
Study of the Communication Strategies Used by Iraqi EFL Students

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the kinds of communication strategies (CSs) used by Iraqi EFL students. The data analyzed in this study were collected in Baghdad University. The study was quantitative in nature where a questionnaire adopted from Dornyei and Scott's taxonomy of CSs (1995). This questionnaire was used to elicit the findings. The subject consisted of fifty Iraqi EFL students. The results obtained show different kinds of CSs used by Iraqi EFL students. The pedagogical and recommendations were provided in this study.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays teaching and learning English becomes crucial importance. The main objective of teaching English is to allow the learner to communicate orally and successfully. People all over the place study a foreign language to enable them to communicate effectively. The use of English as a first international communication means has developed for several decade [1]. The strategies that are used by English as foreign language (EFL) learners to overcome the failure during oral communication are known as communication strategies (CSs). The purpose of this study is to discover the kinds of CSs used by Iraqi EFL students at tertiary level. Few years ago, the concentration on teaching the four skills (writing, reading, listening and speaking) was the major aim in teaching the foreign language but in these days, the concentrate becomes more on the oral communication which includes listening and speaking skills. Rahman (2010) said that speaking is one of the most important approaches to communicate, sometimes is used to convey ideas, present facts, explore and transfer information, and the students need them to be able to communicate well in daily life and places of work [2]. Mastering listening and speaking in foreign language enable what may be called the oral communication. Some speakers use CSs if they face difficulty in conveying their ideas and thoughts in the second language (L2), this happens when the speakers cannot select or use the appropriate words, idioms, structures, phrases and so on. They face difficulties to communicate their thoughts in foreign language (FL), all these difficulties because lack of their communication ability. These strategies will assist the speakers to lessen or remove their difficulties while transferring their opinion and ideas to the others [3].

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Non-native speakers cannot master all words and phrases and terminologies of the English language. When L2/foreign language speakers face difficulty in expressing their thoughts, because of their own limited resources of

the target language, they use verbal and non-verbal means to help themselves to overcome the breakdown during oral communication. Speakers use CSs to make sure that the intended meaning they want to convey is understood [4]. Unfortunately, Iraq EFL students as in the other Arab countries, they use English only during classroom lessons, which means that there are no other opportunities to use English outside these lessons. Rababa'h (2003) argued that there are limited opportunities available to the Arab learners for learning English through natural interactions in English because they only face the English speakers who come to their countries as tourists [5]. Iraq EFL students do not have enough time to use English in daily functions as means of communication. In spite of the hegemonic and imperialistic nature of English, it is still not satisfactory needed in the Arab countries for communicating process with the worldwide [6]. However, following the invasion of American forces to Iraq (2003), the Iraqi people especially EFL students need to use English more in everyday life for the necessities imposed by the presence of occupation forces. Although Iraqi EFL students communicate more in English, they still have problems to communicate in English fluently. The students resort to the use of CSs to help them overcome the difficulty of communication.

3. RELATED STUDIES

Ellis (1994) claimed that CSs are procedural skills that the speakers employ to compensate lack of sources of interlanguage [7]. Boxer and Cohen (2004) defined CSs, as "a systematic attempt by the speakers or the learners to deliver or give the exact meaning that is not proportionate with the rules of the target language [8]. The learners lack in L2 affects their use of CSs when they communicate orally in the target language. Second language speakers use CSs to help them to overcome some of the problems facing them in oral communication due to lack of their language proficiency.

Communication strategies also help them achieve their communication in L2 [9]. Dornyei and Scott (1995) proposed their taxonomy of CSs which included most of CSs available in communication strategy (CS) research [10]. According to Dornyei and Scott (1997), this taxonomy extended on the base of the taxonomies that developed by Tarone (1977) and Faerch and Kasper (1983) but it dealt with "how CSs help the speakers to solve the problems during oral communication tasks and accomplish mutual understanding." [11],[12],[13]. According to Dornyei and Scott (1997), these strategies achieve what may be called mutual understanding. Their classification were extended and collected on the base of CS research. Their taxonomy consisted of three main categories: direct strategies (strategies used by a speaker who faces problems during communication process), indirect strategies (strategies used by a speaker to provide the conditions that lead to the mutual understanding) and interactional strategies which referred to the mutual cooperation which make by two or more speakers to overcome the problems that face them through communication process.

There are many factors that affect the use of CSs that have been investigated and proposed by psychologists of education in the literature. For example, language proficiency, frequency of speaking English outside of the classroom and self-perceived English oral proficiency. Chen (1990) and Tuan (2001) mentioned that learners' level of language proficiency have been affected the use of CSs [14],[15]. Learners would depend on various sources of language if they have different levels of proficiency in the target language. The same results were shown in his study that the learners who have high language proficiency used the CSs more effectively than those who have low proficiency. Chen (1990) and Tuan (2001) also stated that the learners who have high language proficiency used fewer strategies to communicate the intended meaning. However, they used some kinds of strategies in oral communication. According to Nakatani (2006) students who have high oral proficiency use negotiation of meaning, fluency-oriented and social affective strategies, that are more effective to do the oral communication, because the students used them to stay in the communication and to achieve interaction through negotiation [16]. Students with low proficiency depended on ineffective strategies such as low activity listener and message abandonment strategies. This means that the learners who have high language competence had more ability to choose the strategies best suited to communicate in the target language through the use of their linguistic knowledge, while those who have low language competence were unable to do the same work done by the learners who have high language competence.

The use of English as means of communication more often outside the classroom helps the students or the learners to be able to use the suitable CSs. According to Clement (1986) the search for opportunities to increase the area of communication leads to the results of increased opportunities for communication between different significant intercultural [17]. Huang (2010) investigated the factors affecting the use of oral communication strategies (OCSs) by students of technological university in Taiwan [18]. This study showed that the message reduction and alteration strategies used by the students much more than message abandonment strategies. The use

of OCSs has had a close relationship with the self-perceived oral proficiency of the students as well as with their motivation to speak in English. In this study, speaking in English as well as the motivation to speak in this language had a significant effect on the use of OCSs by those learners.

4. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed survey design. According to Creswell (2009) survey design represents quantitative research procedures through which the researchers can administer a questionnaire to a group of participants who are the sample of the study [19]. This study uses Dornyei and Scotts's taxonomy of CSs (1995) to elicit Iraqi EFL students' use of CSs. The total population of students who study English in the College of Languages/University of Baghdad is 193 students. As for the research, 50 EFL Iraqi students were chosen. It was convenience sampling in choosing the students.

To investigate the CSs used by Iraqi EFL students, the researcher used a quantitative method instrument, which is the questionnaire to achieve the above aim. The questionnaire is adopted from Dornyei and Scott's taxonomy of CSs (1995). The questionnaire is divided into three main categories (direct strategies, indirect strategies and interactional strategies). A five-point Likert type scale with the following weights (1=never use this strategy, 2=hardly ever use this strategy, 3=sometimes used this strategy, 4=often use this strategy and 5=always use this strategy) was used to get participants' responses for each strategy involved in this questionnaire. The duration of twenty minutes allowed for the participants to complete the questionnaire of CSs. The data will be computed in the statistical package for social science (SPSS Statistic 17.0), which arises from the participants' respondents of the questionnaire. The researcher will compute the data to find out the mean, standard deviation, frequency and the percentage as well.

5. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

The questionnaire administered to a sample of 50 Iraqi EFL students at tertiary level. Descriptive statistical analyses of their responses to the survey items are shown in this section which addressed their use of CSs. The participants ranged between 18-20 years.

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviation for each direct communication strategy used by Iraqi EFL students respectively. A mean score of 3.5 and above rated as high use, a mean between 2.5 and 3.4 rated as moderate use and mean less than 2.5 rated as low use. From the output shown in the table, code-switching strategy gets the highest mean score ($M=3.6000$, $SD=1.34012$) while message abandonment strategy gets the lowest mean score ($M=2.6200$, $SD=1.21033$) among other direct strategies.

Table 2 presents the means and standard deviations for each indirect communication strategy used by Iraqi EFL students respectively. From the output shown in the table, the scores for indirect CSs resulted in mean score and standard deviation for use of fillers ($M=3.1800$, $SD=1.46650$), self-repetition ($M=3.1800$, $SD=1.35059$), feigning understanding ($M=3.1800$, $SD=1.39518$) and verbal strategy makers ($M=3.1200$, $SD=1.28793$). These results show that the first three indirect strategies get the same mean score while verbal strategy makers get the lowest mean score among other indirect strategies.

Table 3 presents the means and standard deviations for each interactional communication strategy used by Iraqi EFL students respectively. From the output shown in the table, direct appeal for help gets the highest mean score ($M=3.6800$, $SD=1.33156$) while the response: confirm strategy gets the lowest mean score ($M=2.2200$, $SD=1.34453$) among other interactional strategies.

Table 1. The Means and Standard Deviation of Most Frequently Use of Direct CSs by Iraqi EFL Students

Types of CSs	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std.Deviation
Code-switching	50	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.6000	1.34012
Self-Repair	50	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.5600	1.23156
Foreignizing	50	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.4800	1.18218
Message-Replacement	50	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.3600	1.28983
Word Coinage	50	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.3000	1.40335
Mime	50	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.2800	1.29426
Approximation/Generalization	50	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.2800	1.32542
Literal translation	50	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.2600	1.45420
Omission	50	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.1200	1.40901
Retrieval	50	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.0800	1.32234
Use of similar sounding word	50	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.0000	1.44279
Message-reduction	50	4.00	1.00	5.00	2.9400	1.42012
Use of all purpose words	50	4.00	1.00	5.00	2.9000	1.19949
Other repairs	50	4.00	1.00	5.00	2.8200	1.39518
Self-rephrasing	50	4.00	1.00	5.00	2.8200	1.32002
Circumlocution/paraphrase	50	4.00	1.00	5.00	2.7800	1.07457
Restructuring	50	4.00	1.00	5.00	2.7800	1.47482
Mumbling	50	4.00	1.00	5.00	2.7600	1.39328
Message Abandonment	50	4.00	1.00	5.00	2.6200	1.21033
Valid N (listwise)	50					

Table 2. The means and Standard Deviation of Most Frequently Use of Indirect CSs by Iraqi EFL Students

Types of Strategies	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Use of fillers	50	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.1800	1.46650
Self-Repetition	50	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.1800	1.35059
Feigning Understanding	50	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.1800	1.39518
Verbal Strategy Makers	50	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.1200	1.28793
Valid N (listwise)	50					

Table 3. The Means and Standard Deviation of Most Frequently Use of Interactional CSs By Iraqi EFL Students

Types of Strategies	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Direct Appeal for Help	50	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.6800	1.33156
Asking for Clarification	50	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.5800	1.27919
Response: Reject	50	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.5400	1.40277
Expressing Non-Understanding	50	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.4800	1.34377
Response: Repair	50	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.2800	1.37083
Interpretive Summary	50	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.2600	1.38225
Indirect Appeal for help	50	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.0400	1.48407
Comprehension Check	50	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.0200	1.36262
Response: Rephrase	50	4.00	1.00	5.00	2.9800	1.39225
Own accuracy Check	50	4.00	1.00	5.00	2.9600	1.53809
Guessing	50	4.00	1.00	5.00	2.9000	1.43214
Response: Repeat	50	4.00	1.00	5.00	2.8800	1.31925
Response: Expand	50	4.00	1.00	5.00	2.7600	1.40785
Asking for confirmation	50	4.00	1.00	5.00	2.6400	1.39620
Asking for repetition	50	4.00	1.00	5.00	2.4400	1.41652
Response: Confirm	50	4.00	1.00	5.00	2.2200	1.34453
Valid N (listwise)	50					

6. DISCUSSION

According to Dornyei and Scott's taxonomy of CSs (1995), CSs are divided into three main categories, which are direct, indirect and interactional strategies. As shown in table 5.0 (refer appendix), Iraqi EFL students used code switching and self-repair extensively. This is to compensate their low proficiency in English language. This supports Igari's (1998) study, which found that learners at low proficiency of language tend to use L2 based strategies (code-switching and self-repair) more frequently. Iraqi EFL students also used foreignizing, message-replacement, word-coinage, mime, approximation/generalisation, literal translation, omission, retrieval, use of similar sounding word, message-reduction, use of all purpose words, other repairs, self-rephrasing, circumlocution/paraphrase, restructuring, mumbling and message abandonment strategies moderately. These strategies help to overcome difficulties during communication, because of their lack of grammatical competence. This finding supports Rabab'ah's (2003), study which found that when the second language learners recognise that there is a mismatch between their resources of linguistic and their intentions of communication they used CSs (appeal for help, literal translation, circumlocution, approximation, word coinage) to resolve these problems to get better understanding and to communicate effectively [5].

Among indirect CSs, Iraqi EFL students used use of fillers, self-repetition, feigning understanding and verbal strategy makers moderately, while the interactional CSs, direct appeal for help, asking for clarifications and response: reject were used more often by them. Since Iraqi EFL students do not use English more in their everyday life's functions and since they could not master all foreign language words, they tend to use these strategies more to ask about what the suitable words they must use during conversation in the target language. They also ask about how to say them correctly and orderly during communication tasks. They used expressing non-understanding, response: repair, interpretive summary, indirect appeal for help, comprehension check, response: rephrase, own accuracy check. Guessing, response: repeat, response: expand and asking for confirmation moderately. On the other hand, they used strategies asking for repetition and response: confirm in a low rate. This means that they do not have enough opportunities to interact with others in English, so they tend to use these kinds of CSs.

7. IMPLICATION

The findings of the study have many implications for teaching and learning English as second language at tertiary level. These findings show the importance of incorporating CSs in to the English language programs in order to improve students' ability to communicate in English fluently and also provide them with great opportunities to use these strategies inside and outside the classroom. Bialystok and Kellerman (1987) claimed that the use of CSs should be encouraged. Teachers should help students to understand that successful language learning is a matter of developing the competence of grammar, sociolinguistics, discourse competence and strategic competence which includes the use of CSs and their role in sending and receiving messages during conversation successfully [20].

8. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to investigate CSs used by Iraqi EFL students at tertiary level. The result shows that Iraqi EFL student face many difficulties or breakdowns during their communication in English because they use most of CSs in high level. This study suggested a need to incorporate CSs into the English language programs at different levels of education in order to enhance ESL students' ability in oral communication.

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