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COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES IN INTERLANGUAGE PRODUCTION BY INDONESIAN EFL LEARNERS

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Abstract

The lack of balance between the foreign language students' competence and the communicative demands imposed on them prompts them to resort to communication strategies. This study attempts to investigate the relationship between the choices of students' strategies and their proficiency level of the language. Fourteen students from the English Department, State University of Medan were put into two categories, the High proficiency and the Low proficiency level of the language. The strategies used were identified and analyzed. The data analysis was based on Bialystok's taxonomy. The results of the study indicated that the use of strategies between the two groups varied according to their level of the language, but the difference was not significant. The high proficiency level used more L2-Based Strategies, while the low proficiency level used more L1-Based Strategies. The present study also showed that most the students tended to use achievement strategies to cope with their linguistic deficiency. It is hoped that the findings of this study can be used to develop the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language, especially the students' communicative competence in the English Department, State University of Medan, Medan.

Key words: communication, strategy, interlanguage, proficiency.

Introduction

The study of communication strategies can be considered as a result of a new development in the field of second language acquisition. Linguistics and researchers are becoming more interested in the study of the learning process than the learning product, and the development of communicative competence than that of linguistic competence (Widowson, 1978, Ellis, 1982, Taylor, 1983). The study of interlanguage communication relates to problems learners face. Learners often experience a discrepancy between what they would like to say, their communicative intention, and what they know how to say in the foreign language, their interlanguage knowledge. In order to bridge the gap between communicative needs and limited communicative resources, learners may make use of communication strategies.

Foreign language learners are attempting to communicate through a language that is not their own. They have to get acquainted with not only new words but also the unfamiliarity of the situation out of which the language has grown. Second or foreign language learners are expected to acquire the strategies when they face problems in communication. Unfortunately, there are no general rules the learners can learn which will enable them to communicate effectively.

In Indonesia, English is taught as a foreign language. Communication offered in class differs from that in the real situation. In classroom interactions, communication does not serve the primary function of exchanging ideas and of acting in various ways by means of language, but rather it has the

function of making the students learn and practice certain forms. Students are usually not given the opportunity to use English. This lack of opportunity makes them afraid of talking for fear of tumbling.

The difficulties faced in communication cause a great deal of frustration amongst students. They are not competent in conversing and are unable to send their messages across when they speak. It takes them a long time to think of the right word. They try to translate but it does not work. To put it simply, their problems widen the gap between their interlanguage and the desired communicative competence. As a result, they try to use strategies in order to overcome this shortcoming. The situation mentioned above has motivated this study. This present study sets out to investigate a seemingly simple problem. How do the students of the English Department of State University of Medan overcome their deficiencies in the English language when they have to speak English?

There are some factors which cause the failure of teaching and learning English as a foreign language. The shortage of suitable teaching materials and books, the lack of qualified teachers, the use of unsuitable methods in the classroom, and the large number of students in class are factors which make the teachers unable to help students adequately.

Moreover, it is necessary to point out some issues that should be taken into consideration, and to pose some questions. When is the appropriate time the English language should be taught? What domain and topics should be included in the curriculum? What type of language skills should be presented? Therefore, it is necessary to select and decide what is to be given to the foreign language learners in order to obtain good results from the teaching and learning of English.

One of the major difficulties in learning a foreign language is how to communicate in that language. In order to have a clear picture of the problems faced by the foreign language students, this study aims to examine the strategies used by the Indonesian foreign language students. The main problem addressed in this study is the nature of the relationship between the students' proficiency level in the target language and their strategies used in communication.

The result of the study is expected to provide information on how interlanguage speakers of English cope with the communication problems. The findings can determine the teaching technique that should be used. It is hoped that this study would contribute valuable information to the syllabus writers of the English course. Since communication is one of the major problems of the students, more emphasis should be given to the area of communication. Thus, the findings of this study would provide valuable insights into the teaching and learning process.

Language Learning – Language Acquisition

Psychologist and linguists raise a number of issues about how people learn another language after they have acquired their mother tongue. These issues have shifted radically during the last decade. Theories on second language acquisition represent views which are based on the assumption that first language and second language learning are similar. In many ways, theories which have been developed for L2 learning are closely related to first language acquisition.

Several theories have been offered as explanations of how language is learned. Three theories will be discussed in turn. The first is the traditional Behaviourists believe that language learning is simply a matter of imitation and habit formation. According to this theory, children do imitate and practice the sounds and patterns that they hear around them. They do it regularly until it becomes a habit (Lightbown, 1993). The second is the innatist where the linguist Noam Chomsky claims that children are biologically programmed for language and children come into the world with innate language learning abilities (Chomsky, 1959). The third theory is the interactionist which focuses on the role of the linguistic environment as a result of the complex interplay between the uniquely human characteristic of the child and the environment in which the child develops.

Language learning is seen not as a matter of habit formation nor as a matter of learning the correct structures through practice and drills, but as a series of involving hypothesis (Cook, 1969). Thus, language learning is a process of hypothesis testing, trying out the rules of language until the learners attain competence. However, it has to be recognized that L2 or foreign language learner is neither the chronological nor the cognitive equivalent of the child learning to talk.

Krashen (1997) and De Houwer (1982) distinguish 'learning' and 'acquiring'. The former refers to language learned in a formal situation where the rules developed are the product of teaching and can be consciously employed, and the learners monitor their own performance. The latter refers to a subconscious process by which rules are internalized through informal learning procedures and where the linguistic system is the product of communication and interaction through language rather than through attention to linguistic form.

Acquisition is also characterized by the lack of consciousness and awareness of rules. The learners are generally unable to state the rules or to give reason for the use of certain expressions (Krashen, 1979b). Unlike acquisition, learning profits from error correction and rule explanation. The process of learning is dependent on external factors, and this may account for individual differences.

The Influence of L1 on Language Learning

The presence of the mother tongue as part of the L2 learners' experience has been very important in language learning. Studies on the influence of the mother tongue in language learning have been carried out by several researches.

It seems necessary to realize that the presence of native language should not be viewed as a generator of interference, but rather as a reference for the L2 learner when he wishes to say something in the target language, for which he is linguistically unprepared and when he has no other meaningful linguistic category in the target language on which to rely. (Newmark and Reibel, 1968).

In the field of communication strategies, learners do always make use of their L1 when confronted by difficulties in L2. "Thinking in the mother tongue" (Blum-kulka, 1983: 132) is the only way a learner can cope with their difficulties while communicating in a second or foreign language. In addition to the influence of the L1 language, there are two important reasons why first and second

language acquisition will not result in parallel language acquisition. The first being that adult second language learning involves instruction but not natural acquisition sequence and the second, cognitive maternity of the second language learner is greater than that of the first language learner.

It seems, then, that the two most important variables in first and second language learning are the presence of the native language and the more advanced cognitive development of the adult.

Interlanguage Hypothesis

Various terms have been coined to characterize the learner system. Nemser (1971) terms a second language learner's linguistic system an 'approximative system' and emphasizes the successive approximation of the learner's speech to the target language. This term stresses on both the transcient nature of the system and its regularity of patterning. Corder (1971) speaks of such a system as an 'idiosyncratic' dialect. He maintains that a learner language is a separate system which is created by the learner as essentially a dialect of one individual. It is systematic, regular and a number of the sentence patterns are similar to the patterns in the target language.

The term 'interlanguage' has been proposed by Selinker (1972), indicating that structurally it is a system somewhere between the native language and the target language. This term is most widely used in the literature to signify the learner language. It is assumed that the primary source of knowledge which can lead to such an understanding is the language produced by learners when they use their own version of foreign language.

In later development, studies were carried out which related errors to a certain field, e.g. use of the tense. Towards the end of the 70s, the scope of interlanguage studies extended by relating interlanguage to the L2 which is more concerned with the interaction in the classroom between learners and teachers (Sinclair and Brazil, 1982). This resulted in a number of studies of 'teacher talk', the language used by teachers when addressing the class. Furthermore, a number of studies have appeared reporting on how learners performed during communication outside class (Faerch and Kasper, 1983).

Selinker, Swain and Dumas (1975) have suggested four characteristics associated with interlanguage. They are:

a. The stability over time of certain errors in the learner system.
b. The mutual intelligibility among speakers of the same interlanguage.
c. The regular appearance of fossilized errors that are thought to be eradicated.
d. The systematicity of intelanguage at one particular point in time.

By setting up those four characteristics, the study of interlanguage can be touched through various processes of language learning. The boom in foreign language learning and teaching research was for a long time strongly associated with developments in general linguistic. The interlanguage assumption had a major impact on teaching techniques in the 1970s. The concept of interlanguage

liberated the classroom and in part paved the way for the communicative language teaching methods of the 1970s and 1980s. Learner's sentences reflect their temporary language systems rather than an imperfect grasp of the target language. If a student makes a mistake, it is not the fault of the teacher or the materials or even of the student, but an inevitable and natural part of the learning process.

Communicative Competence

Communicative competence is related to the ability to use elements of what we say, how certain strategies are selected to bring about the communication. Communicative competence can be regarded as referring to knowledge in the sense of being able to communicate. Speakers should develop their knowledge about the elements of communicative competence. The speakers not only have to apply the grammatical rules of language in order to form grammatically correct sentences but also know when and where to use the sentences and to whom.

In the mid 1960s, communicative competence has increased in popularity among teachers, researchers and others interested in language. Work on communicative competence has been done by several researchers such as Hymes (1972); and Canal and Swain (1980).

According to the widely accepted theory of Canale and Swain, communicative competence as a whole can be explained in terms of three components of competencies. They are grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence.

Description of communicative competence can be of use in many ways, especially those which are related to language learning. It is necessary to relate communicative competence to the communicative events in which learners participate. The way to develop the learner's communicative competence can be done by analyzing and predicting their communicative needs and then relating these to the teaching goals and syllabus structure.

There is a relationship between communicative competence and communication strategies. Communication strategies are tied up with language use. Communicative competence has sometimes been defined as the knowledge of how to use one's linguistic system appropriately in a situation. Both communicative competence and communication strategies deal with the use of the linguistic knowledge. Communicative competence sometimes refers to the ability to communicate, to be proficient in communication. Communicative competence can also be regarded as referring both to knowledge in the sense of being able to communicate and to knowledge about communication.

Communicative competence is part of the language user's capacity to interact with other members of the same speech community. It is therefore obvious that for learners to be able to communicate with people from different communities they must possess not just communicative knowledge but also competence.

Communication Strategies

The study of communicative strategies can be considered a result of learner's psychological processes of target language. It has been generally accepted that communication strategies are not unique to L2 learners because communication problems occur and are tackled in order not to break down the communicative event. The learner with his imperfect target language engages in a variety of strategies in order to communicate his meaning (Corder, 1983).

When the L2 learners want to say something during communication, it may not always run smoothly. They may either be unsuccessful in retrieving a certain word or unfamiliar with a situation. In order to overcome these problems, communication strategies are needed. L2 learners have a natural tendency to use strategies when the problem arises. Communication strategies become more obvious when communication takes place between a second language learner and a native speaker of the target language (Bialystok, 1983).

The choice of certain communication strategies will be influenced by a variety of factors. The learners' interlanguage seems particularly powerful. The way learners cope with communication problems are determined by their learning environment. The learners' communicative experience and his assessment of the situation will also determine his choice of communication strategies. It has also been suggested that the learners' choice of communication strategies and their level of language proficiency may be related (Tarone, 1978).

Figure 1
Type of Behavior and Strategies

STRATEGIES

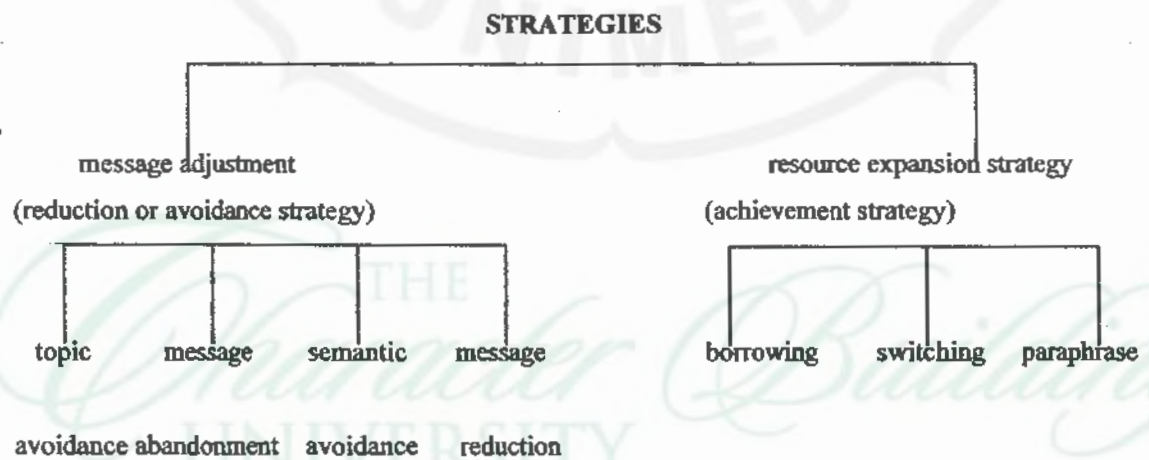| message adjustment | resource expansion strategy |
| (reduction or avoidance strategy) | (achievement strategy) |

| topic | message | semantic | message | borrowing | switching | paraphrase |

| avoidance | abandonment | avoidance | reduction | | | |

Figure 2

A Typology of Communication Strategies (from Tarone 1978)

Strategies	Description
1. Paraphrase	
(a) Approximation	Use of a single target language vocabulary item or structure, which the learner knows is not correct, but which shares enough semantic features in common with the desired item to satisfy the speaker (e.g. 'pipe' for 'waterpipe').
(b) Word coinage	The learner makes up a new word in order to communicate a desired concept (e.g. 'airball' for 'balloon').
(c) Circumlocution	The learner describes the characteristics or elements of the object or action instead of using the appropriate TL structure ('She is, uh, smoking something, I don't know what's its name. That's, uh, Persian, and we use in Turkey, a lot of').
2. Transfer	
(a) Literal translation	The learner translates word for word from the native language (e.g. 'He invites him to drink' for 'They toast one another').
(b) Language switch	The learner uses the NL term without bothering to translate (e.g. 'balon', for 'balloon' or 'tirtil' for 'caterpillar').
3. Appeal for assistance	The learner uses nonverbal strategies in place of a meaning structure (e.g. clapping one's hands to illustrate applause).
4. Avoidance	
(a) Topic avoidance	Occurs when the learner simply does not talk about concepts for which the vocabulary or other meaning structure is not known.
(b) Message abandonment	Occurs when the learner begins to talk about a concept but is unable to continue due to lack of meaning structure, and stops in mid-utterance.

Learning Strategy

The investigation into students' learning strategies is relatively new in the field of second language learning. Learning strategy is part of the learning process of how the learner perceives and organizes the target language materials to which he is exposed as he learns. Learning strategy is defined as an attempt to develop linguistic and sociolinguistic competence in the target language (Tarone, 1980).

O'Malley and Chamot (1990) classify three kinds of learning strategies used by L2 students.

(1) metacognitive strategy refers to knowledge about cognitive process and regulation of cognition, or executive control or self-management through such processes as planning, monitoring and evaluating.

(2) Cognitive strategy refers to the steps or operation used in learning or problem-solving that requires direct analysis, transformation or synthesis of learning materials.

(3) Social strategy means learning by interacting with others, such as working with fellow students or asking for the teacher's help.

Although communication strategies and learning strategies may overlap in some cases, but in other cases they may be clearly distinguished in terms of the goal. One of the goals of communication strategies is the desire to communicate a meaning X to a listener, while for learning strategy; the basic motivation is not to communicate, but to learn. It must be impossible for a learner to focus on learning strategy and communication strategy at the same time.

Data Analysis and Procedure

The data consisted of pictures in sequences. There were thirty nine pictures which represent the story at once. The subjects for this study are students of 'UNIMED' (Universitas Negeri Medan), the English Department of the Faculty of Language and Art in Medan, North Sumatra, Indonesia. Of the fourteen students chosen, seven were females and seven were males. They ranged in age from nineteen to twenty years old. Upon examining the class results, and talking to the head of the English Department, two categories of students were selected, consisting of the High-proficiency and the Low-proficiency level. Those of High-proficiency are with GPA 2.88 – 4.00 (out of 4.00) while those of Low-proficiency lower than 2.88. The students' speech production was recorded as the data after being informed of the purpose.

The first stage in analyzing the data was transcribing the recordings in orthography. The second stage was the classification of students' utterances into clauses. The third stage was that every clause then was further categorized, tabulated and presented in a table to form a statistical presentation of occurrence. It needs, however, to be noted here that no attempts were made to examine pronunciation and grammar which were beyond the scope of the study. No systematic examination of paralinguistic strategies was conducted either.

The results of data analysis are presented in three sections. The first section provides a description of the taxonomy of communication strategies developed from the collected data, which serve as the basis for subsequent data analysis. The second section provides the frequency distribution of communication strategies employed by each subject. The third section is the proportion of communication strategies employed by the High-Proficiency (HP) and Low-Proficiency (LP) groups.

In this study three points are taken into consideration in relation to the identification of the subjects' communication strategies. They are:

(1) Development of the taxonomy was drawn upon previous work on communication strategies (Bialystok, 1983). The typology of the strategies is based on the type of the information included in the communication strategies.

(2) The basis for identifying the subjects' communication strategies is their speech production. The only concern at this stage of the analysis is to identify the subjects' lexical problems, regardless of the truth or the information value of their context, for example, "the man ask the two women to walk or to run with the tyre shoes slowly." The subject's strategy in that phrase is transliteration, regardless of the correctness and acceptability of the phrases used.

(3) The phrases are categorized on the basis of the type L2-Based and L1-Based Strategies, and are finally classified into each strategy. The analysis tries to identify the strategies most frequently used by the subjects when they encountered lexical problems in realizing their speech productions.

The Relationship between Language Proficiency and Communication Strategies Employed by Each Subject

For analytical purposes, we categorized all the communication employed by the subjects into categories of the taxonomy of communication strategies developed for this study. We use a simple frequency to count the use of communication strategies used by the subjects, which is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION OF COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES EMPLOYED BY EACH SUBJECT

Groups	A.I	Phrases	C.D	L.S	F	T	Total L1-Based	S.C	D	W.C	Total L2-Based
HP 1	3.15	42	27 (64.3)	5 (11.9)	0	6 (14.3)	11 (26.2)	0	1 (2.3)	15 (35.7)	16 (38.1)
HP 2	3.15	39	19 (48.7)	2 (5.1)	0	5 (12.8)	7 (17.9)	0	0	12 (30.7)	12 (30.7)
HP 3	3.1	57	11 (19.2)	0	0	4 (7.0)	4 (7.0)	0	0	7 (12.1)	7 (12.2)
HP 4	3.0	58	19 (32.7)	0	0	6 (10.3)	6 (10.3)	2 (3.4)	0	11 (18.9)	13 (22.4)
HP 5	2.92	99	42 (42.4)	0	0	21 (21.2)	21 (21.2)	0	7 (7.0)	14 (14.1)	21 (21.2)

Groups	A.I	Phrases	C.D	L.S	F	T	Total L1-Based	S.C	D	W.C	Total L2-Based
HP 6	2.86	50	16 (32)	0	0	8 (16)	8 (16)	0	0	8 (16)	8 (16)
HP 7	2.85	70	18 (21.7)	2 (2.8)	0	3 (4.2)	5 (7.1)	1 (1.4)	0	12 (17.1)	13 (18.5)
Total				9	0	53	62	3	8	79	90
LP 1	2.75	39	15 (38.4)	0	0	4 (10.2)	4 (10.2)	0)	0	11 (28.2)	11 (28.2)
LP 2	2.74	30	18 (60)	2 (6.6)	0	4 (13.3)	6 (20)	3 (10)	1 (3.3)	8 (26.6)	12 (40)
LP 3	2.71	102	29 (28.4)	3 (2.9)	0	11 (10.7)	14 (13.7)	1 (0.9)	0	14 (13.7)	15 (14.7)
LP 4	2.67	40	25 (62.5)	0	0	14 (35)	14 (35)	0	0	11 (27.5)	11 (27.5)
LP 5	2.65	38	16 (42.1)	3 (7.8)	0	7 (18.4)	10 (26.3)	1 (2.6)	0	5 (13.1)	6 (15.7)
LP 6	2.58	82	28 (34.1)	3 (3.6)	0	14 (17.0)	17 (20.7)	0	1 (1.2)	10 (12.1)	11 (13.4)
LP 7	2.56	58	28 (48.2)	1 (1.7)	0	10 (17.2)	11 (18.9)	0	1 (1.7)	16 (27.5)	17 (29.3)
Total				12	0	64	76	8	3	75	83

Notes:

A.I refers to achievement index, CD refers to communication disruption, L1-Based strategies refers to first language, L2-Based strategies refers to second language, L.S refers to 'language switch', F refers to 'foreignizing', T refers to 'transliteration', S.C refers to 'semantic contiguity', D refers to 'description', WD refers to 'word coinage'.

The Relationship between Language Proficiency and the Proportion of Communication Strategies Employed by the Two Groups

A difference is expected to occur in the use of communication strategies between the High-Proficiency level and the Low-Proficiency level. The difference between the two groups in the selection of the type of communication strategies can be clearly seen in Table 1. However, the data indicates that there are no significant differences between the two groups in their use of communication strategies, especially in L2-Based strategies.

It is also useful to examine the strategies used by the two High and Low proficiency groups. Table 1 shows that the High-proficiency group used L2-Based strategies 90 times. The Low-proficiency group only used this strategy 83 times. In the case of L2-Based strategies, those in the High-proficiency group used word coinage to those in the Low-proficiency group. For example, the High-proficiency used 'word coinage' 79 times compared to 75 times by the Low-proficiency group. Both groups hardly used semantic contiguity and description.

A reverse trend occurs in the case of L1-Based strategies. Table 1 shows that the Low-proficiency group tends to use more L1-Based strategies compared to the High-proficiency group. The Low-proficiency group used L1-Based strategies 76 times while the High-proficiency group only used such strategy 62 times. The most commonly used strategy was transliteration 64 times while the High-proficiency group used 'transliteration' 53 times. Besides 'transliteration', the Low-proficiency and the High-proficiency groups employed 'language switch' 12 and 9 times, respectively.

While word coinage is the most popular strategy, 'foreignizing' is not adopted by any of the subjects as a communication strategy. After 'word coinage', the next most popular strategy is 'transliteration'. In fact, subject HP5 used 'transliteration' 21 times in her communication.

The findings reveal that the students are highly motivated. They used a wide range of achievement strategies to overcome their communicative disruptions. They enjoy speaking English because they become English teachers when they graduate.

To summarize, the above data shows that in general the High-proficiency and the Low-proficiency group employed different strategies to solve their communicative problems. The High-proficiency group compared to the Low-proficiency group relied more on L2-Based strategies than L1-Based ones. Their competence in the target language affected their choice of communication strategies. The subjects had a strong preference for some types of strategies and they tended to stick to such strategies. It seems that for a small number of cases which are insurmountable, the subject would rather carry on their speech production by repeating the same phrases.

Based on the findings of this study, one can conclude that achievement index does not guarantee success in language learning. Those with low achievement index do not necessarily achieve low success in language learning. Conversely, the subjects with a high achievement Index Coefficient are not always a more successful language learning. The achievement Index Coefficient does not guarantee the subjects' competency in language learning. There are other factors which affect to language learning, such as, motivation, aptitude, attitude and intelligence which are beyond this study.

Conclusions and Suggestions

Generally, all the subjects resorted to using some kind of strategy while communicating to overcome their communicative problems. The subjects were aware of the existence of their deficiency in the target language as demonstrated by their adoption of different strategies in this communicative production. The strategies adopted by the subjects were determined by knowledge of the language

they possessed. The less knowledge of the language they have, the more they adopted strategies. The subjects fell back on strategies as a result of the imbalance between the communicative demands imposed on them and their actual ability to use the target language.

It also appears that in solving communicative problems, the subjects drew on their knowledge sources such as, paralinguistic knowledge to compensate for their deficiencies in the target language. The use of paralinguistic knowledge enables the subject to convey the message which their linguistic resources do not permit them to express successfully.

It is evident from this study that the subjects had a tendency to repeat their phrases. Instead of remaining silent, the subjects repeated the same phrases. Also, the study shows that the subjects had some communication problems; such problems, however, did not prevent the subjects from attempting to solve these problems personally. The subjects realized that they can use different strategies to improve their chances of being understood.

This present study is just a start and a more systematic and deeper observation will need to be carried out to modify or complement the finding of the present study. To do so, it is suggested that more studies are carried out.

This study is based on data collected from 14 students. A reduplication with a greater variety of the subject would provide additional information about communication strategies and foreign language teaching.

The choice of communication strategies and success in applying them are influenced by many factors. This study only applied one factor, that is, the subjects' language proficiency. Other factor such as the relationship between motivation and competence in foreign language learning could enrich the study of the communication strategies. Undoubtedly, motivation has a great role for success in language learning. It is also worthwhile to do a study on different learners' characteristic. Extrovert learners always take initiative to talk to native speakers. They are more willing to practice their communicative competence. As for the introverts, they might speak only when they are asked to speak. They use more avoidance techniques to reduce interaction with native speakers. The result of such studies would provide valuable insight to the learners who have less courage in communication.

It must be realized that this study does not aim at investigating all aspects of communication strategies. It focuses only when learners lacked lexical items. Actually, communication has overall system of the language such as; syntax, morphology, sociolinguistic discourse and pragmatics. Study into communication strategies employed in these areas might illuminate the contribution of learners' communicative competence and language proficiency. More creativity is needed in the study of communication strategies.

In summary, this present study shows meaning is conveyed in spite of the limited knowledge of the target language of the subjects and that they can reach their communicative goal by communication strategies. This study hopes to contribute towards improving foreign language teaching and communicative competence among Indonesian English language learners.

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