

# THE EFFECTS OF PROFICIENCY LEVEL ON THE COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES AMONG KOSOVAN AND BOSNIANS STUDENTS AT SAKARYA UNIVERSITY

Elvir Shtavica

Institute of Educational Sciences, Sakarya University, Turkey

elvir.shtavica@gmail.com

**Abstract:** This article reports the communication strategies employed by Kosovan and Bosnian speakers of English as their second language in oral communication tasks outside the classroom. The participants were 18 university students of different departments whose native languages were Albanian and Bosnian. The goal of the study was to determine the effects of English language proficiency (i.e., Elementary and Intermediate levels) on the use of communication strategies while performing the same oral tasks. The data of the oral discussions came from the audio and video-recordings of the tasks. In the current study we applied the taxonomy of communication strategies employed by Tarone (1977; 1981). We analyzed and compared the uses of communication strategies in different occasions. Analysis of the data revealed that the participants dominantly used two types of communication strategies: lower level students used L1 strategies more often and higher level students employed L2 strategies more commonly compared by their lower level peers regardless of the ethnic group.

**Keywords:** Communication strategies, language proficiency, linguistic background oral communication tasks

## 1. Introduction

One of the most important goals for most of the people is how to develop their communicative skills and to be able to communicate with their peers or interlocutors. It is now clear that no individual's linguistic repertoire is perfect. Many studies have proven that both, non-native and native speakers of any language sometimes struggle to find an appropriate grammatical construction or expression when trying to communicate or convey their meaning. Thus, there is a gap created among individuals of what they want to communicate and the directly available linguistic resources. So, the ways in which they are attempting to fill this gap and manage to compensate it are known as communication strategies (CS). However, many researchers are not on agreement about the exact definition of the communication strategies; in fact, there is one widely accepted definition pointed out by Kasper and Faerch (1983, 36) "Communication strategies are potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular goal". Another important issue regarding communication strategies is the development of learners' communicative competence. In this way, language proficiency plays an important role because learners stop speaking and hardly know what to say when they try to ask questions in English or discuss any topic. Generally, the concern of the early studies was to define, classify, and identify communication strategies. On the other side, later studies were more concentrated on empirical research to continue with data collections. In this study, we examined the use of the communication strategies in task base activities including: picture description, picture narration, and ten minutes of natural conversation employed by two groups of students (i.e., Elementary and Intermediate levels).

## 2. Communicative competence

Communicative competence is generally based on the rules of language use, appropriateness, and acceptability rather than on grammaticality itself, as is the case of cognitive explanation of competence. The first to introduce the term of communicative competence was Hymes (e.g. 1972; 1979). For a person to say he or she knows a language, therefore, s/he must know "when to speak, when not, ... what to talk about with whom, where in what manner" (Hymes, 1972: 277). Communicative competence is also concerned with students' performances in real communication. Canale and Swain mentioned

Chomsky's competence arguing about the same communicative points, that is, the students' expressions in conveying ideas in real communicative situations. The four areas of communicative competence they defined are briefly categorized below:

*Grammatical competence.* Mastering L2 phonological and lexicogrammatical rules of sentence formation; that is, to be able to express and interpret literal meaning of utterances (e.g., acquisition of pronunciation, vocabulary, word and sentence meaning, construction of grammatical sentences, correct spelling, etc).

*Sociolinguistics competence.* Mastering L2 appropriately using sociocultural rules, that is, how utterance are produced and understood in different sociolinguistic contexts (e. g., understanding of speech act conventions, awareness of norms of stylistic appropriateness, the use of a language to signal social relationships, etc.)

*Discourse competence.* Mastering L2 rules concerning coherence of various kinds of discourse in L2 (e.g., use of appropriate pronouns, synonyms, conjunctions, substitution, repetition, marking of congruity and continuity, topic-comment sequences, etc.)

*Strategic competence.* Mastering L2 verbal and non-verbal communication strategies when attempting to compensate for deficiencies in the grammatical and sociolinguistic competence or to enhance the effectiveness of communication (e.g., paraphrasing, how to address others when uncertain of their relative social status, slow speech for rhetorical effect, etc.)

(Canale and Swain, 1980)

Strategic competence has also been defined as a tool of repairing communicative problems and developing communication in general. Therefore, it is considered that communication strategy may also influence learning strategies. Communication strategies are based on students' communication command in the target language, that is, how to convey a meaning to peers or interlocutor, whereas, learning strategies are based on students' linguistic knowledge. Some researchers believe that communication strategies may influence learning strategies as well.

### 2.1 Communication strategies: definitions and classifications

The need to communicate an idea in the target language when learners face problems in conveying their intended meaning because of their insufficient linguistic command and the usage of various strategies to make the most of their potential for communicating in L2 (Second Language) including these strategies are called communication strategies (Vardi, 1983). The focus on the interaction between the speakers adopted by Tarone (1980) and its interactional approach, defined communication strategies as "mutual attempts of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in situations where requisite meaning structures are not share" (p. 288). According to coder (1983), communications strategies are transmitted to the relationship between ends and means. Likewise, students sometimes wish to convey messages to their peers but because of their limited linguistic resources do not consent them to express their messages successfully. In such cases, students have two ways, either to modify their meanings with their resources in disposition, or to try to increase their resources in order to grasp their communicative intentions.

The effect of proficiency level on communication strategies is also a focus of this study. Here, Hyde (1982) investigated that lower level students make more frequent use of communications strategies than higher or more proficient ones. Here, they usually face more problems in conveying their messages to their interlocutors or peers due to their insufficient command of the target language. On the other hand, Bialystok and Frohlich (1980) and Bialystok (1983) confirmed verification of a relationship between the learner's choice of specific types of communication strategies and their proficiency level. In more details, the authors called these strategies as: L1-based and L2-based strategies. Thus, low level students in order to overcome their linguistic deficiencies they

usually borrow lexical items from their mother tongue more often than high level students who significantly make more use of L2 strategies based on their communicative manipulation and their linguistic command in the target language.

According to interactionists and psycholinguistics perspectives, most of the analysis of the communication strategies is concerned on a study of learner language. Therefore, these scholars relied on interlanguage data for the intentions of their investigations. Most of the studies according to these scholars are based on the identification of different types of communication strategies. The effects of proficiency level on specific types of communication strategies investigated by (Tarone 1977; Bialystok 1983; Jourdain 2000; Poulisse et al. 1990), investigation of communication strategies based on native language (Palmberg 1979; Si-Qing 1990), personality and learning or cognitive style (Haastrup and Phillipson 1983; Littlemore 2001), and task related features (Poulisse et al. 1990). Considering these objectives in mind, interactionist and psycholinguistics proponents have mainly focused on learner's language production.

According to interactionist approach Tarone (1997; 1981) identified communication strategies based on its Taxonomy. This taxonomy is considered to be one of the most widely used in the field of communication strategies. Another typology of communication strategy is that of Faerch and Kasper (1984), Coder's (1983), Bialystok's (1983), Paribakht's (1985), Oxford's (1990) and Dornyei and Scott's taxonomy (1995; 1997). Tarone's taxonomy seems to be simpler compared to Dornyei's because of the number of the categories.

The table below shows Tarone's categories of communication strategies.

**Tarone's typology of communication strategies**  
(Tarone, 1977; 1981)

- 
1. Avoidance
    - a Topic avoidance
    - b Message abandonment
  2. Paraphrase
    - a Approximation b
    - Word coinage c
    - Circumlocution
  3. Conscious transfer a
  - Literal translation b
  - Language switch
  4. Appeal for assistance
  5. Mime

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the frequency use of the communication strategies employed by Kosovan and Bosnian speakers of English language as their second language in oral communication tasks?
2. Do higher and lower level students employ more L1 based or L2 based strategies?

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. *Setting and participant*

The current study took place at the objects of the University of Sakarya. The participants in this study were Kosovan and Bosnians students whose native languages are Albanian and Bosnian. They come from different departments pursuing their undergraduate and graduate levels and use English language as their second language. The data of the participants comes from two groups based on their language proficiency (i.e. Elementary and Intermediate) levels. To summarize, 18 regular students from different departments participated in the present study and their ages ranged between 20 to 29 years old.

#### 3.2. *Data collection procedure and tools*

In this study we examined the use of communication strategies of lower and higher level students and their preferences on the choice of the communication strategies according to their proficiency level. To examine, transcribe, and decode the data of the participants we used the audio and video-recorder as our data collection. The advantage of audio and video-recorder is that we analyzed students' performances in many perspectives by repeatedly playing back the video-recorder. In the current study we used task based activity to collect our data,

such tasks included: the picture narration, the photograph description and the ten minutes conversation between students and interlocutor, in this case me as a novice researcher. In the first two task students were asked to narrate and describe the pictures as much as possible arranged in the dyadic study. Here, most of the time we observed our students and took part in the interaction only when necessary, whereas in the last task we interacted with our participants as an active interlocutors throughout the conversation. Finally, the data collection instruments, in this case audio and video-recorder were examined in different perspectives, the audio and video effects of the camera, and the students' attitudes toward researcher were studied as well.

#### 4. Findings

##### 4.1 Findings based on the qualitative data

Table 1 presents the frequency of the communication strategies employed by Kosovan and Bosnian students during the task based activities including: oral discussion, picture narration, and picture description task. The data in table 1 presents the use of the communication strategies compared among two different groups of the students (i.e., Elementary and Intermediate levels), and the strategies were classified using the taxonomy applied by Tarone (1977; 1981). The present result make possible to answer our first question developed at the beginning of the study.

Question 1. What is the frequency use of the communication strategies employed by Kosovan and Bosnian speakers of English language as their second language in oral communication tasks?

The frequency of numbers counted on the use of communication strategies employed by two groups of the students was investigated. Here, the results verify the difference of the number of the communication strategies among two groups while trying to complete the oral tasks.

Table 1. PROFICIENCY LEVEL AND NUMBER OF CS

	Elementary Students	Intermediate Students
Number of CS	458	370

The results of the data shown in table 1 clearly meet the agreement of previous studies on the use of the communication strategies, that is, that low level group of students, elementary students will encounter a greater number of communication strategies compared to high level, Intermediate group of students. Moreover, the results also answer our first questions that, low level students because of their insufficient command of the target language vocabulary will come across greater language difficulties, in this case make more use of CS than their high level peers. On the other side, the nature of communicative tasks enables high level students to use more complex sentences and encounter greater lexical difficulties. Here, the proficiency students not only produced more language structures while trying to complete the given tasks, but they also used more accurate language instances to convey their messages or ideas.

Except the frequency of the communication strategies encountered among the two different levels of the students, this study also reveals the amount of the words students used to accomplish the given tasks. Table 2 shows that Intermediate level of the students used a large number of language instances than Elementary level of the students. Based on the ratio of CS to words, the amount of CS is less frequent in more proficient participants. The results shown on table 2 also confirm the difference of the amount of the language and the words used among the two levels of the students.

Table 2. NUMBER OF WORDS AND NUMBER OF CS

	Elementary Students	Intermediate Students
Number of Words	2, 846	3, 937
Number of CS	458	370
Ratio of CS to words	1:62	1:10

As we can see in the data revealed on table 2, more proficient students not only encountered greater use of the language utterances and the words but they also produced more accurate and more completed messages while interacting with their peers compared to less proficient ones. Thus, the amount of the words and the language used by more proficient students, also affected the use of communication strategies, that is, they encountered more complex sentences in order to convey their meanings, describe the actions and the objects given in the task base activity.

In an attempt to complete their tasks successfully, high and low level students used different strategies to describe and narrate the actions and the objects provided on the tasks. The tasks also made possible for more proficient students to use complex and accurate language structure, in this case, make more use of different referential explanations to name the particular action, object, and convey the meanings. Furthermore, in each task performance, more proficient students tried to narrate and make more reference to different objects and actions than less proficient students. In this point, we can argue that high level students were more successful and detailed in the completion of narrative and descriptive tasks.

Question 2. Do higher and lower level students employ more L1 based or L2 based strategies?

The second questions concerns whether elementary and intermediate levels of the students will use more L1 based strategies or L2 based strategies. We considered that the participants will be able to use all the categories of the strategies based on the given taxonomy. Table 3 clearly verifies the strategies two groups of the students employed.

Table 3. PROFICIENCY LEVEL AND THE CHOICE OF CS

	Elementary Students		Intermediate Students		Total CS
	NO	%	NO	%	Number of CS
Avoidance strategies	76	47%	84	52%	160
Paraphrase strategies	200	47%	224	52%	424
Conscious transfer strategies	182	74%	62	25%	244
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>458</b>	<b>168%</b>	<b>370</b>	<b>129%</b>	<b>828</b>

Based on the present results, low-level students depended more on conscious transfer strategies (74%), whereas high-level students accounted avoidance (52%) and paraphrasing (52%) more often to convey their original meanings and appropriate language structures. Table 3 shows that high proficient students used avoidance and paraphrase strategies more often compared to low proficient students who made use of conscious transfer strategies because of their limited command of the target language, that is, they were not able to manipulate the language or develop different means to convey their intended information or ideas, as did the more proficient ones. Table 3, also answers our second questions that low level students make more frequent use of L1 based strategies compared to high level students who made use of L2 based strategies more frequently. Moreover, when using paraphrase strategies, students usually try to manipulate with their interlanguage without using any other languages but the target one. Thus, these strategies have a positive effect in interactions with other students because they convey original meanings and are not likely to mislead the communication. Paraphrase strategies are also more difficult strategies because students try to describe object or actions using their interlanguage resources, therefore they encountered more complex language structures. On the other side, low level students were more reluctant to use these strategies because they are more demanding and difficult, thus, avoidance and paraphrasing strategies are less frequent compared to conscious transfer strategies. The following extract presents the use of these strategies on three tasks, including: avoidance, paraphrase, and conscious strategies.

(1) EXTRACT: “football league around Europe”

INTERLANGUAGE SENTENCE: “ so I:: try to read as much as possible to learn about the (.) a:: last weekend’s result you know the (.) leagues (1) around Europe”. CS ANALYSIS: topic avoidance: student wanted to say “league” but lacking the necessary vocabulary avoided it.

(2) EXTRACT: “University of Sakarya”

INTERLANGUAGE SENTENCE: “ I stay in the dormitory of a:: of:: the Turkish government”.

CS ANALYSIS: topic avoidance: student wanted to say “University of Sakarya” but lacking the necessary vocabulary avoided it.

(3) EXTRACT: “Plan”

INTERLANGUAGE SENTENCE: “ like I said depends (.) what, I what I (.) mo(-) from my schedule.

CS ANALYSIS: topic avoidance: student wanted to say “plan”, but lacking the necessary vocabulary avoided it.

(4) EXTRACT: “father or dad”

INTERLANGUAGE SENTENCE: well (.) the younger guy (.) how do I say (.) how can I say (.) is calling him for help or something like that (.) there is (.) grandparent or...

CS ANALYSIS: topic avoidance: student wanted to say “father or dad”, but lacking the necessary vocabulary avoided it.

(5) EXTRACT: “the child was hit”

INTERLANGUAGE SENTENCE: “ ok. In the very first picture (.) we see a man who is sitting in armchair (1) and a(.) the child who probably (.) it seems to be his grandson (1) is crying and going to call him (.) a::: about the situation”.

CS ANALYSIS: approximation: the student uses “situation” for “hit”, this lexical item seems to be incorrect but shares enough semantic features to be selected as a correct one.

(6) EXTRACT: “baby-bed”

INTERLANGUAGE SENTENCE: “Right (.) here (1) there is like (.) a::: baby chair (1) not chair”.

CS ANALYSIS: circumlocution: the student tried to describe “the baby-bed” in the lack of using the appropriate target item.

These extracts show that more and less proficient students try to avoid the topics when they lacked the necessary target language vocabulary. However, more proficient students used a large number of language structures when they tried to use paraphrasing strategies. Here, the present study substantiate that students used more communication strategies in oral task discussions than in the two other tasks, that is, because students had more freedom to use their natural talk among their participants. Here, less proficient students made use of a higher amount of conscious transfer strategies while trying to narrate and describe the items on the pictures. The following sample of extracts illustrates the instances less proficient students used in their task accomplishments.

(7) EXTRACT: “go on”

INTERLANGUAGE SENTENCE: “vazhdo, vazhdo”

CS ANALYSIS: language switch: the student In this case switched to his mother because he could not think of the English item “go on”.

(8) EXTRACT: “noddy”

INTERLANGUAGE SENTENCE: “...and is klloshari (laughing)

CS ANALYSIS: language switch: the students switched in his mother tounge because he could not find the appropriate word in English for that item.

(9) EXTRACT: “explain”

INTERLANGUAGE SENTENCE: “how I telling (laughing)...

CS ANALYSIS: literal translation: the student wanted to convey more Original explanation, but used conscious transfer strategy, literal translation of the Albanian expression “si ta them”.

(10) EXTRACT: “corpulent boy”

INTERLANGUE SENTENCE: “A:: the main object is:: this one was you are not the strongest man in the world (.) a:: you have more, a::: they have more powerful mass (.) before you”.

CS ANALYSIS: literal translation: the student wanted to convey original explanation, but used conscious transfer strategy, literal translation of the Albani -an expression as “Qellimi I tij kryesore ishte ky; ti nuk je njeriu me I fort ne bote, ne jemi me te fuqishem para jush”.

(11) EXTRACT: “standing”

INTERLANGUAGE SENTENCE: “kako se kazhe stojat”?

CS ANALYSIS: appeal for assistance: the student asked his peer for help. In this case, he used the Bosnian expression “how do we say standing”?

(12) EXTRACT: “scared”

INTERLANGUAGE SENTENCE: “a:: he is knocking the door (1) and:: waiting for a somebody opened the door (.) and his child (.) is so (.) a::: preplasen?”

CS ANALYSIS: appeal for assistance: the student not able to continue on conveying the original meaning asked his peer for help. In the example, he used the Bosnian expression referring to “scared”.

(13) EXTRACT: “have fun”

INTERLANGAUE SENTENCE: “is, is ha(-) is::: the happy day::

CS ANALYSIS: word coinage: the student used “happy day” instead of “having fun” to create a description which he thought was appropriate for

the meaning he wanted to express. The student hesitated to continue speaking, therefore he looked at his peer to get the help, in this case appeal for assistance.

(14) EXTRACT: “No energy”

INTERLANGUAGE SENTENCE: “after the day you are like, hh”.

CS ANALYSIS: mime: the student used gestures simultaneously with the use of words to emphasize what s/he wanted to convey. The student in this case performed the act of a non-energized person.

As we can see from the extract samples, less proficient students made a greater use of conscious transfer strategies. It is also known from previous studies that low level students would make more use of these strategies because they feel unable to find other language means in their interlanguage to convey their messages successfully to their peers.

## 5. Conclusion

The present study validates that Albanian and Bosnian speakers of English as their second language make use of communication strategies based on their proficiency level, but in terms of the frequency and the types of the communication strategies they choose. The measurements of our data show that low proficient students greatly used more communication strategies compared to more proficient participants. However, the results also show that high level students in attempt to complete their natural communicative tasks such as; picture narration and picture description faced more lexical difficulties. Thus, the results of the previous studies validate that the types of the communication strategies used by low and high level students are also influenced by the types of oral tasks and their performances on these tasks. Therefore, students' proficiency level plays a great role in the task accomplishment. The results, also confirm that low level students used more L1 based strategies while high level students used more L2 based strategies. Further studies using a bigger population with different degrees of proficiency levels are needed to provide additional comprehensive understanding regarding the present examination. However, when conducting the study regarding CS, it is necessary to bear in mind the effects of proficiency levels and the types of communication strategies. Here, different factors should be considered such as: the types of the tasks provided to students, the arrangement of the settings, and the qualitative and quantitative measurements of the communication strategies.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Prof. Dr. Firdevs Karahan and Doc. Dr. Dogan Yuksel for their contribution throughout the study. And, finally I would like to thank all the Kosovan and Bosnian students who participated in the present study.

## Reference

- Bialystok, E. (1983). Some factors in the selection and implementation of communication strategies. *Strategies in interlanguage communication*. Ed. Claus Faerch and Gabriele Kasper. London: Longman. 100-18.
- Canale, M., & Swain, M. (1980). Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing. *Applied Linguistics*, 1(1): 1-47.
- Chomsky, N. (1965). *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Coder., P. (1983). Strategies of communication. In C. Faerch & G. Kasper (Eds.), *Strategies in interlanguage communication* (pp. 15 -20). New York: Longman.
- Dorney, Z. (1995). On the teachability of communication strategies. *TESOL Quarterly*, 29 (1): 55-84.
- Faerch, C., & Kasper, G. (1983). Plans and strategies in foreign language communication. In: Faerch, C., & Kasper, G. (Eds.), *Strategies in interlanguage communication*. Longman, London, pp. 20-60.
- Faerch, C., & Kasper, G. (1984). Two ways of defining communication strategies. *Language Learning*, 34, 1: 45-63.
- Haastrup, K., & Robert, P. (1983). Achievement strategies in learner/native speaker interaction. *Strategies in interlanguage communication*. Ed. Claus, F., & Gabriele, K. London: Longman. 140-58.



- Hymes, D. (1972). On communicative competence. In pride, J. B., & Holmes, J., (Eds.) *Sociolinguistics*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Hymes, D. (1979). On communicative competence. In Brumfit, C. J., & Johnson, K., (Eds.) *The Communicative Approach to Language Teaching*, Oxford: OUP.
- Jourdain, S. (2000). A native-like ability to circumlocute. *The Modern Language Journal* 84. 2: 185-195.
- Littlemore, J. (2001). An empirical study of the relationship between cognitive style and the use of communication strategy. *Applied Linguistics* 22.2: 241-65
- Oxford, R., L. (1990). *Language learning strategies: What Every Teacher Should Know*. Massacchusets: Heinle & Heinle publishers.
- Palmberg, R. (1979). Investigating communication strategies. Perception and production of English: Papers in Interlanguage. Ed. Rolf, P. Abo: Abo Akademi. 33 -75.
- Paribakht, T. (1985). Strategic competence and language proficiency. *Applied Linguistics*, 6(2): 132-146.
- Poulisse, N. (1990). The use of compensatory strategies by Dutch learners of English, Enschede: Sneldruk.
- Scott, M., L. & Dorney, Z. (1997). Communication strategies in a second language: Definitions and taxonomies. *Language Learning*, 47:1, 173-210.
- Si-Qing, C. (1990). A study of communication strategies in interlanguage. Production by Chinese EFL Learners. *Language Learning*, 40.2: 155-87.
- Tarone, E. (1977). Conscious communication strategies in interlanguage: a progress report. In H.D. Brown, C.A. Yorio & R.H. Crymes (Eds.), *On TESOL'77: Teaching and Learning English as a Second Language* (pp. 194-203). Washington: TESOL.
- Tarone, E. (1979). Some thoughts on the notion of communication strategies. Paper presenter at First TESOL summer Institute, UCLA. *Forthcoming in Campbell and Bailey (eds.), Selected Papers: 1979 TESOL summer Institute*. Washington, D.C. TESOL.
- Tarone, E. (1980). Communication strategies: foreign talk and repair in interlanguage. *Language Learning*, 30, (pp. 417-431).
- Varadi, T. (1983). Strategies of target language learner communication: message adjustment. In Faerch, C. & Kasper, G. (Eds.), *Strategies in interlanguage communication* (pp. 79-100). New York: Longman.
- Varone, E. (1981). Some thoughts on the notion of communication strategies. *TESOL Quarterly*, 15(3), (pp. 285-95).