The Influence of Proficiency and Designed Task on Yemeni Students' Use of Communication Strategies.

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Abstract

The major aim of this study is to investigate the effect of proficiency level as well as the designed task on the use of communication strategies among the students. Two communicative tasks were designed to involve learners in a problem-solving activity in order to give the researchers a chance to elicit communication strategies from the subjects' utterances. The first task was a concept-identification task and another one was a culture-based task. The results of the study showed that there was no difference in the choice of the students for their types of communication strategies used. It has been found that the nature of the designed task was of great effect on determining the subject's preference of communication strategies. When the students were involved in the concept-identification task, the high-proficient subjects showed strong preference to some types of communication strategies which were supposed to be more preferred by the low-proficient learners. While in the culture-based task, it has been found that the low-proficient subjects used more communication strategies than the high-proficient subjects and that could be attributed to low-proficient limited mastery of L2 vocabulary and grammar.

Key Words: Influence, Profiency, Yemani Students, Communication Stratigies.

Introduction

Since the late 1970s, studies of communication strategies concentrated on primarily descriptive issues to do with their definitions, identification and classification. Within the field of education during these two decades, a gradual shift but a significant one has taken place in the field of

communication strategies. The study of communication strategies is considered to be the result of these shifts as it reveals a language learner's level of communicative competence.

Nevertheless, there remain large gaps in this area, which are worthy of investigation. One of the gaps that have been addressed presently is how the use of these strategies can be related to factors like the proficiency level and the designed task that might effect greatly the selection of communication strategies by second language learners. Communication strategies are tactics used by the non-fluent learners during L2 interaction, in order to overcome specific communicative problems, (Kasper and Kellerman, 1997).

Background of the Study

The number of the English Department students who come to the university with the intention to pursue their studies increases every day. These students however, are exposed to English at later stages of learning a language. They have to use English language to communicate with their colleagues, and lecturers as learners of a foreign language. However, while they are trying to speak a foreign language they are often confronted with lexical problems resulting from their inadequate linguistic knowledge in the target language.

The term "communicative Competence" is comprised of two words, the combination of which means "competence to communicate" This simple lexico-semanticical analysis uncovers the fact that the central word in the system "communicative competence" is the word " competence" (Bagaric, & Djigunovic: 2007). According to Balmer 1996, the nature of communicative competence is not static but dynamic; it is more interpersonal than intrapersonal and relative rather than absolute. Karimnia and Izadparast (2007) asserted that strategic competence was composed of verbal and non-verbal strategies of communication that might be employed to complete for communication breakdown attributable to performance variables or to insufficient competence.

Objectives of the Study

This study aims at:

1.investigating the relationship between the subjects' choice of communication strategies and their proficiency level in English language.

2. finding out the relationship between the subject's choice of communication strategies and the designed task they are involved with.

Research Questions

This study answers the following questions:

1. Is the choice of communication strategies affected by the level of language proficiency among the subjects?

2- Is the choice of communication strategies affected by the designed task?

Literature review

People who attempt to speak a foreign language are often confronted with many communication difficulties that vary according to their inter-language knowledge of the target language. A learner is expected to be able to produce and understand situationally related and coherent utterances. In order for the learner to do so, he must acquire the ability of tangled competencies that enable him to overcome the inadequate command of his knowledge in the target language to communicate his meaning successfully. These competencies include his ability to communicate grammatically, situationally and coherently. The idea is assured by Yarmohammadi (1995) who said that English B.A students should spend the first two years improving their general proficiency and after passing a proficiency test be allowed to take the related specialized courses.

Definition of Communication Strategies

Many linguists have introduced two approaches in defining communication strategies; one is called interactional approach focusing on the interaction between "interlocutors" and "speakers" through their negotiation of meaning. Within this approach communication strategies are seen as discourse devices with a focus on a variety of referential expressions that learners use in interaction. Another approach is called cognitive approach focusing on the range of problem-solving activities open to the individual (cognitive approach). (Maleki, 2007 and Ellis, 2008: 504) believe that communicative strategies are: "To solve own performance problems' and allow the other aspects of problematic L2 production to be dealt with in terms of other, arguably more robust, theoretical frameworks". Faucette, (2001) believes that communication strategies play an important role in the development of strategy competence. Communication strategies are tactics used by the non-fluent learners during L2 interaction, in order to overcome specific communicative problems, (Kasper and Kellerman, 1997).

Methodology

This study is a correlational study that investigates the relationship between communication strategies employed by EFL English Department students in their interlanguage production and the subjects' level of proficiency in the target language and the task they are involved with and their designed tasks.

Research design

The design of this research is an exploratory, non-experimental case study. It involves both qualitative and quantitative variables. The dependent variable is the communication strategy employed by the subjects. The independent variable is the subjects' level of proficiency that determines the nature of communication strategies used by the subjects.

Subjects

The subjects are students at different levels in the English Department, Faculty of Education-Sana'a (undergraduate students). Their age ranges from 19 to 31, with an average age of 25 years old from different levels in English language.

Random sampling method is used in order to select the subjects. Thirty students are asked to set for a proficiency test. According to their score in the test, twenty of them are going to be selected. The students are going to be divided into two groups; high proficiency level students and low proficiency level students.

Instrumentation and Materials

The instrument of this study are:

a. Proficiency Test: A standardized proficiency test is given to the subjects. The Oxford Placement Test has been adopted by this study in order to determine the subjects' level of proficiency. This test is Tarone and Yule's (1987) taxonomy of communication strategies and recordings of the subjects' responses.

b. Interview: Each subject of every group is interviewed and recorded individually and each interview is transcribed later. The nature of the interview is a task that has been designed for the purpose of eliciting communication strategies which are classified into two tasks, a concept-identification and mutual cultural-based tasks.

Findings

It is normally agreed that as part of the learner's communicative competence, all language users make use of their strategic competence that may be called into action either to enhance the effectiveness of communication or to compensate for breakdown in communication, (Canale and Swain, 1980). Most of the initial studies in the filed of communication strategies were driven towards defining communication strategies as well as developing taxonomies that could be used to classify them (Trone, 1980, Farach and Kasper 1983, Kasper and Kellerman, 1997). This study is considered to be a serious attempt to further investigate the relationship of students' level of proficiency and their use of communication strategies. A learner's proficiency has been frequently studied in earlier studies as a potentially influential factor for the use of communication strategies (Tarone, 1980, Paribakht, 1985).

This research intends to explore the relationship between learners' language proficiency levels and their strategic competence as well as the effect that might be brought about by the nature of the designed task. The communication tasks designed for the study were a concept-identification task and a culturally-based task.

The proficiency level and the number of communication strategies

Table (1) below shows that the total number of communication strategies employed by the two groups is 497 strategies. The table also shows that low-proficiency group employed 278 of the total frequent count of communication strategies employed by all the subjects which outnumbers the 219 communication strategies employed by a high-proficiency group. A test was then performed to show the percentage of the communication strategies by the two groups. It was indicated that the difference in the percentage between the two groups' use of communication strategies was remarkable.

Table (2) shows that the low-proficient subjects employ (55.9%) of the total count of communication strategies. While the high proficient subjects employ (44.1%) of the total count of communication strategies. It is indicated from the table that a significant difference does exist between the two groups in their choices of communication strategies. The low-proficiency group employs significantly more communication strategies than does the high-proficiency group.

 In regard of every particular employed communication strategy table (4 and 3) shows clearly that circumlocution is the most frequently used communication strategy (20.72%) and approximation is the second (17.50%). Besides the most other distinguished and remarkable communication strategies are code-switching (12.10%), topic avoidance (11.07%), and message

abandonment (6.84%), literal translation (6.64%) and word coinage (6..04%). Other types of communication strategies made up only (9.53%) of all strategies that are used by the two groups.

Table (1) also shows that circumlocution was the most frequently used strategy by all the subjects of the two groups, but not by subject no. 1 in the high proficiency group and subject no. 6 who is placed in the low-proficiency group. More explanation will be given later in the qualitative analysis of each category.

Table 1

Frequency of Communication Strategies.

Type of CSs	Approximation	Circum-locution	word-coinage	code-switching	literal translation	message abandonment	Topic avoidance	Appeal for assistance	Repetition	Overgeneral-ization
HPG	43	47	20	30	10	15	8	10	7	1
LPG	44	56	10	30	23	19	47	4	2	11
Total number	87	103	30	60	33	34	55	14	9	12
Percent-age%	17.50	20.72	6.04	12.07	6.64	6.84	11.07	2.82	1.81	2.41

Type of CSs	Message replacement	semantic contiguity	Exemplifications	Borrowing	Simile	Overelaboration	Foreignizing	Meta-language	Total number
HPG	1	12	0	3	1	2	9	0	219
LPG	3	10	3	4	2	2	7	1	278
Total number	4	22	3	7	3	4	16	1	497
Percent-age%	0.80	4.43	0.60	1.41	0.60	0.80	3.22	0.20	100

HPG- high proficiency group, LPG- low-proficiency group

CS- communication strategies

On the other hand in order to investigate the relationship between proficiency level and types of communication strategies employed by each group, communication strategies have been divided

into; reduction strategies, achievement strategies and retrieval strategies. The strategies are shown in the following tables .The row frequency count of the types of communication strategies employed by each group has been calculated. A qualitative analysis was done by concerning the row of the total frequency count of above strategies as well as of each category within each type. The frequency count is inverted into percentage to show the use of each strategy type in relation to the total sum of communication strategies employed by the two groups.

Table 2

Achievement Strategies

Type of CSs	Approximation	Circumlocution	Word-coinage	Code-switch	Literal translation	Repetition	Overgeneral-ization	Semantic contiguity
HPG	43	47	20	30	10	7	1	12
LPG	44	56	10	30	23	2	11	10

Type of CSs	Exemplification	Borrowing	Simile	Over-Elaboration	Foreignizing	Meta-language	Total	Percentage
HPG	0	3	1	2	9	0	185	47.4359
LPG	3	4	2	2	7	1	205	52.5641

Table 3

Reduction Strategies

Table 4

Type of CSs	Message abandonment	Message replacement	Topic avoidance	Total	Percentage
HPG	15	1	8	24	25.80645
LPG	19	3	47	69	74.19355

Retrieval Strategies

Type of CSs	Appeal for assistance	Percentage
HPG	10	71.42857
LPG	4	28.57143

In view of the tables 2 and 3 above it is clearly shown that there is a difference between the two groups in their relative frequency use of each strategy type. The low proficiency group employed 52.56%, 74.19%, and 28.57% of the total number of reduction, achievement and retrieval strategies respectively. And the high-proficiency group employ 47.44%, 25.81%, 71.43% of the total number of the above strategies respectively too. All types of these strategies have been more frequently used by the low-proficiency group except for the retrieval strategies which were more frequently used by the high-proficiency group.

The Effect of Task on the Use of Communication Strategies.

On the other hand, it has been found that the nature of the task has been of great effect on the learner's choice, preference and number of communication strategies. In the first task (concept identification item) it has been found that low proficiency proficient learners use more communication strategies than the high-proficient learners. While in the second task (cultural based task) and contrary to our expectation, it has been found that the high-proficient learners employ more communication strategies than do the low-proficient learners. Simply, that is due to the nature of the two tasks. As the first task was a concept identification, the learners have no other alternative choice to resort to just to name the item has been provided to them. Due to the deficiency in the linguistic command, they resort back to some communication strategies to mediate or to bridge the gap exists in their linguistic command. Therefore, from the collected data it has been found that the low-proficient learners have to use a communication strategy to make the concept of the given item clear. Besides, it has been found that among the communication strategies, it is the approximation and the circumlocutions which have been employed the most by the low-proficient learners.

While in the second task as it has been a cultural-based, learners have to be involved in long conversation to convey appropriate messages. That is to say that task needs a good and adequate linguistic command. As the low-proficient learners lack that linguistic command, the resorted to avoidance or reduction strategies while they were dealing with that task. On the other hand, the high-proficient learners feel that their linguistic makes them confident enough to talk about the topic rather than to avoid it. However, as they encounter some problems while they are expressing them selves they resort back to some communication strategies to overcome these communicative problems. That actually results in more communication strategies employed by the high-proficient learners rather than by the low-proficient learners. In that task it has been found that among the communication strategies, it is description, circumlocution and borrowing

strategies that have been used the most. This type of communication strategies have been more frequently used by the high-proficient learners.

Conclusion

This study is intended to correlate the relationship between learners' level of proficiency and their use of communication strategies on one hand and the effect of the designed task on communication strategies on the other. The quantitative analysis of the study showed that the two groups employed the same types of communication strategies. However, it has been shown that the two groups used different patterns of communication strategies. In examining certain types of communication strategies, it had been proven that proficiency level had only a limited effect on the choice of communication strategies. Contrary to our expectation the data revealed that high-proficiency group was in strong preference of certain types of achievement strategies like code-switch, repetition foreign zing and appeal for assistance strategies.

The disparity in the frequent and potential use of communication strategies suggested that a dynamic nature of the learners' inter language system played a role in selecting certain types of communication strategies. Such results generally reflect that the nature of the task is very important to be considered in testing communication strategies. Moreover, the results of this study emphasize that tasks that require good command of language compel people of deficient linguistic system to avoid them, while tasks that doesn't require good linguistic command leaves no other choice for the low-proficient learners just to involve themselves in. that is to conclude that tasks that have the nature of the conversational and dialogue mood need a well-founded linguistic command which the low-proficiency learners really lack.

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