



## Articles

# Communication Strategies by Indonesian EFL Learners in English Conversation Class

Agus Wijayanto<sup>1</sup>, Diyah Murti Hastuti<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>English Department, Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta, Indonesia

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## CORRESPONDENCE

E-mail: [aw213@ums.ac.id](mailto:aw213@ums.ac.id)

## A B S T R A C T

To be able to conduct smooth communication has been the focus of teaching and learning L2. Since the late 1970s, developing language learners' communicative competence has become the center of L2 teaching. This paper is part of a study investigating how elementary-level English learners at an English course in Surakarta-Indonesia conduct English conversations. It particularly observes how they use communication strategies. The data was obtained through recording the conversations between instructors and the learners in teaching and learning activities. This study revealed that the learners frequently used stalling or time gaining when communicating their ideas or opinions. Assertive was the dominant speech act used by the learners, whereas expressive was the least. This could be because during the learning process, the learners were the ones who answered questions and expressed ideas in response to the instructors' questions.

## I. INTRODUCTION

English has been used massively by people around the globe. Since the 19th century, it has become the official language in many countries. It has become the dominant language in many sectors such as commerce, education, politics, social, and many others. The demand for English proficiency has recently correlated directly or indirectly to the global economy's current trend and business opportunities with internet technology as the platform. With the emergence of e-commerce and the global market system, where the customers are from worldwide, companies require qualified personnel to communicate in the international language. Countries having qualified human sources with high English language proficiency tend to earn high export revenue, such as Singapore, South Korea, China, and many others. A similar trend occurs in Indonesia being one of the members of ASEAN economic community and other economic pacts. Almost all national and foreign companies in business sectors prioritize high English proficiency

staff. This implies important roles of formal and informal schools (i.e., English courses) to enhance Indonesians' English communicative competence so that they can understand spoken and written messages, initiate and conclude conversations, and produce texts according to their needs.

Concerning communicative competence, speaking is the most important skill among the four language abilities. Although people do almost all their communication orally on a daily basis, speaking L2 is very challenging. Studies have pointed out that one of the biggest obstacles of speaking L2 is lacking of self-confidence (Hasibuan, 2013). Hasibuan further reported that most Indonesian EFL learners were shy to speak during English class as they were afraid of making mistakes either in grammar or pronunciation. A study by Sayuri (2016) reported that internal factors such as confusion, worries, embarrassment, shyness, and lack of self-confidence as well as misunderstanding contributed greatly to Indonesian EFL learners' poor speaking ability. As Nijat, Atifnigar, Chandran, Selvan, and Subramonic (2019) reported, most Malaysian

primary school pupils became the victims of common physiological factors such as shyness and anxiety. Most of them were less confident in communicating their ideas since they were afraid of making mistakes.

Some others were shy and anxious when they had to speak up. Another study by Souriyavongsa, Rany, Abidin, and Mei (2013) has revealed that external and internal factors induced EFL learners' poor speaking ability. The external factors include the local teachers' less capability to teach English, inappropriate curriculum to help students improve their English proficiency, and an unfavorable class environment. The internal factors include low motivation and lack of self-confidence. A study by Nakhalah (2016) reported similarly that many EFL learners were very nervous, shy, and unconfident when they were asked to communicate in English. Hosni (2014) reported some factors causing EFL learners' poor speaking ability, such as limited vocabulary, inadequate syntactic rules, and anxiety. The study also reported that the learners were shy to speak English. They were afraid of making mistakes as it was very embarrassing to make mistakes in front of others. Unlike the studies above that reported that L2 learners' internal factors greatly affected their speaking performance, Khan (2011) reported that some unfavorable factors relating to both teachers and learners were similarly very discouraging for target language learning. The teachers ran into pedagogic challenges such as qualification, training as EFL teachers, experience as bilingual teachers, their cultural perception towards L2 teaching, language policy, the status of the target language, teaching techniques and methods, language assessments, etc.. In contrast, the learners stumbled upon grammar difficulties, received insufficient teaching techniques, had low motivation, and exhibited a negative attitude towards the target language.

Some teaching strategies have been implemented to develop EFL learners' speaking skills, and the results are rewarding. For example, combining oral conversation, interview, dialogue, and presentation could highly improve EFL learners' confidence in speaking (Muslem, Mustafa, Usman, and Rahman, 2017). Performing hand puppet shows could encourage high motivation and improve EFL learners' speaking ability (Fauza, Usman, and

Muslem, 2018). Storytelling could significantly improve EFL learners' speaking ability than conventional techniques such as asking learners to practice simple dialogues (Bin, 2016).

Other studies have pointed out that learning technology plays an important role in fostering learners' speaking ability. For example, a study by Sun, Lin, You, Shen, Qi, and Luo (2017) used mobile social networking to improve EFL learners' English-speaking ability. The study reported that there was an improvement in the learners' speaking ability between pre-test and post-test. They gained substantial progress in fluency, accuracy, and pronunciation. A study by Parmawati and Inayah (2019) reported that watching a movie was an effective technique to improve speaking abilities as learners could learn how native speakers in the movies communicate in different social situations. A study by Samad, Bustari, and Ahmad (2017) reported that EFL learners' speaking performance could be improved significantly by applying Podcasts. Another study pointed out that communicative games positively applied learners' self-confidence and fluency (Dewi, Kultsum, and Gamesdi, 2017).

Many studies have reported the efficacies of teaching strategies and learning technology in advancing EFL learners' speaking ability. Despite this, very little has been known about EFL learners' communication strategies to cope with communication difficulties. The present research explores communication strategies employed by young Indonesian EFL learners to overcome communication difficulties in English speaking activities. The communication strategies provide crucial information for teachers about the learners' struggles to tackle complications in L2 communication. By knowing the mismatch between the learners' linguistic knowledge and their communicative intentions, teachers could select relevant teaching methods to overcome L2 communication problems.

Communication strategies in L2 are concerned with learners' techniques to convey meaning or ideas with their present knowledge of the target language. Communication strategies in conversation relate to interlocutors' efforts to comprehensible their messages to one another

(Tarone in Wei 2011). They may include the ability to relate linguistic knowledge to its appropriate context to achieve communication goals (Bachman, 1990). They also concern tricks employed by speakers to tackle communication difficulties (Dörnyei, 1995). Dörnyei and Scott (1997) view communication strategies as linguistic devices to overcome communication glitches such as something conveyed is incorrect or partly correct, the speaker's speech is perceived as problematic, and the speaker's need for more time to process and plan L2 communication.

Even though communication strategies have been the rich field of study in L2 learning, they have been scarcely studied in Indonesia's EFL learning context. One important study that is relevant to the present research is that of Cita (2018). The study investigated types of communication strategies employed by adult EFL learners in formal schools in Indonesia. The study found that the learners' most dominant type of communication strategies was Stalling or Time Gaining. They used the strategy to prevent communication from interruptions, keep the communication going, and make it more understandable. To the best of our knowledge, there have been limited studies that investigate young learners' communication strategies in informal schools and the types of speech acts they use in English learning activities.

Speech acts concern the acts of doing things through language. The theory was firstly proposed by Austin (1962) in his book entitled "How to Do Things With Words". It states that every time someone says something simultaneously, the person is doing what was said. In other words, saying something means doing something. Austin (1962) classified speech acts into three levels. Locutionary Act is the presentation of an utterance or the actual utterance and its apparent meaning. Illocutionary Act, that is the intended meaning of the utterance. Through this act, people do something via words, for instance, apologizing, promising, requesting, complaining, thanking, etc. Perlocutionary Act is the effects of other speakers' utterances such as enlightening, inspiring, shocking, misleading, and getting someone to perform something.

Searle (1975) classified speech acts into five categories, namely: (a) Assertives: acts that commit

a speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition such as informing, explaining, swearing, concluding, and boasting. (b) Directives: acts that cause others to take a particular action, such as requesting, commanding, ordering, and advising. (c) Commissive: acts that commit a speaker to some future actions such as promising, offering, betting, and vowing. (d) Expressive: acts that express speakers' attitudes and emotions towards proposition such as congratulating, apologizing, and thanking. (e) Declarations: acts that change the reality according to the declaration's proposition, such as baptizing, electing, pronouncing someone's husband and wife.

The present study explores EFL learners' communication strategies to overcome communication difficulties and the types of speech acts they use in English language learning activities. Two research questions are raised: (1) what types of communication strategies do young Indonesian EFL learners apply to overcome their speaking difficulties?, and (2) what types of speech acts do they frequently use in speaking activities?

## II. METHODS

The present study was qualitative research observing communication strategies employed by young Indonesian EFL learners to overcome communication difficulties. Fifteen English learners took part in the study. They studied English at an English course with fourth and fifth levels (CEFR: A1 and A2 respectively) in Surakarta, Indonesia. The data was 5 hours 45 minutes of conversations that contained communication strategies used by both English learners and instructors in the language learning activities. The data were obtained through recording and was analyzed according to the taxonomy of communication strategies proposed by Dörnyei (1995). The taxonomy was chosen as it offers a more operational and comprehensive list of communication strategies commonly employed by L2 or foreign language learners. The taxonomy is provided in the Appendix.

## III. RESULTS

### Communication Strategies Used by Learners *Avoidance Strategies*

To overcome communication difficulties, the EFL learners in the present study used two types of

avoidance strategies: *message abandonment* and *topic avoidance*. The former was a strategy to leave the message unfinished due to language difficulties. The strategy often provided them more time to recall or find appropriate words. The following excerpt shows a learner used the former strategy. She tried to say a word, but she did not know what to say. She stopped speaking and left the utterance unfinished to overcome the communication difficulty. The strategy gave her time to recall or find appropriate words. For example:

Student 1: *yes*

Student 2: ***Do you like...***

Teacher : *[looks at her eyes and mentions the name of the food]... meatball*

Student 2: *Do you like to eat meatball?*

Student 1: *No I don't*

In the excerpt above, student 1 and student 2 were practicing a conversation on which was favorite food. In turn 2, student 2 lost the name of the food (meatball) and stopped speaking until the teacher (in line 3) gave her a clue of the food name.

Topic avoidance was a strategy of avoiding a topic of a conversation as the learners lacked linguistic resources. They reduced messages to avoid problematic language. For example:

Teacher : *Did you go to school today?*

Student : *No..*

Teacher : *Why?*

Student : *No...*

Teacher : *No. ok, why didn't you go to school?...*

*why? Is it a holiday? Holiday? Libur?*

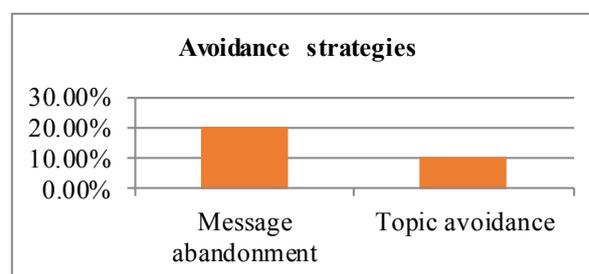
Student : *Yes*

Teacher : *Oh,, hari ini libur ya? Ok, so you didn't go to school.*

The learner in the excerpt above understood the teacher's question, however, in turn 4 she avoided answering it. The utterance "No..." after the question "why" in turn 3 suggests that she did not know how to tell the reasons or she could not find words to tell the reasons. However, after the teacher gave her a clue in L1, she agreed with the teacher by saying "yes" which means that she did not go to school as it was a holiday.

Figure 1 shows the frequencies of the two types of avoidance strategies to overcome communication difficulties. The learners used Message Abandonment considerably more frequently than did Topic Avoidance.

**Fig. 1. The frequency of avoidance strategies**



### **Compensatory Strategies**

Through compensatory strategies, the learners tried to maintain the conversation running to achieve communicative goals. The learners employed three sub-types of compensatory strategy: *Nonlinguistic signals, Stalling, and Appeal for help*.

*Using nonlinguistic signals* means that they used gestures or facial expressions as the cue to ask for help. For example:

Teacher : *ok. // why don't you use a pencil?*

Student : ***heh?.... (nodding his head)***

Teacher : *Kenapa kamu gak pake pensil? ('why don't you write with a pencil?')*

Student : *Aku sukanya pake pulpen ('I like to use my ballpoint'.)*

In the excerpt above, the expression oh *heh?.... (nodding head)* signaled that the student did not understand what the teacher had said. Such kind of a nonlinguistic cue often implied that students needed help to understand the intended meanings.

*Stalling or time Gaining* is a trick by which speakers try to go on speaking by inserting fillers. It is a spontaneous pause occurring when they get stuck on some words and lost ideas. Through the strategy, they could have more time to think. For example:

Teacher : *Okay and then what's your hobby?*

Student : *My hobbies are ehm..err.. singing and then riding bike swimming and many more.*

In the excerpt above, the fillers *ehm---err* was a strategy to find out suitable words that the learner

wanted to say. By using it, the learner could produce the intended words and he finally could continue the conversation.

*Appeal for help* is a strategy of asking for help directly or indirectly. Through the strategy, speakers show either verbal or nonverbal expressions to ask for help. The present research learners used the strategy when they asked for help from either other learners or the teacher. They often utilized the strategy as they did not understand the meaning of words or expressions. For example, in the following extract, a learner asked the meaning of what the teacher had said in L1, *apa ? (what?)*.

Teacher : *Ok, let's continue it. Where is my glasses? Do you see it Caca?*  
 Student : *apa? ('what?')*  
 Teacher : *my glasses for eyes. (touching eyes) I forgot it.*  
 Student : *O, kacamata?. Ini.. ('Oh your glasses?, here you are')*.

The word *apa?* (what?) in the conversation above indicates that the learner did not understand what the teacher had said. Since she could not tell it in the target language, she said it in L1 instead. This implied that the learner asked the teacher to translate what was said. This kind of strategy was commonly employed by learners when they really did not know what to say in the target language (English).

Figure 2 shows the frequency of three sub-types of compensatory strategies used by the learners. Stalling was the most dominant strategy. This indicates that they frequently used fillers such as *ehh, err.., and emm* to get more time to recall or find words they wanted to say. The learners rarely used nonlinguistic signals.

**Fig. 2. Sub-types of Compensatory Strategies.**

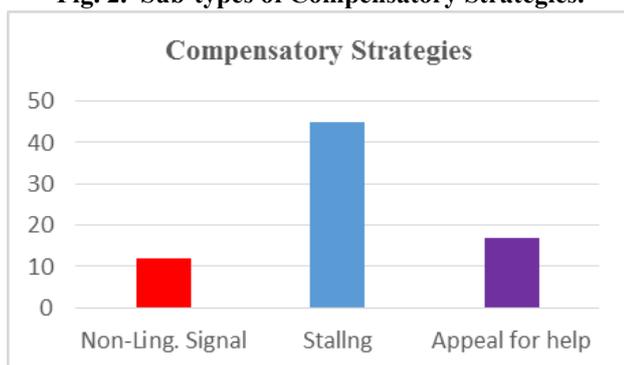


Table 1 shows two types and five subtypes of communication strategies frequently used by the present study learners. Stalling or time Gaining was the most dominant subtype of the EFL learners' communication strategy, followed by Message Abandonment, Appeal for Help, and Non-linguistics signals. Meanwhile, Topic Avoidance was rarely used by the learners.

**Table 1. Summary of Communication Strategies**

Type of Communication Strategies	Subtype of Communication Strategies	Frequency (%)	Total (%)
Avoidance	Message Abandonment	20,40 %	30,6%
	Topic Avoidance	10,20 %	
	Non-linguistic Signals	12,40%	
Compensatory	Appeal for help	13,65 %	26,1%
	Stalling or time gaining	43,35%	

**Speech Acts used by the EFL learners**

Speech acts are verbal actions to accomplish some communicative goals, for example, complimenting, insulting, informing, etc. The study found three types of speech acts that the research participants used, namely Assertives, Directives, and Expressives.

**Fig. 3. The Application of Speech Acts**

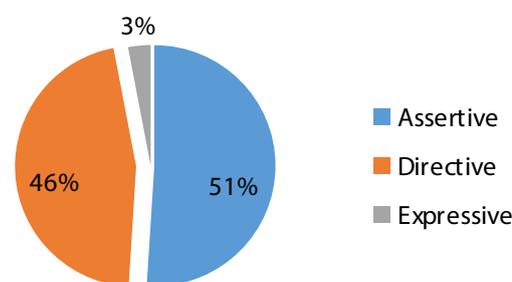


Figure 3 shows that they mostly used Assertives and Directives, and they used Expressives the least often. This could be because, during the English learning, the learners were the ones who answered questions and expressed ideas in accordance with the instructor's instruction and questions.

**The Application of Assertives**

The types of Assertives mostly used by the research participants were declaring and informing. The act of declaring can be described by the following

excerpt. When the instructor asked a learner whether she liked cooking she replied to the instructor's question assertively by saying "yaa of course".

Teacher : *Do you like going out for dinner or lunch?*

Student : yes

Teacher : *How often? Everyday?*

Student : *ahmm it's not really every month every day it sometimes if I have time to eat and ... eee in Zona steak Munmun and many more*

Teacher : *Okay so, do you love cooking?*

Student : ***Yaaa of course***

The following excerpt shows one of the English learners employed an informing act. When the instructor asked the learner who messed the toys out from the basket, the young learner informed the instructor by briefly saying "Jojo" which means that it was Jojo who messed out the toys.

Teacher: *Before going home, let's tidy it all. Who messes the toys out from the basket?*

Student: *Jojo!*

Fig. 4. Types of Assertives Used by the Learners

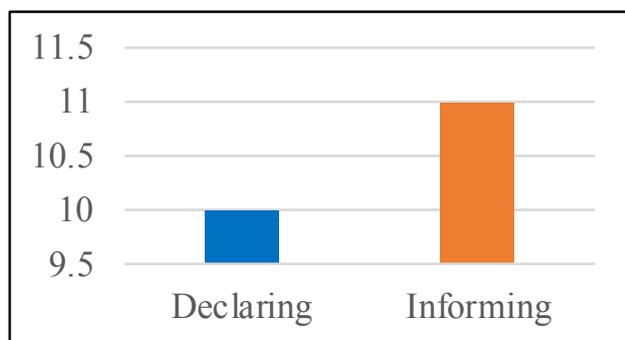


Figure 4 shows the frequency of Assertive acts used by the learners in English classroom activity. Informing was employed more frequently than declaring.

### The Application of Directives

Directive acts are intended to make other interlocutors take certain actions. Requesting and questioning were the directives commonly used by the learners in the present study. The following excerpt is an example of requesting by the learner.

Teacher: *Let's play a game. ok, in the first time. Awalnya kamu gak tau samase kali and then you try to say it. Next, take turn,*

*gantian. You give me instruction.*

Student: *Ok // oh..eh, miss, aku lupa, Apa miss? ('I have forgotten, what is it miss?')*

Teacher: *Say, close your eyes*

Student: *Iya ('yes'), close your eyes// Dah..('done')*

Teacher: [Closing eyes]

Student: *Say it*

The conversation occurred when students and the instructor played a game. Firstly the instructor introduced the game. After that, the instructor started the game by instructing the students to play. There was a turn in which a student became the one who instructed the instructor. However, in the midst of the game, the student did not know what to say. The teacher gave a clue for the words, and the student started the game. The directive act "apa miss?" ('what is it miss?') expressed the learner's direct request for information.

The following excerpt shows the act of questioning that was observed during English learning. Firstly, the instructor asked the students whether they had homework. One of them answered it properly. However, in the midst of the conversation, the student asked for clarification to the teacher's intention.

Teacher: *Do you have homework?*

Student: *Yes, miss. Aku bingung soal ini (pointing the topic in the handbook).*

Teacher: *Ok, it is about grammar. Let's learn it. Caca please take the eraser.*

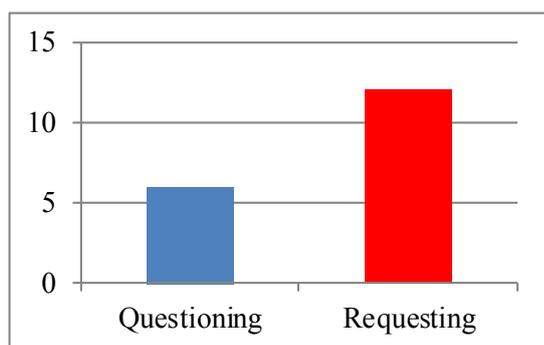
Student: ***Yang mana?*** ('which one?')

Teacher: *in front of you*

Student: ***yang buat papan tulis atau buku?*** ('the one for whiteboard or book?')

Teacher: *Whiteboard*

The question "yang mana?" ('which one?') indicated that the student asked the instructor for more specific information. For the second time, the student used L1 to ask the instructor for more specific information "yang buat papan tulis atau buku?" ('the one for whiteboard or book?'). Figure 5 shows the frequency of directive acts employed by the learners. Requesting was used more frequently than questioning in most of their conversation.

**Figure 5. The types of Directives used by the Learners**

### **The Application of Expressives**

It is a speech act in which the words convey what the speakers feel towards others for example apologizing, praising, congratulating, etc. The present study found some expressive acts conducted by the learners, although it was not as many as the other acts. The following is an example of thanking.

Student 1 : *Do you like drink a glass of tea?*

Student 2 : *Yes, I do.*

Student 1 : *Ok, finish.*

Teacher : *Say what?*

Student 2 : ***Thank you so much.***

Student 1 : *You'r welcome*

The conversation was conducted during the teaching-learning activity where the teacher asked students to do a role play and did an interview about favorite food and drink to their friends. The data shows that one of the learners expressed gratitude in the dialogue. The expressive act *Thank you* said by student 2 conveys her thankfulness to the other student. As an expressive act, it showed the speaker's attitudes and emotions towards the proposition.

## **IV. DISCUSSION**

Speaking is very challenging, and many EFL learners spend a long time using it in authentic communication. Even though many learners have spent so many years studying English, they cannot speak it appropriately and understandably (Bueno, Madrid and McLaren, 2006). Communication strategies are aspects that could cope with L2 learners' speaking difficulties.

The present study has observed communication strategies used by young EFL learners and the types of speech act they used in English conversations. The study found four common strategies applied

by the EFL learners: Message Abandonment, Topic Avoidance, Stalling, and Appeal for help. In line with previous research (e.g., Cita, 2018), the result of the present research has revealed that to overcome the issue of fluency, the learners dominantly used Stalling or Time gaining strategy. They made use of the strategy when they could not instantaneously find out the right words, terms, or expressions. In line with Novitasari (2016), the finding has shown that the learners often inserted long-fillers to keep the conversation going. The fillers were mostly used to gain pauses to have more time to think some ideas and construct the right utterances. The strategy has made them more confident to engage in simple conversations. They rarely employed the Topic Avoidance strategy. They tended to use it when they lacked target language resources. Some of the learners stated that when they did not have ideas to answer the tutor's questions, they felt very nervous. Keeping silent or stop talking about the topic was what they commonly did. All in all, the findings confirm Dörnye's (1995) assertion that exercising communication strategies could bring positive impacts on the learners' speech fluency or rate.

The present study has disclosed that although the young learners had the basic speaking ability, they were eager to speak up by answering every question asked by the instructors. They often mixed their broken English with L1 to cater to their communicative goals. By teaching them to do simple exercises such as answering questions and conducting short dialogues, the tutors could train them to express their ideas in simple English. The learners commonly used three types of speech acts: Assertives, Directives, and Expressives to express their ideas. The finding has indicated that they tended to inform or give opinions to the topics assigned by the tutors in the speaking activities. This was indicated by their recurrent use of assertive acts. By contrast, the teachers mostly produced directive acts in the teaching activities. This could be because the teachers, as the center of teaching activities, mostly instructed the learners with basic English level reported similarly by Merdana, Seken, and Putra (2013). The finding further implies that the low-level (basic level) learners could not directly perform or initiate speaking activities without their teacher's instruction.

## V. CONCLUSION

The present study shows that young L2 learners or beginners have similar problems when learning to speak in the target language. They would use communication strategies to bridge between their limited linguistic knowledge and communication needs. Some different communication strategies are employed by young English learners who have limited L2 linguistic knowledge. The strategies could help them overcome speaking complications so that they would keep conversations going. The strategies may also be used as the ways to prevent misunderstanding between the students and the teacher. In other words, they are employed to make utterances understandable or meaningful to other learners and teachers. In this sense, the strategies

function as attempts to make a deal on important communication.

The finding has revealed that L2 learners with low or basic competence could convey their ideas through some speech acts. However, the performance of the speech acts depended largely on the help of the tutors' instruction. To cater to communication needs, they frequently mixed L1 and the target language. Interestingly, to convey a complete illocutionary force, they could do it through limited or simple utterances consisting of one or two words. This informs us crucial information that the ability to express meanings in L2 could develop well before the learners master the perfect grammar of L2. In other words, limited grammar does not limit them to express themselves in L2.

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**APPENDIX**

Taxonomy of Communication strategies by Dornyei (1995, p.58)

**Avoidance Strategies**

1. Message abandonment: Leaving a message unfinished due to language difficulties.
2. Topic avoidance: Avoiding topic or concepts that cause language complications.

**Compensatory Strategies**

3. Circumlocution: Describing the target objects of action.
4. Approximation: Using an alternative term which expresses similar meaning of the target terms.
5. Use of all-purpose words: Extending a general, empty lexical item to contexts where specific words are lacking.
6. Word coinage: Creating a nonexisting L2 word by generalizing.
7. Nonlinguistic means: Mime, gesture, facial expression, or sound imitation.
8. Literal translation: Translating literally a lexical item, idiom, compound word, or structure from L1 to L2.
9. Foreignizing: Using a L1 word by adjusting it to L2 phonology and/or morphology.
10. Code-switching: Using L1 while speaking in L2.
11. Appeal for help: Asking for aid from the interlocutor either directly or indirectly.

**Stalling or time-gaining strategies**

12. Using fillers or hesitation devices to fill pauses and to gain time to think.