

The Impact of Strategies-Based Instruction on EFL Speaking Competence

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Abstract

So far, there have been relatively few studies investigating the benefits of providing second language learners with formal training in the applications of strategies for oral communication. This research aimed to (1) find out if the teaching of communication strategies contributed to the speaking performance of students in English Speaking class and (2) explore possible roles of strategies-based instruction in students' spoken English communicative competence. In the collaborative study, data were collected through recorded observation, interview, diary, and test. Qualitative data were coded, tallied, and converted to percentage. Data from test were analyzed using the descriptive statistics. The research has shown that communication strategy training, either overt or covert, helped improve students' communicative performance. Improvement was seen in term of students' speech fluency in getting their meaning across. This was made possible with the wider insights into strategies in coping with shortcomings when communication took place. In addition, favorable learning practice led to the conducive classroom atmosphere, such as cheerfulness and learning enthusiasm.

Keywords: *communication strategies, strategies-based instruction, EFL, speaking competence, communicative performance*

1. Introduction

In its nature, language is speech or spoken communication. In the context of EFL learning, language educators have been seeking ways to help learners become more successful in their efforts to speak or orally communicate in English as the most global language nowadays. One effort definitely worth considering is classroom communication strategy training. By strategy training, the teacher trains students to use selected strategies in the teaching and learning process, either in overt or covert mode. With overt mode, students are explicitly taught how, when, and why strategies can be used to facilitate language learning and language use tasks. With covert mode, however, strategies are integrated into everyday class materials, and may be explicitly or implicitly embedded into the language tasks. The second mode focuses on integrating and embedding strategies into classroom language tasks. The strategies might be inserted into the lessons whenever it seems appropriate. Focus on strategies in strategies-based training is given only part of the time. The strategies are implicitly embedded into the language tasks in most of the time. The goal of this kind of training is to help foreign language students become more aware of the ways in which they learn most effectively, ways in which they can enhance their own comprehension and production of the target language, and ways in which they can continue to learn on their own and communicate in the target language after they leave the language classroom.

The use of communication strategies plays an important role in helping language learners or users cope with their linguistic competence shortcoming. Linguistic competence alone is not enough to develop communicative competence as well as performance. On an Indonesia's TV, in an entertainment program presenting the Indonesian songs singing contest the so-called "Asing Star" (Foreign Star), the juries with

an obviously limited English competence were able to ask questions and address comments in English fluently and confidently to each of the contest participants from other countries. Likewise, most contest participants, who were foreign learners of the Indonesian language, were able to communicate fluently with the host and juries. In another entertainment program, a famous national comedian named Komeng in “Wara Wiri” (Travelling) demonstrated similar performance when communicating with his native speaker of English host team-mate, in spite of his below standard linguistic aspects of pronunciation, grammar, and dictions. Describing things with excessive words, using gestures and miming, and inserting first language words in utterances was a reflection of efforts by the TV program hosts in order that communication remained to run smoothly.

The above aforementioned application of communication strategies can be viewed as one vehicle for promoting greater success in oral communication. Therefore, many researchers suggest that language teachers, educators, and learners understand the importance of this idea [1]-[5]. Despite various existing definitions of communication strategies, things in common among them have emerged. One expert sees communication strategy as “an individual's attempt to find a way to fill the gap between their communication effort and immediate available linguistic resources” [6]. This strategy is used consciously and serves as a substitute for failed production plan. While in a more classical work, communication strategy is referred to as “the conscious employment of verbal or nonverbal mechanisms for communicating an idea when precise linguistic forms are for some reason not readily available to the learner at a point in communication” [7]. In contrast to the example mentioned earlier, vendors’ unfluent spoken English at tourist places in the famous tourist destination of Bali Island has been attributed to lack of communicative competence, of which communication strategies are essential part [8].

Experts classify communication strategies in some different ways. The current research adopted the 1995 Celce-Murcia et al.’s taxonomy [9]. This model covers five main categories: (1) avoidance strategy, e.g. topic avoidance and message abandonment; (2) achievement or compensation strategy, e.g. *circumlocution*, *paraphrase*, and *gestures*; (3) *stalling*, e.g. *fillers* and *repetition*; (4) *self-monitor strategy*, e.g. *repairing*; and (5) *interactional strategy*, e.g. *asking for help* and *asking for confirmation*.

A fair amount of research has been conducted to evaluate the benefits of explicitly teaching learners how to apply foreign language strategies for the skills of reading and writing [10], and, recently, some research has also been conducted on listening comprehension [11]. However, there have been relatively few studies attempting to explore the benefits of providing second language learners with formal training in the applications of strategies for speaking. Within those few researches on communication strategy training in speaking skill, the majority have been conducted in ex-post facto survey or experimental designs.

Survey studies have been done more recently and aimed to investigate the differences in the use of oral communication strategies by different groups or in terms of certain variables, mainly language proficiency level and gender [12]-[15]. Whereas, experimental studies have been aimed to compare groups to see the effect of strategy training in the context of teaching English as a second language with target language as language of instruction [16].

An extremely rare classroom action research on communication strategy was conducted, involving 13 university students who were taking “Active English” course within two semesters [17]. The study aimed to develop students’ discussion skill. Through the topic prepared by the teacher researcher, the classroom teaching and learning process went on with the main activities of conversation and debates. The research has shown that only a few students with above average ability were able to use communication strategies directly after being trained. Initially, the students found difficulties in starting

conversation as well as using new strategies. After they had become accustomed to being recorded, they started to enjoy having conversation and using second language-based communication strategies to negotiate meaning with partners. Interestingly, some students said they used new communication strategies just because their friends also used them in the classroom. According to the researcher, teaching communication strategies either implicitly or explicitly gave benefits to raise learners' awareness, but it alone was not enough to use them immediately in the conversation. Further opportunity needed to be given in order that they were really able to use English and evaluate the use of their communication strategies.

Therefore, researchers suggest that communication strategies be taught. By doing so, at least they provide the learners with a sense of security in the L2 by allowing them room to maneuver in times of difficulty. Rather than giving up their message, learners may decide to try and remain in the conversation and achieve their communicative goal. The current study set out to examine the contribution that strategies-based instruction might give to learners in university-level English 'Speaking' class. It is fair to say that speaking is an area that receives such limited attention in the research literature, although it is in many cases the most critical language skill of all. The study aimed to: (1) find out if communication strategy-based instruction in the English 'Speaking' class affects students' speaking performance and (2) explore the contribution of communication strategy training to students' English speaking performance.

2. Methodology

This study was an action research in the classroom. An action research in the classroom is aimed at improving students' learning and teachers' teaching [18]. It is a collaborative research, where classroom practitioners study their own practice together to solve personal practical problems. Bearing this in mind, this type of research is excellent at improving professional learning and teaching through the development of a quality process [19]. The current study was conducted in Speaking 2 course at English Language Teaching Department, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Muhammadiyah Purwokerto in Central Java, Indonesia. It involved 30 students sitting at the second semester. They belonged to group D, as one of 4 parallel groups. This group was chosen by considering their average performance which was the lowest in both classroom participation and achievement.

Research data were collected through video-taped observation, interviews, diary, and test. Observation was intended to identify the use of communication strategies by students during the lessons, both in verbal and non-verbal behavior. Interviews were meant to reveal data on research participants' attitude toward communication strategy training practice. Participants interviewed were those identified to have used communication strategies. In the meanwhile, at the end of each lesson participants were required to write their own experience (e.g. learning progress and interactions with friends and teacher). It could be very helpful, because from such introspective diaries it would be possible that the researcher could see repeated patterns [20]. The adoption of multi-sources of data was intended to complete data and assure data quality (triangulation).

First meeting was used to see a pre-intervention condition. In the interventions, the use of miming/gestures to substitute spoken expressions were also trained, as quite often miming/gestures are universal and with physical and facial expressions learners would feel secure that communication would continue even though they could not convey the message orally. Even, avoidance strategy, that is basically equal to giving up – borrowing Maleki's term "kill innovative thinking of the learner" [21] was also trained as an effort to equip learners for spoken communication.

When teaching and learning was going on, being equipped with field-notes, observation was done by research collaborators. During observation repeated occurrence of communication strategy used was well coded. Occurrences were categorized, tallied, and then converted to percentage. Reflection result by different observers was discussed together.

Interviews were conducted by the researchers independently. Equipped with a semi-structured interview guide, it was hoped that the participants being interviewed would give more detailed information dealing with topics to cover. During the interviews using the first language interview questions were let flow naturally in accordance with information provided by the interviewees. While listening, the researcher interpreted information and sought details as well as understanding. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Interview questions mainly covered participants' personal data, communication strategies that were perceived to have been used, most liked and disliked communication strategies, and steps they took to improve communicative competence. Interview tapescripts were returned to participants for confirmation. Unclear parts have been discussed, while left ideas have been added. Independently, the researcher analyzed interview results (on final version of tapescript) by first criticizing content, building main constructs, then coding relevant parts on the tapescript. The team confronted analysis results of interview data and discussed different points in such a way that finally attended to agreement.

3. Results and Discussion

The research has shown that before communication strategy training was given, during the lesson, nearly no student seemed to speak up. Figure 1 illustrates the initial condition. Only one or two students – where one was clearly seen as a good performer and the other just read a note, in such a way that communication seemed far from being natural due to poor eye-contact. It indicated that students still had difficulties in oral communication. A few notes from Lesson One among others were (1) the use of “survey” card for an interviewing task should not have provided space so that students were encouraged to remember information instead of writing on the card; (2) the instructions on preparing for response and information of doing tasks on time was awarded should have been given; (3) the audio-visual media should have included spoken texts too (e.g. video/audio recording and dialog text) to encourage students to speak.



Figure 1. Pre-Intervention Class: Nearly No Speaking Activity

In Lesson Two the teacher was engaged with communication strategy training. An explicit strategy training given through explanation linked the pre-activity to the lesson main activity. Then, modified cross-puzzle activity was given as main lesson activity.

Students were expected to practice it orally in pairs. In regard with communication strategy use, it was found that out of twenty-two students that were present, eighteen (81.8%) students were identified to have used communication strategies during the lesson. Out of four types of strategy introduced in the lesson, namely (1) *paraphrase*; (2) *gestures/miming*; (3) *fillers*; and (4) *asking for help*, the first three mentioned types occurred in the classroom conversation. Regardless of use frequency or intensity, this means that 75% of the strategies taught have been used by students.

Quite little information was elicited from the diaries. Students were very unproductive in giving comments to reveal their perception and feeling concerning English speaking class. While it was meant to explain their learning process improvement, especially in the aspect of oral English communication fluency during the lesson, only a few students wrote about the teacher and his teaching method. They liked the teacher and felt satisfied with the teaching model applied in the class – fascinating. Conducive teaching and learning process has enabled students to learn enjoyably and confidently. A student (S17), for example, commented that the mistakes she had made in a task of describing transportation did not reduce her self-confidence. Another student (S5) felt the benefit of attending the lesson that introduced strategies so that his communication became more fluent, as he commented (originally in L1) as follows: “Tips on using fillers are quite helpful because I often forget how to say things in English”. He seemed to refer to *paraphrase strategy*. An improved student speaking performance after communication strategy was introduced is reflected, to some extent, in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Smoother Students' Communication after Strategy Instruction

Main activity in Lesson Three was dictation of jumbled sentences. In this activity three types of communication strategy were inserted to the activity. A student dictated jumbled sentences in front of the class while the others were listening and giving response. In this lesson, out of twenty-two students who were present, eleven (50%) students were identified to have used communication strategies during the lesson. In the meanwhile, out of seven types of strategies trained, i.e. four types which have been trained in the previous lesson plus three others taught in this lesson, namely (1) message abandonment; (2) repairs; and (3) asking for confirmation, six types occurred in the conversation in the class. Regardless of use frequency or intensity, this means that 85.7% of the strategies taught have been used by the students. Average number of strategy users within two lessons was 65.9% of all students who were present. Average of types of strategies used

by students for oral communication within two lessons achieved eighty percent of all types of strategies trained. Table 1 is a sample of strategy use occurrences across sessions with strategy training.

Table 1. Example of Coded Data on Strategy

Student Number	Strategy Use	Strategy Type
5	This transportation is so expensive. Uh. Syahrini got it. Syahrini got it. You know <i>lah</i> , err ...something like in the air (with finger pointing upward). <i>Syahrini</i> got it.	repetition, filler, gesture
17	This transportation is in the sea, on the sea and can move in the sea (while hand moving like a wave)	paraphrase, repairs, miming
8	1) I ...I would say that, ah how about your appearance wishes? 2) I wish I had a free time, because this week I was so busy. So, I wish, really really wish 3) Yah, because I'm really really tired with people that say I'm so... what's it , My tall and my weight (with both hands on waist) is less	message abandonment, filler, gesture
13	1) I wish I had err boy friend 2) Do you mean "I wish my father not [...] on Sundays?" 3) Listen /listen/,.../lisen/ 4) Yes, but err some... some words (with hands demonstrating reverse position) 5) [...] the pronunciation? Well, I also wishes...	filler, asking for confirmation, repairs, gesture
11	1) Of course , I like playing futsal 2) What kind of..., ... your favourite?	filler, message abandonment
20	Err maybe...err they're (while turning to and staring at S6) ah...they're talking about err...their hobbies	filler, asking for help
1	1) A: Err ...I...I'm going to go to Paris 2) Emm maybe to shopping 3) Because err I think Paris is a better place to shopping and 4) Err...which you, with you, with whom you want to with? Someone? Maybe I will visit there in the next holiday	filler, repairs
14	1) Emm I want shopping 2) Emm what? 3) Emm with my friends 4) Today, I... I... where are you live in your holiday? I...I want some.	filler, message abandonment, repetition
18	1) Emm I will go to Bali 2) Because I am want I want refresh my mind 3) Maybe three month...three months. 4) Just some clothes and what's that. Emm just just emm apah play play in the beach and go to the and go to hotel	filler, repairs, repetition
24	Err because when I...When I see Sakura flower, I err...	filler,

	(while teacher saying: When you see Sakura flower, what do you feel?) I feel ...(while turning to and staring at a student) I feel that Sakura flower is very beautiful flower	repetition, asking for help
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From the diary this time there was no significant difference compared to the one in the previous lesson. Only a few students wrote about the teacher and the teaching model. They liked the teacher and felt satisfied with the teaching model – fascinating.

Results of interview with four students that had been chosen for their being productive in using communication strategies were as follows. First, students thought that the strategy training has been useful. Whether the strategies they used were those taught explicitly or implicitly through learning tasks now they felt more confident to communicate in English orally, as commented by a student (S13) below:

“... (when) asked by the teacher we should be spontaneous... (when) we have not prepared an answer, that is helpful to fill... errr what...what we call...in order that they don't what we call... think we...errr...why...why just quiet...there's something to fill the silence”.

The comment above has implied that a communication strategy (most probably fillers) introduced/taught to the class was helpful, at least not to give up while giving time to prepare a word(s). A similar message was stated by another student (S5) who formerly often forgot English vocabulary. According to her, since communication strategies have been taught to the class, she found less hindrance when communicating in English, as she illustrated below:

“...forgot how to say 'sepatu' (shoes) in English...yeah...in most of the time it's like that when I am trying to speak in English. What's this...like that...then...Thanks God, here it is...I got it a few days ago, didn't I? ...a way that was told by Mrs. Winda...a way that described a word in our mind but we failed to use the exact word”.

The strategy that the student above meant was most probably paraphrase. Even, the habit of a student (S6) who formally often used filler 'anu', which is equal to 'errr' unconsciously, now, after having been introduced to its proper version in English, has faded away.

Some forms of strategy introduced/taught by the teacher might have been recognized or acquired by the students. Others, however, were new. The students tended to use communication strategies unconsciously. From four students interviewed, two stated that they used communication strategies unconsciously. One student said she used communication strategies between consciously and unconsciously. The other one stated she was aware after she had used communication strategies.

In the meanwhile, an English speaking test administered in the end of cycle one has shown the following result. Students' speaking competence, that took the aspect of fluency into account, could be categorized as satisfactory. Out of nineteen test participants, only one obtained grade C+, the rest achieved grades A, B+, and B. Thus, over 94% of test participants obtained grades B and above. Through the test video recording, it was revealed from those nineteen test participants that five (71.4%) types of communication strategies were identified to have been used, namely *message repairs*, *asking for confirmation*, *fillers*, *repetition*, and *message abandonment*.

From the facts presented above, in quantity, based on the research success criteria, the three points pre-set were all met. In other words, from quantity point of view, the researchers' effort to solve students' spoken communication in the speaking class could be said to be successful. Nevertheless, the research team considered the need to implement further intervention in the class with some revision. One sound consideration was to see further impact, whether it would remain consistent or not later on.

After a slight revision in communication strategy training was made, the teaching and learning became better. Unfortunately, something unpredicted happened to the lesson initiated and conducted by chair of the research team, which is a technical trouble in the use of audio-video media that took nearly 15 minutes before it was finally settled. It, in turn, brought about the less time for teaching and learning activity, so that some students received no opportunity for their spoken communication practice, while it was intended to identify the classroom use of strategy.

This time the lesson dealt with “Like and Dislike” that was taught through a survey-simulation technique. Having been explained in brief, in turns, students in pairs were instructed to come to the front of the class to ask and answer questions related with what each of the likes and dislikes, while the rest were expected to list the likes and dislikes and put them in order from the most common to the least common.

Objective of the lesson this time was to introduce the other two types of communication strategies, namely *topic avoidance* and *repetition*. With these two strategies, so far, altogether nine types of communication strategies have been trained to the students. Out of twenty-two students attending the lesson, fourteen (63.6%) were identified to have used communication strategies during the lesson. In the meanwhile, seen from types of strategy, from the nine communication strategies taught, six (66.6%) of them were identified to have occurred during the classroom conversation. Students’ diaries have shown that from lesson to lesson students got more accustomed to speaking English, as a student wrote as follows: “(Formerly) I felt nervous and suddenly confused as well as forgot what to ask. However, maybe because in every lesson we are expected to speak in the front of the class we get accustomed”. Another student commented that after having been introduced to communication strategies in spoken English there was a progress in communicating in English.

From the experience in conducting the previous lessons, the research team has successfully been able to carry out the lesson that was scheduled to end the action research. The lesson went on smoothly. Out of twenty-one students attending the lesson, eighteen (85.7%) of them were identified to have used communication strategies during the lesson. Number of strategy use was improved. Even, four students employed up to five types of strategy in a monitored activity.

In regard with type of strategy used, from the nine strategies introduced to students, seven (77.7%) were identified to have occurred during the classroom conversation practice. Interestingly, strategy use tended to increase from lesson to lesson, not only in frequency but also in variation as well as distribution. Students who formerly used very limited strategies (for example, filler “err”) now they used more strategies with more variations, filler “what’s it/that”, for instance. Relatively complicated strategy, such as repairs also occurred, though limited. In more details, strategies used in the final lesson covered: (1) *fillers*, (2) *repetition*, (3) *miming/gestures*, (4) *message abandonment*, (5) *repairs*, (6) *asking for help*, (7) *asking for confirmation*. The other two strategies, namely *paraphrase* and *topic avoidance* did not occur in strategy use.

Based on students’ diaries, comments remained relatively the same. Even though they have been reminded repeatedly of completing diaries, they did not seem to care. It was likely that diary was not effective to be used to help explain the process of improving fluency in spoken communication. Most probably, students focused more on their learning and learning tasks, and had little opportunity to speak their mind onto papers.

The second interview with five students (four had been interviewed in the first interview) in the end of the second cycle has shown the following results. First, students perceived that either explicit training, given through tips, or implicit strategy training, embedded/inserted to language learning tasks/activities (games, puzzles, and simulation) was very fascinating and useful. A student identified as a very skillful communication

strategy user had a unique reason for using fillers strategy. In addition to classical reason in order not to be just silent, for her using fillers could create an impression of being smart in the eyes of her speaking partners.

A speaking test of English administered in the end of this study has shown that students' speaking competence could be categorized as very satisfactory. Out of twenty-one participants, all (100%) achieved grades B or above. From those all tests, fourteen (66.7%) of them were identified to have used a variety of communication strategies taught to them. Six types of strategy have been used, namely *repairs*, *asking for confirmation*, *fillers*, *repetition*, *miming/gestures*, and *paraphrase*. A skillful student uttered the following sentence in a lesson: "When you a child, err do you have ...eh did you study about language?" Similarly, another student numbered 12 uttered the following sentence: "Because I always draw (while moving her hand like a person drawing) the skirt". The use of gestures by these students was effective, as indicated that the speech partners did not seem to find difficulties to understand them.

As for the success criteria already pre-set, then, once again, three requirements have been fulfilled. Therefore, the intervention taken by the research team as an attempt to solve the problem of students' spoken communication in the speaking class could be said to be successful. Through this collaborative study, teaching and learning practice was liked by the students. This was revealed from a teacher's statement and students' interviews. According to the teacher, the last two lessons have shown the better teaching and learning practices as compared to the previous ones. In the part of students, in the interview they highlighted classroom conducive atmosphere, such as cheerfulness and learning enthusiasm that became stronger.

4. Conclusion

In regard to the aim of this study, based on the findings as discussed earlier, it can be concluded as follows. Introducing or teaching communication strategies in spoken English communication (Speaking) was able to help improve student communicative competence. The improvement could happen in term of student fluency in expressing messages or ideas when communication was going on. The improvement of fluency in communication was made possible with the wider insights into strategies of coping with spoken English communication shortcomings. Besides, better teaching and learning practice also has a role in creating good atmosphere in the class, such as cheerfulness and learning enthusiasm, which was getting better. Clearly reflected from students' statement they felt happy with the learning activities brought to the class.

For teachers, instructors, or university teachers of English, especially those who teach oral communication skill, findings of this study should be made a technical reference for improving EFL speaking competence. For researchers who want to do further studies, it is a good idea to try techniques of data collection other than diary. Diary was not productive for portraying process of communication strategy during the lesson. This research would have been genuinely worthwhile if process of communication strategy had been investigated more properly.

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