

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES OF HIGH AND LOW ACHIEVERS: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This study is about communication strategies used by high and low achievers when they were doing the role plays in X elementary school. This study is to find out two research questions about the types of communication strategies and the differences and similarities in their use by high and low achievers. In order to answer the research questions, the writer uses Brown's communication strategies (2007) as the main theory and Littlewood's (1984) as the supporting theory. There are three findings: First, the high achievers used nine types of communication strategies and the low achievers used seven types of communication strategies. Second, the high achievers used a lot of different types of communication strategies, but their frequency of using them was lower than the low achievers. On the other hand, the low achievers used fewer types of communication strategies, but their frequency of using them was higher than the high achievers.

Keywords: Communication strategies, conversation, role play, high achievers, low achievers.

The teaching and learning process which is done in the classroom always involves communication between teacher-students and students-students. This communication aims to express ideas. However, many students have difficulties in delivering their ideas to the teacher or to their friends (Brown, 2007). Littlewood (1984) added that the students have communication problem because they lack of certain level of knowledge in L2. To solve the communication problem, students use communication strategies (Littlewood, 1984), "verbally or non-verbally" (Brown, 2007, p. 137). This also happens to the students who are learning English as Foreign Language (EFL) in X elementary school. This study wants to find out the type of communication strategies that were used by sixth grade learners in X Elementary School when they were doing role plays. This study aims to find, first, the types of communication strategies used by the high and low achievers when they were doing their role plays, and second, the differences and similarities of communication strategies' used by the high and low achievers when they were doing their role plays.

The theory used for this study are Brown (2007) about communication strategies, and Littlewood's (1984) theory as the supporting theory. Brown (2007, p. 137) stated that communication strategies are "the employment of verbal or non-verbal mechanisms for the productive communication of information". Brown (2007) added that the learners usually use communication strategies to "compensate" their language difficulties (p. 137). Littlewood (1984) also explained that the learners use communication strategies because their present level of language knowledge is not enough to communicate their intention. According to Brown (2007), communication strategies are a signal that the learners' competence is growing. Brown (2007) develops Dornyei's (1995) theory to classify communication strategies. He classifies communication strategies into two strategies: avoidance strategies and compensatory strategies.

Brown (2007, p. 137) stated that avoidance strategies are the learner's strategies to "avoid" the difficult situation in communication. Littlewood (1984) called this strategy as avoid communicating. In this avoidance strategy, Brown (2007) classified avoidance strategies into three Strategies: message abandonment, topic avoidance, and lexical avoidance. Message abandonment is used when learners find language difficulty to continue their message; they start to talk about concepts, but they choose to stop their message in the mid-utterances and they will not finish or continue the sentences (Brown, 2007). In using topic avoidance, learners simply avoid a whole of topic conversation which are not "familiar" with them (Brown, 2007, p. 138). They can change the subject of the conversation or stay silent the whole time when they are being asked (Brown, 2007). About avoid communicating, Littlewood (1984) said that learners have a difficulty to explain their intention to other people;

therefore, they choose to avoid the topic. Littlewood (1984, p. 84) added that learners who are avoiding to discuss unfamiliar topics that they do not know are the learners who “dislike risks or uncertainty”. Lexical avoidance is used when learners avoid the difficult words by omitting this difficult word (Brown, 2007). This strategy is the same as adjusting the message in Littlewood’s theory. Littlewood (1984, p. 84) mentioned that they will make their “ideas simpler” or they will “omit the difficult word” in using adjusting the message.

Brown (2007, p. 139) also explained that compensatory strategies are the learners’ strategies used for “compensating” their lacking of “language knowledge”. It is a common strategy for beginner level (Brown, 2007). Brown (2007) divided compensatory strategies into 11 strategies. First, in using circumlocution, learners attempt to describe the object to show what they want to say (Brown, 2007). Brown (1994) explained that learners describe the characteristic of the object. In Littlewood (1984, p. 85) using paraphrase and circumlocution belongs to the same strategy, that is the learners use it to “maintain linguistic accuracy”. Second, in using approximation, learners use the words which “express the meaning of the target lexical item as closely as possible” (Brown, 2007, p. 137). About using approximation, Littlewood (1984, p. 85) mentioned that the learners sometimes use the words that are not as “specific” as their “intended meaning”. Third, using of all-purpose words, learners are “extending a general, empty lexical item to contexts where specific words are lacking” (Brown, 2007, p. 138). Fourth, using word coinage, learners create a new word that does not belong to L2 to express their meaning (Brown, 2007). The new words which they made have certain pattern or rules. Littlewood (1984, p. 85), about creating new word strategies, said the learners can overgeneralize the word formation. Fifth, using prefabricated patterns, learners use the “stock phrases” which have already been memorized (Brown, 2007, p. 137). This “stock phrases” are used to solve the communication problem (p. 137). Sixth, using nonlinguistic signal, learners use “mime, gesture, facial expression, or sound imitation” (Brown, 2007, p. 138). Littlewood (1984, p. 86) also called this strategy as using non-linguistic resources strategies. Seventh, in using literal translation, learners translate the meaning from L1 to L2 literally (Brown, 2007). They can translate “ a lexical item, idiom, compound word, or structure from L1 to L2” (Brown, 2007, p. 138). Eighth, foreignizing is the strategies where the learners use the L1 words with L2 pronunciation (L2 phonology) (Brown, 2007). Also, they can adjust L1 words with morphology (“adding suffix”) (Brown, 2007, p. 137). Littlewood (1984, p. 86) mentioned this strategy in the strategy of switching to the native language. The speaker should have enough knowledge about L2 words to use this strategy (Littlewood, 1984, p. 86). Ninth, in using code switching, learners use L1 words and L1 pronunciation while they are speaking in L2 (Brown, 2007). The learners can use the L3 words and L3 pronunciation while they are speaking in L2 (Brown, 2007). Littlewood (1984) called this strategy as switch to native language strategy. In this strategy, a speaker is prefer “using their own native language to create a new word” (Littlewood, 1984, p. 85). Tenth, in using appeal for help, learners ask other people to help the learners to “communicate their message either directly or indirectly” (Brown, 2007, p. 138). Littlewood (1984) also called this strategy as seek help strategies. Eleventh, in using stalling or time-gaining strategies, learners ask for several minutes to think (Brown, 2007). In using this strategy, learners can use “fillers or hesitation devices to gain time to think” (Brown, 2007, p. 138). The writer used these Brown’s (2007) and Littlewood’s (1984) theories to analyze the data.

METHODS

In this study, the writer used qualitative approach. The instrument was the writer herself who collected the data and analyzed the data. The focus of the study was communication strategies based on Brown’s (2007) and Littlewood’s (1984) theories. The source of data was the students’ utterances during the role play. The data were the verbal and non-verbal which contain communication strategies produced by students of conversation class of sixth grade of elementary school: 22 high achievers and eight low achievers. In this school, the high achievers are the students who get around A and B+ steadily while the low achievers are the students who get around C and D steadily (based on the X school’s report, 2015).

The writer gave the questionnaires to the students to search their background information. From the questionnaires, it was found that most of the high achievers have learnt English in the school since they were in the kindergarten. They have already joined English course since they were in the first grade of elementary school. When the data was taken, they still join the course. They also have

lots of opportunities to use English outside school: at home and in the English course. This situation is different from the low achievers. Most of the low achievers have learnt English at school since they were in the kindergarten and in the first grade of elementary school. Only two students still join the English courses until the data was taken. Only one student said that he joined English course when he was in the fourth elementary school, but he stopped joining the English course. Other low achievers never joined English course. Most of the students did not have an opportunity to use English outside school. There were only three students who rarely used English outside school.

To conduct this research, the writer used role-play outside class. In this study, the teacher made five groups and the writer gave five different topics; each group had different topics. The teacher in this study did not teach the expressions in the role plays before the students did the role plays. The writer asked the students to read first the scenarios of the role plays in five minutes, and the students performed the scenarios in pairs in front of the writer. The scenarios were adapted from http://busyteacher.org/classroom_activities-speaking/roleplays/. The topics of the scenarios were asking permission, smoking, complaining, persuading, and telephoning.

When the students were performing in front of the writer, the writer took a note and used the video recorder, and sound recorder. The writer also interviewed some students if their utterances were confusing. After that, the writer made a verbatim transcription based on her note, video and audio recording. Last, the writer analyzed the data based on this transcription.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The writer found that there were many types of communication strategies used by high and low achievers in the role-play. Also, there were some similarities and differences of communication strategies used by high and low achievers. The writer gave examples of communication strategies used by the high and low achievers in the discussion below the table.

Table 1: The Frequency of Communication Strategies Used by High and Low Achievers

Communication strategies		High Achievers		Low Achievers	
		Number	%	Number	%
Avoidance Strategies	Message Abandonment	-	-	1	1.01%
	Topic Avoidance	-	-	-	-
	Lexical Avoidance	7	7.07%	7	7.07%
Compensatory Strategies	Circumlocution	-	-	-	-
	Approximation	7	7.07%	-	-
	Use of All-Purpose Words	-	-	-	-
	Word Coinage	1	1.01%	-	-
	Prefabricated Patterns	-	-	-	-
	Nonlinguistic Signal	-	-	-	-
	Literal Translation	7	7.07%	-	-
	Foreignizing	-	-	-	-
	Code-Switching	4	4.04%	4	4.04%
	Appeal for Help	5	5.05%	16	16.16%
	Stalling or Time-Gaining Strategies	9	9.09%	9	9.09%

Combination Strategies	Combining Code-Switching with Appeal for Help	1	1.01%	12	12.12%
	Combining Non-Linguistic Signal with Appeal for Help	-	-	10	10.10%
Total of Communication strategies		40	40.40%	59	59.60%
Total of Utterances contained of Communication strategies		99		100%	

First, both of high and low achievers did not use topic avoidance, circumlocution, use of all-purpose words, prefabricated patterns, non-linguistic signal, and foreignizing based on the table. These strategies were not found because the context of this study was not natural setting and their language knowledge was still so limited. They have not reaching to certain level which enabled them to activate these strategies. As a result, both the high and low achievers did not use these six strategies.

Second, the example of message abandonment is when the student 29 said, “oh, okay. I will watch a movie. Bye-bye”. In this study, the student did not give any appropriate response or answer towards their partners when they used message abandonment. In this role play, his partner was sad, so his partner wanted to tell her story. However, he could not give appropriate responds. He was directly closing the conversation. He abandoned his message by closing the conversation. Based on the table, the low achiever used message abandonment while the high achiever did not use it. The frequency, which showed in table 1, was the lowest percentage among other strategies for the low achievers. It showed that the high achievers did not rely too much on this strategy. They tried to deliver their message first rather than abandon the message easily. It was different from the low achievers. If the low achievers did not have any choices to find the appropriate terms, they might use this strategy. The low achievers had a limited vocabulary, so what they could do to deal with the difficult word was avoiding it.

Third, in using lexical avoidance, students omitted some difficult words and they could make their idea simpler. For instance, student 3 said, “Why-why?”. He wanted to ask, “why am I not allowed to smoke here?”. He made his idea simpler by omitting the difficult words, which were “am I not allowed to smoke here?”. Based on the table 1, both of high and low achievers used lexical avoidance. This frequency showed that both of high and low achievers were still on the same level.

Fourth, in using approximation, the students use the words which are close to their intended words. For example, the student 2 said, “No, I want to go to Bali. Will you save my cats?”. Students 2 wanted to entrust his cat to his neighbor. He cannot find the phrases “take care”, so he chose to use “save” which had close meaning with “take care”. In this study, the high achievers use this strategy, but the low achievers did not use this strategy. The low achievers did not use this strategy because their vocabulary were not as much as the high achievers. As a result, the low achievers could not find the word which were close to their intended meaning. It is different from the high achievers. High achievers had enough words or phrases which enable them to search the terms which were close to their intended meaning.

Fifth, learners create a new word which does not belong to English when using word coinage. The example is student 16 who said, “no, I can’t change your phone because my phone is distock. Thank you. I can got change your phone tomorrow.” Student 16 did not know the exact word to explain that she did not have any stock, so she created a new word. The word came from “dis-“ means “no” and “stock”. She combined them to express “no stock”. In this study, there was only one high achiever who used this strategy, but the low achiever did not use it. The student combined the meaning of a certain prefix with their own vocabulary. A high achiever is the only one who used this strategy in this study. For the high achievers, this frequency was the lowest percentage among other strategies. It showed that the high achievers did not rely too much on this strategy. The high achievers could use this strategy because they had enough vocabulary to combine one strategy with other strategies. However, for the low achievers, their vocabulary was still limited, which did not allow them to use this strategy.

Sixth, the students translated directly from the first language words (Indonesian) to second language words (English) when they used literal translation. For instance, Student 6 said, “Are you sell handphone this store?”. She translated this sentence directly from Indonesia. She wanted to ask whether she is the seller or not. It is better to use “Are you the seller in this store?”. The high achievers used literal translation, but the low achievers did not use this strategy. Because the high achievers had better language knowledge and language skill than the low achievers, the high achievers could try to use some complicated patterns and vocabulary even if they translated the sentences from their first language. It was different from the low achievers. The low achievers might think that they have not reaching certain level of language knowledge, so they might be afraid to play with the rules and vocabulary.

Seventh, the students used code-switching. Learners are supposed to speak in second language, but they suddenly change or switch into first language. The example is student 1 said, “No, I can’t because I *alergi* (have allergy of the) cats.” Student 1 wanted to say that she was allergic to cats, but she did not know the “allergy” word. Therefore, she chose to switch into the first language. Both of the high and low achievers used code switching. Table 1 showed that both of the high and low achievers students were comfortable enough to say something in their first language if they had language difficulties. They might think that they could easily deliver their message without trying to find the appropriate terms in second language.

Eighth, the students used appeal for help. Learners try to ask help from their friends by using this strategy. They can ask help directly or indirectly. For instance, student 12 said, “Can I care... (pause) my cat to your home?”. Student 12 understood that he could not find the appropriate word for this sentence. Therefore, he paused to ask help from his friends to search the appropriate word. In this study, both of the high achievers and low achievers used Appeal for Help. The low achievers used this strategy more frequently than the high achievers. Lots of low achievers relied on this strategy which was shown by the highest percentage in the table frequency. The frequency for Appeal for help strategies, which were used by the low achievers, was higher than stalling or time-gaining strategies which were used by the high achievers. These results showed that the low achievers needed a help from other people to deliver their message rather than the high achievers. In addition, the high achievers in this study gave lots of help towards the low achievers. It meant that the high achievers were more knowledgeable in the second language than the low achievers.

Ninth, in using stalling or time-gaining strategies, learners need time to think and find the appropriate word. They usually use fillers or hesitation devices. For example, student 10 said, “Er..Because... Because I-I just *marah* (get angry) with my friend in the school. I want tell the story with you.”. He wanted to tell his story to his partner. He needed time to think the “get angry” words, so he used filler. After that, he decided to switch L1. Both of the high achievers and low achievers used stalling or time-gaining strategies. This is the highest percentage for high achievers in the terms of frequency. However, this strategy is the second highest percentage among other strategies for the low achievers. It meant that both of the high and low achievers needed a few time to think and find the appropriate words. After that, they could continue their message.

Tenth, the students used combining code-switching with appeal for help. In using this strategy, learners ask help from his friend by using the first language even if they are supposed to talk in second language. For example, student 14 said, “*ngomonge yak apa?* (How to say it?)”. Student 14 could not pronounce the word “smoke”, so he asked his friends to help him in pronouncing this word. He asked help by using Indonesian, which was his first language. There was only one high achiever and there were three low achievers who used this strategy. Both of the high achievers and low achievers used combining code-switching with appeal for help. The low achievers used this strategy more frequently than the high achievers. From the result, this strategy was the second highest percentage among other strategies. The frequency of the low achievers in using this strategy also beats the stalling or time-gaining strategies which were used by the high achievers. In addition, this second strategy also has an element of appeal for help. Most of the low achievers used appeal for help in this study. It also shows that the low achievers was still relying on the appeal for help. On the contrary, the high achievers did not rely too much on this strategy.

Eleventh, in using combining non-linguistic signal with appeal for help, learners use their body language and facial expression to show that they need help. They give a help signal to their friend when they get language problems. For instance, Student 14: erm... (smile) (look at his friend)

I can't... (scratch his head) (Walk to his friend) *merokok itu apa yo?*(what is “smoke”?). Student 14 was smiling and scratching his head to give a help signal that he got difficulty in looking for the word “smoke”. Therefore, he needed help from his friend. The low achievers used combining between non-linguistic signal and appeal for help, but the high achievers did not use this strategy. The low achievers also mostly used this strategy. From the writer’s finding, the writer thought that the low achievers really relied on the appeal for help because this combining strategy contained appeal for help strategy again. This strategy was the third preference of the low achievers mostly used. This number of occurrences was quite high. Therefore, the writer thought the low achievers relied to appeal for help.

CONCLUSION

Based on the writer’s findings, there were differences and similarities between the high and low achievers. The high achievers used a lot of different types of communication strategies, but their frequency of using communication strategies was lower than the low achievers. In this study, the high achievers can run the conversation well. It happened because the high achievers have a lot of vocabulary rather than the low achievers. The high achievers used their own language knowledge to run the conversation well. It happened because most of the high achievers got lots of opportunities to learn English in their course. Most of the high achievers also get a lot of exposure at home. On the other hand, the low achievers used fewer types of communication strategies, but their frequency of using communication strategies was higher than the high achievers. Most of the low achievers did not join the English course and they rarely used English outside school, so they have fewer vocabularies than the high achievers. Thus, they need a lot of help from their friends to run the conversation well by using lots of communication strategies.

The writer hopes that there would be a further study which involves a natural setting to get more accurate data than this present study. It is a good idea to do the further research on communication strategies which focuses on the levels, such as the beginner and advanced students. The beginner levels can be the elementary students, and the advanced levels can be the university students. The class chosen should be a class which has a few number of students. For example, one class consists of 10-15 students to get a clear voice recording. The number of students can be 10-15 beginner and 10-15 advanced students. Then, the researchers can compare these levels and find out what their similarities and differences in using communication strategies. By doing this research, the result can be different from this present study.

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