

On the Use of Diary Study to Investigate Avoidance Strategy in Spoken English Courses

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Abstract

In the present study, an attempt is made to investigate the frequency and motives of using avoidance strategies by a group of Iranian intermediate language learners through their own journal writing. The effect of gender on the use of avoidance strategies is to be investigated as well. Thirty nine female and twenty three male learners enrolled in an English language spoken course in a private English institute served as the subjects. They were to write freely about their reactions, questions, and their feelings on their endeavor to speak English at the end of each session. One questionnaire was also included to survey the learners overall learning preferences and motivation. Examination and the analysis of the learners' diaries revealed that using avoidance strategies was due, in turn, to the lack of knowledge, effect of fellow students, stress, lack of confidence, the effect of the teacher, score, and fatigue. Analysis also revealed that females used strategies more frequently than male supporting a number of research done previously on the same area.

Keywords: Avoidance Strategy, Communication Strategies, Diary Studies, Self-assessment, Journal Writing, Qualitative Research, Gender

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1. Introduction

The common and seemingly prevailing problem that language teachers have to face is that learners are unwilling to participate in lessons. They either draw back on their L1 to get their messages across or avoid expressing their intended meanings. The underlying reasons can be attributed to a host of different factors such as the learners' motivation and personality or the teachers' handling management of classroom context. It can also reasonably be assumed that in many cases it is due to learners' lacking L2 competence and their inability to communicate meaning (Pawlak, 2005). Included in their L2 competence are communication strategies which are procedures that learners fall back upon to compensate for the inadequacies of their interlanguage systems. According to Yule and Tarone (1997), one of the most important resources available to learners is reduction strategies by which they abandon, avoid or change the original communicative goal.

Furthermore, since learning in another language is different from learning other subjects (Borg, 2006) a variety of factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, affect, etc., are likely to promote or even militate against success (Thanasoulas, 2002). Investigating the reasons behind using avoidance strategies in speaking English courses can lead teachers and practitioners to come up with a better understanding of their students' apparent passivity.

From among different factors considered to be influential in using communication strategies, the effect of gender is going to be investigated in this study. The difference between male and female learners in using communication strategies has been controversial in the literature. Different results have been found in different aspects of learning. While in some aspects males did better than females, in other aspects, it was the other way round. Still

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in another other aspects of learning no difference could be found (Dornyei, Z. and Skehan, P. 2003; Riazi, A. M. and Khodadadi, F., 2007).

Thus, under the influence of gender, reduction/avoidance strategies apparently as easily accessible source to resort in communication needs to be studied. Assuming the importance of the psychological rather than the linguistic aspects of avoidance, researchers can focus on a process-oriented research design to identify the behavior and the strategies of the learners.

Diary writing and its incorporation into spoken courses can shed light on the issue to study the processes involved. As a kind of qualitative research tool it can reveal the variables that uncover processes under which students speak.

These variables can better manifest the nature of avoidance strategies and the reasons behind it which might otherwise be neglected (Marefat, 2002).

Therefore, the purpose of the present paper is to figure out why language learners in speaking English courses use avoidance strategies somewhat frequently. In other words, the researcher is trying to find the reasons why learners do not speak very much. Furthermore, one factor which is supposed to have effects on the use of avoidance strategies, that is, the influence of gender is to be investigated.

The research questions which are to be answered in the present study are as follows:

1. What are the reasons of avoidance strategy use?
2. What is the relationship between gender and avoidance strategy use?

2. The Background of the Study

According to Ellis (1994), the study of strategies generally and communication strategies specifically, has favored a lot of attraction and interests among researchers. For the first thing the concept of 'strategy' is fuzzy one consisting

of some “mental or behavioral activities related to some specific stage” (Ellis, 1994, p. 529) in the process of language learning and language use. There are three types of strategies: production, communication, and learning strategies.

Tarone (1997) considers the first two types as ‘strategies of language use’. He, then, subcategorizes communication strategies into various subtypes, among which ‘avoidance’ is mentioned. This strategy is often used when there is a breakdown in communication, which, therefore, can be found to be used in conversation classes more than in other courses.

Communication strategies consist of attempts to deal with problems of communication that have arisen in interaction. There are two competing viewpoints on the nature of these strategies, each with important implications for the description and investigation. Whereas one, known as the interactional approach, concentrates on classifying the different means of establishing reference in interactions involving learners, the other, referred to as the psycholinguistic approach, focuses on the description of the cognitive processes underlying language reception and production (Yule and Tarone, 1997).

These two approaches have led to different taxonomies. The taxonomy which has been adopted here in this study has been proposed by (Yule and Tarone, 1997) where avoidance strategy is classified into two subtypes, that is, ‘topic avoidance’ and ‘message abandonment’. According to them, by topic avoidance a learner avoids referring to a salient object because he does not have necessary vocabulary or proper structure. By message abandonment the learner begins to refer to an object but gives up because it is too difficult.

2.1. Factors Affecting Communication Strategies Use

There are wide varieties of variables which researchers have identified as influencing learning outcomes. The variables including age, gender, social class and ethnic identity are among those attracted more research attentions.

Ellis (1994) considers age and gender along with social class and ethnic identity influential factors affecting the attitudes held by different learners which can be led to different levels of L2 learning outcome.

Classroom researchers have shown increasing interests in examining gender-related patterns of the learners' behavior in their work. There are a number of studies done by several researchers on gender differences (Boyle, 1987; Nyikos, 1990).

Women almost always do better in the standardness of their speech and use of prestigious language (Spolsky, 1989). As a result, one can expect that women might be and do better in L2 learning than men. Oxford and Nyikos (1989) as well as Green and Oxford (1995) also found that females use strategies far more frequently than males. Gob and Foong (1997) found that female learners used more compensation and affective strategies than their male counterparts.

Therefore, it can concluded that female learners are more active strategy users. It seems that gender more likely to interact with other variables in determining L2 learning. It is important to bear in mind that as Tannen (1996) says "gender related patterns dovetail with all the other dynamics of language behavior: ethnic, class, regional and age differences all affect speaking styles" (p. 341). However, in the study done by Riazi and Khodadadi (2007) students' gender did not show any significant difference in their pattern of strategy use. This is a finding which is in contrast with most of previous research findings.

In addition to the above general differences, some individual differences among learners have a significant role in using communicative strategies or

more specifically avoidance strategies. Rossiter (2003) attributes differential success in learning second language to individual differences such as intelligence, aptitude, personality, motivation, attitude, and anxiety. From among individual differences psychological and emotional dimensions of second language learning seem to be of high importance (Dewaele, 2005).

As acknowledged by some researchers in the field (Dörnyei, 2003; Kristmanson, 2000), affective contributions are central to second or foreign language learning which implies the important role of affection.

Lafford (2004) discusses the relationship between the frequency of communication strategies use and proficiency level. She mentions some body of research in which it has been found that as the proficiency level of a learner increases, the number of communication strategies used decreases, which is in line with her own conclusion.

Therefore, learning another language is an “emotional performance” (Cowie, 2004, p. 27) in which individual and personal factors are of paramount importance. Among them, learners’ feelings, attitude, aptitude, motivation, and anxiety need to be taken into consideration.

2.3. Identifying Learners’ Communicative Strategies

According to Chamot (2005), there exists no other better way than self-report procedures devised to study communicative strategies. As mental processes and techniques for completing a language task, they are mainly unobservable.

Although through some observable behavior the strategies used by the learners can be identified. For example, a student in an interactive listening/speaking process to pinpoint a piece of new information may use “selective attention” strategy (unobservable) to focus on the main ideas and might then decide to “ask questions for clarification” (observable) on these

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main ideas. The only way to find out whether students are using selective attention during the task is to ask them to self report their applied strategies.

Among these procedures are written diaries and journals. In these the learners write personal observations about their own learning experience and the ways in which they attempted to solve language problems (Caron and Longhini, 2002). Self-assessment/self-report which diary writing is one form of it is a key issue in the process of learning and teaching in learner-centered mode of autonomous language learning and builds more independency on the part of the learners. According to Harris (1997), self-assessment is considered as “one of the pillars of learner autonomy” (p. 12), because it gives the learners an opportunity to assess their own progress and focus their own learning and it is one of the vital elements of self-directed, autonomous learning.

Based on the fore grounded rationale, diary writing procedure is used as a tool in the present research and as Marefat (2002) states “since the content of diaries is NOT already determined, some very new variables show up, that could otherwise be neglected” (p. 105).

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants were 62 learners from Shokou language institute in Fars Province, a branch of an Iranian nationwide language institute. They consisted of 23 male and 39 female learners. They were studying at R&R (Review and Reinforcement Level). According to Shokuh institute they were all at the intermediate level of language proficiency. It is worth mentioning that there are six SEC (Spoken English Course) levels for beginning and pre-intermediate level learners in the institute. Finishing SEC6 level, learners are permitted to

proceed to six R&R levels. R&R 1 and 2 are considered for intermediate level, and the others respectively belong to upper-intermediate and advanced levels.

3.2. Instruments

In this research three measuring instruments were used. The first one was Shokou language proficiency test. The test composed of 70 items including listening, structure and vocabulary and reading items. The validity and reliability of the test as an instrument to measure the intermediate level of the language proficiency of the learners has been confirmed by Shokoue.

According to the standards of the institute those who get 70 scores out of 100 total scores have achieved the intermediate level of language proficiency.

Based on this scale all the participants of the present study have passed the test successfully.

The second one was a 45-item questionnaire constructed on the basis of two sources: O' Malley, J., Chamot, A., Stewner-Manzanares, G., Kupper, L. and Russo, R. (1985) and Gardner (1985). Some of the questionnaire items were omitted as they were irrelevant to our own context. It was translated into Persian and then reviewed by two qualified translators to check for the accuracy of translation.

The questionnaire composed of the items to survey the general motivation (21 questions) and general learning preferences of the participants (24 questions). The main aim to use the questionnaire was to check the motivation and general preference learning pattern of the learners before focusing specifically on their avoidance strategy use. The answers to the items of the questionnaire ranged from "very often" to "never" on a five-point Likert-type scale. Each was given a weight from 5 to 1 respectively. To check the reliability

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and validity of the questionnaire, a pilot study was carried out with a group of learners with the same level of language proficiency in another English institute.

Based on a test-retest analysis of the items and Pearson's index of correlation, a reliability measure of 0.89 was obtained. The internal consistency of the items (through Alpha Cronbach index showing the degree of go togetherness) was acceptable. The validity measure was 0.72. The questionnaire was used to determine if the students were at the same or nearly the same level of motivation. In other words, the researcher tried to investigate if all the learners were motivated enough to learn English to communicate.

Also they made an effort to survey learners' general strategies and tendencies in spoken English courses.

The final instrument was learners' diary writings as the main tool of the study for deeper and more detailed analysis of the learners' avoidance strategy use and its underlying reasons. The researcher, who was also the teacher of the same learners, asked them to write their diaries, based on their class experience.

To assist them how to write diaries and give them a framework to write, samples of diaries from Nunan (1989) were read to the students. Along with it, the researcher gave them a general explanation about the purpose and style of their diary writing. However, the researcher didn't guide learners clearly to what they should write, for the fear that, they may be restricted to write what their teacher was after or write something just to satisfy the teacher's demands. They were required to write their diaries during the summer term (2007) which consisted of 19 sessions.

It was definitely important for the learners to be able to write their diaries freely. Therefore, in order to avoid any misunderstanding to happen, learners were asked to write their diaries in L1 i.e. Persian, because the purpose of their diary writing was not practicing writing skill, rather the purpose was to talk

about their experiences and self-assess their use of strategies. Still another justification of writing diaries in Persian is that as natural with any group of learners, some learners tend to be extroverted and some others are more introverted. It seems, therefore, important to let all learners (especially introvert ones) get rid of their affect and articulate about their feelings during the term. Although all the learners had excitedly accepted to participate in the research project, in practice, some of them didn't continue their participation and some others, occasionally, didn't hand their diaries, due to lack of time, being busy, or some other reasons.

This problem was especially tangible with male learners. Also there were some absentees in each session during the term. So, the learners didn't hand in their diaries. Furthermore, especially in male classes, some students decided not to write diaries any more, with no specific reason, and some others handed their diaries from time to time (not always). Therefore, the number of entries collected in male classes was 56 and in female classes it was 310.

In order to reduce the subjectivity of judgments, the researcher didn't work on the diaries, rather he asked three raters to review all the diaries.

They investigated each and every statement which indicates using any of the two types of avoidance strategies. They took two criteria into consideration, either the students mentioned some use of avoidance strategies clearly, or they gave the raters a hint which led them find any examples. Some of the diaries collected were mere summaries of class events and the content of these diaries could, thus, not be used for analysis.

Still, some others were about positive feelings of learners during each session, which were not related to the topic of this study. Out of 310 entries collected from female learners, only 61 entries were determined as true

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expressions of avoidance strategy use. For male learners out of 56 entries just 7 cases were referred to the use of avoidance strategies.

4. Results

Based on Shokou language proficiency test, all the participants of the present study had passed the test successfully. They were considered as intermediate proficiency level learners of English.

With respect to data collected by the questionnaire, the mean score for the whole participants' level of motivation irrespective of their gender was 139.73.

For females this mean was 176.09 which was above the sample mean, while for males it was 103.38 which was below the average mean of the sample. The figures clearly show that the female group was more motivated than the male group.

In terms of their preferences in language learning strategy use, the female group (mean=152.95) was also higher strategy user than male group (mean=85.62) as their whole sample average mean was 119.50 (table 1).

Table 1: Mean scores for motivation and strategy use by gender

	Motivation	Strategy Use
Female	176.09 (39)	152.95 (39)
Male	103.38 (23)	85.62 (23)
Mean	139.73 (62)	119.50 (62)

Concerning the learners' diaries, the researchers investigated the available data collected. Since the effect of gender was to be investigated, the following table shows the frequency of avoidance strategy including topic avoidance and message abandonment types in relation to learners' gender.

Table 2: Frequency of avoidance strategy based on gender type

	Topic avoidance	Message abandonment	Total
Female	52	9	61
Male	4	3	7

As can be seen from table 2, the frequency of using avoidance strategies (in its both types) is not very high. Totally, the frequency of avoidance strategy use by male learners is less than female learners.

Given the diaries, different reasons for avoidance strategies were found by three raters: lack of knowledge, the effect of fellow students, stress, lack of confidence, the effect of teacher, score, and fatigue (table 3). There were also some other reasons which were either less important or difficult to categorize.

As it was mentioned earlier, majority of diaries were, often, mere reports of what happened during each session, which made it difficult to find any statement or example of using avoidance strategies in such diaries.

Table 3: Various reasons of avoidance strategy use and their freq. based on gender

	Lack of knowledge	Fellow Students	Stress	Lack of confidence	Teacher	Score	Fatigue	Other
Female	14	12	8	8	4	2	1	12
Male	1	-	1	1	-	-	1	3

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of the present study was to probe into the frequency and motive of using avoidance strategies by learners of English in speaking English courses.

To this end, both quantitative and qualitative data sources were used. A questionnaire was administered to learners to find out about their learning styles and strategies. They were also given a motivation test to examine if they were motivated enough to make communication in English.

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Learners were, then, asked to write their diaries about each session so that they could express their feelings, needs, attitudes, etc. This was a framework for learners to self-assess their activities and learning styles, including various strategies they employed during each session. At the same time, using avoidance strategies by learners and reasons behind this were particularly important, as it was the focus of the study.

Two research questions were raised at the beginning of the study. They were as follows:

1. What are the reasons of avoidance strategy use?
2. What is the relationship between gender and avoidance strategy use?

The first question sought to find the reasons of using avoidance strategies by learners. As mentioned earlier, there were various reasons of using such strategies, the most important and salient of which were 'lack of knowledge, the effect of fellow students, stress, lack of confidence, the effect of teacher, fear of scores, and fatigue' respectively. The finding supports the view expressed by Pawlak, (2005) that in many cases avoidance strategy is due to learners' lacking L2 competence and their inability to communicate meaning. The first and most frequent reason directly stated in this study was lack of knowledge. Among the following diary samples translated into English, this reason is clearly stated:

Week 1 (Female, 16)

** Since I hadn't had any practice on language for about 15 months, I now feel that whenever I wanted to speak I forget all the words, as a result I am not very active in class.*

Week 3 (Female, 15)

** Anxiously I tried to speak, but what if I made a mistake in speaking. I was not sure about grammaticality of the sentences, so I quitted.*

Week 4 (Female, 15)

** I was a volunteer to speak. When the teacher started to ask his questions, I felt I didn't know how to answer his questions, so I decided not to answer any more questions.*

Week 7 (Male, 23)

** I couldn't speak that day, because I wanted to ask a question, but I didn't know which word I should use for 'volunteer'. Besides I was not sure about the grammaticality of my question. I started to ask my question but after just a few words I stopped and said: "nothing, sorry"*

Week 10 (Female, 14)

**I'm not willing to answer any questions because my pronunciation is poor.*

The second reason was the effect of fellow students. This effect was shown as some students speak so much that others have neither time nor opportunity to speak.

Week 1 (Female, 17)

** Whenever a question is raised (by the teacher), as we are still thinking about it, Miss 'SH' has already answered the question. I mean she doesn't let us think.*

Week 16 (Female, 16)

** Some of the students answered the questions very rapidly. Their answers were similar to those of mine, so I thought I didn't need to repeat them.*

Week 1 (Female, 15)

** Some of the students felt themselves weak in front of other students, and it put me in a bad mood.*

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Another reason which seemed to play an important role in using avoidance strategy was lack of confidence. Here, the subjects mentioned that they knew how to say something; however, they felt they were not confident enough to say anything or to continue what they were saying. This factor was also found by Marefat (2002) in her study.

Week 2 (Female, 24)

** I'm afraid of speaking in class due to lack of confidence.*

Week 8 (Female, 23)

** Today the teacher asked an interesting question... I was thinking of saying what I thought, but I was too shy to say anything.*

Stress also played a role which led students to use some avoidance strategies which was also indicated by Cowie (2004).

Week 7 (Female, 14)

• I was so anxious that I made a mistake in my responses, so I decided to be silent in the remaining time.

Week 5 (Male, 15)

• I wish there were a more intimate atmosphere in class, because we could speak more easily and freely. When the atmosphere is very formal there is a kind of stress which prevents us to say anything.

The teacher and his effect, especially fear of him, also played a role.

Week 1 (Female, 14)

** The teacher is too serious and sends us negative energy!*

Week 1 (Female, 13)

** I don't feel comfortable in your class, because you are very serious.*

There were some interesting expressions regarding the effect of the teacher.

Week 2 (Female, 16)

** Whenever I wanted to say something, I would start talking about my uncle.... That session the teacher greeted me: "how is your uncle doing?" I knew he was kidding me. But some students laughed at me. I, therefore, decided not to participate in any other discussion.*

Week 5 (Female, 15)

** It was the teacher who was speaking, not letting us give our opinion!*

Fear of score or more specifically this idea that speaking wrongly or ungrammatically can influence on their final score, has also been mentioned by some learners.

Week 5 (Female, 16)

** The principal reason which prevents me from speaking is the fear of my final score.*

Week 6 (Female, 16)

** Sometimes I am under a lot of stress because you may give me a negative mark or a zero.*

Another reason was fatigue.

Week 8 (Female, 26)

** Last night my brother had come over to our house, so we stayed up until 2:30 a.m. As a result I was really tired and sleepy today, so I couldn't be that much active.*

Week 9 (Male, 22)

** That day I was really tired because I couldn't get any rest, so my mind was not in class and I couldn't concentrate... so I made a terrible mistake.*

There were also some other reasons which were listed under the general name 'other', for they were either difficult to categorize or less important.

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Week 4 (Female, 20)

** That day I had a headache, so I couldn't concentrate, nor I could speak.*

Week 4 (Female, 17)

** I couldn't remember what I had prepared for the 'reading' section, so I didn't answer any question. I really wanted to leave the class and never come back!*

In response to the second research question concerning the effect of gender on using avoidance strategies, the female group has clearly outnumbered the male group in terms of their uses. Regardless of the total number of dairies collected among female and male groups, the 61 cases of avoidance strategy use by female group in comparison to 7 cases of male group clearly supports the case in favor of the female rather than the male participants. Also given the data collected in the questionnaire, the average means of motivation level and strategy use of the female group are much higher than the male group. This is in line with the findings of the research carried out by other researchers such as Ehrman and Oxford (1989), Hyland (1993) and Oxford and Burry-stock (1995).

In general, the findings of the study support the held view that females face the challenging task of language learning better than males. Given the fact that they are higher language strategy users and more motivated language learners in comparison to males which has been supported by the present research findings, they show this capacity in their endeavors to learn English. The higher number of strategies used by them even the avoidance ones indicate they welcome the challenging task of language learning process. The very act of writing more dairies and acknowledging the hidden reasons behind them can be considered as an indication of their readiness for the task of communication.

Based on the types of reasons underling avoidance strategies mainly expressed by female group the following considerations can be listed:

1. The Iranian language learners mainly suffer from the lack of language knowledge and its communication use in their classes. They need more grammatical and vocabulary knowledge which needs to be explicitly and implicitly presented and followed by wide variety of receptive and productive activities to reinforce their automatic uses.
2. The psychological factors are of prime consideration in our EFL classes. The anxiety-free context can reduce the amount of stress and tension and build up high level of confidence among the learners.
3. The passivity of learners in spoken English classes can be reduced by the equal approach the teachers hold toward different learners group regardless of their gender and different patterns of their behaviors.

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