AVOIDANCE STRATEGY IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE PRODUCTION

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ABSTRACT

Avoidance is one of the common strategies employed by second language learners in the production of the target language when they have inadequate and incomplete knowledge about grammatical rules and lexical items. Previous studies have provided evidence for avoidance. In view of this observation, this study aimed to find out whether Turkish learners of English avoid any grammatical structure or lexical items while producing English sentences, and if so, to what extent they use it as a learning strategy to cope with the difficulties they face in the process of second language acquisition.

The subjects of this study were forty Turkish learners of English studying English as their major. Data were collected from the compositions they wrote about one of their earlier memories first in their native language and then in the target language. They were asked to write the same composition in both languages to identify the modifications and omissions they were making in the compositions they wrote in their native language when producing them in the target language. The results obtained from the study provided evidence that learners did avoid some structures when writing their compositions in their second language. The findings of the study were important as regards its pedagogical implications.

Keywords: *Avoidance, learning strategies, second language acquisition, writing*

İKİNCİ DİL ÜRETİMİNDE KAÇINMA STRATEJİSİ

ÖZET

Kaçınma hedef dil üretiminde ikinci dil öğrencilerinin dilbilgisi kuralları ve sözcüksel ögeler hakkında yetersiz ve eksik bilgiye sahip olduklarında kullandıkları yaygın stratejilerden biridir. Önceki çalışmalar kaçınmaya ilişkin deliller sunmuştur. Bu gözlem ışığında, bu çalışma İngilizce öğrenen Türk öğrencilerin İngilizce cümle üretirken herhangi bir dilbilgisel yapıdan veya sözcüksel ögelerden kaçınıp kaçınmadığını öğrenmeyi, ve eğer öyleyse, ikinci dil edinimin sürecinde karşılaştıkları güçlüklerle baş etmek için

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bunu bir öğrenme strateji olarak ne ölçüde kullandıklarını belirlemeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Bu çalışmanın denekleri İngilizceyi uzmanlık alanları olarak öğrenen 40 Türk öğrenciden oluşmaktaydı. Veriler ilk olarak ana dillerinde daha sonra hedef dilde yazdıkları daha önceki hatıralarından biriyle ilgili kompozisyonlardan toplantı. Yaptıkları değişiklik ve çıkarmaları belirlemek amacıyla öğrencilerin ana dillerinde yazdıkları kompozisyonun aynısını hedef dilde yazmaları istendi. Çalışmadan elde edilen sonuçlar öğrencilerin ikinci dilde kompozisyon yazarken bazı yapılardan kaçındıklarına dair deliller sundu. Öğretime ilişkin sonuçları açısından çalışmanın bulguları önemliydi.

Anahtar sözcükler: Kaçınma, öğrenme stratejileri, ikinci dil edinimi, yazma

1. INTRODUCTION

A language learner aims to convey messages to the other people he communicates while producing a foreign or second language and to reach this aim he makes use of various strategies. Corder (1978:18) points out this fact and states that in such a situation the learner has to choose one of the two principal *macro strategies* available to him. In the first case, he may attempt to use all the linguistic sources at his disposal and pass the precise information to the party he interacts. The learner may paraphrase the message, invent new words, guess words and borrow some items from his mother tongue. They are named as *risk-taking* or *resource-expansion strategies*. However, he also warns that there is the risk of failure as well as success in the use of this strategy.

As the alternative of the first case, the learner may ignore or exclude the part of the message causing difficulty to himself. That is to say, he plays safe and omits the parts including unknown grammatical structures or lexical items in his production, even at the expense of losing some information that should be passed to the interlocutor. Corder (1978) has called them as *risk-avoiding strategies*.

Subsequent to the explanations made by Corder, some other researchers have been interested in strategies employed in communication and classified them into several categories. Varadi (1973, 1983:81-99), one of the early researchers dealing with communication strategies, divided the strategies into two main groups as *meaning reduction* and *meaning replacement*. He distinguished intentional reduction strategies from extensional ones and emphasized generalization, approximation, circumlocution and paraphrase as important strategies.

Tarone (1980:429) approached the issue of communicative strategies with reference to social interaction and identified nine strategies grouped under three main types: *paraphrase*, *transfer* and *avoidance*. The first type includes *approximation*, the use of a vocabulary item or structure existing in the target language and sharing some semantic features with the intended item (e.g. "pipe" for "water pipe"), *word coinage*, the creation of a new word (e.g. "airball" for "balloon"), *circumlocution*, the description of the striking feature or elements of an object or action rather than the use of the appropriate target language structure (e.g. smoking something in the liquid form in some muslim countries).

There are four subcategories in transfer: *literal translation*, translating the sentences from the native language to the target language word for word (e.g. "They toast one another" is replaced with "He invites him to drink"), *language switch*, transferring the native language term to the target language without translating it (e.g. "tirtil" for "turtle"), *appeal for assistance*, the accurate term or structure is learned from the interlocutor (e.g. "What is this?"), and *mime*, the use of nonverbal messages (e.g. clapping hands for illustrating applause).

As to avoidance, it has two subcategories, *topic avoidance*, the abandonment of the topic for which the learner lacks the appropriate grammatical and lexical background to produce sentences and *message abandonment*, after beginning to talk about a concept, the learner leaves her/his utterance incomplete as s/he does not know the meaning of this concept.

In the following years Færch and Kasper (1983:60) focused on communicative strategies as psychological strategies employed by the second learner. They put these strategies into two main categories: *achievement communicative strategies* and *reduction communicative strategies*. For them, the former strategies can contribute to language acquisition since they lead the communicator to use them for practical statement, but the latter strategies do not have such features. These strategies have their subcategories concerning the resources the learner uses in the solution of his communicative problems. The achievement communicative strategies subcategorize *code-switching*, *inter-lingual strategies*, *L1-based strategies*, *cooperative strategies* and *nonverbal strategies*.

The reduction strategies assist the learner in hiding his inadequate knowledge as he produces simplified version of the sentences he planned by reducing the grammatical structures and lexical items. Two types of reduction strategies have been identified by Færch and Kasper (1983:60): *formal reduction strategies* which are related to the parts of linguistic system avoided by the learner, and *functional reduction strategies* which are connected with

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the reduction of actionable communicative goal, modal communicative goal and propositional communicative goal.

Formal reduction strategies may have some psychological motivation as the learner does not want to make mistakes and tries to produce correct forms of the target language, assuming that linguistic correctness is necessary for a successful communication. He also has the second language anxiety in communication and he wants to hide this anxiety with the production of well known forms and this brings fluency to his production. He may realize that elimination of certain forms does not hinder the communication, but facilitates it by improving fluency. Tarone (1980) directs attention to this point and notes that formal strategies are used to increase the efficiency of speech production.

Although formal reduction strategies can be practised on all levels of the interlanguage, some restrictions are imposed on different linguistics levels due to the learner's communicative goals. For example, the learner cannot communicate through a reduced phonological or morphological system in the production of certain words as they are required in particular linguistic contexts. However, the learner can use reduction strategies in her/his lexical choices. As pointed out by Blum and Levenston (1978), some lexical items may be troublesome for him since they may be difficult to pronounce and to produce morphologically because of their irregular morphological structures. In addition, lexis may cause trouble to him as they put some restrictions on the context including it.

According to Færch and Kasper (1983), functional reduction strategies deal with social and practical aspects of the use of linguistic resources. The learner reduces the forms when he faces some difficulties in producing specific speech acts, adjusting the level of politeness and social distance, deciding on the tense of the utterance he generates in communication situations. He tries to be away from the communication situations which may require the use of such functions.

The researchers also identified the strategies a learner can perform while reducing the propositional content of his production. These strategies, introduced by Tarone (1977) and Corder (1978), include topic avoidance, message abandonment, and meaning replacement. In topic avoidance, the learner does not want to talk about the topics that present difficulties or are not known conceptually by him. This type of reduction may result in having no communication or changing the conversation topic from the troublesome one. As an example, a learner who describes a picture including two squirrels can see them, but he cannot produce the exact word describing them. He can choose to ignore or omit them from his description.

The second strategy is used in cases where the learner starts talking about a concept but cannot complete his message because of his incomplete

and insufficient knowledge about the concept. Stopping in mid-sentence, he shifts the topic and passes new messages. For example, in connection with the previous picture example, the learner may construct the following sentence parts: "Around a tree the man saw two little a … er… he walked by the tree …". One common point between topic avoidance and message abandonment is concerned with dropping the problematic topic. This strategy exists in Tarone (1977) and Corder (1978), as well.

The last strategy, meaning replacement, is different from the former strategies, because the topic is preserved but instead of being specific and giving details, the learner produces a general expression such as "The man saw two little … animals around a tree." Váradi (1980) also mentions this strategy in his study. The learner does not expand his linguistic resources to overcome his problem. Rather, he keeps the propositional content but refers to it in a less specific form. This, however, causes certain amount of vagueness in the message. Færch and Kasper (1980:91) summarize these strategies as follows: "At the one end, the learner says 'almost' what she wants to say about a given topic, at the other end she says nothing at all about this."

Several other researchers have attempted to classify communication strategies in some other ways. Kellerman, Bongaerts and Poulisse (1987) dealt with the topic from a cognitive perspective and classified them into two groups as conceptual strategies and linguistic strategies. In 1993, Poulisse addressed this issue in relation with the psycholinguistic model of speech production and provided three strategies: substitution, substitution plus and reconceptualization.

Apart from studies identifying and categorizing communication strategies, there are many studies examining the problematic grammatical and lexical items for second or foreign language learners. One of the early attempts researching this issue is Schachter's study (1974). She has shown that Japanese learners of English avoid using relative clauses in their production since they are troublesome for them. To find out the preference of avoidance strategies over achievement ones, Erwin (1979) looked at 14 intermediate-level American learners of Russian. Data was collected through three different picture stories. The number of the avoidance strategies (108) was lower than that of achievement strategies (159).

In a later study, Hulstijn and Marchena (1989) investigated avoidance in relation with phrasal verbs. They administered a multiple choice test, a memorization test and a translation test to intermediate and advanced Dutch learners or English to find out whether they prefer to use a phrasal verb or an equivalent one-word verb. The results obtained from the tests revealed that the Dutch learners of English do not have the tendency of avoiding phrasal verbs in general, but they avoid using idiomatic phrasal verbs as they perceive them

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related to Dutch. They also show the tendency to produce one-word verbs with general, multi-purpose meaning rather than phrasal verbs with specific meaning. The researchers concluded that semantic factors lead learners to avoid using certain phrasal verbs.

Alonso-Vázquez (2005) provided the results of her study concerning the learning process of negation in English by nine Spanish learners in an EFL context. She found that all learners used avoidance as a learning strategy and it was such a common strategy that in every fourth answer it was used and avoidance of the topic was the most used strategy. In Lin's (2013) study learners indicated that they do use communication strategies in Færchand Kasper's taxonomy. Furthermore, several studies presented some teaching techniques or approaches for communication strategies (Chen, 2007; Maleki, 2010).

As given above, L2 learners play safe when producing sentences in the target language and avoid using grammatical structures and lexical items they do not know properly. In view of the earlier studies, this study aims to find out whether Turkish learners of English avoid any grammatical structure or lexical items in their use of English, and if so, to what extent they employ it as a coping strategy in the process of second language acquisition.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Subjects: Forty Turkish learners whose ages range from 19 to 28 participated in this study. The subjects were English major students in the Department of English Language and Literature at Gazi University. The students' proficiency level was intermediate. Some of them had attended a preparatory course offered by the university before starting their university education as they failed the proficiency exam at the beginning of the Autumn term.

2.2 Data collection: Data was collected from two compositions written by the participants of the study. In a class hour learners were firstly asked to write a composition about one of their earlier memories in Turkish. When they finished their first compositions, they were collected and then the subjects were instructed to write the same composition in English in the second hour of the writing class. The rationale behind the strategy of asking the students to write their memory first in their native language and then in the target language was the view that the activation of the Turkish version of the memory would lead them to produce the same or similar sentences in the target language. Thus, the comparison of two versions of the compositions written

by learners would provide evidence for the modified and avoided forms and lexical items[1].

Learners were also given a cloze test assessing their proficiency level. The test was designed by omitting every seventh word from a text taken from the book called *Developing Skills* by L. G. Alexander (1967). There were thirty two blanks in the test and learners were asked to fill in the blanks with an appropriate word. Learners mostly gave the correct or acceptable answers. The average score for the correct answers was 23,52.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Subsequent to the data collection, data was analysed by comparing and contrasting the two versions of the texts with each other. Taking Færch and Kasper's (1983) taxonomy into account, similarities and differences between the sentences occurring in both versions as well as omissions were identified and the number of avoided items was calculated for each learner. Then, the distribution of avoidance strategies was found for all learners. The result presenting the overall distribution is given in Table I.

Table I. Overall distributions of avoidance strategies

	Topic Avoidance	Message Abandonment	Meaning Replacement	Total
N=40	229	0	147	376
%	61	0	39	100

According to the results presented in Table I, the percentage score for topic avoidance was over 60 percent. This result implied that Turkish learners mostly used topic avoidance when they did not have adequate knowledge relating to the concepts they mention. In other words, they omitted the sentence or the part of the sentence giving information about the topic instead of making some attempts to compensate the topic by getting assistance from other communication strategies. The second avoidance strategy used by learners was message replacement. Learners replaced their original message with a simplified one for nearly 40 percent. In this strategy a general expression was preferred over a specific detail. They did not abandon their message while writing their compositions. There was no sentence showing the use of this strategy.

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[1] Infact to understand the influence of the order of the memory telling first in the native language and then the target language, the same study was repeated with another group by changing the order of the memory telling. That is to say, this group was asked to tell one of their childhood memories first in the target language and then the same story in the native language. These stories were similar to each other. There was no big discrepancy in their content as regards the grammatical structures and lexical items.

The sentences avoided in the production was analysed to see which sentences were omitted. The tentative analysis of these sentences showed that learners mostly omitted the Turkish complex sentences through adverbial clauses, noun clauses and adjective clauses. They had difficulty with the sentences including causative structures, gerund and perfect tense. The total percentage for the sentences posing problems due to their structure was around 63. The sentences having idiomatic expressions or unknown words were excluded in the compositions written in English as well. Their percentage was 37 according to the results given in Table II.

Table II. Distributions of topic avoidance sentences

	AdjC	AdvC	Noun C	LI	T	G	C	Total
Raw score	35	41	41	84	18	6	4	229
%	15	18	18	37	8	2	2	100

*	AdjC: Adjective Clause	AdvC: Adverb Clause
	Noun C: Noun Clause	LI: Lexical item
	T: Tense	G: Gerund
	C: Causatives	

Examples from topic avoidance sentences
Example 1
S1.3.T Kendimi bildim bileli teyzem vardı hayatımda ve sanki hiç ölmeyecekmiş, hiç gitmeyecekmiş gibiydi.
S1.3.E As long as I have known myself my aunt was in my life and as if she would never die, she would never go away.
S1.4.T Hani insan sevdiklerine yakıştıramaz ya ölümü, öyleydi.
S1.4.E Well, an individual cannot associate death with the ones she loves, it was like that.
S1.5.T Dedim ya, onaltı yaşındaydım.
S1.5.E As I told you, I was sixteen years old.
S1.6.T Kanserin bir insanı eritip yok edebileceğini biliyordum ama daha önce hiç bu kadar yakından tanık olmamıştım ve kanserin teyzemi alt edebileceğini düşünmemiştim bile.
S1.6.E I knew cancer can melt away a person, but I have never witnessed it so closely and I have not even thought that cancer can beat my aunt.

Example II-Grammatical competence

S6.15.T Onun çok iyi ve temiz kalpli bir kız olduğuna o kadar inandırmıştım kendimi ki, bir gün başka bir arkadaşımızın bağırışıyla uyandık.
S6.15.E I have made myself believe that she is such a good and ingenuous girl that, one day we woke up with the outcry of another friend.

S22.5.T Bütün insanlar arasında sıkça görülen abi kardeş ilişkisi içinde olamayışımızın bizde bıraktığı o garip duygunun etkisi en çokta hareketlerimize yansıyordu.

S22.5.E The effect of the strange feeling was reflected in our actions because of lack of the sibling relationship that is frequently seen among all humans.

Example III – Lexical competence

S14.23.T Şu an on dokuz yaşındayım ve insanlara ve karşı cinse olan güvnim, onlara yaklaşımım bu ve bunun gibi bir çok olaydan dolayı zedelenmiş durumda.

S14.23.E Now I am nineteen years old and my trust and attitude towards the other gender has been injured because of this and many other such events.

S17.7.T O gün geldi çattı.

S17.7.E That day came round at last.

S18.5.T Doğum yaklaşmış ve biz de hastanenin yolunu tutmuştuk.

S18.5.E Delivery was close and we were on the way to the hospital.

As to meaning replacement sentences, they were the simplified version of the complex Turkish sentences in terms of grammatical structure and mostly idiomatic expressions as regards lexical items. The distribution of the grammatical structures and lexical items produced by learners were not calculated for this avoidance strategy as they were the paraphrase of the original message. The analysis of the data revealed that learners produced complicated and long sentences while writing their memory in Turkish. However, they simplified these sentences in the target language since they did not know how they could express the original sentences in English. The following sentences provide evidence for this claim.

Example IV – Sentences showing meaning replacement

S26.4.T O bir uçak pilotu idi ve onun işinin çok rahat olduğunu uçağı otomatik pilota bağladığında kokpitte çay, kahve içtiğini söylerdim ve boştan yere dünya kadar para kazandığını söylerdim. (He was a pilot and I was saying that your job is very easy and he was drinking tea, coffee in the cockpit, and he was earning lots of money without doing many things.)

S26.3-4.E When I was thirteen or fourteen I would discuss with my uncle who is a pilot, about his job. I would say "Your job is very easy and you earn lots of money without trouble", but he would not agree with me.

S28.29.T Onun o yumuk yumuk ellerini gördüğümde ona asla zarar veremeyeceğimi anladım. (When I saw his little, closed hands I understood that I could never hurt him.)

S28.29.E As soon as I saw his small, sweet hands I knew that I would never do anything to hurt him.

S30.22.T Kontrolü kaybettim ve ağlamaya devam ettim. (I lost the control and continued crying).

S30.22.E I haven't had the control over it.

4. CONCLUSION

The results showed that Turkish learners of English avoid complex sentence structures and idiomatic and metaphorical lexical items. They either omit such sentences while composing their essays or try to shorten or simplify the original sentences to eliminate the risk of making mistakes. These findings imply that learners should be instructed about communication strategies and taught how they can use these strategies to expand their writing skills. Thus, they may make some effort to compensate the avoidance strategies and improve their writing ability.

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