



# Teachability of communication strategies: An Iranian experience

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Received 26 January 2007; received in revised form 5 April 2007; accepted 24 April 2007

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## Abstract

The possibility of teaching communication strategies and the feasibility of incorporating them into school syllabi have been a controversial issue. In the current study, 60 Iranian students were divided into two thirty-member classes; then two different textbooks, one with specific CS and the other without them, were chosen to be taught in the classes. At the end of a four-month teaching period, oral and written examinations were held for both classes and the results were compared. The study's findings confirmed that teaching communication strategies is pedagogically effective, that interactional strategies are more effectively and extensively used, that communication strategies are conducive to language learning, and that language teaching materials with communication strategies are more effective than those without them.

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*Keywords:* Communication strategy; Teachability; Textbook; Language learning; Learners; EFL; ESL

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## 1. Introduction

It goes without saying that individual linguistic repertoire is not perfect. Perfect language knowledge is collective, and a given language resides in the brains of all individuals who are the native speakers of the language. Therefore, native and non-native speakers of any language try sometimes to find an appropriate expression or grammatical construction when struggling to communicate their meaning. Here, a gap is created between what the

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individual wants to communicate and the immediately available linguistic resources. The ways in which he/she tries to fill the gap are known as communication strategies (CS). There is not a consensus among researchers on the definition of communication strategies; however, Faerch and Kasper's definition seems to be widely accepted:

Communication strategies are potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular goal (Faerch and Kasper, 1983, 36).

Early studies aimed at identifying, defining, and classifying communication strategies. Later studies, however, were more empirical in nature, and have continued to date. The main focus of such research has been the relationship between communication strategies and pedagogical issues (Kasper and Kellerman, 1997). In this regard, there have been "the Pros" and "the Cons". The Pros or the supporters of teaching communication strategies have advocated liberal expansion of CS categories. Dörnyei (1995), Dörnyei and Thurrell (1991) and Tarone (1984) are examples of the Pros. The Cons, on the other hand, have been more concerned with the underlying cognitive process and, contrary to the Pros, have found many similarities between L1 and L2 learning; therefore, they, in general, have not been in favour of a link-up between communication strategies and pedagogical issues. Bialystok (1990) and Kellerman (1991) are two well-known opposition figures in this respect. Bialystok (147) writes "what one must teach students of a language is not strategy, but language," and Kellerman (158) says "Teach the learners more language, and let the strategies look after themselves." Thus, teaching communication strategies remains a controversial issue.

This paper intends to examine the problem again using an Iranian experience. It is argued that communication strategy training needs to be incorporated into school syllabuses and textbooks because students would benefit from being familiarized with a large range of strategies. Hence, ineffective use of the language is seen as resulting from lack or inappropriate use of strategies. Faucette (2001) believes that communication strategies would serve as an excellent means for less proficient learners to have the tools to maintain the conversation, resulting in the opportunity to receive more language input and improve their language ability. As Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) put it:

...a NNS's ability to keep a conversation going is a very valuable skill because by maintaining the conversation, the NNS can presumably benefit from receiving additional modified input. Indeed, conversational maintenance is a major objective for language learners who regularly invoke communication strategies (126).

For learners, failure in conversation is equal to failure in developing their conversational ability. Using communication strategies, they will keep the channel of conversation open, stay in it, and develop the ability to use the foreign language. As Hatch (1978) once wrote "... the learner should be taught not to give up." (434).

Many researchers lend support to the beneficial effect of interactionally modified input on comprehension and acquisition through negotiation of meaning (see Doughty, 2000; Ellis, 1994; Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991; Mitchell and Myles, 1998). Appeal for assistance, an example of interactional strategy, is a common communication strategy that is very useful in negotiating meaning. It helps learners improve their comprehension, learn new vocabulary, and get the opportunity to talk in the L2. Yule and Tarone (1991) think that the roles of participants within interactions that lead to negotiation of meaning can be

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