

**RESEARCH PAPER****Undergraduate Students' Use of Communication Strategies: A Case Study of Thall University, Bhakkar****¹Iqra Bashir, ²Dr Abdus Samad* and ³Hassan Alamgeer**

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***Corresponding Author** abdussamad@kum.edu.pk**ABSTRACT**

The major aim of the current study is to investigate the use of communicative strategies by undergraduate English students of Thall University, Bhakkar. The study employed mixed-method approach by employing both quantitative and qualitative methods to collect data. A questionnaire was administered to 100 undergraduate students who were randomly selected from English Department. Subsequently, an interview type communicative activity was carried out with the participants. The data were analysed following the taxonomy of Celce-Murcia, Dornyei, and Thurrell (1950). The findings indicated that the students use four principal and ten sub-types of communicative strategies while communicating in English. The major strategies include avoidance, achievement, stalling/time-gaining, and interactional. Certain other sub strategies include such as code switching, topic avoidance, message abandonment, using fillers, gambits, and hesitation devices. The study offered certain recommendations for further studies and also presented pedagogical implications.

Keywords: Communication Strategies (CSs), Communication, ESL, Thall University**Introduction**

Speaking skill is considered to be a productive one which serves as a means of oral communication. It is recognized as the primary form of language and holds a prominent position among the language skills in terms of communication. It is evident that a significant portion of human interaction occurs through speaking. In language communication, one cannot claim to be a superior speaker or listener. There are individuals who may not be able to speak a target language flawlessly but still can effectively communicate in it. Furthermore, the primary objective of language learning is to develop the capacity to communicate effectively through speaking.

Researchers who have worked on CSs suggest that specific communication methods must be taught to the learners of ESL or EFL to cope with communication challenges and achieve communicative objectives (Nakatani, 2005). The current study examines the use of CSs by Pakistani English Learners in higher educational institutions. English is graded as L2 for Pakistani Students; in Pakistan, English holds the status of official language. Significantly, in academic institutions, it holds prominence for being a compulsory course for the learners. English is recognized as one of the most extensively utilized languages; likewise in Pakistan, it is employed as a second language to communicate in. However, it might project a lot of hurdles during the act of speaking because many students happen to be unfamiliar with English language. English language proficiency is deemed compulsory for securing admission in prominent educational institutions and recruitment in renowned departments. English language proficiency is required for catering future economic possibilities and attaining job success in trade, research, technology, and education, both at local and international levels. Pakistan is no exception to this phenomenon; students and parents identify the ability to communicate successfully as the primary purpose of learning English language (Abbas, 1993).

Communication strategies involve a collaborative effort by both parties engaged in communication to achieve effective level of communication. Successful communication is the shared responsibility of both the speaker and the listener. When participants realize a lack of understanding while communicating in a certain language, they may opt for various strategies such as paraphrasing or avoiding a particular topic, as outlined by Cita & Prasetyarini (2018).

Bachman (1990) states communicative language ability as an integration of language competence and its effective application in specific contexts to accomplish communicative objectives. This ability includes strategic competence which involves the use of communication strategies to enhance communication effectiveness.

The researcher has employed the Celce-Murcia, Dornyei and Thurrell taxonomy to analyze the data in this study. The Celce-Murcia communication strategies taxonomy has been chosen for its comprehensive framework in understanding language use in communication strategies (Fauziati, 2010). The aim of using this taxonomy is to facilitate an uninterrupted communication and maintain its flow.

Based on the aforementioned facts, the current research aims to investigate into the use of communication strategies by undergraduate students at Thall University, Bhakkar (TUB). The focus of the study is on identifying and describing different types of communication strategies that students apply during their classes based on formal speaking. The rationale behind this research is two-fold. First, it aims to explore the strategies that students employ to achieve their intended communication goals while having conversations with others. Secondly, it seeks to determine the most appropriate communication strategies for university students. To achieve this aim, the researcher will draw on previous studies related to communication strategies.

Hafez (2004) stated that, according to specific surveys, Pakistani learners were "barely capable of using English for various communicative objectives". The author concluded that, despite spending several years in studying English language, poor communication in this very language was due to lack of understanding of how to teach communication systematically. Throughout out the extensive academic phase as a student of English language, the researcher discovered that many learners, in response of questions, knew the answer but could not communicate it in English. Hence, they were compelled to utter, "I do not know", or, "I can answer the question in my mother tongue, but I cannot explain it in English".

It has been observed that undergraduate students of Thall University, Bhakkar start speaking their mother tongue when required to communicate in English. In a situation like that, Pakistani learners appear to be at a loss for what to do. If students are taught how to deal with this problem regularly, they may not lose interest in learning English. There are some factors due to which learners fail to communicate effectively; lack of communicative competence is one of them. In Pakistan, English is taught through Grammar Translation Method (GTM), which focuses on reading and writing skills. This method mainly targets exam preparation rather than developing learners' speaking skills. Furthermore, teachers are compelled to use GTM as syllabus is synthetic in nature; they can use advanced teaching methods if prescribed syllabus is functional in nature.

Literature Review

Communication Strategies

The first crucial stage is to define a communicative strategy in a precise manner that proves to be challenging. Communication breakdowns serve as the primary purpose of communication strategy. Corder and Stern (1983) have maintained that communication

strategy is a technique. Realistically speaking, a process is a method of doing something learned through extensive practice instead of merely putting in an effort to perform something. Although communication strategy appears to fit in the description, yet the technique is more appropriate since communication strategy requires a specific method of instruction in the English classroom, a lot of time and practice.

However, the idea behind applying communication strategies is to address issues and challenges in the process of communication. According to Tarone (1983), the proper target languages have certain rules so it is considered a challenge to reach communicative goals. Students may experience problems either related to expression or comprehension during communication. According to Faraech and Kasper (1983), communication strategy aids students in reaching communicative objectives. Therefore, students can use communication strategy as a roadmap for achieving effective communication. Thus, the speaker employs a communicative strategy to fulfill communicative goals and resolve communication issues.

Chuanchaisit and Prapphal (2009) argue that strategy is always connected to problem-solving; however, it does not always result in a solution. Keyton (2001), on the other hand, claims that a strategy is a method for problem-solving. The users opt for any strategy for it is handy in helping them overcome difficulties and find a solution where they feel most comfortable. According to Mirzaei and Heidari (2012), communication strategies are systematic tactics used by a speaker to explain his/her meaning. It can, therefore, be concluded that oral communication techniques are a way to decipher a participant's intended meaning during any conversation.

Likewise, Thornbury (2005) has asserted that communication strategy (CS) exists as a very effective way for the second language (L2) learners to reach a specific degree of communicative understanding. While learning a language, CS plays a crucial role in figuring out ways to bridge the communication gap between students and teachers. According to Canal et al. (2009), CS is a systematic communication-enhancing tool which is used to resolve communication issues and prevent communication breakdown. Learners, who deliver and receive information verbally in L2, benefit from having practical oral communication skills.

Selinker and Savignon (1972) viewed teaching of communication methods to L2 learners as a very crucial aspect of learning process. Tarone et al. (1976) later categorized these methods into four categories: Phonology, Morphology, Syntax, and Lexicon. These categories refer to the various elements and skills which are involved in effective second language communication. They devised a structure and vocabulary for communication methods that have served as the foundation for further research on this topic. They strongly recommended teaching these problem-solving tools. Later, Faerch and Kasper (1983) in the same line, extended study on this topic by exploring communication tactics and, thus, contributed a great deal in enhancing understanding of the phenomenon. They built upon the previous work of Selinker and Savignon; thus, have further developed the field. Both of these studies have had a significant impact on second language teaching and learning; their findings are continuously contributing to language pedagogy today.

Bialystok (1990) spoke about the various theories about communication strategies presented by the researchers including Faerch et al. (1983). The writer has made the most significant observation on their views as they use the psychological process of speech production as a starting point for analyzing communication strategies. Moreover, she prefers teaching linguistic structure over teaching instructional tactics. Following that, a wide range of researchers have showed their interest regarding use of communication strategies. Numerous studies on various competence levels and methodology of teaching communication methods have been carried out over the time contributing theoretically to the field (Nakatani & Dornyei, 2005).

Psychological Concept about Communicative Strategies

Various conceptualizations discussed earlier have one thing in common: they define CS primarily through verbal means. Other researchers, such as Bialystok (1990) and the Nijmegen Group (Bongaerts, Kellerman, and Poulisse), have adopted completely different approaches in their studies. Although both adopted Faerch and Kasper's concept of CS, yet they claim that CS is fundamentally a mental process. CS research should focus on the cognitive factors that cause strategic language use. They argue that using taxonomies with questionable validity could lead to neglecting the mental, psychological, and psycholinguistic aspects of communication strategy (CS) use. Instead, the focus would be primarily on verbalizations without considering the underlying psychological processes. Indeed, Bialystok and the Nijmegen Group's argument has been supported by the growth of diverse product-oriented categories in research.

Communication Strategies (CSs) as Communicative Competence (CC)

Communication strategy is not a stand alone idea but a crucial component of communicative skills (Canale & Swain, 1980). The authors state that strategic competence is essential for communicative competence because it allows language learners to make up for communication breakdowns which are brought on by a lack of language proficiency. Lin (2007) believes that communicative tactics are crucial to strategic competence. According to the author, a learner's ability to transfer and absorb the message is the primary purpose of strategic competence. Strategic competence appears to include tactics that can help language learners make up for communication breakdowns and accomplish communicative objectives. It seems vital to highlight that academics have suggested even communication techniques are also beneficial for language learning (Faerch and Kasper, 1983). The researchers have made the case that language learning and communication techniques are connected. One could argue that while communication techniques enhance communicative skills language learning strategies help learners become more proficient in their native tongue.

Material and Methods

Research design is an essential aspect of any research study. It provides a plan or framework for conducting the research, including the methods and techniques that will be used to collect and analyze data. It helps to ensure that the research is conducted in a systematic and logical manner, and that the results should be reliable and valid.

Every research has its own philosophy which is based on topic and method to conduct research. The present research is based on the philosophy of interpretivism. Interpretivism is a research philosophy that emphasizes the subjective nature of human behavior and social phenomena. The researcher has employed the strategy of a case study. A case study is a research method that involves an in-depth examination of a specific case or phenomenon. It is often used in interpretive research, as it allows the researcher to understand the complex and unique aspects of a particular case. The study has been designed to investigate into the given topic by following inductive approach. Inductive approach involves collecting data and then developing theories or hypotheses on their bases. The researcher begins with a general idea and then uses the data to form a more specific understanding.

From data collection to data analysis, the study has adopted a mixed approach using an explanatory sequential design. Mix methods research is a research approach that combines both qualitative and quantitative methods in a single study. The researcher collected quantitative data through questionnaire and qualitative data by means of interview. According to Creswell (2011), in an explanatory sequential design, quantitative and qualitative data are progressively collected in two phases and combined to produce the

results. In this study design, quantitative data was gathered first, and then qualitative data was acquired to complement the quantitative results. The questionnaire was based on “Five Likert Scale”, while semi-structured interviews were meticulously framed by fulfilling all the prerequisites. The researcher adopted all the necessary measures to ensure the availability of valid and reliable results.

Results and Discussions

Quantitative analysis involves counting and measuring the frequency or occurrence of certain events or phenomenon. In this case, the frequency of communication techniques used by the students was counted and analyzed to determine the most commonly used techniques. The percentages representing each technique's frequency were determined to explain the result with an aim to ascertain whether the students' communication strategies varied from those already employed by university students.

Based on the data analysis, it can be concluded the Thall University students use different communication strategies in their communication. The use of different communication strategies by the participant students can put significant impacts on the teaching and learning process. Here are some ways in which the data on these communication strategies can influence:

Understanding the various communication strategies employed by students can help their teaching methods to accommodate different learning styles. For instance, some students might benefit more from visual aids, while others prefer verbal explanations. By analyzing the data on communication strategies, teacher can adapt their instructional techniques to better match the preferences and needs of their students.

Different communication strategies can impact on how students give and receive feedback. By understanding the preferences of students in terms of feedback delivery, instructors can provide critiques and guidance in ways that are more meaningful and constructive. Additionally, data on communication strategies can inform about how assessment methods may be designed and implemented to align with the manners in which students communicate their knowledge and understanding. Students come from diverse backgrounds, each with their own preferred communication styles.

In this research, the researcher has analyzed the data by using the Celce-Murcia communication strategies as it stands out as a suitable framework for understanding the meaning of language use in communication strategies (Fauziati, 2010). The responses from the conducted interviews were transcribed to allow the researchers to familiarize themselves with the data. Langen (2009) cited Holloway and Wheeler (2002) to explain that qualitative research is a form of social inquiry that focuses on individuals to interpret and understand their experiences and lives.

The research findings indicate that the university students utilized four communication strategies proposed by Celce-Murcia, Dornyei, and Thurrell in their Communication Strategies model (1995). Specifically, the study identified four primary types and ten subtypes of communication strategies that were employed: Avoidance Strategies, Achievement Strategies, Stalling or Time-Gaining Strategies and Interactional Strategies.

According to Tarone (1997), one way that speakers use to cope with unfamiliar language items or structures is to avoid discussion on the associated idea altogether.

Topic Avoidance

Bialystok (1997) defines topic avoidance as a technique employed by language learners to steer clear of certain subjects that may require the use of unfamiliar vocabulary or grammar structures. To illustrate this strategy and clarify its meaning, an example and explanation of topic avoidance has been given below:

Researcher: What's your aim in life?

Respondent: I want to work as a lecturer, *eee*.... My mother is a lecturer. It is an honorable profession. *I told you before.....Hunn...like that..*

In the given example, the interviewer asked the participant about her life goals; although the participant attempted to answer the question, she encountered difficulties in expressing her thoughts due to a lack of appropriate vocabulary or understanding of the topic. Consequently, she chose to avoid the subject and responded with "I think so, Hunnn, like that". Later on, during the interview, she clarified that she was unable to articulate her intended message.

Message Abandonment

When a message is abandoned due to linguistic challenges, it is not completed. It is often observed by students' communication patterns where they initially attempt to convey a message but encounter difficulties in understanding the required form or rules, leading them to halt their communication (Tarone, 1997).

The researcher asked: Why do you want to become a doctor?

Participant replied: A doctor is a person who saves others' lives by treating them well. He helps people in curing all (*pauses for a while*) ..., therefore I want to become a doctor.

In this case, the respondent briefly paused before abandoning the message. She addressed the students in this regard and asked, "Why do you want to become a doctor?" She took a short pause from speaking in the middle of her explanation to elaborate on why she had decided to become a doctor. She was unable to complete the sentences with the next word.

Achievement Strategies

An achievement strategy is employed by a learner when they opt to pursue their original communication objective despite lacking sufficient resources or knowledge, by compensating in some way or making an effort to acquire the necessary items. This strategy encompasses eight sub-types including code-switching, word coinage, all-purpose words, non-linguistic means, word restructuring, and approximation (Faerch & Kasper, 1983).

All-Purpose Words

When students use general words or phrases instead of specific ones to express their ideas, it is known as the use of all-purpose words. The following example and explanation illustrates how students employ all-purpose words:

The researcher asked: Why do you want to become a teacher?

Participant replied: I want to become part of this honorable profession, a *thing* that will inspire the students.

The student's use of the phrase "a thing" in reference to the topic under discussion during the panel discussion could have been improved. It is recommended to use a word with a clear definition, such as "the topic" instead of "a thing" which has several meanings including event, situation, act, and so on. This is especially important when the student was appointed to lead the discussion panel.

Restructuring

When students face communication problems, they may use the restructuring technique to resolve them by leaving their utterances unfinished. Instead, they deliver the intended message by using an alternate plan. The following dialogue provides an example:

The researcher asked: what is your aim in life?

Respondent replied: My aim was in life, *if I want to become a doctor, I want to become a doctor* because I want to help those who cannot afford the cost of treatment for many difficult diseases.

In the given example, the respondent's intended meaning was "offering", but she faced problems when she tried to state. Then, she changed her lines to say "I want to become a doctor" after discovering her mistake. The researcher indicates that the respondent used a restructuring technique after realizing her error and replacing it with a proper one.

Literal Translation

A lexical item, idiom, compound word, or structure may be translated literally from the first language to the second language as an achievement strategy. The following example explains how the students use literal translation:

Respondents: *Which is happening now?* So, the topic is, "What are the benefits of mobile phones in our lives?"

The respondent used a literal translation in the given case directly from L2 to L1; she translated, "*is waqt tak bhi benefit provide kraha ha*" in L1. It should have been "*Which is happening right now*" in L2. There was no need for it.

Code-Switching

Using a word from the first language (L1) with its corresponding pronunciation or using a word from a third language (L3) with its corresponding pronunciation while speaking in the second language (L2) is known as code-switching. The usage of the code-switching approach is shown in the following example:

Respondent: *Yh bht sasta hogia ha*, I mean its prices are very low.

In the example, the respondent used a code-switching method to address her issue with a lack of L2 resources. She spoke it in L1 automatically. She provided the following justification throughout the interview process:

I'm nervous since I don't comprehend the topic. The topic is multilingualism. I speak Urdu 'Yh bht sasta hogia ha' instantly.

Non-Linguistic Means

Non-linguistic approaches, such as mime, pointing, gestures, drawing images, etc., are frequently used to convey complete concepts without using words, or, to support verbal

strategies with visual examples. The example that follows shows how the students used non-linguistic methods to refer to what they wanted to communicate.

Respondent: If the mobile phone is *here*, we can connect it to the internet and send email, videos, etc. to the other side where we want.

The demonstrative "here" is used to point towards a specific person or object in close proximity to the speaker. It indicates that the person or object being referred to is in the immediate physical location of the speaker. In the example given, the respondent utilized non-linguistic means by physically pointing to the explanation of the demonstrative for the place.

Stalling for Time-gaining Strategies

When a speaker recognizes a communication issue with their interlocutor, they may choose to pause or employ a time-gaining strategy. It is noticeable when the speaker starts to discuss a subject but is unable to finish and stops mid-sentence (Faerch & Kasper, 1984).

Fillers/ Hesitation/ Gambits

The fillers are commonly used by students when they require additional time to gather their thoughts and maintain the flow of communication. Here is an example of the analysis to provide a clear explanation of this strategy:

Respondent: We can make *ee* photos and videos. Many people do not even own a camera nowadays *Ummm.....* because their phone has all the image and video *ee* capturing capabilities that they require.....*Long pause eeeee*.

The student employed the filler strategy four times in the above example, using the fillers like "eee" and "ummm". She spoke in such manner to buy herself some time to think of the correct language.

Self and Others' Repetition

Self-repetition is a communication strategy that involves repeating a word or a sequence of words immediately after saying them. This strategy, as described by Widiarini (2016), is used by speakers to emphasize a particular point, provide clarification, or, reinforce their message. It serves a similar purpose to the use of fillers. The students' self-repetition is demonstrated by the following:

Respondent: *Originally, phones used SMS Originally, phones used SMS* technology, allowing the sending of letters, numbers, and symbols, but more recently, *technology has allowed multimedia, technology has allowed multimedia* such as photos and videos, to be sent too.

The student respondent used the self-repetition technique in the case mentioned above by repeating the sentences "*Originally, phones used SMS*" and "*technology has allowed multimedia*" before continuing. She repeated the previous utterance to find the intended word when expressing her ideas rather than using incorrect utterances. Additionally, self-repetition was employed to fill in the speech's prolonged silences. She attempted full sentences before the panel discussion on "What are the benefits of mobile phones in our lives".

Interactional Strategy

When students lack verbal resources, learners adopt an interactional strategy. It is divided into three subtypes: appeals for help, meaning negotiation strategies, and responses (Widiarini, 2016).

Appeal for Help

The speaker either directly (e.g., what do you call?) or unintentionally (e.g., looking at friends, blank look, pause, etc.) requests assistance from the other person. The following example demonstrates how they ask for assistance:

Respondent: Smartphones allow video watching (pauses for a while and looks at the friends) as well as listening to radio, podcasts, or music. Plus... pause... looks at the friend)...if you attend a real-life event.

This example demonstrates the use of the appeal for help strategy by a student. The student employed this technique by seeking assistance from her friend regarding the topic being discussed. She was asked, "What are the benefits of mobile phones in our lives?" In response, she paused briefly before turning to look at her friend because she could not continue her presentation.

Conclusions

This study was aimed to explore different communication strategies used by the students. Mixed method approach involving a close ended questionnaire and interviews was adopted for data collection. Based on the data analysis, it can be concluded the Thall University students use various communication strategies in varying frequency. According to the findings of the study, the students of the English Department at Thall University, Bhakkar supplement their communication by using four main types of strategies; Avoidance Strategies, Achievement Strategies, Time Gaining Strategies and Interactive Strategies. They use sub types of avoidance strategies such as topic avoidance and message abandonment. Time gaining Strategies come into action in the form of fillers, gambits, and hesitation devices. Achievement or Compensatory Strategies are evident when students use tools like literal translation, code-switching, and non-linguistic means. Likewise, the participants were also found to be using Interactional Strategies like appeal for help. For future researchers, it is recommended that for a deeper understanding of the concept a research may be attempted with a larger sample involving students of different academic programs. Moreover, it would be also beneficial to conduct a study on the topic in hand by using other qualitative methods like observation and focus interviews, etc.

Study Implications

The present study offers valuable contribution in the form of the following Implications:

In the classroom, a teacher can improve learners' communication strategies by conducting a discussion session among learners. The use of electronic media can play a positive role in enhancing the communication strategies of learners. At the initial level of learning, a class or a particular time should be reserved for learning communication strategies. Teachers should play a model role in the implementation/adaptation of CSs in the classroom. Competitions can be conducted in the classroom regarding better use of CSs. CSs can be enhanced through the use of role-play activities.

The teaching of CSs should be included in the syllabus so that learners can adopt this phenomenon at the initial level of learning. The areas where learners need improvement, while using CSs, should be responded there and then. The wrong use of CSs should not be taken seriously and learners should be encouraged to use these strategies in their daily

lives. Learners should practice the CSs in the classroom and at their homes, neglecting their contextual background to master the art of effective speaking. The atmosphere of the class and home may be made conducive to the learner's requirements.

Limitations

Every study has its limitations, and this particular study is no exception. First, the participant pool was restricted to undergraduate students enrolled in the English Department which may not fully represent the diversity of students across different academic disciplines or levels. Second, the data collection primarily relied on a close-ended questionnaire supplemented by transcriptions of open-ended responses from the participants. While this approach provided valuable insights, it may not have captured the full depth and shades of participants' perspectives. Thirdly, the data were collected from the participants across three semesters, so perception of students from other academic stages could not be recorded. Lastly, the study focused solely on communication-related content and did not incorporate participants' content courses, which could have provided a broader understanding of their experiences.

Recommendations

Firstly, this study may be replicated to check whether or not the results are reliable. Secondly, this study may be conducted with larger sample and with other research methods to find a more comprehensive view of the topic. Thirdly, the topic may be investigated with English as a non-major students to see whether or not their strategies differ.

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