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'Free' to Choose: Communication Strategy Use in EFL Classrooms in Iran

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Abstract

This study investigated six English lessons from the learners' textbooks at a private language institute in Shiraz, Iran, to assess the use of Communication Strategies (CSs) in open-ended conversation tasks. The participants were 30 pairs of English learners (N=60) divided into elementary, intermediate, and advanced proficiency levels. Conversations were recorded and transcribed and the final assessment of the data was made using both quantitative and qualitative analyses. The results showed that the frequency of CSs was relatively low, compared with previous studies on EFL learners in other contexts. Indeed, no significant difference was found between the three groups vis-à-vis the total number of CSs used. However, it was found that elementary-level students frequently used the strategies which impeded the flow of their communication. On the other hand, advanced students mostly

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employed strategies to maintain the flow of interaction. Nevertheless, no group could adequately use self-solving strategies such as circumlocution and approximation for target language (TL) vocabularies. The results indicated that while a small number of students could use CSs for conversation tasks; it is necessary to introduce explicit meta-cognitive strategy training to raise awareness of CS use in order to further expand TL development.

Keywords: Communication strategies; Target language; Proficiency levels; Frequency

Introduction

There is a growing body of research on the effects of learning strategies for second language communication (e.g. Cohen, 1998; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990), and while the inculcation of CSs has been a central concern for enhancing interaction skills in the TL (Bialystok, 1990; Canale & Swain, 1980; Kasper & Kellerman, 1997; Nakatani & Goh, 2007), there is still some disagreement regarding the extent to which characteristics, such as proficiency level and cultural contexts, affect CS use (Chen, 1990; Dörnyei, 1995; Rost & Ross, 1991). As Oxford (1996) claims, different cultural contexts can affect individual learners' strategy use and thus it is important to examine actual individual classroom situations (Foster, 1998). Yet the number and scope of CS studies which have examined different cultural and linguistic contexts in the area of English as a foreign language (EFL) is relatively small (e.g., Dörnyei, 1995; Nakatani, 2005). In particular, according to Maleki (2007), there is paucity of research on the use of CS in specific EFL contexts and classrooms in Iran.

Several researchers have critically noted that the pedagogical context for EFL learning in Iran is far from ideal (e.g. Maleki & Zangani, 2007; Moradi, 1996; Rahimi, 1996). According to the researchers, imported textbooks and materials are still not widely acceptable and available in the public school system, which is run by the Ministry of Education. For political reasons, there is very little contact, if any, with native speakers of English (see Taki, 2008). Under such circumstances, some teachers have explored the applicability of CSs which have been regarded as a useful method to improve the communication ability and interaction skills of the learners in such restricted situations (e.g. Ansarin, 2003; Saemian, 1991). However, it appears there is little agreement regarding the influence that learners' TL

proficiency level may have on the use of different CSs in different classroom contexts.

Given the high popularity and extent of private institutes in Iran, much research has still yet to be done on their overall effectiveness. In other words, there is still research needed to examine the efficiency of language institutes in terms of accomodating learners with adequate ability to communicate freely in the target langauge environment. Although everyday operations and financial matters are controlled by the Ministry of Education (Razmjoo & Riazi, 2006b), such institutes can choose teaching methods and textbooks more freely than public institutes. In addition, much more 'speaking' opportunities are provided for the learners in these institutes; so students are expected to use more CSs consciously or sub-consciously compared to the English learners at public schools. Hence, this study investigates the kinds of CSs Iranian EFL students use in classroom tasks at a private institute in Iran and aims to examine TL interactional problems with respect to how proficiency levels affect the use of CSs. Under scruntiny is whether private institutes in Iran are successful in developing their students' speaking abilities.

Background of the Study

Iranian EFL Contexts

Some researchers argue that students graduated from schools or universities still lack the basic needs to communicate and cope effectively in L2 environments (Moradi, 1996; Rahimi, 1996). Although a great deal of attention is paid to memorizing vocabulary, learning grammatical rules and translating written texts, oral skills are often neglected in Iranian high schools and universities (Rahimi, Riazi & Seif, 2008). And, as Rahimi (2009) points out, English is still taught through the grammar translation method in schools and even in some universities. Furthermore, as students' contact with the English language is often limited to class time, those who are interested in learning English for communicative purposes often have to attend private language institutes.

Gradually, due to the "shortcomings of EFL instructions in Iranian schools" such as limited facilities, outdated textooks and financial problems, as well as the recognition of "the importance of foreign language instruction", more and more private institutes have been set up throughout the country (Razmjoo & Riazi, 2006a, p.344).

Razmjoo and Riazi (2006b) claim that the institutes place particualr emphasis on conversation activities, with less time spent on direct translation. Lectures and mini-talks also offer students the chance to discuss different subjects. In sum, it appears that there are more "learner-learner interactions than one way teacher-learner interactions" (p.64).

Accordingly, this study explores the use of CSs in the classrooms of private institutes because it is assumed that students may have more opportunites to learn English through communication activities in these institutes.

Psycholinguistic and Interactional Views on CSs

The effects of CS use have been investigated from both psycholinguistic and interactional perspectives regarding the compensatory function relative to proficiency (e.g. Cohen, 1998; Kasper & Kellerman, 1997). The former focuses on the range of problem-solving activities for specific TL terms.

The latter, interactional perspective on the other hand, focuses on the interaction between interlocutors and negotiation of meaning. Here Tarone (1980) argued:

"CSs relate to a mutual attempt of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in situations where requisite meaning structures do not seem to be shared." (p.420)

This interactional perspective would allow for the inclusion of various repair mechanisms. Tarone's intention was to "clarify intended meaning rather than simply correct linguistic forms" (p. 424).

Dörnyei (1995) also extended the definition of CSs believing that insufficient processing time is a big communication problem for second language speakers. He proposed *stalling strategies* that help the speakers gain time to think and keep the channel of communication open. Therefore, in order to analyse learners' use of CS in both perspectives, Dörnyei (1995) proposed taxonomies consisting of the following major categories: 1. Avoidance or Reduction Strategies; 2. Achievement or Compensatory Strategies; and 3. Stalling or Time-gaining Strategies.

Avoidance or reduction strategies involve an alteration, a reduction, or complete abandonment of the intended message. Achievement or compensatory strategies offer alternative plans for the speakers to carry out their communicative intention by manipulating available language and compensating for their linguistic

deficiencies. Stalling or time-gaining strategies are for gaining some time and keeping the channel of communication open in case of difficulties (*ibid.*).

Communication Strategy Research in Iranian EFL Contexts

Despite the diversity of research on CSs in other contexts, only a few studies have examined the relationship between communicative tasks and the use of CSs in Iranian contexts. For example, Saemian (1991) investigated the relation between the effects of proficiency and the use of CSs among Iranian EFL learners. The researcher found statistically significant difference between the groups in terms of both frequency and types of CSs employed. The high proficiency group resorted to more circumlocution and approximation. Yet, the low proficiency group used more repetition, paralinguistic, avoidance, and code-switching.

Yarmohammadi and Seif (1992) undertook research into the application of different CSs for solving communication problems in interrelated oral and written tasks. The researchers identified a link between the type of task (oral compared to written) and the use of specific CSs. For instance, strategies of literal translation, approximation and topic avoidance, were found aplenty in writing, while code-switching strategies were employed more in oral tasks. However, from this tentative position, it is still unclear whether Iranian learners could use strategies such as paraphrase, and circumlocution effectively.

Ansarin (2003) gave some tasks to a number of first year and final year students to illuminate the cognitive decisions and psychological processes of the learners to overcome linguistic hindrances. Although, the first year students tended to use more CSs than the final year students, proficiency in the TL language did not significantly affect the amount of strategy use. It was found that that Iranians preferred to solve their problem through achievement strategies rather than avoidance strategies.

Maleki (2007) investigated the teachability of CSs for university students. He used a textbook which dealt with specific CSs such as approximation, circumlocution, foreignizing, word coinage, appeals for assistance, and time-stalling devices for the experimental group. The control group used a textbook without CS use. After four months, the experimental group performed better on the Cambridge ESOL speaking test and a house-made achievement test than the

control group. It was suggested that teaching CSs could be effective and conducive to English language learning.

To summarize, although EFL learning environments are relatively restricted, alongside the implementation of CS training, Iranian learners could benefit from the use of CSs. However, the research on CSs is still inadequate and no mention has been made of learners in private English language institutes in Iran. Furthermore, few studies have investigated authentic interactional tasks such as personal conversations in classrooms. The extent of CSs learners of different language levels use in a restricted EFL context such as Iran helps us to assess the applicability and usefulness of each strategy in this context. One of EFL learners' ultimate goals - to become fluent in the TL contexts - requires spontaneous and flexible interaction. It is reported that EFL learners could enhance the TL proficiency by increasing awareness of the use of specific CSs, such as maintenance of fluency and negotiation of meaning to solve interactional difficulties in authentic tasks (e.g. Nakatani, 2005). By utilizing these strategies, they can recognize their own deficiencies and employ specific strategies to negotiate meaning and produce the TL. These behaviors offer learners sufficient opportunities to learn how to solve communication problems while maintaining conversation flow (Nakatani, 2010).

It is therefore important to examine the use of CSs among Iranian EFL learners in the discourse data of open-ended communicative tasks to see if the use of CSs is in accordance with the students' progress to higher proficiency levels. Therefore, this study examined the application of CSs by Iranian EFL learners of different proficiency levels at an English language institute. More specifically, the study attempted to answer the following questions:

1. What are the frequency and features of CSs used by Iranian EFL learners in open-ended conversation tasks in their language classes?

2. Is there any difference among the learners of different proficiency levels in the use of CSs in the Iranian EFL classroom?

Method

Participants

Participants were 60 EFL learners comprising 30 pairs at a language institute in Shiraz, Iran. They were from different social and economic backgrounds. Twenty students from each of the three different proficiency levels were randomly chosen

to make 10 pairs for a conversation task in individual classes. Their levels were determined by the results of Oxford Placement Test 1 (OPT) (Allan, 1992). The students were not majoring in English. They were all male, adult learners and their age ranged from 16 to 25. During informal interviews with the learners about their purpose of learning English, they mostly expressed the desire to speak English fluently.

Instrumentation

A common technique to gather data for the research in this area has been through conversation tasks in which the participants are asked to play roles (Khanji, 1996). In this study, there was a topic assigned for student-student interaction in each level. The topic was "Talking about what people do" for elementary learners and "Discussing preferences" and "Talking about their heroes" for intermediate and advanced learners respectively. These topics were chosen from the textbooks' lessons, which did not contain specific CS instruction, according to the students' corresponding linguistic competence. Individuals were asked randomly to communicate in pairs in front of the class and the resultant conversations worked as the data for this study. To enhance the reliability of data collection, the conversations were recorded for further detailed analysis.

Data Collection Procedures

During each two-hour session of the classes in the three proficiency levels, systematic pair-work conversation activities lasted for about 20 to 30 minutes. Thirty pairs of students yielded 30 conversation tasks for our analysis. The teacher did not explicitly teach CSs in his classes. After the coverage of all related vocabulary items and grammatical structures by the teacher, the lesson was observed carefully by one of the researchers in this current study.

During the lesson, the learners were expected to talk spontaneously about the specific topics such as, "Talking about what people do", "Discussing preferences" and "Talking about their heroes". As the learners had practiced the same task for the previous lessons, they were familiar with the procedure. The learners were not informed about the purpose of the observer in order not to affect their speech and production.

First, the teacher asked several general questions about the topic to ascertain and verify their understanding of the issue. Then, the teacher modelled a

conversation with one of the proficient students in order to show the learners how they should do the task. The topic of the demonstration was different from that of the intended task. The teacher suggested using the grammatical structures and the keywords covered in the course. After that, it was the learners' turn to initiate conversations with each other. It took approximately 20 minutes for the learners to finish the task. With the task finished, the teacher asked random individuals to communicate in pairs and these recorded conversations were used as the data for the present study. More precisely, the new tasks with different topics for each pair were unplanned. It is also important to note that the new pairs were different from the ones practiced with each other, in order to let the CSs emerge spontaneously and to neutralize the effect of the previous practice and hence to keep the situation as natural as possible. With pairs communicating separately, it was possible for the observer and the teacher to identify and count the non-linguistic means used by each participant and to record the voices easily. As mentioned previously, these conversations were audio-taped and transcribed to analyse the specific features of Iranian students' use of CSs.

Analysis

The Persian-speaking author of this paper observed two elementary, two intermediate and two advanced classes as a non-participant observer. He did not interfere in the processes of teaching and handling the classes. It is worth mentioning that the same teacher instructed all the classes. The observer audio-taped the conversations and then transcribed for further analysis. The reason that the researchers decided against video-taping was the possibility that the students could have been distracted by the camera. The researchers wanted to keep the situation as normal as possible. The observer listened very carefully to the students conversing with each other in English and counted non-linguistic signals as well. The teacher assisted the observer in counting non-linguistic signals as well as identifying other strategies (He was an MA graduate of TEFL and totally familiar with CSs).

In order to analyze the use of strategies, Dörnyei's (1995, p. 58) classification of CSs, was used to identify the categories of strategies each participant employed. To answer the research questions, the different CSs used by the learners in all classes were identified. In order to improve the reliability of the coding, as mentioned previously, the analysis of the observer was compared to the analysis of the teacher of the class who also helped in identifying strategies. When there were

discrepancies between the coding, cross examination was conducted on the items until mutual agreement was reached.

The frequency of individual strategies in each proficiency level was counted and tabulated. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to compare the number of total strategies and the three major categories used by the learners in different levels. Chi-square tests were conducted to assess whether the difference was statistically significant between each two groups (elementary vs. intermediate, intermediate vs. advanced, and elementary vs. advanced). In order to validate the statistical data, examples of CSs were carefully examined. These examples can illustrate authentic discourse data regarding how Iranian EFL learners coped with communication problems in classroom interaction tasks, a point which has been neglected in the previous studies.

Results and Discussion

Quantitative Data and Analysis

Table 1 below shows the frequency of each strategy among the learners of different proficiency levels. This table provides an accurate answer for the first research question mentioned above with regard to the frequency count of different strategies.

Table 1
Frequency of Communication Strategies

Proficiency levels / Strategies	Elementary	Intermediate	Advanced
Avoidance or Reduction Strategies			
Message abandonment	20	9	1
Topic avoidance	0	0	0
Sub Total	20	9	1
Achievement or Compensatory Strategies			
Circumlocution	0	0	2
Approximation	2	5	1
Use of all-purpose words	0	4	25
Word coinage	0	0	0
Non-linguistic means	0	1	4
Foreignizing	1	1	0
Code switching	18	10	5
Appeal for help	4	6	0
Literal translation	0	1	3
Sub Total	25	28	40
Stalling or Time-gaining Strategies			
Use of fillers	18	20	34
Total	63	57	75

As Table 1 shows, a total of 195 CSs were observed in the thirty conversations of 60 participants in the three proficiency levels. Sixty-three strategies were observed in the elementary classes; 57 strategies in the intermediate classes; and 75 strategies in the advanced classes. The number of strategies collected in this study was relatively low compared with other research (see for example Chen, 1990; Rabab'ah & Bulut, 2007; Wannaruk, 2003). For example, Wannaruk (2003) reported 463 instances of CSs by 75 students and Chen (1990) noted 220 instances of CSs by 12 Chinese EFL learners. As frequency counts in Table 1 show, a number of achievement or compensatory CSs were not used at all in the conversations of elementary, intermediate, and advanced learners. For example, circumlocution, use of all-purpose words, word coinage, non-linguistic means, and

literal translation were not used by the elementary learners at all. As mentioned earlier, achievement or compensatory strategies assist speakers to sustain their communication via alternative plans. The small number of achievement strategies (25 among the elementary learners and 28 among the intermediate learners) suggests that without direct assistance and explicit instruction from the teacher, it is difficult for learners to utilize CSs frequently in English.

Table 2 below answers the second research question and compares the frequency count of CSs among each two levels. It demonstrates that the total frequency of CSs was generally at the same level among the three proficiency levels and there is no significant difference among the three groups (Asymp. Sig = .58, Asymp. Sig = .11, Asymp. Sig = .30).

Table 2

Chi square results for the use of CSs among the three groups

Avoidance or Reduction Strategies (sub total)	
Elementary and Intermediate, Chi square = 4.17	Asymp. Sig. = .04*
Intermediate and advanced, Chi square = 6.40	Asymp. Sig = .01*
Elementary and advanced, Chi square = 17.19	Asymp. Sig = 0 *
Achievement or Compensatory Strategies (sub total)	
Elementary and intermediate, Chi square = .17	Asymp. Sig = .68
Intermediate and advanced, Chi square = 2.1	Asymp. Sig. = .14
Elementary and advanced, Chi square = 3.46	Asymp. Sig = .06
Stalling or Time-gaining Strategies (sub total)	
Elementary and intermediate, Chi square = .10	Asymp. Sig = .74
Intermediate and advanced, Chi square = 3.6	Asymp Sig = .05*
Elementary and advanced, Chi square = 4.9	Asymp. Sig = .02*
Total	
Elementary and intermediate, Chi square = .30	Asymp. Sig = .58
Intermediate and advanced, Chi square = 2.4	Asymp. Sig = .11
Elementary and advanced, Chi square = 1.04	Asymp. Sig = .30

* $p < .05$

However, the use of different categories of CSs was significantly different according to the proficiency level. As results in Table 2 show, the elementary group used more Avoidance or Reduction Strategies than the intermediate and the advanced group (Asymp. Sig. = .04*, Asymp. Sig = 0 *). The intermediate group used them more than the advanced group as well (Asymp. Sig = .01*). In fact, the

results suggest that lower level learners used strategies which interrupted and affected the flow of their conversation. This fact was consistent with previous studies undertaken in different contexts and conditions (e.g. Khanji, 1996; Nakatani, 2006). In this respect, this study therefore goes some way to expanding the research in this nascent area.

With regard to Stalling or Time-gaining Strategies, Table 2 shows that the advanced group used more strategies than the other two groups. However as the Table shows, there was no statistically-significant difference between the elementary and the intermediate learners, with regard to this category (Asymp. Sig = .74). Also, there was no statistically-significant difference in the use of Achievement or Compensatory Strategies among the learners of the three levels ($p > .05$). This result shows that it is difficult to assert that higher level students used strategies for negotiation with peers in order to develop their interaction. As such, the present research produces different findings from previous studies which argued that higher-level EFL learners tend to use negotiation behaviors to enhance their interaction (e.g. Clennel, 1995). It may be difficult for EFL learners to use such strategies for negotiation without preparatory training (e.g. Nakatani, 2005). Nevertheless, analysing statistical data is insufficient as we need to take the context into consideration. Therefore, in the next section we look at examples of CS use to validate the current results.

Qualitative Data and Analysis

As this is the initial attempt to explore the Iranian EFL learners' use of CSs in classroom interaction tasks and as it is significant in the Asian context due to the limitations of speaking opportunities in EFL environments compared with ESL and native-language contexts, it is important to look at the discourse data in detail. The following section provides some information on the "features" of the CSs used by Iranian EFL learners, as claimed in the first Research Question.

Avoidance or Reduction Strategies

Message abandonment strategy comprised 14.92% of the total strategy use among the learners. This result is consistent with Khanji, Shiyab, and Hussein (2000). In that research, message abandonment was designated as "incomplete sentences". It was found that the elementary group used them very frequently. Similarly in this research, compared to the frequency of 20 in the elementary group, this number was nine for the intermediate group but only one for the advanced group. Thus,

lower-level learners tended to use this strategy more which was in line with previous research (Khanji, 1996).

As seen in the following examples, the lower-level learners usually left the message incomplete and resorted to message abandonment. S1 (student number 1) and S4 abandoned their utterances when in difficulty.

S1: What does your father do?
S2: He is a banker. And what does your father do?
S1: He is…

S3: I'm a student and my father is a teacher. What about you?
S4: I'm a student too and my father is a …

Therefore, it can be claimed that lower proficiency learners resorted to message abandonment as their language capability did not enable them to continue effectively. There seemed to be no Topic avoidance in their conversation. Yet, as we did not obtain the participants' comments on specific strategy use, it was difficult to analyze their intention of avoiding any utterances. As claimed in previous studies (Cohen, 1998, Nakatani, 2010), verbal report protocol analysis can be used for future research in order to investigate this kind of strategy more precisely.

Achievement or Compensatory Strategies

Achievement strategies which assist the learners to sustain their communication comprised 12%, 14%, and 20% of strategy use in the three proficiency levels of elementary, intermediate, and advanced, respectively. Each single achievement or compensatory strategy with the degree of its use has been mentioned in the following sections.

Circumlocution

As explained by Dörnyei (1995), circumlocution can be understood as "describing or exemplifying the target object or action" (p.58). The elementary and intermediate learners did not use this strategy. The advanced group applied it only twice. Such behaviors demand more proficient "speaking" skill in order to express yourself and thus it was not easy for the participants to produce circumlocution

without further instruction. In the following example, S6 could not retrieve the name of Lionel Messi and hence tried to give some explanations instead.

S5: My idol is Cristiano Ronaldo. He is a great player. What about you?
S6: A football player?
S5: Yes.
S6: *mmmm, I like that young player from Argentina, playing in Barcelona.*
S5: Messi
S6: ah, yes. I could not remember the name.

Approximation

Approximation was used to express the meaning of the target lexical item with an alternative term. The frequency count of approximation was five for the intermediate level and two and one for the elementary and the advanced learners, respectively. As the numbers were small, it was difficult to explain the reason about these differences within the collected data. Moreover, it seems apparent that this strategy could prove difficult for elementary learners as their vocabulary knowledge is still limited. For advanced learners, it may not be necessary because they seem to have sufficient knowledge of TL vocabularies. In the future research, it is important to collect the data over much longer periods which can offer enough information regarding these issues. In the following example of the intermediate level class, the word "boat" was used instead of "yacht".

S7: How would you like to travel?
S8: As a matter of fact, I prefer to travel with a *boat*.

In the next example, S10 used approximation in using the word "boss" instead of "CEO (Chief Executive Officer)" or "chairman" which is usually used for Bill Gate's position.

S9: Can you name a person who you really admire?
S10: Yes, of course. I really like Bill Gates. He is Microsoft's *boss.* I've heard he has some …

All-purpose words

The advanced group used 25 all-purpose words as compensatory strategies. The frequency count was four in the intermediate classes and zero in the elementary

classes. The advanced learners frequently used words such as "thing", "stuff", "something", and "someone", because these expressions assisted them in sustaining conversations with their interlocutors when the exact word was not retrievable.

S11: Last week, I was watching *something* about Christophe Columbus, my favourite figure.
S12: Which channel showed it?
S11: Hmmmmm, I don't remember.

Word-coinage

No group used word-coinage. According to the teaching experience in Iranian contexts, the teachers themselves usually do not use this strategy in their classes. So it was unfamiliar and difficult for the learners to use this strategy in this task. Another reason might be what was mentioned by the learners about the fear of being laughed at if they made mistakes. If they had used word-coinage for their utterances, errors and mistakes could have doubled in frequency because of the aforementioned reasons. As Rusina (2008) pointed out, EFL learners are sometimes anxious about making mistakes in speaking and have a propensity to avoid speaking altogether.

Non-linguistic means

Non-linguistic means or para-linguistic features were observed in low frequency in all classes. The elementary group did not use non-linguistic means and the intermediate group used them only once. The result was predictable as mimes and gestures are seldom used among Iranian people in general and students and teachers in particular. However, as seen in the following example, a few learners used specific body language to explain unfamiliar cultural expressions. From this we can say that in terms of future research, it might prove useful to explore the use of para-linguistic CS for the TL culture. In the example below, S13 did not understand the meaning of the word "crucified" and hence he appealed for assistance with the ungrammatical expression: *They what him?* Then, S14 employed a gesture to help the interlocutor understand the meaning.

S13: Which holy figure do you admire? Why?
S14: I always admire Jesus Christ. People bothered him a lot and finally they crucified him but he did not object.

S13: *They what him?*
S14: Crucify [showing by gesture and acting himself]

Foreignizing

Another compensatory strategy which had low frequency was foreignizing. This strategy was not practiced widely by the participants, presumably from fear of being mocked by their peers in producing weird words that were neither English nor Persian. Foreignizing was just used once both in the elementary classes and the intermediate classes. S16 used the word "masmalize" (/mæsməlaiz/) in which the first part or the stem is a Persian word plus the English suffix –ize. It means to consider a problem or a task in a cursory and superficial manner.

S15: Would you rather solve a problem or put it aside?
S16: *well*, I usually /mæsməlaiz/ a problem.

Code-switching

This strategy was used in all level classes. While the elementary group employed code-switching 18 times, intermediate and advanced learners used this compensatory strategy 10 times and five times, respectively. Thus, the lower-level students clearly had a propensity to use this strategy in greater frequency. As shown in the following example, S18 used this strategy when having problems of TL vocabularies.

S17: What does your father do?
S18: He is a /karmænd/. (employee)
S17: I am a student. What do you do?
S18: I am a /væki:l/. (lawyer)

Appeal for help

When it comes to "appeal for help", the frequency counts were six and four respectively for the intermediate and elementary levels, while the advanced group did not call for this strategy. In the following example, S20 expressed intentional puzzlement when he did not understand a term and combined this puzzlement with a clarification request expressed in rising intonation. His interlocutor S19 used code-switching to convey his meaning when he found out that S20 did not know the meaning of the word 'flight attendant'. He quickly translated it to Persian to make himself understood.

S19: Ahmad, is your mother a flight attendant?
S20: ha? [Puzzled face]
S19: /mehmandare hævapeima/
S20: aha. Yes, she is.

Overall, this strategy was employed more by the elementary and intermediate students. It was manifested in rising intonation, or in directly asking for repetition or help. In the next example, since S22 did not know the meaning of the word "violent", he appealed for help with a clarification request.

S21: Would you rather see a violent movie or a horror movie?
S22: *What is violent?*

Literal translation

Literal translation is "translating literally a lexical item, idiom, compound word, or structure from L1 to L2" (Dörnyei, 1995, p. 58), while in another compensatory strategy, code switching, the exact L1 word with L1 pronunciation is used when speaking in L2. It seems fair to conclude that code switching is a useful strategy when the learners in a class possess a common first language.

The strategy of literal translation was not frequently used in the classes. It was used only once in the intermediate classes and three times in the advanced classes. The typical example used by the advanced learners was the structure "although…but", which does not exist in English. This expression reflects the grammatical structure of Persian language. It is standard in Persian to use both the subordinator, /ægærče/ (although) and conjunction, /æma/ (but) whereas in English, either the subordinator or the conjunction is used. In the following example, S23 resorted to code-switching strategy to translate the title of the film (/karagahe heivanat/ instead of "pet detective"). S24 translated from Persian directly to English. i.e., / næ, *ægarče* mæn fi:lmhaye komedi: ra du:st daræm, *æma* ʤi:m Kæri: ra du:st nædaræm. Lorel Hardi: ra tærdʒih mi:dæm/. /ægarče/ equals "although" and /*æma* / equals "but". The subordinator (although) and the conjunction (but) were both used in English but within a structure of Persian language. It is worth mentioning that in the example below both strategies, i.e. literal translation and code switching are found.

S23: I like Jim Carrey and his film /karagahe heivanat/. Do you like Jim Carrey too?
S24: No, *although* I like comedies, *but* I don't like Jim Carrey. I prefer Laurel and Hardy.

Another literal translation was the direct translation of a Persian idiom to English. In the following example, S26 uttered the Persian word /vejhe/ instead of "charisma" which was another example of code-switching. Then, S25 used the sentence "my eyes don't drink water", a literal translation of a Persian idiom, which means "I don't think so". The instances of literal translation show the existence of native-language mindset among the learners of even higher levels of proficiency. Again, it should be mentioned that literal translation (my eyes don't drink water) in the example below is accompanied by code switching (/vejhe/ for charisma).

S25: I like Mr X a lot. I think he is a good politician. Do you agree?
S26: Yes, he has a good /*vejhe*/ in the world. Will he become president?
S25: No, *my eyes don't drink water*.

Stalling or Time-gaining Strategies

Use of fillers was a frequently used strategy in all groups. It was used 18, 20 and 34 times in the elementary, intermediate and advanced groups, respectively. This strategy was used more when the participants wanted to keep the attention of their peers. The application of expressions such as *hmmm, well, in fact, as a matter of fact, actually* was among the examples occurred. These expressions were used to "fill pauses and to gain time to think" (Dörnyei, 1995, p. 58).

S27: Would you rather see a documentary or drama?
S28: *well*, I prefer a documentary.

The reason behind this high frequency of usage may be attributed to the frequent use of this strategy in the learners' L1. Iranians use expressions such as "uh", "hmmm", "well", etc. to sustain their communication in L1. Drawing on formative childhood experiences of parents using these expressions when speaking to them or to other people together with exposure to this strategy in adulthood, learners were already familiar with this type of strategy and tended to use it in L2.

Conclusion

Compared with previous research (Rabab'ah & Bulut, 2007; Wannaruk, 2003; Chen, 1990), the frequency of CSs use in this study was relatively low, with 195 CSs used by 60 learners. In fact, rare instances of the majority of achievement or compensatory strategies among the learners indicate lack of knowledge about this useful aspect of communication by language teachers. To be more precise, use of fillers, code-switching and the use of all-purpose words, which were found to be abundant in the discourse data, points to the subconscious nature of the learners and the occurrence of these strategies in the learners' native language.

Although it can be claimed that proficiency level did not affect overall strategy use (see Ansarin, 2003), the use of CS categories was different according to the levels. For example, the lower-level learners easily gave up when unable to express themselves in the TL. This result could be explained by the fact that lower level learners were insufficiently equipped to cope with communicative deficiencies in regular classroom tasks. The intermediate group employed more approximation and all-purpose words than the elementary group, which enabled them to continue their interaction to some extent. As explained above, use of fillers is a common CS in L1 and it could be easy for Iranian learners to transfer this strategy to the TL. In particular, the advanced group used this strategy more than other levels.

Moreover, only the advanced group frequently introduced the use of all-purpose words in order to maintain their discourse. It may be possible for higher-level Iranian EFL learners to utilize some CSs without specific training. Yet even the advanced group seldom used strategies for circumlocution which required more complex skills for TL production. Therefore, establishing CS training with a focus on solving TL vocabulary problems could be useful for the future curriculum development. In fact, designing books with explicit strategy training in order to raise the consciousness of the learners to CSs is a good starting point. In addition, more research on the use of CSs could lead to new developments in psycholinguistics and communication studies.

In addition, the current study dealt with a relatively small number of classes. It is important to devote more classroom time to investigate the behaviour of EFL learners. Further research can be done by video-taping, if learners are not distracted and the teacher does not over-formalize proceedings. Moreover, in this study, we have only considered the proficiency level of the learners. The relationship

between CSs and other variables such as motivation or anxiety of Iranian students can also be studied (see Oxford & Nyikos, 1989).

It can be argued that EFL learners in general and Iranian EFL students in particular should be exposed to CSs more and encouraged to use them in their daily conversations. It is important to develop a specific teaching program focusing on CSs in the Iranian context. Apart from the subconscious strategies transferred from native language to the TL such as the use of fillers, teachers can introduce various types of CSs and raise learners' awareness of their effectiveness. In order to achieve these goals, as Cohen (1998) suggests, it can be beneficial to introduce meta-cognitive training to solve problems and develop interaction in English. Once EFL learners get used to utilizing meta-cognitive strategies, they can freely choose some CSs which they think the most appropriate according to specific learning contexts.

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