



Sabzevar Tarbiat Moallem University

Department of English Language and Literature

**The Effect of Task Type and Proficiency Level on
Communication Strategies of Intermediate Iranian EFL
Learners in Synchronous Computer Mediated
Communication (SCMC)**

Supervisor: Dr. Zargham Ghapanchi

Advisor: Dr. Mohammad Davoudi

By:

Mahdi Taherkhani

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By:

Mahdi Taherkhani

Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Students in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts (M.A.)

In

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Sabzevar University for Teacher Education

Sabzevar, Iran

Evaluated and approved by the the Thesis Committee as: **Excellent**

.....

Z. Ghapanchi, **Ph.D., Supervisor**

.....

M. Davoudi, **Ph.D., Reader**

.....

M. Ghazanfari , **Ph.D., First Examiner**

.....

M. Elyasi, **Ph.D., Second Examiner**

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In the Name of God

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Dedication

*To my family, for their support, without which
this thesis would not have been possible*

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Abstract

This study investigates the effect of task type as defined by Prabhu (1987, cited in Ellis, 2003) on compensatory communication strategies as introduced by Poulisse (1990) in synchronous computer mediated communication among intermediate Iranian EFL learners and further it examines whether the two proficiency levels (high and low groups) within intermediate learners differ in the amount of communication strategy production. In order to address the above mentioned purposes, the researcher selects a group of seventy students. Out of them, only sixty two met the criteria of having familiarity with computers and necessary equipments, and scoring between two standard deviations below and above the mean of proficiency test (PET). They were assigned to do three different task types in pairs on Gtalk software. All chat scripts were analyzed for the amount of communication strategies. Further, the researcher divided the participants' communication samples into high-proficient and low-proficient groups based on their scores of (PET) test to investigate the relation between proficiency level and communication strategies. The results revealed that there is a significant relationship between task type and communication strategies of participants and also there is a significant relationship between proficiency level (high and low groups) and the frequency with which the participants used communication strategies in synchronous computer mediated communication.

Key words: Task, Communication Strategies, Proficiency Level, Synchronous Computer Mediated Communication.

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List of Abbreviations

CMC	Computer Mediated communication
CS	Communication Strategy
CSs	Communication Strategies
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
F2F	Face to Face
Gtalk	Google Talk
PET	Preliminary English Test
SCMC	Synchronous Computer Mediated communication

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1. Introduction

This study reports on an investigation of the use of task-based, synchronous computer mediated communication (SCMC) and the effects of task type and proficiency level on the amount of communication strategies (CSs) among learners of English as a foreign language. SCMC has been used with increasing frequency in foreign language (FL) instruction, and results from previous studies of its use in learning activities have been promising. As with any technology, it is important to consider how the use of that technology is substantially more effective for meeting instructional objectives than traditional classroom activities. SCMC has unique qualities that distinguish it from other forms of technology and modes of discussion such as its ability to: transcend distance and provide access to a larger language community; allow learners to formulate, edit and review their utterances before submitting entries in a discussion; provide visual reinforcement of what is being “said” and the opportunity to re-read entries to facilitate comprehension; and archive discussions during partner and small group work and give instructors a means to monitor all language use (essentially allowing the instructor to be in all places at one time unlike in face-to-face (F2F) instruction).

1.1. Task-based Learning

The focus of the current study is on the analysis of task performance in the SCMC environment. Task-based instruction has been promoted as a means to encourage completion of classroom activities not for the sake of language practice, but rather for using the FL to achieving specific goals. Nobuyoshi and Ellis (1993) argued that by contextualizing language use in communication to complete a task, learners are more likely to notice forms or lexical items they lack for successfully executing discourse functions. They are also focused on the communication

of ideas, but at the same time on form, and they develop linguistic, communicative, strategic, and discourse competencies (Long, 1985; Ellis, 2003).

Previous research of the use of tasks in both face-to-face (F2F) and SCMC modes of FL instruction has shown that task-based activities encourage learner interaction and meaning negotiation. Researchers have found that task type has an effect on the amount of learner output (e.g., Blake, 2000; Doughty & Pica, 1986; Nobuyoshi & Ellis, 1993) and communication strategies (e.g., Smith, 2003b).

1.2. Communication Strategies

Some people can communicate effectively in an L2 with only 100 words. How do they do it? They use hands, they imitate the sound or movement of things, they mix languages, they create new words, they describe or circumlocute something they do not know the word for _ in short, they use “communication strategies” (Savignon, 1983, cited in Dörnyei, Z., & Scott, M. L., 1997).

Interest in communicative language teaching has led researchers in applied linguistics to focus on the use of communication strategies (CSs) by second language (L2) learners. The study of CSs is important, as it looks at how learners are able to use the L2 in order to convey meaning (Littlemore, 2001).

CSs are defined in different ways by different researchers. Some (e.g., Faerch & Kasper, 1983) restrict their definition of CSs to cases in which the speaker attempts to overcome linguistic difficulty, whereas other researchers (e.g., Taron & Yule, 1989) consider them to include all attempts at meaning-negotiation, regardless of whether or not there is linguistic

difficulty. Poulisse (1990) defined communication strategies as ways of filling vocabulary gaps in the first or second language.

Littlemore (2001) states that research into the use of CSs in second language learning goes back at least 20 years. As different CSs have emerged from the data, a challenging task for researchers has been to find useful ways of classifying them (e.g., Taron 1980; Faerch & Kasper 1984; Poulisse, 1990; Bialystok, 1990).

Early studies of CSs first focused on defining and classifying strategies into taxonomies. More recently, empirical studies and reviews of CS have been conducted, and researchers have turned their attention to the relationship between CS and pedagogical issues. Bou-Franch (1994) states that several aspects have been dealt with in relation to CSs: Are they equally used by L1 and L2 speakers? What are the factors controlling the selection and use of the different kinds of CSs? , etc. For example, Chen (1990, cited in Littlemore, 2001) showed that a language learner's L1 influences the types of CSs that they use in L2. As well as their L1, it is highly likely that an individual's psychological characteristics will lead him to adopt different types of CSs.

Bialystok (1990) identifies three potential factors that influence the choice of CS, namely, nature of the task, proficiency level of the L2, and features of the communicative situation.

A study by Littlemore (2001) investigates whether or not different cognitive styles are associated with a tendency to use different categories of CSs. One particularly interesting finding made in this study is that different types of items elicit different types of CSs. This supports Poulisse's finding that the nature of the task strongly influences the type of CSs adopted. This is an important discovery as it emphasizes the fact that, even though individual's cognitive style appears to influence the approach they take to communication, they do not dictate this approach. There is a possibility that the task only influences the strategies of some learners.

1.3. Computer-mediated Communication

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) has increasingly been used in FL instruction for creating environments that encourage learner-learner interaction. According to Berge and Collins (1995), CMC is changing instruction by providing tools for interactive methodologies (e.g., SCMC) and by focusing teachers on appropriate learner-centered task design.

Previous research has shown that SCMC in particular has proven very effective in increasing learner-learner interaction (e.g., Kern, 1995), increasing language output (e.g., Beauvois, 1995) and facilitating negotiation of meaning (e.g., Fidalgo-Eick, 2001). Some additional benefits that have been established are: reduced anxiety (e.g., Arnold, 2007), more open communication (e.g., Beauvois, 1995), more equal participation in discussions (e.g., Warschauer, 1996), and increased experimentation with the FL (e.g., Belz & Reinhardt, 2004).

1.4. Statement of the Problem

Poulisse (1990) states that when second and foreign language learners attempt to communicate in L2, they are often confronted with linguistic problems resulting from an inadequate command of that language. Although this occasionally leads to a breakdown in communication, L2 learners generally manage to overcome their problems by employing what are known as “communication strategies”. However, how this management of difficulty is carried out by the language learners is still vague and needs further investigation, especially in the new contexts of communication (e.g., SCMC).

The study of second language acquisition often involves the elicitation of language use data from learners. This data is then analyzed to describe the phonological, syntactic, and semantic systems of those learners, to consider how they might differ from target language norms, and to

specify how they change over time. In the course of such analyses, any number of variables which may affect the learners' second language production can be analyzed. This study examines the effects of two such variables, that is, proficiency level and different task types, on learner performance in SCMC. The particular aspect of learner performance that this study examines is communication strategies.

The potential contribution of this study to second language acquisition research rests on the fact that it highlights the impact of task type and proficiency level on learner performance in SCMC. Recent work by Smith (2003b) has looked at the effect of task type on the learners' communication strategies in SCMC. Smith has investigated two task types in his study. This study will build on the work of Smith (2003b) by examining one more task type, that is, three task types, and further attempts to explore how proficiency level affects the use of communication strategies.

1.5. Significance of the Study

Dörnyei & Scott (1997) state that language problems and difficulties are a salient part of communication in an L2, and problem-management occurs at several levels. No wonder "communication strategies", seen as the language devices used to handle communication problems, have been the target of much research during the past two decades. It has remained a potentially fertile source of insight for two reasons: First, it is a truly "applied" area: The practical implications of understanding problem-management in L2 communications are enormous. After all, L2 speakers spend a lot of time and effort struggling with language difficulties, yet L2 courses do not generally prepare students to cope with performance problems. Second, by relating interlanguage analysis to psycholinguistic investigations of speech

production, the study of CSs helps refine scientific models of L2 learning and use. It is also understandable that the approaches to understanding CSs have varied according to the researchers' general orientations towards language analysis.

It is also worth mentioning that there are a few studies that have attempted to compare the performance of a group of subjects across different elicitation methods (tasks) and usually most researchers utilize only one elicitation procedure. For example, Taron (1977, cited in Poulisse, 1990), Galvan & Campbell (1979), Elsen (1982, cited in Poulisse, 1990) and Paribakht (1985) used only one elicitation method in their research. There have been few large-scale studies in which a variety of different elicitation methods was used. One is a project by Stedje (1985) about the use CSc by forty Swedish learners of German and an unreported number of anomic aphasics. The tasks are 1) the retelling of a well-known story, read by the experiment, 2) a picture description task and 3) a picture story task. The other study was a longitudinal study by De Keijser (1986, cited in Poulisse, 1990). In this research two elicitation methods were used: picture description task and oral interviews. Another study was done by Poulisse (1990). She used three elicitation methods in her study: the concrete picture description task, the oral interview and the story retell task.

The above-mentioned studies were carried out in F2F environment; similarly few studies (e.g., Smith, 2003b) investigated different task types and their effects on CSs in SCMC environment. This study is unique in its approach to use three task types in SCMC and the use of high proficient and low proficient groups in the same proficiency level, that is, intermediate level.

1.6. Research Questions

In order to grapple with the hypotheses put forward in a scientific way, the following research questions have been raised:

1. Is there any relationship between task type and communication strategies of intermediate Iranian EFL learners in synchronous computer mediated communication?
2. Is there any relationship between Iranian EFL learners' L2 proficiency level (high proficiency and low proficiency groups) and the frequency with which they use communication strategies in synchronous computer mediated communication?

1.7. Research Hypotheses

In order to investigate the above-mentioned research questions, the following null hypotheses were stated:

HO₁. There is no statistically significant relationship between task type and communication strategies of intermediate Iranian EFL learners in synchronous computer mediated communication.

HO₂. There is no statistically significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners' L2 proficiency level (high and low proficiency groups) and the frequency with which they use communication strategies in synchronous computer mediated communication.

To test the first hypothesis, an analysis of chi-square will be run to investigate the relationship between each task type and communication strategies.