

The Effect of Anxiety on the Use of Oral Communication Strategies by Engineering Students in the Indian Context

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the findings of a study that aimed to find out the types of communication strategies (CSs) used and the frequency of their use by engineering students with high and low levels of anxiety. The data on students' anxiety level was collected by using Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA) (McCroskey, 1982) and Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) (Horwitz & Cope et. al., 1986). To collect data on CSs, selected students were given three oral tasks: public speech, presentation and interview. By using a multi-featured advanced mobile with a good audio recorder, students' performances were audio recorded. To analyse the data, the taxonomy of communication strategies was adapted from Tarone (1977), Faerch and Kasper (1983), Ellis (1984) and Dornyei (1995). Results showed that high anxious students frequently used reduction strategies and low anxious students used achievement strategies more than high anxious students.

Keywords: Communication Strategies; Anxiety and learning; Engineering students.

Introduction

"I always feel nervous when speaking English."

"Thoughts came into my mind but I can't express them quickly in English."

"I can't write grammatically correct in English."

"I do not get exact word at exact place in writing as well as in speaking."

(Quoted from the transcripts of the study)

Such statements are commonly used by foreign language learners, and foreign language teachers are also well acquainted with them. These statements show an important problem that the majority of students face in learning, particularly in speaking and writing a second/ foreign language. Many learners express their inability to, and sometimes even acknowledge their failure in learning to,

speak and write in a second/foreign language. These learners may be experts at learning other skills but, when it comes to learning to speak another language, they claim to have a 'mental block' against it (Horwitz et al., 1986).

Language Anxiety can bring about several problems in the process of language learning since it can hinder students from mastering the language. Anxiety refers to concern and fear, especially about what might happen (*Oxford Dictionary*, 1995, p. 16) and language anxiety refers to a type of anxiety unique to second language learning (Horwitz et al., 1991, p. 25).

What are the causes that hinder or stop learners in learning a second/foreign language? Most of the time, students' feeling of stress, anxiety or nervousness may impede their language learning and performance. Theorists and Second Language Acquisition (SLA) researchers have reiterated that these feelings of anxiety are specifically associated with learning and speaking a second/foreign language, which distinguishes SL/FL learning from learning other skills or subjects. Both language teachers and students are aware and generally feel strongly that anxiety is a major hurdle to be overcome when learning to speak another language.

The highly anxious students usually construct learning strategies, such as learning certain tricks, that help them to keep the conversation going, in order to be able to perform well in their oral activities. Those strategies are called Communication Strategies. A Communication Strategy is defined as "a systematic technique employed

by a speaker to express his or her meaning when faced with some difficulty (Corder, 1981, in Dornyci, 1995, p. 56). It can be in the form of using circumlocution, fillers, code switching, et cetera (Dornyci, 1995, p. 58).

The focus of the present research is to check the level of anxiety of the engineering students and find types and frequency of communication strategies used by them.

Theories

According to Horwitz et al. (1991), language anxiety means the feeling of nervousness, worry, or uneasiness experienced by foreign language students, especially EFL students. Many students, especially in a classroom situation, find that learning a foreign language is stressful, especially if they have to perform something using foreign language, owing to the fear of making mistakes, feeling of high self-consciousness, and the desire to be perfect when speaking (Foss et al., 1991).

There are three types of language anxiety: *test anxiety*, *communication apprehension*, and *fear of negative evaluation*. "Communication apprehension is the fear or anxiety an individual feels about orally communicating" (Daly, 1991, p. 3). It usually occurs in a classroom situation. Students may avoid talking in foreign language because they are unprepared, uninterested, lack confidence, or because they are afraid of communicating. The characteristics of a person with high communication apprehension level are that they have difficulties in concentrating, become forgetful, and sweat much (p.3). The most

commonly used measure is that of McCroskey et al. (1985), called Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA). It consists of 24 items related to communication apprehension. Students experiencing high Communication Apprehension score high in PRCA, while those with low Communication Apprehension level score low in PRCA.

Communication Strategies

"When language learners are unaware of how to say a word in English due to fear or anxiety, they can communicate effectively by using their hands, imitating sounds, inventing new words, or describing what they mean. These ways of communicating are called **communication strategies (CSs)**." They are "attempts to bridge the gap between the linguistic knowledge of the second-language learner and the linguistic knowledge of his or her interlocutor in real communication situations" (Dornyei, 1995). According to Selinker (1972), "Strategies of Second Language Communication" are the ways in which foreign/second language learners deal with the difficulties they encounter during the course of their speaking performances in the target language when their linguistic resources are inadequate. Among the four language skills, 'speaking' appears to be more complicated for learners. Therefore, "speaking in English fluently and accurately and communicating orally in the target language have been accepted as threatening acts for EFL learners since effective oral communication requires the ability to

use the language appropriately in social interactions" (Shumin, 1997).

Many researchers have proposed definitions of communication strategies since the notion of 'communication strategy' was first introduced by Selinker (1972). Tarone, Cohen and Dumas (1976-1977), and Tarone, Frauenfelder and Selinker (1976) defined 'communication strategy' as "systematic attempt by the learner to express or decode meaning in the target language (TL), in situations where the appropriate systematic target language rules have not been formed." A common definition is that communication strategies are considered "a mutual attempt of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in situations where requisite meaning structures are not shared" (Tarone, 1980).

Taxonomy of Oral Communication Strategies

The taxonomy of oral communication strategies has been adopted and adapted from various available taxonomies of Tarone (1977), Faerch and Kasper (1983), Ellis (1984), and Dornyei (1995). The CSs identified in the taxonomy are divided into two categories: Reduction Strategies and Achievement Strategies (Faerch and Kasper, 1984).

A) Reduction Strategies:

These are learners' attempts to escape from a communication problem. The strategies from this category include:

- 1. Topic avoidance:** Not try to talk about terms/concepts which students find difficult to express.
- 2. Message abandonment:** The learner starts communication but then cuts

short because he faces difficulty with the target language rules or forms.

B) Achievement Strategies:

By using achievement strategies, the learner attempts to solve problems in communication by expanding his communicative resources, rather than by reducing his communicative goal (functional reduction) (Faerch and Kasper, 1983). Achievement strategies aimed at solving problems in the planning phase due to insufficient linguistic resources can be called **compensatory strategies**. In executing a plan, learners may have difficulties in retrieving specific interlanguage items and may adopt achievement strategies in order to get at the problematic item (Faerch and Kasper, 1983). Such strategies are called **retrieval strategies**.

1. **Literal translation:** Learner translates the content or matter from L1 to L2.
2. **Generalization:** Learner employs an L2 word which is semantically similar to the targeted lexical item.
3. **Paraphrase:** By using a paraphrase strategy, the learner solves a problem in the planning phase by filling the 'gap' by using simple language structures.
4. **Word coinage:** Learner coins a non-existent L2 word or creatively constructs a new word.
5. **Use of all-purpose words:** Learners use some empty lexical items to transmit the message completely.
6. **Restructuring:** This strategy is used whenever the learner realizes that he cannot complete a local plan which he

has already begun and develops an alternative local plan which enables him to communicate his intended message without reduction.

7. **Circumlocution:** It is a strategy used by learners in which they go on describing or paraphrasing the target object or concepts.
8. **Waiting:** When the learner starts communicating, he/she sometimes stops in between and takes time to think up the next utterance.
9. **Use of fillers:** The learner uses filling words to get some time to think. For example: *well, as a matter of fact, now let me see*. Wajnryb (1987) added examples of fillers such as *I think, you know, you see, um, mm, ah, sort of, OK, right, really*.
10. **Repetitions:** Learner repeats the same words, phrases, or sentences if he/she does not get next part of their communication.
11. **Asking for repetition:** It is a cooperative strategy which includes requesting repetition when not hearing, or misunderstanding, something.
12. **Asking for clarification:** It is also a cooperative strategy in which the learner requests to elaborate unfamiliar meaning structure or new concepts – for example, *What do you mean?, You saw what?*
13. **Code Switching:** It is a strategy in which learners switch from L2 to L1 when they face difficulties in continuing the communication.
14. **Unused strategies:** Meaning replacement, asking for confirmation

and foreignizing are generally unused but important strategies.

Methodology

Data collection

For the present research both qualitative and quantitative methods were used. Data for the present research was collected from all (four) engineering colleges in Ratnagiri district, (Maharashtra) from 120 second year engineering students from various branches, the sample being selected using stratified random sampling.

To collect information on the anxiety levels of the students, a questionnaire adapted from PRCA (McCroskey, 1982) and FLCAS (Horwitz & Cope et al., 1986) was used. PRCA records participants' feelings about communication in four different

communicative situations: group discussion, meetings, conversations and public speaking. However, in the present study one situation, i.e. meeting, was replaced with 'debate' as these engineering students are more familiar and experienced with debates than with meetings. Students' concerns related to their self-image can be addressed in a similar manner using the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) (Horwitz, 1984), which can also be used to identify students mostly likely to suffer from language anxiety related to speaking and writing in the target language. To elicit information on communication strategies, case study method was used. To observe and analyze students' use of CSs in oral communication situations, 24 second year engineering (mixed branches) students from the four colleges were selected:

Table 1: Sample Sizes

| Purpose | Class | No. of Students |
|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| To check anxiety level | SE (From All Colleges) | 120 |
| To check use of CSs | SE (From All Colleges) | 24 |

Selected students' performances were observed and audio recorded with a multimedia mobile phone having high quality audio recording facility. Along with the audio recording, observation, questionnaire, and retrospective interview methods were also used for the present research. Personal information on students was also collected.

Data Analysis

Based on the responses of the engineering

students and the weightage given by them, three oral communication situations (i.e., public speech, interviews and presentation) were chosen. Based on the analysis of the students' responses to a questionnaire on PRCA and FLCAS, 24 out of 120 students were selected as the subjects for the present study. They were divided into two categories, viz. high anxious and low anxious. Recordings of the students' performances in the selected oral communication situations were transcribed and analyzed to

identify students' use of various communication strategies. Students' retrospective interviews were also transcribed and analyzed to know what planning they did to solve the given tasks.

Discussion and Findings

The analysis of the questionnaire showed that only 11 (9.1%) out of 120 students had low level of communication apprehension, fifty (41.66%) medium communication apprehension and 61 (50.83%) high communication apprehension. The public speaking scores revealed high communication apprehension for a majority of the respondents. Group discussion and debate scores revealed that most respondents experienced comparatively low communication apprehension in both types of communication situations. It indicates that students need more training or practice in public speaking.

Comparing students' use of CSs in oral communicative situations

Use of fillers (42.83%), repetition (14.14%)

and restructuring (10.31%) were the most often used strategies in all the tasks. *Message abandonment* (overall usage of 8.46%) was used more frequently in the interview task than in public speech and presentation. *Topic avoidance* was used only in the interview task (overall usage 3.18%). *Literal translation, paraphrase and waiting* were used more in public speech than in presentation and interview. *Generalization, word coinage, circumlocution, use of all purpose words, asking for repetition and asking for clarification* were used more in the interview task but the frequency of use of *word coinage, asking for repetition and asking for clarification* was remarkably less. *Code switching* was used only in the interview task and also less frequently. However, some other important strategies like *meaning replacement, foreignizing and asking for confirmation* were not at all used by the subjects of the present study in any of the oral tasks. **Figure 1** below shows the overall use of CSs in oral communication situations.

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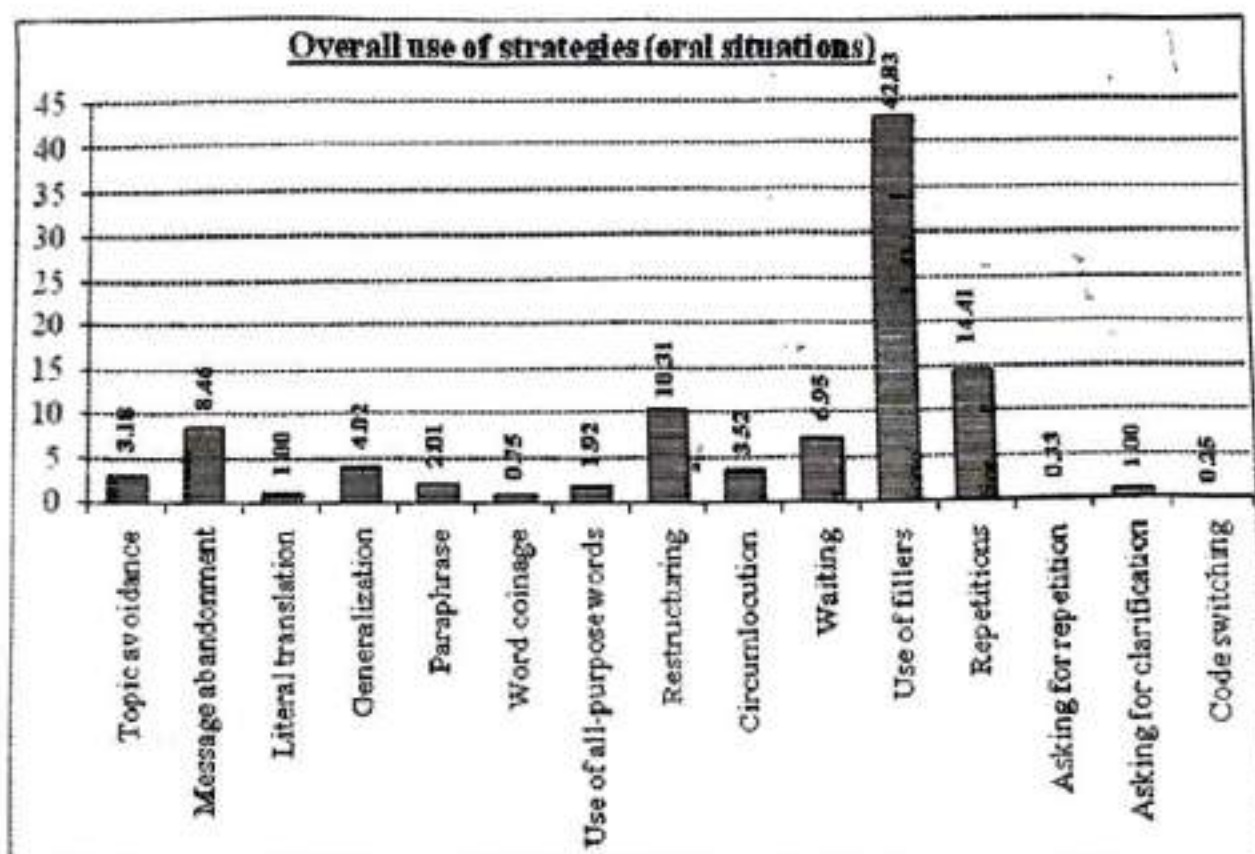


Figure 1: Overall percentage of use of CSs in oral communication situations

Comparing high anxious and low anxious students' use of CSs in oral communication situations

Even if low anxious students had a little anxiety in some tasks, they performed better than the high anxious students. Their anxiety was facilitative anxiety, which made them make efforts to perform better in all oral and written tasks. Many low anxious students felt fear initially – at the beginning of interview, public speech or presentation, but once they got settled on the stage they did not experience any kind of fear or anxiety. On the other hand, high anxious students' anxiety was debilitating. They could not perform well due to nervousness and anxiety though they had prepared well for the tasks.

According to the retrospective interviews of some high anxious students, facing an interview was a little easier than giving a public speech or a presentation. The reason given was that in the interview task they could sit and answer questions, while in public speech and presentation they had to stand in front of the audience and maintain eye contact with them. Almost all the students had selected technical topics for presentations. It showed that giving a presentation on a technical topic was felt to be easier than giving one on non-technical topics, because they were learning technical topics every day in the classroom and so they need not take too much effort to remember those concepts and terminology. Low anxious students, on the other hand, were found to

be confident in oral as well as written tasks. Some of them were a little anxious at the time of speech and presentation but their anxiety did not become a barrier in their performance. They were getting their doubts clarified and taking help from the researcher as well as their friends.

The analysis of low anxious and high anxious students' use of CSs showed that high anxious students used reduction strategies more frequently than low anxious students. Comparing the use of CSs by LA and HA students in oral communication situations, it was found that *use of fillers* was used in oral tasks by both high and

low anxious students; *message abandonment, restructuring and repetition* were used more by high anxious students; *waiting* strategy was used more by low anxious students. *Topic avoidance, code switching, generalization, word coinage, use of all purpose words* and *asking for clarification* were used more by high anxious students, while *literal translation, paraphrase, asking for clarification* and *asking for repetition* were used more by low anxious students. **Figure 2** shows strategy wise overall use of CSs in oral communication situations by LA and HA students.

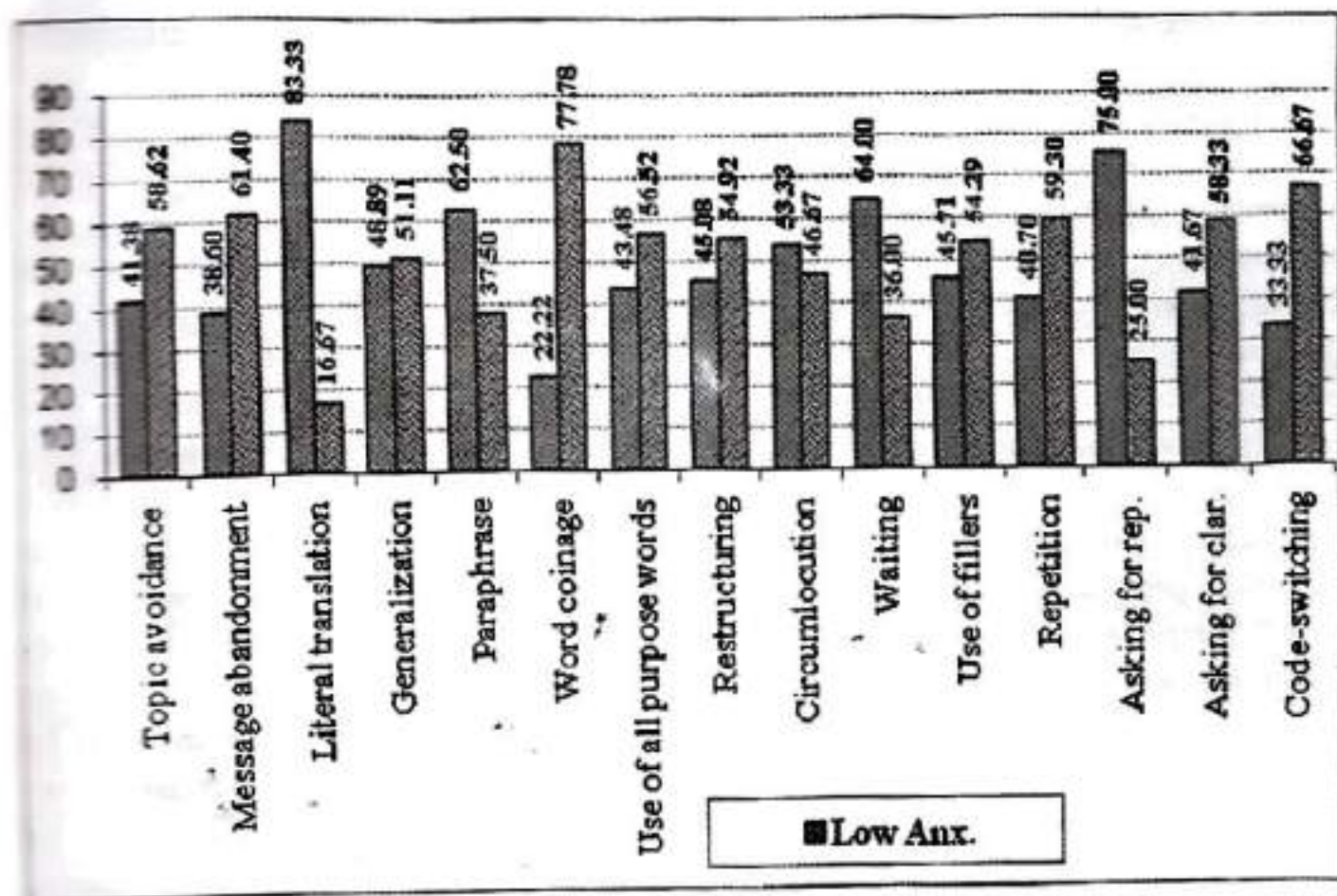


Figure 2: Comparison of overall usage of CS (oral situations) by LA & HA students

Conclusion

Strategies most often used in all the tasks were *use of fillers, repetition and restructuring*. *Message abandonment* was used more frequently in the interview task than in public speech and presentation. *Topic avoidance* was used only in interview and frequently, too. *Literal translation, paraphrase* and *waiting* were used more in public speech than in presentation and interview. *Generalization, word coinage, circumlocution, use of all purpose words, asking for repetition* and *asking for clarification* were used more in the interview task, but the frequency of use of *word coinage, asking for repetition* and *asking for clarification* was remarkably less. *Code switching* was used only in the interview task and less frequently so. However, some other important strategies like *meaning replacement, foreignizing* and *asking for confirmation* were not at all used by the subjects of the present study in any of the oral tasks.

Use of fillers was used in oral tasks by both high and low anxious students. While *message abandonment, restructuring* and *repetition* were used more by high anxious students, *waiting* was used more by low anxious students. *Topic avoidance, code switching, generalization, word coinage, use of all purpose words* and *asking for clarification* were used more by high anxious students, whereas *literal translation, paraphrase, clarification* and *asking for repetition* were used more by low anxious students. Among oral communication situations, students experienced comparatively less fear in interview and presentation than in speeches.

Implications and Recommendations

The present research has significant pedagogical implications. If students are made aware of reasons for anxiety in communication and how to overcome them by using various successful communication strategies that low anxious students use, it will be very useful to improve the output quality of engineering students. Teachers teaching English in engineering colleges can play a crucial role in alleviating students' anxiety and creating an anxiety-free learning environment by teaching them how to use positive communication strategies.

A module or unit on using communication strategies and reducing language anxiety should be included in the syllabus of engineering courses. This view corroborates Dörnyei's (1995), who suggests that communication strategies need to be taught and he also suggests procedures for strategy training.

High-anxious students should be introduced to risk-taking strategies employed by low-anxious students in order to build their confidence level. Cohen and Dörnyei hold the same view: "One possible way to help low-ability students improve their oral communication may be to introduce them to the use of risk-taking strategies employed by high-ability students." Cohen et al. (1998) and Dörnyei (1995) have claimed that "communicative skills can be improved by developing specific CSs and raising low-ability students' awareness of strategies for solving potential communication problems, leading to the development of their oral communication ability." These suggestions are supported by Nakatani (2005), who has

noted that "trained participants significantly improved their oral proficiency test scores and their success."

Teachers should also remove students' fear of tests and test scores. They should not make students worried about passing or failing the course. Classroom environment should be made comfortable to students, which will in turn lead to more efficient learning. Teachers should give pair/group activities, as many students feel comfortable talking to their friends; if they make a mistake, they do not feel bad or anxious. There should also be an additional module in the syllabus on using the register features of EST correctly and frequently in their oral performances.

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