Based on Speaking Proficiency Levels, How Do Students Perform Communication Strategies?

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ABSTRACT

Communication strategies are believed by many experts to overcome breakdowns in communication and help speakers to attain the communication goal. This research aims at investigating communication strategies based on students' speaking proficiency levels. Qualitative research was used as an approach to capture what happened in the classroom setting. This study involved 24 participants from English department students at a university in Padang, West Sumatra. Students' utterances in a transcript text were used as the data obtained from the video recording of two session observations and one session of Stimulated Recall Interview (SRI) in their speaking task. The findings revealed that higher speaking proficiency level (HSPL) performed circumlocution, approximation, code-switching, filler and gambit, and meaning-negotiation strategies. Besides, lower speaking proficiency level (LSPL) students reported using approximation, non-linguistics means, code-switching filler and gambit, appeal for help, and negotiation strategies. Both HSPL and LSPL students might perform similar strategies but they performed at different frequencies of time. Certain strategies such as circumlocution can indicate that students carried extending strategies while the other strategies conducted by them can be assumed that students found more problems in communication than the other students did.

Keywords: *Speaking, Communication Strategies, Proficiency Level*

1. INTRODUCTION

English is very demanding in this world today. It bridges the communication among international people as their first language, second language, or foreign language. Indonesia is perceiving English as a foreign language and it is learned starting from schools up to universities as a required subject and one particular concentration. However, many studies that focused on the obstacles and difficulties in English learning reported that the students found difficulties when they use English to communicate and revealed that they were still struggling to improve their oral proficiency.

The study on the English department students revealed that they faced several linguistic problems and struggled with some psychological problems. Those linguistics problems are related to a lack of appropriate vocabulary, poor grammar mastery, and pronunciation fluency. Besides, psychological problems refer to anxiety and self-confidence to speak [1]–[5]. Related to those speaking issues, it was suggested by the experts for that language users to use communication strategies (CS) to overcome the limitations and misunderstandings in communication. Communication strategies (CS) refer to those mechanisms applied by the second or foreign speaker to enhance the communication breakdown so that

the goal of communication is achieved [6]. The learners need to master CS because, in a natural setting, they might encounter unpredictable constraints in a conversation and need to conquer the problem they face.

On the other hand, the curriculum in the university did not provide CS in one explicit concentration. Accordingly, they have some difficulties to extend their communicative ability. The limitation in communication strategies makes them feel ashamed to be involved in English conversation in classroom interaction. The students may find it challenging to start a conversation with the lecturer and the other students without switching their speech to their mother tongue. Furthermore, the absence of CS makes them unable to continue the topic of the conversation and cannot close it favourably. It is clear to say that CS is a crucial thing to enhancing communication breakdown. It is required for the learners to be familiar with how to get over when they have to express an uncertain word or a concept they are not acquainted with or cannot be retrieved [7].

Numerous studies investigate the use of CS in the classroom context. The first group has primarily focused on the definition, classification, and purposes for applying CS [8]–[11]. A study about communication strategies related to the different brain hemispheric of

students reported that the left-brain learners favored the strategies of message abandonment, avoidance strategy, literal translation retrieval, omission, and self-repetition. While right-brain learners mostly choose message reduction, avoidance strategy, circumlocution, approximation, mime, similar-sounding words, and self-repair [9].

An interlanguage analysis research found that there were 30 strategies adopted by the students while they carried out the conversation in the classroom; it admitted that the CS applied by the students can assist them in maintaining the talk and enhance the gap between the speaker and interlocutors [8]. Besides, it revealed that there were 18 strategies used by the participants from 34 CS from the taxonomy of Dörnyei & Scotts [10]. Also, it was discovered that the CS performed by English department students and native speakers were having a relative balance of power in their interaction [11].

The second group concentrated on the factors concerned with the performance of CS and the relation of CS to certain factors such as gender differences, language proficiency level, different programs, and tasks [12]–[16]. It admitted that a statistically significant difference was not found in the use of CS between male and female English native speakers and Iranian EFL learners [12]. A study was conducted connecting the use of communication strategies towards self-perceived overall English proficiency, speaking confidence, and communication anxiety/apprehension [16]. In addition, CS was also related to the degree of students' proficiency level [13]; Talk-based English debates model [14]; and gender and perceived language ability[15].

However, these two groups of research did not analyze how students perform CS based on their speaking proficiency level. This present research focused to examine how CS is performed based on students' speaking proficiency levels because Higher Speaking Proficiency Level (HSPL) students and lowest Speaking Proficiency Level (LSPL) students would have different ways of employing CS.

1.1. Communication Strategies (CS)

The definition of CS can be viewed from two related perspectives: the interactional approach and the psycholinguistics approach [17]. Interactional approach considers CS as a sort of method to deliver the meaning to the target language while the relevant rules are difficult to be constructed [18]. Interactional approach place CS between the gap found by the speakers and the interlocutors towards linguistics mastery of them aimed to enhance communication to be effective.

Meanwhile, the Psycholinguistics approach associate CS with the thought of problem-orientedness and potential consciousness [6], [19]–[21]. Problem-orientedness refer to those problems that potentially occur and interrupt the speakers when they are attaining communication with the interlocutor [21]. Therefore, the notion of problem-orientedness signifies that CS is strategies to get over troubles in communication matters [17].

Besides, potential consciousness is defined as a set of mental responses to the problem in communication instead of the mutual response between two interlocutors [6]. CS subsequently implies the concept of potential consciousness as a problem-solving toward the matters encountered by people in attaining the communicative goals. Thus, if these two concepts are combined into the definition of CS, it would come to the determination that CS constitutes such tools (problem-orientedness) to overcome or to be a problem-solving (potential consciousness) toward those problems that might be faced while the speakers are attaining the communicative goal.

Insufficient abilities or unpredictable problems of the speakers in the communication required them to adopt a series of CS. Furthermore, in natural settings, the learners might find themselves the in unpredictable challenging situations such as; conveying undecided words or phrases but still having to make them appropriate to the rules of the language [7]. Besides, it might be hard to illustrate the approximate ideas or sort of words they are hard to retrieve. To anticipate these situations, they might speak by using their hands, duplicate the sounds or motions of something, mix two or more languages, create a new word, describing the things they do not know about [22]. Those kinds of behaviors are defined as CS.

There are five classifications of CS that can be applied by learners in communication matters[23][24]:

1. Avoidance or reduction strategies refer to adjusting the topics or the messages according to someone's language resources by replacing those messages, avoiding certain topics, or even totally abandoning someone's message. It contains message replacement, topic avoidance, and message abandonment.
2. Achievement strategies or compensatory strategies are used when the speakers are presented with a challenging linguistic issue by using the available language resources to construct a new word or explain the topic of the sentence to achieve their communicational objectives. The strategies included: circumlocution, approximation, all-purpose words, non-linguistic means, restructuring, word-coinage, literal translation from L1, foreignizing, code-switching to L1 or L3, and retrieval.
3. Stalling or time-gaining strategies relate to techniques to extend their talks and offer themselves additional opportunities to speak more. The strategies include fillers, self-, and other-repetition.
4. Self-monitoring strategies are employed by the speakers to fix their errors in conversation to make sure the information they deliver is correct and appropriate. This part consists of self-repair, other-repair, and self-rephrasing.
5. Interactional strategies refer to the combination of the aspects of the strategies. These techniques help the speaker to make the words clear so that the listener can follow along and participate fully in the

conversation. This strategy includes a variety of techniques, such as direct appeal for help, indirect appeal for help, repetition request, clarification request, confirmation request, expression of non-understanding verbally or non-verbally, and responses. Responses strategies consist of repetition, rephrasing, expansion, reduction, confirmation, rejection, repair, and comprehension check.

2. METHOD

This study was categorized as a descriptive qualitative study because it tried to catch and illustrate what happened exactly in the field. Descriptive qualitative study focuses on conveying the phenomenon in a natural and comprehensive view about something concerned in a sociocultural context and micro level [25]. The researcher purely came to the class without doing any treatment to the students and analysed the students' behaviour related to the requirement study.

The data of the research were the utterances of students' performance that were recorded in the video while the observation sessions and students' responses in Stimulated recall Interviews (SRI). The participants were students from the third semester of the English department at a university in Padang, West Sumatra. The participants were 24 students consisting of 12 students from Higher Speaking Proficiency levels (HSPL) and 12 students from Lower Speaking Proficiency Leve (LSPL). The students were grouped based on their speaking scores from the last semester. Those data were collected by implementing two sessions of observation classroom and one session of Stimulated Recall Interviews (SRI). The observation classroom is carried out by doing video recordings in the speaking classroom. Besides, an observation checklist is assisted to check what CS is applied and how it is used by them. SRI is chosen to allow the participant to see a video sequence of their behaviour and are then asked to consider the choices they made while the event was being recorded [26]. Interview guidelines content of open-ended questions is employed to assist the conduct of SRI.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This passage attempts to answer the research question encompassing the similarity and differences of communication strategies performed by English department students based on the speaking proficiency level of Higher Speaking Proficiency level (HSPL) and Lowest Speaking Proficiency Level (LSPL) during two sessions of data gathering.

The communication taxonomy suggested by Celce Murcia et al [23] highlighted in Celce-Murcia [24] was used to investigate the use of CS by students. This taxonomy involves five classifications supported by 19 subtypes: (1) avoidance or reduction strategies (message replacement, topic avoidance, and message abandonment); (2) achievement or compensatory strategies (circumlocution, approximation, all-purpose words, non-linguistics means, restructuring, word-coinage, literal translation, foreignizing, code-switching, retrieval); (3) stalling or time-gaining strategies (fillers, hesitation devices, and gambits, self, and other repetition); (4) self-monitoring strategies (self-initiated repair, and self-rephrasing); (5) interactional strategies (appeal for help and meaning negotiation strategies).

The findings of the data revealed that HSPL students perform three categories of CS which are achievement or compensatory strategies, stalling or time-gaining strategies, and interactional strategies. Achievement or compensatory strategies includes circumlocution, approximation, and code-switching. Stalling or time-gaining strategies covering the strategies of filer and gambit. Interactional strategies contain meaningful negotiation strategies.

Along with HSPL students, LSPL students employed three types of CS as well including achievement strategies, stalling or time-gaining strategies, and interactional strategies. Achievement strategies encompass approximation, non-linguistic means, and code-switching. Stalling or time-gaining strategies including filler and gambit strategies. Interactional strategies consist of appeal for help and meaning-negotiation strategies. Avoidance or reduction strategies and self-monitoring strategies were not come across by the HSPL students nor the LSPL students. From these patterns, it can be seen that both HSPL and LSPL students perform similar types of strategies respectively with different subtypes.

Achievement or compensatory strategies

Firstly, the circumlocution strategy has performed by HSPL students four times when the students were attempting to say something or a certain term by describing its characteristics instead of mentioning its term. One of the examples was:

HSPL-1: "I don't know; I don't have any allergies before. What allergic what I may have now probably?"

HSPL-2: "*It might allergic because of a cold that makes you get itchy and red on your skin*."

In this dialogue, the student cannot recall or have no idea about the disease suffered by his/her friend so he/she described it to him. Circumlocution or paraphrasing is of strategy carried out by exemplifying, illustrating, or representing the aim of the target object or action [17]. By observing the circumlocution employed by HSPL students, it is possible to infer that the learners might have an extensive vocabulary. The learners were able to speak clearly despite occasionally forgetting words or phrases.

Secondly was an approximation. It is a strategy that encourages the student to say an L2 word that fits semantically with the lexical item being addressed. Both HSPL students and LSPL students employed approximation in their talk. The findings noted that HSPL students employed approximation twice while LSPL students performed six times. For instance, when LSP students stated "clothes for cardigan" and when HSPL students said "napkin for tissue." Approximation was the usage of a single vocabulary word or structure in the target language that the learner knows is incorrect but that

has enough semantic similarities to the intended word to satisfy the speaker [27].

There are two potential reasons for students to employ approximation. Both HSPL and LSPL students might be conscious or unconscious to use another terminology to express their meaning as close as possible to the desired target word. the use of approximation indicates that students are attempting to use suitable language and avoid inserting misleading or inappropriate phrases into conversations [13]. After all, it showed that LSPL students performed approximation frequently more than HSPL students did.

The next is code-switching. It was a strategy that had shared by both HSPL and LSPL students in achievement or compensatory strategies. Code-switching is the action to add some words or phrases from another language [28]. The result found that HSPL students used code-witching once while LSPL students used it three times. The following excerpt explains the example of how LSPL students use code-switching:

LSPL-1: "Have you ever gone to *bioskop*?"

LSPL-2: "you mean cinemas?"

'*Bioskop'* is a word from L1 that is used by the students to replace 'cinema'. It might happen because of their lack of vocabulary or might be they struggling to retrieve it. Moreover, the students might utilize language-switch due to the target word being peculiar to her/his culture [21][27]. Both HSPL and LSPL students perform code-switching to recreate the vocabulary they cannot find in the target language even though LSPL students showed it more frequently than HSPL students did.

Next is non-linguistic means. It is a kind of strategy grouped into achievement or compensatory strategies. This strategy was found in LSPL students three times and not found in HSPL students. For instance, when the speakers from LSPL students ask their friends "have you ever made an *Instagram snap*?" His friends were only responding to her by narrowing their eyes. Fortunately, the speakers were aware that his friend did not get what he said before and replaced the word 'Instagram snap' with Instastory.

In this matter, when the interlocutor narrowed his eyes, he had made an answer that he did not understand the information delivered by the speakers. Narrowing eyes are a kind of mime. Mime, gesture, pointing, and drawing pictures are the strategies to convey the messages without saying verbal language. Non-linguistic strategy is applied when the learners use mime, gesture, facial expression, or sound imitation [29]. As known, the use of gestures during communication implicitly carries meaning. People will get mutual understanding, for instance, when the one who speak touches his head and shows a facial expression like getting pain, they may assume that she or he got a headache even if he/she said no word at all. In other words, due to non-linguistic means essentially including information, individuals can infer what they signify.

Stalling or time-gaining strategies

The next category of CS is stalling or time-gaining strategies involving filler, gambit, and hesitation devices. The researchers found them in students speaking for both HSPL and LSPL students. It found that HSPL students perform it five times while LSPL student six times. The following excerpt describes the use of fillers by students:

LSPL-1: "*well*, I haven't got my breakfast yet this morning"

HSPL-1: "hello Alma, *aaaa* I mean Anisa"

The use of sounds like, emm, amm, errr, ahhh, or even words or phrases like 'well', 'actually', and 'where was I?' indicate filler, gambit, or hesitation devices. The strategy that the speaker uses to stall or gain time is the use of fillers or hesitation devices to fill pauses and gain time to think about the ideas they were going to say as to make a pause in the talk. When a speaker needs extra time to get their point across, they frequently choose this strategy. The fact that LSPL students more frequently used this strategy than HSPL students did, showed that they need more time to think to keep the communication open than HSPL students did.

Interactional strategies

Interactional strategies consist of appeal for help strategies and meaning-negotiation strategies. It found that HSPL students implement meaning-negotiation strategies twice while LSPL students employ appeal for help once and meaning-negotiation strategies four times. The following excerpt explains the example of how students use these strategies:

LSPL-4: "*what do we call Koper* in English?"

HSPL-3: "*did you say* your headache is getting worse?"

LSPL-3: "*pardon*?"

The first example refers to the kind of strategies that appeal to help. Appeal for help is in which the student requests the appropriate terms [27]. Besides, meaning-negotiation strategies are used by demonstrating a lack of knowledge by making a request, expressing it verbally or nonverbally, responding, or confirming it by providing a comprehension check [23]. The less interactional strategies imply the learners have good knowledge and are comfortable enough to explain the idea on their own [11].

4. CONCLUSION

The more frequent strategy used by students does not always indicate that students were poor in linguistics knowledge. HSPL students have applied circumlocution could be assumed that they were having a comprehensive vocabulary. However, in different types of strategies, LSPL students were found employ more frequent strategies than HSPL students did. In this case, the students that used more strategies seemed to find more problems than the other students. It might be affected by the poor appropriate vocabulary and non-fluency in speaking. It can be said that both of HSPL and LSPL students have performed communication strategies in the same way. However, the frequency of strategies shows

their diversity in facing difficulties in carrying out communication.

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