

# The Effect of Communication Strategy Teaching on Iranian EFL Learners' Oral Performance across Genders

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## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates an application of communication strategies of a group of EFL learners who encountered problems in the effective use of their target language in oral communication with other language users. Adopting both qualitative and quantitative research approaches, I collected data from interviews with a group of Iranian EFL learners. Analyzing video-recorded data, I provided a descriptive account of the participants' oral performance in the use of CSs in an EFL context. The findings indicated that it is impossible to communicate successfully in target language without knowing CSs. The study also indicated that the gender has no significant effect on the use of CSs in terms of frequency and effectiveness but it has considerable effect in terms of types of CSs used by different genders. This finding requires to move from traditional linguistic point of view to new socio-cultural dimensions within which researchers pay equal attention to both cognitive/linguistic and social/pragmatic factors.

**KEYWORDS:** L2 oral communication, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), gender effect, Communication strategies, Qualitative and quantitative approaches.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Research questions

1. Does communication strategy teaching have any effect on Iranian EFL learners' oral performances? 2. What are the effects of communication strategy teaching on Iranian EFL males' oral performance, if any? 3. What are the effects of communication strategy teaching on Iranian EFL females' oral performance, if any?

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Communication strategies have been defined as strategies which language users employ in order to achieve their intended meaning on becoming aware of problems arising during the planning phase of an utterance due to their linguistic shortcomings (Poulisse, 1990, from Ellis, 1994, p.44). The factors that influence the use of CSs have been discovered such as language users' proficiency, the nature of tasks, and their cultural and learning background (Parikh, 1985; Chen Siqing 1990; Bialyok 1990). But does the gender make variation? Since females have been believed to use languages differently (Zhao, 1999), do Iranian female learners use CSs differently from the males? Still, this is a contentious problem. In some related researches, such as Oxford and Ehrman's (1987, from O'Malley & Chamot, 1990), females definitely report different use of communication strategies in comparison to males. In their view, males are more direct and braver, thus, they look for opportunities to take risks for communication with people in English while females relatively are quiet and conservative. Among the CS research in China, only those by Hou Song (1998) and Wang Limei (2008) have explored the sex difference in CSs. According to Hou Song (1998), the females tend to use more appeal for assistance strategies than the male EFL learners in communication. They acted much the same in the narrative task. Wang Limei, adopting a questionnaire for CS study, concluded that female and male learners differ only in the code-switching strategies. Communication strategies studies, as a part of L2 oral performance, have also primarily been concerned with the mental process underlying the use of strategies with particular emphasis on lexical problems (Ellis, 2008). The majority of L2 lexical communication strategies researches used the standard method of CSs elicitation whereby the learners are put in the situation in which they have to speak about some more or less determined 'objects' by the use of their target language. When the language user is encountered with an element of this message that s/he does not know the word for, he employs a strategy. In fact, studies on oral performance, and by implication CSs, followed the assumptions such as empirical data gathered by experimenter survey in an artificial communicative setting to examine a hypothesis which are the basic features of the quantitative approach. As 'oral communication/ psycholinguistic approach to language teaching and learning (Parks & Raymond, 2004; Boxer, 2004), they were also influenced by the quantitative research approach. Almost all of the CSs researchers employ corpus-based data

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collection. Therefore, more research is needed to specify whether there exist differences between female and male students in using communication strategies.

### **Participants**

To choose the participants first all advance level learners from both genders (those students studying level 4) in Sama English language Institute in Shiraz city will be selected as our population. Then from this population according to their final exam of the previous term 60 learners in two groups will be selected as samples to take part in the study. Those whose final scores be upper than the others will be selected. Then we started from the highest grade and came down to choose 30 of them in each group (15 males and 15 females). Then, two groups of participants (one as control group and the other one as an experimental group) were ready for investigation.

## **METHODOLOGY**

To investigate participants' performance and perception, I employed four main tools for collecting my data: oral communication recording, interviews, TOEFL and T-test. All the sessions of the participants' group conversation were video-recorded and transcribed. Video-recording allowed us to record every word (and other events) during the L2 interaction between the participants. Therefore, the main source of data in this research was the video-recording of a series of communication events in which a group of 30 participants from both genders discussed different topics, usually chosen by them. A class, a park, the teachers' office and the room in a research institute were the locations I chose to create a variety of appropriate oral communication settings for my data collection. To analyze the participants' performance in L2 oral communication, I decided to rely on different sources of evidence: discourse markers and participant's signaling of the problems such as pauses, requesting for help, gestures and repetition. The interview was my second tool for collecting data. The interviews were helpful to make us become more familiar with the field and the participants' attitudes toward oral communication strategies. In fact, all the learners' interviews were group communication, because the participants were more interested in being interviewed in English and in a group, probably to have more opportunities for communication. All interviews were video-recorded. The interviews were analyzed based on thematic view. Thematic Analysis is an approach to dealing with data that involves analyzing and, in Holliday's (2007: 93) words, organizing the data. The main step in thematic analysis is coding and arranging the data under emerging themes through the dialogue between data and a researcher (ibid: 94). These two tools helped us to measure learner's oral performances through qualitative approach. However, I applied TOEFL and T-test to support my research quantitatively in order to measure listening and speaking proficiencies during pre-test as placement tests and post-tests after treatment. To do this research we have an experimental and a control groups in order to measure reliability of the test. My treatment was teaching CSs for experimental group. Through this approach I was able to measure correlation-coefficient and reliability. To assess its validity I performed this research in some other similar locations with identical tools and assessment systems.

## **DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS**

Based on Dörnyei and Scott's (1997) inventory of CSs, we analyzed the transcripts of the recorded oral communication sessions and discovered that the participants employed 8 different strategies when communication broke down. Table 1 presents the 8 different strategies, with their brief descriptions and discourse markers used by learners before getting treatment in the pre-test stage.

### **Table 1: STRATEGY ANALYSIS EXAMPLES OF DISCOURSE MARKERS**

#### **1. Requesting for help:**

Requesting assistance from other interlocutors when being faced with a problem in self-expression.  
'What's an equivalent of this word in English?'

#### **2. Clarification request:**

Requesting for more explanation using questions such as 'Would you please explain it?' or 'would you please elaborate more?'

**3. Confirmation request:**

Asking the speaker to ensure whether the heard utterance is correct or not using ‘question repeat’ or questions such as ‘Do you mean...?’

**4. Expressing non-understanding:**

Expressing that the communicators does not understand properly what did his interlocutor mean using questions such as ‘I don’t understand what you mean?’

**5. Use of L1 knowledge:**

Using the knowledge of the first language to express the meaning when being faced with a problem

**6. Repairing: Repairing self or other errors in oral performance:**

No, he **don’t**... he **doesn’t** know,  
I cannot put myself in **those**... in **their** shoes

**7. Say nothing or Stop speaking as the speaker is faced with a problem:**

I don’t know what to say.

**8. Use of Fillers:**

Using gambits words or phrases to fill pauses such as **let say, well, actually** and etc. Table 2 presents the frequency of CSs used by EFL learners in pre-test stage.

**Table 2: Interpretation of communication strategies used by EFL learners**

Interpreted Functions	Observed frequencies	
	Males	Females
Communication strategies usage		
Requesting for help	8	5
Clarification request	6	4
Confirmation request	5	2
Expressing non-understanding	9	5
Use of L1 knowledge	3	1
Repairing self or other errors in oral performance	2	10
Say nothing or Stop speaking when faced with a problem	4	2
Use of Fillers	9	14
<b>Total</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>43</b>

Getting treatment, the participant used more and new CSs than before in their communication with others which we observed in the post-test. Table 3 is the description of learners CSs usage after getting treatment.

**Table 3: Interpretation of communication strategies used by EFL learners**

Interpreted Functions	Observed frequencies	
	Males	Females
Communication strategies usage		
Requesting for help	12	8
Clarification request	10	8
Confirmation request	7	3
Expressing non-understanding	13	10
Use of L1 knowledge	4	2
Repairing self or other errors in oral performance	5	13
Say nothing or Stop speaking when faced with a problem	8	5
Use of Fillers	14	18
Use of gestures	8	6
Use of synonyms	9	10
Use of antonyms	11	13
Use of general words	8	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>109</b>	<b>103</b>

Comparing the data obtained from these two tables, we found that CSs teaching had significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' oral performance but gender had no significant effect in terms of frequency and effectiveness of CSs usage. The gender influenced only the type of CSs used by learners. According to the data obtained from this research females used more assistance strategies than males.

To get a result as accurate as possible and to prove or reject the hypotheses in this study, we applied TOEFL in both pre-test and post-test. The data first tabulated in the form of figures and numbers and then analyzed using inferential statistics of the independent T-test. The reason of choosing this statistical method is that inferential statistics procedure is used to infer or induce generalizations about a population from data available on the sample and T-test a quantitative procedure which is used for determining the statistical significance of difference on two sets of scores which is used for statistical measurement of 30 participants. The research questions of this study concern with the possible effect of communication strategy teaching on Iranian EFL learner's oral performance across genders. We register the scores of both experimental and control groups. After pre-test we taught CSs to our experimental groups and then we set another test for all groups to see the result of our treatment. We found that the experience group had better performance using CSs in its oral communication. Then we apply this research method to some other institutes in order to measure its validity. We found similar results for oral CSs usage through communicating target language. After treatment the experience group was able to apply CSs for filling the gaps in its communication or requesting for help through using compensating words or phrases. The findings also indicated that gender had no significant effect in terms of frequency and effectiveness of CSs usage but it had an important role in terms of types of CSs used by participants in their communication. The research showed that females tend to use more appeal for assistance strategies than males and the males were braver to take risk to communicate in target language. Table 4 indicates that CSs teaching have influenced the performance of an experimental group. As it shows the mean for group 1 (experimental group) in post-test is higher than the mean in pre-test but there is no significant difference in the two means in the case of group 2 (control group). Analyzing data, we found that females used more assistance strategies than males which this finding approves the result obtained from video-recording and interviews.

	VAR000 01	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
<b>Pretest</b>	1	30	15.30	2.231	.407
	2	30	15.03	1.299	.237
<b>Posttest</b>	1	30	16.93	1.048	.191
	2	30	15/26	1.710	.312

## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Social sciences usually use qualitative approach for gathering data. In this study we apply a mixture of both qualitative and quantitative approaches in order to enhance the reliability and thereby the validity of the research result. The data obtained from both approaches approved the effect of CSs teaching on Iranian EFL learners' oral performance but the gender had no significant effect in the case of frequency and effectiveness. Gender influenced the type of CSs used by communicators. Females had more appeal in using assistance strategies than males and the males were more eager in taking risk to communicate with others. Communicative strategies are interpreted as social events constructed by the contextual conditions of the communication and by the interlocutors or participants which supported by Donato (2000: 46). Communication strategies in this perspective have 'context- communicative functions' (William et al, 1997: 306), and are used for more than just the exchange of information. In fact, particular contextual conditions in L2 communication provide opportunities for learners not only to transfer meaning, but to practice the accuracy of the target language, and to establish, support and develop successful oral communication. In introducing a variety of functions of communication strategies, teachers can persuade their students to take risks and to use CSs. This means that learners could use all their available resources to communicate in target language without being afraid of making errors (Yule & Tarone, 1990). One way to do that is to provide students with examples of target models of the use of certain CSs by means of listening materials and videos which contain communication strategy usage and taking exams through using questionnaire, and then to ask learners to identify, categorize and evaluate CSs used by native speakers or other native speakers.

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