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# **Investigating the Role of Gender in Jordanian EFL Young Learners' Use of Communication Strategies \***

**Wedad Khalid Al-Bzour \*\***

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## استقصاء الاستراتيجيات التواصلية الأكثر والأقل استخداما من قبل طلاب اللغة الانجليزية

### ملخص:

الاتصال هو من أهم الأهداف التي يجب تحقيقها عند تعلم أي لغة أجنبية سواء على الصعيد الكتابي أو الشفوي. لذلك تعتبر الاستراتيجيات التواصلية مهارات تستخدم للتغلب على مجموعة من الصعوبات الشفوية. تهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى استقصاء الاستراتيجيات التواصلية الأكثر والأقل استخداما من قبل طلاب اللغة الانجليزية الأردنيين في الصف السادس. وتهدف الدراسة أيضا إلى استقصاء دور الجندر على استخدام هذه الاستراتيجيات. تكونت عينة الدراسة من خمسين طالب وطالبة من طلاب الصف السادس. الأدوات المستخدمة في الدراسة كانت امتحان شفوي بالإضافة إلى قائمة رصد لاستخدام الطلاب الاستراتيجيات التواصلية. تضمنت هذه الاستراتيجيات: التقريب، الإطناب، التكرار، طلب المساعدة، التصحيح الذاتي، طلب التأكيد، طلب التوضيح والتخمين. أظهرت النتائج بان استخدام الطلاب لاستراتيجيات: التكرار، طلب المساعدة، التصحيح الذاتي، طلب التأكيد، طلب التوضيح والتخمين كانت الأكثر تكرارا وكانت استراتيجيات التقريب، الإطناب هي الأقل استخداما. وقد أظهرت النتائج أيضا أن الجنس لا يؤثر على استخدام هذه الاستراتيجيات. الكلمات المفتاحية: الأردن، الاستراتيجيات التواصلية، الجنس، المتعلمين الصغار، طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية

### Abstract:

The ultimate goal of learning languages is 'communication'; either in oral or written forms. To communicate successfully, some techniques are used to overcome various oral breakdowns; these techniques are referred to as 'communication strategies'. These communication strategies, particularly Jordanian EFL sixth grade students, were examined in terms of extent of use in EFL classrooms. The study also examined whether there is a gender effect on using these strategies or not. The sample, however, consisted of 50 male and female sixth grade students. To collect data, an oral test and a communication strategy checklist were used. With particular interest, the targeted communication strategies to be investigated included approximation, circumlocution, repetition, appeal for help, self-

repair, confirmation request, clarification request and guessing. The findings revealed that the use of the targeted communication strategies was higher for the strategies of: repetition, appeal for help, confirmation request, self-repair, clarification request and guessing than approximation and circumlocution use. Results also revealed that gender did not affect students' communication strategies' use.

**Key words:** Communication Strategies; EFL learners; Gender; Jordan; Young learners.

## Introduction

Teaching English Language at schools aims conventionally at developing EFL learners' linguistic competence as research reports that teachers focus more on grammatical and linguistic competences, rather than the communicative or oral competence of EFL students (Putri, 2013). Probably, neglecting the communicative competence is one of the various reasons which cause some EFL learners to be proficient but not fluent in English, i.e. they cannot use English functionally. EFL learners' difficulty of speaking accurately and fluently may appear while interacting orally. Nunan (1987) asserted that the most crucial element to learn a language is the "art of mastering speaking" (p.39). Based on Nunan's conclusions, it's crystal clear that EFL learners need to be permanently encouraged to change their silence period and overcome their fear that may be preventing them from demonstrating what they are able to say.

Due to their low level in oral proficiency, many EFL learners fail to communicate effectively. Tackling such weakness, when interacting orally, involves equipping EFL learners with appropriate techniques that help in reducing the gap between their competence and oral performance. Consequently, EFL learners need to be aware about using communication strategies (henceforth, CSs) to make their messages, ideas or thoughts accessible and to get rid of probable oral breakdowns while communicating. CSs are defined by Færch and Kasper (1983) as devices or tools used by second or foreign language learners to dispose of multiple obstacles that could be encountered by learners in order to achieve the

ultimate goals of communication.

With particular focus on CSs, factors such as cultural background, language proficiency, and the type of tasks or even gender affect learners' use of CSs (Bialyok 1990; Chen 1990; Parihkt, 1985). Concerning gender, Zhao (1999) claimed that female learners tend to use the language differently from male learners. Consequently, the difference in gender use of CSs is an argumentative issue. Likewise, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) concluded that female EFL learners showed different use of CSs compared with male EFL learners. O'Malley and Chamot further added that male EFL learners are braver and more direct as male learners tend usually to find opportunities to take risks when communicating with the target language. Females were found as quieter and more considerate when communicating in English with others. They even questioned whether the difference between male and female learners influences the use of CSs. In the same vein, the effect of gender on CSs' use is correspondingly one of the purposes of the present study.

## Statement of the Problem

One of the serious problems that some Jordanian EFL students face is their inability to communicate and handle spoken English at school. Based on the researcher's experience as an English teacher for fourteen years in the basic stage from the first to the ninth grade, she has noticed a general weakness in her students' communicative ability while speaking English in the class. Moreover, EFL students tend to avoid such communicative practices or end the conversations when they are encountered with unknown English words.

## Purpose and Questions of the Study

With regards to eight CSs on focus, the current study examined which CSs Jordanian EFL sixth grade students used most, and which CSs are used least. This study also investigated whether there is a probable gender effect on the use of CSs under study. More specifically, the study aimed to find out answers for the following questions:

1. To what extent do Jordanian EFL sixth grade students use the CSs under study?

2. What are the most frequently and the least frequently CSs used by sixth grade students under study?
3. Are there any significant differences at ( $\alpha=0.05$ ) in CSs' use between male and female Jordanian EFL learners?

## Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it investigated the use of eight CSs by Jordanian EFL sixth grade students. The results of the study could be helpful for Jordanian EFL teachers in demonstrating CSs in language classes. Demonstrating CSs may assist students to practice the target language more successfully. What's more, CSs practice in language classrooms motivates students to apply these strategies outside the classroom context. Up to the researcher best of knowledge, few studies were examined the gender effect on CSs' use; therefore, the present study may bridge such research gap. Further, it is hoped that this study will trigger researchers to investigate different variables which influence CSs use such as gender, EFL proficiency or the type of tasks on different levels.

## Review of Related Literature

### Communication Strategies (CSs)

Research on CSs' use began early, during the seventies of the twentieth century, and still occupied researchers' interest until the twenty first century. Research showed many benefits of using CSs and their role as key in helping students to encounter linguistic breakdowns (e.g. Dörnyei and Scotte, 1995; Nakatani, 2010). One of the various advantages of using CSs is improving EFL learners' ability of negotiation (Dörnyei and Scotte, 1995). In order to convey their messages and remain in a conversation, EFL learners need to employ different strategies to keep the act of communication going. Littlemore (2003: p. 331) stated that "CSs are the steps taken by language learners in order to enhance the effectiveness of their communication". He added that CSs are considered as supporting techniques that could be used by EFL/ ESL learners to overcome certain communicative deficiencies in order to

attain specific communication purposes. In this concern, EFL learners' ability to manage probable communication problems is referred to as strategic competence which is one of the components of communicative competence.

Researchers (namely; Tarone, 1981; Færch and Kasper, 1983; Poulisse, 1987; Bialystok, 1990; Dörnyei and Scott, 1997) discussed two crucial perspectives upon which CSs concept is based. These binary theoretical perspectives are the psycholinguistic perspective and the interactional perspective. Bialystok (1990) suggested that the psycholinguistic perspective is derived from the communicative behavior of EFL learners with a specific focus on learners' mental processes. Poulisse(1990, p. 88) defined CSs as "various strategies which a language learner uses to obtain the intended message by becoming conscious about problems which may arise while planning an utterance, however, these problems "may be caused by linguistic shortcomings". For the interactional perspective advocated by Bialystok nevertheless, communication deals with the need for understanding the cognitive aspects of EFL learners. What's more, the interactional perspective addresses the interactional role of using CSs and focuses mainly on the importance of negotiating meaning in communication.

## **Taxonomies of Communication Strategies**

Researchers (Tarone's, 1977; Faerch and Kasper's, 1983; Dornyei and Scott's, 1997) categorized CSs according to their research and findings. Due to their significance, the clarification of CSs taxonomies is essential in order to explain how CSs could be employed for EFL/ESL learners subsequently. However, these taxonomies are generally categorized in terms of their potential account of amplexation of communicative competence. Off course, clarifying various concepts of CSs is crucial in such taxonomies. In spite of the wide discussion on CSs taxonomies among researchers, there is eventually more agreement than differences in researchers' points of view.

Tarone's (1977) taxonomy is viewed as one

of the first CSs taxonomies in which CSs are classified into three main categories that are: paraphrase, transfer and avoidance. These three categories are divided into three subcategories. They are: Paraphrase strategy which includes approximation, word coinage and circumlocution. Transfer strategy which is considered as the second category of Tarone's CSs taxonomy includes four subcategories. They are literal translation, language switch, appeal for assistance and mime. The third category is avoidance which consists of topic avoidance and message abandonment.

Furthermore, Faerch and Kasper (1983: 38-53) presented another CSs taxonomy. It consists of two opposed strategies; they are reduction strategies and achievement strategies. According to Faerch and Kasper, language learners may get rid of their problems while communicating by "adopting avoidance behavior, trying to do away with the problem, normally by changing the communicative goal or by relying on achievement behavior, attempting to overcome the problem by improving an alternative solution" (1983. p.36).

Dornyei and Scott (1997) classified CSs according to the source of the communication problem. Their main classification is branched into three main subcategories which are: direct strategies, indirect strategies and interactional strategies. The direct strategies and interactional strategies have the same subheadings which are resource deficit-related strategies, own performance-related strategies, and other-performance related strategies. In contrast, the subheading resource deficit-related strategies in the indirect strategies, are replaced by processing time pressure-related strategies.

According to the present study, the researcher adopted Faerch and Kasper's (1983) and Dornyei and Scott's (1997) taxonomies of CSs. From Faerch and Kasper's (1983) taxonomy, three strategies are selected. They are: paraphrase strategy which includes: approximation, and circumlocution, in addition to self-repair strategy. These strategies offer interaction among the speakers. Five interactional strategies are chosen from Dornyei and Scott (1997) and they include: repetition, appeal for help, confirmation request, guessing and clarification request.

## The Effect of Gender on Choosing CSs

Several studies examined the probable effect of gender on CSs' choice (e.g. Teh, et, al. 2009, Green and Oxford, 1995; Sy; 1994; Politzer, 1983). Research findings reported that females use learning strategies more than males. What's more, females are generally regarded as more interactive and sociable than males generally (Green and Oxford, 1995; Ehrman and Oxford, 1988). However, other researchers showed that males use learning strategies more than females (Wharton, 2000). Other researchers found out dissimilar findings as they established no remarkable differences between males and females in using learning strategies (Rahimi, Riazi, and Saif, 2008; Chou, 2002).

Lai (2010) examined the effect of gender on CSs' use on 36 Chinese EFL learners. Data was collected from an oral pre/post test, communicative tasks and an interview. The results revealed that there were no significant differences between females and males in CSs' use. The participants' use of CSs was attributed mainly to their learning environment. However, it was claimed that females were more effective in their use of CSs than males.

Kabrizadeh, Nasrollah and Tabatabaei (2014) examined CSs' use by 100 Iranian male and female EFL university students. Data was collected by using a questionnaire. The results revealed that there were no significant differences referred to the gender when using CSs by EFL students.

The conclusion is difficult to be drawn according to the results of the previous studies. These results were mixed and questionable. Several studies found differences in CSs' use because of gender (Green and Oxford, 1995) while others refused the idea of gender's effect on using CSs (Rahimi, Riazi, and Saif 2008). As such, the current study investigated the effect of gender on EFL sixth grade student's use of CSs.

## Methodology

### Participants of the Study

Data, in this study, were elicited from 50 (25 male and 25 female) sixth grade students

at a private school in ArRamtha Directorate for Education during the second semester of the scholastic year 2015/2016. Of particular interest, the reason behind selecting a private school is related to intentionally research students who have a 'good' command of the language. For teachers, it is crystal clear to expect that young students do not know their way around the academic side of foreign language learning; as such communication strategies are not realized to be taught. In the current study, accordingly, the researcher reported students' actual practices.

### Instruments of the Study

The instruments used to collect data were: an oral test and a CSs checklist. The targeted CSs included approximation, circumlocution, repetition, appeal for help, self repair, confirmation request, clarification request and guessing.

### Validity and Reliability of the Instruments

The validity of the instruments was checked by giving the oral test and the CSs checklist to a group of university professors, supervisors, and experienced teachers to express their views and give their suggestions.

Moreover, to achieve the reliability of the oral test, it was administered to an outside sample of 20 sixth grade students. Two weeks later, the same test was administered to the same sample. The correlation between the first and the second administrations amounted to 0.81 which was deemed appropriate for the purpose of the research.

### Design and Variables of the Study

The present study is an analytical descriptive one which has two types of variables. Specifically, an independent variable which comprises the gender and a dependent variable which comprises investigating the use of eight CSs.

### Findings and Discussion

The first research question asks about the

extent to which EFL learners use CSs. The answer depends on the participants' results on answering the oral test. To mark the oral test, the researcher used the statistical model of proportional scaling in order to classify the means of the test as the following:

### The Statistical Model of Proportional Scaling

Means	Degree
2.33 & below	Low

Means	Degree
2.34 - 3.67	Moderate
3.68 & above	High

Table 1 shows the use of Jordanian EFL sixth grade students of CSs in terms of rank orders, means, and standard deviations in the oral test.

**Table1:**

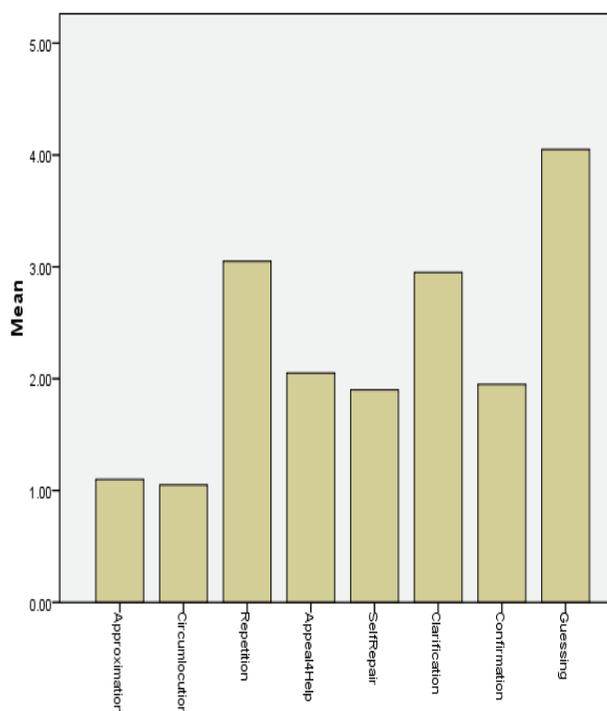
**Rank Order, Means and Standard Deviations of Jordanian EFL Sixth Grade Students' Use of Communication Strategies in the Oral Test**

No.	Rank	Items The student is able to:	Mean	Std. Dev.	Degrees
1	1	Ask and answer questions about past abilities.	2.24	1.19	Moderate
2	2	Describe objects from the past.	2.11	1.18	Moderate
3	3	Name different objects found in different places.	1.58	1.40	Low
4	4	Produce simple sentences free of errors.	1.48	1.29	Low
5	5	Participate in conversations about unfamiliar topics	1.42	1.37	Low
6	6	Prepare a simple dialogue	1.39	1.25	Low
7	8	Talk about past experiences.	1.27	1.42	Low
8	7	Talk about familiar situation.	1.29	1.39	Low
9	10	Present a simple prepared speech to the class.	1.10	1.48	Low
10	9	Define, compare, and classify objects using sentences	1.25	1.37	Low
		Total	1.51	1.28	Low

Table 1 shows that students' oral performance degrees on answering the questions of the oral test were classified into two degrees: moderate for items 1 and 2 and low for items 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10. The mean scores of all items were 1.52 with a low degree of CSs' use. Students achieved the best means with 2.24 on ask and answer questions task. The moderate degree of the participants' achievements for this task might be explained according to the conventional practice of asking and answering questions which students are used to from the first stages of learning English. Whereas the lowest mean scores among the ten oral tasks were for present a prepared speech to the

class with a mean score of 1.10. Participants' low achievement in this task could refer to its probable difficulty for the participants since they are still in their primary stages of learning English and the factor of years of learning any target language affect learners' levels.

The results indicated that the participants' use of the investigated CSs is generally low and unstable. This remarkable note can be proved by answering the second research question which asks about the most and least frequently used CSs. Figure 1 shows the results.



The most and least frequently used CSs of the participants

All in all, it can be concluded that the mean scores of circumlocution and approximation use were about 1. They were the least frequently used among the eight investigated CSs. Whereas the mean scores of self-repair, confirmation and appeal for help were a little bit higher than circumlocution and approximation use with 2 mean scores. Appeal for help use reached to 2. Using repetition did not surpass the mean scores of 3. Then, clarification use mean scores reached to 3. The highest mean score was for using guessing with 4.5.

It is worth noting that the targeted CSs to be investigated in the present study were classified into two types: the paraphrase strategies which include approximation and circumlocution and the interactional strategies that include repetition, appeal for help, confirmation request, guessing and clarification request. The participants' achievement was better in using the interactional strategies than the paraphrase strategies. This difference in CSs' use could be the result of the participants' limited vocabulary items, since the lexical bulk of EFL students at the elementary

levels is usually limited. Therefore, it was easier for the participants to use strategies such as repetition, appeal for help, confirmation request, guessing and clarification request which demand using few words or simple expressions instead of using paraphrase strategies such as approximation and circumlocution. The use of approximation and circumlocution strategies requires a wide lexical repertoire which is not available for the sixth grade students yet.

The third research question asks whether there are any significant differences at ( $\alpha= 0.05$ ) in communication strategies' use between male and female EFL learners. To answer this question, rank order, mean scores and standard deviations of students' oral performance in answering the oral test questions were calculated according to their gender as it is illustrated in Table 2.

**Table 2:**

**Mean scores and Standard deviations of the Students' Scores on CSs' Use due to Gender**

CSs	Gender	No.	Mean	Std. Dev.
Approximation	Male	25	1.28	0.84
	Female	25	1.48	1.36
Circumlocution	Male	25	1.76	1.16
	Female	25	1.84	1.52
Repetition	Male	25	3.06	0.96
	Female	25	2.94	1.35
Appeal for help	Male	25	2.84	0.90
	Female	25	2.72	1.34
Self-repair	Male	25	2.68	0.90
	Female	25	2.84	1.46
Clarification	Male	25	3.04	0.94
	Female	25	2.92	1.41
Confirmation	Male	25	2.20	0.82
	Female	25	1.97	1.26
Guessing	Male	25	3.68	1.28
	Female	25	3.32	1.38

Table 2 showed that there is a difference in the mean scores of students' use of CSs according to gender. To investigate the significance of the observed difference, ANCOVA was used for calculating the students' scores on the test due to gender as it is illustrated in Table 3

**Table 3:**  
Analysis of Variance by gender and CSs

		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Approximation	Between Groups	.5000	1	.5000	.3920	.5340
	Within Groups	61.280	48	1.277		
	Total	61.780	49			
Circumlocution	Between Groups	.0800	1	.0800	.0440	.8350
	Within Groups	87.920	48	1.832		
	Total	88.000	49			
Repetition	Between Groups	1.620	1	1.620	1.182	.2820
	Within Groups	65.760	48	1.370		
	Total	67.380	49			
Appeal for help	Between Groups	.1800	1	.1800	.1380	.7110
	Within Groups	62.400	48	1.300		
	Total	62.580	49			
Self-repair	Between Groups	.3200	1	.3200	.2170	.6430
	Within Groups	70.800	48	1.475		
	Total	71.120	49			
Clarification	Between Groups	3.380	1	3.380	2.358	.1310
	Within Groups	68.800	48	1.433		
	Total	72.180	49			
Confirmation	Between Groups	.5000	1	.5000	.4440	.5080
	Within Groups	54.000	48	1.125		
	Total	54.500	49			
Guessing	Between Groups	1.620	1	1.620	.9160	.3430
	Within Groups	84.880	48	1.768		
	Total	86.500	49			

The results showed that the CSs which male students used most often are approximately the same as those used most often by female students as shown in Table 4. It is clear from the results of Table 4 that the difference between the participants' use of CSs was not significant, which means that the gender did not affect the participants' use of CSs.

It can be inferred according to the gathered data and the statistical analysis of the participants' results according to their use of CSs that Jordanian EFL learners are low users of CSs. This conclusion is similar to the results of different studies which

were conducted in various EFL contexts (Wharton, 2000 in Singapore).

As a result of investigating the effect of gender on using CSs, the mean scores of the participants' use were similar for male and female learners respectively. Therefore, gender differences were marginal. Female and male EFL learners used the targeted CSs almost in the same ways, i.e., the same amount and types of strategies. This result is similar to Huang's findings (2010) which revealed that no significant correlation was found between the use of CSs and the participants' gender. In contrast, the result of the gender's effect on using

CSs contradicts Li's research results (2010) which claimed that female students used CSs more often than males.

#### Conclusion, Implications and Suggestions for Further Research

The present study examined the extent to which Jordanian EFL sixth grade students use certain CSs and which strategies were more frequently used. It also investigated the effect of gender on students' CSs use. The conclusions of this study were threefold. First, the participants' use of the eight CSs in focus was low. Only two strategies achieved moderate mean scores whereas the other six CSs scored low mean scores. Second, the participants' use of the targeted CSs varied from each strategy to another. For instance, guessing and confirmation strategies demonstrated extensive use by the participants. In contrast, the least frequently used strategy was circumlocution. Third, the present study reported that gender did not affect the participants' use of the investigated CSs significantly.

Many pedagogical implications could be drawn from the results of this study. First of all, EFL teachers should create situations which encourage EFL students to produce oral tasks. Additionally, teachers should present CSs to their students and praise their use. Off course, the use of communication strategies crucial; as Faerch and Kasper (1983:56) concluded that "it bridges the gap between pedagogic and non-pedagogic communication situations". As such, oral activities need to be considered. Let's say, teachers can steer their teaching towards students' practice of various oral activities in class such as: role play, ask and answer or even description activities. Another implication that stemmed out of the conclusions of the present study highlights the significance of an early start in teaching communication strategies. Due to the significance of such strategies, young learners can learn how to compensate for their linguistic problems.

In this regard, teaching English functionally is essential where mastering oral interaction is crucial. Provided that, English is a dominant first global language as it needs to be taught comprehensively with reference to mastering its four main skills: reading, speaking, writing and listening. Nevertheless, grammar is important but it is not the most essential component when

teaching English; it's rather one among other components that should be focused on.

As concluded by the literature review, the effect of CSs was not investigated extensively but rather by few studies; as such further research is needed to examine various variables that could affect CSs' use. More specifically, other variables can be taken into account in future research are those of grade level or even students' linguistic proficiency level; having in mind that this study examined only the effect of CSs' use on elementary stage learners, namely the sixth grade. As such, future research can explore the effect of CSs' use on the intermediate and advanced levels. What's more, proficiency level on CSs' use as not being examined by the present study is worth considering in future research.

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