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Communication Strategies in Speaking Skill of EFL Learners

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Abstract

In EFL learning, among all the skills: listening, reading, and writing, speaking seems to be one of the most important skills. However, to master speaking is not an easy thing. And as a matter of fact, there are still many learners who have learned English for some years have not been able to speak fluently. Brown (2007) states that the difficulties the learners find in speaking are due to the fact that they have to focus on forms and function of the language. Further, Ellis (1994) also states that speaking has two sequential phases: planning and execution. Planning is done when speakers think of what utterance to produce to impact the listeners and execution is the realization of planning into words, phrases and sentences. To cope with the difficulties in speaking, learners need to understand well about Communication Strategies. Communication strategies are strategies that learners might use to handle their speaking problems. Next, using communication strategies learners might meet their communication goals. Further, EFL learners might improve their speaking skill when they are proficient in communicative competence.

Keywords: EFL learners' proficiency, communicative competence, communication strategies.

A. Introduction

Speaking is one of the important skills that learners might learn in EFL learning. Speaking skill is very important because by mastering this skill learners are able to express their ideas or opinion to their interlocutors well. However to master speaking is not an easy thing. There are many students who have learned English for years but they have not mastered this skill yet. What's up with those students? Why do they feel difficult to master speaking though they have learned English for years? Are there any devices that EFL learners might use to make them easy to master speaking? In line with those questions, this article aims at sharing ideas on the importance of the use of Communication Strategies to improve EFL learners' speaking skill. It includes the nature of speaking, learners' proficiency, communicative competence, communication strategies, and the research supports on Communication strategies.

B. The Nature of Speaking

Speaking is one of the communication means to express our ideas or opinion. Speaking is important because to be able to function in another language is characterized by being able to use that language in an oral communication. Besides, the success of language learning is determined by being able to use that language in real communication (Nunan, 1999). Speaking has some standards. The standard for learners to speak is in the pronunciation reflected in sounds, volume, speed, pausing, stress, and intonation. Speakers can use these elements of pronunciation to reach clarity of what they are saying and to reach proficiency; they should also master the grammar (Luoma, 2003). To be able to speak well, there are some language elements that students should master like grammar, vocabulary, intonation, pronunciation, stress, and the choice of language functions (Nunan, 1991).

Next, speaking might include at least four speech production processes: (1) conceptualization, (2) formulation, (3) articulation, (4) self-monitoring. *Conceptualization* is concerned with planning the message content. It draws on background knowledge of pattern discourse. The conceptualization includes a ‘monitor’, which checks everything that occurs in the interaction to ensure that the communication goes to plan. This enables the speakers to have the ability of self correction for expression, grammar and pronunciation. *Formulation* is referred to find words and phrases to express the meaning and then sequencing and putting them in appropriate grammatical markers (such as inflection, auxiliaries, articles). It also prepares the sound patterns of the words to be used: L1 errors of pronunciation usually involve switching sounds between words that are separated from each other; such switches indicate that the pronunciation of words must be prepared in batches prior to pronunciation. The next process after formulation is *articulation*. This involves the motor control of the articulator organs, in English: the lips, tongue, teeth, alveolar palate, velum, glottis, mouth cavity and breath. And, *self-monitoring* is related to the ability of the language users to identify and self-correct mistakes (Levelt, 1989 in Carter and Nunan, 2001).

Then, speaking is basically an instrumental act. Speakers talk in order to have some effects on their interlocutors. Speakers say something to change their state of knowledge or ask questions to get the information. They also request things to get things that they need (Clark and Clark, 1997). Speaking seems to be more disorganized when it is written down. It seems to be less organized than written language. But in real spoken interaction, speakers can understand and

respond one another. Although spoken language seems disorganized, it has its own structure and pattern that make it possible for the speakers to understand each other. On the other hand, written language is characterized by its well-performed sentences that are unified in a well paragraph (Burns and Joyce, 1997). In addition, speaking is often organized either of clauses or phrases. It is context-bound and not always expressed in complete sentence. Besides, it has a lot of repetitions and redundancy. Such repetitions, rephrasing, and elaboration help the interlocutors to process the meaning by offering more time and extra information. It may also contain colloquial, idioms, slang, and reduced forms (Brown, 1987). In line with Brown, O'Malley and Pierce (1996:58) state that spoken language often use incomplete sentences, less specific vocabulary, syntax in loosely organized manner, and present less densely packed information. It is different from written language in term of its less formality and it is very contextual and influenced by the situation.

To speak well, learners need to master three areas of knowledge: 1) Mechanics that consist of pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. In this case, learners should use the right words in the right order with the correct pronunciation. 2) Functions that consist of transaction and interaction. In this case, learners should know that the message clarity is very important for the sake of building understanding. 3) Knowing the social, cultural and norms (turn-taking, rate of speech, length of pauses between speaker, and the roles of the participants). In this case, learners should know how to take account, who is speaking to whom, in what circumstances, about what, and for what reason. Therefore to speak well, students should master the micro skills of speaking such as producing forms of words and phrases; convey links and connections between events and communicate such relations as main idea, new information, use facial features and body language to express the meaning. Next, they should develop speaking strategies such as emphasizing key words, rephrasing, appealing for help, etc (Burkart,1998).

Next, to able to speak well, learners must have communicative competence (Young, 1992). Knowing about communicative competence, learners might become proficient in speaking. Proficiency itself refers to the high degree of competence trough training (Omaggio, 1986). In conclusion, there are some characteristic of successful speakers: 1) they talk a lot, 2) they are active to participate in the discussion and this kind of activeness could show about their high motivation, 3) they can express relevant utterances that are grammatically accurate and easy to understand by other speakers (Ur, 1996).

In short, the description above indicates that speaking is one of the most important skills in language learning. People generally hope to be able to use language in real conversation when they learn a language. And one of the purposes of the language learning is to make learners be able to use the language in a real speaking/conversation practices. By mastering speaking, learners can express their ideas well. However, to master speaking is not easy because learners need to do two activities at almost the same time such thinking of the form and the content/meaning of the utterances that they want to express. This makes EFL learners feel difficult to master speaking. Thus, learners need to know more about communicative competence.

C. Communicative Competence

Communication and communicative competence have been studied in many disciplines like linguistics, education, business and media. The main reason why communication has taken the attention among all those fields is that communication is used in all human interaction activities. Communication has also made human beings unique in which human communication is very complex cognitively, socially and emotionally. The concept of communicative competence is also affected by social norms. A communicatively competent person is the one who speaks fluently, using complicated long words and articulates well. On the contrary, people who use and speak with broad dialects are classified as having low communicative competence (Le, 2005). Having communicative competence, learners are able to communicate well in certain contexts (Brown, 1987). In addition, communicative competence is relative. Communicative competence depends on the cooperation of the participants and it is dynamic and interpersonal construct. It can only be examined through the performance of the two or more individuals in the process of negotiating meaning (Savignon, 1983).

The most influential work on defining communicative competence related to the second language or foreign language learning is of Canale and Swain (1980), and later in Canale's (1983) definition covering four different components in communicative competence. The first two components reflect the use of linguistic system itself: *grammatical competence* and *discourse competence*. *Grammatical competence* covers knowledge on lexical items, rules of morphology, syntax, semantics and phonology. *Discourse competence*, the complement of grammar competence in many ways, is the ability that we must have to connect sentences in

various discourses and to form meaningful utterances. Discourse means everything from simple spoken conversation to the long written texts. In this case, grammatical competence focuses on the sentence-level grammar and discourse focuses on the inter - sentential relationship. The last two components cover *sociolinguistic competence* and *strategic competence*. *Sociolinguistic competence* is the knowledge of the socio-cultural rules of language. This competence needs the understanding of social context of the language employed such as the role of the participants, the information they share and the function of the interaction. Only in a full context (Savignon, 1983), judgment can find its appropriateness with the particular utterances. *Strategic competence* is verbal and non verbal communication strategies employed to compensate the breakdowns in communication due to insufficient language competence. This strategy, Savignon (1983), is employed by an individual to compensate for the imperfect knowledge of rules or limiting factors such as fatigue, distraction, and inattention. In short, strategic competence is the ability to cope with the imperfect knowledge and to keep communication by doing paraphrases, circumlocution, repetition, hesitation, avoidance, and guessing as well as shifts in registers and styles.

Communication strategies/ strategic competence have a very big role in communication. Having knowledge about communication strategies/ strategic competence learners might handle the problems that they face during communication so that they might achieve their communication goals. In relation to communication strategies/ strategic competence, Brown (1987) states that strategic competence occupies a special place in understanding communication. It is the way we manipulate the language in order to meet the communication goals. An eloquent speaker has and employs a sophisticated strategic competence. Next, Bachman (1987) states that strategic competence is the ability to use all elements of language competence and all of psychomotor skills as well in the process of negotiating meaning. In addition, Karimnia and Zade (2007) states that strategic competence refers to the individuals' ability to use communication strategies, for example paraphrase, circumlocution, literal translation, lexical approximation, mime, et cetera to get their message across and to compensate for limited or imperfect knowledge of rules or the interference of such factors like fatigue, distraction or inattention. Finally, Bialystok (1990) states that using communication strategies learners could resolve their linguistic problems and talk more comprehensibly.

In brief, to be able to speak well learners need to know well about communicative competence. By having communicative competence, learners can communicate with their speaking partners well. Further, communicative competence is important because by using it learners can express their ideas and negotiate meaning in certain contexts. There are some components in communicative competence such as grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence and the last one is strategic competence. Strategic competence is verbal and non verbal communication strategies to handle the problems that learners face during communication due to the learners' language deficiencies.

D. Communication Strategies

The action that learners do to learn a language has been variously labeled: behaviors, tactics, techniques, and strategies. The term which is most commonly used is 'learning strategies'. It is defined as behaviors or actions that learners do to make language learning more successful, self directed and enjoyable (Oxford, 1989). Communication strategies in some cases are the same as learning strategies because communication strategies also about techniques/ strategies used by the learners to handle their problems during communication and to reach their communication goals. There are some definitions of communication strategies. In general communication strategies might be defined as the techniques that learners use to handle their problems during communication. Dealing with the definition of communication strategies, Bialystok (1990:3) cites four definitions of the communication strategies of second language learners as follows: (1) a systematic technique used by learners to express his meaning when they face some difficulties (Corder, 1977), (2) a mutual attempt or two interlocutors agree on a meaning in situations where requisite meaning structures are not shared (Tarone, 1980), (3) learners' conscious plans for solving problems in reaching communicative goals (Faerch & Kasper, 1983a), (4) techniques of coping with difficulties in communication in a limited second language (Stern, 1983).

Communication strategies were firstly popularized by Selinker (1972) in his paper entitled "Interlanguage" which explains about errors made by learners of a second language. There is general agreement that conversational interaction can result to the IL development and communication strategies are thought to be one of the factors affecting IL development.

Interlanguage refers to a separate linguistic system based on the observable output resulted from learners' efforts to speak using TL norm.

Communication strategies are one of the psycholinguistic processes in the interlanguage and it can be used to handle learners' speaking problems. Dealing with the use of communication strategies in interlanguage, Ellis (1994: 396) states that in theory, interlanguage covers five psycholinguistic processes which could affect the interlanguage construction and among them communication strategies are regarded as one of the five processes which can be employed by learners to handle their communication problems. For example, when learners try to communicate and the needed linguistic items are not available, they can employ communication strategies to achieve their communication goals. As a central component of IL, communication strategies refer to approach that learners employ to handle their limitedness in IL resources.

Communication strategies are the process of how learners use L2 knowledge to solve their communication problems. These communication problems might be caused by limited knowledge of the second language. Limitedness of knowledge in L2 might arise gaps which might cause communication problems. These gaps might be in the form of a word, a phrase, an idiom, a tense marker or a structure. In relation to the function of communication strategies, Ellis (1994:16) states communication strategies are the process of how the learners use of the existing knowledge of the L2 to cope with communication difficulties. Commonly learners do not master every item of L2. They need certain strategies to compensate the gaps. According to Bialystok (1990:1), "the familiar ease and fluency with which we sail from one idea to the next in our first language is constantly shattered by some gaps in our knowledge of a second language". The forms of these gaps can be a word, a structure, a phrase, a tense marker or an idiom. The attempts to overcome these gaps are described as communication strategies.

The aim of communication strategies is sending the message across to the listeners. Learners might use verbal and non verbal strategies to make listeners catch their ideas. Dealing with the aim of communication strategies, Brown (1987: 180) states that communication strategies cover process of interlinguas and intralingua transfer and the context of learning in which the learners try to get the message across to the hearers. In this case, there is a conscious employment of verbal and nonverbal mechanism to communicate ideas when precise linguistic forms are not available to the learners during the communication. In addition, Wenden and Rubin

(1987: 109) state that learners who emphasize the importance of using the language often utilize communication strategies.

Using communication strategies, learners can effectively express their ideas though they lack of linguistic elements such as vocabularies and grammar. In relation to the function of communication strategies, Savignon (in Dornyei, 1995) states that people can speak effectively in foreign language with only 100 words. It can be done by using our hands, imitating the sound or movement of things, mixing languages, creating new words, describing or circumlocuting something we do not know. Because of the lack of basic grammar and vocabulary in the target language, their communicative success relies entirely on their “ability to communicate within restrictions”. These strategies are known as communication strategies.

Communication strategies might help learners achieve L2 acquisition in some ways. Dealing with the role of communication strategies in L2 acquisition, Kasper and Kellerman (1997) in Ellis (2008: 511-512) indentify some ways in which communication strategies might assist L2 acquisition: (1) Communication strategies help to keep the flow of the conversation going and thus increase learners’ exposure to input. (2) Communication strategies trigger negotiation for meaning which aids acquisition. (3) Communication strategies increase their control over existing linguistic resources. (4) Communication strategies enable learners to obtain access to new linguistic resources when they incorporate strategic solution into their interlanguage. (5) Communication strategies fill gaps in the learners’ lexicon through positive feedback following requests for assistance. (6) Communication strategies produce pushed output. (7) Communication strategies increase overall processing control.

There are some types of communication strategies. One of them is Dornyei’s communication strategies. The table below describes Dornyei’s communication Strategies.

Table 1 : Dornyei’s Typology of Communication Strategies (Dornyei, 1995)

Communication Strategy	Description of Strategy
Avoidance or Reduction Strategies	
1. Message Abandonment	Leaving a message unfinished because of language difficulties.
2. Topic Avoidance	Avoiding topic areas or concepts which pose language difficulties.

Achievement or Compensatory Strategies

- | | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| 3. Circumlocution | Describing or exemplifying the target object or action (e.g. <i>the thing you open bottles with</i> for <i>corkscrew</i>). |
| 4. Approximation | Using an alternative term to express the meaning of the target lexical item as closely as possible (e.g., <i>ship</i> for <i>sail boat</i>). |
| 5. Use of all purpose words | Extending general, empty lexical item to contexts where specific words are lacking (e.g., the overuse of <i>thing</i> , <i>stuff</i> , <i>make</i> , <i>do</i> , as well as using words like <i>thingie</i> , <i>what-do-you-call-it</i>). |
| 6. Word Coinage | Creating a non-existing L2 word based on a supposed rule (e.g., <i>vegeterianist</i> for <i>vegetarian</i>). |
| 7. Use of non-linguistic means | mime, gesture, facial expression, or sound imitation. |
| 8. Literal translation | translating literally a lexical item, an idiom, a compound word or structure from L1 to L2. |
| 9. Foreignizing | Using a L1 word by adjusting to L2 phonologically (e.g., with a L2 pronunciation) and/or morphologically (e.g., adding to it a L2 suffix) |
| 10. Code Switching | Using a L1 word with L1 pronunciation or a L3 word with L3 pronunciation in L2) |
| 11. Appeal for help | Turning to the conversation partner for help either directly (e.g., <i>what do you call...?</i>) or indirectly (e.g., rising intonation, pause, eye contact, puzzled expression). |

Stalling or Time-gaining Strategies

- | | |
|--|--|
| 12. Use of fillers/ hesitation devices | Using filling words or gambit to fill pause and to gain time to think (e.g., <i>well</i> , <i>now let me see</i> , <i>as a matter of fact</i>). |
|--|--|

In relation to the types of communication strategies, Karimnia & Zade (2007) state that it is possible that a single utterance might be labeled under two different categories because there is not agreement among the researchers about the taxonomies of communication strategies. Some researchers have developed and proposed new taxonomies of communication strategies from time to time. The taxonomies offered by various researchers vary as Bialystok (1990) states that the various taxonomies proposed in the literature differ primarily in terminology and categorizing principles rather than in the substance of the strategies (Dornyei, 1995).

Thus, in language learning, second or foreign language learners might face problems in communication due to their lack of linguistic elements. This problem makes them uneasy to convey the

messages to the interlocutors. To solve this problem, they might use communication strategies. Communication strategies are strategies that learners might use to handle communication problems. Communication strategies might help learners achieve their communication goals. There are some types of communication strategies and they might be different in term of terminologies rather than in the substances.

E. Research Supports on Communication Strategies

Research on communication strategies has indicated significant relation between communication strategy use and language performance. For example, Lam (2006) studied about the effects of oral communication strategy teaching (OCST) on learners' performance. Two classes in the secondary ESL classroom in Hong Kong participated in this study. One class received 16 hours of OCST and the other served as a comparison group. In weeks 1, 10 and 20 data were collected from the learners' performance in group work discussions, self-report questionnaires, observations of learners' strategy use, and interviews. The finding indicated that the treatment class generally had better performance than the comparison class. The study above indicated that training learners communication strategies might increase their speaking performance.

Next, dealing with the importance of training communication strategies to students that might increase their speaking performance, Lin (2007) studied seven Taiwanese University on their perception in the use of communication strategies. This study was aimed at finding out Taiwanese learners' perception on learning five communication strategies. In this study, twenty four university students were trained for 10 weeks to use strategies using Faerch and Kasper's (1983) taxonomy and then seven volunteers were interviewed. None of the students were from the English students but they were taking a required Basic English course. In the middle and at the end of the training period participants were interviewed and videotaped for 90 minutes. The results found that in reduction strategies, seven volunteers tended to admit that "topic avoidance" was applicable but they disagreed about keeping silence because of their concern of politeness. Students had some opinions about "message abandonment" such as being in a neutral position to appropriate and inappropriate usage. In the "meaning replacement strategy" most of the students believed that it was convenient to know their interlocutor's intended meaning. In the "interlanguage strategy" six students stated that it might enhance their comprehension in English communication and one student had a neutral attitude. In the "cooperation strategy" six students believed that it helped them to achieve the purpose of learning but two of seven students believed it was losing face when they appealed for help. Thus, an important point to be noted is that communication strategies training might help learners develop their speaking skill.

In addition, related to the factors that might improve learners' language ability, Huang (2010) investigated the factors influencing the use of oral communication strategies of technological university students in Taiwan. The study found that students often employed message reduction, alternation strategies and at least message abandonment strategies. Students' self-perceived oral proficiency, the frequency of and motivation in speaking English were significantly correlated with the use of oral communication strategies. But, gender and English proficiency did not have any impacts on the use of oral communication strategies among this group of learners. It is finally concluded that functional practice and intrinsic motivation are important in the development of communication strategies and oral competence. Thus, an important point to be noted is that learners need to have intrinsic motivation and do more speaking practices using communication strategies to develop their speaking skill.

Then, related to the use of communication strategies by the learners, Mei and Nathalang (2010) studied about the use of communication strategies by Chinese EFL learners. They analyzed communication strategies used by undergraduates (non-English major) studying English at Chinese Universities. The participants were first year Arts and Science majors classified as having either high or low English proficiency level. They collected data by seeing their performance both on one- way and two- way tasks. They found that students' use of communication strategies was influenced by three variables: task types, English proficiency, and academic major. In this research, the finding could be useful for the language training for Chinese EFL learners. Next, EFL instructors might enhance their students' performance by making them aware of communication strategies which were already in their mind and encouraging them to use communication strategies more frequently. Thus, an important point to be noted is that learners' use of communication strategies are inclined by task type, English proficiency and academic major. Arising learners' alertness on communication strategies and encouraging them to use communication strategies more regularly in the communication might advance learners' speaking skill.

Afterward, related to the importance of arising learners' alertness on communication strategies to handle their speaking problems, Rababah (2005) studied about communication problems faced by Arab learners of English. He found that raising foreign learners' alertness on communication strategies (CSs) by making them aware of the CSs in their repertoire and sensitizing them to the appropriate situations is one way to solve their communication problems. However, teachers should provide students with the definition of CSs and ask them to perform tasks that require them to use CSs, such as definition, story-telling and role play tasks. Finally they should watch their performance in the target language to see the communication problems they face and how they solve the problems. Rababah (2005) stated that to raise awareness of some strategies is important for some reasons: 1) CSs can lead to learning such as by getting help from the interlocutor, especially in the appeal for help strategy. 2) CSs are part of language use and even native speakers use CSs in their speech to make the conversation go on, such as the use of time

gaining strategies like “you know, what do you call it?” and other such strategies. 3) The use of CSs is not an indication of communication failure; on the contrary, it can be very useful to compensate for the lack of linguistic elements. And the use of communication strategies might help learners solve their communication problems and achieve their communication goals. Thus, the use of communication strategies in the conversation might help learners cope with their speaking problems to achieve their speaking goals. Further, it might improve learners’ speaking performance.

In relation to the use of communication strategies to facilitate learners’ speaking skill, Syamsudin (2014) studied about the use of communication strategies by Independent EFL learners to facilitate their speaking skill. He studied about the communication strategies used by independent EFL learners at the English department State Islamic University ‘Maulana Malik Ibrahim’ of Malang. The participants were two students classified as having the characteristics of independent learners and having high English proficiency level. Data were collected by doing observations and interviews. The study found that EFL independent learners used some communication strategies to facilitate their speaking skill. It was found that those students used repeatedly use of non linguistics means and fillers strategies. They often employed use of non linguistic means and fillers strategy because these strategies had helped them feel comfortable and get the time to think so that they might express their ideas confidently. In this research, the finding could be useful for the lecturers and learners. Knowing the importance of communication strategies to facilitate learners’ speaking skill, lecturers might enhance their students’ speaking performance by making them aware of the importance of communication strategies and encouraging them to use communication strategies more frequently. Thus, an important point to be noted is that communication strategies might help learners facilitate their speaking skill. And arising learners’ awareness on communication strategies and encouraging them to use communication strategies more frequently in the communication might improve learners’ speaking skill.

Based on the description of the research findings above, some conclusions can be drawn as follows:

- 1) Teaching communication strategies to students can progress students’ speaking performance.
- 2) Communication strategies support learners achieve their speaking goals.
- 3) It is important to practices speaking regularly using communication strategies with high motivation to develop learners’ speaking performance.
- 4) Improving learners’ speaking performance can be done by doing communication strategies training and encouraging their use in every communication. The use of oral communication strategies is influenced by learners’ oral proficiency, frequency of practice and motivation.
- 5) Communication strategies training followed by its application in conversation might help learners handle their communication problems.
- 6) Doing more speaking practices using communication strategies might help learners facilitate their speaking skill.

F. Conclusion

From the discussion above, it might be concluded that communication strategies are essential for learners to improve their speaking skill. Communication strategies, either using verbal or non-verbal strategies, might help learners cope with their speaking problems. Generally, learners' problems in speaking are usually caused by their lack of linguistic elements. Using communication strategies EFL learners might reach their speaking goals. In this case, communication strategies might help EFL learners develop their speaking skill. However, to be good speaker, learners need to know more the other elements of communicative competence such as grammatical competence, discourse competence and sociolinguistic competence.

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