

The Use of Speaking Strategies by Iranian EFL University Students

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Abstract

Speaking is one important skill in language learning. EFL students are sometimes faced with problems, while speaking to their interlocutors due to the lack of sufficient linguistic knowledge, and they have to quit the conversation. This study examines the use of speaking strategies by some Iranian male and female EFL university students. The use of these strategies was examined in relation to the EFL university students' gender and their proficiency level based on which, they were classified as low, intermediate and high-proficient groups. A sample of 100 Iranian EFL students was randomly selected. The sample consisted of students with different gender and proficiency levels. The questionnaire of communication strategies use was administered. It included five main categories in 30 items for speaking. The results showed no differences related to the use of speaking strategies by EFL students and their gender. In relation to the use of speaking strategies by EFL students and their proficiency levels, no differences were observed, either. The implications of this study are discussed in this article.

Key Words: Iranian EFL students, communication strategies, gender, English proficiency level

Introduction

Life today is extremely different from what it used to be. With the advent of so many new technologies, machines and equipment, living has dramatically changed so that what was impossible to do in the past and human beings could not imagine it has turned out to be a fact today. These changes include transportation, communication, medicine, engineering, etc. Concerning communication, it has become really easy and practical for human beings to communicate with each other so that one can contact others within a few seconds via an e-mail. Who could believe the practicality of this in the past? However, there still exists a problem. English has been accepted as an international language among the whole nations for communication so those familiar with this language can make the most use and benefits of new technologies since the language explaining how to use them is English. The latest news relating to the latest technologies are printed in English. English is spoken all over the world, that is, one can communicate easily with both native speakers of English and non-native ones if she/he is proficient in English. As a result, learning English is a must. In relation to learning English language among different learners, some researchers came to an agreement that some learners seemed to be successful regardless of methods or techniques of teaching. They began to see the importance of individual variation in language learning. Certain people seemed to be endowed with abilities to succeed; while others lacked those abilities. This observation led Rubin (1975) and Stern (1975) to describe "good" language learners in terms of personal characteristics, styles, and strategies. Rubin (Rubin and Thompson, 1982) later summarized fourteen such characteristics. (See Brown, Fifth Edition, p132-133).

During the past two decades, numerous second language acquisition (SLA) researchers (e.g., Bialystok, 1990; Cohen, 1998; McDonough, 1995) have argued for the effectiveness of learner strategies for learning and using a language. It is also believed that learners can improve communicative proficiency by developing an ability to use specific communication strategies that enable them to compensate for their target language deficiency (e.g. Bialystok, 1990; Dorney, 1995). Communication strategies were typically divided into two

types: achievement or compensatory strategies and reduction or avoidance strategies (see Bialystok, 1990; Dorney & Scott, 1997; Faerch & Kasper, 1983; Nakatani, 2005; Tarone, 1981). Using the former type of strategies, learners work on an alternative plan for reaching their original goal by means of whatever sources are available. These strategies are regarded as “good learner” behaviors. Using the latter type of strategies, learners avoid solving a communication problem and give up on conveying their message. These behaviors affect interaction negatively and are common among low-proficiency learners. However, as Clennel (1995) pointed out, opinions diverge on what constitutes a communicative strategy, and researchers in this field have used several competing taxonomies for communication strategies.

To sum up, researchers have seldom examined the effect of variables such as gender and English proficiency level on communication strategies use in Iranian context. It is not now obvious how effective these factors are on communication strategy use. There is not much known about the extent to which individual and educational factors play a role in shaping communication strategy use and how these communication strategies make a suitable school syllabi to meet teaching and learning requirements.

Communication strategy use may be influenced by gender and the level of English proficiency level. There is not much information about the extent to which these factors influence on communication strategy use. People like Dornyei and Thurell (1991, 1994), Faerch and Kasper (1983, 1986), Tarone and Yule (1989) and Willems (1987) advocate communication strategy instruction and recommend pedagogical guidelines and argue that CS teaching is conducive to development of strategic competence.

The present study is an attempt to examine gender differences in relation to the use of speaking strategies by Iranian male and female EFL students and the most and the least frequently speaking strategies used by low-proficient and high-proficient Iranian EFL students. To this end, the following research questions were formulated:

Research Questions

1. What is the university EFL students' frequency use of oral speaking strategies?
2. What are the most frequently and the least frequently speaking strategies used by high-proficient Iranian EFL learners?
3. What are the most frequently and the least frequently speaking strategies used by low-proficient EFL learners?
4. Are there any significant differences in the use of speaking strategies between male and female EFL learners?

Literature Review

This part reviews the impact of learners' gender and language proficiency level on the use of speaking strategies. The bulk of research on communication strategy use started in the 1960s and has continued up to now. Communication strategy use is here discussed with reference to two variables: 1) gender and 2) language proficiency level. In addition, the findings of studies into two specific areas are discussed.

An Overview of Language Learning Strategies

The word strategy comes from the ancient Greek word “strategia” meaning steps or actions taken for the purpose of winning a war. The warlike meaning of strategia has fortunately fallen away, but the goal and directedness and control remain in the modern version of the word (Oxford, 1990). A given strategy is neither good nor bad; it is essentially neutral until the context of its use is thoroughly considered. What makes a strategy positive and helpful for a given learner? A strategy is useful if the following conditions are present (a)

the strategy relates well to the L2 task at hand, (b) the strategy fits the particular students learning style preferences to one degree or another, and (c) the student employs the strategy effectively and links it with other relevant strategies. Strategies that fulfill these conditions “make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations” (Oxford, 1990, p.8). Research in learning strategy (LS) instruction indicates that strategy instruction may also facilitate language learning. For more than a decade, there has been a growing interest in LS, including how to integrate strategy training in language classroom. Learning strategies are specific actions, behaviors, and procedures involved in the process of learning. There are a number of definitions and frameworks of language LS, ranging from broad definitions (e.g., Wenden, 1987) to more specific characterization (e.g., Oxford & Cohen, 1992). L2 learning strategies are specific behaviors or thought processes used by students to enhance their own L2 learning. Learning strategies can also enable students to become more independent, autonomous, lifelong learners (Allwright, 1990; 1991). Yet students are not always aware of the power of consciously using L2 learning strategies for making learning quicker and more effective (Nyikos & Oxford, 1993). Skilled teachers should help their students develop an awareness of learning strategies and enable them to use a wider range of appropriate strategies.

Definitions of Speaking Communication Strategies Adapted in the Present Study

Social Affective Strategies: They are related to students’ affective factors in social context. In order to communicate smoothly, these learners try to control their own anxiety and enjoy the process of oral communication. They are willing to encourage themselves to use English and to risk making mistakes. They also behave socially in such a way as to give a good impression and avoid silence during interaction. (Items 1-7).
Example: 1. I encourage myself to express what I want to say.

Fluency-oriented Strategies: They are related to the students’ fluency of communication. They pay attention to the rhythm; intonation, pronunciation, and clarity of their speech to improve the listeners’ comprehension. They also consider their speaking context and take their time for the purpose of not sending inappropriate messages to their interlocutors.
Example: I pay attention to the conversation flow.

Accuracy-oriented: They are related to the speakers’ desire to speak accurately. These learners pay attention to the forms of their speech and seek grammatical accuracy by self-correcting when they feel they have made mistakes. They want to speak appropriately like a native English speaker even though this is not an easy job. Being conscious of accuracy in speech seems to be another essential strategy for developing communication ability in a foreign language.
Example: I pay attention to my pronunciation.

Negotiation for meaning while speaking: They are related to the speakers’ attempts to negotiate with their interlocutors. In order to keep their interaction and avoid a communication breakdown, interlocutors are expected to conduct modified interaction. These speakers need to check listeners’ understanding of their intentions. They sometimes repeat their speech and give examples of terms until the listener is able to figure out their intended meaning. They also pay attention to the reaction of their interlocutor to see whether they can understand each other.
Example: While speaking, I pay attention to the listener’s reaction to my speech.

Compensation Strategies:

They are related to the speakers' strategic behaviors or actions to create new words, simplify the utterances by using key words, paraphrasing, use of body languages, and asking for help from others.

Example: I use facial expression and gestures to help express what I want to say.

A Study Conducted on Speaking Strategy Use in Iran

Kabirzadeh Najafabadi and Tabatabaei (2012) conducted a survey on the application of speaking strategy by Iranian EFL students learning English in one of the private English teaching institutes in Iran. A summary of their research is as follows: "Speaking is one important skill in the field of language learning. The present article examines the differences of using speaking strategies by Iranian EFL students studying English in one of the private English Teaching Centers in Iran. To measure speaking strategies use, a questionnaire received via internet was given to the students (16 male and 16 female). The aims followed by this study are: 1-examining the relationship between the use of different speaking strategies by Iranian EFL students and their self-evaluated skill level and gender. 2-Differences regarding the frequency of using speaking strategies among male and female students. The results obtained in this study were analyzed through SPSS software. The results showed no difference related to the gender and use of speaking strategies and the frequency of using strategies was different among male and female students therefore communicative-experiential strategies were among the most frequent ones used by both male and female students and affective strategies were among the least frequent ones for male students and the interpersonal strategies were the least frequent ones for female students. Also, there was a relationship between the use of speaking strategies by the students and their self-evaluated skill level. The pedagogical implications in relation to these findings are discussed in this article".

Methodology

In this part, the researcher elaborates on participants, instruments, procedure and data analysis. Each of the relevant parts are explained in details, that is, the participants' characteristics, the whole instruments to collect the necessary data and the ones to analyze the obtained data from the participants are explained perfectly.

Participants

Participants in this study were 100 Iranian EFL university students studying English at Islamic Azad University of Najafabad in Iran, who were randomly selected. Since gender was an important variable in the present study, the researcher conducted the study on two equal numbers of Iranian EFL students, that is, fifty male students and fifty female students. The participants were studying English in MA and BA grades. The reason behind choosing both BA and MA students lies in having proficiency as the mediatory variable. All the participants in this study were of Iranian nationality. Their ages ranged between 21- 30 years.

Some of the students did not answer the items of Oral Communication Strategy Inventory completely; therefore they were replaced by others. The participants in this study had no experience of living abroad or in any English speaking country. Due to the equal educational system for all the participants in this study and the participants not living in any English speaking country, the researcher could feel confident that all participants of the present study had experienced similar exposure to English.

Measurements and Variables

The focus of this study was on investigating the use of speaking strategies by Iranian EFL students studying English in one of Azad Universities in Iran. So, the researcher wanted to see if there exist any significant relationships between using these strategies by Iranian EFL students and their level of proficiency and gender.

Instruments

To collect data in this study, two instruments were used: 1- the OPT Test, Version one (Oxford Placement Test) which is a standard and valid placement test for ranking the students' proficiency levels. This instrument consists of 60 multiple-choice items and each item includes four answers, one of which is correct and the other three ones are distractors. The test consists of two parts: part one (questions 1-40) and part two (questions 41-60). The standard time to answer the whole test is thirty minutes. 2-the Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI) adapted from Nakatani's (2006) Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI), which has been designed for measuring the use of oral communication strategies in EFL contexts. To check the validity of the OCSI in Iranian context, the researcher asked the thesis advisor and six graduate students to review all the items carefully and provide feedback afterwards. The researcher then revised the description of some items based on the received feedbacks to make them more specifically and clearly stated for the participants to read and comprehend. Also, before conducting the pilot study, eight EFL university students had been asked to review the items to ensure that all the items were clearly understood. To sum up, the OCSI consists of two parts, the first part, that is, the EFL students' biodata including their full name and sex. The second part consists of thirty 5-point Likert-scale strategy items. The categories for speaking strategies were as follows: social affective, Fluency-oriented, Accuracy-oriented, Negotiation for meaning while speaking, and Compensation strategies. To answer each item, the participants were required to select one out of the following five replies, ranging from *Never or almost never true of me marked as 1 point*, to *Usually not true of me marked as 2 point*, *Slightly true of me marked as 3 point*, *Usually true of me marked as 4 point*, and *Always or almost always true of me marked as 5point*.

Table 1. Item Replies and the Corresponding Scores in the OCSI

| Replies | Scores |
|------------------------------------|--------|
| Never or almost never true of me | 1 |
| Usually not true of me | 2 |
| Slightly true of me | 3 |
| Usually true of me | 4 |
| Always or almost always true of me | 5 |

According to Brown (2001), the researchers should avoid incorporating negative or double negative questions while designing a questionnaire since this may result in misinterpretation and confusion (p.47). Also, the thesis advisor and the researcher thought that strategies should be used positively to increase the success of interactive oral communication. So, some items existing in Nakatani's OCSI were either removed or transferred to other factors to suit the Iranian context under research.

Regarding the speaking strategies, the focus of the study was on the degree and frequency of speaking strategies use among the low and high- proficient male and female Iranian EFL university students so as to determine which speaking strategies were most frequently used and which ones the least frequently used by Iranian EFL university students

and whether there exists any significant relationship between use of these strategies and the students' gender and language proficiency level.

Table 2. The categories and subcategories of speaking strategies used in the research

| | |
|----------------------|--|
| Speaking Strategies: | Social affective Fluency oriented Accuracy oriented Negotiation for meaning |
| Speaking | Compensation |

Procedure

The questionnaire was distributed among Iranian EFL learners in Najafabad Azad University where they were learning English in January of 2014. The students filled out the questionnaire at the end of the class when they could read them carefully and answer them with care. It was required that each EFL student determined his/her sex and educational grade on the top of the questionnaire. Then, they were required to mark their response to the option that best explains their use of speaking strategies. In this part, all the participants expressed the degree of their use of speaking strategies on a 5-point Likert Scale: from 1 for "never or almost never true of me", to 5 for, "always or almost always true of me". There existed no negative item in the questionnaire so the five-point Likert Scale for all the items were the same. The OPT was administered to the students in another session since administering the test and the questionnaire simultaneously might make the students tired and this could lead to students' carelessness while answering the test or the questionnaire. They answered the OPT in 30 minutes.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed considering the variables gender and EFL learners' level of English proficiency. Descriptive statistics were calculated. The mean score and standard deviation for each category and sub-category along with the results of independent group t-test was reported separately. The quantitative analysis of data was done using SPSS software (Version 19) to find the significance of the difference between results if any, and the frequency use of speaking strategies used by both high and low -proficient learners.

Data analysis and results

This part presents data analysis. In this part, the collected data are analyzed and tabulated. As the data were collected by a questionnaire on a Likert Scale, the calculation of mean score for each single item of the questionnaire was possible. SPSS software (Version 20) was used to this aim. Descriptive Statistics for Proficiency Scores of the Students was as follows:

Table 4.1. The Results of Descriptive Statistics for Proficiency Scores of the Students
Descriptive Statistics

Dependent Variable: proficiency

| Sex | group | Mean | Std. Deviation | N |
|-------|-------|---------|----------------|---|
| Males | low | 21.7778 | 2.53859 | 9 |

| | | | | |
|---------|--------------|---------|---------|-----|
| females | intermediate | 33.2727 | 3.71040 | 33 |
| | high | 45.6250 | 2.38672 | 8 |
| | Total | 33.1800 | 7.74778 | 50 |
| | low | 19.5556 | 4.66667 | 9 |
| | intermediate | 33.4138 | 3.97777 | 29 |
| | high | 43.6667 | 2.38683 | 12 |
| | Total | 33.3800 | 8.65410 | 50 |
| | low | 20.6667 | 3.81945 | 18 |
| | Total | 33.3387 | 3.80657 | 62 |
| Total | high | 44.4500 | 2.52305 | 20 |
| | Total | 33.2800 | 8.17248 | 100 |

Table 4.1 shows the means and standard deviations of language proficiency scores for both male and female EFL students classified as “low”, “intermediate” and “high-proficient” and the number of each group is also given.

Post Hoc Tests were run for the groups classified as “low”, “intermediate” and “high-proficient” in this study to see if the mean differences among the groups are significant. The results of these tests are as follow:

Table 4.2. The Results of Post Hoc Tests for the Groups of I and J

Multiple Comparisons

Dependent Variable: proficiency

Scheffe

| (I) group | (J) group | Mean Difference (I-J) | Std. Error | Sig. | 95% Confidence Interval | |
|--------------|--------------|-----------------------|------------|------|-------------------------|-------------|
| | | | | | Lower Bound | Upper Bound |
| Low | intermediate | -12.6720* | .96135 | .000 | -15.0632 | -10.2809 |
| | high | -23.7833* | 1.16657 | .000 | -26.6849 | -20.8818 |
| Intermediate | low | 12.6720* | .96135 | .000 | 10.2809 | 15.0632 |
| | high | -11.1113* | .92335 | .000 | -13.4079 | -8.8147 |
| High | low | 23.7833* | 1.16657 | .000 | 20.8818 | 26.6849 |
| | intermediate | 11.1113* | .92335 | .000 | 8.8147 | 13.4079 |

Based on observed means.

The error term is Mean Square (Error) = 12.893.

*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

Table 4.2 shows the Mean Differences obtained via Multiple Comparisons and indicates that the mean differences among low and intermediate-proficient groups are statistically meaningful. However, no interaction between group and sex is found indicating that the male and female groups did not differ significantly from each other.

The Results of Descriptive Statistics for Speaking Strategies Categories of the Questionnaire

The results of descriptive statistics for speaking strategies categories of the questionnaire were obtained and tabulated as follows:

Table 4.3. The Results of Descriptive Statistics for the Five Categories of Speaking Strategies

| Descriptive Statistics | | | | |
|-------------------------------|-------|--------|----------------|----|
| | group | Mean | Std. Deviation | N |
| socio | low | 3.2540 | .81339 | 18 |
| | high | 3.7571 | .77432 | 20 |
| | Total | 3.5188 | .82261 | 38 |
| flu | low | 2.8704 | .80553 | 18 |
| | high | 3.5000 | .69669 | 20 |
| | Total | 3.2018 | .80553 | 38 |
| accu | low | 3.1190 | .92225 | 18 |
| | high | 4.0143 | .59698 | 20 |
| | Total | 3.5902 | .88261 | 38 |
| nego | low | 3.2222 | .87283 | 18 |
| | high | 4.0600 | .67465 | 20 |
| | Total | 3.6632 | .87377 | 38 |
| comp | low | 3.1333 | .63616 | 18 |
| | high | 3.6100 | .81428 | 20 |
| | Total | 3.3842 | .76460 | 38 |

Table 4.3 shows the means and standard deviations relating to the use of the five categories of speaking strategies by the students classified as low and high-proficient EFL students. The number of students using speaking strategies in each group is also given. The use of speaking strategies by high-proficient EFL University students in a descending order based on the obtained values shown in the above table is as follows:

Negotiation while speaking, accuracy-oriented, social affective, compensation, fluency-oriented strategies.

The value of means for using each category of speaking strategies by high-proficient EFL students shows that negotiation of meaning while speaking with a mean of 4.06 was used more than the other speaking strategies and fluency-oriented strategy with a mean of 3.50 was used less.

The use of speaking strategies by low-proficient EFL University students in a descending order based on the obtained values shown in the above table is as follows: Social affective, negotiation of meaning while speaking, compensation, accuracy-oriented, and fluency-oriented strategies.

The value of means for using each category of speaking strategies by low-proficient EFL students shows that negotiation of meaning while speaking with a mean of 3.25 was used more than the other speaking strategies and fluency-oriented strategy with a mean of 2.87 was used less.

The results of Multivariate Tests for speaking strategies to find the relationships between the use of speaking strategies and the students' gender and their proficiency level, if any.

Multivariate tests were run to see if there exists any difference in relation to the use of speaking strategies and the students' proficiency level as determined according to their OPT Test scores and also the students' gender which was one variable in this study.

Table 4.4. The Results of Multivariate Tests for Speaking Strategies

| Multivariate Tests ^a | | | | | | |
|----------------------------------|--------------------|-------|--------------------|---------------|----------|------|
| Effect | | Value | F | Hypothesis df | Error df | Sig. |
| speakingstrategies | Pillai's Trace | .495 | 7.605 ^b | 4.000 | 31.000 | .000 |
| | Wilks' Lambda | .505 | 7.605 ^b | 4.000 | 31.000 | .000 |
| | Hotelling's Trace | .981 | 7.605 ^b | 4.000 | 31.000 | .000 |
| | Roy's Largest Root | .981 | 7.605 ^b | 4.000 | 31.000 | .000 |
| speakingstrategies * sex | Pillai's Trace | .033 | .268 ^b | 4.000 | 31.000 | .896 |
| | Wilks' Lambda | .967 | .268 ^b | 4.000 | 31.000 | .896 |
| | Hotelling's Trace | .035 | .268 ^b | 4.000 | 31.000 | .896 |
| | Roy's Largest Root | .035 | .268 ^b | 4.000 | 31.000 | .896 |
| speakingstrategies * group | Pillai's Trace | .127 | 1.128 ^b | 4.000 | 31.000 | .361 |
| | Wilks' Lambda | .873 | 1.128 ^b | 4.000 | 31.000 | .361 |
| | Hotelling's Trace | .146 | 1.128 ^b | 4.000 | 31.000 | .361 |
| | Roy's Largest Root | .146 | 1.128 ^b | 4.000 | 31.000 | .361 |
| speakingstrategies * sex * group | Pillai's Trace | .096 | .819 ^b | 4.000 | 31.000 | .523 |
| | Wilks' Lambda | .904 | .819 ^b | 4.000 | 31.000 | .523 |
| | Hotelling's Trace | .106 | .819 ^b | 4.000 | 31.000 | .523 |
| | Roy's Largest Root | .106 | .819 ^b | 4.000 | 31.000 | .523 |

a. Design: Intercept + sex + group + sex * group
Within Subjects Design: speakingstrategies

b. Exact statistic

As table 4.4. shows, Wilks' Lambda for gender is .967, with a Sig. value of .89 (which really means $p > .05$). Because our p value is more than .05, we can conclude that there is not any statistically significant relationship between the use of speaking strategies by students and their gender which is an independent variable in our study meaning that male and female students have equally used speaking strategies.

In relation to the use of speaking strategies by the groups of students labeled as "low" and "high" according to their OPT Scores, as Table 4.11. shows the value of Lambda is .837 with a Sig. value of .36 and $p > .05$, so we can conclude that there exists no relationship between the use of speaking strategies by students and their levels of proficiency.

Also, In relation to the use of speaking strategies by the male and female group of students classified as "low" and "high" in our study, as Table 4.11. shows the value of Lambda is .904, $p = .523$, with a Sig. value of .52. Because our p value is more than .05, we can conclude that there exists no relationship between the use of speaking strategies by students and the students' gender and proficiency levels.

Summary, Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate Iranian EFL university students' use of speaking strategies. Furthermore, the researcher of the study also examined the differences in speaking strategy use between high and low-proficient students as well as male and female students. This part concludes the study by first summarizing its major findings following the order of the four research questions of the study, and then presents the pedagogical implications of the

study. Finally, this part ends with the limitations of the study and suggestions for further researches.

Summary of the Study

This section summarizes the major findings of this study to answer the four research questions of the study listed as follows:

1. What is the university EFL students' frequency use of oral speaking strategies?
2. What are most frequently and least frequently used speaking strategies used by high-proficient EFL learners?
3. What are most frequently and least frequently speaking strategies used by low -proficient EFL learners?
4. Are there any significant differences in the use of speaking strategies between male and female EFL learners?

Speaking Strategy Use by Iranian EFL University Students

The value of Wilks' Lambda for speaking strategy use by 100 EFL students in our research is $.505, p < .05$ and $F = 7.60$ meaning that the use of speaking strategies by EFL students is meaningful, that is, students reported using groups of speaking strategies differently.

Most Frequently and Least Frequently Speaking Strategies Used by Iranian EFL University Students

In relation to the use of speaking strategies by the students labeled as low-proficient and high-proficient students based on their OPT scores in this study, the value of Wilks' Lambda is $.863, p > .05$ and $F = 1.31$ meaning that there exists no significant relationship between the use of speaking strategies by EFL students and their proficiency level. In general, out of the five main categories of speaking strategies, some were most frequently and some least frequently used by low and high- proficient students.

Referring back to Table 4.8., the descending order use of speaking strategies as specified based on their means from the descriptive statistics for high-proficient students is as follows: Negotiation of meaning while speaking, accuracy-oriented, social affective, compensation, fluency-oriented strategies.

As it is clear, negotiation of meaning while speaking strategies are the most frequently used speaking strategies and fluency-oriented strategies the least frequently used ones by high-proficient EFL students.

Referring back to Table 4.8., the descending order use of speaking strategies as specified based on their means from the descriptive statistics for low-proficient students is as follows: Social affective, negotiation of meaning while speaking, compensation, accuracy-oriented, fluency-oriented strategies.

As it is clear, social affective strategies are the most frequently used strategies and fluency-oriented the least frequently used ones by low-proficient EFL students.

Gender and Speaking Strategy Use

In relation to the use of speaking strategies by Iranian EFL students and their gender, no significant relationship was found. Referring back to Table 4.10., Wilks' Lambda for gender is $.967$ with a Sig. value of $.89$. Because our p value is more than $.05$, we can conclude that there is not any statistically significant relationship between the use of speaking strategies by students and gender which is an independent variable in our study meaning that male and female students have equally used speaking strategies.

Discussion

The purpose of this section is to discuss the results of communication strategy use by 100 Iranian EFL university students studying English in Najafabad Azad University who were divided into two equal groups of male and female students, that is, 50 male and 50 female students. The data presented in this section was compared with those of similar studies conducted by other researchers in the area of communication strategy use.

Results of the present study revealed that there exists no relationship between the use of communication strategies by EFL students and their gender meaning that both groups of male and female students used communication strategies equally.

These results appear to match with some studies in Asian contexts. Kim (1995) found that there is no significant difference on language strategy use between males and females in his study on Korean adult ESL learners. In another study Lee (1994, cited in Lee, 2003) found that there are differences in strategy use between the sexes at the middle school level, but less difference or no difference can be observed as learners advance in their level. Again, Oh (1996) in his study on fishery college students in Pusan found no relationship between sexes and strategy use category preferences. He insisted that strategies were frequently used regardless of sex.

Students' proficiency level and its relationship with the use of speaking strategies were examined in this study. The two groups of students labeled as low and high-proficient in the present study showed no significant differences concerning their proficiency level as determined based on their OPT scores and the use of speaking strategies. This result is in line with Chen's statement (2009) stating "Although speaking proficiency is related to the use of oral communication strategies, no direct relationship exists between them".

However, the descending order use of speaking strategies as specified based on their means from the descriptive statistics for high-proficient students is as follows: Negotiation while speaking, accuracy-oriented, social affective, compensation, fluency-oriented strategies.

As it is seen, negotiation of meaning while speaking is the most frequently speaking strategy category used by high-proficient students. This implies that most students were likely to rely on strategies that would help them negotiate the meaning of the speech with their interlocutor while speaking English.

Fluency-oriented is the least speaking strategy category used by high-proficient students.

This shows that high-proficient students in our study paid more attention to their accuracy than fluency, that is; they tend to be more cautious of speaking correctly rather than fluently. This finding is in line with the finding of Nakatani's (2006) study indicating that EFL learners seem less likely to use strategies that are geared toward helping them maintain their fluency while communicating in English.

They also paid more attention to their interlocutors' reaction to their conversation and behaved socially in such a way as to give a good impression and avoid silence during interaction.

The above results are in harmony with Nakatani's study (2006) in which students with high oral proficiency level tended to use social affective, fluency-oriented, and negotiation of meaning strategies, which are effective for oral communication, since students used them for keeping the conversation flowing and for maintaining their interaction through negotiation. They also paid less attention to compensation strategies. This result is in line with Poulisse and Schils' study (1989) who indicates that the most advanced subjects used fewer compensatory strategies than the least proficient ones. The researchers reason that this result is explained by the limited vocabulary of the latter, compelling them to resort more often to

compensatory strategies. Chen (1990) and Tuan (2001) also indicated that high proficient learners employed fewer CSs to convey meaning.

The descending order use of speaking strategies as specified based on their means from the descriptive statistics for low-proficient students is as follows:

Social affective, negotiation of meaning while speaking, compensation, accuracy-oriented, fluency-oriented strategies.

As seen, social affective strategies are the most frequently used strategies by low-proficient students meaning that they are very likely to have a high degree of anxiety while communicating in a foreign language, so they pay more attention not to fluency but accuracy to avoid making mistakes and losing faces in an English conversation.

Fluency-oriented is the least used speaking strategies by low-proficient EFL students which is in line with the finding of Nakatani's (2006) study that EFL learners seem less likely to use strategies that are geared toward helping them maintain their fluency while communicating in English. These students tend to be more cautious of speaking correctly rather than fluently.

Compensation strategies were also used more frequently by low-proficient EFL students. This is in line with Paribakht's report (1985) stating that "highly proficient language learners with richer linguistic knowledge of the target language tended to rely on linguistic approach, while those with low proficiency level adopted a conceptual approach that does not require specific target language linguistic or cultural knowledge to compensate for their weak linguistic knowledge.

The fluency-oriented strategy category is the least used one by low and high - proficient EFL students which shows that Iranian EFL students in Iran do not rely much on strategy use to maintain their fluency while speaking English.

Conclusion

Speaking is one important skill in language learning. FL students sometimes, due to lack of sufficient linguistic knowledge, have to give up conversation with their interlocutors. To fill this gap, they can make use of some strategies while speaking to their interlocutors called oral communication strategies. It has been, by some studies, proven that those EFL students using these strategies will be better speakers and listeners. However, students should be encouraged to take risks and to use communication strategies. This means that learners should use all their available resources to communicate language without being afraid of making errors (Yule and Tarone, 1990). Not all communication strategies should be encouraged. This consciousness-raising of some strategies is important for the following reasons. First, communication strategies can lead to learning by eliciting unknown language items from the interlocutor especially in the appeal for help strategy. Second, communication strategies are part of language use. Even native speakers use communication strategies in their speech and use time-gaining devices in order to keep the conversation going such as "you know", "what do you call it?", and other strategies. Finally, the use of a communication strategy is not an indication of communication failure; on the contrary, it can be a success in compensating for the lack of sufficient linguistic knowledge. To sum up, EFL teachers, taking the many advantages of using communication strategies into consideration, should incorporate these strategies into their curricula. Incorporating such communication strategies in the form of authentic materials such as giving directions, ordering a meal, going to the doctor and the like in the curricula can be to the students' benefit to be better speakers during an interactive conversation.

Pedagogical Implications

Different studies have been conducted by various researchers in the field of oral communication strategies. Some studies have examined the relationship between using these oral communication strategies by EFL students and some variables such as students' gender, proficiency level, motivation and some more. Some other studies have examined whether these strategies should be taught to the students or not. Among the many researchers conducted in this regard, most of them have proven the effectiveness of teaching these strategies to EFL learners and making them aware of such strategies (Canale, 1983; Nakatani, 2005; Lee, 2002; Maleki, 2007). Based on the findings of this study, university EFL students regardless of their English proficiency levels used fluency-oriented strategies the least frequently. Hence, teachers may consider helping students improve their communicative skills and competence by using oral communication strategies in proper contexts.

Particularly, teachers should highly be encouraged to provide their students with information of different types of oral communication strategies since the students may not be aware of them and the potential effectiveness of these strategies on their English learning. Dörnyei (1995) in an empirical study showed that focused CS instruction could contribute to L2 development. By this, he supports a direct approach to teaching CS, and includes awareness-raising in this approach. Rabab'ah (2005) argues that there are three reasons for raising consciousness of some CS. First, the interlocutor, especially the appeal for assistance strategy. Second, CS help the conversation continue. Third, the use of CS can help learners solve their communication problems and achieve their communication goals (194).

Apart from making the students familiar with oral communication strategies, University EFL teachers should attempt to incorporate communication strategies into curriculum. They should incorporate different types of tasks in students' curriculum by which they can practice communication strategies so that they can improve their English speaking skills in this way. Two-way tasks like situational information-gap activities may provide students with semi-authentic communication contexts for potential use of communication strategies. To do so, teachers should provide students with authentic materials in which the students have to practice real life activities such as going to a doctor, ordering a meal in a restaurant and the like. Such group works may promote students' interests and motivation to practice communication strategy use in real life situations of their own choices. On the whole, suitable tasks should be in use to practice oral communication strategies.

Limitations of the Study

Although the present study led to exploration of some useful findings, there still exists some limitations stated as follows:

First, the participants of this study were chosen from a limited number of EFL students studying English in one university in Iran the results of which certainly can't be generalize able to the whole Iranian EFL students studying English in universities and other educational centers such as colleges, English teaching centers and the like.

Second, in this study the relationship between the use of oral communication strategies by EFL students and their gender was examined. This is while there exists some other variables which might affect the use of oral communication strategies and being aware of them can help to facilitate the students' communication in the target language. Therefore, the findings of this study cannot reveal the whole possible factors related to the EFL learners use of oral communication strategies in learning English.

Suggestions for Further Research

Despite the research findings and implications described above, this study is not without limitations. However, this study can be enhanced observing the following suggestions:

1-This study was conducted with 100 EFL university students in one of the Islamic Azad universities in Iran .It can be conducted with a higher number of EFL students in other educational centers such as English Teaching Centers the number of which has recently increased in Iran.

2-The instruments for gathering data related to the use of communication strategies in this study were only limited to one questionnaire so that other instruments such as interviewing with students and the like can be in use to gather more information in this regard for the purpose of better illuminating the research area.

3-In the present study only gender was examined in relation to the use of oral communication strategies .This is while other variables such as students' motivation in speaking English, self-perceived English oral proficiency and the like can be examined for the purpose of finding other factors affecting use of communication strategies leading to facilitation of English language learning.

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