

“WAIT, HOW DO I SAY THAT IN ENGLISH?” COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES FOR ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

This research aimed to investigate communication speaking skill strategies applied by two groups of English foreign language learners in two boarding senior high schools in Aceh, Indonesia. Of the successful group, there were 52 learners and of the less successful group 24 learners. To collect the data, this study employed the observation sheet adapted by Tarone (1978), which determined nine categories of communication strategies; approximation, word coinage, circumlocution, literal translation, language switch, mime, appeal for assistance, topic avoidance, and message abandonment. The students were observed during their speaking class. The result of this research is the literal translation, approximation, and language switch become the most frequent strategies used by the less successful learners. It implies that the students have had difficulties communicating in the target language. On the other hand, successful learners prefer to use approximation, literal translation, and appeal for assistance strategies. It implies that the students tend to speak and communicate well, if not yet fluently. Based on the findings, it is suggested that English teachers should introduce several communication strategies for both groups of learners to improve their effective communication.

Keywords: communication strategies, effective communication, successful learners, less successful learners, EFL

INTRODUCTION

The process of communication occurs between speaker and interlocutors (Dynel, 2010). The speaker communicates meanings and the interlocutors make suitable conclusions. Moreover, the aim of communication in the context of language itself is to communicate efficiently and use the language accordingly. Students should be able to communicate in three types of discourses: interpersonal, transactional, and functional. In the process of foreign language teaching and learning, communicative skill in the form of speaking is the most essential skill (Oradee, 2012). In the teaching and learning process in a language classroom, students use their speaking skills to interact not only with the teacher but also with their classmates. Interaction occurs when two or more speakers have an effect upon one another in the speaking process. To communicate effectively, students should be able to speak with one another without any gaps in communication.

Communication problems usually arise when students interact with friends in the classroom. Yang and Gai (2010) have mentioned that communication strategies help students cope with unpredictable situations during

the learning process in a classroom. In order to convey meaning when communication problems emerge, the students are more likely to make efforts by applying certain strategies. Therefore, communication strategies are to solve difficulties when trying to achieve the main goal of students' communication.

Mei and Nathalang (2010) have conducted research about communication strategies used by Chinese EFL university students and whether proficiency levels influence the use of communication strategies. The participants consist of 117 students from first-year arts and science majors, classified into low and high English proficiency levels. Moreover, the data are collected from one-way (identification task) and two-way (role play task) speaking tasks. The research divides communication strategies (CSs) into four groups: avoidance, inter-language based on CSs, transfer by using L1-based CSs, and inter-language negotiation. The result of the study reveals that inter-language based on CSs (57,6%) is the strategy most frequently used by students, the second most frequent is inter-language negotiation (39,6%), the third is avoidance (26,3%), and the last is L1-based CSs (21%).

The finding also shows that low proficiency students

tend to use avoidance and L1-based CSs strategies more often than high proficiency students. On the other hand, high proficiency students use inter-language based on CSs and inter-language negotiation more frequently than low proficiency students. Thus, inter-language based on CSs and inter-language negotiation are more beneficial strategies since they involve active attempts to overcome communication problems.

In addition, Ugla, Adnan, and Abidin (2013) have conducted the research about communication strategies (CSs) that is used by Malaysian students. The participants include 50 Malaysian students at Universiti Sains Malaysia. The data are collected using questionnaires adopted from Dornyei & Scotts's taxonomy of CSs (199). The result of the research shows that the top four strategies that students frequently use are retrieval (3,38%), use of all-purpose words (3,36%), code-switching (3,12) and circumlocution (3,0). Their results suggest that Malaysian ESL students have problems with poor vocabulary since they use these strategies at a low rate. There have been a few types of research on communication strategies of EFL learners in Aceh Indonesia. Thus, this research endeavors to fill the gap on research dedicated to communication strategies in the context of EFL learners by differentiating between successful and less successful learners in Indonesia.

Communication strategies are efforts made by speakers and interlocutors to achieve a shared meaning. In other words, communication strategies are the attempts to bridge the gap between the linguistic knowledge of second-language learners and the linguistic knowledge of interlocutors in real communication situations. Approximation, mime, and circumlocution may be used to bridge this gap while communicators may resort to message abandonment and avoidance when the gap seems unbridgeable (Sukirlan, 2014).

Zhao and Intaraprasert (2013) have asserted that communication strategies refer to knowledge or ability used by EFL students to deal with oral communication problems. These problems are often the result of inadequate linguistic knowledge in oral communication. It is clear that using communication strategies helps the speaker overcome difficulties when delivering messages and allowing communication to continue. Tarone (1978) has suggested that there are nine main types of communication strategies: paraphrase (which includes approximation, word coinage, circumlocution, literal translation, language switch, mime, appeal for assistance, topic avoidance, and message abandonment). Topic avoidance occurs when a student simply does not talk about concepts for which the vocabulary or other meaning structures are not known. Then, message abandonment is the strategy in which a student, unable to continue talking about a concept due to a lack of meaning structure, stops in the middle of speaking and gives up.

The approximation is the use of a target language vocabulary item or structure, which the student feels shares enough semantic features with the desired items to their satisfaction although they know it is incorrect. Word coinage is based on the student's creation of a new word. Circumlocution in the circumlocution strategy, the students describe the characteristics or elements of an object or action instead of using the appropriate target language item.

The conscious transfer has two elements, literal translation and language switch. The first strategy is the literal translation. It means that the students translate word-to-word from the native language to the target language.

The second is language switch which refers to the student's use of the native language term or pronunciation without bothering to translate it into the target language. Appeal for assistance is the strategy in which the student asks for the correct lexical term to the interlocutor because of their limited knowledge of lexical terms in the target language. Mime occurs when the student uses non-verbal strategies or gestures in order to replace a target meaning structure in the communication process.

Talley and Tu (2014) have clarified that in the process of language learning, speaking becomes a simple way to deliver messages. Duong (2014) has stated that pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, accuracy, and fluency are commonly considered the principal components of speaking. Pronunciation, which refers to the performance of the way in which a word is produced, is considered a component of oral proficiency (Pinget et al., 2014).

Vocabulary refers to words (objects, actions, and ideas) that the student uses to communicate in the oral and written language. Moreover, vocabulary is an aspect they must know to increase their comprehension (Heidari, Karimi, & Imani, 2012). Grammar is a set of rules that determine the structure of a language and how to combine units of a language to communicate and relate to what one wants to say or write (Al-Mekhlafi & Nagaratnam, 2011). Furthermore, accuracy refers to producing and understanding words and structures, pronunciation, syntax as well as the meaning of messages of a language in the speaking process without making mistakes that can disturb the flow of the interaction (Kuśnierek, 2015; Fata, 2014). Finally, Yang (2013) has defined fluency as the ability to speak smoothly and continuously at an effective speed in which the speakers do not always have to stop to think of the right word.

English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom can be defined as the study of English by students who live in places in which English is not the first language learned for communication (Tuan, 2011). Moreover, Al-Mekhlafi and Nagaratnam (2011) have argued that the students of the EFL classroom mainly use the target language in the classroom only because it is not the primary language in their country. Yang and Gai (2010) have mentioned that communication strategies help students cope with unpredictable situations during the classroom learning process. It explains that the EFL classroom is the situation where the students are studying English in a non-English speaking country, and the target language is only used in the classroom during teaching and learning process.

The researchers have found that communication problems usually arise when students interact with friends in the classroom. In order to convey meaning when communication problems emerge, the students are more likely to make efforts by applying certain strategies. Therefore, communication strategies are to solve difficulties when trying to achieve the main goal of students' communication. Here, the research problem is formulated as what are the communication strategies applied by EFL learners of successful and less successful learners in Aceh?

METHODS

In order to examine the use of communication strategies, this research is guided by the research question; what are the communication strategies applied by successful and less successful learners? This research

employs a qualitative design that is adapted from Creswell (2009) especially by having observation guidelines. The observation guidelines are promoted by Tarone (1978).

The researchers have observed two types of students; successful and less successful. The reason is to compare these groups to find out which communication strategies do they apply the most and least. The standard of having these two groups is by examining their English scores provided by the class teacher. The data are collected from the students in their speaking classroom. There are 52 successful and 24 less successful learners from two boarding senior high schools in Aceh. These schools are chosen based on the teachers' lesson plan on communication strategies application.

This research employs the communication strategies based on Tarone's (1978) taxonomy since it is the eldest and most completed theory on communication strategies in English language teaching. To collect the data, the researchers gather utterances produced by students, which are afterward classified into the communication strategies. In total, there are 83 utterances produced by both groups. This is a continued study of experimental research on communication strategies to improve students' speaking skill. In the previous study, it is shown that the mean score of control class is higher than the experimental class, which means that the communication strategies successfully promote learners to have better speaking skill.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The results reveal that literal translation is the most dominant type of communication strategy that students apply with 27 utterances (32,5%). This is followed by approximation with 25 utterances (30,1%). The third strategy is the appeal for assistance with 16 utterances (19,3%), language switch with 12 utterances (14,4%), message abandonment with 2 utterances (2,5%), and the least-frequently applied is topic avoidance with only 1 utterance (1,2%). Meanwhile, circumlocution, word coinage, and mime strategies are not applied by students as communication strategies when having interaction with their classmates. The chart for this result can be seen in Figure 1.

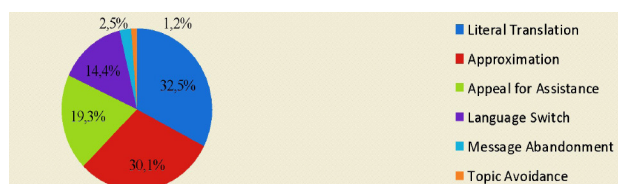


Figure 1 The Percentage of Each Communication Strategy Used by Learners in Classroom Interactions

The most frequent strategy utilized is literal translation, making it the highest ranked in terms of application frequency of all strategies with a total number of 27 utterances (32,5%). The researchers have identified that some students directly translate word-to-word from Indonesia to English. Examples of literal translation can be seen in the following excerpts:

- E1: ...“it isn’t break or morally wrong if the students eat what they want.”
 E2: “junk food makes basic the diseases in the future.”

Regarding E1 and E2, the research reveals that the students produce the utterances, “break or morally wrong” and “make basic”, via literal translation. In this case, the students directly translate word-to-word from native to target language. While they do not have enough linguistic knowledge to produce the correct collocation, the utterances are sufficiently correct for the interlocutor to understand the speaker’s aims for the conversation to continue.

The second ranked strategy in the speaking process is approximation with a total number of 25 utterances (30,1%). Students apply this strategy to substitute their desired meaning. Examples of approximation are shown in the following excerpts:

- E3: ” it feels delicious”
 E4: “we very attention to you

E3 and E4 indicate that the student uses approximation strategy “feels” and “attention”. Initially, the student wants to say “taste”, but she apparently has difficulties to say it. Therefore, she uses the word “feel” to compensate. The student feels that it shares equal meaning with the target word. The later utterance of “attention to you” is also assumed by students to be an adequate alternative to “care about you”.

The research reveals that appeal for assistance culminates is 16 utterances (19,3%). The researchers have identified that the students mainly use this strategy because of being nervous or lacking of vocabulary. That being said, it is important to note that these students are afraid of making mistakes. Thus, many students likely believe that it would be better to ask the interlocutor for assistance rather than producing the wrong words. The examples of appeal for assistance are presented in the following excerpts:

- E5: ...“but it kind of taking one side... what to say? *Keputusan*?”
 E6: “I think the teenagers are the most... how to say? *Tanggung jawab*?”

In these utterances, the researchers assume that the students use the appeal for assistance to try getting help from the interlocutor directly. They speak by expressing the Indonesian word and then asking what the word is in English. The appeal for assistance in this utterance is “what to say? *Keputusan*?” and “how to say? *Tanggung jawab*”.

The fourth strategy is language switch. It occurs in 12 utterances (14,4%). The researchers have found that this strategy is employed by students when they do not have an idea of certain vocabularies in the target language. Examples of language switch can be found in the following excerpts:

- E7: “It is just a one side *keputusan* without thinking of other people”
 E8: “the teachers have *kewajiban* to remind the students not to buy junk food”

As evidence in E7 and E8, the students use the language switch strategy to compensate their ideas. The utterances that indicate the language switch are “*keputusan*” (decision) and “*kewajiban*” (obligation). It is obvious that the students directly switch the word from Indonesian to English because of a lack of vocabulary. Since the students have no words to substitute the intended words, they use language switch to reach their intended communication goal.

The fifth strategy is message abandonment which is ranked fifth in terms of frequency of application with 2 utterances (2,5%). This strategy is identified when students leave a message unfinished because of some language difficulty. Here are the excerpts of message abandonment:

- E9: "there are many kinds of food especially for junk food and it's...So, what do you think who is the most responsible for teenager health?"
- E10: "because we don't have the rights to forbid them to eat whatever they want and I think

As seen in E9 and E10, the students implement message abandonment strategy. In the beginning, the student tries to complete her thought, but she stops in the middle of the utterance because she does not have the vocabulary needed or she has some language difficulty. In both cases, they discontinue their speech, as indicated by the ellipses.

The last strategy is topic avoidance. This is applied on one occasion (1,2%). An example of topic avoidance can be seen in the following excerpt:

- E11: "no, if the school ... junk food products, it will give negative effects for students so, junk food is a bad idea.

The topic avoidance strategy is used by the students to navigate around certain vocabulary. The students prefer to avoid some words or intended elements because of a lack of linguistic resources. Furthermore, circumlocution, word coinage, and mime are the strategies that the students do not incline to employ during the speaking process. The researchers suggest that the nature of the task has not prompted a need to use these types of strategies. The students do not attempt to create a new word to convey their messages.

The results reveal that the less successful learners do not apply all of the communication strategies in their communication processes. The researchers have reported that the total number of communication strategies that the less successful learners have used is 44 utterances. The sequence of communication strategies of the less successful learners from the most frequently to the least frequently used is literal translation with 16 utterances (33,6%), approximation with 10 utterances (22,7%), language switch with 8 utterances (19,2%), appeal for assistance with 7 utterances (16,1%), message abandonment with 2 utterances (4,6%), and topic avoidance with 1 utterance (3,8%).

Literal translation, approximation, and language switch are the strategies most frequently used by less successful learners during the speaking process. In addition, appeal for assistance, message abandonment, and topic avoidance are less frequently utilized by less successful learners. This is presumably because they feel that those strategies are not helpful for them in solving their communication problems.

The successful learners apply five communication strategies out of nine types with an overall total of 39 utterances. The approximation is ranked second with 15 utterances (38,4%), followed by the literal translation with 11 utterances (28,2%), appeal for assistance with 9 utterances (23,1%), and language switch with 4 utterances (10,3%).

Nevertheless, successful learners rely most heavily on three types of communication strategies; approximation, literal translation, and appeal for assistance. Moreover, the strategies that the successful learners rarely use are language

switch because they have greater language proficiency. Furthermore, topic avoidance and message abandonment strategies are not applied by successful learners because they do not need to avoid topics or certain words. Aside from that, language switch is identified as a strategy that is frequently used by less successful learners, whereas successful learners prefer to use the appeal for assistance strategy to compensate their problems in communication.

Less successful learners prefer to apply three types of communication strategies; literal translation, approximation, and language switch. Successful learners prefer to use approximation, literal translation, and appeal for assistance. In addition, less successful learners have four communication strategy applications during the speaking class. This applied communication strategies can mean that both successful learners and less successful learners are enthusiastic and aware of carrying on communication.

The research suggests that the students believe each of those strategies is the easiest to help them handle their communication problems. Successful learners use those types of strategies in speaking because they know how to solve communication problems and they have the abilities to apply them. The differences between successful learners and less successful learners can be examined on the use of topic avoidance and message abandonment strategies. Therefore, it can be concluded that less successful learners tend to apply topic avoidance and message abandonment strategies more often than successful learners.

The researchers have identified that literal translation strategy is the one most frequently used by the students with 27 utterances (32,5%). Hence, the literal translation is a helpful strategy for students to overcome problems in communication. This finding is corroborated by Moattarian and Tahririan's work (2013), which has reported that literal translation is in the top three most helpful communication strategies for students in their communication needs. Meanwhile, the approximation is the second most frequently used strategy with 25 utterances (30,1%). The finding is in agreement with Uztosun and Erten (2014), in which they have reported that Turkish EFL learners often apply the approximation strategy by finding alternative vocabulary items that may send the intended message to the interlocutor.

The appeal for assistance strategy emerges out of 16 utterances (19,3%). The students appeal for assistance when they do not know the words, assuming that asking the interlocutor is better than producing the wrong words. This finding is similar to the research by Ugla, Adnan, and Abidin (2013), which has revealed that the appeal for assistance strategy is a better way for students to solve their difficulties during communication than avoiding their intended meaning. Language switch is the fourth most-frequently used strategy with 12 utterances (14,4%). The students use this strategy because they do not know the target language vocabulary and they prefer to switch to their native language. Previous research has shown similar findings where students apply language switch because they do not know the specific term (Hua, Nor, and Jaradat, 2012).

The result of this study has also indicated that students do not frequently use avoidance strategies. Topic avoidance culminates in just 1 utterance (1,2%) and message abandonment in 2 utterances (2,5%). This finding suggests that students do not easily give up in delivering messages and they prefer to try using other strategies to help them solve communication problems. The result is consistent with Nakatani, Makki, and Bradley (2012) in their study of Iranian EFL learners with findings that the learners seldom

leave messages incomplete by abandoning their utterances or avoiding some words that they do not know when in difficulty. Meanwhile, circumlocution, word coinage, and mime strategies do not arise in this study.

Furthermore, the researchers have identified that communication strategies that can help less successful learners' problem in delivering their idea in speaking process are the literal translation, approximation, and language switch. This is in line with the findings of Abunawas (2012), mentioning that EFL Jordanian students' best strategy is to use a variety of the active strategies (not including abandonment strategies). Finally, it is shown that both successful and less successful learners show the slightly different amount of communication strategies application. Although the total number of communication strategies applied by the students is quite different, they use those strategies with different frequency. The less successful learners rely on literal translation, approximation, and language switch. On the other hand, successful learners prefer to apply approximation, literal translation, and appeal for assistance.

Language problems and difficulties are commonly faced by students when attempting to convey their ideas in oral communication processes. That assertion is in line with Oradee (2012) who has assumed that students are experiencing English language speaking anxiety because they believe that they should produce faultless sentences. Consequently, they are reluctant to speak and have the tendency to be silent. In order to handle the difficulties that students face, they need to use a tool to reach the goals of their communication.

After comparison with the previous studies, it is revealed that communication strategies apart from Tarone's (1978) theory are; use of fillers with 546 utterances (70%), self-repetition with 189 utterances (25%), and self-repair strategies with 36 utterances (5%). Use of fillers and self-repetition strategies are known as strategies that let the students gain more time to think before continuing to the next utterances. The finding is supported by Khoiriyah (2015) in her study. It obtains that when the students experience difficulties in describing, they use the fillers while pausing and repeat the previous words to make time for what will be said next. Self-repair strategy is applied by students because they realize that they have made a mistake and initiated to repair the utterances. The finding is related to Zhao and Intaraprasert (2013) where they revealed that the application of self-repair strategy based on the students' self-initiated corrections in their own speech.

In conclusion, applying communication strategies can be a meaningful way for students to handle problems in their oral communication process. Khoiriyah (2015) has revealed that being able to communicate effectively is the optimal goal of all language learners. Therefore, despite the difficulties they face while delivering messages, they rely on employing various communication strategies. Finally, the researchers have elaborated the application of communication strategies used by low and successful learners. If the frequency with which they use a strategy is constant, it seems that the determining factor is the type of strategy employed.

CONCLUSIONS

The research has examined 83 utterances of communication strategies applied by both groups of learners,

successful and less successful. The learners do not apply three types of communication strategies; circumlocution, word coinage, and mime strategies. Successful learners apply communication strategies in 39 utterances, which are 15 utterances of approximation, 11 utterances of literal translation, 9 utterances of appeal for assistance, and 4 utterances of language switch. Thus, approximation, literal translation, and appeal for assistance are the strategies most frequently utilized by successful learners. On the other hand, less successful learners apply 44 utterances of communication strategies in which 16 of them are the literal translation, 10 utterances of approximation, 8 utterances of language switch, 7 utterances of appeal for assistance, 2 utterances of message abandonment, and 1 utterance of topic avoidance.

Literal translation, approximation, and language switch are the most frequently used strategies by less successful learners. To sum up, among 83 utterances; 27 utterances are literal, 25 utterances of approximation, 16 utterances of appeal for assistance, 12 utterances of language switch, 2 utterances of message abandonment, and 1 utterance of topic avoidance. From this, it can be seen that literal translation is used by both groups of learners. This implies that successful and less successful learners have difficulty to communicate in the target language. Thus, the teacher is suggested to expose another way of communication to develop students' speaking achievement.

This research's limitation results in the researchers not being able to go into the details of why the strategies are applied. Hence, the researchers invite all those who are interested in conducting further studies of a similar topic to consider the reason of why particular strategies are applied. In addition, it is best to gain the respondents on a larger scale of different age, achievement, language use, and attitudes toward their communication strategies.

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