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The Effects of Task Type on Learners' Use of Communication Strategies

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Abstract

This paper presents results from a study conducted to understand the use of communication strategies by Algerian students of EFL. Based on Tarone's (1983) interactional taxonomy of communication strategies and Bialystok's (1983) tripartite division into L1-based, IL-based and non-verbal based strategies, the investigation also sought to examine the effects of task types on the use of communication strategies. For this purpose, a group of second year university students were observed during the performance of two different communicative tasks: picture description task and free discussion task. The results demonstrated that to solve their communication problems, the students employed a wide variety of communication strategies drawing upon different sources of knowledge. Thus, they relied on their interlanguages, mother tongue, other mastered foreign languages or paralinguage. The results also revealed that task type had significant effects on the number (quantity) of communication strategies but not on the type (quality) of communication strategies used by the participants. To explain the phenomenon, three factors in relation with the nature of the two tasks were discussed: task demands, context and time constraints.

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, it is widely accepted that the main goal of learning a foreign language (FL) is to be able to communicate effectively. Nonetheless, it is a well-known fact that, to most FL learners, the process of communication is complex and problematic. For Selinker (1972), learners meet problems when they attempt to express communicative intentions because of their interlanguages (IL) that are limited and deficient by definition. To solve these problems, many researchers (see Tarone and Yule 1989, Faerch and Kasper 1983, Paribakht 1985, Poulisse 1989, Mc Donough 1995, Cohen 1998, Dornyei 1995) reported on learners' use of communication strategies (CSs). Therefore, CSs are considered as learners' vital means applied to communicate intended meaning when communication breakdowns occur (Faerch and Kasper, 1983, Tarone 1987, Cohen 1989). This ability to

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overcome communication problems is referred to as “strategic competence” and recognized as an important component of learners’ communicative competence (CC). In view of the importance of CSs use, Canale and Swain (1979:11) emphasized that: *“learners must be encouraged to use such strategies [meaning CSs] (rather than remain silent if they cannot produce grammatically accurate forms) and just be given the opportunity to use them”*. Therefore, many researchers consider the use of communicative tasks, in FL classrooms, as critical opportunities for learners to employ CSs and develop CC in the target language (TL). Communicative tasks do not only give the language learners the chance to negotiate meaning more effectively but also the possibility to take on an active role. Moreover, previous research reported that CSs use is probably task-specific (Poulisse and Schills 1989, Paribakht 1985) and that more studies need to be conducted to identify the tasks that are likely to elicit more CSs from the learners.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Definitions and Taxonomies of CSs

Selinker (1972) is credited for being the first to use the term CSs in his paper entitled “Interlanguage” to explain certain types of errors made by second language learners. The term IL is generally used to refer to second language learners’ separate linguistic system based on the observable output which results from learners’ attempted production of a TL norm (Selinker 1972). CSs are regarded as one of the factors affecting the construction of the IL. Varadi (1983) argued that in the attempt to express meaning in the TL, learners experience problems to get their message through because of limited linguistic means. To overcome, learners resort to a variety of CSs to maximize their potential for communicating.

The importance attributed to CSs is noticeable in the myriad of definitions and taxonomies provided by the different scholars in the domain. However, there are many differences and similarities between the various definitions and classifications arising from the different theoretical perspectives adopted by the researchers. In Tarone’s words (1983), adopting an interactional approach, *“the term CSs relates to a mutual attempt of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in situations where requisite meaning structures do not seem to be shared”* (P420). It is clear, that for Tarone (1983), the negotiation of meaning as a joint effort between the interlocutors is central to the definition of CSs (See appendix A for a detailed description of Tarone’s taxonomy of CSs).

In their attempt to explain CSs, Faerch and Kasper (1983) elaborated a psycholinguistic framework where they located CSs in a general model of speech production divided into a goal, a plan and an action (or execution) to reach the goal. Thus, they view CSs as *“potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a communicative goal”* (212). This definition conceives CSs as mental plans used by learners when they have problems to reach a communicative goal with no request for assistance from the interlocutor. For Faerch and Kasper, there are two opportunities open to the speaker to overcome his communication problems: enact some kind of avoidance by changing or reducing the original communicative goal or adopt what linguistic means he has to achieve the goal. Therefore, the two major categories of CSs devised by Faerch and Kasper are *“reduction strategies”* where fearing to produce incorrect language items, the learner may employ a reduced system and *“achievement strategies”* where the learner expands his linguistic resources (drawing upon his mother tongue, his interlanguage or any other language he might know (See appendix B for a detailed description of Faerch and Kasper’s taxonomy).

Operating on Faerch and Kasper’s (1983) framework, Bialystok (1990) suggested a tripartite division of CSs based on the linguistic source of the strategy, it included: L1- based strategies (drawing upon the learner’s mother tongue), L2-based strategies (drawing upon learner’s IL) and Non-verbal based strategies (the use of gestures and mime. See appendix C for a detailed description of Bialystok’s taxonomy).

Despite the fact that the above overview of the most quoted definitions of CSs suggested that there is no universally accepted definition of CSs, researchers seem to agree on the fact that CSs are resorted to when learners’ linguistic means are not enough to convey their intended meaning. Accordingly, in this study, CSs are defined as learners’ verbal and non-verbal means to resolve interactional problems, to negotiate meaning, to stay in the

conversation and keep the channel of communication open. In line with this definition, the present study is based on Tarone's (1983) interactional taxonomy, because it is the one that mostly highlights the interactional power of CSs in face to face interaction. Moreover, in order to evaluate the communicative potential of every identified strategy, the indications derived from Bialystok's (1983) tripartite division into L1-based, L2-based and non-verbal based strategies were used. This enabled us to have an idea about the preferred information source of the strategies used by our participants.

2.2 Task Type and CSs Use

In language teaching, current interest into tasks comes from the conviction that they are effective pedagogical tools to develop learners' CC. They are generally defined as “*a piece of work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form*” (Nunan 1989:10 cited in O'Brien 1998:24). Thus, tasks are regarded as opportunities to experience language as it is used outside the classroom. Moreover, Tarone and Yule (1989) argued that communicative tasks give the language learners the possibility to negotiate meaning successfully. During task completion, learners take on active roles; helping each other when they do not understand, and making themselves understood when their message is inarticulate. This implies that, to reach the communicative task goal, learners may resort to CSs in the negotiation process.

According to Poulisse and Shills (1989) and Paribakht (1985) and, then later, Pica, Kanagry and Falodun(1993), different types of tasks offer different opportunities for negotiation of meaning, CSs use and alteration in interlanguage. Therefore, CSs researchers need to multiply their efforts to find which of the tasks, that are generally used in language classrooms, are more likely to generate CSs from learners and their interlocutors beyond their linguistic capabilities. In this respect, many studies have been carried out to elicit CSs from ESL learners using different types of tasks as for instance topic description, cartoon description, and definition formulation by Dornyei (1995); translation task, storytelling and free discussion by Flyman(1997); Jigsaw and decision making by Smith(2003). These studies suggested that task type has an effect on the frequency (quantity) and type (Quality) of CSs usage.

In the present study, two types of tasks were adopted: a free discussion and a picture description. The free discussion task was adopted, because it is closer to real interaction than other tasks as “*concept-identification*” (Chen 1990: 160) or “*explanation of concrete nouns*” (Paribakht 1985: 133). Generally, it takes the form of an exchange of views and experiences organized around a prompting theme. It provides context, allows the subjects to use as much time as they need, and creates opportunities for a range of language uses such as persuasion, enquiring interlocutor's position, explaining or justifying. Regarding the picture description task, it seems less realistic and context- free. However, we think that description is one of the most frequent tasks in real life and seems to have the same characteristics as the free discussion in terms of the possibility of control over vocabulary and syntax uses. In addition, these two types of tasks have been chosen as they were the mostly resorted to by oral expression teachers at the Department of English, University of Algiers.

3. Research Aims

Although, much research has been done on learners' CSs in EFL and ESL contexts, university students' of English strategic competence has not been widely investigated in Algeria. In addition, the potential of the tasks usually used in oral expression sessions in generating CSs has seldom been evaluated. Hence, the first aim of this study was to find out the CSs used by a group of second year University students of EFL. The attempt was to gain insight into how Algerian learners cope with their linguistic difficulties and what sources of knowledge they draw upon when using CSs. The second aim was to make a fine-tuned link between learners' CSs and their use in the performance of two specific communication tasks: free discussion and object description.

4. Research Questions

The study was designed to answer the following two research questions:

1. What communication strategies do second year students of English at the University of Algiers use to overcome communication problems?
2. Is there any difference of communication strategy use arising from different kinds of communicative tasks?

5. Research Methodology

5.1 Participants

The subjects of this study were sixteen second year students preparing for a four-year degree in English at the University of Algiers. There were no specific criteria for the selection of these subjects; those who participated were all volunteers. Their ages ranged from nineteen to twenty five years old. Moreover, these subjects shared Arabic as L1, French as L2 and English as target language (L3).

5.2 Research Design, Data Collection and Analysis

The necessary data for the present study were collected adopting two qualitative research tools, namely task elicitation and non-participant observation using a camcorder. The latter permitted the recording and identification of both learners' verbal and non-verbal CSs. Thus, the final data consisted of two video recordings of the participants performing two communicative tasks.

The data were analyzed in two phases:

Phase1: to find out the CSs utilized by the participants, the data were transcribed using Jefferson's (1979) transcription conventions, because they capture both verbal and non-verbal behaviours (gestures, pauses and eye-gazes). Then, since this study adopted an interactional approach to CSs use, every communication strategy was directly identified relying on what Raupach (1983:225) calls "*strategy markers*"; considered as external indicators of strategic behaviour. The frequency of occurrence of these "*markers*" is an indication that the learner is experiencing a communicative problem, which could prevent him from achieving his communication goal. The main "*strategy markers*" examined in this study were: learners' use of implicit performance markers such as "*unfilled pauses*", "*filled pauses*", "*Self repairs*", "*false starts*" and "*new starts*", explicit performance markers as for instance when the speaker asks directly his interlocutor(s) for help saying "*How is this called?*"; "*What is that?*" or "*How do we call in English ...?*"; "*Do we pronounce like this?*", and "*paralinguistic problem indicators*" as gazing appealingly to his peers for help. Moreover, the intensive use of "*hesitation markers*" was also interpreted as an appeal. After the identification phase, the strategic behaviours were coded according to Tarone's (1983) taxonomy (see appendix A). Besides, as a further refinement and in order to evaluate the participants' strategic behaviour, the CSs were grouped according to the source of information they were based on and their communicative potential. To this end, the indications deriving from Bialystok's (1983) tripartite division were adopted (see appendix C). However, some modifications were necessary to adapt the model to our participants' peculiar linguistic situation, and to the strategic behaviours they have adopted. Thus, the CSs were categorized into four broad categories: L1/ L2- based (when participants drew upon Arabic or French, respectively), IL-based (when participants drew upon English), cooperative strategies (when explicit verbal appeals were made to involve other interactants in solving communication problems) and, non-verbal strategies (when non-verbal means of communication such as facial expressions and hand gestures were used).

To find out the frequency of each communication strategy, the total number for each strategy was calculated in the whole corpus. Further, in descriptive statistics, we presented the frequencies and percentages of every communication strategy in tabular form.

Phase2: to determine the effect of task type on communication strategy use, the total number of CSs used in every task was calculated and compared. Then, the frequency of CSs for the broad categories IL-based, and L1/ L 2-based was calculated and compared according to different task types.

6. Results and Discussion

6.1 Research Question 1: What communication strategies do Second year Algerian university learners of English use to overcome communication problems?

In response to our first research question, the results indicated that the participants made use of a wide range of CSs commonly noted in CSs studies. They resorted to almost all the strategies singled out in Tarone's (1983) model, and to some others described in Faerch and kasper's one. Thus, for all the 16 students, who participated in the research, a total of 140 instances of CSs were counted. The frequency and percentage of each of the 10 strategies starting from the most to the least frequently used strategy are shown in the table below:

Table 1. Overall use of CSs

| Strategy type | Broad category | Observed frequency | | Frequency rank |
|-----------------------|----------------|----------------------|-------|----------------|
| | | Nbr of instances | % | |
| Repetition | IL- based | 56 | 40.00 | 1 |
| Restructuring | IL- based | 30 | 21.42 | 2 |
| Message abandonment | IL- based | 20 | 14.28 | 3 |
| Gestures and mimes | Non- verbal | 14 | 10.00 | 4 |
| Code switch | L1/ L2-based | 07 | 05.00 | 5 |
| Circumlocution | IL- based | 04 | 02.85 | 6 |
| Approximation | IL- based | 04 | 02.85 | 6 |
| Word coinage | IL-based | 02 | 01.42 | 7 |
| Appeal for assistance | Cooperative | 02 | 01.42 | 7 |
| Literal translation | L1/ L2-based | 01 | 0.71 | 8 |
| Total | | 140 instances | | |

At the beginning of this study, we supposed that the students would use most of the strategies singled out in our model, but that some L1/L2-based strategies as for instance code switch, would dominate. The supposition was made on the basis of the participants' shared linguistic background (same L1 and L2, Arabic and French, respectively). A view that was also pointed out by Faerch and Kasper (1983), who considered code switch as a typical strategic behaviour of the foreign language classroom. They stated that "*the extent to which this is done depends on the interactants' analysis of the communicative situation. Learners frequently share the L1 with their teacher, which enables them to code switch intensively between L2 and L1*". However, from the grand total (140), it appeared that the IL-based strategies prevailed: 116 instances of strategy use in comparison to only 08 instances of L1/ L2based strategies (See table03 below). Code switch is, then, rarely used, only 7 instances over the whole corpus. This is an interesting result as it shows that the participants, who shared the same linguistic background and

limited language proficiency, attempted to use the target language in communicative tasks instead of resorting to CSs rooted in previously learned languages.

The data further indicated that among the IL-based sub-categories, repetition and restructuring were the most prevailing (40% and 21.42%, respectively of the total of instances). Nevertheless, these two strategies were not of a high communicative potential, as they appeared to be manifestations of the pre-communicative stage than of the communicative stage itself. Moreover, repeating an utterance or a word several times or restructuring an idea costs a lot of time and might lead to losing turn in conversation (time constraints in natural communication). With regard to the same broad category (IL-based), it seemed that gestures and mimes occurred more often than circumlocution (2.85%), approximation (2.85%) or word coinage (0.71%). A tentative explanation of these results would lead to the consideration of the participants' cultural background. They come from a culture in which people use a wide range of gestures and facial expressions either as an aid or as a substitute to their linguistic output. Yet, more data from future studies are needed to support this explanation.

On the basis of the same factor (cultural background), we also anticipated that our learners would very often resort to appeal for assistance, because in the participants' culture people live communally; a factor that creates a kind of cooperation and reliance on each other. Our reasoning was that this spirit of cooperation would be apparent in their linguistic behaviour. However, contrary to our expectations, the learners resorted to appeal for help only twice in the whole corpus (01.42%). We supposed that such behaviour might be attributed to either the classroom situation that creates an atmosphere of competition between learners, rendering them more individualistic and reluctant to ask for others help or the participants' lack of consciousness of the advantages such a strategy may offer in face to face communication.

Another noticeable fact about our learners' strategic behaviour is their frequent use of message abandonment (the third most frequent strategy, 14.28 %). This strategy is considered by Tarone (1983) as an avoidance strategy, as it indicates learners' inability to accomplish independently a communicative act. This type of behaviour might be attributed to the complexity of the task (a factor that is discussed below).

1.6.2 Research question 2: Is there any difference of communication strategy use arising from different kinds of learning tasks?

The analysis in relation to our second research question concerning the effect of task type on learners' use of CSs revealed a quantitative difference in CSs use between the two tasks. The free discussion task generated 108 instances of CSs(see table 2 below) , a number that is significantly higher compared to the 32 instances in the picture description task. These results are in line with Poulisse and Schills' (1989) who found that their subjects used different CSs with different frequencies in three communication tasks: picture description, story retelling and interview. To explain this phenomenon in their study, they discussed the nature of the three tasks, taking in consideration four factors: task demands, context, time constraints and the presence of an interlocutor. Yet, in our study, only three seem to be the most relevant: task demands, context and time constraints, in addition to the learning pattern adopted for each task (group work for the discussion task and pair work for the description task). Although, learning pattern is not a factor that is directly related with the nature of the tasks, it seemed to have strong impact on the quantity of CSs generated in each task.

Table 2. CSs Use across Task Type

| Strategy type | Broad-category | Observed frequency across task type | | | | Frequency rank | |
|-----------------------|----------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------|---------------------|-----------------|---------------------|-----------------|
| | | <i>Nbr of instances</i> | | <i>%</i> | | Picture Description | Free Discussion |
| | | Picture Description | Free Discussion | Picture Description | Free Discussion | | |
| Repetition | IL- based | 10 | 46 | 31.25 | 42.59 | 1 | 1 |
| Restructuring | IL- based | 08 | 22 | 25.00 | 20.37 | 2 | 2 |
| Message abandonment | IL- based | 05 | 19 | 15.62 | 17.59 | 3 | 3 |
| Gestures and mimes | Non- verbal | 03 | 09 | 09.37 | 08.33 | 4 | 4 |
| Code switch | L1/L2 based | 03 | 07 | 09.37 | 06.48 | 4 | 5 |
| Circumlocution | IL- based | 02 | 02 | 06.25 | 01.85 | 5 | 6 |
| Approximation. | IL- based | 01 | 01 | 03.12 | 00.92 | 6 | 7 |
| Word coinage. | IL-based | 00 | 01 | 00 | 00.92 | 7 | 8 |
| Appeal for assistance | Cooperative | 00 | 01 | 00 | 00.92 | 7 | 8 |
| Literal translation | L1/L2based | 00 | 00 | 00 | 00.00 | 7 | 9 |
| Total | | 32 | 108 | | | | |

Table 3. CSs Broad-Category Use across Task Types

| CSs broad-category | Observed frequency across task type | | Frequency rank | |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------|---------------------|-----------------|
| | <i>Number of instances</i> | | Picture Description | Free Discussion |
| | L1/L2-based | IL- based | | |
| Picture Description | 08 | 89 | 2 | 1 |
| Free Discussion | 00 | 27 | 2 | 1 |
| Total | 08 | 116 | | |

6.2.1 Task Demands

From the number of CSs used in the free discussion task (108 out of 140 reported instances see table 2), one might conclude that the task was more complex and therefore more cognitively taxing from the learners. This might have had an effect on the learners' ability to manage the task through the use of a good number of CSs. In addition, the tasks required the production of two different types of discourse. In the free discussion task, the learners were dealing with a very involving topic of their choice. The fact that there were two groups attempting to argue for two antagonist positions required the production of longer stretches of language. However, in the second task, the participants were required to describe objects from photographs. So, they were less emotionally involved in the topic. Consequently, they limited themselves to producing short stretches of language i.e. enough single word labels or short phrases to enable the object identification by the listener. In some cases, the reference to some of the object properties made its identification possible. This might explain why the participants did not produce longer stretches of language or resort to CSs as much as in the free discussion task.

6.2.2 Context

The two tasks provided different possibilities for context use. The description task appeared to be the least contextualized one. The learners were required to describe isolated familiar objects to enable the listener to identify

them among other sets of items. It was probably an easy task in comparison to the free discussion one, which involved the participants in hot debate, requiring convincing arguments, and, particularly, the total use of their limited linguistic capacities and their knowledge of the world. This could explain why they resorted more frequently to CSs in the free discussion.

6.2.3 Time constraints

In both tasks, the learners were given the same amount of time; however, they did not make use of the time equally. In the free discussion task, the learners exploited all the 30 minutes allotted for the task. While the picture description task led to a rapid completion of the activity i.e. before the time allotted. Besides, when the participants had difficulty identifying the object, they abandoned the task, arguing for their incapacity to refer to the object. In this case, the students could have used some strategies that might be of usefulness in a referential task such as circumlocution and approximation.

6.2.4 Learning Pattern

In this study two different learning patterns were adopted: pair and group work for the picture description and the free discussion task, respectively. In our opinion these two different patterns generated different amounts of negotiation of meaning. The number of exchanges and turns produced by the pairs in the discussion task is inferior in comparison to the free discussion task. We supposed this was due to the simplicity of the task, and to a lack of interaction and negotiation of meaning between the pairs of students. However, the important number of exchanges in the free discussion task could explain the number of strategies generated.

Moreover, the analysis of task effect on participants' selection of some categories of CSs revealed that task type prompted the learners to choose differentially between the broad categories: L1/L2 based and IL-based strategies. However, task type did not affect the choice between the sub-categories as for instance repetition, restructuring or word coinage. These results seem to be in consistence with Bialystok's (1983:110) findings in a study on the effect of language proficiency factor on CS use. She concluded that: "*target language proficiency biases the learner to select differentially between L1- and L2 based strategies, but does not predict the selection of specific strategies.*"

Table 3 above showed that of the total of 140 instances of strategy use in the whole corpus, 116 are IL-based strategies, whilst only 08 are L1/ L2-based. However, Table 2 shows that except for some categories, almost the same type of strategies was used by the participants in the two different tasks. Of the 10 sub-categories identified (see table1 above), 9 of them were used in the free discussion task (excluding word coinage). However, with the exclusion of code switch, and appeal for help, only 7 of the 10 sub-categories were used in the picture description task.

On the other hand, a look at the frequency rank of these strategies in the two different tasks would reveal that, basically, the same sub-categories of strategies were of high frequency: restructuring, repetition and gestures and mimes. These results might imply that the participants shared the same strategic competence (using the same set of strategies). Nevertheless, regarding the learning potential of the most favoured strategies above, one might conclude that the participants are not using their strategic competence effectively to face the requirements of different communication tasks (Bialystok 1983; Paribakht 1985). This could suggest that raising learners' awareness about the linguistic potential of certain categories of CSs is necessary. In this respect, Poullisse and Schills (1989) insisted on the usefulness of some strategy types over others in performing different task types. As an illustration, circumlocution and approximation seem to be very informative in a description task, because they permit reference to many properties of the item under description. With regard to free discussion, appeal for assistance could be very useful in the process of learner - learner interaction. Learners could rely on each other's strengths to achieve individual personal goals.

To sum up, this part of the results revealed that task type affected the quantity but not the quality of CSs. Besides, they showed the significance of free discussion task in oral expression sessions, as it provided the

participants with more opportunities to negotiate meaning, to make use of a good number of CSs and to have fun communicating with each other in the group.

Conclusion and Implications

In the present study, the analysis of the data indicated that the participants made use of a wide range of CSs. However, and contrary to our expectations, task type proved to have only a limited effect on the choice of CSs. The two different tasks significantly influenced the quantity but not the quality of generated CSs, as the participants used more CSs in the free discussion task than in the object description one. The data further revealed that the participants resorted to almost the same sub-categories of CSs in both tasks, namely repetition, restructuring, appeal for assistance and message abandonment. These results imply that the learners made use of the same repertoire of CSs when attempting to reach the goals of the two different communicative tasks. Yet, the dominance of restructuring and repetition strategies in both tasks was an indication of the participants' ineffective use of their strategic competence. This suggests that the students need for guidance on how to make use of their limited linguistic knowledge adopting appropriate CSs. Therefore, oral expression teachers should raise learners' awareness of the communicative potential of some CSs in different Communication tasks. Besides, they need to stimulate the use of the less frequent strategies in this study, namely approximation, circumlocution and appeal for assistance.

Categorizing CSs into IL- based and L1/L2-based strategies in this study was also very enlightening. It helped the evaluation of the participants' strategic behaviour. The data revealed that IL- based strategies were more prevalent than L1/L2- based ones. This is positive as it implied that the learners drew more upon the target language they were learning than upon any other previously learned language, and for a foreign language learner, it was an achievement in itself.

Finally, although the results of this study were only tentative, we still hope they will be an interesting source for those who would like to know something about the subject of CSs among EFL learners in Algeria. However, the subject is not completely covered in this study, so there is no doubt about the need to conduct further studies especially on the teachability of CSs among EFL learners in the Algerian context. .

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