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The Communication Strategies Employed by English Majors at Bejaia University in Academic Presentations

استراتيجيات التواصل التي يستخدمها طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية في العروض الأكاديمية بجامعة بجاية

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Abstract :

Thecurrent study aims at identifying the most common communication strategies employed by EFL graduate students at Bejaia University when delivering oral presentations. Further, the study attempts to explore the possible effect of task demands and context on the performer's strategic behaviour. To this end, data were elicited from audio recordings of oral presentations carried out by 16 participants in two different settings: the classroom and masterthesis defense session.Communication strategieswere identified according to Dörnyei and Körmos' taxonomy (1997).
The overall results show that the participants resorted to a number of communication strategies including non-lexicalized fillers, repetitions, restructuring, and self-repair respectively. In addition, the findings revealed that the context of communication might influence the quantity more than the quality of communication strategies.Hence, It is recommended to expose the students to awide range of oral activities in different settings so they can learn how to adjust their strategic behavior according to the demands and context of the tasks.

Keywords: Communication strategies, EFL students, task demands and context.

ملخص :

تهدف هذه الدراسة الي معرفة استراتيجيات التواصل التي يستخدمها طلاب الماستر تخصص لغة انجليزية بجامعة بجاية عند تقديم العروض الشفوية.كما نحاول من خلال هذا البحث استكشاف تأثير سياق التواصل ومتطلبات النشاط على السلوك الاستراتيجي للطلبة. تم جمع البيانات عن طريق تسجيل سمعي للعروض الشفهية داخل القسم وفي حصة دفاع عن اطروحة الماستر.تم تحديد استراتيجيات التواصل وفقًا لتصنيف دورنييوكورموس (1997). تشير النتائج الي استخدام الطلاب للاستراتيجيات الحشو غير المعجمي،التكرار، إعادة الهيكلة والإصلاح الذاتي على التوالي وقد لوحظ ان سياق التواصل قد يؤثر على كمية الاستراتيجيات المستعملة أكثر من نوعيتهم.وبالتالي يوصى بتعريض الطلبة لمجموعة واسعة من الانشطة الشفوية في اماكن مختلفة حتى يتعلموا كيفية تعديل سلوكهم الاستراتيجي وفقا لمتطلبات وسياق النشاط.

الكلمات المفتاحية: استراتيجيات التواصل، طلابباللغة الانجليزية،سياق ومتطلبات النشاط

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INTRODUCTION:

The ability to communicate effectively and appropriately is widely recognized as the main goal of foreign language education. While both written and oral communication are emphasized in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), the latter seems to pose more challenges for students since it occurs often in real-time. It has been observed that many students in Algeria are still struggling to become fluent and confident English speakers. Even advanced English learners, who display a good command of the English language, still encounter communication difficulties and breakdowns. These issues are more apparent when the students are facedwith real and authentic communicative situations away from the safe context of the classroom, particularly graduate students of English.They often engage in various academic tasks that require effective oral communication skills such as public events, seminars, discussions, academic talks and presentations. The nature and context of these tasks add more complexity to the oral communication process.

During the course of communication, the students draw on their linguistic resources to deliver their messages. However, problems may arise when EFL students' interlanguage (IL) is limited; hence, their resources are not sufficient to communicate their intended meaning (Faerch and Kasper, 1983, Tarone 1987). To fill in this gap and keep the communication process going on, the students resort to a repertoire of strategies (Bialystok, 1990; Dornyei, 1995; Faerch& Kasper, 1983; Willems, 1987).

The ability to cope with communication problems is referred to as "strategic competence". The concept of "strategic competence" was introduced by Canale and Swain (1980), as a major component in their construct of communicative competence, is defined as "verbal and nonverbal strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient competence" (p. 30). The importance of CSs in the communication process has been widely acknowledged since their use by EFL learners is almost inevitable and, in fact, beneficial in developing the learners' IL and improving their communicative competence (Bialystok, 1990; Dornyei, 1995). This, in turn, highlights the value and significance of investigating and understanding EFL learners' strategy use. In view of this, the current research is carried out to identify the CSs employed by EFL graduates at Bejaia University when delivering academic oral presentations (henceforthAOP). Further, an attemptis made to explore the possible influence of the task demands and context on students' strategic behavior. This endeavor originated from previous work conducted by the researchers. Upon observing and examining the difficulties EFL learners experience when delivering oral presentations, it was imperative to explore how students manage their difficulties and overcome their communication problems. The current study is based on the premise that EFL learners should be made aware of effective CSs and considerations should be taken into account concerning the context of oral communication. To this end, the two primary research questions to be addressed in the present study are as follows:

What are the most frequently used oral communication strategies by Master 2 students of English at Bejaia University when delivering academic oral presentations?

To what extent do Master 2 students of English at Bejaia Universityvary their use of oral communication strategies according to different situations?

Literature review :

The historical development of CSs is well documented in Dörnyei and Scott (1997) in which they indicate that the theoretical antecedents of the term 'communication strategies' go back to early work on interlanguage when Selinker (1972) introduced CSs as one of the five processes involved second language (L2) learning. According to Selinker (1972), L2 learners resort to CSs when they try to express meaning through a limited target language system. Later, Savignon (1972) tackled the notion and importance of coping strategies and Váradi (1973) initiated the first attempts to empirically investigate CSs. This was followed by the work of Tarone (1977) and Tarone, Cohen & Dumas (1976), which focused on defining and classifying CSs in their well-known taxonomy. A few years later, Canale and Swain (1980) included these strategies in their model of 'communicative competence' as one of its main constituents, termed as "strategic competence" (as cited in Dörnyei & Scott, 1997). Since then, CSs have been widely explored in the fields of linguistics and second language acquisition, resulting in a plethora of definitions and taxonomies.

There has been little consensus among researchers and scholars concerning the notion of CSs. However, Ellis (2008)notes that CSscan be viewed from two broad theoretical perspectives: psycholinguistic and interactional. Traditionally, the use of CSs was regarded as problem-solving behavior employed by the language learners to compensate for their linguistic deficiencies (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997). This view is better illustrated in Færch and Kasper's (1983) work, where they define CSs as: "potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal" (p. 36). In this sense, the strategy use is restricted to problems arising in the stages of planning and execution of ones' own speech (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997). This clearly excludes the interlocutor's role in resolving those problems (Færch& Kasper, 1983, p. 36). This view reflects an intraindividual, psycholinguistic approach that "locates CS in models of speech production or cognitive organization and processing"(Kasper & Kellerman, 1997, p. 2). In contrast, Tarone (1980) suggests that "the term CSs relates to mutual attempts of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in a situation where the requisite meaning structures do not seem to be shared" (p.420). This conceptualization reflects an inter-individual, interactional perspective. According to this view, CSs are considered "tools used in a joint negotiation of meaning where both interlocutors are attempting to agree as to a communicative goal" (Tarone,1980, p.420). This definition clearly emphasizes the role of both interlocutors in assisting each other to achieve mutual comprehension and overcome communication problems. This implies not only a focus on the problem-solving phenomenon, but also on how learners use CSs as pragmatic discourse devices to enhance their messages (Nakatani, 2010). Additionally, Dörnyei (1995)extended the definition of CSs arguing that insufficient processing time creates serious problems for L2 speakers. His conceptualization of CSs included stalling strategies such as pause-fillers and hesitation gambits, which help the speakers gain time to think and to keep the channel of communication open (as cited in Dörnyei & Scott, 1997).

In spite of the differences between the existing conceptualizations of CSs, consensus has been reached about two common criteria most CSs definitions share: problem-orientedness and consciousness (Bialystok, 1990; Dörnyei& Scott, 1997; Færch& Kasper, 1984). As for Bialystok (1990),problematicityis related to the idea that speakers only use CSs if they sense that there is a problem that may disturb the process of communication (p. 3). The second defining feature is consciousness, which refers to the degree of speakers' awareness of his use of CSs (Bialystok, 1990).

A review of the literature shows that there are various overlapping CSs taxonomies. However, Bialystok (1990) notes that "the variety of taxonomies proposed in the literature differ primarily in terminology and overall categorizing principle rather than in the substance of the specific strategies" (p. 61). A closer look at these typologies reveals some commonalities and allows for a basic classification of CSs into three main categories (Dörnyei, 1995). The first one is referred to as "achievement" or "compensatory" strategies, which are used when the speaker, despite his deficient resources, attempts to attain his original communicative goal by manipulating the available resources. The second category includes "avoidance" or "reduction" strategies. These are employed when the speakers abstain from unfamiliar topics, avoid solving communication problems, reduce or abandon their intended message(Huang, 2010). The last category is called stalling or time gaining strategies which often used to gain time to think about what the speaker wants to say (Dörnyei, 1995).

The current study adopted a psycholinguistic approach drawing on a taxonomy proposed by Dörnyei and Scott (1997).Given the nature of oral presentations as a one-way task, the study focuses on the problem-solving mechanisms implemented by learners rather than the interactional aspects of communication. According to Dörnyei and Scotts's (1997)classification, there are four types of communication problems: resource deficit, processing time pressure, own-performance problems, and other performance problems. In line with these problems, the speakers may use three categories of CSs: direct, indirect and interactional. To begin with, direct strategies provide self-reliable devices that directly help the speaker to get the meaning across; whereas, indirect strategies are employed to "facilitate the conveyance of meaning indirectly by creating the conditions for achieving mutual understanding" (p. 198). Finally, interactional strategies are implemented when the speakers help each other to deliver their messages and reach mutual understanding. Dörnyei and Scott's (1997) taxonomy, in its original form, comprises several strategies, most of which fall under the category of direct strategies. However, only the most common strategies identified in this study will be illustrated in the following table.

Table 1. Communication strategies

Communication strategy type	Description
Restructuring	Leaving the utterance unfinished and communicating the intended message according to an alternative plan.
Self-repair	Making self-initiated corrections in one's own speech typically after the wrong form has been uttered
Self-rephrasing	The speaker repeats the term, but not quite as it is, by adding something or using paraphrase, in spite of the first version being already appropriate.
Use of fillers	Using gambits to fill pauses, to stall, and to gain time in order to keep the communication channel open.
Umming and erring	Using non-lexicalized pauses ('er', 'muh')
Repetition	Repeating a word or a string or words immediately after they were said.

Source:Dörnyei and Scott, (1997).

The use of CSs is associated with several variables such as proficiency level, gender, motivation, attitudes, anxiety, self-efficacy and task effect (Nakatani & Goh, 2007). Numerous studies examined the possible relationship between gender, proficiency level and the use of CSs (Ahmed & Pawar, 2018; Chang & Liu, 2016; Huang, 2010; Idrus, 2016; Maldonado, 2016). However, limited research has been conducted on the effect of task type and contextual factors on strategic behavior(Ghout-Khenoune, 2012; Moattarian & Tahririan, 2013;Poulisse and Schills, 1989). These studies showed that different tasks are likely to generate different quantities of CSs and in some cases, may affect the type of CSs as well.

To date, there have been few studies regarding communication strategy in the Algerian context (Douadi, 2019; Ghout-Khenoune, 2012; Hamlaoui & Haddouche, 2013), a fact which stresses the possible contributions of this study. Pertinent to this study is the work of Ghout-Khenoune(2012) who examined the effect of task type on the use of CSs by 16 EFL undergraduate learners at the University of Algiers. Employing an observational method, she found that the most frequent strategies implemented by the students are repetition, restructuring, appeal for assistance and message abandonment. The findings of the study also revealed that task type though has limited effect on the kind of strategies used, showed a significant effect on the quantity of CSs.

Methodology:

The purpose of this study is to explore the strategic behaviour of EFL master students when delivering academic oral presentations. It is worth exploring the CSs learners employ in different communicative settings. This descriptive study used a mixed-method design. The main tool for data collection was direct observations. Data elicited were qualitative in nature but the analysis was quantitative to locate and count strategy tokens in the participants' speech data.

Participants of this study were 16 EFL master II students majoring in Linguistics at Bejaia University. The participants consisted of both male and female students, ranging in age from 24 to 40 years old. The researchers employed convenient sampling and included all the participants who agreed to take part in the study.

Data were obtained through observations and audio recordings of students' oral presentations. The recording of oral presentations was deemed as an appropriate technique to elicit speech data from the participants. Oral presentations occurred in two settings, the classroom and the master thesis oral defense session. Both presentations revolve around the students' research works.

Once the data was collected from oral presentations, it was transcribed and analyzed. The analysis was conducted by manually locating, counting and categorizing CSs following Dörnyei and Körmos' taxonomy (1998). Speech data taken from both contexts were equal in terms of time (100 minutes for each setting). Results are presented in tables illustrating counts and frequencies of CSs identified.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

The Most Frequently Used CSs by EFL Graduates:

Table 2. The most common CSs employed by the participants.

Rank	CSs	Number of instances	Frequencies
1	Use of umming, erring	125	29 %
2	Repetitions	103	23.83 %
3	Restructuring	82	19 %
4	Self-repair	50	11.6 %
5	Self-rephrase	36	8.35 %
6	Use of words and gambit as fillers	35	8.12 %
Total		431	100%

As table 2 shows, the most frequently used strategies by the students when delivering AOPs were direct and indirect strategies. This indicates that the participants were preoccupied with the attempt to solve communication problems resulting from their own speech production, which can be attributed to the nature of OP as a one-way task. The findings show that the overall use of CSs (431 instances) by the participants in an extended period of speech (200 minutes) is approximately moderate, whereas, the type of CSs generated is restricted to time gaining and achievement strategies. This corresponds well with the students' level of language proficiency (Master 2 students). Recent evidence that the number and choice of CSs are associated with language proficiency levels. Students with high or moderate language proficiency often select time gaining and achievement strategies and employ them (or other types of CSs) in a moderate or low quantity. Whereas, low proficiency students are likely to employ avoidance strategies and tend to be marked as highly frequent users of CSs in general (Bialystok, 1990; Dörnyei& Scott, 1997; Faerch& Kasper, 1983). The participants draw only on some types of CSs that are common among competent EFL speakers such as the use of fillers, repetitions and restructuring, which is consistent with the findings of Maldonado (2016) and Ahmed and Pawar (2018).

As illustrated in Table 2, the most common strategies employed by participants in this activity are the use of umming and erring as fillers (29%) and the use of repetitions (23.83 %) respectively. This suggests that the main source of students' communicative problems in AOPs is related to insufficient processing time. The participants relied intensively on the use of fillers and repetitions to gain more time to think and since they are performing a monologue, they seem to feel more inclined to control and maintain the communication flow. This concurs with Dörnyei & Kormos's (1998) findings in the sense that L2 speakers employ frequently stalling and time gaining strategies because their speech production is not yet fully automatized. Self-repetition was also found to be the most frequently used strategy by undergraduates in Ghout-Khenoune (2012). The use of time gaining

mechanisms by moderate or high proficiency students was reported in many studies (Nakatani, Makki, & Bradley, 2012; Maldonado, 2016; Chang & Liu, 2016).

The findings showed that the performers also implemented restructuring (80 instances) and self -repair (52 instances) strategies in high quantities. It appears that the third most common strategy (restructuring) is related to the student's linguistic resource deficiency. When the participants attempt to communicate their ideas through a certain verbal plan but lack linguistic resources to execute that plan, they resort to an alternative way to express their messages (Dörnyei & Kormos, 1998). The use of structuring by the participants indicate that the students are not willing to give up on their communicative goals and prefer to get the meaning across by any available means. Moreover, the participants seem to encounter another type of problem that emerges after they verbalize their messages then realize that their production was erroneous or imperfect. This calls for an intervention using self-repairing and self-rephrasing strategies, which were employed by the participants successively. The use of these mechanisms is cognitively and linguistically demanding since it involves the reformulation of their initial verbal plans as well as self-monitoring of their output (Dörnyei&Körmos, 1998).This outcome coincides with few studies, which found that self-repairing and self-rephrasing were most common among moderate and high proficiency students (Chang & Liu, 2016; Maldonado, 2016).

Difference between CSs generated by students in Two Contexts:

Table 3. Communication strategies employed by students in two settings

Communication Strategies	Instances in classroom OPs	Instances in thesis defense OPs
Umming and erring	95	30
Repetitions	75	28
Restructuring	44	38
Self-repair	20	30
Self-rephrase	17	19
Use of gambit and fillers	10	25
Response repair	8	0
Response rephrase	6	0
Comprehension check	6	0
Indirect appeal for help	4	0
Direct appeal for help	3	0
Message abandonment	3	0
Total number	291	170

The goal of the oral presentation task was to report on the students' research processes and findings. To this end, the participants employed various strategies to fulfill the task requirements in both contexts. However, table 3 shows that there is a significant difference between the number of CSs generated in each situation. The findings revealed an overriding use of CSs in in-class presentations compared to master thesis presentations. This probably occurred because the participants tend to take the master thesis OP more seriously than in-class OPs since the former is conducted in a public sphere and in the presence of known and unknown audience. In such a scenario, the students tend to pay considerable time and efforts in planning, rehearsing, and even memorizing their speech which presumably would lead to less communicative problems hence less use of CSs. The reason behind this variance in the quantity of CSs implemented in the two settings can be also attributed to the

use of media. In-class presentations were performed without any kind of aids, relying solely on the speakers' mimetic and linguistic resources to solve their communicative problems. However, the master thesis presentations were delivered via the same resources in addition to another external visual and textual medium, which facilitated their communication and limited their use of CSs. Indeed, it was observed that many students resorted to direct reading from PowerPoint slides as a delivery style or as a survival mechanism. This suggests that the students' style of delivery might play a role in the number of CSs generated by students.

The results also revealed that the use of fillers and repetitions in in-class OPs (95 instances) is significantly higher than master thesis OPs (30 instances). This could be explained in relation to some factors such as style, pre-planning and media. These, in turn,are prompted by task demands and context. Further, the findings indicate that the participants employed restructuring and rephrasing strategies in close proportions in both settings. However, self-repairing was employed more frequently in thesis OPs despite the observed similar rate of errors in both tasks. This implies that accuracy is seen as an essential requirement of the master thesis OP but less important in the classroom environment where errors are often tolerable. Interestingly, the findings demonstrated that the participants' use of words and gambits such as "well, okay, actually," during their master thesis defense was more frequent than the classroom presentations in which the participants relied instead on humming and erring as well as some unfilled pauses. This indicates that their use of time-gaining devices was more effective and efficient in the context of thesis presentation since the selection of filling words requires more complexity and often considered as a more elaborated choice than using non-lexicalized filled pauses (Dörnyei&Körmos, 1998).

As illustrated in Table 3, the participants draw mainly on time gaining and achievement strategies in both contexts. However, there were 5 instances in the classroom environment where the students resorted to message-abandment. Apart from this record, the participant did not employ reduction strategies in both environments. In fact, their choice of CS type was similar in the two settings judging by the most frequently employed strategies (umming and erring, repetition, restructuring and self-repair). However, when examining these results in more detail, it can be seen that the classroom presentation generated another type of CS called interactional strategies. It was noted that when students face communication breakdowns in classroom pair presentations, they turn to their partners for some help either by directly asking them or by pausing and looking at their mates seeking help. More interestingly, the participants draw also on other cooperative strategies such as response repair, response repeat and comprehension check. These strategies were not identified in the context of master thesis pair-presentations. The variance identified in the participants' strategic behavior might be due to the context of the task. It appears that the friendly and interactive environment of the classroom may prompt the speakers to employ cooperative strategies as opposed to the master thesis setting which is more formal and may exert more demands on the part of students to carry out their turns individually. This outcome concurs well with Nathalang and Mei (2010) who found that one-way tasks elicited more IL-based CSs such as paraphrase, restructuring and generalization while two-way tasks generated cooperative strategies.

5. CONCLUSION:

The aim of this study was twofold: to identify the CSs used by EFL graduates when delivering AOPs and to explore the differences between the type and number of CSs

generated in two settings in an attempt to capture the possible effect of task demands and context on participants' strategic behavior. The results of this study suggest that the main problem that triggered the use of CSs in AOPs is related to the insufficient time to process ideas and information in the target language, followed by resource deficit problems and own-performance problems. To overcome these communicative issues, the participants employed effective strategies such as time gaining mechanisms and achievement strategies, indicating that the performers take risks and actively use their available resources to achieve their communicative goals. The findings showed that the students draw primarily on direct and indirect strategies. Expectedly, the use of interactional strategies was very limited giving the monologic nature of the task. In addition, the results indicate that the context and demands of the task have more effect on the quantity rather than the quality of CSs. When giving classroom presentations, the students resorted to CSs more frequently than master thesis OP despite that the latter is perceived to be more challenging for the students. It seems that the students were well aware of the demands of both tasks and planed accordingly. Additionally, it was found that the choice of CSs is similar across both settings, except for some instances of interactional strategy use in the classroom environment. It can be concluded that task context and demands may alter the students' communicative stylesand degree of preplanning which, in turn, may affect their strategic behavior.

Finally, it should be noted that the current study bares a few limitations, since it is a small-scale study and relied on speech data to identify verbal tokens without including retrospective comments. Hence, the findings of this study cannot be generalized; they can be considered as suggestive rather than conclusive. However, this study showed that examining CSs does not only help us understand the learners' strategic behaviour but also identify the communicative problems underlying such behaviour. This, in turn, will help understand the development of the students' strategic competence so that appropriate strategies could be selected for pedagogical purposes. Raising students' awareness of CSs may indeed help the students to communicate effectively in academic settings. Further, the findings of the current study highlighted the CSs generated in one-way tasks and draw attention to the possible effect of some factors such as style, pre-planning, task demands and context on the use of CSs. Hence, teachers should create more opportunities for out-of-class oral communication or encourage students to participate in academic public events. Exposing students to different communication settings may help the learners not just to expand their repertoire of CSs but also to select the most efficient ones according to the demands and context of the task. Moreover, communication strategies can be introduced in oral courses to support students in becoming effective presenters (Idrus, 2016). Considering the limitations of this study, we suggest that future studies recruit larger samples and focus on the association of other factors such as gender, proficiency level andtask type with the use of CSs. In order to further explore the students' strategic behavior, other research instruments such as stimulated recall and interviews may provide pertinent insights into students' thinking when employing CSs.

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