# Communication strategies of ESL learners: Problem solving or message enhancing?

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## Abstract

This paper is based on a study of the use of communication strategies by adult second language learners of English when performing a discussion task. The study aims: (1) to describe the communication strategies used by L2 learners in an attempt to find out whether the strategies are used more for coping with breakdowns in communication or for enhancing the negotiation of shared meanings in an interaction; and (2) to determine whether strategy use and preference vary with the L2 learners' proficiency in English. The interactional data collected for this study are analysed for types of communication strategies based on approaches such as Tarone (1980) and Faerch and Kasper (1984). The analysis is validated through the participants' retrospection on their beliefs as to why they had behaved in the way they had at significant points of the interaction. The results of this study are discussed in the light of the relationship between the frequency of communicative disruption and communicative success. The findings on the role of communication strategies have implications on the accuracy-fluency emphasis in language learning.

## Introduction

The term "communication strategy" was first used by Selinker (1972) in his account of the processes responsible for interlanguage. Selinker describes interlanguage as the L2 learners' system that has a "structurally intermediate status" between the learners' first language and the target language. They have inadequate mastery of the L2 linguistic system to negotiate meaning effectively with their interlocutors, and hence encounter communication difficulties. To bridge these communication gaps, learners use communication strategies. "[F]or speaking [this] include using synonyms, circumlocution and gesturing to suggest the meaning." (Oxford, 2001, p. 168).

The ability to use communication strategies to "compensate for some deficiency in the linguistic system, and focus on exploring alternate ways of using what one does know for the transmission of a message" (Tarone, 1981, p. 287) to keep the conversation going is strategic competence. It is an integral part of the language user's overall