation for more learning can be enhanced and add that CSs are used when there is a difference between the learner's knowledge and communicative intend.

As for the main types of CSs, there is an abundance of CSs taxonomies in the literature. Wenden and Rubin (1987), for example, note that a common communication strategy is to use one's linguistic or communicative knowledge to remain in the conversation

such as using synonyms, cognates, simple sentences, semantic contiguity, gestures or mime, and circumlocution or paraphrase. They also state that learners can remain in the conversation by using a few well-chosen conversational formulas to continue to participate in activities which provide contexts for the learning of new material. These consist of opening and closing a conversation, pausing, getting and keeping turns, and requesting assistance.

Another widely recognised taxonomy is Tarone's Taxonomy of Communication Strategies, which includes the strategies of *paraphrase* (approximation, word coinage, and circumlocution), *borrowing* (literal translation, language switch, appeal for assistance, and mime), and *avoidance* (topic avoidance and message abandonment) (Tarone 1977, cited in Bialystok, 1990: 39).

Review of Research into Communication Strategy Use

The number of investigations on the relationship between language proficiency and communication strategy use in the field of foreign language education is accelerating. Bialystok and Fröhlich (1980), for example, investigated the effect of linguistic proficiency on the use of CSs with a teenage group of learners of French. The findings of the study revealed that low-linguistic proficiency subjects used L1-based CSs (codeswitching, literal translation and foreignising) more frequently than high-linguistic-proficiency subjects, whereas high proficiency learners made more frequent use of L2-based CSs.

Another study with parallel results was carried out by Chen (1990) who investigated the effects of linguistic proficiency on the communication strategy use by a group of Chinese learners of EFL. The findings revealed that linguistic proficiency affects the quantity, quality and effectiveness of communication strategy use. Higher proficiency learners used fewer strategies, as well as employing those strategies more effectively than did the lower-proficiency learners.

Similarly, Özarı (1997) found out that linguistic proficiency does not influence the quantity of communication strategies. However, it influences the quality of CSs employed. That is, subjects with low linguistic proficiency employed L1-based CSs more frequently than the subjects with higher linguistic proficiency. Also, Gümüş (2007) investigated the use of communication strategies of high school students and concluded that linguistic proficiency seems to be a factor significantly influencing communication strategy use. It was also found that communication strategy use differs between prep and non-prep students in terms of modification devices and L1-based CSs.

As for the investigation of the relationship between gender and communication strategy use Ehrman and Oxford (1989), Macro (2006), and Sheorey (1999) demonstrated that female learners tend to use more strategies than males.

Methodology

Research Design and Aim

The study is built with a structure suitable for combined approach where quantitative and qualitative methods are used together during the data collection and analysis phases. The main objective of this study is to examine the communication strategies employed by the freshman students studying at the English Language Department (ELT) of Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University. It also aims to reveal the relationship between the strategy use and success of the students. The research questions posed for this study are as follows:

RQ1- What are the most frequent/least frequent communication strategies employed by ELT freshman students?

RQ2- What are the communication strategy use differences in terms of prep group and non- prep group?

RQ3- What are the communication strategy use differences in terms of gender?

RQ4- Is there a relationship between the use of their communication strategies and oral competence?

Setting and Participants of the Study

In order to answer the research questions, the questionnaire was distributed to the students studying in the 1st year of the ELT Department of Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University. The Department offers a four-year training program, plus a compulsory one-year prep class to improve the skills of students who fail to attain a sufficient score in a skills-based exemption exam at the beginning of their studies. In total, 76 students, 28 males and 48 females, studying their first year in the Department participated to the study. They were all native speakers of Turkish Language and were in the Fall Term of 2011-2012 Academic Year

Data Collection Procedures and Instruments

The questionnaire designed for the study consists of two parts. The first part includes 4 demographic questions and one open-ended question related to the communication strategies they use to be more successful while communicating with others. In the second part, the "Communication Strategy Inventory" which was adopted from the inventory developed by Gümüş (2007) was used. 44 items were adopted out of 86 items and two check items were included. The items of the inventory were organized in thirteen categories.

Table 1.
Communication strategy subcategories

Strategy Sub-categories	Number of Items
Functional reduction	1/2/3/4/10/11
Formal reduction	6/7/8/9
Overgeneralization	5
Circumlocution	14/18/19
Approximation	12/13/15/16
Literal translation	20
Code-switching	21
Foreignising	23
Guessing	39/40
Appeal for assistance	30/31/33/34/35/36/37/38
Stalling	27/28/29/45/46
Modification devices	41/42/43/44
Non-linguistic devices	17/24/25/26

The scale was a five-item Likert-type scale and the language of which was English. The questionnaire was administered during class hours, and it took them almost 25 minutes to answer the questions. In order to compare the strategy use and achievement of the students, the list including the results of mid-term oral-communication skills course of the students was provided from the tutor who gives the course.

Results and Discussions

Firstly, the quantitative data obtained through an inventory were analysed by using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 16.0. On the first hand, the reliability of the items was calculated (Cronbach's alpha=.80). The answers of the participants to the open-ended questions were analysed through content analysis by putting the items under determined categories.

The three most frequently used sub-categories of communication strategies were found to be approximation (mean=3,85); circumlocution (mean=3,71); modification devices (mean=3,63). The analysis showed that the least frequently used sub-categories were foreignising (mean=1,95), overgeneralization (mean=2,55); and codeswitching (mean=2,57).

Table 2.

Descriptive statistics for groups of most and least used communication strategies

Categories and Items	Mean	S.D
Approximation	**3, 85**	
Item12.	3, 88	, 938
Item13.	3, 45	1, 159
Item15.	4, 21	, 884
Item16.	3, 87	1,063
Circumlocution	**3, 71**	
Item14.	3, 63	1,153
Item18.	3, 58	, 928
Item19.	3, 93	,854
Modification Devices	**3, 63**	
Item41.	3, 72	, 888
Item42.	3, 92	, 796
Item43.	3, 14	1,016
Item44.	3, 71	, 877
Foreignising		
Item23.	1, 95	1,165
Overgeneralization		
Item5.	2, 55	1,076
Code-switching		
Item21.	2, 57	1, 289

When prep and non-prep variable was investigated, t-test analysis showed a significant difference in the groups of approximation (mean= 3,9856), literal translation (mean= 2,7500), guessing (mean= 3,6442), and non-linguistic devices (mean= 3,2212). In all of these groups, students who stated that they studied the prep class scored higher than those who did not study the prep class. It can be deduced that the students are able to learn some communication strategies during their prep education either from tutors or from their peers.

When gender differences were examined, a significant difference in favour of the females only in the non-linguistic devices category was found. The mean score of the female students (mean= 3, 2448) was found to be higher than the mean scores of the male students (m=2, 8036). This result seems interesting because according to the findings of several studies (e.g. Bialystok et. al, 1980; Phillipson, et. al., 1984) low-linguistic proficiency learners tend to use non-linguistic devices (i.e. pointing, mimicry, drawing, gestures, etc.) more frequently than linguistic devices. In order to test this result, male and female learners' proficiency could further be examined in another study.

When the relationship between the strategy use and success was examined, it was revealed that the students who employed the modification strategies (mean= 3,8068) were found to be very successful. Other significant differences are in overgeneralization (mean=2,7609), code switching (mean=2,8913), foreignising (mean= (2,2609), and non-linguistic devices (mean= 3,2935) categories. It is clearly seen that students employ other repair, self-repair, comprehension check questions and become very successful. This set of strategies includes both asking for clarification or verification and asking for correction (Oxford, 1990:168-169).

Table 3.

Achievement differences of different strategy groups

Categories and Items	Mean	S.D
Approximation	**3, 85**	
Item12.	3, 88	, 938
Item13.	3, 45	1,159
Item15.	4, 21	, 884
Item16.	3, 87	1,063
Circumlocution	**3, 71**	
Item14.	3, 63	1,153
Item18.	3, 58	, 928
Item19.	3, 93	, 854
Modification Devices	**3, 63**	
Item41.	3, 72	, 888
Item42.	3, 92	, 796
Item43.	3, 14	1,016
Item44.	3, 71	, 877
Foreignising		
Item23.	1, 95	1,165
Overgeneralization		
Item5.	2, 55	1,076
Code-switching		
Item21.	2, 57	1, 289

When the qualitative data were analysed, it was found that there were many strategies employed by the students to be more successful while speaking. However, the most used groups were as follows: (1) "lowering anxiety" (26.25%), (2) "using gestures" (22.50%), and (3) "approximation" (11.25%). The students openly state that when they are relaxed and have self-confidence and trust the people they address, they become more successful. Similarly, Şener (2010) found the existence of considerable levels of anxiety in L2 classes in her study.

In short, the analysis of the qualitative data implies that tutors should remember to encourage, support, hearten, and comfort their students during lessons and out of class activities; and introduce them some communication strategies, repair strategies and strategies for success which will be useful during their communication with others. In this study, parallel findings were found as a result of quantitative and qualitative data analysis.

Conclusion

According to the results of this study, ELT freshman students most frequently use approximation strategies like super-ordinate terms, antonyms and synonyms which are L2 based strategies. This might imply that participants of this study mostly employ strategies used by learners with generally high proficiency level as relevant literature reveals (Wannaruk, 2002).

The second finding is that students who studied the prep class use more CSs than non-prep group students. This finding implies that prep education induces learners to be aware of and use more strategies. It also suggests that foreign language teachers and tutors should undergo communication strategy training courses so that they can incorporate strategy training into their classes and in this way their learners are motivated and encouraged to use CSs to remain in the conversation in the target language.

In terms of the relationship between learners' oral competence and use of CSs, it is seen that successful students use most frequently modification strategies such as comprehension check, self-repair, and other-repair. These strategies are also referred as social strategies and considered to be essential and helpful for all language skills (Oxford, 1990).

Finally, the findings obtained from the qualitative data suggest that tutors should take affective factors into consideration; and motivate their learners to use anxiety lowering strategies through developing positive attitudes, creating a friendly atmosphere, and arranging speaking activities and tasks increasing their self-confidence

References

Bialystok, E., Theoretical Model of Second Language Learning. In K. Croft (ed.), Readings on English as a Second Language, Winthrop Publishers, 199-212, Cambridge, 1980.

Bialystok, E., Communication Strategies: A Psychological Analysis of Second Language Use, Blackwell, London, 1990.

Bialystok, E. & Fröhlich, M., Oral Communication Strategies for Lexical Difficulties, Interlanguage Studies Bulletin-Utrecht, 5, (1980), 3-30.

Brown, H. D., Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy, Longman, ISBN.0-13-028283-9, New York, 2001.

Chen, S., A Study of Communication Strategies in Interlanguage Production by Chinese EFL learners, Language Journal, 40(2), (1990), 155-187.

Ehrman, M. & Oxford, R., Effects of Sex Differences, Career Choice, and Psychological Type on Adults' Language Learning Strategies, Modern Language Journal, 73, (1989), 1-13.

Gümüş, P., A Study into the Impact of Language Proficiency on the Use of Communication Strategies by High School Students, Unpublished MA Thesis, Çanakkale: Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University, 2007.

Lai, H., Gender Effect on the Use of CSs, English Language Teaching, 3(4), (2010), 28-32.

Macro, E., Strategies of Language Learning and Using: Revising the Theoretical Framework. The Modern Language Journal, 90, (2006), 320–337.

Oxford, R. L., "Language Learning Strategies: What Every Teacher Should Know", Heinle&Heinle Publishers, Massachusetts, 1990.

Özarı, R., A Study on Comparison of Communication Strategies of Turkish EFL Learners at Different Proficiency Levels, Unpublished M. A. Thesis, Eskişehir: Anadolu Üniversitesi, 1997.

Phillipson, R. & Haastrup, P.K., Learner Language and Language Learning, Multilingual Matters, Avon, 1984.

Sheorey, R., An Examination of Language Learning Strategy Use in the Setting of an Indigenized Variety of English, System, 28(2), (1999), 173-190.

Şener, S., Measuring Anxiety Levels of Turkish University Students, ELT Conference, 441-447,Turkey, May 2010.

Wannaruk, A., Communication Strategies in an EST Context, 2002, [Online]: Retrieved on January 3, 2012 at URL: http://www.nceltr.mq.edu.au/conference2002/papers/Wannaruk.pdf.

Wenden, A. & Rubin, J., Learner Strategies in Language Learning, Prentice Hall International, Hemel Hempstead, 1987.

Williams, M. & Burden, R.L., Psychology for Language Teachers: A social Constructivist Approach, Cambridge University Press, ISBN 0 521 49880 5, UK, 1997.

Ya-ni, Z., Communication strategies and foreign language learning, Foreign Language, 5 (4) (2007), 43-48.