Exploring the Use of Oral Communication Strategies by High and Low Proficiency learners of English: Tunisian EFL students as a case study

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Abstract

EFL learners tend to use different communication strategies (CS) in the course of speaking in order to cope with communication breakdowns. This study aims at discovering CS use among EFL learners following the Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI) developed by Nakatani (2006). The OCSI is 58 items self-reporting questionnaire. It includes eight categories of strategies for coping with speaking problems and seven categories of strategies for coping with listening problems. It is used to gather data regarding CS use from 100 2nd year undergraduate students at the Higher Institute of Languages in Gabes, Tunisia. Additional data is gathered regarding general English proficiency of the participants in order to identify which CSs are commonly used by Tunisian students and to examine the relationship between strategy use and proficiency levels. The results of this study shows that “achievement strategies” such as negotiation of meaning, non-verbal strategies and message reduction and alteration are, respectively, the most frequently reported strategies while speaking. On the other hand “message abandonment strategies” are the least frequently reported strategies. For the listening part, the results reveal that non-verbal strategies, negotiation for meaning whilst listening and getting the gist are the most frequently reported strategies where as scanning strategies are the least frequently reported strategies. Additionally, the analysis of the students’ responses to the OCSI reveals that meaning-negotiation strategies, social affective, fluency-oriented for coping with speaking problems are characteristically associated with high proficiency students; whereas message abandonment and less active listener strategies are frequently reported by low proficiency students. Thus a notable distinction is confirmed in the distribution of CSs between HP and LP learners. The findings suggest that low proficiency speakers should be familiarized and made aware of the importance of effective OCSs through strategy instruction in the classroom setting.

Keywords: communication strategy, OCSI, taxonomy of CS, high proficiency and low proficiency students.
PART ONE: A Review of the Literature

In this part, previous conceptual frameworks and empirical studies related to communication strategies are reviewed.

1. Introduction

During an oral interaction in a foreign or a second language, speakers and listeners sometimes struggle to find the appropriate words to communicate, express and grasp the intended messages. It seems that this struggle is due to a gap between what the speakers want to say and their available linguistic resources. So they try to fill in this gap through resorting to different ways and strategies which are commonly referred to as “communication strategies”. These strategies permit to the speakers to compensate for and to cope with problems resulting from their lack of linguistic, communicative and cultural codes of the foreign language. Many researchers are concerned with defining and classifying communication strategies and it seems that there is no agreement on a single definition of CS. Additionally; learners’ communicative competence has been widely considered as an important issue relating to communication strategies. As a result, language proficiency plays an important role because the speakers abandon the execution of verbal plan and stop the conversation when they don’t understand what is said or don’t know what or how to say.

Communication strategies appear to be a major area of examination and exploration since these strategies do not only help the speakers overcome problems but also they can significantly contribute in improving and building up the communicative competence. CSs can also enhance the quantity and the quality of interpersonal and intercultural interaction. They are efficient tools that can sustain and back up both the speakers and the listeners in key points as opening and closing the conversations, keeping the conversation on-going and managing turn taking.

According to Hatch (1978), the primary aim of communication strategies is “to help language learners and users not give up in the face of problems, enabling them to exercise more control on interaction, to deal effectively with uncertainty in linguistic and intercultural contacts, and to increase their personal autonomy in learning and using a language”. (p434)

2. Communicative competence

From a cognitive point of view, Communicative competence usually denotes the appropriateness of language use and its adequacy. According to Hymes communicative competence reflects the individual’s ability to know “when to speak, when not, … what to talk about with whom, where in what manner” (1972, p277). Communicative competence also refers to the speakers’ performances in real communicative situations. In this context, Canale and Swain (1980) argued that communicative competence consists of four important components which are:

- **Grammatical competence**: It deals with features and rules of language, word formation, and pronunciation, sentence formation to understand, interpret and express accurately the literal meaning of utterances.
• **Sociolinguistic competence**: It includes socio-cultural rules of use and rules of discourse. It involves appropriateness in understanding and producing utterances in different sociolinguistic contexts. That is, the appropriate use of the language which requires the understanding of speech act conventions, awareness of norms of stylistic appropriateness, the use of a language to signal social relationships, etc.

• **Discourse competence**: It deals with cohesion in form and coherence in meaning. It refers to the ability to use coherently various kinds of discourse in L2 such as the use of appropriate synonyms, pronouns, substitution, repetition, coordinating conjunctions, etc.

• **Strategic competence**: It refers to the speakers’ ability to use verbal and non-verbal communication strategies when trying to cope for lack in the grammatical and sociolinguistic competence or to enhance the effectiveness of communication, for example; paraphrasing, use of gestures and facial expressions, use of fillers and comprehension checks, etc.

Together, these four competencies are considered mainstays of modern theory on second-language acquisition (Diaz-Rico & Weed, 2006). Strategic competence in particular constitutes a framework for determining a language learner’s proficiency in communication. It has been widely defined as an efficient mean of repairing communicative problems through appropriate use of communicative strategies.

3. **Defining communication strategies**

Even though many definitions have been proposed regarding the communication strategies of L2 learners, scholars have not yet reached a consensus on a universal definition. During the 1970s and 1980s many researchers contributed to the development of the concept of CCs through offering various definitions of communication strategies. The term communication strategy was first appeared in Selinker’s (1972) classic article on inter-language which sought to expand on certain classes of errors made by L2 learners (Corder, 1983). Corder defined CS as “a systematic technique employed by a speaker to express his meaning when faced with some difficulty.” (1981, p. 103). Veradi (1980) and Tarone (1977) elaborated on Selinker’s nation by providing a systematic analysis of communication strategies, introducing various categories and terms used in subsequent research. From an interactional point of view, Tarone (1977) considered “interaction” as one of the important parameters in defining communication strategies. Tarone posited that communication strategies were used to compensate for the gap between speakers’ native language and the target language. She considered communication strategy to be an interactional phenomenon: “a mutual attempt of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in situation where requisite meaning structures are not shared” (p. 288). Tarone confirmed that “Conscious communication strategies are used by an individual to overcome the crisis which occurs when language structures are inadequate to convey the individual’s thought” (1977, p.195). Savignon (1972) provided a language teaching experiment which has involved a communicative approach including student training in CSs. She termed CS as ‘coping strategies’. Savignon suggested that “the effective use of coping strategies (communication strategies) is important for communicative competence in all contexts and distinguishes highly effective communicators from those who are less so” (2002, p.10).

However, from a psycholinguistic point of view Faerch and Kasper (1983) perceived communication strategies as being a part of verbal plans. CSs are “mental plans implemented...
by the L2 learner in response to an internal signal of an imminent problem, a form of self-help that does not require support from the interlocutor for resolution, such as asking for help and negotiating for meaning” (p. 36). The definition focuses solely on the speaker and on the problems experienced by the speaker in speech reception and in planning and executing speech production. It is noticeable that this definition only centers on L2 learners’ self-initiated solution to linguistic problems and it disregards the important role of support offered by the interlocutor in a conversation.

As it is clarified above, the bulk of research on communication strategies has demonstrated that foreign language speakers can improve their fluency and communicative proficiency by developing CSs that enable them to compensate for their linguistic deficiencies (Bialystok (1990) and Dörnyei (1995)). It has been shown that CSs are efficient tools to assist the speakers to repair communication breakdowns and thereby communicate more successfully (Dörnyei, 1995; Dörnyei & Scott, 1997). In a CLT classroom, sometimes students face difficulties to get their meaning across or to express their thoughts and in order to perform these tasks CSs are useful ways to overcome communication difficulties. It is believed that CSs supply students with the means necessary to fill foreign language gaps while they are communicating with their interlocutors and allow them to maintain the conversation. In this context, Cohen affirmed that “a major trait of successful speakers is that they use strategies to keep the conversation going… Communication strategies compensate for deficits the speaker may have” (1990, p.56). According to Ellis (2008), the term ‘Communication Strategy’ was coined by Selinker in 1972:

“…but it wasn’t until the 1980’s that interest in CSs really took off… Communication strategies are useful tools to solve own performance problems’ and allow the other aspects of problematic L2 production to be dealt with in terms of other, arguably more robust, theoretical frameworks.” (2008, p.504).

From these brief definitions and expectations of communication strategies, it is remarkable that there is a general agreement among researchers that CSs facilitate the overcoming of gaps in the foreign language knowledge and allow the students to keep the conversations going. When Students meet gaps during in-class conversations, CSs help students to reassess the situation and to strategically overcome temporary difficulties. According to Cohen “Speakers use communication strategies to resolve difficulties that they encounter in expressing intended meaning; these may be either reduction strategies or compensatory strategies” (p.176). Thus, it is assumed that Communication strategies (sometimes referred to as “conversation strategies” or “coping strategies”) are ways for learners to become more confident and more comfortable in their FL or L2 communication.

4. Taxonomies to classify CSs

Much research has been devoted to identify and classify communication strategies. CSs have been tackled from three significant approaches which are the psycholinguistic, the cross-cultural, and the interactional perspectives:

- The psycholinguistic view perceives CSs as a cognitive process to avoid communication breakdowns. CSs are considered as an attempt to explain what is going on in the
speaker’s mind when encountering a problem (Lee, 2004). The term CSs can be referred to verbal and non-verbal devices speakers tend to use when they encounter difficulties in verbalizing a mental plan or lack of linguistic resources (Cook 1991; Yule and Tarone 1991).

✓ The **cross-cultural** perspective emphasizes the impact of L1 on L2, and L1-based strategies such as language switching, foreignizing, and translation which have formed a major part of the several taxonomies of CSs proposed especially by Bialystok (1990) and Tarone (1981). This line of inquiry into the use of CSs has found that less-proficient L2 learners often tend to resort to L1-based strategies (Bialystok 1983; Haastrop & Phillipson 1983; Paribakht 1985).

✓ The **interactional** perspective focuses on CSs as problem-solving devices to bridge the communication gaps. It assumes CSs as pragmatic discourse functions that emphasize part of the intended message (Dörnyei & Scott, 1995; Tarone, 1980). It means that CSs are perceived as linguistic tools employed by the learners to reveal their intended meaning so as to fulfill a shared meaning.

As a logical culmination of these three distinct views of CSs, the taxonomies offered by many researchers vary somewhat. In this context, Bialystock (1990) claimed that

“The variety of taxonomies proposed in the literature differs primarily in terminology and overall categorizing principle rather than in the substance of the specific strategies. If we ignore, then, differences in the structure of the taxonomies by abolishing the various overall categories, then a core group of specific strategies that appear constantly across the taxonomies clearly emerges” (p.61)

It is necessary to display the traditional conceptualization of CSs based on Váradi (1973), Tarone (1977), and Færch and Kasper (1983) basic principles for classifying CSs that organizes CSs broadly into two basic types: avoidance strategies and compensation strategies.

1. **Avoidance strategies:** It is subdivided into message abandonment and topic avoidance. Following Nakatani (2006), this type of strategy affects negatively the process of communication as the user chooses not to speak and intentionally avoids carrying on the conversation because of language deficiency.

2. **Compensatory strategies:** It is subdivided into 10 categories: circumlocution, approximation, use of all-purpose words, word coinage, prefabricated patterns, nonlinguistic signals, literal translation, foreignizing, code-switching, appeal for help, and stalling and time-consuming strategies (Dörnyei, 1995). According to Nakatani (2006), speakers make use of this type of strategy to compensate for their lack of linguistic knowledge and to choose another way to communicate and convey their messages.

In the latter half of the 1980s, researchers at Nijmegen University disapproved of the product-oriented traditional classifications of CSs (Kellerman, 1991; Poulisse, 1987; Cook, 1993). They criticized the surface structures of underlying psychological processes and the ambiguous validity of the various strategies. Besides, they offered an alternative process-oriented typology of CSs which includes Conceptual strategies and Linguistic/code strategies. While the first type of strategies dealt with manipulation of the target concept to make it
expressible through available linguistic resources, the second type referred to the manipulation of the speaker’s linguistic knowledge. The Conceptual strategies encompassed Analytic strategies (circumlocution) and Holistic strategies (approximation) however; Linguistic/code strategies comprised Morphological creativity (grammatical word coinage) and Transfer from another language.

It is worth noting that this article approaches CSs from an interactional point of view and unlike earlier studies which tried to identify and classify CSs, this study is more empirical in nature and seeks to explore and to study the relationship between CSs and proficiency level in particular.

5. OCSI

In 2006, Nakatani developed the Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI). He clarified that he has used the term Oral Communication Strategy instead of Communication Strategy “in order to avoid terms that might exacerbate the confusion regarding taxonomies” (p. 152). The OCSI is made up of 58 items and encompasses two parts. The first part includes eight categories reflecting strategies for coping with speaking problems, and the second part consists of seven categories relating to strategies for coping with listening problems. Following Nakatani (2006, pp. 155-157), a summary of the OCSI is presented as follows:

- **Strategies for Coping with Speaking Problems**
  1. **Social-affective strategies** involve learners’ affective factors in social contexts.
  2. **Fluency-oriented strategies** are related to fluency of communication.
  3. **Negotiation for meaning while speaking strategies** are relevant to the participants’ attempts to negotiate with their interlocutors.
  4. **Accuracy-oriented strategies** are concerned with a desire to speak English accurately.
  5. **Message reduction and alteration strategies** involve avoiding a communication breakdown by reducing an original message, simplifying utterances, or using similar expressions that can be confidently used.
  6. **Nonverbal strategies while speaking** require using eye contact, gestures, or facial expressions to give hints and to help the listener guess the intended meaning.
  7. **Message abandonment strategies** are associated with message abandonment by learners in communication.
  8. **Attempt to think in English strategies** involve thinking as much as possible in the foreign language during actual communication. The importance of these strategies is that oral communication usually requires a quick response to interlocutors.

- **Strategies for Coping with Listening Problems**
  1. **Meaning-negotiation strategies while listening** are clearly characterized by negotiating behavior while listening.
  2. **Fluency-maintaining strategies** involve paying attention to the fluency of conversational flow.
3. Scanning strategies include focusing on specific points of speech, such as subject and verb, the interrogative, and the first part of the speaker’s utterance, in which important information is usually contained.

4. Getting-the-gist strategies require paying attention to general information contained in speech rather than to specific utterances and considering the context and the speaker’s previous sentences to guess overall meaning.

5. Nonverbal strategies while listening are related to making use of nonverbal information, such as speaker’s eye contact, facial expression, and gestures.

6. Less active listener strategies represent negative attitudes towards using active listening strategies for interaction. Students who utilize this strategy translate the message into their native language little by little and depend heavily on familiar words.

7. Word-oriented strategies reflect a learner’s tendency to capture the meaning of speech by paying attention to individual words.

6. CS use and proficiency level

Many researchers have studied and examined Communication strategies from different angles and various perspectives (Huang & Van Naerssen, 1987; Maleki, 2007; Nakatani, 2005). Agreeing on CSs’ positive influence on sustaining the flow of the communication, they offered a multitude of frameworks focusing on the identification and classification of CSs. However, there is still a number of conflicting findings concerning the use of CSs among different foreign language learners.

Some studies like Liskin Gasparro (1996) and Poulisse & Schils (1989) concluded that low proficiency students use more CSs in particular reduction strategies. According to Ting & Lau (2008) low proficiency students’ heavy reliance on CSs precisely on negotiation or interaction strategies in the form of explicit clarification requests and comprehension checks could be due to their inability to express the intended meaning or to restructure the message. Hyde (1982) investigated that lower level students make more frequent use of communications strategies than higher or more proficient ones. Here, they usually face more problems in conveying their messages to their interlocutors or peers due to their insufficient command of the target language.

In contrast, Bialystok and Frohlich (1980) and Bialystok (1983) sustained the strong relationship between the learner’s choice of specific types of communication strategies and their proficiency level. In more details, the authors called these strategies as: L1-based and L2-based strategies. In order to overcome their linguistic deficiencies, low level students usually use lexical items from their mother tongue more often than high level students. However, high level students significantly resort to L2 strategies based on their communicative manipulation and their linguistic command in the target language. Huang and Van Naerssen (1987) also showed that successful L2 learners employ more CSs than less successful ones. Furthermore, Chen (2009) explored the OCSs used by high and low speaking proficiency Taiwanese L2 learners. He discovered that whereas fluent speakers commonly used social-affective, fluency-oriented, negotiation for meaning while speaking, and accuracy-oriented strategies, less fluent speakers used message reduction and alteration, and message abandonment strategies. In the same vein, the findings of Nakatani’s study (2010)
pointed out that throughout their oral performance high proficiency L2 learners tended to resort to communication strategies as tools to fill communication gaps. HP learners used specifically maintenance and meaning-negotiation strategies to enhance mutual understanding with their partners.

The literature then, revealed a remarkable number of studies which have reported contradicting findings regarding the differences of strategy use between low and high proficiency L2 learners (e.g., Chen, 2009; Huang & van Naerssen, 1987; Liskin-Gasparro, 1996). Therefore, the aim of this study is to determine and identify the OCSs that HP and LP Tunisian students report using in an attempt to further illuminate and enrich this area of research.

Part two: Methodology

After dealing with the literature review part, it is necessary to embark upon the methodology part which constitutes the basic building blocks of any research. This part serves as the leading path towards finding answers to the research questions.

1. Research Questions
This study seeks to answer the following research questions:
   1. What are the overall communication strategies used by the subjects?
   2. What are the differences in the types of CS used by High and Low proficiency learners?

2. Participants
Goddard and Melville (2004) affirm the necessity of the participants in any research in their state: “Samples must be representative of the population being studied; no general observations about the population can be made from studying the sample” (p.35). Accordingly, it is necessary to choose a sample which actually belongs to the population that the researcher is concerned with. In fact, to guarantee validity and reliability, choosing a representative sample from the appropriate population is very efficient. Because this research is concerned with EFL learners, the participants form a total sample size of 100 Tunisian EFL learners who are 2nd year undergraduate students enrolled at the Higher Institute of Languages in Gabes, Tunisia. They were randomly selected from the whole population of almost 320 second year English students. The sample population is fairly homogeneous in terms of age (approximately 20 years old), first language (Arabic), second language (French) and Length of English study (approximately eight years). All the participants have the same educational background and they are exposed to English only through academic learning. The subjects were divided into two groups, a high level English proficiency group and a low level English proficiency group judging by their MELA-O scores. It is to be noted that there are significantly higher number of female students within the Institute, which is reflected in the gender profile of the sample group (68 female and 32 male participants).
3. Data collection

According to Wilkinson and Brimingham (2003, p.3), “research instruments are simply devices for obtaining information relevant to the research project”. These instruments facilitate the gathering of information and affect its interpretation. In this study data are collected from two sources: OCSI questionnaire reports and the MELA –O scoring matrix.

a- The Oral Communication Strategy Inventory: The instrument used to accomplish the research purpose is the Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI). OCSI was originally developed by Nakatani in 2006 and it was first delivered in Japanese. The English language version was later published by Nakatani. It is a 5-point Likert type scale ranging from 1 (never or almost never true of me) to 5 (always or almost always true of me), consists of two parts: 26 items and strategies for coping with speaking problems, and 32 items for coping with listening problems. This study aims at adapting the self-reporting questionnaire and participants are asked to answer the questions considering the strategies they use while communicating. Participants are informed that participation is voluntary and their contributions would remain anonymous.

b- The MELA-O Scoring Matrix: It is used to measure the students’ proficiency levels. It includes measurements of Comprehension (The process by which a person understands the meaning of spoken or written language) and Production (The process of communicating through speech). The MELA-O Scoring Matrix focuses on four specific areas of speech production which are Fluency (The ability to produce continuous speech without pause or hesitation in the “flow” of spoken communication), Vocabulary (Units of language used to convey meaning in the language system), Pronunciation (The way certain sounds in a language are produced, intonation, rhythm, emphasis, and juncture (pauses)), and Grammar (The structural arrangement and relationship of words to one another, sentence structure and word order).

4. Research design

Outlining the research design procedures is an important step towards ensuring an organized configuration for answering the research questions.

“A research design is a plan, structure and strategy of investigation so conceived as to obtain answers to research questions or problems” Kumar (2005) (cited in Kelinger, 1986:279) (p.84).

This study uses cross-sectional design to gather quantitative data on the overall communication strategies use of 2nd year undergraduate students and aims at exploring any differences in use relating to English proficiency. For the purpose of this study, the MELA-O Scoring Matrix is used to assess each participant. Two teachers were recruited to rate the participants and assign them as high and low proficiency groups according to their scores in speech comprehension and production. Participants who are assigned to level 4 and level 5 are considered as high proficiency students where as participants who belonged to level 1 and level 2 are considered as low proficiency students. It is to be noted that no participants
belonged to level 0 and participants who are assessed to level 3 were perceived as intermediate proficiency students. Afterward, the participants (HP and LP) are administered the self-reporting questionnaire “the Oral Communication Strategy Inventory” in order to get insights about their use of CSs.

5. Data analysis

The OCSI (Nakatani, 2006) is employed to determine the use of oral strategies by the participants. The OCSI, consisting of 58 items, is divided into two parts: 8 categories of strategies for coping with speaking problems and 7 categories of strategies for coping with listening problems. The items are assessed on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from ‘never or almost never true of me’ (1) to ‘always or almost always true of me’ (5). Using Cronbach’s alpha, the reliability estimate of the OCSI is calculated to be \( r = .86 \) for the first part and \( r = .85 \) for the second part. Then, the self-reporting questionnaire was administered to the participants in order to determine their use of OCSs. It is worth emphasizing at this point that the high and low proficiency learners’ use of both verbal and nonverbal OCSs is probed through collecting only the self-reported data. Descriptive data (rank, mean and SD) are used to identify the frequency and range of CSs used by the participants and to capture any significant difference that may exist between the two groups.

6. Results and discussion

- **Research question 1: What are the overall communication strategies used by the participants?**

  - **Analysis of the participants’ self-reporting responses to the first speaking part of the OCSI:**

    The reliability, as measured by Cronbach’s alpha for the pilot study, of the speaking part of the questionnaire is .86, which indicates a highly acceptable internal consistency. The results reveal that the majority of the participants consider achievement strategies such as ‘negotiation for meaning’, ‘non-verbal strategies’ and ‘message reduction and alteration’ as the most practical and effective strategies used to cope with communication problems and to transmit the intended message. Indeed, the calculation of the mean number of the participants self-reporting responses to the OCSI displays that negotiation for meaning whilst speaking (M=4.5), social-affective strategies (M=3.5), message reduction and alteration (M=3.33), non-verbal strategies (M=3.24) and fluency-oriented strategies (M=3) are respectively the most frequently reported strategies to compensate for speaking difficulties whereas message abandonment (M=2.25) is the least frequently reported strategy. The following table 1 displays the rank, mean, and standard deviation of strategies used to cope with speaking problems.
According to table 1, negotiation for meaning whilst speaking is the top ranking strategy. It seems that most of the participants believe that negotiation for meaning strategies are very effective in sustaining the flow of the conversation. By way of using CSs, learners can become stronger at negotiation in class. The importance of this strategy is further highlighted in Lee’s claim “Negotiation consists of interactions during which speakers come to terms, reach an agreement, make arrangements, resolve a problem, or settle an issue by conferring or discussing; the purpose of language use is to accomplish some task rather than to practice particular language forms” (2000, p.9). Lee recommends that L2 teachers “pause to consider the teaching and learning of negotiation devices such as clarification checks, indications of lack comprehension, and so on” (2000, p.66) and asserts that learners can benefit a lot from negotiating and interacting with partners in class thus becoming good communicators in English. In the same vein, Lightbown and Spada cite that “Negotiation of meaning is accomplished through a variety of modifications that naturally arise in interaction, such as requests for clarification or confirmation, repetition” (2006, p.150).

- Analysis of the participants’ self-reporting responses to the second listening part of the OCSI:
The reliability, as measured by Cronbach’s alpha, of the listening part of the questionnaire is .85, which indicates a highly acceptable internal consistency. Concerning the strategies relating to the listening problems, the analysis illustrates that non-verbal strategies, negotiation for meaning while listening, and getting the gist and Fluency-oriented strategies are correspondingly the most frequently reported strategies whereas scanning strategy is the least frequently reported strategy. The following table presents the rank, mean and SD of strategies related to listening strategies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor Name</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negotiation for meaning whilst speaking</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>1.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social affective strategies</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message reduction and alteration</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>1.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-verbal strategies</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fluency oriented strategies</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy oriented strategies</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attempt to think in English</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message abandonment</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>.95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table1: Rank, mean and SD of the speaking strategies reported in the OCSI (N=100)
Factor name | Rank | mean | SD
---|---|---|---
Non-verbal strategies | 1 | 4.5 | .70
Negotiation for meaning | 2 | 4.25 | 1.7
Getting the gist | 3 | 3.75 | 1.25
fluency-oriented strategies | 4 | 3.6 | 1.1
Word oriented | 5 | 3.25 | 2.21
Less-active listener | 6 | 2.5 | 2.12
Scanning strategies | 7 | 2.25 | 1.5

Table 2: Rank, Mean and SD of the Strategies Relating to the listening Problems (N=100)

This study presents “achievement strategies” as the most frequently reported listening strategies. Then, we can conclude that the majority of the students believe that achievement strategies are deemed necessary to achieve success in listening. As Vandergrift states “Given the importance of listening in L2 learning, students should benefit from the development of effective listening strategies that can help them comprehend more input” (1997, p. 495). The table 2 shows that non-verbal strategies are the highest ranking strategies with an average (M= 4.5) respectively followed by negotiation for meaning (M=4.25) and getting the gist strategies (M=3.75). It seems that when listening to English, these participants tend to make use of nonverbal information, such as eye contact, facial expression, and body gestures, in order to boost their understanding. They reveal their difficulties in comprehension through their gestures. Moreover, it seems that whenever these participants face listening problems in interaction, they tend to resort to modified interaction in order to maintain the conversational goal with their partners. They repeat what the speaker has said or make clarification requests in order to understand the speaker’s intentions (Items 22, 21). They are eager to negotiate with the speaker and ask for help in order to avoid misunderstandings (Items 20, 19, 23). As all of the most frequently reported listening strategies are classified as achievement strategies, it could be concluded that learners view these listening strategies as the most useful to achieve success in listening. It is argued that the use of these strategies could enhance students’ opportunities to learn the foreign language through interaction (Pica, 1996; Williams, Inscoe, & Tasker, 1997). Previous research studies on communication strategies generally maintained the effectiveness and usefulness of non-verbal strategies (Murphy, 1991; Allen, 1999; Canale & Swaine, 1980), negotiation for meaning strategies (Tyler & van Lier, 2001; Nakatani, 2010; Naughton, 2006) and getting the gist strategies (Chiang 2010; Vandergrift, 1999; Vogely, 1995) to improve communication.
Research Question two: How the Different Types of CSs vary between High and Low Proficiency Learners?

In this study, the differences in OCSI responses between participants with high and low levels of proficiency in English are identified through inferential statistics. Participants are classified to high or low proficiency levels according to their scores from the MELA-O Scoring Matrix (high proficiency group (N = 25) and the low proficiency group (N = 30). The middle group (N = 45), however, is not included in the analysis. In order to investigate any significant differences in means of the two groups, independent samples t-tests are performed for each of the factors.

The results of the analysis dispose significant differences between HP and LP groups. The results (see Table 3) show that while speaking, high proficiency students report using noticeably negotiation for meaning whilst speaking, social affective strategies and fluency-oriented strategies (all significant at p< .05). In contrast, low proficiency learners report significantly higher use of message reduction and alteration strategies, attempt to think in English and message abandonment strategies (all significant at p< .05).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaking strategies</th>
<th>High proficiency students</th>
<th>Low proficiency students</th>
<th>t-value</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean SD</td>
<td>Mean SD</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiation for meaning</td>
<td>4 1.15</td>
<td>2.5 1.9</td>
<td>-.101</td>
<td>.046</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social affective strategies</td>
<td>3.1 .70</td>
<td>1.6 .01</td>
<td>-.094</td>
<td>.049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fluency-oriented strategies</td>
<td>3.2 .90</td>
<td>2 1</td>
<td>-.107</td>
<td>.043</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-verbal strategies</td>
<td>2.8 0.836</td>
<td>2.6 .894</td>
<td>-.136</td>
<td>.045</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy-oriented strategies</td>
<td>2.4 1.51</td>
<td>2.2 .836</td>
<td>-.133</td>
<td>.045</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message reduction and alteration</td>
<td>2.25 1.25</td>
<td>.6 .894</td>
<td>.090</td>
<td>.048</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attempt to think in English</td>
<td>.5 .707</td>
<td>2.1 1.41</td>
<td>-.177</td>
<td>.037</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message abandonment</td>
<td>.25 .5</td>
<td>2 .815</td>
<td>.180</td>
<td>.036</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Comparison of the speaking strategies use between HP and LP groups (N=55)

Additionally, the analysis of the listening part (see table 4) reveals that, negotiation for meaning whilst listening, getting the gist and fluency maintained strategies (all significant at p< .05) are highly reported by High proficiency students where as word-oriented, less-active listener and scanning strategies (all significant at p< .05) are more reported by Low proficiency students.
Table 4: Comparison of the listening strategies use between HP and LP groups (N=55)
This study concludes that “achievement strategies” and in particular “negotiation for meaning strategies” are significantly associated with high proficiency students who endeavor negotiate their communicative difficulties and know how to supply information and knowledge from their interlocutors whereas “avoidance strategies” are likely to be used by low proficiency learners who try to evade the communicative problems and mostly bring an up-rapt unhappy close to the conversation. High proficiency learners’ frequent use of achievement strategies can be explained by their equipment with the necessary linguistic tools, hence, they feel very comfortable and confident in using the language for communicative purposes and sustaining the conversation especially through meaning negotiation. Furthermore, when faced with communication breakdowns it seems that high proficiency students’ high level of lexical knowledge facilitates their use of negotiation for meaning and getting the gist strategies. In this context, Chen (cited in Smaoui 2015, p 40) stated that

“High proficiency learners are more able to estimate the linguistic knowledge they have at their disposal. They are more aware of the limitations of their TL resources and more accurate in the prediction of the problems they might encounter in their communication, therefore in most cases they are able to solve the communication problems in the planning process or choose more appropriate and effective strategies” (p.171).

In contrast, it appears that low proficiency students who are likely to have a limited linguistic knowledge are unable to express themselves and to deliver their intended messages. Because
of their poor lexical repertoire, low proficiency students are even unable to grasp the appropriate meaning and they cannot control their frustration and therefore they choose to give up the conversation in order not to “lose face”.

It is deduced that the relationship between oral proficiency and CS use seems to display a noticeable consistency across diverse cultural settings. The most consistent findings across previous studies focus on three factors which are negotiation for meaning whilst speaking, social-affective and fluency-oriented strategies. High proficiency students report extensively higher use of these three strategies in the present study and also in previous studies by Nakatani (2006) and Chen (2009). Additionally, lower proficiency learners reported significantly higher use of message abandonment in the present study and previous studies by Chen (2009) and Kavasoglu (2011).

Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to determine the OCSs that high proficiency and low proficiency speakers employ during listening and speaking in English. The basic outcome of this study is that participants reported the highest use of achievement strategies such as negotiation for meaning whilst speaking strategies, social affective strategies and message reduction and alteration as a way to enhance their own spoken communication. When listening to an interlocutor, they reported that they are most likely to use meaning negotiation strategies whilst listening and getting the gist strategies. Furthermore, the analysis of the reported strategy use of high and low proficiency groups indicates that achievement strategies in particular meaning negotiation, social affective and fluency-oriented are more frequently reported by high proficiency learners. In contrast, reduction strategies specifically message abandonment and less active listener are significantly reported by low proficiency learners. The remarkable differences observed between the CS uses of high and low proficiency learners put forward some helpful pedagogical implication. It is deemed necessary to raise students’ awareness of the importance of using CSs as efficient tools to cope with communication problems through strategy training or instructing within a classroom setting. It is recommended then that an integration of a formal instruction on CSs along with awareness-raising activities is highly crucial in the school curriculum. In this way, students could develop their strategic competence through relying on different kinds of useful communication strategies. Some previous researchers (Le, 2006; Kongsom 2009) have confirmed that CS training in the classroom could literally help students to communicate more effectively, raise students’ awareness of CSs, and enhance students’ confidence in speaking English. Others as Dornyei (1995) and Nakatani (2010) have also called for the need for direct strategy training which can generate a significant improvement in the quality and quantity of strategy use and oral fluency.

Based on the findings of this study, further research focusing on the effects of CS training with LMD Tunisian students would be exceptionally valuable.
References


Faerch, C., & Kasper, G. (Eds.), Strategies in interlanguage communication. New York, USA: Longman.

Faerch, C., & Kasper, G. (Eds.), Strategies in interlanguage communication (pp. 4-14). New York, USA: Longman.


Appendix

Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI)

Please read the following items, choose a response, and write it in the space after each item.

1. Never or almost never true of me
2. Generally not true of me
3. Somewhat true of me
4. Generally true of me
5. Always or almost always true of me

Strategies for Coping With Speaking Problems

1. I think first of what I want to say in my native language and then construct the English sentence.
2. I think first of a sentence I already know in English and then try to change it to fit the situation.
3. I use words which are familiar to me.
4. I reduce the message and use simple expressions.
5. I replace the original message with another message because of feeling incapable of executing my original intent.
6. I abandon the execution of a verbal plan and just say some words when I don’t know what to say.
7. I pay attention to grammar and word order during conversation.
8. I try to emphasize the subject and verb of the sentence.
9. I change my way of saying things according to the context.
10. I take my time to express what I want to say.
11. I pay attention to my pronunciation.
12. I try to speak clearly and loudly to make myself heard.
13. I pay attention to my rhythm and intonation.
14. I pay attention to the conversation flow.
15. I try to make eye-contact when I am talking. 16. I use gestures and facial expressions if I can’t communicate how to express myself.
17. I correct myself when I notice that I have made a mistake.
18. I notice myself using an expression which fits a rule that I have learned.
19. While speaking, I pay attention to the listener’s reaction to my speech.
20. I give examples if the listener doesn’t understand what I am saying.
21. I repeat what I want to say until the listener understands.
22. I make comprehension checks to ensure the listener understands what I want to say.
23. I try to use fillers when I cannot think of what to say.
24. I leave a message unfinished because of some language difficulty.
25. I try to give a good impression to the listener.
26. I don’t mind taking risks even though I might make mistakes.
27. I try to enjoy the conversation.
28. I try to relax when I feel anxious.
29. I actively encourage myself to express what I want to say.
30. I try to talk like a native speaker.
31. I ask other people to help when I can’t communicate well.
32. I give up when I can’t make myself understood.

Strategies for Coping With Listening Problems
1. I pay attention to the first word to judge whether it is an interrogative sentence or not.
2. I try to catch every word that the speaker uses.
3. I guess the speaker’s intention by picking up familiar words.
4. I pay attention to the words which the speaker slows down or emphasizes.
5. I pay attention to the first part of the sentence and guess the speaker’s intention.
6. I try to respond to the speaker even when I don’t understand him/her perfectly.
7. I guess the speaker’s intention based on what he/she has said so far.
8. I don’t mind if I can’t understand every single detail.
9. I anticipate what the speaker is going to say based on the context.
10. I ask the speaker to give an example when I am not sure what he/she said.
11. I try to translate into native language little by little to understand what the speaker has said.
12. I try to catch the speaker’s main point.
13. I pay attention to the speaker’s rhythm and intonation.
14. I send continuation signals to show my understanding in order to avoid communication gaps.
15. I use circumlocution to react the speaker’s utterance when I don’t understand his/her intention well.
16. I pay attention to the speaker’s pronunciation.
17. I use gestures when I have difficulties in understanding.
18. I pay attention to the speaker’s eye contact, facial expression and gestures.
19. I ask the speaker to slow down when I can’t understand what the speaker has said.
20. I ask the speaker to use easy words when I have difficulties in comprehension.
21. I make a clarification request when I am not sure what the speaker has said.
22. I ask for repetition when I can’t understand what the speaker has said.
23. I make clear to the speaker what I haven’t been able to understand.
24. I only focus on familiar expressions.
25. I especially pay attention to the interrogative when I listen to WH-questions.
26. I pay attention to the subject and verb of the sentence when I listen.