

Problems Facing Libyan Learners of English

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Introduction

Several international English foreign language (EFL) learners often find themselves in a position where, when they attempt to speak English, they have to use their available linguistic resources to overcome their language problems and put their message across despite the gaps in the target language knowledge (Dörnyei 1995). Tarone (1977) Færch and Kasper (1983) and Bialystok (1990) show in their studies that learners avoid, choose and rely on the target language by means of strategies that help them carry out and succeed in communication. Effective strategies used by second and foreign language learners (L2L/FLL) to face such difficulties are called communicative strategies (Faucette 2001).

Within the area of foreign language research, a number of researchers such as Kasper and Kellerman (1997), Cohen (1998), and Rabab'ah (2007) indicate that there is a link between compensatory strategies and language learning. When learners for example, employ a strategy such as appeal for help or ask each other/their teacher for clarification, this leads to feedback which in turn could lead to effective interaction and language

development. What is more, Bialystok (1990: 139) argues that despite the fact that language learners normally use the same strategies e.g. communication, cognitive and metacognitive strategies and consistently achieved a sort of meaningful interaction, it is also true that learners differ in implementing these strategies. This could be attributed to differences in language proficiency, communicative ability, and risk taking behaviour. It has been claimed however, that the use these strategies not only enhances language learners' linguistic competence, but also helps them to cope with their communication problems (Cf. Rabab'ah 2005).

Statement of the Problems

It's been claimed that learning another language is often full with difficulty. Ellis (2003: 69) indicates that 'maintaining a conversation is often effortful for learners because they lack both the linguistic resources to understand what is said to them and to make themselves understood'. As shown in Rabab'ah (2005), Arab learners studying English as a foreign language have more problems in the productive skills than in the receptive skills at all levels. Language learners have little opportunity to learn English through natural interaction in the target language.

In general, it is through formal instruction in classrooms that Libyan students learn English (Cf. Shihiba 2011). Consequently, the policy of the state leaves the students enrolled in this domain with no choice other than English as the medium of instruction. A large number of students, who do not have good command of English are therefore at a loss. In this situation, the students face a two-fold problem. Namely, they have to comprehend the subject which is, obviously, complex and it becomes more complicated for them because of the unfamiliar language in which the subject is presented. In this alien situation, the learners are compelled to cope with school work with their limited English (Elhensheri 2004).

Furthermore, despite the fact that they have studied English for many years. At the Faculty of Arts at Misurata University English language learners have difficulties in using the successful strategies in their learning process. This might be attributed to the unsatisfactory input language learners receive in tertiary level. In this context, teachers only teach the basic grammatical structures mostly through their L1, which is Arabic. It is the teacher who speaks and the learners are merely passive listeners. The instruction learners receive focuses little on oral and written communication skills. The emphasis on learning English language in this context is on enhancing grammar translation skills rather than on fostering communication skills.

Indeed, teaching is reduced to vocabulary and grammar out of context, and there is no teaching of speaking skills as such (Orafi and Borg 2009 and Shihiba 2011).

Moreover, teachers in Libya rely heavily on rote learning and memorization in teaching English. They strongly motivate their students to obtain good grades and to pass exams (Orafi and Borg 2009). One can safely say that exams in Libya have a great impact on learning and teaching approaches. This state of obvious 'incompetence' may result in academic problems and/or dropout. In addition to their need for knowledge of forms and their meanings and functions, learners must be able to use this knowledge and take into consideration the communicative strategies (CSs) in order to convey the intended meaning appropriately. Jiamu (2001) argues that facilitating the acquisition of learners' communication skills obliges language teachers to be aware of the teaching methods they adopt e.g. to distinguish and combine the declarative and the procedural knowledge. Accordingly, the primary goal for language teachers is not only to notice that there are gaps in their students' knowledge when they attempt to communicate in the TL, but to follow this up with the right strategy in order to optimize the results of teaching and learning. This study, then, sets out to contribute to bring change to the Libyan language classroom.

Literature review

Tarone (1977) compared speakers' performance on story-telling tasks in their L1 and L2. The researcher found that the proficiency level of the speakers influenced their choice of strategy; low level students preferred avoidance to achievement strategies. Similarly, (Ellis (1984) and Hamayan & Tucker (1980) compared of the performance of L1 speakers with that of L2 speakers on an identical task. Ellis (1983) found that learners who opted for avoidance strategies in the earlier stages increasingly turned to achievement strategies as he progressed. Ellis later study (1984) revealed that L2 children relied more on avoidance strategies while native English children more on paraphrase strategies.

Bialystok (1983) took different approach and focused on the use of specific lexical items in a picture story reconstruction task. Bialystok's study showed that advanced speakers used more L2-based strategies and fewer L1-based strategies than less advanced speakers. L2-based strategies are referred to those related to target language rules or knowledge such as approximation, and circumlocution. Whereas L1-based strategies are related to mother tongue such as language transfer, and code switching.

Some studies however, on the use of CSs have shown that there is a relationship between the frequency of CS use and the proficiency level. Phan and Ting (2008) examined the influence of English proficiency level on the use of CSs. In this study, the interactional data of twenty Malaysian undergraduate English learners was analyzed to identify their choices of CSs. The results revealed that TL proficiency did not influence the use of CSs by the interlocutors. Phan and Ting however, also found that the use of CSs enhanced the negotiation of meaning between learners. In the process, proficient learners supported less-proficient speakers to construct communication strategies e.g. language switch.

In a similar line, Nakatani (2006) investigated the relationship between the EFL proficiency level and the use of CSs for negotiation of meaning. The participants in this study were 400 Japanese students. The researcher used self-reported instrument to investigate EFL female Japanese learners' use of CSs in interaction tasks. Analysis of eight variables of strategies was used to cope with oral problems and another seven for coping with receptive problems during communication tasks (see table below). The Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI) was developed in the process. The reliability of the tool was tested by Cronbach's alpha (speaking part: 86; reading and listening part: 85). Nakatani (2006) demonstrated 'the concurrent

validity' of OCSI through the correlation analysis with the SILL (161). The researcher concluded that the high proficiency group used negotiation-for-meaning, social-affective and oral-maintaining strategies more than the low proficiency groups when they encountered production problems. It was also found that learners used strategies e.g. clarification requests to maintain their interaction tasks when they encountered listening problems.

Table 1: Descriptive of Nakatani (2006) variables of speaking and listening

The speaking part	The listening part
Social affective strategies Fluency-oriented strategies Negotiation for meaning while speaking strategies Accuracy-oriented strategies Message reduction and alteration strategies Nonverbal strategies while speaking Message abandonment strategies Attempt to think in English strategies	Negotiation for meaning while listening strategies Fluency-maintaining strategies Scanning strategies, getting the gist strategies Nonverbal strategies while listening Less active listener strategies Word-oriented strategies.

Methods

Questionnaire

In this study, all students in the two groups were asked to complete a five-point Likert-scale questionnaire in week 1 and week 12 (pre/post). It included questions about their spoken English. There were questions on the target strategies, with each question focusing on one strategy and questions on non-target strategies that were not taught to students in the strategy instruction. These questions are modelled on Lam's (2006) questionnaire (See Appendix A).

The sample of this study

A sample of 36 students from the target population participated (158) in the current study. Participants were divided into classes constituting a control group and a treatment group, each with 18 students. They were all taken from first-year English major learners at the Faculty of Arts at Misurata University.

Research Design

The underlying hypothesis of the study was that training in CSs would not only increase knowledge and use of the targeted strategies, but would also enhance participation in different activities and help language learners to solve their language problems. In order to test the hypotheses, , a quasi-experimental research design was implemented in which two

similar groups of English foreign language learners were compared as they carry out identical group activities. One group in this study constitutes the experimental group which was training in the use of CSs and the other serves as a control group which did not receive special training. Punch (2005: 71) states that ‘in a quasi-experiment, comparisons are possible because of naturally occurring treatment groups’.

Strategies targeted for investigation

In the present study, ten CSs were selected from the four typologies of Tarone (1981), Dörnyei (1995) and Bejarano et al (1997): reduction strategies, achievement strategies, modified-interaction strategies and social-interaction strategies (See Appendix B). Bejarano et al (1997) recommends implementing a broad range of types of CSs in a study, to provide natural discussions settings in L2/LF (ibid: 211). Researchers such as Tarone (1981), Dörnyei (1995) and Bejarano et al (1997) have established that the strategies below are the most commonly used. The reduction strategies consisted of ‘topic avoidance’ and ‘message abandonment’. Also, another three non-taught strategies, ‘responding’, ‘translation’ and non-linguistic were considered in this study because it was expected that English language learners would resort to them while attempting to communicate in English. Therefore, the total number of strategies investigated was 14.

Results of the questionnaire

The findings of the learners' use of CSs are discussed.

The analysis of the data obtained from the pre/post questionnaires of the two groups

The frequencies of the pre and post sample members' responses were calculated for each group. The data was analyzed using descriptive statistical procedures, along with t-tests, to examine if there were significant differences between the pre- and post-CS mean perceptions of frequency of use. The analysis focused on three areas: the use of CSs before and after instruction, and a comparison of learners' perceptions pre/post-CSs instruction.

To identify the differences between the pre and post mean scores of CS usage, the t-test for related means was applied, and the statistical significance of this difference was evaluated.

Strategies	test	Mean	St.	t – test	sig
Repetition	Pre	1.111	1.131	1.207	.244
	Post	1.6111	1.334		
Repairing	Pre	1.722	1.487	1.400	.179
	Post	2.333	1.188		
Circumlocution	Pre	2.500	1.424	1.410	.177
	Post	3.000	.766		
Message Abandonment	Pre	1.611	1.334	.325	.749
	Post	1.500	1.098		
Topic Avoidance	Pre	3.388	.849	**4.150	.001
	Post	2.000	1.137		
Non-linguistic Strategies	Pre	2.722	1.017	*2.587	.019
	Post	1.666	1.188		
Responding	Pre	2.666	.970	**3.298	.004
	Post	1.333	1.236		
Facilitating	Pre	3.722	.574	1.511	.149
	Post	3.333	1.028		
Asking for clarification	Pre	3.055	1.109	.308	.762
	Post	3.166	.923		
Seeking an opinion	Pre	3.166	.985	.000	1.000
	Post	3.166	.707		
Giving assistance	Pre	2.166	1.790	*2.224	.040
	Post	3.222	.808		
Paraphrasing	Pre	3.333	.907	1.162	.261
	Post	2.944	1.161		
Using fillers	Pre	1.055	1.392	1.211	.243
	Post	1.611	1.613		
Translation	Pre	3.611	.697	*2.250	.038
	Post	2.722	1.227		

Table 2: t-tested mean frequencies of responses for experimental group

The results revealed that there were some statistically significant differences in the mean scores of CSs usage in five strategies: ‘Topic Avoidance’; ‘Responding’; ‘Non-linguistic’; ‘Giving assistance’; and ‘Translation’. Students’ mean usage scores in all strategies were higher in the pre-tests, except in ‘Giving assistance’, where students scored higher in the post assessment.

Comparison of Results of the pre and post assessment (control group)

Strategies	test	Mean	Std	t- test	sig
Repetition	Pre	.685	.161	1.584	.132
	Post	1.200	.282		
Repairing	Pre	1.195	.281	1.458	.163
	Post	1.319	.311		
Circumlocution	Pre	1.182	.278	.121	.905
	Post	1.258	.296		
Message Abandonment	Pre	1.274	.300	1.571	.135
	Post	1.231	.290		
Topic Avoidance	Pre	2.607	.614	1.226	.237
	Post	.985	.232		
Non-linguistic Strategies	Pre	1.243	.293	1.054	.307
	Post	1.294	.305		
Responding	Pre	1.289	.303	*2.024	.042
	Post	.937	.220		
Facilitating	Pre	1.109	.261	.275	.786
	Post	1.248	.294		
Asking for	Pre	1.043	.245	1.638	.120

Strategies	test	Mean	Std	t- test	sig
clarification	Post	1.328	.313		
Seeking an opinion	Pre	1.533	.361	*2.465	.025
	Post	1.078	.254		
Giving assistance	Pre	1.617	.381	.959	.351
	Post	1.711	.403		
Paraphrasing	Pre	2.645	.623	1.334	.200
	Post	1.161	.273		
Using fillers	Pre	1.392	.328	1211	.243
	Post	1.613	.380		
translation	Pre	1.437	.338	.122	.904
	Post	1.227	.289		

Table 3: Comparison of most frequent perception of CS usage (control/experimental groups)

To check the statistical validity of the differences between the pre and post mean scores of the control group's CS usage, a t-test for related means was applied. The results revealed that there were statistically significant differences in the mean scores in only two strategies, 'Responding', and 'Seeking an opinion'. Students' mean scores were higher in the pre-tests in these strategies (table 3). Their reliance on such strategies in this early stage might be attributed to a lack of target language, or a lack confidence and fear of making mistakes. Shihiba (2011) observed this problem of productive skills in Libyan students.

The independent mean scores of the pre/post-assessments

Following the method suggested by Dörnyei (2012), a numerical value was assigned to each positional choice: always (4); often (3); sometimes (2); rarely (1); and never (0). A standard calculation of independent mean values and associated factors of significance was made, using the SPSS software.

Strategies	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-test sig
Repetition	Experimental	18	1.1111	1.13183	**2.849
	Control	18	2.0000	.68599	.007
Repairing	Experimental	18	1.7222	1.48742	.247
	Control	18	1.6111	1.19503	.806
Circumlocution	Experimental	18	2.5000	1.42457	1.400
	Control	18	3.1111	1.18266	.170
Message Abandonment	Experimental	18	1.6111	1.33456	.766
	Control	18	1.2778	1.27443	.449
Topic Avoidance	Experimental	18	3.3889	.84984	.172
	Control	18	3.2778	2.60781	.865
Responding	Experimental	18	2.6667	.97014	.149
	Control	18	2.6111	1.24328	.882
Non-linguistic Strategies	Experimental	18	2.7222	1.01782	.861
	Control	18	2.3889	1.28973	.395
Facilitating	Experimental	18	3.7222	.57451	*2.640
	Control	18	2.9444	1.10997	.012
Asking for clarification	Experimental	18	3.0556	1.10997	.619
	Control	18	2.8333	1.04319	.540
Seeking an	Experimental	18	3.1667	.98518	.388

Strategies	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-test sig
opinion	Control	18	3.0000	1.53393	.701
Giving	Experimental	18	2.1667	1.79050	1.172
assistance	Control	18	1.5000	1.61791	.249
Paraphrasing	Experimental	18	3.3333	.90749	.927
	Control	18	3.9444	2.64513	.360
Using Experimental Control	filler	18	.6111	.97853	1.108
			1.0556	1.39209	.276
Translation	Experimental	18	3.6111	.69780	*2.213
	Control	18	2.7778	1.43714	.034

Table 4: t-tested independent mean frequency of use comparison- experimental & control groups (Pre-assessment)

Before teaching the two groups, some statistically reliable differences were seen in the reported use of three strategies, namely 'Repetition', 'Facilitating', and 'Translation'. The control group members' mean score (2.00) was higher than that of the experimental group (1.11) in 'Repetition', but the experimental group members' mean scores of both the 'Facilitating', and 'Translation' strategies were higher than those of the control group members. The experimental group members evidently used these two strategies more often than the control group members.

After the intervention, there were also significant differences in the mean scores of use of the CSs, in seven strategies. These were ‘Repetition’, ‘Non-linguistic’, ‘Asking for clarification’, ‘Seeking an opinion’, ‘Giving assistance’, ‘Translation’, and ‘Using Fillers’. The control group members' mean scores were higher than those of the experimental group on ‘Repetition, Non-linguistic Strategy’, and ‘Translation’ (those strategies requiring less linguistic competence), while the experimental group members mean scores were higher on the remaining four strategies.

Strategies	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-test sig
Repetition	Experimental	18	1.6111	1.33456	*2.101 .043
	Control	18	2.5000	1.20049	
Repairing	Experimental	18	2.3333	1.18818	.133 .895
	Control	18	2.2778	1.31978	
Circumlocution	Experimental	18	3.0000	.76696	.160 .874
	Control	18	3.0556	1.25895	
Message Abandonment	Experimental	18	1.5000	1.09813	1.000 .324
	Control	18	1.8889	1.23140	
Topic Avoidance	Experimental	18	2.0000	1.13759	1.410 .168
	Control	18	2.5000	.98518	
Responding	Experimental	18	1.3333	1.23669	1.975 .056
	Control	18	2.1667	1.29479	
Non-linguistic Strategies	Experimental	18	1.6667	1.18818	**3.893 .000
	Control	18	3.0556	.93760	
Facilitating	Experimental	18	3.3333	1.02899	1.311 .199
	Control	18	2.8333	1.24853	

Strategies	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-test sig
Asking for clarification	Experimental	18	3.1667	.92355	*2.185
	Control	18	2.3333	1.32842	.036
Seeking an opinion	Experimental	18	3.1667	.70711	**3.472
	Control	18	2.1111	1.07861	.001
Giving assistance	Experimental	18	3.2222	.80845	**2.989
	Control	18	1.8889	1.71117	.005
Paraphrasing	Experimental	18	3.3889	.69780	1.391
	Control	18	2.9444	1.16175	.444
Using fillers	Experimental	18	2.9444	1.30484	**2.726
	Control	18	1.6111	1.61387	.010
Translation	Experimental	18	1.1111	1.32349	**3.787
	Control	18	2.7222	1.22741	.001

Table 5: t-tested independent mean frequencies of use comparison Experimental & control groups (Post-assessment)

The acquisition of CSs by learners in the two groups after instruction

Questionnaires data in this study indicate that the different types of CSs were acquired in varying degrees by language learners in the English department in Misurata University. The acquisition of some CSs was statistically more significant than that of others (See the tables below).

Significant CS acquisitions	Less significant CS acquisitions
Fillers Asking for clarification Seeking an opinion Giving assistance	Repetition Message Abandonment Responding Non-linguistic Strategies Translation Strategies

Table 6: CSs employed by the experimental group after the instruction

Significant CS acquisitions	Less significant CS acquisitions
Repetition Non-linguistic Strategies Translation Strategies	Giving assistance Fillers

Table 7: CSs employed by the control group after the instruction

As table 6 above shows, it seems that, of 14 CSs examined, students in the experimental group acquired fillers, asking for clarification, seeking an opinion and giving assistance more than other strategies. In contrast, students in the control group acquired repetition, non-linguistic strategies and translation strategies more significantly than others. Although the teaching of CSs helped English language learners to acquire some important CS for communicating in the TL, it seems that

teaching a large number of strategies within a period of three months 'semester' may have lessened the measurable impact on usage of specific CSs. Therefore, further studies should investigate an optimum number of CSs to teach to maximise learners' outcomes.

Conclusion

The findings in the present study reveals that students' awareness and tendency to use some CSs to solve their language problems have been increased. In this, a significant statistical increase was found in the use of some CSs in the experimental group post-training assessment, which included 'Asking for clarification', 'Seeking an opinion', 'Giving assistance' and 'Using fillers'. The experimental group also used 'Repairing', 'Facilitating' and 'Paraphrasing' strategies more than learners in the control group. Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that the training of CSs encouraged language learners to use them in their conversation and to have a wider range of strategies to deploy in different communicative contexts.

The findings also showed an increase in the use of non-taught strategies, 'Non-linguistic' and 'Translation' in the control group. These non-taught strategies are a last resort when students lack the lexical resources to use other CSs to maintain their conversation. Conversely, the data revealed that learners of

the experimental group decreased their use of non-taught strategies which include 'Responding', 'Non-linguistic' and 'Translation'. The findings of the present study may offer some insights into the nature of CSs used in Libya since this area of research has received little or no attention.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire

Please grade the following on a 5–point scale questionnaire Your responses to these questions are strictly anonymous.

Communicative Strategies you use		How often you use each one				
		Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Type of Strategy						
A	I repeat / I ask students to repeat the words or phrases they have just said to help me understand and to gain time					
B	I don't mind making mistakes					
C	If I have difficulty to use the right word for something, I try to describe it					
D	If I do not know the meaning of a word or the structure is not clear, I prefer not to talk					
E	I direct the conversation to a topic for which I know the words					

F	If I don't agree with other students, I tell them so					
G	When I don't understand others, I use gestures or facial expressions to make themselves clear					
H	I use some words/expressions to respond to or to expand the discussion e.g. 'really?', 'I agree', 'what do you mean by that'					
I	I like to clarify what I think is right					
J	I ask other students to confirm the meaning of a word or phrase which I don't know					
K	If someone doesn't understand the meaning of a word or the grammatical structure, I don't hesitate to help him/her					
L	When I don't know the right word(s), I use words or phrases with similar meaning					
M	I use fillers such as 'um', 'well', 'you know', to help me to think of what I say					
N	When I do not know the right English word, I use an Arabic word					

This questionnaire is adapted from Lam's (2006) study

Thank you for completing the questionair

Appendix B

Name of Strategy	Definition of Strategy	Time
Reduction Strategies		
1.a Topic avoidance:	The learner attempts not to talk about aspects in the target language he/she does not know.	1.30
1.b Message abandonment:	The learner abandons the topic due to language difficulties.	
Achievement Strategies		
2. Circumlocution:	The learner describes the characteristics of the objects instead of using the appropriate target item.	1.30
3. Using fillers:	‘Using empty words such as ‘well’, ‘actually’, ‘you know’ etc. as a stalling device to gain time to think of ‘what to say’ or ‘how to say it’.	1.30
4. Repetition:	‘To ask the speaker to repeat what he/she has just said as a stalling device to gain time to think of ‘what to say’ or ‘how to say it’, (Lam 2006)’.	1.30

Social-Interaction Strategies		
5. Paraphrasing	Using alternative expressions with similar meanings to clarify the previous speaker's contribution.	1.30
6. Facilitating:	A participant uses 'promoters' words that encourage continuation of the conversation	1.30
7. Seeking an opinion:	A participant asks for the speaker's opinion or seeks relevant or more detailed information	1.30
Modified-Interaction Strategies		
8. Asking for clarification:	Asking the interlocutor to clarify the meaning of what he/she has just said to facilitate comprehension.	1.30
9. Repairing:	'This enables participants to correct grammatical or lexical errors in the target language that were made by themselves or other members of the group	1.30
10. Giving assistance:	'This enables participants to help other members of the group who have difficulty expressing themselves in the target language and appeal for assistance	1.30

Table 9: Typology of CSs adopted in this study