
COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES; DO THEY DIFFER ACROSS THE STUDENTS' LEVEL OF LANGUAGE LEARNING ANXIETY?

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Abstract

Since English is not used as a means of communication in daily life interaction, students usually get difficulties to use it which could possibly trigger their language learning anxiety. This case leads them to use certain strategies in order to keep the conversation going on which so-called communication strategies. In relation to this issue, this survey study aims at investigating communication strategies employed by EFL students pursuing Speaking I course. It attempts to find out whether high-anxiety students employ different communication strategies from that of low-anxiety students. Questionnaire is used to measure the students' level of anxiety and identify their communication strategies. Identification of communication strategies could train the students to be a strategic learner which is required in foreign language learning.

Keywords: *communication strategies, language learning anxiety*

1. INTRODUCTION

In performing oral-related activities, students are required to be spontaneous in expressing their thought. The problem might arise when it comes to speaking by using the Second Language (L2) due to limited linguistic repertoire as well as limited exposure toward the language. Students have to understand what the interlocutor is saying and how they should respond to it. In other words, it requires them not only to understand the input (comprehension) but also to produce the output (production). Once the speaker and listener realize that they do not share a mutual understanding, and need to repair problems or modify the conversation, they have to use tricks which so-called communication strategies. Thus, speaking and communication strategies are interrelated.

Communication strategies have caught the researchers' interest since they were introduced by Canale and Swain (1980) as part of communicative competence (Dörnyei, 1995). Thereby, communicative competence could probably be gained by developing an awareness to employ communication strategies. Furthermore, Nakatani (2006) proposes that fluency in speaking depends not only on knowledge about the language but also on ability to make use of communication strategies. In a nutshell, language competence only is not sufficient to be competent in communication. Interestingly, communication strategies also contribute positively to the students' willingness to communicate. A study conducted by Yousef, Jamil, & Razak (2013) found that the regression coefficient of the use of communication strategies and willingness to communicate was significant which means that the students willingness to speak improved as they used communication strategies, particularly, negotiation of meaning strategy. Research evidence has shown the beneficial role of enhancing the students' awareness of communication strategies (Brown, 2007; Dörnyei, 1995). Willems (1987) cited in Mirzaei and Heidari (2012) argues that familiarizing the students with communication strategies assists them to "develop a feeling of being able to do something with the language."

Nevertheless, students are mostly not aware of the communication strategies they use. In fact, awareness of communication strategies facilitates them to cope with the difficulties they encounter in speaking. Besides, it is believed that successful language learners are those who use a wide range of strategies in learning. Thus, teachers are expected to familiarize the students with communication strategies.

The main aim of communication strategies is “to manage communication problems” (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997). It means that communication strategies serve as devices for keeping the conversation going on and/ for solving communication breakdown. It plays a role in negotiating meaning, leading to a mutual understanding.

A growing number of studies have been conducted to investigate communication strategies employed by students in performing communicative tasks. Some employed quantitative research by distributing questionnaire (Chuanchaisit & Prapphal, 2009; Uгла, Adnan, & Abidin, 2013) and compared the strategies used by high and low proficient students (Nakatani, 2006; Teng, 2011; Yaman, Irgin & Kavasoğlu, 2013; Najafabadi, 2014). Some others were qualitative research by observing the classroom interaction (Cervantes & Rodriguez, 2012) and comparing the strategies used by students with high and low degree of communication apprehension (Tiono & Sylvia, 2004; Bijani & Sedaghat, 2016) as well as comparing students with different proficiency level (Mirzaei & Heidari, 2012).

Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope (1986) point out that one of the factors affecting the use of communication strategies is language learning anxiety. In this case, there is a tendency for anxious students to avoid participating in the classroom activities. It is confirmed in a study conducted by Grzegorzewska (2015) that anxious and non-anxious students reacted differently when facing difficulties in speaking. Anxious students tended to use avoidance strategy in approaching the task. On the contrary, non-anxious students tried to take the risks by trying to convey a message despite the difficulties.

Language learning anxiety is a type of anxiety specifically associated with learning L2. Further, speaking is seemingly considered as the most anxiety provoking situation due to the “on the spot” nature of the tasks. Horwitz, et al. (1986) has conceptualized anxiety as “subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system”. Thus, it could be inferred that anxiety is related to psychological tension that is experienced by students in learning English as a L2.

Tiono & Sylvia (2004) conducted a study on how students with different degree of communication apprehension as one of the components of language learning anxiety used different kind of communication strategy. They found that while students with low degree of communication apprehension tended to use approximation, there was a tendency for students with high degree of communication apprehension using repetition more frequently. Moreover, the number of strategies used by students with high degree of communication apprehension exceeded those of low degree of communication apprehension. This finding is consistent with a recent research conducted by Bijani & Sedaghat (2016) suggesting that in spite of having a high degree of communication apprehension, the students attempted to cope with their difficulties when performing communicative tasks. Their apprehension in speaking does not hinder them to use communication strategies in order to survive in communication. A contrast finding is found in Grzegorzewska’s study (2015) in which there was a statistically significant difference in the number of strategies used by high and low-anxiety students. It turns out that low-anxiety students used bigger number of communication strategies compared to their high-anxiety counterpart. Thus, Grzegorzewska (2015) came up to the conclusion that anxiety hinders the use of communication strategies.

In spite of extensive research on communication strategies, the findings are diverse requiring further study. This study aims at investigating the use of communication strategies of students with different degree of language learning anxiety. Specifically, it compares the communication strategies used by high-anxiety and low-anxiety students. The main questions to be addressed in this study are formulated as follows:

1. What kind of communication strategy most frequently and least frequently used by students with high degree of language learning anxiety?
2. What kind of communication strategies most frequently and least frequently used by students with low degree of language learning anxiety?

2. REVIEW OF RELATED THEORIES

This part describes the review of related literature consisting of the notion of communication strategies and language learning anxiety.

Communication Strategies

The term communication strategies were firstly proposed by Selinker in 1972, which refers to the approach that a learner employs for communication with another speaker (Dörnyei, 1995). The insight came up with the recognition that the difference between the speakers' linguistic repertoire and the intended message leads to a systematic language phenomenon which aims at solving communication difficulties or breakdowns (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997). Following Selinker's definition, Corder (1978) in Dörnyei (1995) defines communication strategies as "a systematic technique employed by a speaker to express his [or her] meaning when faced with some difficulty." Færch and Kasper (1983) cited in Brown (2007) defined communication strategies from a psychological perspective as "potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal." Therefore, it could be implied that communication strategies are any techniques used to help the participants of the conversation solving communication difficulties.

There are various taxonomies of communication strategies. Surapa and Channarong (2011) state that the taxonomies of communication strategies have been classified differently following the principles of terminology and categorization of different researchers. Despite the varied taxonomies, they actually refer to similar thing which means that they are overlapping one another. What makes it differ is on the terminology used (Bialystok, 1990, in Dörnyei & Scott, 1997).

Broadly speaking, communication strategies are divided into two categories, namely achievement or compensatory strategies and reduction or avoidance strategies (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997). The categorization is based on how the students' deal with difficulties that they encounter during speaking. Achievement or compensatory strategies are considered as effective strategy in which the students try to maintain the conversation for the sake of achieving communicative goals. In contrast, reduction or avoidance strategies refer to strategies for avoiding the communication difficulties, which in turn affects the interaction negatively.

In 2006, Nakatani (2006) developed Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI) based on the students' self report questionnaire on communication strategies. Besides, it combines features from many of the previous taxonomies making it more comprehensive. Due to the interactive nature of speaking which takes form not only in expressing ideas but also in comprehending the message, the OCSI is divided into 2 main parts, namely strategies for coping with speaking difficulties and strategies for coping with listening difficulties.

The followings are strategies for coping with speaking difficulties:

- Socio-affective strategies
- Fluency-oriented
- Negotiation for meaning whilst speaking
- Accuracy-oriented
- Message reduction and alteration
- Non-verbal strategies whilst speaking
- Message abandonment
- Attempt to think in English

Strategies for coping with listening difficulties consist of:

- Negotiation for meaning whilst listening
- Fluency-maintaining
- Scanning
- Getting the gist
- Non-verbal strategies whilst listening
- Less active listener
- Word-oriented

Some of the aforementioned strategies (socio-affective, fluency-oriented, fluency-oriented, negotiation for meaning whilst speaking, accuracy-oriented, non-verbal strategies whilst speaking, attempt to think in English, negotiation for meaning whilst listening, fluency-maintaining, scanning,

getting the gist, non-verbal strategies whilst listening, and word-oriented) are classified as achievement strategies. Some others, such as message reduction and alteration, message abandonment, less active listener belong to reduction strategies.

Language Learning Anxiety

Language learning anxiety is a common phenomenon experienced by foreign language learners. It stems from the students' fear of being failed to achieve their goals making them feel uneasy, frustrate, self-doubt, apprehension and worry.

Anxious students tend to feel insecure, and uncomfortable to the learning environment. This phenomenon leads to students' discouragement, loss of ability, and have less willingness to use the target language. In fact, students' active involvement is required in language learning context. Since anxiety interferes with the students' ability to process information, it influences both fluency and accuracy of speaking. Students could probably get difficulty either to learn the language or to speak by using the language. It indicates that language learning anxiety has debilitating effect on learning by preventing the students using the language which in turn limits their participation. It, therefore, could be safely deduced that language learning anxiety is one of the plausible reasons why some students are more successful in learning a language than the others in spite of learning in a same environment.

Horwitz, et al. (1986) classified language learning anxiety into communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. Difficulty in speaking to others is the symptom of having communication apprehension. Communication apprehension seems to be increased in relation to the students' negative self-perception caused by their inability to understand others and make themselves understood (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). Fear of negative evaluation refers to afraid of being judged negatively by others. Young (1991) argues that students who are experiencing fear of negative evaluation are more concerned about how their errors are corrected than whether the errors should be corrected. Finally, afraid of being failed is the manifestation of test anxiety. It is considered as one the components of negative motivation. Students might likely feel more pressure when asked to perform in a second or foreign language. Such feeling is augmented by the fact that they need to recall and coordinate many points at the same time during the limited test period.

To sum up, both students and teachers play a crucial role in either raising or reducing language learning anxiety.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study primarily aims at finding out whether students with different degree of anxiety employ different communication strategies. To obtain the answer of the research questions, a survey study was conducted toward 51 students of *Halu Oleo* University pursuing Speaking I course. Their age ranges from 18 years old to 19 years old. They have been learning English for about 8 years. The students were firstly divided into high-anxiety and low-anxiety group based on their response to the language learning anxiety questionnaire. The maximum score is 100 indicating the highest degree of anxiety and the minimum is 25 indicating the lowest degree of anxiety. The students whose total score were above the average were considered as having a high degree of anxiety and those below the average considered as having a low degree of anxiety. Based on the computation, there were 24 students considered as having high degree of language learning anxiety, and 27 others belonged to low-anxiety group.

In order to get the answer of the research question, a close-ended questionnaire was distributed. It is a 4-point Likert scale consisting of 37 items for communication strategies questionnaire, and 25 items for language learning anxiety questionnaire. OCSI developed by Nakatani (2006) was used to identify the communication strategies the students use, while language learning anxiety questionnaire was adapted from Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale developed by Horwitz, et al. (1986). Those two questionnaires were used because they have been used widely in many different contexts. The students were required to choose one of the options ranging from "always" to "never" for OCSI, while language learning anxiety ranges from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree".

Before taking the real data for the purpose of this study, the questionnaires were tried out first toward 13 students who were not belonging to the sample of this study. It aims at ensuring the reliability of the questionnaires. After computing the raw data, it was found that the score of Cronbach's alpha for language learning anxiety questionnaire is .831, while the OCSI is .806 which suggest that the questionnaires were reliable enough and could be used to collect data for this study. The questionnaires were distributed before the Speaking class was ended. It took around 45 minutes for them to complete those two questionnaires. The questionnaires were, then, collected by that time. The data of the questionnaires were then analyzed by using Ms. Excel. The score of the questionnaire range from 4 indicating "always" or "strongly agree" to 1 indicating "never" or "strongly disagree". For language learning anxiety questionnaire, the score of some items was reserved when the statement is negative. The answer of the research questions were based on the mean score of the strategies. The highest the mean score, the most frequently the strategy is used.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This part presents findings of the research followed by discussion which is divided into communication strategies used by high- and low-anxiety students.

Communication Strategies Used by High-Anxiety Students

The tables below illustrate communication strategies used by high-anxiety students.

Table 1. Communication strategies for coping with speaking difficulties

Kinds of strategy	N	Mean	Order of usage
Socio-affective strategies	24	3.36	3
Fluency-oriented	24	3.13	6
Negotiation for meaning whilst speaking	24	3.40	1
Accuracy-oriented	24	3.31	4
Message reduction and alteration	24	3.10	7
Non-verbal strategies whilst speaking	24	3.21	5
Message abandonment	24	2.68	8
Attempt to think in English	24	3.38	2

As could be seen from the above table, of the eight strategies used for coping with speaking difficulties, the most frequently used strategy by high-anxiety students is negotiation for meaning whilst speaking indicating by the highest mean score ($M = 3.40$). It indicates that those students more concern about the accomplishment of communication. They tend to focus more on speaking comprehensively rather than speaking fluently. They also attempt to increase their participation by conquering their weaknesses through negotiation with the interlocutor, for instance, by repeating what s/he has said or by checking the listeners' understanding. Al-Mahrooqi and Tuzlukova (2011) state that negotiation of meaning plays a role in reducing the students' anxiety and providing them with an enjoyable learning environment as students have to work with others to achieve mutual understanding. While the least frequently used is message abandonment indicating by the lowest mean score ($M = 2.68$). Grzegorzewska (2015) reports that high-anxiety students also tend to use reduction strategy, but, in the form of topic avoidance. As the name suggest, message abandonment means that the students cannot continue the conversation. They have no choice besides ending the conversation, for instance, by giving up when s/he cannot make her/himself understood or by leaving the message unfinished. Since this strategy ceases the communication, it is not recommended to be used. Nakatani (2006) proposes that message abandonment is commonly used by low-proficient students.

Table 2. Communication strategies for coping with listening difficulties

Kinds of strategy	N	Mean	Order of usage
Negotiation for meaning whilst listening	24	3.26	4
Fluency-maintaining	24	2.92	7
Scanning	24	3.17	5
Getting the gist	24	3.08	6
Non-verbal strategies whilst listening	24	3.29	3
Less active listener	24	3.42	2
Word-oriented	24	3.58	1

As shown in Table 2, of the 7 strategies used for coping with listening difficulties, the most frequently used by high-anxiety students is word-oriented strategy ($M = 3.58$). Word-oriented strategy could be in the form of paying attention to the words which the speaker slows down or emphasizes or trying to understand every word that the speaker uses. Students who use this strategy seem like “have formed the habit of using words to get the meaning of speech” (Nakatani, 2006). The least frequently used strategy is fluency-maintaining ($M = 2.92$). Paying attention to the speakers’ pronunciation and intonation is one of the manifestations of fluency-maintaining strategy.

Communication Strategies Used by Low-Anxiety Students

The tables below illustrate communication strategies used by low-anxiety students.

Table 3. Communication strategies for coping with speaking difficulties

Kinds of strategy	N	Mean	Order of usage
Socio-affective strategies	27	3.21	7
Fluency-oriented	27	3.48	1
Negotiation for meaning whilst speaking	27	3.46	2
Accuracy-oriented	27	3.43	3
Message reduction and alteration	27	3.26	5
Non-verbal strategies whilst speaking	27	3.22	6
Message abandonment	27	2.70	8
Attempt to think in English	27	3.37	4

The above table shows that the most frequently used strategy for coping with speaking difficulties used by low-anxiety students is fluency-oriented ($M = 3.48$), and message abandonment is the least frequently used strategy ($M = 2.70$). Fluency-oriented strategy could be in the form of paying attention to the pronunciation and intonation, and taking more time to express what the speaker wants to say. It means that low-anxiety students focus more on the flow of conversation and clarity of their speech for the sake of enhancing the listener’s comprehension. This strategy is found to be one of the most frequently used by high-proficient students (Nakatani, 2006).

Table 4. Communication strategies for coping with listening difficulties

Kinds of strategy	N	Mean	Order of usage
Negotiation for meaning whilst listening	27	3.17	5
Fluency-maintaining	27	2.90	7
Scanning	27	3.31	2
Getting the gist	27	3.19	4
Non-verbal strategies whilst listening	27	3.22	3
Less active listener	27	3.15	6
Word-oriented	27	3.54	1

As shown in Table 4, the most frequently used strategy for coping with listening difficulties for low-anxiety students is word-oriented ($M = 3.54$). Moreover, the least frequently used strategy is

fluency-maintaining ($M=2.90$). Surprisingly, this finding is similar with that found in high-anxiety students.

In a nutshell, having analyzed the data, it was generally found that the communication strategy used by high-anxiety students for coping with speaking difficulties and listening difficulties were similar from that of low-anxiety students, except the most frequently used strategy for coping with speaking difficulties. Further, the finding of this study shows that regardless their different degree of anxiety, both of the groups regarded message abandonment as the least frequently used strategies for coping with speaking difficulties. It turns out that the students try to maintain their conversation no matter whether they are anxious or not.

It is interesting to note the strategies used for coping with listening difficulties in which case there is not any difference in the most and the least frequently used strategy by both of the groups. Both of the groups regarded word-oriented strategy as the most frequently used strategy suggesting that the students tend to focus on the word the interlocutor uses.

5. CONCLUSION

Communication difficulties are inseparable part of L2 communication which could be tackled through the use of communication strategies. Due to the important role of communication strategies in foreign language learning, teachers are supposed to familiarize the students with the communication strategies. For the students, especially those who suffer from a high degree of language learning anxiety, they are expected to make use of communication strategies in order to improve their speaking performance. Based on the research findings, it could be concluded that language learning anxiety could likely influence the strategy used for coping with speaking difficulties, but not for coping with listening difficulties.

Since this study only relies on questionnaire to collect the data, it is advisable for future research to conduct a similar study by using multiple data collection procedures for further validating the findings of this study.

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