Iraqi EFL First Year College Students' Mastery of Communication Strategies Used in the Writing of Answers in Literature

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1. Preliminaries

In the last quarter of the previous century, language researchers interested in L2 learning have turned their attention away from studying learning products to studying learning processes, ie they have focused research frameworks on the strategies used by the learners in the development of their communicative competence rather than focusing on linguistic competence (Widdowson, 1978).

2. Communication Strategies

Faerch and Kasper (1983:36) define communication strategy as "potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal". The term 'communication strategies' (CSs) as used here denotes psycholinguistic plans which are as part of the language user's communicative competence. They are

conscious plans used as substitutes for communication plans when the learner is unable to implement the original plan.

In other words, CSs are devices that are exploited by the learner to overcome communication problems related to interlanguage deficiencies (Corder,1981: 103-6). They involve the conscious employment of verbal or non-verbal mechanisms for communicating an idea when precise linguistic forms are not available to the learner at that point in communication (Brown, 1987: 180). An alternative term is 'compensatory means' used by Tarone (1981). The term 'strategy' is used here to mean a plan controlling the order in which a sequence of communicative operations are to be performed.

Researches on the interlanguage paradigm have revealed a number of possibilities about the strategies L2 learners might use. James (1998: 198 cited in Al-Dulaimi, 2006:83) divides the category of CSs into two types:

1. holistic strategies (e.g. approximation, language switch, calque), and
2. analytic strategies (e.g. circumlocution, avoidance, message abandonment).

For both quantitative and qualitative purposes of the study, the researcher had to base the current analysis upon a taxonomy of communication strategies used by the L2 learners in writing their answers.

The taxonomy chosen was that devised by Chimbganda [1] (2000:212) which, in turn, was partly drawn from previous taxonomies [2] and based on the main types of writing strategies which could be clearly identified from the large volume of the written answers. These writing strategies were classified into macro- and micro-strategies. Eight micro-strategies within four macro ones (two within each) were identified as:

1- Risk taking strategies (e.g. achieving communicative intent through expansion resources) [(A) Restructuring (B) Alternative lexis].

2- Risk avoidance strategies (e.g. giving up or reducing the original communicative goal) [(A) Topic avoidance (B) Message reduction/ abandonment].

3- Second language based strategies (e.g. using existing L2 knowledge efficiently) [(A) Paraphrase (B) Circumlocution /generalisation].

4- Semantic simplification strategies (e.g. using simplified versions to facilitate communication) [(A) Expressing something else (B)Ungrammatical uses].

3. Background to the Study

Factors which encourage the researcher to carry out this study must be represented here. The first is that the majority of the students enter the Department of English/ College of Arts/ University of Baghdad after obtaining an average of a 'very good' grade at high school or the ministerial certificate of education in English. They, therefore, may be considered as L2 learners who are willing to master a second language fully, ie 'integratively motivated', supposedly, with one aim in mind of attending the field of the English literature. This presupposition seems to be unhappy once a report of our professional lecturers in the field is recorded. It appears most of our first year students are 'instrumentally motivated', who only tolerate English as 'an inevitable nuisance' (Chimbganda, 2000: 309) which is learned but for purposes of obtaining a degree qualification.

The second factor is that in their written communication, many of our first year students show low proficiency level [3]. In this respect, the lecturers of literature were forthright in pointing that:

Students lack both the logical selection and organisation of points which are prerequisite for the precise and concise answers; they are unaware of the writing techniques and skills. They are not competent enough in the linguistic means they use in conveying their ideas.

The third is that many of our first year students at the university have not done much original writing during their high school education. Therefore, quite often the lecturers of literature have to spend considerable time in teaching them the basic and generic writing skills instead of concentrating on the subject under study.

These factors show a cycle of deficiency in their writing skills; and the shortcomings become acutely felt at university level where they are expected to cope with the higher demands of the profession.

4. Dimensions of the Analytical Framework

4.1 Subjects

Thirty subjects from various social and learning backgrounds were randomly sampled. They had completed the first of a two-semester academic year in the College of Arts/ University of Baghdad, during which time they had been taught composition, covering aspects such as: summarising, paraphrasing, and structured text writing.

4.2 Test

A test on 'Basic Concepts and Terms' was given to the subjects by their lecturer. The subjects did not know that their answers would be subject to further analysis. One question was given in which the students were expected to give answers in a sustained textual form, requiring them to draw upon their resource expansion strategies. The question for which the answer was analysed was:

Q: Identify and comment on the following lines:
  Here she lies a pretty bud
  Lately made of flesh and blood;
  Who as fell fast asleep
  As her little eyes did deep,
  Give her strewings, but not stir
  The earth that lightly covers her.

Its answer[4] was:

These lines are Robert Herrick's "The Epitaph". These words are written on the grave stone of a little girl. Because death is an ugly, grim aspect of life, and since she is only a baby, the poet deals with death in a more soft way. He resembles death to sleep. He compares the grave to her cradle and so on. This way of comparison is like the simile and the metaphor, another figure of speech which is called euphemism.

4.3 Problem of the Study
  The basic questions which the study attempted to answer were:
  1. Are the strategies mentioned in section two also used by Iraqi EFL first year students of the College of Arts/ University of Baghdad, ie the subjects of the study?
  2. To what extent do our students seek to use any one of these strategies?
  3. How far does the use of these different writing strategies affect performance in the subject?

4.4 Data Analysis

The answer of each of the thirty students was corrected by the lecturer of the course material, and then, it was checked carefully by the researcher to determine the most prominent type of writing strategies which had been employed in each answer. This determination was not that easy one since an overlapping in use and sense between the types of strategies may occur. To ensure the validity and reliability of the strategy classifications, a colleague[5] in the same field verified each of the categorizations.

In order to achieve accurate results concerning what were mentioned in section (4.3), the researcher decided to check each answer twice. The first was done by the lecturer of the course material with an ultimate goal of checking the level of performance in the subject whereas the second was carried out by the researcher to score the frequency of each of the strategies under study.

To establish the relationship between the types of strategies used and the performance as determined by the lecturer, an approach was adopted for which we had to find common agreement. This approach told that the strategies used were juxtaposed to their frequency count, and the performance categorised according to the actual marks obtained out of a total of (10) using the following classification regime: poor (0-4); average (5-7); good (8-10).

5. Statistical Results

Table (1) Communication strategies used in writing answers in literature by Iraqi EFL first year students in the Dept. of English/ College of Arts/ University of Baghdad

Risk taking strategies	Risk avoidance strategies	L2 based strategies	Semantic simplification strategies
(A) Restructuring **(6)**	(A) Topic avoidance **(3)**	(A)Paraphrase **(1)**	(A)Expressing something else **(2)**
(B) Alternative lexis **(0)**	(B) Message reduction/ abandonment **(17)**	(B) Circumlocu-tion/ generalisation **(0)**	(B) Ungrammatical uses **(1)**
Total (A+B) **(6)**	**(20)**	**(1)**	**(3)**

Table (2) Relationship between writing strategies used and performance

Strategies Used	Frequency of Strategies	Poor (0-4)	Average (5-7)	Good (8-10)
Risk Taking	6			6
Risk Avoidance	20	13	6	1
L2 based Strategies	1		1	
Semantic Simplification	3	3		

5.1 Quantitative

It can be seen (as shown in Table 2) that (20) subjects preferred to use risk avoidance strategies, (6) used risk taking

strategies, (3) depended upon semantic simplification strategies, and only (1) subject exploited L2- based strategies.

What is interesting to note is that the micro-strategies with the highest frequency were message reduction/abandonment (17) and restructuring (6). The latter is associated with high proficiency learners (those who use risk taking strategies), while the former is used by only one high proficiency learner (risk avoidance), (10) low proficiency learners, and (6) average.

Yet there was a frequency of (6) subjects, using micro-strategies belonging to the low proficiency learners (risk avoidance and semantic simplification), such as expressing something else/ ungrammatical uses (3) and topic avoidance (3). What this suggests is that first year students of the College of Arts/Dept. of English are an assortment of both high and low proficiency learners.

However, for purposes of efficient learning, it is disturbing to note that among the low proficiency learners there was a rather high frequency of semantic simplification by expressing something else, ungrammatical uses and risk avoidance through the use of message reduction/ abandonment; strategies which show a very low communicative competence, that is unlikely to facilitate learning at university level. The use of different strategies seems to indicate that the choice of strategies was somewhat inextricably linked to the knowledge of the answer: yet I think for each question the subject had to decide on 'how' best to answer the question which was the water mark between high and low proficiency writers.

In terms of performance, there was a strong correlation between the types of strategies used and performance outcomes. Generally all of those students who used risk strategies were able to score marks in 'good' range, while those who did not exploit their resource expansion strategies and relied mostly on simplification could, in all cases, only obtain 'poor' marks. As can

be expected, those students who used avoidance strategies could only score 'poor' to 'average' marks but failed to obtain top marks- only in one case out of twenty.

5.2 Qualitative

Since the researcher was dealing with a large corpus of written material which had a potential for yielding different results depending on what one was focusing upon, it seemed unlikely to cite all the cases that illustrated each and every micro-strategy used. What I will do here is reproduce samples of strategies which best illustrated the most recognisable strategies used. Many of the texts cited here partly confirmed the claim of Bialystok and Frohlich (1980) that advanced learners use more achievement strategies such as risk taking and L2-based strategies, while less proficient learners prefer to use risk avoidance and semantic simplification strategies. Here is a good example (uncorrected) of a proficient language learner who used risk taking strategies in answering the question under study:

It is a poem of Robert Herrick and the topic of this poem is (epitaph upon a child that died) the general meaning of this poem is about commemorating a dead girl.

When he read's a verse that have been written on the tombstome of a little dead girl he say's that she lies here, it seem's that he sitting near her grave and he discrib's her as a pretty bud, he say's that she is flower and later she will change into flesh, she has very short time to live and she fell fast asleep.

At last he say's that pleas don't disturb her while she is asleep, she is so delicate that easily will be disturbed, give her strewings but dont disturb her. She is slightly covered.

The theme of this poem, we should respect other human being even if they are died.

It is clear from this answer that the writer has used achievement strategies by restructuring the answer. The ideas are well organised and recast in a logical manner. The writer has also taken some risk by using cohesive devices such as the anaphora 'he' which is used to avoid the repetition of the subject 'the poet', and has used the connective of contrast 'but', which helps to bring out the difference between the action of 'giving something to somebody' and 'causing no disturbance to that body'. As well the use of 'At last' reinforces the writer's logical contention of the ideas. The student has also correctly identified the semantic field of the subject matter by using appropriate registers belonging to the literary genre such as 'poet', 'poem', 'verse', 'epitaph' which show the situational appropriateness of the discourse. Since the answer was quite informative and well developed, it scored 9 marks.

Regarding the use of L2-based strategies which are generally associated with high proficiency learners, one student, as shown in Table (1), used paraphrase. This strategy, however, did not pay dividends in terms of bringing out a precise communicative intent which would enable to student the obtain full marks. Take the following (uncorrected) answer on the examined question:

Epitaphe upen child that died
by: Robert Herrick
This poem is about agirl "child" who just died the poet talked abut the little girl is dead and He "metophor" the girl like a bud and she fell asleep and she will stay asleep for long time and Her little eye is deep sleeps in the grave and the earth is the last place of the girl, and the earth covered her body and the poet says dont destirbe her dont make noises. Let her sleep.

In this answer, the student is clearly trying to use the strategy of 'paraphrasing' by repeating him/ herself and attempting to paraphrase in order to negotiate meaning. The 'characteristics' are unsubstantiated and the 'boundary' is vague and generalised, while the second sentence is an attempt to paraphrase or repeat the first sentence in order to realise the initially intended meaning. By generalising and giving wooly information (it is also possible the student had no inkling of the answer) and by not being precise as is required in literary discourse. The student did not score a mark but 6. Therefore, the claim of Bialystok and Frohlich (1980) that advanced learners use more L2-based strategy than less proficient ones, has its limitations in literary writing because some of the alternative forms may not articulate the precise meaning as demanded by the task.

With regard to the use of semantic simplification strategies, it is interesting to note from Table 2 that those who used this strategy recorded 'poor' and 'average'. Consider the following (uncorrected) sample which exemplifies this category in which the subject attempted to answer the question under study:

As her little did deep
(Dreaming) lyric
Give her strewings but not stir
(doffidolse) marlow
strewings stirs Alliteration
The earth that lightly covers her
(The posionant shephered for his love) shacspaers

It is clear that although the subject has identified the semantic field to which the question relates, his/her information has been oversimplified and he/she has been so cagey in his/her expression that a lot of information has either been 'withheld' or collapsed;

and he/she does not, therefore, achieve the desired communicative goal.

However, the answers dealt with show an interesting aspect concerning literary writing which allows students to score top marks even if they do not use grammatically correct structures. It can be seen that those subjects using restructuring, all were recorded for getting 'good' marks even though their texts were seriously flawed by various types of errors. The lecturer's tolerance of errors is inconsistent with the earlier claim by the lecturers of the literary subjects that "students lack essay writing skills…lack brevity, have problems with selection, organisation, and merely lift points with out recasting them"; which gave the impression that the literary lecturers consider 'how' ideas are communicated when allocating marks. Consider again, for instance, the first sample presented on page (11). Clearly this student shows considerable ignorance of the basic rules of sentence construction which should have been learned at the primary school level. The subject has not observed the difference between the possessive −'s and that of 3rd person singular and apparently does not know where a sentence begins and ends as shown by the whole construction which needs complete restructuring in order to read well. Furthermore, the student misuses the articles (e.g. she is flower) and also incorrectly expresses the continuous tense as in (he sitting). Obviously this is a good example of a student who has merely 'lifted' points without 'recasting' them. Despite all these language flaws, the subject was given a full mark perhaps because of the 'informativeness' of the answer.

This, then, raises a critical question faced by content subject teachers: should they simply 'look' for the information required when they assess students' work or should they also consider 'how' the ideas are communicated? Ellis (1994), a respected language theorist, advises us that 'formal intervention' (=

grammar) in combination with the 'language in context' (weak version of the communicative approach which encourages 'fluency' over 'accuracy') should be encouraged at secondary level rather than teaching which ignores the metacognitive skills such as form and structure.

The study (see Table 1) also showed that the subjects used risk avoidance strategies such as topic avoidance sparingly. However, message reduction was very frequent. In terms of the qualitative aspect many subjects who used risk avoidance were strikingly deficient in their cognitive development as illustrated by the following two samples in answer (uncorrected) to the same question:

-The poet (metaphor) compared between
(1) apretty bud for a girl   (metaphor)
(2) bed for grave   =
(3) sleep for death   =
(4) the earth that lightly (metaphor) cover the soil

-(Theme) Epitaph upon a child that died
He is comparing the died girl a beautful a budwho were built of blood and flesh and was burried under the ground.
(Robrret Herrick)
(1591- 1674)

In the first answer the student has used the strategy of topic avoidance by not answering the part of the question on 'comment on' fully while the information given is communicated in a ridiculously telegraphic manner which does not capture the essential message. On the other hand, the second answer attempts

to give the information required, but the message is so condensed that it loses the thread of the intended communicative goal.

Again, another researcher might say that the reason for not giving detailed information was that the students did not know the answer. I think this would be a simplistic explanation of the second language speaker's learning dynamics in which the students simultaneously struggle to conceptualise the right answer and yet must still figure out how to put across their ideas intelligibly. My interviews with some of the students who had used message reduction and topic avoidance strategies confirmed that they had serious communication problems which probably affected the way they had answered the question. When I asked each of them in separate interviews: "Did you have enough time to prepare for the test and why do think you got the answer wrong for this question?" This is what one of them said, "I had plenty of time. I find it difficult to explain". The other student claimed, "These lecturers ask tricky questions…but in looking back I didn't know what to say". The third student gave the most revealing answer: "I prepared for the test. You see, you can have the facts but how to express yourself on paper becomes the problem". What strikes me is that all of these students who could be characterised 'as yet to acquire academic language proficiency' claimed that at least they knew the answer or part of it, but they found it 'difficult' to answer or did not know 'how' or 'what' to say. This study was therefore worth pursuing because it enabled me to appreciate the delicate psycholinguistic processes involved in literary writing which the L2 learner goes through in order to realise his/her intended meaning.

6. Conclusion

The findings of the study indicate that the majority of first year literary students preferred to use risk avoidance strategies to achieve their intended communicative goals. They mostly preferred to use message reduction/abandonment, but this strategy

did not help them in their performance because one of the major skills required for success in literary discourse is the ability to write literary ideas with artistic and effective accuracy and precision. Although an insignificant number of students opted for absolute reduction such as topic avoidance and expressing something else completely different, those who did so performed badly which is a clear indication that such strategies do not develop writing competence appropriate to university studies.

However, those students who were prepared to take risks in their writing communication by restructuring their discourse to negotiate the intended meaning, to explain and redefine their ideas and to risk making grammatical and other generative errors, were able to do better.

This, then, implies that in order to improve the students' ability to communicate their ideas effectively, the focus on EFL teaching should be on those activities and tasks which promote meaningful use of their strategic resources so that the learners can internalise their existing strategies by attending to input, and by simplifying their inner criteria through the use of their spontaneous linguistic repertoires.

7. Pedagogical Recommendations

Richards and Lockhart (1994: 60) identify four learning strategies: concrete, analytical, communicative and authority oriented. They suggest that students with an authority-oriented learning style (the majority of our students fall into this category!) might adapt well to a lecture mode while those of communicative learning style would prefer the more social and personal approach of group work. Teaching which therefore combines these two styles might cater for both of these two types of learners, while the more analytical learners are likely to do best at university as they are able to work independently. Since the majority of our students are dependent and come from an authority-oriented learning background, they need more guidance and support through structured teaching and learning materials. For them

to flourish, they need to be helped to move from dependence to communicative, and to become independent, analytical learners.

In order to enhance the communicative abilities of the students, lecturers of content subjects could exploit the 'process' and 'interactional' approaches for teaching writing. In the process approach students should be encouraged to pay attention to the revision of their work before presentation, and to be made aware of the 'purpose' of and 'audience' for their writing. To activate the students' discourse skills, writing activities should be preceded by oral presentations; and they should first be encouraged to freely write their ideas as they come, and later on to edit them individually or with the help of peers. These chain activities could inspire self-confidence in the ability of the neophyte writer to produce a meaningful text which conveys the intended communicative goal.

Similarly, the interactional approach can also inspire a meaningful writing context in which there can be greater rapport between the lecturer and the students. In adopting this approach all written work is followed by a appropriate feedback which uses the students' work as the basis for class discussion, error correction, and a plan for future improvement.

NOTES

(1) His paper reports on a study of the communications strategies used in the writing of answers in biology by ESL first year BSc students of the university of Botswana.

(2) Previous taxonomies successfully used by Bialystok and Frohlich (1980), Faerch and Kasper (1983) and Paribakht (1985). Adapted versions of these earlier taxonomies were subsequently used by Si Qing (1990) and Sionis (1995) who studied, respectively, the communicative competence of Chinese English majors and the CSs used by French scientists in the writing of research articles.

(3) One of the major reasons behind this, as reported by the lecturer of the course material, is that "the answers on the students' papers constitute a first written attempt at literary criticism".

(4) This was the typical answer as it was proposed by the examiner who was the lecturer of the course material, Dr. May al-Khazraji.

(5) The colleague is my husband Dr. Mahdi I. al-'Utbi. He has a taste for literature as well as being specialised in linguistics.

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