

Communication Strategies in English as a Second Language (ESL) Context

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Abstract

Communication is important for people around the world. People try to communicate to other people around the globe using language. In understanding the differences of some languages around the world, people need to learn the language of other people they try to communicate with, for example Indonesian people learn to acquire English. In the context that English in Indonesia is considered as a foreign language, it causes the learners of English in Indonesia understand not only the language but also the culture. Foreign language learners may encounter various communication problems when their interlanguage is limited. In order to convey their messages and remain in a conversation until their communication goal is achieved, ESL (English as a Second Language) learners need to employ communication strategies, which have been defined generally as devices used by second language learners to overcome perceived barriers to achieving specific communication goals (Færch & Kasper, 1983). In order to avoid certain miscommunication, the teacher of English in Indonesia should also give their learners the understanding of communication strategies.

Keywords: Communication Strategies, ESL, Context

I. Introduction

In real life, people use language to communicate to other people. People often use the same language with people they talk to in order to make them understand and get the meaning of the message. This event can be called as communication. Communication problems occur when the encoded message differs from the decoded message. In other words, the message sent is not the message received. In daily communicative interaction, communication strategies are often used as communication is basically functional. Communication is not just what a message is about but what it wants to achieve.

Foreign language learners may encounter various communication problems when their interlanguage is limited. In order to convey their messages and remain in a conversation until their communication goal is achieved, ESL (English as a Second Language) learners need to employ communication strategies, which have been defined generally as devices used by second language learners to overcome perceived barriers to achieving specific communication goals (Færch & Kasper, 1983).

Language learning cannot be separated from its culture. Language is a clear manifestation of culture. A word can have both cognitive meaning and cultural meaning. Cultural meaning refers to words and expressions which represent cultural perception, values and behavior. At discourse level, the link between language, communication and culture is virtually inseparable.

Miscommunication occurs when one interprets communicative rules of one culture in terms of the rules of another culture. In the process of learning a second language, learners make some errors due to first language interference. By knowing strategies to avoid misinterpretation between different backgrounds of speakers, the problems mentioned before shall be avoided easily.

Language teaching at school has traditionally been aimed at developing linguistic competence. Teachers tend to teach grammar and linguistic features without letting their learners practice and improve their communication in English. Probably this is one reason that cause some learners are good in English but they cannot use English orally. This problem may be solved by the teacher to introduce communication strategies to their learners in order to avoid them from some communication problems and equip them with strategies to overcome the problems of speaking that they are dealing with.

2. Discussion

2.1 Definitions of Communication Strategies

Some scholars define communication strategies differently. They point out the definition by stating different angle of perception about the communication strategies itself. Corder (1983) defines such strategies as “a systematic technique

employed by a speaker to express his meaning when faced with some difficulty". The term communication strategies is often limited to strategies resorted to when the second language learner has difficulty with communicating. Thus, communication strategy is used when things go wrong, it is "a spare tyre for emergencies" (Cook, 1993, p. 119).

Ellis (1985) defines communication strategies as psycholinguistic plans which exist as part of the language user's communicative competence. They are potentially conscious and serve as substitutes for production plans which the learner is unable to implement" (p. 182). Ellis (1994) also suggests that communication strategies be seen as a set of skills, which learners use in order to overcome their inadequacies in the target language. When students fail to communicate because of their limited knowledge in the target language they have to find a way to communicate in other ways, for example by imitating sounds, code-switching or avoiding the topic.

Communication strategies are usually associated with spoken language and research has shown that students tend to use various communication strategies when they are unable to express what they want to say because of their lack of resources in their second language (L2) (Hedge 2000:52). When learners experience that fluency in their first language (hereafter L1) does not follow the same pattern as their L2, a gap is created in the knowledge of their L2. These gaps can take many forms: a word, a phrase, a structure, a tense marker or an idiom (Bialystok 1990:1). In order to overcome that gap, learners have two options: they can either leave the original communicative goal or they can try to reach other alternative plans and use other linguistic means that they have at their disposal.

In line with the explanation above, the writer may say that communication strategies are the strategies of communication that someone of non-native speaker of one language should know in order to avoid some problems that may occur during the conversation with the interlocutors. It is also important to know that culture and language cannot be separated, therefore in the context of language teaching, the knowledge of language and its culture need to be taught as well to second language learners. By letting the learners know about it, they may solve their problems during communication and may choose properly which strategies of communication they are going to use. The role of teachers in introducing communication strategies to the learners could determine their learners' successfulness in facing problems of communication occur in real life situations.

2.2 Taxonomy of Communication Strategies

Some scholars define types of communication strategies based on their researches and findings. Therefore, the taxonomy and the type of communication strategies may differ from one scholar to other scholars. The taxonomy in the table below is proposed by Bialystok (1990) and adapted from Varadi (1973), Tarone (1977), and Faerch and Kasper (1983).

Communication Strategies	Strategies	Explanation of Strategy
A. Avoidance or Reduction Strategies	a. Message abandonment	leaving a message unfinished because of linguistic difficulties
	b. Topic avoidance	avoiding topic areas or concepts which pose linguistic difficulties
B. Achievement or Compensatory Strategies	a. Circumlocution	Describing or exemplifying the target object or action (e.g., the thing you open doors with for describing keys)
	b. Approximation	Using an alternative terms which expresses the meaning of target lexical items as closely as possible (e.g., ship for describing sail boat)
	c. Use of all-purpose words	Extending a general empty lexical item to contexts where specific words are lacking (e.g., overuse of thing)
	d. word-coinage	Creating non-existing L2 word based on a supposed rule (e.g., paintist for painter)

	e. Use of non-linguistic means	Mime, gestures, facial expressions
	f. Literal translation	Translating literally a lexical item an idiom, a compound word or structure from L1 to L2
	g. Foreignizing	Using a L1 word by adjusting it to L2 phonologically (e.g., adding a L2 suffix)
	h. Code switching	Using a L1 word with L1 pronunciation
	i. Appeal for help	Turning to the conversation partner for help directly or indirectly
C. Stalling or time gaining strategies	a. Use of fillers/hesitation devices	Using filling words or gambits to fill in pauses and to gain time to think (e.g., now, let me see...)

Johnstone (1989, 71, cited in Mali, 2007, 48) lists achievement production strategies as follows: Code-switching and gesticulation, Literal translation and foreignizing, Word coinage, Simplification, Generalization, Paraphrase, Restarts and approximation, Establish foreign identity, and Appeal for repair and confirmation.

It can be seen that some types of communication strategies offered by different scholars are almost similar one another but may have different meaning on its applications. In addition, the uses of those strategies above are also varied from one another. The writer claims that only some strategies are used frequently by some people to overcome the problem they are dealing with during the process of communication. People often use gestures or miming, code switching, and fillers/hesitation to fill the gap that occur when they try to convey the meaning they intended. It is better for the teacher to raise their learners' awareness about different kinds of taxonomy of communication strategies from different scholars and let them practice so that they have enough knowledge to overcome problems of communication in real life situations.

2.3 Factors Affecting the Choice of Communication Strategies

a. Learners' Attitude

The learners' attitude towards a particular strategy affects the use of that strategy. Generally, a positive attitude towards the strategy leads to a high frequency of using it. Learners' positive attitude towards stalling strategy and non-linguistic means strategy, for example, leads to a learner's active use of these strategies. Similarly, a negative attitude to reduction strategies does not result in low frequency of using of them. This "abnormality" may result from the learning situation, traditional teaching methods, and the inadequacy of strategic competence.

b. Learners' Level of L2 Proficiency

The proficiency level of an individual may influence his/her choice of communication strategies. Generally in speaking, learners of high proficiency level tend to use achievement or L2-based strategies such as paraphrase, whereas the learners of limited proficiency prefer reduction or L1-based strategies.

c. Learners' Personality

The learner's personality may also affect the choice of communication strategies. Based on the approach of storytelling, Tarone (1977) suggests that personality has a very close relation with the choice of communication strategies.

d. Learning Situation

Of the factors affecting the use of strategies, learning situation, in which the learner has learned his/her interlanguage, seems to be particularly powerful. For instance, learners may use less-strategies in a formal classroom context than in daily actual communication, especially when the teaching focus is on accuracy of L2 use rather than on fluent communication. The learning situation may also affect the type of strategy used.

e. Communication Context

Communication context also influences a learner's preference for particular communication strategies. The learner's communicative experience and his/her assessment of the context will determine his/her choice of communication strategies.

2.4 Teachability and teaching of Communication Strategies

The teachability of communication strategies has been controversial. There are different arguments for or against communication strategies instruction. One of possible reasons for the controversy is that most of the arguments on both

sides are based on indirect evidence. Hence, there is great need to conduct empirical studies to examine the effect of communication strategies teaching.

Maleki's (2007) study on the teachability of communication strategies found that communication strategies teaching were pedagogically effective, that interactional strategies were employed in a more effective and extensive way, that communication strategies were helpful to language learning, and that language teaching materials containing communication strategies were more effective than those without them.

Tian and Zhang (2005) investigated the effectiveness of the training of communication strategies on non-English majors. Some of their findings of the study showed that the students in the experimental class used more communication strategies in group discussion after training, that with the help of the communication strategies in group discussion, the students' communicative competence improved greatly, and that the students held a positive attitude towards communication strategies.

Despite the fact that many SLA researchers lend support to communication strategies training; some opposition to it has been expressed. Bialystok (1990) and Kellerman (1991) argue that one should teach the language itself rather than the strategies. Schmidt (1983) believes that L2 learners develop their strategic competence at the expense of their linguistic competence. According to Skehan (1998), using communication strategies by skilled learners may hinder the development of their interlanguage knowledge resources.

Teaching communication strategies to the students is a good thing to do but as some scholars mentioned their support and against to it, teacher needs to consider that the availability of the strategies itself will not go further than the availability of using the target language in the classroom.

3. Conclusion

Communication strategies have a direct influence on communication and play a constitutive role in second language acquisition. Communication strategies in general keep the channel open and help to secure more input for learners. There are many factors affecting the use of communication strategies, such as: a learner's level of language proficiency, a learner's personality, and his/her attitude towards a particular strategy; and communication situations. These factors interactively affect the use of communication strategies.

Communication strategies help students to get their meanings across and ensure listener comprehension. It is believed that only when ESL learners realize the need to communicate and exchange information that more interactions will be generated. In other hand, although it is good to reinforce the learners to use communication strategies, teachers should also notice that the learners shall not depend much on it to improve their speaking in target language.

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