

# **The Reflection on the Utilization of Communication Strategies of the English majors at Ho Chi Minh City Open University**

## **Abstract**

Reflective deployment of communication strategies to ensure the sustainability in communication is a cornerstone in the development of L2 learner's strategic competence. That real-life communication in L2 is problematic and diverse requires learners to execute every possible survival strategy to successfully encounter performance problems. The paper is aimed at observing how English majors from DH15AV56 and DH14AV44 classes at Ho Chi Minh City Open University (HOU) make use of their L2 Communication Strategies in language classrooms. The findings enable language teachers to elaborate on the potential consciousness of L2 learners in their adoption of communicative strategies and take into account the possibility of incorporating those communication strategies into their actual language teaching programs so as to foster the students' motivation, flexibility and strategic competence in using L2 at their levels in response to a pressing communicative need despite their restricted L2 linguistic resources.

**Key words:** strategic competence, communication strategies, communication breakdown, linguistic resources, language/ linguistic inputs, learner output, cross-cultural differences, motivation

## **Abbreviations**

HOU: Ho Chi Minh City Open University

ELT: English Language Teaching

L1: First language

L2: Second Language

SLA: Second Language Acquisition

DH15AV56: first-year English majors

DH14AV44: second-year English majors

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In the context of globalization, Vietnam is on the threshold of cultural, economic and educational integration in which English is regarded as the global language and its acquisition is of great necessity in pursuit of cultural integration and career promotion. In recognition of its crucial importance, students at HOU, especially English majors demonstrate their increasing needs for English language acquisition. As real-life L2 communication is problematic and varied, language classrooms do not generally prepare students to cope with performance problems. That is to say students often find themselves hard to get across their intended meaning through real-life communication. Such an issue accounts for a dearth of essential L2 linguistic resources to thoroughly transfer their message to the interlocutor. In order to achieve desired communicative goals, they attempt to take advantage of a range of communication strategies at their levels, which involve verbal and non-verbal means of dealing with difficulties and breakdowns that may occur in daily communication. Reflection on the complications of real-life communication in L2 and HOU English majors' varied deployment of communication strategies enables language teachers generally to provide an extensive strategy instruction in line with the formal provision of L2 linguistic knowledge to be well-prepared for their students to overcome communication breakdown.

## **COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES IN SLA– A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Communication Strategies and Strategic Competence**

The term “communication strategy” was coined by Selinker, 1972 and expeditiously captured the interest of many language researchers in exploring how learners use L2 in their real-life communication to achieve their ultimate goal of getting their meanings across.

First of all, strategies are, according to Nunan, 1999, “the mental and communicative procedures learners use in order to learn and use language”. Thus, the greater awareness of strategies underlying learning learners have, the more effective they will be at not only knowing what but also knowing how.

Second, due to a lot of public attentions towards the term initially introduced by Selinker, 1972, the definition of “communication strategy” has been extensively modified. To start with, Varadi, 1973 realizes that L2 errors may take place either accidentally or intentionally. That L2 errors arise accidentally is the result of learners' production strategies and thereby indicates the

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transitional state of learners' L2 knowledge along the interlanguage continuum. However, if L2 errors are made intentionally, they are the result of communication strategies which are consciously used by learners so as to avoid, compensate or retrieve some element of meaning or form in their initial plan of conveying the meanings. Consciousness is a recognizable characteristic of communication strategies; however, the definition still leaves a gap as to whether a strategy is conscious or subconscious until Faerch and Kasper, 1980 expand the definition by attributing communication strategies to "potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal" (Faerch & Kasper, 1980, p. 81). The reason for this expansion is that learners may not realize their use of communication strategies.

Corder, 1977 presents his definition on communication strategies as being problem-oriented. That is a technique employed by learners to express their intended meanings in the face of their lack of L2 linguistic resources to carry out the production plan. Learners' efforts in demonstrating communication strategies are recorded as a short-term solution to a problem (Ellis, 1985).

Being further discussed in psycholinguistics, communication strategies are defined by Tarone, 1981 as a mutual attempt of two interlocutors to negotiate an agreement on meaning. That is to say, Tarone's definition is limitedly aimed at the interaction in which there exists a negotiation of meaning between interlocutors. However, his interactional definition is inoperable in monologue as Faerch and Kasper, 1983c; 1984 point out and because communicative problems still "occur in monologue as much as in dialogue" (Ellis, 1985, p. 182).

As learners make use of communication strategies to smooth away their communication breakdowns owing to their insufficiency of linguistic knowledge required for expressing their ideas, communication strategies are considered to be closely related to strategic competence, part of communicative competence critically framed by Canadian applied linguists Canale and Swain, 1980. Strategic competence is seen as "verbal and nonverbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient competence" (Canale & Swain, 1980, p. 30). To be precise, it involves survival strategies such as avoidance, paraphrase, substitution, word coinage, repetition, non-verbal signals, etc. (Savignon, 1983). This competence plays a pivotal role in relation to the other components of communicative competence: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence and discourse

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competence (Canale & Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983) with a view to equipping learners with some of the coping or compensation strategies to get over communication breakdowns.

On the whole, foregoing debates in an attempt to shed light on the problems of definition help adequately clarify the term as psycholinguistic plans which exist as the language user's strategic competence. They reflect the two fundamental features: potential consciousness and problem orientedness (Ellis, 1985) and accredit learners' attempts to "enhance the effectiveness of communication" (Canale, 1983, p. 11).

### **Typology of Communication Strategies**

On account of the complexity of definition, there is no unanimity on a standard typology of communication strategies. Various models have been proposed by Varadi, 1973; Tarone, 1977; Corder, 1978c; and Faerch & Kasper, 1980. Moreover, typologies regarding lexical problems are framed by Blum-Kulka & Levenston, 1978; and Paribakht, 1982. Table 1 is a summary of the typology of communication strategies provided by Faerch & Kasper, 1984 (as cited in Ellis, 1985, p. 184-185). Nonetheless, the typologies of communication strategies suggested before Faerch & Kasper, 1984 focused on product-oriented and surface-level features (Kumaravadivelu, 1988) whereas subsequent research conducted by Bialystok & Kellerman, 1987; Bialystok, 1990; Dornyei & Scott, 1977; Kumaravadivelu, 1988) aimed at digging deeper into deep-level psychological processes. Table 2 demonstrates communication strategies which were conceptualized by Bialystok & Kellerman, 1987 and encompassed conceptual and linguistic strategies.

In addition, *stalling or time-gaining strategies* are often employed by L2 learners in real-life communication to keep the communication channel open in the face of difficulties. In fact, they are not utilized to compensate for any linguistic deficiencies. However, many linguists such as Hatch, 1978; Canale & Swain, 1980; Savignon, 1983; Haastrop & Phillipson, 1983; Ellis, 1985; Rost, 1994 reach an agreement on the significance of using fillers and hesitation devices to sustain communication in time of waiting for the items to come to learners. Rost, 1994 (as cited in Dornyei, 1995) embedded the deployment of using conversational fillers in his typology of communication strategies to foster learners' strategic competence.

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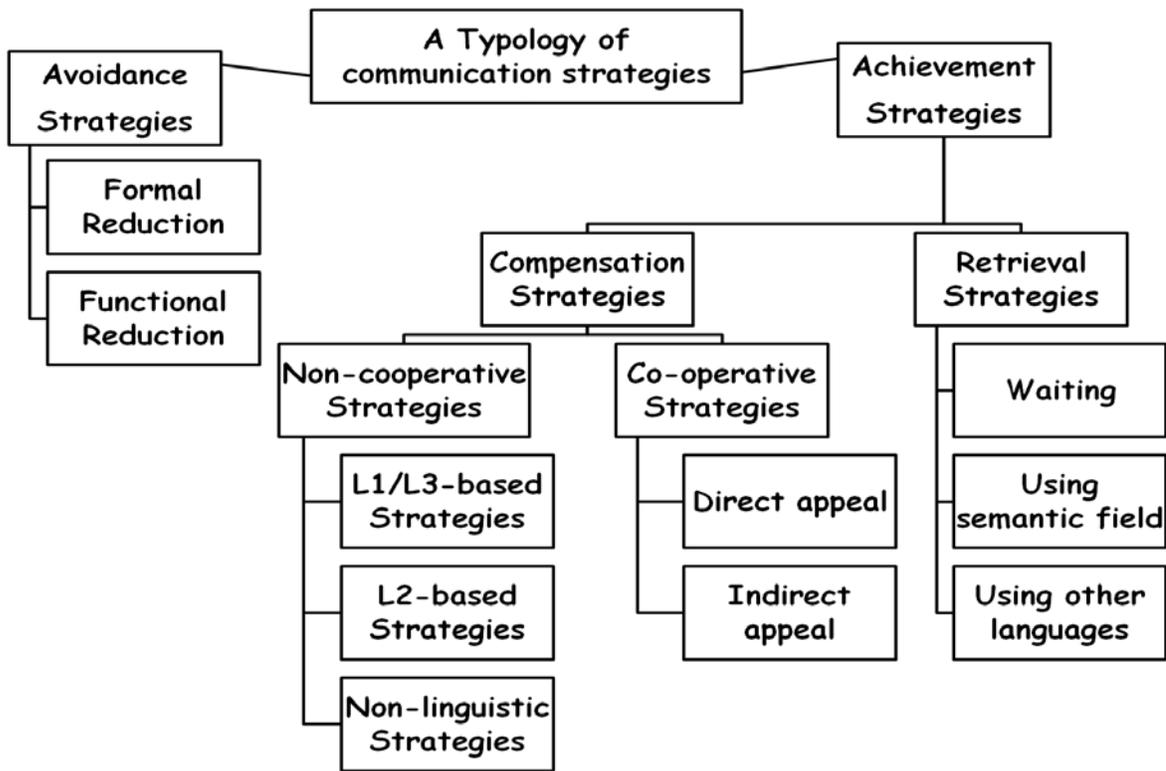


Table 1: Communication Strategies as conceptualized by Faerch & Kasper, 1984

<b>Conceptual Strategies:</b> <i>refers to the manipulation of the target concept by making it expressible through available linguistic resources</i>	<b>Analytic Strategies</b> involve selecting criterial properties of the referent e.g.: <i>a machine that cooks and defrosts very fast by means of waves for <u>microwave</u></i>
	<b>Holistic Strategies</b> involve using a similar referent e.g.: <i>stove for <u>microwave</u></i>
<b>Linguistic Strategies:</b> <i>refers to the use of L1 and L2 linguistic knowledge</i>	<b>Morphological Creativity</b> involves the creation of a new word by applying L2 morphological rules to a L2 word e.g.: <i>vegetarianist for vegetarian</i>
	<b>Transfer</b> from another language e.g.: <i>coffee spoon for tea spoon</i>

Table 2: Communication Strategies as conceptualized by Bialystok & Kellerman, 1987

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### **The Role of Communication Strategies in SLA**

Some people who have a limited command of L2 knowledge are still able to communicate by using their gestures, imitating the sound or movement of things, describing things in such a simple way or mixing languages, etc. They are making every possible effort to use communication strategies to attain their ultimate goal of communication. The insufficiency of L2 linguistic knowledge enables them to “communicate within restrictions” (Savignon, 1983, p. 43) by deploying strategies to maintain communication. Such strategies keep communication going and L2 language users take risks with their language as Hatch, 1978 (as cited in Ellis, 1985) asserts that the most important thing of all has to be “don’t give up”.

Corder, 1978c refers to avoidance strategies as “risk-avoiding” and achievement strategies as “risk-taking”. In most cases, risk-taking, according Faerch & Kasper, 1980, is a rudimentary condition for communication strategies to have a potential learning effect and thus, helps learners expand their linguistic resources. In this respect, learners are willing to make optimal use of their available linguistic knowledge to actively contribute to keeping their communicative channel open. Kumuravadivelu, 2006 regards communication strategies as one of the tactical factors that “help learners pay attention to potentially useful linguistic input and also promote opportunities for negotiation thereby activating necessary cognitive processes” (p. 38).

### **CLASSROOM OBSERVATION - RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Classroom observation was conducted in two different-level classes at HOU, the Faculty of Foreign Languages. The observation was made on 33 intermediate-level students at DH15AV56, and 40 upper-intermediate-level students at DH14AV44. The students at DH15AV56 were given a speaking task on *the role of mass media in social life* to discuss in groups of three. And those at DH14AV44 were requested to work in groups of four to talk about *factors affecting work performances*. After a ten-minute group discussion, each group member has to raise his or her ideas about the issues given. Their speaking performance was recorded for the analysis of the deployment of communication strategies.

The result shows that in my sample of 73 subjects, there are ten major strategy types utilized as follows: *lexical avoidance, syntactic avoidance, phonological avoidance, paraphrase, literal translation, foreignizing, non-verbal signals, restructuring, retrieval strategies* and *stall or time-gaining strategies*.

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The frequent choices of strategies of the students at DH15AV56 are lexical avoidance, syntactic avoidance, phonological avoidance, literal translation, foreignizing, non-verbal signals and time-gaining strategies. Their choices of strategies, to a certain extent, reflect their entry level in SLA. They are likely to use more avoidance strategies to be secure enough in communication. According to Tarone (1977), the less able students preferred avoidance to achievement strategies. Besides, more L1-based strategies such as literal translation and foreignizing are employed, which demonstrates their restricted L2 linguistic resources.

With respect to the students at DH14AV44, they are recorded to use more L2-based strategies, namely paraphrase and restructuring; non-verbal signals; retrieval strategies and time-gaining strategies. Their use of paraphrase reveals that their L2 knowledge is in progress. This phenomenon was also justified by Ellis, 1983 through his longitudinal study on learners of different linguistic capabilities. He found that his learner had a tendency to opt for avoidance-type behaviour in the earlier stages, and gradually through learning he turns to more achievement-type behaviour. According to Bialystok, 1983b (as cited in Ellis, 1985) advanced learners use more L2-based strategies such as paraphrase than less advanced learners. In support of Bialystok, 1983b, Haastруп & Phillipson, 1983 posits that paraphrase is the strategy most likely to be successful.

### **PRINCIPLES FOR LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY**

Such observation on how the students from two classes make use of communication strategies in their production plan leads the author to the strong belief that there is a practical necessity for the incorporation of communication strategies into L2 language instruction. Despite considerable controversy over the teachability of communication strategies to learners over the years, certain pedagogic precepts should be taken into careful consideration to enhance students' communicative competence, particularly strategic competence.

First of all, the major task of the teachers is to help learners attain a desired level of linguistic and pragmatic knowledge in response to their needs, wants and real-life situations. Therefore, in order to promote L2 development, *the conversion of language input into learner output is the bedrock of L2 instruction*. Nevertheless, "language input should be linguistically and cognitively accessible to learners" (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Based on Krashen's Comprehensible Input Hypothesis, comprehensible input is considered the input that secure the semantic meaning and contain the structure which is a little higher than the students' current level (I + 1). He argues that I +1 is a prerequisite for language learners to be successful in L2 learning. In other words,

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comprehensible input helps learners navigate on the L2 developmental route with the help of more capable instructors or peers in order to jump from the current level up to the potential level in accordance with the Zone of Proximal Development conceptualized by Vygotsky. This leads the writer to proceed with the second precept: *negotiated interaction, negotiated interpretation and scaffolding*.

The initiation of negotiated interaction and interpretation in language classrooms is of great importance as it entails learners' active engagement in communicative activities in which communication problems are negotiated between interlocutors. Hence, negotiated interaction stimulates comprehension and production on the L2 developmental route (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). In line with the opportunity to interact, learners should be well-equipped with cultural norms of interpretation to prevent pragmatic failure in communication (Thomas, 1983, as cited in Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Negotiated interaction and negotiated interpretation serve as a scaffolding to activate psycholinguistic processes.

The third precept lays its emphasis on *meaningful interactional activities* which are vital for L2 development. Vygotskian sociocultural theory highlights the substantial role of interaction in language classroom. In support of this approach, it is argued that socio-cultural theory has the greater potential with a primary emphasis on the collaborative nature in meaning making in discourse, not just in exchanges where communication breakdown occurs (Ellis, 1999). Being an "activity organizer" (Tudor, 1993, p.24), the teacher should provide a wide variety of activities in which accuracy, fluency and overall communicative skills are embedded through instruction that is predominantly meaning-based first and form-based later (Lightbown & Spada, 1990, as cited in Kumaravadivelu, 2006). In all likelihood, learners will try to deploy a far wider repertoire of their language and experiment with or take risks with language they are not certain of as long as their meanings can be got across. Most importantly, meaningful interactional activities should be constructed on the selection of topics from learners as Slimani, 1989 (as cited in Kumaravadivelu, 2006) argues that learners gained more benefits from self- or peer- nominated topics than from teacher nominated topics. That is to say learner-topic control would create a better opportunity for them to digest the linguistic complexity of the input at their own level and negotiate meaning during the interaction (Ellis, 1992).

Last but not least, teachers generally should keep it in mind that *learner errors are just a natural, inevitable and essential part of the acquisition process*. They reflect the stage of

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development the learners have reached. To put it another way, learner errors are a manifestation of each L2 developmental stage in which learners make an active contribution to acquisition. Thus, not all learner errors should be corrected, and those that are corrected should usually not be treated immediately (Klapper, 2006).

### IMPLICATIONS FOR ELT

In compliance with the four pedagogic precepts mentioned above, language teachers should be mindful of their responsibilities to facilitate L2 development not only by providing learners with necessary language inputs through negotiated interaction but by prompting them to take enormous advantage of communication strategies to develop their strategic competence in using L2 in and outside the classrooms.

<b>PEDAGOGIC PRECEPTS</b>	<b>IMPLICATIONS</b>
1. The conversion of language input into learner output is the bedrock of L2 instruction.	<i>Teachers should</i> 1. offer students comprehensible inputs and have them work on these inputs for language use in negotiated interaction and negotiated interpretation.
	2. contextualize linguistic inputs as language is more than a system. It should be treated far more as discourse. This calls for the contextualization of linguistic inputs so that learners can maximize the language use for interaction with those inputs.
2. The initiation of negotiated interaction and interpretation in language classrooms is of great importance as it entails learners' active engagement in communicative activities in which	3. facilitate negotiated interaction in which learners have more freedom and flexibility to control their talk. Only through negotiated interaction do learners can boost their comprehension and attempt to restructure their interaction with their interlocutors until mutual comprehension is met.
	4. increase students' motivation and build up their positive attitude towards learning situation in which shared decision-making is implemented to decide how learning and teaching should be organized. Teachers can appreciate their students' effort of not giving up in any interactive situation by using communication strategies to sustain the communication.

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<p>communication problems are negotiated between interlocutors.</p>	<p>5. highlight cross-cultural differences in communication strategies use, especially in employing non-linguistic strategies as in some cultures, the same gestures can convey different meanings. Some of indications can be negative and impermissible. If learners are not well-prepared or untrained for that, they will fail to get their intended meanings across.</p>
<p>3. Meaningful interactional activities are vital for L2 development.</p>	<p>6. maximize learning opportunities, make learning more enjoyable and enrich the learning environment in such a way that is “challenging, personally relevant, accepting and supportive” (McCombs, 1997, p.54).</p>
	<p>7. encourage students to be willing to take risks and make good use of communications strategies. Teachers offer them a chance to experiment with the language they are not sure of. In other words, students can exploit their available linguistic resources without having any fear of making errors to express their ideas freely despite lack of required linguistic inputs. If so, it can help improve their flexibility in using L2 knowledge for achieving their desired communicative goals.</p>
	<p>8. provide opportunities for practice in strategy use through meaningful learner-learner, learner-teacher interaction in language classrooms. An increase in strategic competence helps students get over inhibitions when they are involved in real-life communication in L2.</p>
<p>4. Learner errors are just a natural, inevitable and essential part of the acquisition process.</p>	<p>9. offer them plenty of opportunities to use their language in the classroom in a supportive atmosphere in which rewards successful use and does not penalize unavoidable failings in accuracy.</p>
	<p>10. raise students’ awareness about the role of communication strategies to readily encounter most of the difficulties in L2 real-life communication and that they already possess their communication strategies in L1. Teachers should also sensitize</p>

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	them to the appropriate situations in which they can find communication strategies actually work to get their intended meanings across.
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### CONCLUSION

The communication strategy use of HOU English majors at DH14AV44 and DH15AV56 has been placed under critical reflection through classroom observation and findings discussion in order to serve the ultimate purpose of this paper which underlies the viable incorporation of communication strategies into L2 instruction along with the formal provision of L2 linguistic knowledge for learners generally. In the face of much debate over the teachability of communication strategies in ELT, it is imperative that learners be well-equipped with communication strategies training so that they can sustain real-life communication with more ease. The conceptual framework on communications strategies and strategic competence serves as a basic premise that generates and shapes language teachers' pedagogic precepts on how to integrate communication strategies in their practical classroom instruction to illuminate their actual teaching practices. The job of teaching is that of creativity, variety, flexibility and adaptability in which the teacher plays a tremendous role in fostering the learners' learning outcomes and - most importantly of all - their notable success in L2 real-life communication.

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