

**Teaching communication strategies to EFL learners and its impact on anxiety level and motivation: A hindering or facilitating factor?**

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## Abstract

The aim of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is basically to improve communication ability for many learners. Teaching communication strategies (CSs) can be a useful way to meet learners' communication needs. However, the effectiveness of strategy teaching to EFL/ESL learners had been a matter of controversy among scholars for many years. This study intended to prove that teaching communication strategies to EFL learners could help them communicate more effectively and easily in a foreign language. Moreover, using these strategies by EFL learners could improve their motivation in learning English, enhance their communication skills and also lessen their anxiety level during communication. In the current study, a Cambridge Proficiency Test was used and 40 Iranian homogeneous participants among learners who were 12-14 years of age were selected. According to the results of the proficiency test they were at intermediate level. The learners were taught how to use CSs during communication in the foreign language. At the end of 3-month teaching and applying these strategies to the class activities, oral and written Cambridge Proficiency Test were held again to determine whether there was an improvement in their communication skills. A five point Likert Scale questionnaire was also used to measure their anxiety level and motivation during communication in English after learning and using CSs. The findings of the study confirmed that teaching CSs to EFL learners and applying them to the class activities is a practical way to improve students communication skills, increase their motivation and decrease their anxiety level in learning EFL.

**Keywords:** Communication strategies; Teaching; Learning; EFL; Learner; Communication skills; Motivation; Anxiety

## 1. Introduction

English is taught as a foreign language in Iran and is a highly valued subject. Students are introduced to English at age 12 to the age 19. Moreover, the majority of them attend private English institutes to improve their communication skills. Although meaningful and fluent communication is the ultimate goal of EFL learners but they have lots of problems to interact in the target language. Attempting hard to express their minds through their limited English knowledge and to have difficulties to initiate and maintain in conversations due to lack of linguistic knowledge is considered a toil and causes anxiety to many learners. Lots of EFL learners are not satisfied with the results of studying English for many years and become demotivated gradually. Teaching CSs to EFL learners is a useful way to develop their strategic competence and so to enhance their communication ability. Canale (1983) and Canale and Swain (1980) defined strategic competence as “the mastery of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies in L2 used when attempting to compensate for deficiencies in the grammatical and sociolinguistics competence or to enhance the effectiveness of communication”. When motivated learners encounter difficulties in communicating meaning in the target language without finding any solution to cope with their problems and when they feel they have no progress in learning it could lead them to become anxious, demotivated and unsuccessful language learners. Teaching CSs can be a solution to this problem and not only can improve learners’ communication skills, but also decrease their anxiety level, increase their motivation and can pave the way for learners to become more successful in EFL learning. According to Faerch and Kasper (1983), “communication strategies are conscious plans to solve learners’ problems in achieving a special goal”.

### 1.1. Literature Review

According to Dörnyei (1995), studies on CSs which paved the way for further studies were begun in 1970s by Selinker, Váradi and Tarone. Teaching CSs has some pros and cons. According to Dörnyei and Thurell (1991), who have supported this approach, “strategic competence is a crucial component of communicative competence, largely determining the learner’s fluency and conversational skills”. Dörnyei (1995) asserted that by using communication strategies learners feel a sense of security and allowing them to cope with

difficulty in L2”. Maleki (2007) claimed that “teaching communication strategies is not only useful, but feasible”. However, the two well-known cons, Bialystock (1990) and Kellerman (1991) were disagreed to link CSs and pedagogical issues. As Bialystock (1990) argued, the teachers should teach language not strategy and Kellerman (1991) asserted “there is no justification for providing training in compensatory strategies in the classroom .... Teach the learners more language and let the strategies look after themselves” (p. 158). On the one hand, Bialystock (1990) argued that communication strategies reflect the underlying psychological processes and so focusing on surface structure won’t improve strategy use or communication ability. However, on the other hand, Faerch and Kasper (1986) and Tarone and Yule (1989) were agreed on strategy training in EFL teaching.

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of teaching CSs on Iranian EFL learners’ communication skills and to find out if applying CSs to classroom activities could motivate learners, lessen their anxiety level and help them to be successful in learning English as a foreign language.

## 1.2. Communication Strategies used

The typology of the communication strategies which were used in the study according to Dörnyei (1995) are presented here.

Circumlocution: describing or exemplifying the target object or action (e.g., the thing you open bottles with for corkscrew).

Approximation: using an alternative term which expresses the meaning of the target lexical item as closely as possible (e.g., ship for sail boat).

Word coinage: creating a non existing L2 word based on a supposed rule (e.g., vegetarianist for vegetarian).

Appeal for help: turning to the conversation partner for help either directly (e.g., what do you call ...?) or indirectly (e.g., rising intonation, pause, eye contact).

### 1.3. Research questions

This study intends to answer the following research questions:

- Is teaching CSs to EFL learners a facilitating factor to improve their communication skills?
- Is teaching CSs a useful way to increase learners' motivation?
- Is teaching CSs a practical way to lessen learners' anxiety level?

### 1.4. Research hypotheses

The following research hypotheses were proposed to conduct the study:

- Teaching CSs to EFL learners is a facilitating factor to improve their communication skills.
- Teaching CSs is a useful way to increase learners' motivation.
- Teaching CSs is a practical way to lessen learners' anxiety level.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants were 40 female EFL learners at an English language institute. Their age range was 12-14. All of them were at the same proficiency level according to the Cambridge Proficiency Test. They were instructed English through using CSs for three months.

### 2.2. Materials

To determine students' level of proficiency, a pretest was conducted. It consisted of a 100 point Cambridge Proficiency Test to examine the participants' knowledge on reading tasks, comprehension tasks, speaking and writing tasks. Reading tasks included multiple choice items, comprehension tasks were used to measure competence consisted of multiple

choice questions. Speaking tasks included talking about a topic to determine students' fluency, accuracy and relevance and finally, writing tasks consisted of writing answers to some questions. Top Notch English book, the main and the activity book for intermediate level (Top Notch 2), was taught to follow the institute curriculum. Four types of communication strategies including circumlocution, approximation, word coinage and appeal for help were introduced to the students to apply to all the class activities especially discussions. At the end of the semester the pretest as a posttest was repeated to measure the progress of learners regarding teaching CSs. In order to examine the impact of teaching CSs on learners' motivation and anxiety level a five point Likert Scale questionnaire was distributed among the participants after the posttest. The questionnaire contained 10 questions and in order to be completely understandable and clear and also to increase the validity and reliability of the answers was conducted in the learners' native language. The aim of the questions which were asked from the participants was to determine whether there was a change in their communication ability, motivation and anxiety level after CSs were introduced and taught by the teacher during the semester.

### **2.3. Procedures**

Participants took a 100 point Cambridge Proficiency Test at the beginning of the semester in order to measure their proficiency level before starting to learn and apply CSs. Sessions started with identification, explanation and teaching of four types of CSs by the teacher including circumlocution, approximation, word coinage and appeal for help. Teacher introduced and explained learners these strategies. During the semester teacher controlled using CSs in all the classroom activities especially in discussions and role plays. After three months of practicing and using these strategies the same test was administered to find out if learners' communication skills in the foreign language were improved. Participants had 90 minutes to complete the test in all. In order to collect information about changes in learners' motivation and anxiety level after applying CSs to the class activities, the questionnaires were distributed among the students after the posttest. The collected data was analyzed on the basis of SPSS 18.

### 3. Results

By comparing the results of the pretest and posttest it is clear that learners performed better on the posttest than the pretest. Therefore, strategy teaching was the cause of progress. This table depicts both the results of the pretest and post test.

#### Comparing the results of the post test and pretest

Test	N	Mean	df	SD	t
Pretest	40	80.77	39	13.34	2.94
Posttest	40	82.87	39	12.71	2.94

P<0.05

This table shows that the means are different and difference between the pretest and post test is significant (t-test= 2.94) and P<0.05.

### 4. Discussion

The main and important task of EFL/ESL teachers is to determine learners' problems and find the best solution to cope with learning difficulties. Teaching CSs is a practical solution to help EFL/ESL learners to have a better performance as the result of improving their communication skills. According to the results of the study there is a significant difference between students' performance on the pretest and posttest. The scores of the posttest were higher than those of the pretest, which confirms progress in students' communication skills. Through using communication strategies students can get more opportunity to speak and communicate with their teachers and classmates. They can continue their interaction without any interruption which was confirmed by the results of the speaking test and that the learners' accuracy, fluency and topic relevance were improved. Learners' strategic competence has improved and they can encounter communication difficulties easily. Canale and Swain (1980) defined strategic competence as "verbal and nonverbal strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or insufficient competence" (p. 30). Fluency is a crucial point for

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learners in communicating meaning which according to Bialystock (1990), learners' fluency can be shattered by some gaps due to the lack of enough knowledge of second language. Therefore, gaps of knowledge of L2 can be filled through using CSs. Due to the fact that learners were practicing the use of CSs and applying them to the classroom activities for three months, they are able to perform well in communicating meaning with their partners and teachers. This result shows that the learners' strategic competence which according to Dörnyei and Thurell (1991) is the ability to communicate meaning successfully with partners when there are problems in communication process, has improved. Scores on the vocabulary, reading and writing tasks were also higher in the posttest than the pretest which shows that learners' vocabulary knowledge has progressed due to the fact that they were exposed to more vocabularies during the process of using CSs in different communication situations. According to the results of the questionnaires which searched for changes in learners' motivation and anxiety level regarding the use of CSs, 57% strongly agree, 24% agree, 9% almost agree, 0% strongly disagree, and 10% disagree. It was proved that strategy teaching has an effective and crucial impact on enhancing learners' motivation and decreasing their anxiety level. Learners' high anxiety is a barrier to successful language learning. Learners are afraid of making mistakes and prefer to give up their conversations and not to participate in classroom activities. Due to their high anxiety level they do not feel comfortable and secure and so being a successful language learner is considered very difficult to them. According to Saville-Trolke (2006, p.90) low anxiety can increase student motivation to learn. The best learning occurs when learners feel comfortable and enjoy the classroom activities. Therefore, enjoying and participating the classroom activities without any anxiety can enhance their motivation. As Saville-Trolke (2006, p.86) asserted "motivation largely determines the level of effort which learners expend at various stages in their L2 development, often a key to ultimate level of proficiency". In a secure situation learners can be more active and express their mind without being worried of making mistakes. When there is not any barrier or filter in the learners' mind they feel relaxed and are not anxious of not performing well on a task. Therefore, their motivation to practice and learn L2 and to participate in classroom activities will increase. As Krashen (1980) defined anxiety as an affective variable which inhibits learners to achieve an optimal level of proficiency. Therefore, controlling and decreasing the



learners' anxiety can improve learning L2. One of the ways to achieve this goal is using CSs. Finally, the results of the study are in line with Dörnyei (1995) that stated "communication strategies provide the learners with a sense of security in the L2 by allowing them room to maneuver in times of difficulty".

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has considered teaching communication strategies and its impact on learners' motivation and anxiety level. According to Dörnyei (1995), through using CSs learners "... rather than giving up their message, may decide to try and remain in the conversation and achieve their communicative goal". The results of the study proved that teaching communication strategies is an effective approach to improve learners' communication skills which in turn can decrease learners' anxiety and increase their motivation because they feel more secure and comfortable during communication. Improved communication skills, high motivation and low anxiety are interrelated and without one of them others are incomplete. Through strategy teaching learners can be more successful in learning EFL/ESL.

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## Questionnaire

Please read the following questions carefully and circle your choice.

1. I like using communication strategies when speaking English.

Strongly agree	Agree	Almost agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
5	4	3	2	1

2. By using CSs I can speak English better.

Strongly agree	Agree	Almost agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
5	4	3	2	1

3. By using CSs I can understand English better.

Strongly agree	Agree	Almost agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
5	4	3	2	1

4. By using CSs my knowledge of English vocabulary has improved.

Strongly agree	Agree	Almost agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
5	4	3	2	1

5. By using CSs I can read English better.

Strongly agree	Agree	Almost agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
5	4	3	2	1

6. By using CSs my English writing has improved.

Strongly agree	Agree	Almost agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
5	4	3	2	1

7. By using CSs I feel more comfortable and secure when speaking English.

Strongly agree	Agree	Almost agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
5	4	3	2	1



لطفا با دقت سوالات زیر را مطالعه نموده و دور گزینه مورد نظر خط بکشید.

1. من به کارگرفتن استراتژی های یادگیری را هنگامی که به زبان انگلیسی صحبت میکنم دوست دارم.

کاملا موافقم	موافقم	تا حدودی موافقم	مخالفم	کاملا مخالفم
5	4	3	2	1

2. با استفاده از استراتژی های یادگیری بهتر می توانم به زبان انگلیسی صحبت کنم.

کاملا موافقم	موافقم	تا حدودی موافقم	مخالفم	کاملا مخالفم
5	4	3	2	1

3. با استفاده از استراتژی های یادگیری انگلیسی را بهتر متوجه میشوم.

کاملا موافقم	موافقم	تا حدودی موافقم	مخالفم	کاملا مخالفم
5	4	3	2	1

4. با استفاده از استراتژی های یادگیری دانش لغوی انگلیسی ام افزایش یافته است.

کاملا موافقم	موافقم	تا حدودی موافقم	مخالفم	کاملا مخالفم
5	4	3	2	1

5. با استفاده از استراتژی های یادگیری مهارت خواندن انگلیسی ام افزایش یافته است.

کاملا موافقم	موافقم	تا حدودی موافقم	مخالفم	کاملا مخالفم
5	4	3	2	1

6. با استفاده از استراتژی های یادگیری مهارت نوشتن انگلیسی ام افزایش یافته است.

کاملا موافقم	موافقم	تا حدودی موافقم	مخالفم	کاملا مخالفم
5	4	3	2	1

7. با استفاده از استراتژی های یادگیری احساس راحتی و امنیت بیشتری موقع صحبت کردن به زبان انگلیسی دارم.

کاملا موافقم	موافقم	تا حدودی موافقم	مخالفم	کاملا مخالفم
5	4	3	2	1

8. هنگامی که به زبان انگلیسی صحبت می‌کنم نگران نیستم چون هر موقع با مشکلی مواجه شوم از استراتژی های یادگیری استفاده خواهم کرد.

کاملا موافقم	موافقم	تا حدودی موافقم	مخالفم	کاملا مخالفم
5	4	3	2	1

9. علاقه مندم بیشتر به زبان انگلیسی صحبت کنم و از اینکه اشتباه کنم نگران نیستم.

کاملا موافقم	موافقم	تا حدودی موافقم	مخالفم	کاملا مخالفم
5	4	3	2	1

10. با استفاده از استراتژی های یادگیری می‌توانم زبان آموز موفقی باشم.

کاملا موافقم	موافقم	تا حدودی موافقم	مخالفم	کاملا مخالفم
5	4	3	2	1