

The Relationship Between Proficiency Level And the Use of Communicative Strategies

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The study described in this paper was set up to investigate the effect of foreign language learners proficiency level on communicative strategies used by these learners to solve their lexical problems. The study involved two groups of Persian EFL learners at two different proficiency levels. The subjects were tested on one task, that is picture naming, and the strategies used by them were finally identified and analyzed.

It appeared that “proficiency level” is inversely related to both number and type of communicative strategies used by the subjects. The high proficiency group resorted to fewer but linguistic and context - based strategies (which are basically dependent on the target language knowledge) whereas the low proficiency group resorted to more but knowledge based, repetition , paralinguistic , avoidance , L1 based and some L2 based CSs . These findings suggest a positive relationship between language proficiency level and the use of communicative strategies. The closer the learner gets to a native-like competence, the more linguistic based CSs he/she uses, but at the same time he employs fewer number of CSs to express his/her intended meaning.

Key words:

communicative strategies , language proficiency, strategic competence

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1. Introduction

Following the many dynamic changes in the domain of linguistics during the few past decades which led to a shift from the study of form of language (linguistic competence) to the study of meaning or functions of language (communicative competence), the field of second language teaching and pedagogy has focused on the development of communicative competence rather than the teaching of linguistic system. The study of communicative strategies can be considered as a result of these shifts of emphasis as " ... it reveals not only learner's psychological processes of target language communication, but also indicates their level of communicative competence " (Chen, 1990, p. 156). Communicative strategies which are demonstrative of strategic competence, one of the components of communicative competence, have been defined as devices used by L2 learners in situations in which their communicative needs outrun their communicative means (Tarone, 1981; Corder, 1983; Faerch & Kasper, 1983; Paribakht, 1985; Chen, 1990). A practical way to develop communicative competence, as Chen(1990) states, is to develop learner's strategic competence, " their ability to use CSs that allow them to cope with various communicative problems that they may encounter " (p 156). This approach is especially useful for Persian EFL learners who do not have the opportunity to be involved in real communication situations with English native speakers and who mostly learn English through formal classroom setting. In order to develop learner's strategic competence, having a clear picture of its construct and factors that affect it deems necessary. This research is an attempt to test one of the factors (i.e. language proficiency) on the use of CSs, the manifestation of strategic competence.

2. Methodology

2.1. Subjects:

The present study aims to explore the relationship between learners' language proficiency and their communicative strategy use by examining the type and proportions of strategies used by these learners. To do so, forty male & female English major students chosen from three different universities in Tehran were divided into two groups according to their language proficiency. The high proficiency group (HP) with an average age of 24 was composed of 20 undergraduates (fourth year students) and post graduates. The low proficiency group with an average age of 22 was composed of twenty undergraduates (first year students in the second term) (The grammatical proficiency of the two groups were measured by the Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency. Their oral proficiency was determined by an interview on three items: their field of interest, their ideas about Iranian educational system and sports.

2.2. Task

By using a concept identification task, the subjects were required to communicate twenty lexical items comprising of ten concrete and ten abstract nouns to an English native speaker who would later listen to the recording of their speech. Through a pretest given to the third year undergraduates, the researcher came to know that the concrete items finally chosen were not familiar to the students. The rationale behind the inclusion of abstract nouns in the experiment was that "... abstract concepts, lacking visual clues,...place heavier linguistic ... burden on the speakers than concrete concepts" and consequently reveal "... more clearly the disparity

among the subject groups in their communicative ability ..."(Paribakht, 1985, p. 133).

2.3. Procedures

The pictures of the concrete items were drawn on separate cards and in isolation from any context in order to let the learners not rely on the context and consequently not avoid tackling lexical problems. But the abstract items were written on separate cards in both English and Persian in order to avoid any ambiguity and to ensure that the learners know what the target items were. The subjects were asked to communicate the items, without using the exact target words, to an English native speaker who would later listen to the recording of their speech. This measure was intended to make them use communicative strategies. In order to ensure that none of the subjects would be helped more than the others no verbal feedback was provided. But some verbal feedback such as "would you please explain more", "you are not clear enough" were provided whenever the experimenter felt that the information provided by the learners was not clear or enough for a native speaker. The response to this verbal feedback sometimes took the form of repeated information provided previously. These pieces of information are categorized as repetition strategy.

In order to identify the communicative strategies easily, the learners were required to say in Persian exactly what they wanted to say in English. This was asked immediately after the communication of the items in English, while the learners' memory was still fresh. This procedure is in accordance with "intended meaning hypothesis" (Varadi, 1973; Ervin, 1979). At the same time they were asked to say in Persian where they had any linguistic problems or what they wanted to say. Later after the

transcription of the data whenever a case of strategy was still doubted the learners were consulted. This is again in line with "introspective procedures" proposed in the literature (see palmberg, 1979; Raupach, 1983). This procedure also entails the defining criteria of CSs defined by Faerch & Kasper (1983) as consciousness & problem orientedness. In addition to these procedures, the data itself with its defining features (repetition, false starts , long pauses , etc) was used to identify the CSs.

2.4. Taxonomy

Before doing any statistical analysis on the students' performance a taxonomy has been developed on the basis of both Persian EFL learners' performance and previously proposed taxonomies (Bialystok & Frohlich, 1980; Faerch & kasper, 1980; Paribakht, 1985; Chen, 1990). The Persian EFL learners were observed to exploit different sources of information to overcome their deficient knowledge of the target language. These sources of information are classified into eight types:

1. The target language (forming linguistic -based CSs , such as synonym, antonym, metalanguage, in which "the learner gave a formal (linguistic) analysis of the semantic features of the concept by making use of the formal knowledge of the target language " (Chen 1990 , p. 163).

eg., metalanguage: It's a noun (bravery) LP (low proficiency learners) synonym: It means loyalty (Faithfulness) HP (high proficiency learners)

2. world knowledge (forming knowledge-based CSs, such as exemplification, cultural knowledge, simile, in which the learner provided a contextual information about the concept.

e.g simile: They are like helicopters(dragonfly)Lp & HP

3. Contextual information (forming context - based CSs , such as linguistic context or use of target language idioms & proverbs, in which the learner provided a linguistic context for the concept , leaving the target item blank.

e.g linguistic context: People who go to war and die for a cause are called this(martyrdom)HP

4. First language (forming L1 based CSs , including code switching & literal translation , in which the learner used either his/her L1 or a combination of linguistic features of his/her L1 and his/her Interlanguage to convey his/her idea.

e.g code – switching : /ya?ni / (that is) Lp
literal translation : give importance (mind) Lp

5. Gestures (forming paralinguistic CSs) : the learner used gestures, either accompanying or replacing the verbal output , to convey his/her idea.

e.g :It has some ...(gestures replacing `beads') LP

6. Repeated information(forming repetition CSs through which the learner passed on the old information by repeating what he/she said in the previous turns.

e.g: A kind of fly which can't fly...It can't fly (ostrich) Lp

7. No information (forming avoidance CSs , in which the learner gave up communicating his/her intended meaning.

e.g I can't explain this one (faithfulness)HP

8. Other L2 - based CSs: This category includes two L2 - based CSs, i.e. word - coinage and approximation which , though not unrelated to linguistic based CSs' were basically used by LP learners. That is why they are included in a separate category.

e.g word coinage: bravery (bravery)Lp
approximation: light (flame) Lp

3. Results

3.1. Frequency of Communicative Strategies Employed

To find if there is any difference between the groups in terms of number of CSs employed , first a quantitative analysis was done by a simple frequency count of the use of CSs by each group for each category.

TABLE 1: The Frequency Distribution of CSs Employed by the Two Groups for Each Category

Group	LB	KB	CB	L1-B	P	R	A	Other L2-B	Total
Hp N=20	480	56	76	0	70	0	1	1	684
Lp N=20	527	180	24	26	260	46	31	44	1138

LB : linguistic – based CSs P : Paralinguistic CSs
KB : knowledge – based CSs R : repetition CSs
CB : context based CSs A : avoidance CSs
L₁-B : L₁ – based CSs L₂-B : L₂ – based CSs
HP : high proficiency group LP : low Proficiency group
N : number of subjects

Table 1 shows that 1138 CSs employed by LP learners outnumber the 684 CSs employed by the HP learners. A t- test was then performed on the mean number of CSs used by the two groups to see if this difference was significant. The result in table 2 indicates that a great difference exists between the two groups in the number of CSs employed. The LP group used

significantly more CSs than did the HP group.) This result is not in line with Bialystok & Frolich's (1980) finding in which no significant difference was found between the learners of different proficiency levels, but it is in complete agreement with poulis's (1987), poulis & schils's, (1989) and Chen's (1990) findings in which the LP learners used more CSs than did the HP learners).

TABLE 2: T- Test Results of Group Differences in the Number of CSs Employed

Group	Mean	S	df	t	outcome
Hp N=20	34	7.74			
Lp N=20	57	11.14	38	7.66*	LP>HP

*P<.01

3.2. Types of Communicative Strategies Employed

To find out the difference between the two groups in terms of types of CSs employed, the raw frequency count of the types of CSs employed by each group for each category was converted into proportions by representing the frequency of occurrence of CSs within each category as a ratio of the sum of CSs used by each group.

TABLE 3: The Proportion of CSs Employed by the Two Groups for Each Category

Group	LB	KB	CB	L ₁ -B	P	R	A	other L ₂ -B
HP	0.684	0.080	0.111	0.000	0.102	0.000	0.001	0.001
LP	0.463	0.158	0.021	0.022	0.228	0.040	0.027	0.038

Differences in the selection of the types of CSs by the two groups can be clearly seen in table 3. To ensure that these differences didn't occur by chance, t- tests were performed on the mean proportional scores of the two groups for the selection of CSs within the eight categories. The results are presented in table 4.

TABLE 4: T- test Results of Group Differences in Selection of the Eight Types of CSs Employed

	Mean of HP	Mean of LP	t	outcome
LB	0.7150	0.4745	6.85 [*]	HP > LP
KB	0.0745	0.1551	4.50 [*]	LP > HP
CB	0.1118	0.0200	5.95 [*]	HP > LP
L ₁ -B	0.0000	0.0220	4.84 [*]	LP > HP
P ¹	0.0092	0.2155	4.89 [*]	LP > HP
R	0.0000	0.0379	5.40 [*]	LP > HP
A	0.0018	0.0295	6.00 [*]	LP > HP
other	0.0012	0.0418	6.96 [*]	LP > HP
L ₂ - B				

^{*} P < .01

The T- test results revealed a significant difference between the HP & LP groups in their relative frequency of the use of CSs within all categories. Linguistic-based CSs and context - based CSs are employed more often by HP learners whereas knowledge based CSs , Paralinguistic CSs , L1 - based CSs, repetition CSs , avoidance CSs and other L2 - based CSs including word - coinage and approximation are used more frequently by the LP learners.

There are some similarities and differences between the findings in the present research and those of others. The HP Persian EFL learners, like the HP learners in Chen's (1990) and Paribakht's (1985) used linguistic - based CSs more often than did the LP learners whereas the LP learners used

knowledge - based CSs and repetition CSs more often than did the HP learners. But the point of difference is that context-based CSs in paribakht's (1985), and paralinguistic and avoidance CSs in Chen's (1990) produced no significant difference between different proficiency learners whereas in this experiment these strategies provided significant differences between the LP & HP Persian EFL learners. That is, context - based CSs (see table 4 & 5) were employed more often by the HP learners whereas avoidance and paralinguistic CSs were employed more by the LP learners. Moreover, contrary to Chen's, (1990) subjects, Persian EFL learners used some L1 - based CSs and some L2 - based CSs which were not observed in the HP learner's linguistic product.

TABLE 5: T-test Results of Group Differences in Selection of the subcategories of Context – Based CSs Employed

	Mean of HP	Mean of LP	t	outcome
LC	0.1085	0.0190	6.20 [*]	HP>LP
U.L2 I & P	0.0075	0.0005	7.00 [*]	LP>HP
U.L1 I& P	0.0000	0.0020	1.50 [*]	n.s.

LP:Low Proficiency group

HP:high proficiency group

LC:linguistic context CSs

U.L2 I & P : use of target language idioms and proverbs

U.L1 I & P : use of first language idioms and proverbs

*P<.01

4. Discussion

The result in table 1 shows that there is a negative relationship between the learners' language proficiency and the number of CSs employed. The high proficiency learners used 684 CSs , significantly fewer than the 1138

CSs employed by the low - proficiency learners. This phenomenon can be accounted for by the greater mastery of the target language items by the HP learners to overcome their lexical problems, which in turn led them to resort to fewer CSs employed whereas the LP learners , handicapped by their limited knowledge of the target language , needed to compensate more and consequently resorted more frequently to CSs.

With the exception of L1 - based CSs and repetition CSs which were not observed in the HP learners ' performance , all learners exploited similar sources to compensate for their insufficient knowledge of the target language , but they differed in the proportional use of the sources of information according to their target language proficiency . High proficiency learners who had greater formal control over the target language and thus were in a better position to rely on their knowledge of the target language could certainly choose linguistic - based and context - based CSs (which were basically dependent on the target language knowledge) such as synonym, antonym, or linguistic context to refer to the intended meaning. But the LP learners, due to their limited linguistic knowledge couldn't use linguistic based CSs and had to rely on their knowledge of the world . As a result they extensively used knowledge - based CSs (see table 4).

Low proficiency learners were also observed to use more paralinguistic strategies than did the high proficiency learners. This , again, can be attributed to the LP learners' deficient linguistic competence. That is, whenever the learners couldn't find a direct , economical and meaningful linguistic - based CSs to convey their ideas or whenever they felt that their expressed ideas were not effective enough , they tried to use paralinguistic

CSs along with their linguistic product to make it as comprehensible as possible.

Repetition CSs were also used by the LP learners . These strategies were used when the learner had neither new linguistic knowledge nor world knowledge to express his/her idea and consequently resorted to repetition of the previously expressed idea to maintain communication rather than to avoid it. But whenever none of the linguistic knowledge, world knowledge or repetition appeared appropriate to him/her, she/he tried to avoid communication.

In addition to knowledge - based CSs , repetition CSs and paralinguistic CSs, the LP learners were also observed to use L1 - based strategies (of literal translation and code- switching) , and some L2 - based CSs such as word coinage and approximation which represented the early stage development of L2 learning, similar to what has been observed in L1 learning.

The findings in this research all show the shaky state of linguistic competence of LP learners which forces them to resort to greater number and larger variety of CSs in which linguistic based CSs has no significant place whereas a more stable state of the HP learners' linguistic competence leads them to rely confidently on their target language competence. Moreover, the data suggests that though strategic competence is shared by learners of different proficiency levels , its manifestation would have different forms at different stages of development of linguistic competence.

The findings in this research also indicate a positive relationship between the learners' language proficiency and their strategic competence. That is, the closer they get to a native - like competence , the more probable it will

be for them to resort to linguistic based CSs and the fewer CSs they need to convey their ideas as effectively as possible. Therefore, it seems possible to help Persian EFL learners, especially the HP learners to get more involved in communication in the target language through the use of CSs and consequently develop their communicative competence more rapidly.

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