

# COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES IN AN ENGLISH CONVERSATION CLASS

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## ABSTRAK

*Penelitian ini dilaksanakan untuk mengetahui interaksi yang terjadi di kelas English Conversation, yang lebih lanjut akan digunakan untuk menginvestigasi dan menggambarkan, bagaimana pengajar dan pembelajar menerapkan strategi komunikasi. Kemudian, peneliti menerapkan penelitian dengan rancangan deskriptif-kualitatif, dengan peneliti bertindak sebagai instrumen utama disertai instrumen pendukung untuk mengumpulkan data, antara lain pedoman wawancara, lembar pengamatan, dan catatan lapangan. Secara umum interaksi dalam kelas English Conversation menunjukkan hasil yang positif. Pengajar dan pembelajar bekerja sama secara interaktif dalam menciptakan suasana kelas yang hidup. Diskusi merupakan interaksi utama di kelas English Conversation.*

**Kata kunci:** *English Conversation, strategi komunikasi, interaksi kelas*

### A. Background

Communication is considered as one of the basic needs of human beings besides food, clothing, and housing. It involves not only expression of one's own ideas, but also comprehension of those to others. When learners learn to communicate; they listen to others, talk with others, and negotiate meaning in a shared context. Therefore, communication is a collaborative activity that includes delivering and receiving messages, understanding ideas or messages, and also negotiating meaning. This activity which can be performed by two or more people using verbal or non-verbal media also involves certain context or situation. Furthermore, communication, whether oral or written, is the central goal of foreign language learning. In order to achieve the goal, learners need to cooperate

and interact among themselves, between them and teacher, or between them and somebody else who is aware of language learning. In short, communication is derived from interaction since in communication there must be interaction between people who have something to share (Rivers, 1987: 25).

As one of the essential aspects in classroom interaction, communication strategies should be possessed by everybody, especially when they are involved in an interaction. These communication strategies are defined as potentially conscious plans for solving communication problems that individuals present as a way of receiving a particular communication aim. Concerning these strategies, Faerch and Kasper (1983: 60) suggest that in solving communication problems, learners can solve such problems either by adopting avoidance behaviour or by relying on achievement behaviour. On the basis of those two different approaches to problem solving, there are compensatory strategies that can be classified into *different code* (code switching and interlingual transfer), *different code and the interlanguage code simultaneously* (interlingual and intralingual transfer), *interlingual code exclusively* (generalization, paraphrase, word coinage, and restructuring), *discourse phenomena* (appeal), and *non-linguistic devices* (mime). Gebhard (2000: 36) finds that if learners, either advanced or beginner, encounter difficulties in expressing their ideas, willing, and feelings in second language, they tend to use their mother tongue as the communication strategies to overcome those problems. In addition, he finds that the learners sometimes applied *L1 – L2 translation strategy*, for instance, *walking stairs* that stands for *escalator*. Besides,

they also frequently used *paraphrase* or *additional explanation* to achieve their goal in communication.

English is categorized as a foreign language in Indonesia since it is studied by Indonesians who do not use English as their first language. It is commonly abbreviated EFL—*English as a Foreign Language* (Gebhard, 2000: 41). Learning English means learning the four language skills of English: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Among those four skills, speaking tends to be neglected in most EFL classrooms. As we can see in an actual conversation class, learners are required to listen much more than to speak. As a result, most of the learners have deficiencies in oral communication. Although they are given opportunity to speak, their focus is likely on the language form rather than on its meaning. Conversation class, however, can become an effective place for speaking activity if both teachers and learners try to make it successful and useful for them both.

The teachers begin to realize the importance of classroom interaction in the language learning situations; the patterns of the interaction are not only restricted to a one-way traffic model between teachers and learners, but can also be a two-way traffic model of interaction between teachers and learners, and an interaction among learners, which comprises a small-group work or pair-work interactions. The models are also can be applied recently in foreign language classroom interactions. Philips (in Nunan, 1999: 45) states there are several participation structures in terms of the speaker-audience relationship that occur in English Foreign Language classroom. They are *teacher to whole class*, *teacher to group*, *teacher to individual learner*, *individual learner to teacher*, and *individual*

*learner to individual learner* (in pair-work activity). On the basis of the above considerations, the researcher tries to investigate and describe the communication strategies that occur in the English Conversation class.

## **B. Some Relevant Theories**

### **1. Speaking Skill in EFL Classroom**

In connection with speaking, Bygate (in Nunan, 1999: 57) suggests that oral interaction or speaking can be analyzed in terms of routines. Routines are conventional ways of presenting information which can focus on either informational or interactional routines. *Informational routine* or *transactional routine* encloses recurring types of information structures like the routines that are basically expository in nature, for example, telling stories, describing something, giving instructions, and making comparison. Besides, it also contains some routines that are evaluative like giving explanations, making justifications, predicting, and coming to conclude decisions. Meanwhile, *interactional routines* can be subdivided into service encounter (job interview) and the social one (dinner party or coffee break). In addition, Bygate states that in having conversation or speaking, the participants constantly need to negotiate meaning and generally manage the interaction in terms of who says what, to whom, when, and about what.

As it is stated before English in Indonesia is considered as a foreign language because it is taught as a school subject and is not used as a medium of teaching. Then, learners have little opportunities to practice speaking in classroom. Therefore, teachers should make use of some important strategies. It is

essential for them, for instance, to apply group work discussion, to use easy language, to choose appropriate topics and tasks in order to stimulate learners' interest, to give instructions or to training in discussion skills, and to keep learners speaking the target language.

In association to this, Tsui (in Nunan, 1999: 69) suggests six ways to develop learners' speaking skills. Those are: (1) lengthening the amount of time between asking a question and nominating someone to respond, (2) improving the questioning techniques, (3) accepting a variety of answers given by the learners, (4) giving the learners an opportunity to prepare their responses in small-groups or pairs first before being asked to speak in front of the whole class, (5) creating a low anxiety classroom atmosphere by asking the learners to consider the content when they speak, and (6) creating good relationships with learners. Temporarily, learners should always talk a lot to have a high motivation in speaking or expressing their ideas and feelings and to communicate to each other (Ur, 1996:70).

Learners are given a lot of chance to practice and develop their target language skill and to share their ideas, opinions, and feelings to their peers, especially in speaking skill. Moreover, the goals of conversation/ speaking class are: (1) to emphasize and to expose learners' language skill on the target language, (2) to encourage the learners to be actively involved in the classroom through in-pairs or small-group discussions and whole-class discussion, (3) to encourage the learners to practice their target language skill in order to get useful and meaningful feedback from their teacher (Ur, 1996: 76).

## 2. Communication Strategies

Corder (in Faerch and Kasper, 1983:16) describes the term *communication* or *interactional strategy* as a systematic technique employed by a speaker to express his opinion when he/ she faces some difficulties. The difficulties here refer to the speaker's inadequate command of the language used in an interaction. Besides, Tarone (in Faerch and Kasper, 1983: 5) defines it as a systematic attempt by the learners to express or to decode meaning in the target language, where the appropriate systematic target language rules have not been formed. Meanwhile, he (1983:65) also classifies it as a mutual attempt of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in certain situations where requisite meaning structures do not seem to be shared. He, further, identifies the criteria of communication strategy: (1) a speaker desires to communicate a certain meaning to a listener, (2) the speaker believes that the linguistic or sociolinguistic structure desired to communicate a certain meaning is unavailable or is not shared with the listener, (3) the speaker chooses to avoid communicating the certain meaning or to attempt alternate means to communicate the meaning. The speaker stops trying alternatives when it seems clear to the speaker that there is shared meaning. Furthermore, Tarone (1976: 10) also proposes the kinds of communication strategies that are commonly employed by the learners: (1) transfer from the native language, (2) overgeneralization, (3) prefabricated pattern, (4) over elaboration, (5) epenthesis or vowel-insertion, and (6) avoidance strategies (topic and semantic avoidances, appeal to authority, paraphrase, message abandonment, and language switch).

Communication strategies have essentially to do with the relationship between ends and means (Corder, 1978: 18). Concerning this relationship, communication strategies fall into two macro-strategies namely, *message adjustment strategies/ risk-avoidance strategies* and *resource expansion strategies/ risk-running strategies*. To be more specific, both macro-strategies are divided into some micro-strategies, such as: (1) message adjustment strategies: topic avoidance, message abandonment, semantic avoidance, and message reduction, and (2) resource expansion strategies: switching, paraphrase/ circumlocution, paralinguistic devices/ gestures, and appeal for help. In addition, learners can either solve their problems by paraphrasing, transferring or borrowing, and avoiding. In paraphrasing, the learners may approximate the word coinage, and circumlocution; then, in transferring or borrowing, they will do such literal translation, language switch, appeal for assistance, and mime. While, in avoiding, they may avoid topic and abandon message.

In conclusion, those communication strategies can be functioned as potentially conscious plans for solving communication problems that individuals present as a way of reaching a particular communication goal.

### **3. Classroom Interaction**

Interaction is the heart of communication, and communication itself, whether it is oral or written, is the central goal of the foreign language learning. To achieve the goal, the learners need to cooperate and interact among themselves, between them and the teacher, or between them and someone else

who is aware of the language learning. Gebhard (2000: 66) proposes that interaction is an activity that involves three important components: *interactional act* (the smallest component in an interactional transfer, like nodding), *interactional move* (a response given by the addressees as feedback of what the addressor has said), and *turn at talk* (an opportunity or a chance for expressing ideas or opinions).

Further, classroom interaction is a collaborative activity in which the learners and the teacher are interacting for the purpose of learning, either by using verbal or non-verbal media, during the learning and teaching process. In a classroom interaction, the information shared between the learners and the teacher is the primary goal. Therefore, as well as in daily social life, interaction is also very important in language learning situation or in the classroom. This is due to the fact that it can provide the learners with opportunities to practice their target language skills.

### **C. Research Methodology**

This study is a descriptive-qualitative classroom research that is used to investigate what actually happens inside the classroom. It is done for learning purposes and describing the phenomena which occur in the English Conversation class of the English Department at Widya Mandala University Madiun. The researcher tries to investigate and describe the communication strategies that occur in the English Conversation class. They will be described in the form of words rather than in numbers.



The researcher is the main instrument and the data collector as well. Then, observation sheets and field notes were also used for completing the data. Both instruments were used to assist the researcher to do the observation, to write the description of what were seen and experienced during the data collection. The observation was conducted for two months, from October to November 2007.

The subjects of the study were the third semester learners of the English Department at Widya Mandala University Madiun, at the academic year of 2006/2007. At the English Department, the learners were required to join the English Conversation class for seven semesters. Then, the learners of this semester were chosen under an assumption that they were not new with the English Conversation class but had not finished yet with the class; besides, the researcher was not the supervisor of the English Conversation class herself.

The main data are the communication strategies used by the learners and the teacher on the teaching technique applied by the teacher in stimulating and encouraging the learners to interact in the English Conversation class. Then, the additional data are the utterance and behaviours of both the teacher and learners during their interaction in the classroom.

#### **D. The Communication Strategies Applied during the English Conversation Class of the Third Semester Learners at Widya Mandala University Madiun**

By applying communication strategies, the interactants can overcome the communication problems that occur during the interaction. It was found that both the teacher and the learners applied communication strategies as the best solution

for solving the communication problems. Those strategies are clearly described in the following.

### **1. Communication Strategies Applied by the Teacher**

The researcher found four communication strategies applied by the teacher in the Conversation class. Those were code switching, repetition, paraphrase, and restructuring.

Code switching or language switches, according to Dulay, et al (1982: 42), is additional area where first and second languages interact. They further define code switching as an active and creative process of incorporating material from both of a bilingual's languages into communication acts. It involves the rapid and momentary shifting from one language into another. This alternation may occur many times within a single conversation and is not uncommon within single sentences. Code switching was applied by the teacher when she wanted *to make sure that the learners understood what she said*. Besides, based on the result of the interview with the teacher herself, she admitted that she sometimes *forgot or could not find the appropriate English expressions* for certain utterances. Then, she finally switched into the native language or another language. She, further, added that sometimes *there were jokes that could not be expressed in English*. Instead, Bahasa Indonesia (the native language) was used for expressing them in order that the learners could understand what she said and have more fun.

By applying repetition, the teacher repeated a part or the whole of her utterances in order to *confirm that the learners understood* the instruction,

information, or material given. The teacher's repetition seems to be effective for improving the learners' comprehension. In addition, by using this strategy, the teacher could also provide the learners with more chances to process the information given by the teacher or to follow the teacher's model.

Paraphrase refers to the rewording of the expression or the message in an alternate, acceptable target language construction in order to avoid unknown lexical items and to introduce new ones (Tarone, 1976: 10). Here, the teacher applied the strategy during the Conversation class because she wanted *to ensure that her speaking was comprehensible* to her learners; then, the teacher would *clarify her question or statement* if the learners could not answer or respond it. She wished that by paraphrasing her question or statement, the learners would comprehend it better.

The third communication strategy is restructuring. Basically, the teacher applied this strategy because she wanted *to clarify what she said* by reforming her utterance into another that has close relationship with her intended utterance. By doing so, the learners were expected to be able to comprehend her utterance and to respond it as well. In conclusion, the teacher used the communication strategies to ensure that the learners would be able to comprehend the conversation which happened during the Conversation class. Among those four communication strategies applied by the teacher, code switching and repetition are the commonly used strategies in the Conversation class.

## 2. Communication Strategies Applied by the Learners

The researcher discovered nine communication strategies applied by the learners in the Conversation class. They were topic avoidance, message abandonment, code switching, interlingual transfer (literal translation), paraphrase, restructuring, appeals, mime, and repetition. Faerch and Kasper (1980: 79) mention that *topic avoidance* was applied by the learners when they found problems in the *planning phase*, that referred to insufficient linguistic resources, or in *execution phase*, that referred to retrieval problems. Then, the learners would also do this strategy when their behaviour, in the actual situation, is one of avoidance rather than achievement.

By adopting topic avoidance, the learners reduce their communication goal in order to avoid the problem. In this study, the learners applied the topic avoidance strategy because of their lacking of linguistic resources. The learners deliberately *tried not to talk about topics* for which the target language item or structure was not known; it was like one of the avoidance. They did this as an attempt to totally evade communication about topics which required the use of target language rules or forms. In this case, the learners did not yet know the language rules well. During the English Conversation class, a learner avoided talking about the topics that he did not know by *throwing the chance to speak* to his other friends. He wished that this friend would give her opinion or idea that would arouse his own opinion. Here, it could be said that the learners had no prior knowledge about the topic.

Message abandonment was one of the avoidance applied because the learners were insufficient with their linguistic resources. When the learners were trying to say something, their utterance was incomplete for they encounter a difficulty with a target language form or rule. They simply *did not know what they were going to talk next*.

Code switching refers to alternating between one language and another language among bilinguals (Dulay, 1982: 42). It may involve varying stretches of discourse from single word up to complete turns. The learners applied code switching because they *wanted to emphasize the English terms* or words by using their equivalents in the native language together with their English words in their interlanguage utterance. In addition, the learners sometimes did not know the target language expression of an utterance when they were planning it.

Interlingual transfer (literal translation) is different from code switching. Interlingual transfer does not ignore the interlingual code and is a combination of linguistic features of the interlingual transfer and the first language or other foreign languages. Interlingual transfer may involve the transfer of phonological, morphological, syntactical or lexical features, and also may occur at the pragmatic and discourse level. Literal translation was applied by the learners because the transfer was modified at the level of the interlingual system, for instance, translating compounds or idiomatic expressions from the first language into the target language. The learners in the Conversation class used the first language expression as a target language expression, so that the adjustment at the lexical level of the interlingual transfer occurred.

Paraphrase refers to the rephrasing of the message in an alternate and acceptable target language construction in order to avoid unknown lexical items and to introduce new ones (Tarone, 1976: 13). For the learners of Conversation class, paraphrase was applied for overcoming the problem in the planning phase by filling the gap in their plan with a construction which is well-formed according to their interlingual system. Paraphrase may be in the forms of description, circumlocution, and exemplification. During the Conversation class, the learners applied the circumlocution strategy as the solution for overcoming their communication problem. The learners *gave the definition of the desired words* that they did not know what to say and how to say those words.

Restructuring is used whenever the learners realize that they cannot complete a local plan, and develop an alternative local plan. They realized the plan in which they have already begun. It enables them to communicate the intended message without reduction. The learners of the Conversation class applied this communication strategy when they realized that *they could not complete the utterance they spoke*. Therefore, they restructured their utterances *so that they could continue the interaction and communicate the intended message* without reducing the communication goal. It was also expected that without reduction, the speaking could still be carried out fluently and would be comprehensible for their other friends.

An appeal was the communication strategy that was frequently applied by the learners of the Conversation class, either with the teacher or among the learners themselves. This strategy was applied because the learners *did not know*

*for sure an English expression*; thus, a learner would ask another learner to supply it or to look it up in the dictionary. In addition, the learners might ask his/ her peers whether the utterance he/she had spoken was correct or not, both in vocabulary and accuracy. This interaction showed that the learners had an interaction in the Conversation class among the learners themselves by applying the appeal strategy.

Mime, one of the non-linguistic devices, was frequently used by the learners during their interaction in the Conversation class. The learners, mostly, applied it to support the other verbal strategies. Sometimes, when the learners were asked to express their ideas or opinions, they felt nervous and afraid; then, they *covered their nervousness* by applying this strategy. On another occasion, the learners used *mime to support their verbal ones*, in which they wanted to emphasize their utterance, for example by doing hands movements to shape something or head/ shoulders movements to make sure that their listeners comprehended their speaking. Finally, repetition was applied to eliminate long pause and produced longer utterances automatically. Then, by doing the repetition, the learners made themselves more fluent in their speaking. It seems that the first utterance that they produced was such a planning statement; then, they repeated it once in a more fluent way.

## **E. Conclusion and Suggestion**

### **1. Conclusion**

The findings of the study support the existing theories of classroom interaction in EFL classes. The teacher has employed various teaching techniques

to facilitate the learners in having a fun and valuable English conversation class. Having a nice interaction with the whole class, the teacher is able to conduct a better English conversation class through fluent and happy communications in the class.

It can be concluded that both the teacher and the learners employed various communication strategies as the best solution in solving the communication problem they experienced during their interactions in the classroom. Finally, it is expected that not only the communication problems can be solved, but the communication goals can be achieved as well.

## **2. Suggestion**

Teachers are suggested to apply a teacher-group interaction to show the learners the best model of interactive communication in the English Conversation class. Then, the conversation material should be chosen under the consideration of the learners' interests and their prior knowledge so that the conversation may run smoothly.

The learners are recommended to be more active in a speaking or conversation class. It seems to be a good chance to practice their language. They do not need to be ashamed and afraid to speak the target language.

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