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## Communication Strategies in the Written Medium

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### ABSTRACT

*The field of second language acquisition has distinguished between two types of strategies: learning strategies and communication strategies. Learning strategies deal with the receptive domain of intake, memory, storage, and recall. Communication strategies pertain to the employment of verbal and nonverbal mechanisms for the productive communication of information. Dörnyei (1995) has developed a taxonomy of communication strategies, and he divides them into two broad categories: avoidance strategies and compensatory strategies. Although the relevance of the concept of communication strategies with written production has been well affirmed theoretically, few studies have been devoted to the empirical investigation of this concept in the written medium. As students who study English Language and Literature at South East European University (SEEU) find writing the most difficult skill to master, this study investigated the manifestation of communication strategies in the written production of those students.*

### INTRODUCTION

One of the most important individual differences that influence foreign language learning is the varied use of language learning strategies. In the field of second language acquisition these strategies are divided into two broad groups: learning strategies and communication strategies. Brown (2000) writes, “Communication is the output modality and learning is the input modality” (p. 87) and that communication strategies are used by L2 learners as well as native speakers to manage production problems. Recently, Ellis (2009) pointed out that,

As anyone who has tried to communicate in L2 knows, learners frequently experience problems in saying what they want to say because of their inadequate knowledge. In order to overcome those problems they resort to various kinds of communication strategies. (p. 60)

When communication strategies are mentioned, there is a belief that they are related to only verbal communication. However, communication strategies are connected with written production as well. Ellis (1985) is of the opinion that communication strategies are concerned with L2 production, and that both verbal communication and writing are productive skills. Most

empirical studies have investigated the use of communication strategies in oral production tasks, but few have studied the use of communication strategies in written production tasks. Writing can be personally fulfilling, and it helps students to learn disciplinary content. College students everywhere have to do a lot of writing in the course of their studies. Additionally, writing is also a powerful democratic tool for justice (Leki, 2003, p. 324).

Students at the English department at SEEU, as part of their evaluation, are required to do a lot of writing in order to measure improvement over the course of the semester. Because English language teachers often note that students have difficulty in mastering this skill, this study aimed to provide new information about the communication strategies used by English-language students in writing, with the results serving both English teachers and students toward improving student writing.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The term *communication strategy* was first used by Selinker (1972), and since then there has been an increased interest in the learner's communication strategies because it is a part of modern language teaching. As stated above, Ellis (1985) treats communication strategies as problem-oriented, and differentiates between learning strategies and communication strategies. He further states that,

Communication strategies differ from learning strategies in that the problem arises as a result of attempts to perform in L2, and the strategies are needed to meet a pressing communicative need. If learning strategies are the long-term solution to a problem, communication strategies provide short-term answers. (p. 181)

Brown (2000) believes that,

A learning strategy is a method of perceiving and storing particular items for later recall. A communication strategy is a method of achieving communication, of encoding or expressing meaning in a language. The two types of strategies are quite different in their manifestation. (p. 83)

Communication strategies are used by speakers intentionally and consciously in order to cope with difficulties in communicating in an L2 or foreign language (Bialystok, 1990). Faérch and Kasper (1983) concentrated on the psychological dimension of what is going on in the L2 learners' mind when attempting to express something in the L2, and they found that learners often use communication strategies when they encounter a difficulty. Communication strategies can be divided into two main groups: achievement in trying to solve their problems, and avoidance. The lack of vocabulary is a difficulty that learners have in expressing their ideas in writing, a fact which was highlighted by Poulisse (1989) who investigated Dutch learners of English. During the task of retelling stories and describing geometrical shapes, she found that the learners used another strategy, *archi* strategies (solving the problem by thinking of the meaning of the word and attempting to convey it in another way), which helped them to cope with unknown words. She further divided the *archi* strategy into two categories: analytic strategies (a learner tries to break the meaning of the word up into parts and then convey the meaning

separately) and holistic strategies (a learner thinks of the meaning of the word as a whole and tries to use a word that is the closest approximation).

Tarone (1977) lists his classifications of communication strategies as paraphrase, approximation, word coinage, circumlocution, falling back on literal translation, and avoidance. He believes that in the 1980s researchers from Nijmegen University (Kellerman, Bongaerts, & Poulisse, 1987) viewed the existing typologies (Váradi, 1973; Tarone, 1977; Paribakht, 1985) of communication strategies as mainly product-oriented, which meant that they were mainly descriptive and focused only on the linguistic product. They tended to show strategy types with isolated examples rather than represent how these typologies could be applied to cohesive speech or writing (Aliakbari & Allvar, 2009). Williams (2006) concurs with Tarone, saying that,

Communication strategies aid learners with participating in and maintaining conversations and in improving the quality of communication. This, in turn, enables them to have increased exposure to and opportunities to use the L2, leading to more chances to test their assumptions about the L2 and to receive feedback. Without such strategies, learners are likely to avoid L2 risk-taking as well as specific conversation topics or situations. (para. 3)

Another issue being debated currently is the impact of computers in second language writing. As Pennington (2003) puts it forth,

As the communicator of the present day of the future and especially of the future is inevitably linked to electronic media, those charged with instructing ESL students in writing cannot afford to remain outside these developments, teaching without regard to the communication technologies that are increasingly at the center of their students' world; teachers should be prepared to bring computers into the center of their own pedagogical practice. (p. 287)

Warschauer (1999) believes that many of the literacy practices in education, work, and social life have moved off the page and onto the screen; more and more, people are doing the majority of their writing and reading on computers, and transmitting messages electronically rather than on paper. Similarly, Belisle (1996) is of the opinion that using email in a writing class can occur over any kind of network as long as workstations with email software are readily available to the students. This could be in a lab, over a campus network, or across the Internet. Nevertheless, writing cannot be successful if the students are not familiar with communication strategies, and all the aforementioned research shows that communication strategies should be treated separately from learning strategies.

### **Dörnyei's Taxonomy**

Dörnyei (1995) developed a taxonomy of communication strategies based on the above mentioned theories of the Nijmegen University Group (Kellerman et al., 1987; as well as Tarone, 1977; Faérch & Kasper, 1983; Bialystok, 1990) and adds one more strategy: *stalling*. His taxonomy divides the strategies into two broad categories: avoidance strategies and compensatory strategies (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Communication Strategies (Dörnyei, 1995, p. 58)

Avoidance Strategies	Compensatory Strategies
<p><i>Message Abandonment:</i> Leaving a message unfinished because of language difficulties.</p> <p><i>Topic Avoidance:</i> Avoiding topics or concepts that pose language difficulties.</p>	<p><i>Circumlocution:</i> Describing or exemplifying the target object or action.</p> <p><i>Approximation:</i> Using an alternative term which expresses the meaning of the target lexical item as closely as possible.</p> <p><i>Use of All-Purpose Words:</i> Extending a general, empty lexical item to contexts where specific words are missing.</p> <p><i>Word Coinage:</i> Creating a nonexistent L2 word based on a supposed rule.</p> <p><i>Nonlinguistic Signals:</i> Mime, gestures and facial expressions.</p> <p><i>Literal Translation:</i> Translating items from L1 to L2.</p> <p><i>Foreignizing:</i> Using an L1 word by adjusting it to an L2 phonology and morphology (e.g., adding to it an L2 suffix).</p> <p><i>Code-Switching:</i> Using an L1 word with an L1 pronunciation or an L3 word with an L3 pronunciation.</p> <p><i>Appeal for Help:</i> Asking for aid from the speaker either directly or indirectly.</p> <p><i>Stalling/Time-Gaining:</i> Using fillers or hesitation devices to fill pauses and to gain time to think.</p>

It can be seen that Dörnyei's (1995, p. 58) taxonomy contains twelve strategies. The two Avoidance strategies refer to a reduction or complete abandonment of the intended meaning. The Compensatory group offers alternative plans for the learners to carry out their original communicative goal by manipulating available language. Tarone (1981) gives a very interesting example of Circumlocution: "Something you put your food to make it cold" (p. 289). "Circumlocution" is considered by many researchers (Tarone, 1981; Willems, 1987; Dörnyei, 1995) to be the most important strategy, while "stalling" is considered a last resort. "Approximation" means that the learner creates an approximate phrase; in Dörnyei's (1995) words, the speaker uses "an alternative term to express the meaning of the target lexical item as closely as possible" (p. 56). The rest of the terms are fairly self-explanatory. Since Dörnyei's taxonomy combines many strategies from other authors (Kellerman et al., 1987; Tarone, 1977; Faérch & Kasper, 1983; Bialystok, 1990), I believe that it is applicable to an EFL context like Macedonia, and it was used for this study.

## METHODOLOGY

This study investigated the manifestation of the communication strategies in the written production of English language students at SEEU using the following questions: What are the communication strategies used by students of English in writing argumentative essays? Are there any differences in the use of strategies among female and male students?

### Participants

The study began with 100 Albanian-speaking students majoring in English Language and Literature at SEEU. Their ages ranged from 19-22 years, they were in the second year of their studies, and all had similar educational backgrounds (before entering the University, they took an entrance exam which measured their language skills). After taking the Strategy Questionnaire (see Appendix), 30 participants (15 female and 15 male students) chosen randomly from the total sample of 100, were asked to reflect on their thinking processes while writing an essay.

### Instruments and Procedure

After being introduced to communication strategies and their importance in writing, the 30 students verbalized their cognitive processes while writing a 45-minute, 120-word argumentative essay. The essay topic was: *The influence of media (including TV, radio, and newspapers) on the younger generation*. First, the participants were trained in using the think-aloud procedure, and during the think-aloud tasks the students were prompted with questions like ‘How will you start writing the essay?’ ‘What are you doing now?’ and ‘What are you thinking now?’ Then, the essay verbalizations were analyzed by the researcher and categorized into Dörnyei’s (1995) taxonomy.

## RESULTS

### Results from the Strategy Questionnaire

The aim of the Strategy Questionnaire was to investigate the employment of the communication strategies while writing in English. Table 2 presents the most-used and most-useful strategies.

Based on the results of the questionnaire, the communication strategy “Circumlocution” was the most-useful strategy, and it was marked with a 3 by 63% percent of the participants (see Appendix for scoring information). The second-most useful strategy was “Approximation” which was marked by 42% of the participants. The strategy “Appeal for Help” was useful for 42% of the participants, and “Literal Translation,” the forth-most useful strategy, was marked by 28% of the participants.

**Table 2.** Most-Useful and Most-Used Communication Strategies

Rank	Strategy	Strategy as Useful	%
1	If I don't know the English word for something, I describe it. (Circumlocution)	63	63
2	If I don't know how to express something in English, I use a word that has roughly the same meaning (e.g., <i>boat</i> instead of <i>ship</i> ). (Approximation)	42	42
3	If I don't know how to say something in English, I turn to my teacher for assistance. (Appeal for Help)	42	42
4	If I don't know the vocabulary I want to use, I translate word for word from Albanian. (Literal Translation)	28	28
Rank	Strategy	Using the Strategy	%
1	If I don't know how to say something in English, I turn to my teacher for assistance. (Appeal for Help)	71	71
2	If I don't know how to express something in English, I use a word that has roughly the same meaning (e.g., <i>boat</i> instead of <i>ship</i> ). (Approximation)	55	55
3	If I don't know the English word for something, I describe it. (Circumlocution)	54	54
4	If I don't know the vocabulary I want to use, I translate word for word from Albanian. (Literal Translation)	36	36

*Note:* Strategy as Useful & Using the Strategy = the number of participants that reported; % = the percentage of participants.

The most useful strategies were actually used by the participants, but in a different order of frequency. The first most-used strategy was “Appeal for Help,” and it was marked by 71% of the participants. The second most-used communication strategy was “Approximation,” and it was marked by 55% of the participants, while “Circumlocution” was marked by 54% of the participants. “Literal Translation,” the fourth most-used strategy, was marked by 36% of the participants. Given these results, it seems that the top-ranking most-used strategies are also the most useful ones.

### Results from the Think-Aloud Tasks

#### *Female Participants*

During the think-aloud procedure, the students verbalized the strategies they used while writing the argumentative essays and these comments were analyzed in order to identify the communication strategies used by the female participants. Out of twelve strategies that Dörnyei's taxonomy includes, the most-frequently used communication strategies by female students are presented below.

**Table 3.** Types of Communication Strategies Used by Female Subjects

Subjects	MA	TA	C	A	UAW	UN	LT	CS	AH	S	WC	F
1	-	/	1	4	2	2	3	/	4	2	2	3
2	2	1	3	3	2	3	4	1	3	2	3	3
3	/	2	2	5	2	1	5	1	5	2	2	1
4	1	1	4	2	3	3	3	/	3	1	1	/
5	1	1	3	4	3	/	3	1	4	3	2	1
6	/	3	2	5	3	/	3	2	5	3	2	2
7	2	/	5	4	2	4	7	2	6	4	3	3
8	1	/	2	6	2	2	4	1	3	2	/	2
9	1	1	4	7	3	2	5	2	5	1	3	2
10	/	1	3	4	4	1	6	4	5	/	3	1
11	2	1	5	5	5	/	3	2	4	3	2	4
12	3	1	2	3	1	/	6	/	5	4	4	3
13	2	2	3	3	2	2	3	1	3	1	2	2
14	1	3	4	7	2	1	4	3	3	2	1	/
15	2	1	3	4	3	2	2	4	2	2	/	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>29</b>

Note: MA = Message Abandonment; TA = Topic Avoidance; C = Circumlocution; A = Approximation; UAW= Use of All-Purpose Words; UN = Use of Nonlinguistic Signals; LT = Literal Translation; CS = Code Switching; AH = Appeal for Help; S=Stalling; WC = Word Coinage; F = Foreignizing.

As shown in Table 3, female students used all twelve strategies. The five most frequently employed strategies by the female participants were “Approximation” (66), “Literal Translation” (60), “Appeal for Help” (60), “Circumlocution” (46), and “Use of All-Purpose Words” (39).

The first most-used strategy by the female participants was “Approximation” (66). An example of the use of the “Approximation” strategy is when Participant 9 tried to overcome the difficulty of finding the term *celebrity* by writing “well-known person in the world.” It is interesting that two strategies, “Literal Translation” and “Appeal for Help,” got the same number (60), and an example of “Appeal for Help” is when Participant 5 asked for help because she was not sure whether the word *source* could be used in “We know that media are source of information...” In another example, Participant 6 appealed for help because she was not sure about the word *improve* in the sentence “Media can improve our knowledge of...” “Circumlocution” was the fourth-most used strategy (46 times) among the female participants, and an example is where a student wrote, “TV is sometimes bad because it makes children *to act not in a good way*” instead of *to behave violently*. The total number of “Use of All-Purpose Words” was 39; Participant 6, for example, used wrong words in the sentence, “The mass media *is attacking us from everywhere*,” meaning that the media influences us a lot. As seen in Poulisse’s (1989) study with Dutch learners, this is due to a lack of vocabulary which handicaps learners in expressing their ideas clearly. It seems that strategies like “Message Abandonment” and “Topic Avoidance” were not very popular among these female participants, having the lowest occurrences of use.

### Male Participants

The communication strategies employed by the male participants are presented in Table 4. Male participants used all twelve strategies but they used fewer strategies than female participants.

**Table 4.** Types of Communication Strategies Used by Male Participants

Subjects	MA	TA	C	A	UAW	UN	LT	CS	AH	S	WC	F
1	2	1	4	5	2	2	3	1	1	/	2	/
2	1	/	3	4	3	1	1	1	5	3	3	1
3	1	1	3	4	3	2	6	/	4	2	2	1
4	/	1	3	3	2	4	4	2	4	3	1	2
5	2	/	4	4	2	3	6	3	5	4	3	1
6	3	2	5	2	/	/	4	1	3	1	4	2
7	1	1	3	3	2	2	2	2	3	2	/	1
8	1	2	4	3	3	/	4	4	5	2	/	2
9	/	3	5	2	2	2	3	3	1	3	3	3
10	1	/	3	5	1	4	2	2	/	/	2	1
11	2	2	6	5	/	3	5	1	3	3	1	2
12	/	1	4	8	2	1	/	2	4	2	1	2
13	2	1	3	4	3	2	5	/	3	2	1	1
14	1	2	5	3	4	1	3	/	6	3	2	4
15	1	/	9	3	6	3	4	3	9	1	1	2
<b>Total</b>	18	18	60	58	35	30	52	25	55	31	28	25

The most-used strategy by the male participants was “Circumlocution” (60 times). For example, Participant 3 wrote, “TV can *give many choices* of complete entertainment,” meaning *it can offer* complete entertainment. Participant 7 wrote, “Many people nowadays should go to *the place for swimming* instead,” meaning a pool. “Approximation” was the second-most employed strategy by the male participants (58), while “Appeal for Help” was the third-most used strategy (55). Participant 3 appealed for help because he did not know the English equivalent of the word *perparesite* (disadvantages) in his sentence “TV has both advantages and disadvantages.” The fourth-most used communication strategy reported by the male participants was “Literal Translation” (52). For example, Participant 9 translated *media and TV* literally from Albanian, writing, “*shtrohet pyetja*.” The fifth-most used communication strategy was “Use of All-Purpose Words”; Participant 7 wrote, “If we *close look* at Satellite Television programs,” when she should have written *take a closer look*.

Comparing the male and female results, the same top four strategies—Approximation, Circumlocution, Literal Translation, and Appeal for Help—were used, but in a different order for men than for women.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this study lead one to conclude that the most preferred communication strategies for both males and females are “Approximation,” “Circumlocution,” “Literal

Translation,” “Appeal for Help,” and “Use of All-Purpose Words.” The results here are similar to the study conducted by Wongsawang (2001) with Thai learners (who mostly used “Approximation” and “Circumlocution”), but different from the results found by Pornpibul (2005) where the participants mostly used Code-Switching and Non-Linguistic Signals. However, neither of these studies had a written component, but were oral only.

Overall, the results show that students use some good strategies. Therefore, in order to build on this and improve ESLs’ language skills even more, strategy-training programs should be included in regular instruction: *learners should be exposed to, and experiment with other strategies*. I believe that the information revealed in this study will serve all English Language teachers at SEEU and beyond, and that teachers should present communication strategies explicitly in order to raise students’ awareness about their use in L2 writing.

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## APPENDIX

## Strategy Questionnaire

*Communication strategies are devices you use while writing in English to overcome the difficulties that you have in saying what you mean. The purpose of this questionnaire is to obtain your views of communication strategies while writing in English. Please, indicate to what extent you use the strategy it describes. Please, choose a number by marking (√) to indicate the use and usefulness. Thank you very much.*

<b>How often do you use it?</b>	<b>Communication Strategies</b>	<b>How useful do you think it is?</b>
<i>1 = never 2 = sometimes 3 = often</i>		<i>1 = not useful 2 = neutral 3 = useful</i>
	1. If I don't know the English word for something, I describe it.	
	2. I use general words like "thing" or "stuff" to refer to the English word I don't know.	
	3. I make up new words if I don't know the right ones in English.	
	4. If I don't know how to say something in English, I turn to my teacher for assistance.	
	5. When I don't know what to say in English, I leave the sentence unfinished.	
	6. When I realize that I have used a wrong word, I immediately correct it by myself.	
	7. I use an Albanian word or structure modified in accordance with an English word.	
	8. I avoid talking about the concepts which I don't know.	
	9. If I don't know the vocabulary I want to use, I translate word for word from Albanian.	
	10. When I don't know an English word, I mime it.	
	11. When I don't know an English word, I use an L1 word by adjusting it to the L2 word phonologically.	
	12. If I don't know how to express something in English, I use a word that has roughly the same meaning (e.g., <i>boat</i> instead of <i>ship</i> ).	

### Strategy Questionnaire Results

Communication Strategies	Use %	Useful %
1. If I don't know the English word for something, I describe it.	54%	63%
2. I use general words like "thing" or "stuff" to refer to the English word I don't know.	23%	27%
3. I make up new words if I don't know the right ones in English.	22%	20%
4. If I don't know how to say something in English, I turn to my teacher for assistance.	71%	42%
5. When I don't know what to say in English, I leave the sentence unfinished.	21%	28%
6. When I realize that I have used a wrong word, I immediately correct it by myself.	15%	22%
7. I use an Albanian word or structure modified in accordance with an English word.	11%	15%
8. I avoid talking about the concepts which I don't know.	16%	20%
9. If I don't know the vocabulary I want to use, I translate word for word from Albanian.	36%	28%
10. When I don't know an English word, I mime it.	19%	17%
11. When I don't know an English word, I use an L1 word by adjusting it to an L2 word phonologically.	15%	12%
12. If I don't know how to express something in English, I use a word that has roughly the same meaning (e.g., <i>boat</i> instead of <i>ship</i> ).	55%	42%