Communication Strategies Used by Iranian EFL Learners and English Native Speakers: Gender in Focus

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Abstract
This article was intended to explore the frequency and order of communication strategies used by Iranian male and female EFL earners as well as English native speakers while facing communication breakdowns. Furthermore, it was aimed to investigate the difference between native speakers and non-native speakers of English in their use of communication strategies. In addition, it was probed whether gender had any effects on the use of these strategies among native and non-native speakers. To this end, the data were collected through the communication strategy questionnaire distributed among 30 male and female Iranian intermediate EFL learners and 15 English native speakers. The design of this study was a quantitative one in which the questionnaire and thus numerical data were applied. To analyze the data, Cronbach alpha and independent-samples t-tests were used. The results indicated that non-verbal and social affective strategies were the most frequent strategies used by non-native speakers and native speakers of English, respectively. Furthermore, there was no significant difference between male and female Iranian EFL learners, but a significant difference between male and female English native speakers were seen. It can be concluded that language proficiency can contribute to...
the type and frequency of communications strategies which are used non-native speakers; likewise, it can play a significant role in gender differences in language use.

**Keywords**: Communication strategies; Speaking; Gender; English Native speakers; Nonnative speakers

1. **Introduction**

A great number of research works on communication strategies have been conducted. Many of them mainly focused on the nature of communication strategies, namely, the definitions, identifications and classifications (e.g. Tarone, 1977; Bialystok, 1983 and 1990; Nakatani, 2006; Mariani, 2010; Somsai & Intaraprasert, 2011; Bui & Intaraprasert, 2012). Sometimes ELF users tend to communicate with others but they are unable to express what they want to say because of their lack of resources in their second or foreign language (hereafter L2). When learners experience that fluency in their first language (hereafter L1) which does not follow the same pattern as their L2, a gap is created in the knowledge of their L2. These gaps can take many forms: a word, a phrase, a structure, a tense marker or an idiom (Bialystok, 1990). In order to overcome that gap, learners have two options: they can either leave the original communicative goal or they can try to reach other alternative plans and use other linguistic means that they have at their disposal. Furthermore speakers can compensate for their lack in resources in the L2 by either changing their original intention or by using other ways of expression (Hedge, 2000). Ellis (1994) suggests that communicative strategies be seen as a set of skills, which learners use in order to overcome their inadequacies in the target language. When speakers fail to communicate because of their limited knowledge in the target language, they have to find a way to communicate in other ways, for example by imitating sounds, code-switching or avoiding the topic.

Some of the ways of dealing with a communicative difficulty have been referred to as social affective strategies, fluency oriented strategies, negotiation for meaning while speaking strategies, accuracy oriented strategies, message reduction and alteration strategies, nonverbal strategies while speaking, message abandonment strategies and attempt to think in English strategies which are known as Communication Strategies (CSs). All these strategies are used for the purpose of maintaining communication (Nakatani, 2006).

Concerning taxonomies and classifications of communication strategies, as there is no consensus on the definitions of communication strategies, there are no generally agreed upon typologies of communication strategies, either. Various typologies have been proposed by Tarone (1981), Faerch and Kasper (1983), Bialystok (1990), and Nakatani (2006), among others. Tarone (1981) classified communication strategies as follows:
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1. Paraphrase: e.g., approximation, word coinage, and circumlocution
2. Transfer: e.g., literal translation and language switch
3. Asking for assistance: e.g., asking for assistance from the interlocutor
4. Mime: e.g., nonverbal strategies
5. Avoidance: e.g., topic avoidance and message abandonment

Nakatani (2006) proposed a classification including eight categories of communication strategies dealing with speaking problems included 1) social affective strategies, which were concerned with learners' affective factors in social contexts, such as controlling their anxiety and encouraging themselves to use English or to risk making mistakes; 2) fluency-oriented strategies, which were related to fluency of communication, such as paying attention to the rhythm, intonation, pronunciation, and clarity of speech; 3) negotiating for meaning while speaking strategies, which were related to the participants' attempts to negotiate with their interlocutors, such as checking listeners' understanding of their intentions, repeating the speech, and giving examples; 4) accuracy-oriented strategies, which were concerned with a desire to speak English accurately, such as paying attention to forms and grammatical accuracy of the speech; 5) message reduction and alteration strategies, which learners might use to avoid a communication breakdown by reducing an original message, simplifying their utterances, or using similar expressions that learners could use confidently; 6) non-verbal strategies while speaking, which involved learners using eye contact, gestures or facial expressions to give hints or help the listener guess what they wanted to say; 7) message abandonment strategies, which involved learners giving up their attempt to communicate when they faced difficulties executing their original verbal plan; and 8) attempts to think in English strategies, which required learners to think as much as possible in the foreign language during actual communication.

The advantage of Nakatani's (2006) classification over Tarone's (1981) classification is that he focused on the interactive characteristic of communication in the actual EFL classroom context. He further classified communication strategies into strategies dealing with listening and speaking problems L2 learners encountered during communication. As the interactive nature of communication strategies is emphasized in the current study, Nakatani's (2006) classification of communication strategies was therefore adapted. In addition, as this study focuses on the strategies coping with speaking problems, only a modified version of speaking strategies within Nakatani's Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI) was used.

Bialystok (1983) conducted an empirical study in which she focused on the issue of age and compared the adults' and children's application of communication strategies. Her findings displayed that adult language learners used more first language based strategies than the children learners. Furthermore, in 1984, Tarone's study found that those students in classroom settings offering more natural input established a higher level of strategic competence than students in ordinary classrooms, who used only a limited number of mostly unsophisticated communication strategies. He implied in his study that teachers should train the students to use communication strategies with
the immersion classes. Poulisse (1987) directed a quantitative-empirical study funded by Nijmeg University, Holland. This study discovered that the strategy application was related closely to the subjects' proficiency level. "Not surprisingly, the number of compensatory strategies used is related to proficiency level, since speakers of a lower proficiency level have more lexical problems" (p. 150).

Dörnyei (1995) related a six-week training experiment in Hungary with 109 students in the use of three communication strategies, namely, topic avoidance and replacement, circumlocution, and using fillers and hesitation devices. The results showed that there was an improvement in measures related to students' overall speech performance and to both the quality of circumlocutions and the frequency of fillers and circumlocutions in the oral post-test, which consisted of topic description, cartoon description, and definition formulation.

Iranian scholars working on communication strategies, Ansarin and Syal (2000) conducted important quantitative-empirical to count the frequency of communication strategies in an interview after training in a University of Iran. In this study, they discovered that Iranian language learners tended to use more conceptual analysis strategies; on the other hand, they used less cooperation strategies. They implied that the story telling tasks were quite suitable for teaching communication strategies. Two tasks of the "picture-based story telling" and the "retell stories in English" were applied for training and interview processes (Ansarin & Syal, 2000, p. 74).

Rossiter (2003) reported the effects of communication strategy instruction on strategy use and on second-language performance. Two classes of adult immigrants in Canada participated in this study. One class received 12 hours of direct communication strategy training, and the second served as a comparison group. Two oral tasks (picture story narratives, object descriptions) were administered in week 1, week 5, and week 10. The post-test results showed a direct effect in favor of the communication strategy condition on a range of strategies used in the object description task, which was more effective than the narrative in eliciting communication strategies. Nonetheless, the author concluded that strategy training appeared to have little overall effect on learners' task performance.

Zhao and Intaraprasert (2013) carried out a communication strategies study with tourism-oriented EFL learners in relation to attitude towards English speaking and English language and exposure to oral communication in English in the Chinese context. This study was intended to explore the use of communication strategies in relation to attitude towards English speaking. The findings revealed that the tourism-oriented EFL learners with positive attitude surely did their best to know more about the strategies which could help them better communicate because they valued much about English for their future career. This might be a reasonable justification for the more frequent use of CSs by the participants holding positive attitude in this study. Mahardhika et al (2014) also conducted a study to explore the communication strategies used by ELT students; they found that fillers were the most frequently used strategies; while non-linguistic strategies were also among the frequent ones.
In a study, Ehrman and Oxford (1995) who looked at the strategies used by 1200 university students came to this conclusion that gender differences made a profound influence on the communication strategies used. Also, Songsang (1998) studied the effect of gender on communication strategies. The results indicated that the female learners tend to use more appeal for assistance strategies than the male EFL learners in the interactional task. They acted much the same in the narrative task. Gascoigne (2002), in a study on the role of gender on L2 interaction brings that males tend to use linguistic devices such as interruptions, directives, and sentence-initial conjunctions. Females, in contrast, tend to rely more heavily upon questions, justifiers, intensive adverbs, personal pronouns and word-initial adverb.

Kho (2006) conducted a research to investigate communication strategy (CS) use of male and female adult ESL speakers in tertiary setting, she figured out that from the total number of CS (n=453), generally male and female ESL speakers had similar preference for CS use but female speakers (n=260) used more CS than male speakers (n=193) in general except for approximation and topic avoidance. Male speakers used more repetition, message abandonment, and topic fronting in same-gender pairs, while female speakers used more topic fronting and approximation in cross-gender pairs. In another study, Wang (2008) explored the sex differences in the use of CSs, it was concluded that female and male learners differ only in one strategy which was the code-switching strategies. In a study reported by Aslan (2009), it was reported gender influences strategy choice. Along the same vein, females and males are observed to employ various strategies in language acquisition. However, in the study conducted by Mahardhika et al (2014), the findings revealed that there is no significant effect of gender on communication strategies.

English has spread around the world in recent decades. With the rapid development of English throughout the world, Iran, like any other country, needs English-speaking people to work in a variety of fields, including hotels, travel agencies and tour guiding, etc. Thus, EFL learners are expected to have better English language proficiency, especially their oral communication competence for the future career. However, compared with the EFL learners in the developed countries, the EFL learners in underdeveloped or developing countries find it difficult to orally communicate due to lack of communicative opportunities and communication strategies while communicating with either native speakers or non-native speakers of English. Thus, this research study was conducted to investigate the frequency and order of the communication strategies used by Iranian EFL learners and native speakers of English and if there is a difference between the communication strategies used by these two groups of participants; Moreover, it explored the effect of gender on the use of these strategies used by native speakers and non-native speakers of English.

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Participants

Two groups of English speakers were selected for the purpose of this research study: native speakers of English and non-native speakers. Non-native speakers who
formed the sample population of this study were 30 male and female Iranian EFL learners who studied English translation at Islamic Azad University, Isfahan Branch. They were selected through random sampling procedure. In this research, all EFL learners age ranged between 20 and 35 and they were rated as intermediate level of language proficiency after they took the Oxford Placement Test. 45 EFL learner took the placement test and those scoring between 50% and 80% (intermediate) were chosen. According to Perry (2005), those students scoring over 80% correct might be considered high ability (advanced), those between 50% and 80% average ability (intermediate), and those below 50% below average (beginner).

The English native speakers group who formed the second group of participants of this research study was composed of 15 male and female English native speakers. They were selected through convenience sampling method. They were originally Canadian and American English native speakers since they were raised and are still residing in Canada and America.

It was noted that some of these English native speakers were indeed born to not necessarily Canadian and American parents. As Canada and America are multicultural countries, a great number of children live there, whose parents are immigrants from other countries and whose mother tongues are languages other than English. However, as they were born and raised in Canada and America, they were considered to be English native speakers.

2.2 Instruments

2.2.1 Oxford Quick Placement Test

The Oxford Quick Placement Test (UCLES, 2001) was produced in collaboration with the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES). It was administered to guarantee participants’ homogeneity in terms of their English proficiency level. It is quick, reliable, and easy to administer, making it ideal for placement testing and examination screening. This placement test contains 60 multiple-choice questions and participants’ responses were scored on a scale of 60 points.

2.2.2 Oral Communication Strategy questionnaire

The aim of the communication strategy questionnaire was to obtain detailed information about the use of each type of communication strategy among non-native speakers such as EFL learners as well as native speakers of English. The questionnaire is named the Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI) developed by Nakatani (2006). It has five-point scale, ranging from the category "I agree entirely" to "I disagree entirely" (1-I agree entirely, 2- I agree, 3- Neutral ,4-I disagree 5-I disagree entirely). Each category is assigned to the value of one to five respectively. A higher score indicates high frequency of using of a particular strategy. This instrument is advantageous in that it facilitates the conduction of research on large groups. Meanwhile, it makes scoring relatively easier.

The main part of the questionnaire consists of thirty two statements describing communication strategies. Each statement stands for a specific strategy. Below is a
brief introduction to the eight groups of strategies included in the questionnaire. The questionnaire has eight parts. The first part of the questionnaire is related to all variables in Factor 1 which is concerned with learners’ affective factors in social contexts. In order to communicate smoothly, learners try to control their own anxiety and enjoy the process of oral communication (Items 1, 2). They are willing to encourage themselves to use English and to risk making mistakes (Items 4, 5) They also behave socially in such a way as to give a good impression and avoid silence during interaction (Items 3, 6); therefore, this factor can be labeled social affective strategies.

Items in Factor 2 were related to fluency of communication. These students pay attention to the rhythm, intonation, pronunciation, and clarity of their speech to improve the listener's comprehension (Items 7, 8, 9). They also consider their speaking context and take their time in order not to send inappropriate messages to their interlocutors (Items 10, 11). Hence, Factor 2 can be called fluency-oriented strategies.

Items in Factor 3 are related to the participants’ attempts to negotiate with their interlocutors. In order to maintain their interaction and avoid a communication breakdown, interlocutors are expected to conduct modified interaction. These speakers need to check listeners' understanding of their intentions (Item 12). They sometimes repeat their speech and give examples of terms until the listener is able to figure out their intended meaning (Item 13). They also pay attention to the reaction of their interlocutor to see whether they can understand each other (Item 14). Accordingly, this factor can be referred to as negotiation for meaning while speaking strategies.

The variables in Factor 4 are concerned with a desire to speak English accurately. Learners pay attention to forms of their speech and seek grammatical accuracy by self-correcting when they notice their mistakes (Items 16, 17, 18, 19). They want to speak appropriately like a native English speaker even though this is not an easy goal (Item 20). This factor can be named accuracy-oriented strategies.

Factor 5 represents strategies that learners use to avoid a communication breakdown by reducing an original message, simplifying their utterances, or using similar expressions that they can use confidently (Items 21, 22). This factor can be labeled message reduction and alteration strategies.

Factor 6 receives loadings from two variables concerned with nonverbal strategies to achieve communication goals. When speaking English, the learners can use eye contact in order to attract the attention of their listener (Item 23). They use gestures or facial expressions to give hints and help the listener guess what they want to say (Item 24). These strategies can be termed nonverbal strategies while speaking.

Items in Factor 7 are associated with message abandonment by learners in communication. When learners face difficulties executing their original verbal plan, they tend to give up their attempt to communicate, leave the message unfinished, or seek help from others to continue the conversation (Items 25, 26, 27, 28). These variables can be labeled message abandonment strategies.
Finally, Factor 8 receives loadings from Items 2 and 1. It is useful for learners to think as much as possible in the foreign language during actual communication. Oral communication usually requires a quick response to interlocutors. In Item 2, learners show a tendency to think in English, and they show a negative attitude toward thinking in their native language and then constructing the English sentence. It, therefore, seems reasonable to label Factor 8 attempt to think in English strategies (Items 29, 30).

2.3 Data Collection Procedures

The Quick Oxford Placement Test was taken to indicate the participants' level of language proficiency and thus form the intermediate language group. 45 male and female students who were EFL learners took the placement test which lasted 30 minutes to answer the required questions. The test scores ranged from 0 to 60 in the user guide; thus, those who scored from 30 to 48 (between 50% and 80% of the total score) were selected as the participants of the study.

The EFL learners were asked to fill out the communication strategy questionnaire. First, they were briefed on what the questionnaire was. Then, the questionnaires were distributed among them. Each student took the communication strategy questionnaire which lasted 20 minutes to answer the required questions. Furthermore, the communication strategy questionnaires were emailed to English native speakers and they were asked to fill it out.

2.4 Statistical Procedures

The statistical procedures employed in this study to indicate the statistical significance of the data collected were Cronbach alpha and independent-samples t-tests. The Cronbach internal consistency coefficient for the items in the communication strategy questionnaire was computed to find out whether all the items in the questionnaire could measure the participants' communication strategy use with enough consistency or not. Further, independent-samples t-tests were run on the data to explore the statistically significant differences between native speakers and non-native speakers of English concerning the use of communication strategies and the statistically significant differences between male and female participants of each group.

3. Results

The Cronbach internal consistency coefficient was computed to find out whether all the items in the questionnaire could measure the participants' communication strategy use with enough consistency or not. Table 1 shows the reliability estimate of the communication strategies questionnaire.

Table 1. Reliability Estimate of Communication Strategy Questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questionnaire</th>
<th>Cronbach's Alpha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Native speakers</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonnative speakers</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As it was shown in Table 1, the Cronbach internal consistency coefficient was 0.70 and it indicated that the questionnaires used for English native speakers and nonnative speakers were reliable. Tables 2 and 3 demonstrate the analysis of frequency of communication strategies used by Iranian EFL learners and English native speakers.

Table 2. Analysis of the Frequency of Communication Strategies Use among Non-native Speakers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Social affective</th>
<th>Fluency oriented</th>
<th>Accuracy oriented</th>
<th>Message reduction</th>
<th>Non-verbal</th>
<th>Negotiation</th>
<th>Message abandonment</th>
<th>Attempt to think in English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>2.71</td>
<td>3.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Std. Deviation</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>0.96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 shows that the lowest mean score (2.71) was for message abandonment strategies and the highest one (4.14) for non-verbal strategies. The order of different types of communication strategy use among non-native speakers was: 1- nonverbal, 2- negotiation for meaning, 3- social affective, 4- message reduction, 5- fluency oriented, 6- accuracy oriented, 7- attempt to think in English, and 8- message abandonment strategies.

Table 3. Analysis of the Frequency of Communication Strategies Use among Native Speakers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Social affective</th>
<th>Fluency oriented</th>
<th>Accuracy oriented</th>
<th>Message reduction</th>
<th>Non-verbal</th>
<th>Negotiation</th>
<th>Message abandonment</th>
<th>Attempt to think in English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>1.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Std. Deviation</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As indicated in Table 3, the mean scores ranged between (1.66) attempt to think in English strategies and (4.36) social affective strategies. Social affective strategies have the highest mean score among the other strategies. However, the lowest mean among the other strategies, which is (1.66), is attempt to think in English strategies. The order of different types of communication strategy use among native speakers of English was: 1- social affective, 2- negotiation for meaning, 3- nonverbal, 4- message reduction, 5- accuracy oriented, 6- fluency oriented, 7- message abandonment, and 8- attempt to think in English strategies.

Table 4 displays the comparison of the communications strategies which were used by the native speakers and non-native speakers of English. It shows whether there was a statistically significant difference among all the eight strategies that were used by the participants of these two groups.
As indicated in Table 4, the level of significance was lower than 0.05 and thus the hypothesis was rejected, claiming that there is a significant difference between native and non-native speakers in terms of types of communication strategies use.

To explore whether there was a statistically significant difference between male and female participants in native speaker and non-native speaker groups, the data were subjected to two independent-samples t-tests. The results are tabulated as below.

As Table 5 shows, the t value was 0.514 and as the level of significance was higher than 0.05 (P=0.609), it is indicated that there is no statistically significant difference between male and female Iranian EFL learners in terms of using communication strategies.

Table 6 indicated that the t value was -4.022 and the level of significance was lower than 0.05 (P=0.001); thus, there is a statistically significant difference between male and female native speakers of English in terms of communication strategies use.
4. Discussion and Conclusion

This present study aimed at investigating the Iranian male and female EFL learners’ use of communication strategies in terms of frequency and order and also comparing them with male and female native speakers of English. In addition, gender differences in the use of communication strategies were explored among both native speakers and non-native speakers of English. According to the results of the study, it has been found that the most frequently used communication strategies differed among native speakers and non-native speakers. EFL learners preferred the non-verbal strategies while native speakers used social affective strategies most often. This finding was in line with Mahardhika et al.’s (2014) findings which stated that non-lingistic strategies were among the frequent ones. Nonverbal strategy was the first type of communication strategy which has been used by non-native speakers (tourism and hotel management students as well as EFL learner) this means, they prefer to use eye contact in order to attract the attention of their listeners or they use gestures and facial expressions to give hints and help the listener guess what they want to say. Unlike non-native speakers, social affective strategy was the first type of communication strategies which has been used by native speakers. According to this strategy, as Nakatani (2006) also stated, native speakers are willing to use English and to risk making mistakes, they also behave socially in such a way as to give a good impression, avoid silence during interaction and they try to control their own anxiety and enjoy the process of oral communication because English is their L1.

Message abandonment strategy was the last type of communication strategy which was used by non-native speakers. Based on this strategy, when learners face difficulties executing their original verbal plan, they tend to give up their attempt to communicate, leave the message unfinished, or seek help from others to continue the conversation, but considering the results of the questionnaire, although this strategy was the last preferred one, it can be assumed that they wouldn't abandon their conversation suddenly and would prefer to make conclusion and apologize before giving up their communication. As for the native speakers, attempt to think in English strategy is the last type of communication strategy which was used. They believed that language can't directly be translated word for word into another language; for example, if we translate Persian to English, then our sentences will be awful in meaning and structures; thus, language should be produced as smoothly as possible so as not to disappoint addresses by pauses, repetitions, etc. They claimed that English was their L1; however, if it was not, they would do their best not to think in L2.

Concerning gender differences, it was indicated that there was no difference between male and female non-native speakers, yet male and female native speakers showed differences in their use of communication strategies. Most of the previous studies, some of which were mentioned in this study, showed differences between men and women in the use of communication strategies (e.g. Ehrman & Oxford, 1995; Gascoigne, 2002, and Aslan, 2009) and the findings of this study which were related to English native speakers were in line with these research projects. However,
Mahardhika et al. (2014) revealed no gender differences in the use of communication strategies; hence, the results related to Iranian EFL learners were compatible with those of Mahardhika et al.'s study. In between, there were studies which did not show sheer results; indeed, their findings were partial. Song (1998), Kho (2006), and Wang (2008) demonstrated that men and women differed on the one hand and they were similar on the other hand.

It can be concluded that Iranian EFL learners' mindset concerning native speakers of English differ although they learn English as a foreign language and they seem to follow native speakers cultural and social patterns. The non-native speakers in this study were intermediate EFL learners; it can be assumed that learners with higher language proficiency might come closer to native speakers as Poulisse (1987) also believed that lower level learners of language tend to use compensatory strategies less due to their lexical problems. The second conclusion drawn is that gender differences exist in all dimensions of language use and cultural issues contribute to such a discrepancy. Presumably, gender differences can be observed in language learners who have more contacts with English native speakers. It seems that they don't have language problems and they can negotiate their meaning easily; thus, they can represent gender differences clearly.

References


