

# Communication Problems Facing Arab Learners of English

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## Abstract

The major portion of this paper is devoted to presenting the communication problems of Arab learners of English in general, and the problems specific to Arab World University English language majors/graduates. Then, it discusses the notion of communicative competence, and defines *strategic competence*. It also briefly deals with the various definitions of communication strategies and taxonomies of communication strategies. Finally, the paper concludes by presenting the pedagogical implications of communication strategies.

## Introduction

Much research has been conducted discussing the various problems of Arab learners of English, but there has been very little discussion to the various ways of solving these problems or tackling the importance of the development of foreign language learners' strategic competence, i.e., the use of communication strategies (henceforth CSs) to solve communication problems, an essential component of communicative competence. Many researchers (e.g. Oxford, 1990; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Tarone and Yule 1989; Dornyei and Thurrell, 1991) support the idea of teaching communication strategies either by raising learners' consciousness or training them because CSs solve their communication problems they encounter during the course of communication and because they lead to learning.

Therefore, in this paper I intend to present communication problems encountered by Arab learners of English. Then, I briefly discuss language problems specific to English majors/graduates at the Arab world universities. I also highlight the reasons for such a persistent problem. Finally, I present the solution to such a persistent problem with special reference to the

significance of strategic competence and the use of communication strategies in language teaching.

## **General Problems of Arab Learners of English**

Arab learners of English encounter problems in both speaking and writing. This fact has been clearly stated by many researchers, e.g. Abdul Haq (1982), Harrison, Prator and Tucker (1975), Abbad (1988) and Wahba (1998). The students in Jordan, for example, learn English in their home country where the native language is Arabic. The only way to learn English in Jordan is through formal instruction, i.e. in the classroom where language teachers are native speakers of Arabic. There is little opportunity to learn English through natural interaction in the target language which is only possible when students encounter native speakers of English who come to the country as tourists.

Many studies have been conducted in Jordan to investigate lexical, syntactical and phonological errors made by Jordanian school learners of English (e.g., Abdul Haq, 1982; Zughoul and Taminian, 1984). Abdul Haq (1982: 1) states that "One of the linguistic areas in which students in the secondary cycle commit errors is in the writing skill". He adds "There are general outcries about the continuous deterioration of the standards of English proficiency of students among school teachers, university instructors and all who are concerned with English language teaching." In support of Abdul Haq's view, Zughoul (1984:4) finds that "Jordanian EFL students commit serious lexical errors while communicating in English."

The Ministry of Education in Jordan has specified goals of teaching English at the secondary stage. Among such goals, students should be able to write English passages that are grammatically correct, properly punctuated and effectively organized. They are also expected to understand and communicate using a variety of notions and linguistic functions based on everyday situations. Accordingly, all Jordanian secondary school graduates are expected to develop native-like facility in English, which will enable them to communicate spontaneously, effectively and confidently about a broad range of topics (Jayyusi et al, 1990). The results of the

studies conducted in Jordan lead to the conclusion that the goals set by the Ministry of Education are ambitious and have not yet been achieved.

In the Sudan, Kambal (1980) analyzes errors in three types of free compositions written by first-year Sudanese University students. The study gives an account of the major syntactic errors in the verb phrase and the noun phrase made by these students in an attempt to improve the quality of the remedial English program in the context of the Arabization in the Sudan.

Kambal (ibid.) reports on three main types of error in the verb phrase: verb formation, tense, and subject-verb agreement. He discusses errors in tense under five categories: tense sequence, tense substitution, tense marker, deletion, and confusion of perfect tenses. With regard to subject-verb agreement, three types of error were identified. These involve the third-person singular marker used redundantly, and the incorrect form of verb to be.

Similarly, Egyptian learners of English face problems, but the majority of these problems are related to pronunciation. Wahba (1998:36) summarizes these problems:

Egyptian students face certain problems related to pronunciation. Some of these problems are related to stress, others are related to intonation. However, most of these problems can be attributed to the differences in pronunciation between English and Arabic.

In Yemen, the situation is almost the same as in the other Arab countries. Abbad (1988:15) admits the weakness of Yemani learners of English, and adds that "in spite of the low proficiency level in English of most applicants, they are accepted into the department." This is what happens in most of the Arab universities. English language departments accept high school graduates without taking into consideration their proficiency level and whether or not they will be able to manage in a program of English studies.

Above all, another important area of difficulty that Arab learners of English have is communication. Arab learners find it difficult to communicate freely in the target language. This may be due to the methods of language teaching. It can be also due to the learning environment

which some judge to be unsuitable for learning a foreign language. This is noticeable in Jordan where the formal language of communication is Arabic.

## **Problems of Majors in English at Arab Universities**

My experience in teaching English as a foreign language in schools and other educational institutions in Jordan, Oman, UAE and Saudi Arabia has led me to believe that English language majors/graduates in Jordan have difficulties in using English for communication. When engaged in authentic communicative situations, they often lack the necessary vocabulary they need to get their meaning across. As a result, they cannot keep the interaction going for an extended period of time.

There have been several complaints made about the weakness in English of school graduates who join the universities as English language majors or as English language learners. Because of the seriousness of the problem, *The First Conference on the Problems of Teaching English Language and Literature at Arab Universities* was held at the University of Jordan/Amman in 1983. Many papers were presented at the conference, the most important of which were those of Suleiman (1983), Ibrahim (1983), Zughoul (1983) and Mukattash (1983).

Mukattash (1983) divides the problems that Arab learners of English face into two types. First, university students continue to make some basic errors in pronunciation, spelling, morphology and syntax. Secondly, they continue to be unable to express themselves "comfortably and efficiently either when dealing with 'academic topics' or 'common everyday topics' (1983:169). He argues that the students' major difficulty arises from the fact that they cannot use English correctly and appropriately in and out the classroom when required to do so. This means that the difficulty is related to the students' deficiencies in communicative competence and self-expression. He also attributes the students' failure in using English as a tool of self-expression to achieve their communicative goals to study plans and methods of teaching (1983:169).

In evaluating the English competence of the graduates at the University of Jordan, Ibrahim (1983:23) finds that most faculty members are not totally happy with the quality of English with

which the graduates leave. In fact, these faculty members are often embarrassed when asked by the principal of a private school or a business manager to recommend graduates to hire them. Ibrahim states that on one occasion, "in all honesty, I could not recommend any of our graduates for that year."

Zughoul (1987:224) argues that "well-documented research evidence on the competence of the English major is scanty, but examples of general impressionistic evaluation are available in a variety of references." Zughoul (1985) reports the results of the proficiency testing of the graduates of the English department at Yarmouk University, Jordan, where the standards are judged to compare positively with those of the rest of the Arab universities. The average equated mean score of the three groups of graduates (168 students) who took the Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency (MTELP) was 67.75 (individual scores were 68.22, 69.02, and 66.02), which is interpreted in the manual of the test as "not proficient enough to take any academic work." Zughoul (1987:224) concludes and supports Ibrahim's findings (1983) that this average mean score indicates that just a few of our graduates would qualify for admission into the freshmen program of an English language university."

The results of the TOEFL test administered by Rababah (Rababah, 2001) of English majors (160 students) at Yarmouk University in Jordan also support these findings, as the individual scores range from 26 percent to 72 percent. When compared to the TOEFL test standards, the top score gained by the students is 510. The average mean score is 59.32. This average mean score indicates the low proficiency level of English majors.

## **Causes of Arab Learners' Weaknesses**

The weakness of English language learners in general, and English language department majors/graduates more specifically, has been attributed to various factors: lack of pertinent information on the part of school graduates when they join the university, school and English language department curricula, teaching methodology, lack of the target language environment, and the learners' lack of motivation (Suleiman, 1983; Mukattash, 1983; Zughoul, 1983, 1987; Ibrahim, 1983).

Suleiman (1983) argues that the continuing dissatisfaction with the performance of Arab students in English courses suggests a lack of fundamental standards in curriculum design, testing and oral communication skills, meager development of productive skills and inadequate teaching/learning strategies at university level, etc.

Zughoul (1983) examines the curricula of a number of English departments at Arab universities (the University of Baghdad, Iraq; Damascus, Syria; Kuwait, Kuwait; Yarmouk, Jordan; Amman, Jordan) and at two American universities in the Middle East, and concludes that the curricula of these departments (with the exception of the American University of Beirut) are heavily dominated by the literature component. Zughoul (1987:222) adds that "the study of English literature does not only dominate the syllabus of the English department, but also shapes the syllabus of the secondary schools" (1983:222). According to Zughoul, in English language and literature departments "the other two components of the syllabus – namely, language and linguistics – show a lack of balance in the curriculum, where the language component, in particular, stands out as the weakest" (1987:223). The language component typically includes two courses in communication skills and a course in writing. Zughoul (ibid.) claims also that

Rarely does a department in a TW country offer solid language training, i.e., training in reading comprehension, listening comprehension, term paper writing, or speech. In fact, the curriculum assumes that the incoming student is proficient in the language and that he does not need any further language training. This, indeed, is a very unrealistic assumption (Zughoul, 1989:223).

Furthermore, about one-third of Bachelor degree courses are taught in Arabic, especially in Faculties of Arts and Education. These courses include Islamic Studies, Arabic, Social Studies, History, Computer Science and Education. I think that the remainder of the courses is not enough to help graduates communicate freely and effectively in the target language. They are thus likely to face difficulties in their performance. I suggest that it would be more helpful if such courses were taught in English rather than in Arabic. In discussing ways of learning a foreign language, Halliday et al. say:

In Nigeria, English is used in almost all the teaching in high schools. This has two important results. In the first place, the quantity of classroom experience that each pupil receives is much greater outside the English lesson than within it. Some people have said that if the English language lessons were removed entirely from the schools in Nigeria, little or no effect would be noticed on the ability of the pupils in English when they came to leave schools. But, in the second place, the children are influenced by class teachers other than those who are trained in English. If those teachers' English is not very good, the pupils will suffer. Teaching in a language is an excellent way of teaching a language, but all those who teach subjects in the foreign language need to be able to perform well in it themselves." (Halliday et al., 1984:18)

If this is the case in high schools, it would be even more advisable to use English in teaching all the courses at university level. I am, therefore, of the opinion that all university courses except Arabic language course(s) should be taught in English, which would certainly improve the English majors' linguistic ability, which would, in turn, improve their communicative competence.

Lack of knowledge on the part of the incoming English majors could be another reason for this phenomenon. Suleiman (1983:128) claims that school graduates lack the knowledge necessary for them to communicate. Basing his arguments on his observations and his personal experience, he claims that transition from an introductory level, i.e., school, to a more advanced level, i.e., the university, is "as difficult as passing from the lack of knowledge to an introductory level". Zughoul (1987:224) supports Suleiman's point of view when he questions the competence of the incoming students: "In fact, it can be safely generalized that the linguistic competence of the incoming student and, for that matter, even the graduate from a TW university, does not enable him to make sense of a literary piece, let alone appreciate it."

Suleiman (1983:129) argues that the most noticeable problems, which impede the progress of Arab students at university level, may be attributed to the "inadequate mastery of the four language skills; namely listening, speaking, reading and writing." This supports Zughoul's (1987) who states that English language departments should offer solid language training. Suleiman (1983) adds that the major problem faced by students who attend the university is that they find it difficult to communicate in the target language. According to Suleiman, mother tongue

interference is not the only factor responsible for the difficulty, but also may be attributed to the teaching/learning process as a whole.

In order for language learners to use the language more successfully, they should be involved in real-life situations. Unfortunately, in Jordan as well as most Arab countries, English is used only as an academic subject, when taught in schools or universities. Without practice, English or any other language cannot be acquired. English Language Department graduates do not have enough practice in English; they use Arabic most of the time even after becoming English language teachers. They only use English when they encounter a situation where they are obliged to use English as a medium of communication and this hardly ever happens. We may therefore come to the conclusion that most of those graduates' speaking time is in Arabic. Practice is very important for mastering any language. Halliday et al. (1984) suggest that:

Oral mastery depends on practising and repeating the patterns produced by a native speaker of the foreign language. It is the most economical way of thoroughly learning a language.... When one has such a control of the essentials of a language, he can almost automatically produce the usual patterns of that language (1984: 16).

This shows the importance of using the target language in language teaching. Teachers of English in Jordan use Arabic to teach difficult words and to explain English literature. This was indeed a feature of my colleagues' teaching experience in Jordan. Vocabulary items are still taught in isolation, though the Communicative Language Teaching approach stresses the importance of teaching vocabulary items in context. Listening materials are not used by the majority of school teachers, most probably because of the limited number of cassette recorders and the large number of teachers at the same school. Therefore, teachers try to read dialogues to their students, and this does not provide the learners with the necessary native speaker model. This also demotivates learners and makes them bored. Dialogues are designed to be read by two or three partners, not by the teacher alone, who would read role A and role B with the same voice and intonation, a by-product of the audio-lingual method, which was used in Jordan until the early eighties. Teachers were taught by this method, so they use it in their teaching. Out of my experience as a teacher and teacher trainer, I feel that the Teacher-training programs were not very successful in changing the teachers' methodology. The adopted methodology is claimed to



be eclectic and focuses on communicative approaches to language teaching, but because of teachers' practices in the classroom, it is more likely a grammar translation method.

Lack of the target language exposure as spoken by its native speakers could be another reason for the English majors' weakness in communication. Before 1983, the English Language Department at Yarmouk University used to bring over American groups in summer to teach two English language courses. They used to teach 'English Pronunciation' and 'Stress and Intonation' courses in which students attended tutorials all day long. It was called "The English Village." Most of the students' speaking-time was in English since they were exposed to the target language as presented by its native speakers. That was a very helpful experience for English majors. Unfortunately, the English Department there is no longer interested in having this practice. In addition, currently about 94% of the professors in the English Language Department are native speakers of Arabic. In the academic year 2000/2001, there were two American professors out of a total of about 30 staff members. This means that the students might not have enough exposure to the target language as spoken by its native speakers, especially with respect to stress and intonation.

Motivation also plays an important part in improving and developing learners' communicative ability. Attitudinal studies conducted on Arab students, such as those of Zughoul and Taminian, 1984, Salih, 1980 and Harrison et al., 1975, have consistently shown that Arab students are instrumentally motivated to learn English and that they are well aware of the utility of knowing English (Zughoul, 1987:225). This means that the main stimulus for learning English is instrumental, i.e., to achieve a goal, e.g. a career. It is true that some learners are integratively motivated, but they are a minority. According to Seedhouse (1996: 69), those with integrative motivation have a genuine interest in "the target speech community" which the learner is "aspiring to become a member of." I do not think, however, that there are many English majors who desire to be part of an English-speaking community. It might be true that a few of them have such desire, but the majority of English majors join the English department because it is easier for them to get a job with a BA in English than in any other specialization.

To conclude this section, it is obvious that Arab learners of English and English language majors in the Arab world universities encounter many communication problems either in writing or speaking. This problem is very serious and it needs a solution. Research conducted so far has proven the importance of the development of strategic competence, i.e., the use of communication strategies to solve problems encountered during the course of communication. Thus, the following sections will deal with strategic competence, communication strategies, taxonomies of CSs and how they lead to learning, and their pedagogical implications.

## **Communicative Competence**

The ultimate goal of English language teaching is to develop the learners' communicative competence which will enable them to communicate successfully in the real world. Successful communication refers to passing on a comprehensible message to the listener. According to Canale (1983) communicative competence consists of grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competence.

*Strategic competence* refers to the individual's ability to use 'communication strategies' e.g. paraphrase, circumlocution, literal translation, lexical approximation, mime, to get his/her message across and to compensate for a limited or imperfect knowledge of rules or the interference of such factors such as fatigue, distraction or inattention.

Tarone and Yule (1989:103) believe that strategic competence includes "the ability to select an effective means of performing a communicative act ... strategic competence is gauged, not by degree of correctness ... but rather by degree of success, or effectiveness."

According to Tarone and Yule (ibid.), there are two areas related to strategic competence:

(1) the overall skill of a learner in successfully transmitting information to a listener, or interpreting information transmitted and (2) the use of communication strategies by a speaker or listener when problems arise in the process of transmitting information (p.103).

## Defining Communication Strategies

It is difficult to find a rigorous definition of communication strategies on which CS researchers have reached an agreement. There have been many definitions proposed for the communication strategies of second language learners. The following definitions will provide an insight into the nature of communication strategies.

*Learners' attempt to bridge the gap between their linguistic competence in the target language and that of the target language interlocutors (Tarone, 1981 : 288 ).*

*CSs are potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal (Faerch and Kasper, 1983: 36).*

*Communication strategies, i.e., techniques of coping with difficulties in communicating in an imperfectly known second language (Stern, 1983: 411).*

*....all attempts to manipulate a limited linguistic system in order to promote communication. Should learning result from the exercise, the strategy has also functioned as a learning strategy, but there is no inherent feature of the strategy itself which can determine which of these roles it will serve (Bialystok, 1983: 102 – 103 ).*

*Compensatory strategies are strategies which a language user employs in order to achieve his intended meaning on becoming aware of problems arising during the planning phase of an utterance due to his own linguistic shortcomings (Poulisse, 1990 : 88).*

*the conscious employment by verbal or non-verbal mechanisms for communicating an idea when precise linguistic forms are for some reason not available to the learner at that point in communication (Brown, 1987: 180).*

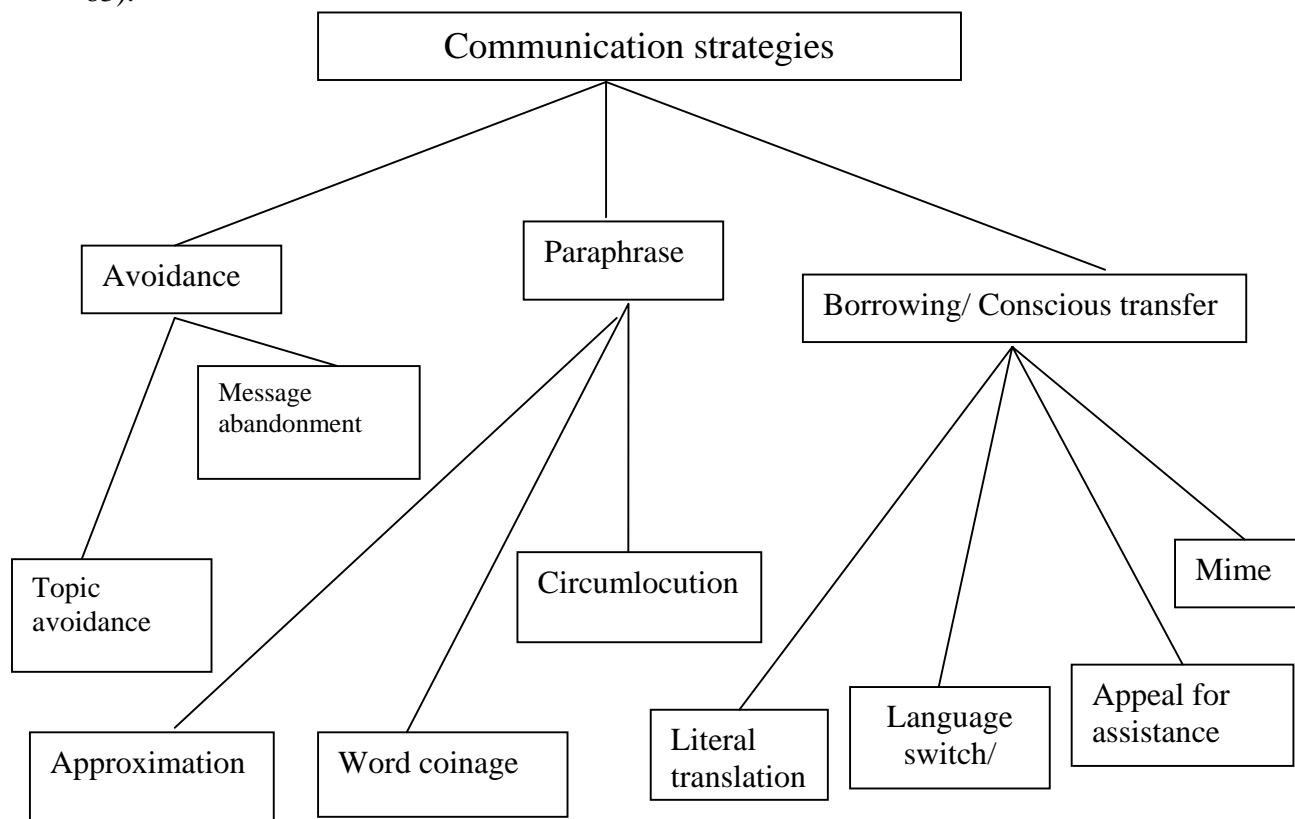
The key defining criteria for CSs are 'problematicity' and 'consciousness'. All the previously mentioned definitions support the claim that CSs are employed when L2 learners encounter a problem in communication. Tarone's (1977), Faerch and Kasper's (1983a), and Brown's (1987) definitions emphasise the idea that CSs may be used consciously. Faerch and Kasper (1983a) see problem orientation and potential consciousness as defining criteria of communication strategies. This is very clear in their definition of CSs as "potentially conscious plans for solving what to an

individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal" (ibid:36.). The ultimate aim after using communication strategies is to achieve a communicative goal.

## Taxonomies of Communication Strategies

There is no consensus among researchers over a taxonomy of communication strategies. It is very clear in the literature that a single utterance may be labelled under two different categories. Cook (1993) argues that " if the lists were standardised, at least, there would be an agreement about such categories" (P. 133). Researchers develop and propose new taxonomies of communication strategies from time to time. Tarone's taxonomy of CSs (1977/1983) is discussed here as it is considered the basis of all proposed taxonomies. See figure (1).

Figure (1) Tarone's Taxonomy of Communication Strategies (Adapted from Tarone, 1983:62-63).



The taxonomies of Tarone (1977), Faerch and Kasper (1983a, 1983b), Bialystok (1983), and Willems (1987) show many similarities. Thus, Bialystok (1990) remarked:

... the variety of taxonomies proposed in the literature differ primarily in terminology and overall categorizing principle rather than in the substance of the specific strategies. If we ignore, then, differences in the structure of the taxonomies by abolishing the various overall categories, then a core group of specific strategies that appear consistently across the taxonomies clearly emerges.... Differences in the definitions and illustrations for these core strategies across the various studies are trivial (p. 61).

## **Communication Strategies Lead to Learning**

Language learners often use communication strategies to cope with the problems they encounter while attempting to speak a foreign or a second language. They attempt to solve communication problems when they lack adequate competence in the target language. When faced with such problems, they may try to avoid particular language or grammatical items; paraphrase when they do not have the appropriate form or construction; ask the interlocutor for the correct form; use gestures to convey meaning; insert a word or a phrase from their first language; apply L2 morphology and/or phonology to L1 lexical items; translate literally, or they may use word coinage which produces items that do not exist in the target language to achieve their communicative goals. This phenomenon exists even in first language use. Sometimes there are words that we do not know in our native language, so we try to convey the meaning to the listener by means of paraphrase, description and gesture (verbal and non-verbal CSs). Once I want to buy some spare parts for my car, I usually know what I want, but the exact word or expression in my native language (Arabic) is lacking, so I use its shape, size, function, where it is fixed, etc. to describe it and make myself understood by the shopkeeper. Then, the shopkeeper says "Aha! You want this part! Here you are." As a result of negotiating meaning with the shopkeeper, I get the exact word. If I then need this spare part again at a later date, I will go to the shop and ask for it using the correct expression without resorting to any communication strategy.

With L2 (English), the problem is greater, and the use of some CSs may also lead to learning. Once I wanted to sell my furniture and a Filipino rang me up. The following conversation took place:

**The Speaker:** You have an ad in the newspaper regarding household items for sale.

**The Author:** Yes. How can I help you?

**The Speaker:** Do you have a shoe rack?

**The Author:** Pardon? (The author could not make out 'shoe rack' as a result of the speaker's pronunciation).

**The Speaker:** The place where you keep shoes.

**The Author:** No, I don't.

**The Speaker:** OK. Thank you.

**The Author:** You're welcome.

In the conversation above, both the author and the caller used communication strategies. The author initiated repair when he said 'pardon' because he did not catch the caller's word(s). On the other hand, the caller resorted to a CS to repair the problem and make her message comprehensible. Maybe she used a communication strategy because she thought that the author did not know the meaning of "shoe-rack." This conversation is an example of the negotiation of meaning, and use of CSs, which can lead to learning. Suppose that I did not know what the word "shoe rack" meant, then at the end of the conversation I would be able to add new words to my competence. This is an example of when negotiation of meaning can take place through direct exposure to the target language in real-life situations, as opposed to the classroom, which might not be an ideal environment for acquiring a foreign language.

## **Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications**

To conclude, Arab learners face many problems in all language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. The great number of erroneous utterances that Arab learners of English produce in oral performance and their recourse to communication strategies, as shown in Rababah's study (2001), is an indication of how serious the problem is. It is also an indication that the objectives of the English departments in the Arab world have not yet been achieved, and that this situation requires a solution.

Raising foreign learners' awareness of the nature and communicative potential of communication strategies (CSs) by making them conscious of the CSs existing in their repertoire, and sensitizing them to the appropriate situations is one way of solving their communication problems. Teachers should provide them with the definition of CSs and ask them to perform tasks that require them to use CSs, such as definition and story-telling role-play tasks. Then, they should be audio-/or video-recorded while performing these tasks. Finally, they should watch their performance in the target language and be asked to see the communication problems they encountered and how they managed to solve them.

To raise consciousness of some strategies is important for the following reasons. First, communication strategies can lead to learning by eliciting unknown language items from the interlocutor, especially in the appeal for help strategy. Second, communication strategies are part of language use. Even native speakers use communication strategies in their speech and use time-gaining devices in order to keep the conversation going, such as "*you know*", "*what do you call it?*", and other such strategies. Finally, the use of a communication strategy is not an indication of communication failure; on the contrary, it can be very successful in compensating for the lack of linguistic knowledge, and they can help the English language learners solve their communication problems and achieve their communicative goals.

All teachers and learners need to understand that successful language learning is not only a matter of developing grammatical, sociolinguistic and semantic competence, but also the strategic competence which involves the use of CSs to transmit comprehensible information successfully.

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