



## Communication Strategies Used by the Students on the Perspective of Language Proficiency

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### **Abstract**

In today's global environment, communication plays a crucial role since everyone cannot be separated with communication activity. Language is believed as a tool of communication. It provides the means to take the place in the society, to express and convey information, to learn about the people and the world around us. This qualitative case study is set to investigate the use of communication strategies on the perspective of language proficiency because the most significant predictor of specific communication strategy use is language proficiency. There are twelve students with high and low proficiency level as the subject of this study which is taken purposively. They are the second year students of English Education Department at one of the universities in Indonesia. In this study, the researcher used multiple data sources, namely observation, interview, and documentation. It is intended to address the research questions. The results showed that the students with high proficiency level used five (5) types and ten (10) sub-types of communication strategies. While the students with low proficiency level used four (4) types and nine (9) sub-types of communication strategies. It means that students with high proficiency level utilized more types and sub-types of communication strategies than the low proficient students did. The study provides valuable contribution in introducing communication strategies and raising students' awareness to actually use English in real-life communication.

**Keywords:** Communication; Communication Strategies; Proficiency Level

### **Introduction**

In today's global environment, communication plays a crucial role since everyone cannot be separated with communication activity. Being able to communicate effectively is regarded as the most important of all life skills. Many people believe that the significance of communication is like the importance of breathing. Indeed, communication facilitates the spread of knowledge and forms relationship between people.

Language is believed as a tool of communication. It provides the means to take the place in the society, to express and convey information, to learn about the people and the world around us. Good communication can be easily achieved if the speaker and listener deliver the meaning using the first language. However, there will be a problem if they communicate using second or foreign language. The

gaps between speaker and listener appear because of their limitation in grammatical or linguistic knowledge.

In regard to the fact, learning a foreign language, especially speaking skill is a necessity in the area of communication and globalization. According to Richard and Renandya (2002), “A large percentage of the world’s language learners are study English in order to develop proficiency in speaking” (p. 201). Speaking in a second language has been considered as the most challenging of the four skills given the fact that involves a complex process of constructing meaning (Celce Murcia and Olshta., 2000 as cited in Gruyter., 2006, p. 139). Having a good ability in speaking English will not only make learners easier in using English with what so ever, but also assure them to have the ability in delivering information through the meaning of messages.

In coincidence with the importance of English speaking skill in communication, the speaker and listener must find some effective ways to communicate their thought using English. It aims at coping with various communicative situations. In other side, it is also used to compensate the learners’ inadequacies so that they can survive in their communication in the target language. Those effective ways which help people to communicate in the presence of such deficiencies can be called as communication strategies.

Theoretical antecedents of communication strategies can be traced back to interlanguage studies and learner errors in early of 1970s when Selinker (1972) introduced the notion of second language communication strategies in his seminar article entitled “Interlanguage”. He argued that learners’ insufficient knowledge of language and at the same time willingness to communicate leads to the use of communication strategies. Later, Corder (1981, p. 103) suggested a working definition for communication strategies as: “systematic techniques employed by the speaker to express his meaning when faced with some difficulty”.

The publication of Selinker in 1972 became the starting point for further communication strategy research. The study of communication strategy becomes an interesting field to be explored. Savignon (1972 as cited in Dornyei & Thurrel., 1997) proposed the importance of coping strategy in communicative language teaching and testing. Tarone and her associates (Tarone., 1977 as cited in Dornyei & Thurrel., 1997; Tarone., Cohen., & Dumas., 1976 as cited in Faerch & Kasper., 1983) have published studies in 1973 that concerned with the definition and the taxonomy of communication strategy.

In 1980, the communication strategy is involved in the concept of communicative competence as the sub-competencies of strategic competence. It is proposed by Canale and Swain (1980). In 1983, Faerch and Kasper published an article entitled *Strategies in Interlanguage Communication*. The article focuses on identifying and classifying communication strategies, and on their teachability. In 1990, Bialystok publishes a book entitled *Communication Strategies: A Psycholinguistic Analysis of Second Language Use*. At the same time, a book published by Kasper and Kellerman entitled *Advances in Communication Strategy Research*. Nowadays, the broader concept of communication strategy taxonomy was developed in order to accommodate in the 21st century. Table 1 below shows the taxonomies of communication strategies proposed by experts, namely Tarone, Dornyei, and Celce-Murcia (Fauziati., 2016, p. 37-40).

**Table 1** Taxonomy of communication strategies

Tarone (1981)	Dornyei (1995)	Celce-Murcia (1995)
Topic Avoidance	Avoidance	Avoidance
Message Abandonment	Compensatory	Achievement
The Use of Paraphrase		Stalling or Time-gaining
Coinage		Self-monitoring strategies
Native Language		Interactional Strategies
Switching		
Miming		
Appeal for Assistance		

Previous studies in the field of communication strategies revealed that the use of communication strategies is influenced by English speaking proficiency (Rost and Ross., 1991; Huang and Naerssen., 1987; Moattarian and Tahririan., 2013). As suggested by Bialystok (1997) that the most significant predictor of specific communication strategy use is language proficiency. Whereas contradictive finding reported by Kaivanpanah, Yamouty, and Karami (2012), they reveal that there is no statistically significant relationship between language proficiency and the use of communication strategies. It is supported by Malasit & Sarobol (2014), they state that English-speaking proficiency did not have the impact on the choices of communication strategies. In respect to language proficiency, there are still rooms for more investigation due to some inconsistencies in the findings of different studies.

Referring to the whole discussion above, the researcher wants to dig more deeply relate to the use of communication strategies on the perspective of language proficiency. Then, the researchers formulate the research questions as follows.

1. What are the types and sub-types of communication strategies used by high and low proficient students?
2. What are the differences and similarities of communication strategies used by high and low proficient students?

### **Methodology**

The design of the study is qualitative case study which explored particular phenomena more deeply. It also used multiple data to enrich the information from the subject of the study (Tuckman., 1999, p. 38). Twelve students consisted of six students with high proficiency level and six with low proficiency level at the second year students of English Education Department of one of the Universities in Indonesia were selected to participate in this study. The use of purposive sampling technique was to ensure the strengthness of the data. The data are in the form of students' utterances, and then the researcher recorded the speaking activity and transcribed the recording the data in order to be analyzed.

In collecting the data, the researcher used observation, interview, and documentation. Then, she analyzed the data based on Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen, Razavieh's concept (Ary., Jacobs., Sorensen., Razavieh., 2010, p. 481). First, familiarizing and organizing steps are done by listening to the recorded data in the forms of students' utterances repeatedly, then transcribing them. Second, coding and reducing are done by summarizing all the data from observation, interview, and documentation. Third, interpreting and representing are done by identifying students' utterances, grouping them into Celce-Murcia, et.al's

taxonomy, and giving the explanation. The researcher used Celce-Murcia, et.al's taxonomy to classify the use of communication strategies due to the completeness and the newest taxonomy. The last, presenting a detailed description in the forms of words and tables.

## **Result and Discussion**

The researchers classified the finding into 2 parts, namely type and sub-types of communication strategies used by students with high and low proficiency level and the differences and similarities of communication strategies employed by high and low proficient students.

### **Type of Communication Strategies Used by High and Low Proficient Students**

Based on the data analysis, there are various types and sub-types of communication strategies employed by the students with high and low proficiency level. The explanation and the instances are as follows.

#### **a. Avoidance Strategies**

Avoidance strategy is identified as the speaker simply does not talk about the concept for which the target language item or structure is not known (Tarone., 1997; Bialystok., 1990; Faucette., 2001 as cited in Sukirlan., 2014, p. 2039). It consists of three sub-types, namely message replacement, topic avoidance, and message abandonment. In this strategy, the sub type was only employed by the students in the form of topic avoidance and message abandonment.

##### **1) Topic Avoidance**

Topic avoidance and message abandonment seemed to be similar, yet both of them were different. According to Bialystok (1997, p. 40), topic avoidance is the strategy that employed by the students to avoid talking about particular topics because they may require vocabulary or structures which they do not know. To get a better understanding, the section below serves the example and the explanation of topic avoidance.

AF : Oke. Good. The last question, what is your motivation?

MA : Yah... e... as I said before, everyone... what? Want to develop skill about job. ***I want to develop my skill in order to..., yah... e... like that.***

(Observasi/ S5)

As seen in the example 1, the student MA was asked about his motivation. He tried to answer the question, he intended to give some more information but he did not know the vocabulary or other meaning structure, then she omitted the troublesome topic by saying “**yah, like that**”. It means that he did not want to talk the target concept anymore. In interview, he explained the reason to the researcher.

“I have no ideas to continue the statement. Finally, I did not communicate the intended message, and I just say ‘yah..like that’ to make it simple”.

(Interview/ S5)

## 2) Message Abandonment

Message abandonment is leaving a message unfinished because of some language difficulties. It is commonly identified by observing students' behavior in communication in which they initiate to communicate message but then they cut because they run into difficulty with the target form or rule. In order to overcome the breakdown in communication, the students stop in the mid-sentence, with no appeal to authority to help finish the utterances. To get a better understanding, the section below serves the example and the explanation of message abandonment.

NA : Looking for science is the obligation of every Muslims, male and female.  
So, *they should (pauses for a while)*... yah they have to look for science.

(Observasi/ S1)

From the example above, NA left the message unfinished after stopping the time for a while. In this regard, he gave speech in front of the class entitled "The importance of science". In the mid-speech, he paused the time for a while when he wanted to explain the conclusion about the obligation of Muslim in relation to science. He could not find the next word to complete the whole sentences.

### b. Achievement Strategies

Achievement strategy is taken by the learner when he/she decides to keep the original communicative goal but compensate for insufficient means or makes the effort to retrieve the required items. It covered eight sub-types namely circumlocution, approximation, all-purpose words, non-linguistic means, restructuring, word coinage, literal translation, code-switching. In this type, there are 5 sub-types employed by the students, namely all-purpose words, non-linguistic means, restructuring, literal translation, and code switching.

#### 1) All-Purpose Words

The use of all-purpose words refers to the use of words or phrases having general meaning instead of specific words to convey the utterances. The example and the explanation of all-purpose words strategies done by the students:

MH : And today we are going to discuss *a thing* that become ee..  
happening in the right now. So, the topic is "bringing mobile phone  
in class."

(Observasi/ S3)

In the case above, the student MH employed all-purpose words, namely "**a thing**". It started when he became the moderator in the panel discussion session. He firstly mentioned the word "a thing" to describe the point being discussed in the panel discussion session. In the next utterance, he mentioned the word "topic" to replace the word "a thing". It would be much better is he directly used a specific word like "the topic" instead of the word "a thing" that having multi-purpose meanings, such as event, situation, act, etc.

## 2) *Non-Linguistic Means*

Non-linguistic means commonly taken by describing whole concepts non-verbally or accompanying a verbal strategy with a visual illustration, such as mime, pointing, gestures, drawing pictures, etc. the following example clearly showed that the students utilized non-linguistic means to refer what he wants to say.

AS : Demonstrative *here (pointing the explanation in the white board)* is to point someone or object.. or an object or person.

(Observasi/ S9)

The example above showed that AS employed non-linguistic means by pointing the explanation of demonstrative in the white board. It was used to enables the listener in understanding the word “**here**”, so it was completed by pointing the point that refers to what AS wants.

## 3) *Restructuring*

Restructuring strategy is employed when learners experience the communication problem and then they solve it by abandoning the execution of a verbal plan, leaving the utterances unfinished, and communicating the intended message according to an alternative plan. The example and the explanation are as follow:

YB : You have two positions, to be a conductor and programmer. *So if you want to be conductor? Do you want to be a conductor?*

(Observasi/ S6)

In example above, the intended meaning of YB is offering the interviewee whether he wanted to be conductor or not. But, in the first sentence, he faced difficulty by saying “**So if you want to be conductor?**”. After realizing that he made mistake, then he restructured his sentences became “**do you want to be a conductor?**”. It means that restructuring strategy employed when YB realized in making a mistake and he replaced it into the correct one.

## 4) *Literal Translation*

Literal translation is translating literally a lexical item, idiom, compound word, or structure from first language to second language. The following example show how literal translation employed by the students:

FW: And today we are going to discuss a thing **that happening in the right now**. So, the topic is “bringing mobile phone in the class.”

(Observasi/ S2)

FW in example b made uses of literal translation. He directly translated L1 into L2. His intended meaning in L1 is “**yang terjadi pada saat ini**”. When it was uttered into L2, it should be “**happening right now**”. Furthermore, he translated into “happening in the right now”. He translated “pada” became “in the”. Actually, it was not necessary.

### 5) Code-Switching

Code-switching is using a L1 word with L1 pronunciation or a L3 word with L3 pronunciation while speaking in L2. The following is the example of the uses of the code-switching strategy:

VA : Indonesian people see English as the object to learn, however multilingualism ask us to see English as a media komunikasi, I mean medium of communication.

(Observasi/ S11)

In the example above, VA employed code-switching strategy to solve her problem dealing with L2 resource deficit. She forgot to translate “media komunikasi” into English form. She automatically spoke it using Bahasa. Yet, after seconds, she was aware about it and then she repaired her utterance in English word “medium of communication”. She explained the reason in the interview process as follow:

“I feel nervous because I do not really understand the material. It is about multilingualism. Automatically, I speak bahasa for media komunikasi. It should be medium of communication”.

(Interview / S11)

### c. Stalling or Time-gaining Strategies

Stalling or time-gaining strategy is used when the speaker realizes that he/she encounters communication problem with interlocutor. It is identified when the speaker begins to talk about a concept but cannot continue and stop in the mid-utterance (Faerch & Kasper., 1984; Faucette., 2001). This strategy is characterized by a silence or filler in the mid utterance and the use of filling words or gambits to fill pauses and to gain time to think. It is consisted of two sub-types, namely fillers/ hesitation/ gambits and self and other repetition. The explanation and the instances are as follow:

#### 1) Fillers/ Hesitation/ Gambits

Using fillers or hesitation devices aims to fill pauses and to gain time to think in order to keep the communication channel open and maintain discourse at time of difficulty, such as well, now, let’s see, uhm, ee, uh, etc (Dornyei., 1995 as cited in Brown., 2000: p. 128). The following examples are fillers used by the students when they need more time to think about what they should utter to keep the channel open. In this research, the researcher found that students make use of fillers several times. To see the clear description about this strategy, here the example of the analysis:

FW : internet can make *ee...* students *ee..* easier to cheat because they can looking for *ee...* the answer *ee..* and save the answer in the note.

(Observasi/ S2)

In the example above, the student FW used the strategy fillers four times employing the same kinds of fillers, namely “*eee*”. He uttered the strategy to gain time to think for getting the target words. In this case, he tried to give an opinion related to a theme in panel discussion session, namely “**bringing mobile phone in the class**”.

## 2) *Self and Other Repetition*

Self-repetition is employed by repeating a word or a string words immediately after they were said (Widiarini., 2016, p. 117). It has similar function to use of fillers. Instead of uttering non-lexicalized fillers, speakers repeat a word or a phrase in order to fill pauses in conversation. (Purnama., 2017, p. 72). In this case, the students employed self-repetition by repeating their previous words/phrases frequently while gaining time to think for appropriate words/phrases to continue their communication to the target language. The following is the example of self-repetition committed by the students:

II : Said to ourselves right now, ***I am stepping up, I am stepping up*** on my way to success, and therefore I have to be brave.

(Observasi/ S12)

In the example above, the student II employed the strategy of self-repetition by repeating the phrase “***I am stepping up***” before continuing her speech. Instead of utilizing the incorrect utterances, she chose to repeat the previous phrase in order to find the target word in communicating her ideas. Self-repetition was also used to fill the lengthy silent in the speech.

### d. *Self-Monitoring Strategy*

It consisted of two sub-types, namely self-initiated repair and self-rephrasing. The explanation and the instances were as follow:

#### 1) Self-Initiated Repair

Self-initiated repair is an effort in correcting inappropriate or inadequate information in one’s own speech. The examples below showed how the students employed self-initiated repair strategy:

NR : It is very great honour to have moment with you in the opening ceremony of the fourth anniversary of HMJ PBI. I am NR as your master of ceremony. ***The ceremony have been command with... The ceremony has been commanded with some agendas*** and the opening ceremony will be proceeding with the program details as follow.

(Observasi/ S8)

Regardless of utilizing incorrect grammatical utterances, the student NR left the utterances unfinished and communicated the intended message using the correct grammatical utterances. So, she repaired the word “***the ceremony have been command***” into “***the ceremony has been commanded***”. It was caused that she realized that she made incorrect grammatical utterances, so she revised into the correct one. She stated the reason in the interview as below:

“There is a mistake in placing subject-verb agreement. The ceremony should be followed by has, not have because it is singular. So, I repeat and correct it”.

(Interview/ S8)

#### 2) *Self-Rephrasing*

Self-rephrasing is an attempt to repeat the slightly modified version of a word or phrase because of uncertainty about its correctness.



FW : *They can use e... they can see* the information during the final exam.

(Observasi/ S2)

The student FW rephrased uttering ‘they can use’ become ‘they can see’. Because he realized that they can see is the correct one to deliver his intended meaning, as he said in the interview:

“Yeah.. at that time, I thought that ‘they can see’ is the correct one to continue my sentence rather than ‘they can use’. I want to deliver the message that the students can see the information in the internet during the final exam, not they can use, yet they can see.”

(Interview/ S2)

### ***e. Interactional Strategy***

Interactional strategy is literally used by learners when their linguistic resources are unavailable or inadequate (Wongsawang., 2001; Wannaruk., 2003; Binhayearong., 2009; Kongsom., 2009 as cited in Malasit and Sarobol, p.803). It is consisted of three sub-types, namely appeal for help, meaning negotiation strategies, and responses. The explanation and the instances were as follow:

#### ***1) Appeal for Help***

The speaker asks for aid from the interlocutor either directly (what do you call?) or indirectly (e.g., look at friends, blank look, pause, etc). The following example showed how appeal for help employed by the students:

VA : I would like to present the material about promoting multilingualism in the classroom. (*Stop for a while and look at the note*). Ee.. in this material, we will talk about what is the definition of multilingualism.

(Observasi/ S11)

The example above showed that the student VA did appeal for help strategy. She employed the strategy by looking at her note about the materials that are being presented. In this case, the material is multilingualism. Before looking at her note, she stopped for a while and could not continue delivering her presentation. after looking at her note, she could continue to present the material.

#### ***2) Meaning Negotiation Strategies***

Meaning negotiation strategies can be defined as indicators of non/mis-understanding requests. It consists of repetition requests, clarification requests, confirmation requests, and expressions of non-understanding. In this study, the students employed meaning negotiation strategies in the form of expressions of non-understanding, namely interpretive summary. The students employ this strategy if they don’t understand with the topic and they want to clarify what they heard by saying “you mean?” or “So, what you’re saying is?”. The example below shows the interpretive summary employed by the students:

CA : Please, tell me more about yourself now!

MA : *Do you mean* my curriculum vitae?

(Observasi/ S5)

In the example above, the student MA used the strategy of interpretive summary to show that he did not understand what has been asked by CA. To compensate the communication breakdown, then MA clarified what he heard by saying “do you mean”.

### ***The Differences and Similarities of Communication Strategies Employed by High and Low Proficient Students***

In coincidence with the findings, students with high proficiency level utilized 5 types and 10 sub-types out of 13 sub-types of communication strategies. The 5 types are avoidance or reduction strategies, achievement or compensatory strategies, stalling or time-gaining strategies, self-monitoring strategies, and interactional strategies. Whereas the ten sub-types were message abandonment, all-purpose words, non-linguistic means, restructuring, literal translation, fillers/hesitation devices/gambits, self-repetition, self-initiated repair, self-rephrasing, and appeal for help.

Moreover, students with low proficiency level employed four (4) out of five types of communication strategies and nine (9) out of thirteen (13) sub-types of communication strategies. The four types consisted of avoidance or reduction strategies, achievement or compensatory strategies, stalling or time-gaining strategies, and interactional strategies. While the nine sub-types are topic avoidance, message abandonment, restructuring, literal translation, code-switching, fillers/ hesitation devices/gambits, self-repetition, appeal for help, and meaning negotiation strategies.

Espousing to the explanation above, there is a type used differently by high and low proficient students, namely self-monitoring strategies. The type employed by high proficient students, yet did not employ by low proficient students. For the sub-types of communication strategies, there were six sub-types used similarly by high and low proficient students, namely message abandonment, restructuring, literal translation, fillers/hesitation devices/gambits, self-repetition, and appeal for help. Moreover, the other sub-types utilized differently. To sum up, students with high proficiency level utilized more types and sub-types of communication strategies than the low proficient students did.

The major findings of the current research complied with previous findings reported by Purnama (2017, p. 75). He stated that high-proficient students appeared to use communication strategies more than low-proficient students did. It was also supported by Zhao and Intaraprasert (2013, p. 53), they argued that the more advanced the language learner are, the better communication strategy users they will be. Other previous studies also in line with the major findings of the current research (Bialystok., 1981; Ok., 2003; Oxford and Nyikos., 1989; Potizer., 1983 as cited in Zhao and Intaraprasert., 2013, p. 53).

Yet, contradictory findings written by Dobao (2002, p. 81), she stated that the lowest level group of students used a considerably larger number of communication strategies than the more proficient advanced learners. For the differences, the researcher assumed that age affected the use of communication strategies. The subjects in the Dobao's research were elementary students for low proficient students and Senior High school students for advance level. Moreover, the subjects of the current research were students' college. This assumption is in line with Coulmas (2005, p. 52), he proposed that age as a factor of linguistic choice.

In conclusion, students' proficiency level affected the choice of communication strategies used by the students. The high proficient students tended to report using a greater range of communication strategies than those who perceived as low proficiency level did. To get a better understanding, the lists of

types and sub-types of communication strategies used by high and low proficient students can be seen in Table 2:

**Table 2** Types and sub-types of CS used by high and low proficient students

No	Types of CS	Sub-types of CS	High	Low
1.	Avoidance	Topic avoidance	-	√
		Message abandonment	√	√
2.	Achievement	All-purpose words	√	-
		Non-linguistic means	√	-
		Restructuring	√	√
		Literal translation	√	√
		Code switching	-	√
3.	Stalling	Fillers	√	√
		Self-repetition	√	√
4.	Self-monitoring	Self-initiated repair	√	-
		Self-Rephrasing	√	-
5.	Interactional	Appeal for help	√	√
		Meaning negotiation strategies	√	√
		(interpretive summary)		

## Conclusion

Espousing to the findings of the research, it can be inferred that communication strategies aid the students to circumvent their linguistic difficulties. Communication strategies also promote students' fluency in speaking because the students can communicate without any restrictions. It can be seen from the fact that the high proficient students utilized higher communication strategies than the low proficient students did. These strategies enable the students with high proficiency level to survive in communication.

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