

## **Iranian EFL Learners' Perception of the use of Communication Strategies and Gender Effect**

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### **ABSTRACT**

One of the main factors which enhance learning and teaching a foreign or second language is communication strategies applied by learners in the learning process and instructors in the teaching process. This study investigated the perception of Iranian EFL (English as a foreign language) learners regarding the use of communication strategies in their English learning efforts. The study was also aimed at finding out if gender had an effect on the perception of learners regarding use of communication strategies. To do so, the researchers sampled 60 students and divided them into two groups, control and experimental group. Each group consisted of 30 students (15 males and 15 females). The researcher used Dornyei and Scott's (1997) inventory of CSs, which was a self-report questionnaire, as a data collection method. After analysing data by running a T-test statistical procedure, it was found that teaching communication strategies had significantly affected perception of the learners who reported more frequent use of communication strategies (mean for control group = 15.69; mean for experimental group = 19.93). Moreover, data analysed using a chi-square depicted that females outperformed males in the application of the communication strategies regardless of the treatment they received. The study indicated that teaching communication strategies to language learners, especially to males, is necessary. In fact, it can help the male learners to communicate more efficiently with their classmates and instructors and enhance their learning.

*Keywords:* Gender effect, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Communication strategies, perception

### **ARTICLE INFO**

#### *Article history:*

Received: 21 July 2015

Accepted: 30 January 2016

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## INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, people have to learn English speaking abilities to communicate with interlocutors who speak in a foreign language or to conduct international trade, diplomatic exchanges and the use of new technology. Since the Islamic Republic of Iran is playing an active role internationally, the ability to communicate in English clearly and efficiently could lead to the learner's success not only in the classroom but also in every phase of his or her life. In order to communicate in English, learning just basic skills in grammar and vocabulary does not contribute to a proper and effective communication. Learners also need communication strategies which enable them to communicate successfully and effectively in real life situations. Therefore, "speaking in a foreign language is very difficult and competence in speaking takes a long time to develop" (Alderson & Bachman, 2004, p. ix). "This is because speaking includes a variety of processes. Speaking involves acquiring knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, negotiating effectively and adapting to different contexts within cultural and social rules of the communication setting" (Wells, 1985, p.22).

Researchers have tried their best to find a solution for a successful language learning. Among them, educational researchers have pointed out that those learners who take advantage of their learning are successful learners. One method for autonomous learning is the use of language learning strategy taxonomies among which communication strategies are an important

component. Communication strategies are those strategies that are employed by learners when there is insufficient knowledge about a language which is learnt. Communication strategies help learners to have a better understanding of themselves. To offset any inadequacies in grammatical ability especially in vocabulary, learners try to use communication strategies. The quality of communication is determined, maintained and improved through the aid of communication strategies. Thus, communication strategies create some opportunities for using the target language and also create a chance to test the learners' assumptions about L2 (*what is L2? Is it "Second Language"*) to receive feedback. It seems that the learners are not able to take communications risks without such strategies. The current study attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. Does instruction of communication strategies affect the learners' perception on the use of communication strategies?
2. Does gender have any impact on the perception of Iranian EFL learners regarding the application of communication strategies?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In teaching and learning communication strategies, early research involved the definition and the classification of CSs. Selinker (1972) introduced the notion of communication strategies in his paper titled "Inter-language". "He included these strategies as one of the five central processes involved in second language learning" (p.

229). He suggested that inter-language in the second language learners' speech production is acceptable and supportable. However, he did not explain in detail the nature of these strategies used by learners in their communication. In the same year, Savignon (1972) emphasised the effectiveness of "coping strategies" applied in teaching and testing a second language. She used the term "coping strategies" in her study to refer to CSs. The articles of Selinker and Savignon provided the background for much of the following studies on CSs. An early example of CS was provided by Varadi (1973). At a minor European conference, he mentioned "message adjustment" as a strategy used by language learners. However, this article was not published at that time. In 1980, Varadi conducted a small-scale experimental research with a group of Hungarian learners of English to examine the strategies, especially message adjustment the learners used, when they had a gap in their communication. The results of Varadi's study indicated that in the target language, learners adjusted their messages based on the available communicative resources. His study therefore, was the first systematic analysis of strategic behaviours of second language learners.

The concept of CS was further developed by Tarone, Cohen and Dumas (1976) in their paper titled "A framework for communication strategies". They provided a framework in which the terminology of the learners' inter-language was described in order to represent categories of types of inter-language phenomena (p.4). They

identified four types of CSs commonly found in inter-language: phonology, morphology, syntax and lexicon (p.5). By drawing on the inter-language system of foreign language learners, Varadi, Tarone, Cohen and Dumas developed the framework and terminology of CSs which have been used as a starting point for later research in CSs. However, the first empirical and systematic study of CS was undertaken by Tarone (1977). She examined the CSs used in the speech production of adult language learners. Her study attempted to examine CSs of oral production completely by employing the terminological framework developed by Tarone, Cohen and Dumas (1976:p. 194). She proposed five basic CSs: "avoidance, paraphrase, conscious transfer, appeal for assistance and mime" (p.197). She also provided a definition and features of CSs as "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" (p.195). Tarone's framework has been considered the most important and influential in the literature and subsequent studies of CSs. It has been used for defining and classifying CSs found in second language learners' speech. In the early 1980s, the role of CSs was widely acknowledged in second language learning due to the seminal works of Canale and Swain (1980) and Faerch and Kasper (1983). According to communicative competence by Canale and Swain (1980), to overcome communication problems that have occurred as a result of shortage of knowledge in any

of the other sub-competencies, strategic competence use problem-solving devices. In fact, communication strategies are the problem-solving devices. In addition, they suggested teaching CSs in classroom and providing students the chance to use these strategies.

Another important work in the field of CSs is described in *Strategies of inter-language and communication* (Faerch & Kasper, 1983). In this book, many studies and papers on CS are collected and divided into three main parts: CSs definitions, empirical studies of CSs and problems in analysing CSs. This collection, therefore, provides a valuable contribution to the research in CSs. Following these two seminal works, many researchers in the 1980s published papers on the identification and classification of CSs, the issue of teaching CSs in the second language classroom and the factors that influenced learners' use of CSs. In 1980s, a group of researchers at Nijmegen University in the Netherlands also conducted a large-scale research on CSs. At that time, the Netherlands were the centre for research on CSs. Their studies shed light on various aspects of CSs such as definitions, classifications and theories of CSs.

Researchers in the 1980s had attempted to define, identify and classify CSs more systematically. They proposed various CS taxonomies based on their conceptual papers and research that they had carried out. In the 1990s, several important books and papers were published. One of the most important and influential works is Bialystok's book *Communication Strategies: A Psychological*

*Analysis of Second Language Use*. In this book, the definitions and theories of CSs proposed by Poulisse (1987), Faerch and Kasper (1983), Corder (1977) and other scholars in the field of CSs were discussed. The latter parts of this book explored empirical evidence of CSs used by children or adults in the first or second language in relation to language processing. In the last part, the issue of learning and teaching CSs are discussed.

The most important point Bialystok suggested was that the psychological process of speech production should be regarded as a basis for the study of CSs. She argued that language learners should be taught and practise language structure rather than strategies. Following the seminal work of Bialystok, researchers in the 1990s investigated CS application in relation to different proficiency level and teaching pedagogy of CSs. Their works have shed light on CS studies and provided theoretical contributions to the field at that time. Since then, the issue of CS instruction has received increasing attention from a variety of researchers.

Despite the controversy about CS instruction, many researchers have defined CSs, promoted CS application and supported CS instruction (e.g., Lam, 2004; Wen, 2004; Nakatani, 2005). Wen (2004) conducted empirical studies to investigate the impacts of strategy instruction among the learners who used communication strategies. Lam (2004) argued that it is possible and desirable to teach and raise learners' awareness of using CSs in oral communication. Nakatani (2005) also

supported the idea that language learners should be made aware of how to use CSs in their communication. As has been noted, a large number of researchers have recently paid more attention to the teachability issue of CSs as well as promoting strategy instruction. They have attempted to explore the effect of CS instruction on learners' strategic behaviour and competence.

Based on the argument in favour of teachability of CSs, the current study attempts to address this issue to provide new knowledge for this research area. Dornyei and Scott (1997) summarised the taxonomies and definitions of CSs suggested by researchers. The researchers had a classification of CSs in the extended taxonomy of problem-solving strategies which were based on the manner of problem-management that was related to the issue of how CSs help resolve conflicts and achieve mutual understanding (Dornyei & Scott). Direct, indirect and interactional strategies were three basic categories which were separated by researchers.

According to Dornyei and Scott (1997), direct strategies contain "an alternative, manageable, and self-contained means of getting the meaning across, like circumlocution compensating for the lack of a word" (p.198). Indirect strategies can't be considered exactly as problem-solving devices. "They facilitate the conveyance of meaning indirectly by establishing the conditions for achieving mutual understanding: preventing breakdowns and keeping the communication channel open or indicating less-than perfect forms that require extra effort to understand"

(p.198). Interactional strategies include a third approach, "by means of which the participants perform trouble-shooting exchanges cooperatively (e.g., appeal for and grant help, or request for and provide clarification), and therefore mutual understanding is a function of the successful execution of both pair parts of the exchange" (Dornyei & Scott, 1997, pp. 198-199).

Several researchers emphasised the teaching of communicative strategies in L2 instruction. Faerch & Kasper (1986, p.186) mentioned three activities in teaching communicative strategies. "These are (1) communication games with full visual contact between the participants and full possibilities for immediate feedback, (2) communication games with no visual contact between the participants but still full possibilities for immediate feedback (e.g., simulating a telephone conversation) and (3) monologue with limited or no possibilities for obtaining immediate feedback" (e.g., "two-minute talk").

Manchon (2000) suggested a two-step training scheme which summarises the instruction of CSs in second language including instruction and practice step. The instruction stage aims to enhance the learners' familiarity with communicative strategies in addition to showing how they can be used to eliminate the problems in communication. She believes that learners may become aware of these strategies in two different ways, inductively or deductively. A deductive way refers to direct explanation and modelling of strategies in the classroom while an inductive way refers to classroom activities and exercises or observing what

other learners do in communication and how other learners use these strategies to solve their problem in communication. Manchon (2000) noted that communicative strategies instruction will increase the learners' self-confidence when they try to resort to their first language in order to communicate in the second language.

A remarkable number of studies have found that females use more communicative strategies than males. For example, Holmes (1995) reported that females are more polite than males and that females use more communicative skills in verbal communication. Holmes made a connection between a greater use of communicative skills and politeness as using communication skills implies politeness. In another study, Holmes (1995) and Coates (1987) found that females outperform males in using tag questions as another communication skill. Moreover, females changed statements to questions more than males (Mills, 1995; Lemmer, 1996; Coates, 1996) because questions tend to generate a response. Furthermore, disclaimers, qualifiers and fillers were used more frequently by females (Lemmer, 1996). All these studies reveal that females use communicative strategies more than males. However, in an another study which investigated the application of communication strategies in email communication with male instructors found that male students used more communicative strategies (Abbasi et al, 2014).

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The population for the current study was Iranian EFL learners. However, selection of participants involved a two-step sampling procedure. First, based on a sample of convenience, Shiraz University was selected since there are many universities that offer EFL courses and it was not possible to take samples from each one of them. Second, purposive sampling was applied and all advanced level learners (senior students) from both genders were selected. Advanced learners were selected to ensure they had an appropriate level of English and sufficient learning experiences to enable them to present their perceptions of communicative strategies. The students selected had three years of formal English learning. Then, based on their final exam score in the previous semester, 60 learners whose scores were  $\pm 1$  SD from the mean were selected as our samples to ensure their homogeneity. The sample comprised equal numbers of males and females and was divided randomly into two groups of 30 students (15 males and 15 females). One group acted as the control group and the other as the experimental group. Fish and Ball's technique was used to assign males and females to control and treatment groups. Pre-testing, as will be explained later, was used to ensure the homogeneity of the sample.

This approach allowed us to determine the effect of gender on the use of CSs in an EFL context among a homogeneous and gender-balanced sample. To collect

data from participants in pre- and post-testing phases, the self-report inventory of CSs developed by Dörnyei and Scott (1997) was used. This inventory is a 33 item questionnaire (for 16 CSs), to which students are required to indicate the extent to which they applied CSs by responding on a five point Likert-scale where 1=never, 2=rarely, 3=sometimes, 4= often and 5=most often. The inventory's internal consistency value is 0.78 which is within the acceptable range ( $0.8 > \alpha \geq 0.7$ ).

This study was conducted in three phases. In the first phase, a pre-test was administered to ensure equality and homogeneity of both groups. The treatment was given to the experimental group in the second phase and finally a post-test was administered in the third phase to determine if the treatment had made any difference in the report of CSs between the two groups. The procedure of how the treatment is presented is described below. Various models of teaching communication strategies have been proposed. In one model, an explicit style is preferred; in a second model, strategies are defined and taught separately; and in a third model, strategies are used in integrity. Other models try to integrate the communication strategies with language tasks without any preface.

Generally, the model of teaching strategies separately is much more preferable for the *start* than the model which teaches the strategies in integrity. The approach which was used here is based on Dörnyei and Scott's (1997) inventory of CS's. In this stage, the experimental group in addition to

its regular university curriculum (namely studying their course book) received a 15 session treatment of CSs while the control group continued with their ordinary weekly schedule without any additional programme. According to the university weekly schedule, three sessions would be held weekly, each lasting for 90 minutes.

It is necessary to mention that everything (except the treatment for experimental group) for the two groups including course book, time of the classes, materials, equipment and the teacher were the same to minimise the external factors which might affect the result. After the students in the experimental group had received the treatment, the researcher asked the participants of both groups to answer the self-report questionnaire again. The results obtained were statistically analysed using SPSS software by running a T-test and a chi-square.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to answer the first research question, "does instruction of communication strategies affect the learners' perception on the use of communication strategies?", it was necessary to ensure homogeneity of the perceptions of participants of the application of communication strategies in both the control and experimental group. Therefore, the self-report questionnaire was administered to both groups before treatment. Table 1 shows the results obtained.

As depicted in Table 1, the mean score for the control group before treatment was 15.83 whereas it was 15.73 for the

experimental group. Although the mean score for the control group is a little higher than that of experimental group, the t-test showed this difference is not significant as p value is higher than 0.05 ( $P = .0907 > 0.05$ ). Thus, it can be concluded that both groups are homogenous based on their perception of the application of communication strategies. It means that both groups had similar perception of the application of communicative strategies. Therefore, if any difference is found on the perception of learners after treatment, it can be safely attributed to the treatment. On the other hand, since the researchers tried to control everything that may affect the results except the treatment, lack of difference between the experimental and control groups before treatment and significant difference between the groups after treatment will show the effect of treatment in changing the perception of participants in experiment group. After teaching communication strategies to the learners, the self-report questionnaire was again administered to the students. The results are reflected in Table 2.

As depicted in Table 2, the experimental group (Mean=19.93) outperformed the control group (Mean=15.60) after treatment. As  $P < 0.05$  ( $.000 < .05$ ), this difference is significant. It confirms that teaching communication strategies to the learners made them aware of these strategies and helped them report the strategies more frequently and subsequently use them more frequently in communication. Therefore, teaching these strategies was positively effective. The study confirms the belief that the strategies should be taught to the

students in the beginning of semester to make them aware of these strategies. There should be a justification of how and how much of these strategies may improve their learning. If implemented well, it may increase the students' motivation to learn better and more thoroughly. This point was also highlighted in the study conducted by Kafipour, Nooreen and Pezeshkian (2010), Yazdi and Kafipour (2014), and Kafipour, Yazdi and Shokrpour (2011). Additionally, curriculum developers and book designers should pay more attention to these strategies in their material development to enhance learning and teaching. These strategies may be practised through adding some exercises to the work books used by EFL learners. To do so, EFL textbook evaluation process may be followed as suggested by Soori, Kafipour, Soury (2011).

To answer the second research question, "does gender have any impact on the perception of Iranian EFL learners regarding the application of communication strategies?", and to find out if the difference between the males' use of CSs and females' application of these strategies is statistically significant, the researcher employed descriptive statistics and the Chi-Square tests and the outcome is shown in the following table.

As shown in Table 3, the mean for male students (Mean=13.15) in the pre-test is lower than that of female learners (Mean=17.79). This is true in the case of the post-test in which the mean score for male learners is 14.38 while it is 20.35 for female learners. In both cases, the P value is smaller than .05 ( $.000 < .05$ ). It shows that females

employed more communication strategies than males regardless of treatment. Thus, the application of communication strategies was gender-influenced. It depicts that females use these strategies more frequently than males. This is an important finding which highlights that male students need more attention regarding communicative strategies. Therefore, if sex segregation has been applied to the classes, the teachers' job may not be very difficult. They can work more on communicative strategies in male-only classes. However, if classes are mixed, the teachers' job may be a bit more difficult. They should decide how to work on these strategies as male students are more in need of them compared with female students. One of the solutions may be by assigning more homework to the male students to

encourage them to work on communicative strategies and which will ultimately benefit in their English learning. One reason female students use more communicative strategies may be due to cultural issues. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, females need to consider more ethical issues and more techniques to be able to establish a successful and effective communication. This may be why they employ more communicative strategies compared with their male peers.

### CONCLUSION

The results of the current study supported the teachability of CSs. It was an approval of previous statements that were in favour of CS instruction regarding CSs as cognitive processes (Dornyei, 1995; Manchon, 2000; Lam, 2004; Wen, 2004; Nakatani,

Table 1

*T-test for mean differences before treatment (pre-test)*

Groups	Mean	SD	F	T	DF	Sig.
Control	15.83	3.14	.287	.117	58	.907
Experiment	15.73	3.46				

Table 2

*T-test for mean differences after treatment (post-test)*

Groups	Mean	SD	F	T	DF	Sig.
Control	15.60	3.24	6.34	6.04	58	.000
Experiment	19.93	2.21				

Table 3

*Chi-square for mean differences between male and female learners*

Test	Gender	Mean	SD	Sig.
Pre-test	Male	13.15	2.01	0.000
	Female	17.79	2.55	
Post-test	Male	14.38	2.15	0.000
	Female	20.35	1.63	

2005). As Oxford (1990) had reported, making the learners aware of the strategies will help them apply the strategies more consciously and more frequently. The current study confirmed this claim as the learners reported the application of more strategies after treatment. More frequent use of communication strategies by females is consistent with the outcome of other studies. In the previous studies, the impact of gender on strategy use was investigated along with different variables (Green & Oxford, 1995; Ghadesi, 1998).

The findings of the majority of studies showed females took more advantage of learning strategies than males (Politzer, 1983; Sy, 1994; Wharton, 2000). However, a study by Moazen (2012) showed that gender did not affect the application of communication strategies. The reason may be due to the learners' level of education and setting in which they were learning English as Moazen had conducted the study in an English institute where all the learners were high school students. It appears the setting (high school, university) affects the frequency of strategy use. It may be a good topic for further studies to identify the reason why setting affects the role of gender in the application of communicative strategies. Communicative strategies are interpreted as social events and are used for more than just the exchange of information.

In introducing a variety of functions of communication strategies, teachers can help their students to take risks and to use CSs in their conversation, that is, using all their available resources to communicate in the target language. One way is by providing

students with sufficient target language models. It can be achieved through listening to movie or audio files or even videos in which these strategies are frequently used and then try to determine, analyse and classify CSs used by native speakers in these materials (Yang & Gai, 2010). Besides watching movies, students can make short videos because student-generated videos cause them to be actively involved in producing the language they are learning (Khojasteh et al., 2013). We are still at the start point and more research should be done in the case of communication strategies.

However, this study has a number of limitations which should be considered when generalising the findings. First, the study applied a convenient sampling method and the subjects were selected from one university within a large number of universities that offer EFL programmes whether undergraduate or post graduate. Moreover, the researcher focused only on advanced English learners who had a good knowledge of English and sufficient experience of English learning. Therefore, the results cannot be generalised to all EFL learners with any level of English proficiency and exposure to English.

Based on the stated limitations, it is recommended that other researchers try to investigate communicative strategies for other EFL learners such as freshers, post graduate students and even high school students to see the differences in the application of communicative strategies among students with different level of English knowledge. The current study had tried to investigate perceptions of the

students which may be different from the application of communicative strategies in the real world. So, it is recommended that other data collection methods are used such as interviews, journal writing, and observations. Moreover, the current study had only considered gender. Other researchers may try to investigate the relationship between CSs and other variables such as personality type, motivation and attitude which may have a significant relationship with CSs.

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