

# EFL Learners' Perception through Communication Strategies to Improve Their Speaking skill

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## ABSTRACT

EFL learners might get different achievements in learning speaking. Some learners might get high achievement while some others might get low achievement. These differences of levels of achievement are influenced by some factors. One of the learning approaches that might bring learners to develop their speaking skill is using communication strategies. This study is about the perception of EFL learners through communication strategies usage to improve their speaking. This study used a qualitative case study and it is aimed at discussing some observations and in depth interviews results to two EFL learners on their perception to use communication strategies to improve their speaking. To dig further the discussion on learners' perception through the use of communication strategies, the theory of Dornyei (1995) about communication strategies was used. Data were in the form of words or expression stated by the two EFL learners taken as the subjects of the study. These learners are chosen as the subjects of the study based on their very active participation in speaking class activities. Data were collected through observation and in-depth interview. The result showed that both learners agree that communication strategies might help them cope with the difficulties they found during the conversation caused by their limited mastery of linguistic elements. There are two communication strategies they used frequently in the conversation: use of non-linguistic means strategies and fillers. For the use of non-linguistic means strategies, they often used hands movements, smiles, and also eyes contacts. Finally, using communication strategies EFL learners might improve their speaking skill.

**Keywords:** Speaking problems, use of non-linguistic means strategies, fillers.

## INTRODUCTION

In EFL learning, one of the four skills to be learned by EFL learners is speaking. However, to master speaking is not easy. According to Ellis (1994: 398) in speaking learners have to do two sequential activities. Firstly, *planning* when the speakers think of what to produce to impact the listeners and secondly, *execution* when the speakers put the plan into words, phrases and sentences. Next, Speaking is difficult to master because it phases. There are some activities that should be done in speaking such as thinking the discourse to be spoken, choosing the right sentences to be used based on the discourse, and choosing the right terms, articulations, expressing the articulations. Dealing with the difficulties to master speaking, Clark and Clark (1977) describe five phases in speaking processes: (1) *Discourse plan*, it occurs when the speakers decide the discourse to be used. (2) *Sentence plan*, it is the selection of sentences based on the discourse to get the intended message. (3) *Constituent plan*, it is the process of choosing the right words, phrases, or idiom to perform the decided sentences. (4) *Articulatory program*, it deals with the process of choosing phonetics segments, stresses, and intonation patterns to represent the speech. (5) *Articulation*, it is the final step to carry out the content of articulatory program. Subsequently, speaking is difficult because learners must focus on two activities: thinking the form and the function of the language. To facilitate their speaking, learners need communication strategies. Dealing with the use of communication strategies to handle difficulties in speaking, Brown (1987) states that learner' difficulties to speak is caused by the fact that they have to focus on both forms and functions of the language. Learners need to think of the speaking form and functions to reach the message. It makes learners often find difficulties to express their ideas

fluently during the conversation. This is experienced by almost all learners from the beginners up to the advanced levels. To handle those problems, learners must have some communication strategies. Next, Ellis (1994:16) states that communication strategies include the process of how the learners use the L2 knowledge to solve the communication problems. Then, Faerch and Kasper (in Bialystok, 1990) state that communication strategies are potentially conscious plans to solve the problems in the communication to reach a certain communication goal. Thus, communication strategies are useful for the learners to solve their speaking problems. Learners' speaking problems might be affected by their limited understanding about the elements of language like the lack of mastery of grammar, vocabularies and pronunciation. This condition might happen to all EFL learners. Lack of linguistic elements might bring students to have low speaking proficiency. To solve their problems in speaking they should know well about linguistic elements and communication strategies. The more learners know about linguistic elements and communication strategies and the more practices by applying communication strategies learners do, the better their speaking performance will be. Next, after knowing communication strategies, learners need a media to practice speaking. Further, to be able to practice English well, learners need speaking partners. Researches on communication strategies have shown significant relations between communication strategies usage and language performance.

Pratama and Zainil (2020), for example studied about EFL learners' communication strategies related to speaking performance. They found that it is good for the students to know about communication strategies so that they might solve communication problems in different conditions. They further stated that it is useful for the students to have the ability to select and apply the right communication strategies creatively and efficiently. Next, Hua, Nor, and Jaradat (2012) studied about the differences in the use of communication strategies between high and low proficient speakers. The participants were a group of ten low proficient Arabic speakers of English and a group of ten high proficient Chinese and Arabic speakers of English. They found that code switching is the strategy which often used by the learners. Next, they also found that the level of oral proficiency will influence the use of communication strategies. They finally stated the importance to arise learners' awareness on communication strategies for both low and high proficient speaker to help them handle problems in communication. Then, Panggabean and Wardhono (2017) who studied about the communication strategies used by EFL students in their presentation. The study found that the more proficient students tended to apply more L2 based strategies, while L1 terms happened in all levels of proficiency. They stated that it is important to encourage students to use communication strategies that might help them reach their communication goal. In addition, Mesgarshahr and Abdollahzadeh (2014) studied about the impact of teaching communication strategies (CSs) on Iranian EFL learners' WTC (Willingness To Speak). The study found the learners who get training about communication strategies willing to speak more than those who do not. They stated that communication strategies lead learners to become more active in speaking. And then, N.L.T., I Gede, and I P.N.W (2018) studied about kinds of communication strategies used by young Learners in EFL classrooms. The study indicated that learners used several communication strategies when they are communicating in the classroom. They stated that to improve speaking, learners should be encouraged to often use communication strategies in communication. From the above previous studies, it might be concluded that communication strategies is very useful for the learners to solve their speaking problems and enhance their speaking skill. Dealing with the previous studies above, this study is very significant as it might give insights about the importance of communication strategies to help learners handle speaking problems to improve speaking skill. Thus, this study is designed to find out the students' perception through the use of communication strategies to enhance students speaking skill.

## DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH METHODS

In conducting this research, the researcher applied a qualitative case study design. A case study is a detailed examination of one setting, or a single subject, a single depository of documents, or one particular event

(Merriam, 1988). Cohen and Manion (1989) state that in the case study, researcher might observe the characteristics of an individual unit – a child, a clique, a class, a school or a community. Further, Thomas (2003:33) states that a case study consists of an entity and the entity's actions. Frequently it also offers explanation of why the entity acts as it does. The purpose of such observation is to probe deeply and to analyze intensively the multifarious phenomena. The researcher used a case study due to the fact that the subjects of this research were particular learners. The researcher focused on the learners' perception on the use of communication strategies to enhance their speaking skill.

In this research, the researcher used a qualitative approach due to the fact that the data in this research was in the forms of words and not numbers. Creswell (2002:46) states that in a qualitative research in education, the researcher relies on the research participants. The researcher collects the data from the participants in the form of words and then he describes and analyzes these words based on themes. Next, Bogdan and Biklen (1992) state some characteristics of qualitative research as follows: (1) it has the natural setting as the direct source of data and the researcher is the key instrument, (2) it is descriptive, (3) it is concerned with the process rather than simply with the outcomes or products, (4) it tends to analyze data inductively, and (5) meaning is its essential concern. In addition, Miles and Huberman (1994) state that the strength of qualitative data is their richness and wholeness, with strong potential for revealing complexity; such data provide "thick description" that are vivid, nested to the real context and truthful. The subjects in this research are two students and they are chosen based on their intense activeness in the speaking class activities. The data in this research are in the form of words, phrases or sentences about learners' perception in using communication strategies to enhance their speaking skill. The sources of the data were the learners' opinion on the use of communication strategies to enhance their speaking skill collected through in-depth interview. Those verbal expressions were recorded and then transcribed. There are some steps in collecting the data in this research. First, observing the conversations and the discussions of the learners. Second, recording their utterances and noted some expressions or behaviors that they did during the conversation or the discussion process. Third, interviewing the learners why they used certain communication strategies and finding out about their perception about communication strategies to improve their speaking skill. Fourth, transcribing the recorded data and fifth, data analysis based on the Dornyei's theory of communication strategies (1995).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the analysis, it was found that students have various opinions on the communication strategies usage to improve their speaking. However, they agree that communication strategies are very helpful to handle their problems in speaking. This is in line with Dornyei (1995) stating learners might handle their speaking problems using communication strategies. In addition, it was found that learners got some benefits in using communication strategies during the conversation. Communication strategies usage might help learners solve their speaking problems. They were presented as follows:

The subject 1:

well ee.. in my opinion when we speak we should've to understand ee.. that people will be more understand when we talk if we do kind of eye contact with people or person we talk to because it's also like kind of manner for me. And for body language sometimes there's a kind of you know some words or some sentences that cannot be explained in verbal so body language is really help us to deliver what we want to say to people or to person about what we what we want to say and the purpose of it.

In addition, subject 2 stated:

Actually, ... it's an important part like in having conversation like to have an eye contact with the person we talk to and mm.. so far I'm so bad with eye contact thing when we do some conversation but it's actually

very important part because when we talk to a person we have the eye contact thing, it actually it will make us easier to talk, and that's all, but I know that I'm so bad at eye contacting, but I'm trying right now. The data indicated that the subjects aware that communication strategies are important to create mutual understanding among the speakers. This is exemplified by the use of eyes contacts during the conversation. They said that communication strategies had helped them solve their problems in speaking caused by the lack of understanding about unfamiliar word or a certain expression. Next, they might use body languages or the use of non-linguistic means strategies to solve their problems in speaking. Thus, it might be concluded that the subjects used the use of non-linguistic means strategies by using eyes contacts. This is in line to the theory of communication strategies stating that the usage of non-linguistic means strategies covers the use of mime, gesture, facial expression, or sound imitation (Dornyei, 1995). The study also showed that the subjects above have tried to use communication strategies like the eyes contacts usage during the conversation to impact their speaking become successful and enjoyable. This is in accordance with Oxford (1989) stating that learners might use certain learning strategies to make language learning become more successful, more directed and enjoyable. However, to be able to speak well she should (Nunan, 1991) master some linguistic elements like pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. Next, they must train those linguistic elements in real conversation practices again and again in many contexts. This might bring her to the proficiency level. Thus it might be concluded that communication strategies might make the learning of speaking become more successful, directed and enjoyable. However, to become proficient speakers, learners should master some linguistic elements like grammar, vocabularies, and pronunciation. By mastering language elements and doing more speaking practices learners might achieve proficiency. Being friendly, having sense of humor and smiling are important for her to maintain the run of the conversation. She did them because she might avoid boredom and could create two ways of communication:

#### Subject 1:

Of course people like to see a friendly person, and they also like you know some kind of humor when we speak, so smiling and a little bit joke is good in order to maintain our speaking and communication strategies. So people won't be boring with us, so if I if I like now if I talk to you without smiling or without putting a bit joke in what I talk about, in what I speak about, I think you will be bored and I also feel something like that, when people talk to me without smiling or yea a bit joke, I will think that this person is not friendly, yes. I think it's a part of communication strategies when, so speaking is a communication. Two way communication, so aa.. if you don't make something new in order to make people attract with us, I don't think people will pay their attention to us when we speak.

In addition, Subject 2 also liked to do smiling during the conversation:

Actually it's.. the smiling thing is just.. it comes just like that, because I know it's the habit, like the habit of us, some you may see people who talk without smiling like they really stiff when they talk, and but there are people who smile and laugh at the same time, when they have conversation with other people. And I think It comes just like that because it's your habit. And my habit like I really like to smile so that's why I smile when I talk. The data above indicated that the subjects aware the importance of the use of smile as a part of the use of nonlinguistic means strategies for the success of the conversation. Besides, smile is also used to avoid boredom. In addition, smile and joke are as a symbol of friendliness. Further, smile is used to avoid stiffness during the conversation. With these strategies they feel sure that the people she talks to would be happy. And further communication might run well into two ways communication. Thus, the subjects believe that speaking is a two way communication and to reach the success of communication she needs to use some strategies like smiling and jokes as symbols of friendliness. She believes that these strategies might bring to the conversation success. This is in line with Brown (1987) stating that speaking is a process of interactive bringing meaning construction involving the producer and the receiver of the information. In

addition, Nunan (1999) states that the success of learning a language is determined by how far we are able to use that language in speaking and the target of learning language is to be able to speak the language. Thus, it might be concluded that communication needs a mutual understanding between speaker and listener to create meaning. However the learning speaking success is determined by how far we might practice the language in real conversation to reach communication goals. The subject 1 was found to use body language frequently during the conversation. She said that she did it in line with the thinking process in which the brain would stimulate the body to do body languages for the sake of the conversation success. Thus the use of body language is significant for the success of the conversation and she often uses body language in the conversation:

Subject 1:

okay, well umm.. here we go, well all I know that when people is speaking and talk about something, it's.. They wouldn't realize what their body do because our body have.. all of the part of our body have kind of ee.. what we call it memories. Memories and also.. umm.. ee... what we call it a response of stimulation, so when we talk about something the brain process.. what the brain is processing, so it's a thing that we wouldn't realize, smiling, body language and other things that we do when we speak that we do when we talk about something, we wouldn't realize about it. I think ee.. the relation between body language and speaking is that the brain work like that, the brain when we talk the brain will stimulate our body to you know to make some kind of ee...

Next, body language is also used by Subject 2:

yea, actually when I nod, yea just like you say that when I nod I agree with people ideas, people says, just like that, when I don't agree with people I just say it without nodding, I just like mm ok, ok, yea you are right, but mm.. when people say that, when people have the same ideas as I do and what they say is true or something like that, I like I start to nod and like oh yea that's true and yea it's just like that The data indicated that the subject 1 and 2 often use body language like smiling, nodes or other expressions during the conversation. They believed that body language as the part of communication strategies would bring her to achieve the communication goal. Body language would help them give the opportunity to think and also to express agreement in the conversation. In this case, during the conversation they might think of some vocabularies. Their memories tried to recall the vocabularies they had ever learnt that she might forgot about. Thus, body language has helped them handle the problem that they faced during the conversation. This is in line with Dornyei's (1995) stating that communication strategies are the strategies that learners might use to handle their problems in speaking. Next, Stern (1983) states that communication strategies might cope with difficulties during the conversation due to the limited mastery of the second language. In addition, Corder (1977 in Bialystok, 1990) states that communication strategies are techniques learners might employ to express their ideas when they face some difficulties during the conversation. Ellis (194) states that communication strategies are the process of how the learners employ their knowledge to handle speaking problems. This often happens due to the limitedness of the learners' mastery on second language and they need certain strategies to handle the gap in communication. Thus, it might be concluded that communication strategies might help learners handle their problems in communication and gaps caused by their linguistic element shortage.

Subject 1 likes to use fillers during the conversation. The use of fillers might help her get time to think:



I think we need some fillers because it will be funny and you know it will be strange when we talk and then we just stop and don't do anything while we are thinking, so fillers is a kind of aa ... you know another kind of the attraction to people, so people won't be think that o..o he's not, He don't know what He talk about, or she don't know what she talk about, so fillers is really important for us, when we try to speak another language and we don't understand some meaning and how to deliver it to other people.

Fillers are also used by Subject 2:

Fillers...yes of course I use it a lot, maybe in some people's perspective it's not a good idea to have an umm and aa.. maybe for those like oh you are not really good at speaking because you cannot think while you speak or like you use an umm and aa a lot but for me I think I use it for just an expression because sometimes when you see people like they talk a lot like that without any comma or point.. it seems that they are like a robot, but when you see a native speaker talking it's like, there will always be an emm and aa in every they say because it actually just come like that. The data indicated that the subject 1 and 2 stated that they employed fillers in the conversation to get the time to think. Subject 1 said that fillers are really important as she tried to speak she sometimes forgot some vocabularies. Next, subject 2 said that fillers might make the conversation run naturally. So, both subject 1 and 2 needs filler to fill the pause. Thus, it might be concluded that the subjects employed time gaining strategies/ fillers to solve their communication problems. This was known when he employed some expressions like 'mmm..., what's it..., eee..., and also employed some repetitions during the conversation. This is relevant to the theory of communication strategies which suggests that use of fillers or hesitation devices are using filling words to fill pause and to gain time to think (Dornyei, 1995). In addition, Bialystok (1990) states that learners might face some speaking problems due to their gaps of the second language. These gaps might be in the forms of a word, a structure, a phrase or a tense marker and the attempts to solve these gaps are known as communication strategies. Thus, it might be said that learners might solve their gaps in second language in the form of a word, a structure or a tense marker using communication strategies.

Subject 1 stated that communication strategies are important for her in learning speaking. Using communication strategies during the conversation she could handle her speaking problems so that she could improve her speaking skill:

.. well, at the beginning I'm not really good in speaking, because I could say that I don't really like having you know connection with people I don't really like to speak with people. So when I study about the communication strategies ...I know how to do when I have to talk with people when I have to speak about what I think, what in my mind. So it's really you know it is really big contribution for me. In addition dealing with the contribution of communication strategies to enhance speaking skill Subject 2 stated: "yea, actually there is a lot, so far this way, I learn a lot... what you say speaking strategies like that, I think umm.. I learn a lot ...and I hope that I can use it more in the future." The data indicated that communication strategies are very important. They believe that using communication strategies they might improve their speaking skill. This is relevant to Selinker (1972) stating conversational interaction might bring to the IL (Inter language) progress and communication strategies are thought to be one of the factors affecting IL development. Inter language refers to a separate linguistic system used by learners to speak using TL norm. Thus it might be concluded that communication strategies to be one of the factors in the development of inter language and using communication strategies learners might enhance their speaking skill.

## CONCLUSION

From the above discussion, it might be concluded that both learners agree that communication strategies are very important for the EFL learners. Communication strategies, either using verbal or non-verbal strategies,

might help learners handle their speaking problems. Generally, learners' problems in speaking are caused by their lack of linguistic elements like the lack mastery of pronunciation, vocabularies and grammar understanding. Using Communication strategies in conversation, learners might handle the speaking problems that they face, reach communication goal and become more comfortable to speak. There are two communication strategies they use frequently in speaking such as use of non-linguistic means strategies and fillers. The use of non-linguistic means strategies are in the forms of using hands movements, smiling and eyes contacts. They stated that the more speaking practice using communication strategies they do, they become more motivated to practice speaking. Thus, EFL learners' use of communication strategies in speaking might help them handle their speaking problems and improve their speaking skill.

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