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An Investigation on Communication Strategies in English Classrooms

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Abstract

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. 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. The first aim of the study sought to find the reasons of using avoidance strategies by learners. There are 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. As with the goal, that was the effect of Gender on using avoidance strategies, female learners appeared to be more avoidance strategy users. Generally speaking, it seemed, gender had no significant influence on the use of avoidance strategies. With regard to the effect of age on using avoidance strategies, the third aim, it seemed that age had a marginal effect on the use of avoidance strategies, in that, as the age increased, the use of avoidance strategy decreased.

Keywords: Self-assessment, communication strategies, avoidance strategies, Language Learning

Introduction

The study of strategies generally and communication strategies (CSs) specifically, has favored a lot of attraction and interests among researchers. For the first thing, the concept of 'strategy' is a fuzzy one. There have been some general detentions in which strategies have been defined as consisting of some "mental or behavioral activity 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 (1980) 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 other courses.

Since learning in another language is different from learning other subjects (Thanasoulas, 2002) a variety of factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, affect, etc., are likely to promote or even militate against success. 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, two factors and their effects are going to be investigated in this study; gender and age. 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 in some other aspects of learning no difference could be found.

Age is still another factor which is believed to have significant effect on the frequency and type of strategies. Since learners in speaking courses are usually of different age groups, finding the pattern and frequency of using communication strategies, especially avoidance strategy, can be useful to the teachers in dealing with learners of different ages. In the literature, the results about influence of age are also controversial, although it is widely accepted by teachers and researchers that the younger the learners, the more efficient they are in learning.

In order to investigate the pattern of using avoidance strategies, a particular and somewhat new technique has been employed in the present paper, which is usually referred to as 'diary study'. Diary writing is a technique which is a subtype of a broader category in the process of learning/teaching, which is self-assessment, which is in turn an aspect of assessment process.

Diary writing seems to be novel for learners in and about the classroom settings. Writing diaries gives learners an opportunity to express themselves freely and reveals their deep feelings and attitudes regardless of their extroversion or introversion. Taking all the advantages and limitations of diary writing into consideration, it can be said "diaries… have a valuable place in the overall methodological repertoire of the language research" (Nunan, 1992, p.124).

Review of the Related Literature

The concept of 'strategy' has made lots of controversy among practitioners and researchers. As it was mentioned earlier, a distinction is often made between three types of strategies namely, production, communication, and learning strategies. Communication strategies consist of attempts to deal with problems of communication that have arisen in interaction. A language learning strategy is "an attempt to develop linguistic and sociolinguistic competence in the target language" (Tarone, 1980, p.419).

CSs are product-oriented. In addition, Dörnyei and Scott (1997) indicate the problem-orientedness feature of CSs. It is considered as a way, used most often by a learner who has a limited command of the language, to express a meaning in a second or foreign language.

In case there is a lack of grammatical or vocabulary knowledge, a learner who tries to communicate, needs to make up for this deficiency. Tarone (1980) refers to CS as "an interactional phenomenon, a mutual attempt of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in situations where requisite meaning structures are not shared" (p.419).

There seems to be two competing approaches regarding CSs, namely: The Interactional approach and The Psychological approach, each of which has led to different taxonomies. The taxonomy which has been adopted here in this paper has been proposed by Tarone (1980) where 'Avoidance Strategy' is classified into two subtypes, that is, 'Topic Avoidance' and 'Message Abandonment'. According to her, by topic

avoidance one avoids referring to a salient object because he/she 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.

Factors Affecting CSs Use

"There is a veritable plethora of individual learner variable which researchers have identified as influencing learning outcomes" (Ellis, 1994, p. 471). In a classification proposed by Altman (1980) there is a list of variables influencing language learning including 'Age', 'Sex', 'Social Class' and 'Ethnic Identity', among which the first two are related to the present project. Ellis considers these two factors –as well as some other factors- as 'Social' factors. According to her, these factors –along with social class and ethnic identity- influence "the attitudes held by different… learners and… lead to different levels of L2 proficiency" (p.201).

Age has received a lot of attention from sociolinguistics. Due to 'Critical Period Hypothesis', "There is widely-held lay belief that younger L2 learners generally do better than older learners" (Ellis, 1994, p.484). This is a great obstacle to adult language learners –which is in the minds of both learners and teachers (Schleppegrell, 1987). This benefit is, however, controversial in that whether significant differences do exist in L2 learning regarding age.

Classroom researchers have shown increasing interests in examining gender-related patterns of their behavior in their work. There are a number of studies done by several researchers on gender differences.

Women almost always do better in the standardness of their speech and use of prestigious language (Brustall, 1975; Boyle, 1987; Nyikos, 1990; Spolsky, 1989). As a result, one can expect that women might be and do better in L2 learning than men. Oxford and Nyikos (1989, cited in Green & 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, we can conclude that female learners are more active strategy users.

In summary, Ellis asserts that gender is "likely to interact with other variables in determining L2" (p.204) learning. It is important to bear in mind that "gender related patterns dovetail with all the other dynamics of language behavior: Ethnic, Class, Regional and Age differences all affect speaking styles" (Tannen, 1996, p.341).

Personal Differences

Individual differences among learners have a significant role in using CSs 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 mentioned above, psychological and emotional dimensions of second language learning seem to be of high importance (Dewaele, 2005). As acknowledged by many researchers in the field (Dörnyei, 2003; Finch, 2001; Kristmanson, 2000), affective contributions are central to second or foreign language learning which implies the important role of affect.

Lafford (2004) discusses the relationship between the frequency of CSs use and proficiency level. She mentions some body of research (LaBarka & Kanji, 1986; Poulisse & Schils, 1989 to name a few) in which it has been found that as the proficiency level of a learner increases, the number of CSs used decreases, which is in line with her own conclusion.

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

Assessment is the measurement of the ability of the learners or the measurement of the success of a course. Assessment is considered as a process of collecting and interpreting information in order to make decision on the students' performance (Srimavin & Darasawang, 2004). Assessment is used for different purposes such as identifying students' problems, making judgments on their performance and providing feedback to students. It is a term which seems to have a negative impression among both learners and teachers. It implies so many different concepts such as test, stress, mark, pass or fail. However, assessment is just one stage in teaching-learning process: "goals are set and attainment of these goals is monitored, which then leads to feedback and a renewed cycle of goal setting and learning" (Tudor, 1996, p. 161). It is, then, an integral part of teaching (Tudor, 1996).

Diary Study

It was mentioned earlier that diary writing is used as a technique to elicit learners' ideas, feeling, and attitudes towards classroom settings which can lead us to find reasons or motives of using avoidance strategies. Self-assessment which diary writing is one form of it is a key issue in the process of learning and teaching generally and in learner-centered mode of teaching specifically which leads to autonomous language learning and builds more independency on the part of the learners. It is 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.
Nunan (1992) considers diaries as an important tool in language research. Finally 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).

Research Questions
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 author is trying to find the reasons for which learners do not speak very much. Furthermore, two factors which are supposed to have effects on the use of avoidance strategies, that is, the influence of age and gender are 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?
3. What is the relationship between Age and Avoidance Strategy use?

Methodology

Participants

The participants were 62 learners from Enghelab-e-Seyedan Language Institute, Marvdasht, Fars Province. They consisted of 23 male and 39 female learners. They were studying at R&R1 (Review & Reinforcement) level, according to ILI Institute Graduation level, that is they were all at the intermediate level of proficiency. It is worth mentioning that according to ILI Level, there are six SEC (Spoken English Course) levels which consist of Beginning and Pre-Intermediate level. Finishing SEC6 level, learners are permitted to proceed to six R&R levels. R&R 1 and 2 are considered as Intermediate levels, and then there are Upper-Intermediate and Advanced levels. They were, then, grouped into three different groups according to their age, i.e., Teenagers (13-19), young learners (19-30), adults (30 and above), based on Berk's (2007) age classification. However, the three groups were not placed into three different

classes. Rather they all attended the same class, the same class atmosphere. The number of learners in each age group were; Teens: 27, Young learners: 8, and adults: 4, in female learners and 18, 3, and 2, in male learners respectively. All the learners had passed at least six levels in the same institute (that is SEC levels). Table 1 below shows the classification of participants according to their age and gender.

Table 1: *The number of participants according to their gender and age*

	Male	Female
Teenagers	18	27
Youngsters	3	8
Adults	2	4
Total	**23**	**39**

Instruments

In this research three measuring instruments were used. The first one was an Institute Language Proficiency Test (ILPT) –Enghelab-e-Seyedan English Institute Test- of the previous level (SEC6) to determine the learners' proficiency level. The second one was a Persian version of Motivation Test battery from Gardner (1985), 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.
The last instrument, used in determining students' general tendencies in language learning, was a questionnaire adopted from Gardner (1985) to survey learners' general strategies and tendencies in spoken English courses.

Data Collection

In the process of data collection, the ILPT test of previous level (SEC6) which all the learners had passed through was chosen to be considered as their proficiency test. In fact, this test was administered to them to be sure on the part of the researcher that all language learners are proficient enough to be placed in intermediate level.
As mentioned earlier, a motivation test was administered to the students in the very first session of R&R1 term. Since Spoken English Courses are considered extra curriculum programs in which students are not forced to enroll, the very act of enrollment can reveal that all learners are motivated to learn English as a means to communicate. However, this is a factor which the researcher couldn't depend on solely, since there might be other reasons for such learners to participate in these classes, one of which can be the role of their family or even their school to force them to enroll in such classes. As a result, a motivation test seemed crucial here. The third stage consisted of administering a questionnaire on the purpose of surveying learners' overall tendencies and preferences. Both motivation test and questionnaire, which had been translated into Persian, were, then, reviewed by a couple of university professors to check for accuracy of translation.

Then 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 in, samples of diaries from Nunan (1992) 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 lead 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 (1386/2007) which consisted of 19 sessions.

It was definitely important for the students to be able to write their diaries freely. Therefore, in order to avoid any misunderstanding to happen, both motivation test and questionnaire were translated into Persian. Furthermore, learners were asked to write their diaries in 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. As a result they need to be able to express themselves clearly. 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/couldn't hand their diaries, due to lack of time, being busy, or some other reasons. This problem was especially tangible with male learners.

Data Analysis

After collecting learners' diaries, they were investigated to find any examples or statements of using avoidance strategies. 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 was indicative of 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.

Since the effect of age and gender was to be investigated, the numbers of each type of avoidance strategy were reported once according to the gender of learners and once more according to their age.

They, therefore, came up with four tables for each. We, then, formed four final tables for each part, that is, two tables which show the frequency of avoidance strategy use based on age and gender, and still two more tables showing the reasons for which avoidance strategies have been used, again based on age and gender. In the next stage both motivation test and questionnaire were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS), version 9.0, and Chi-square analysis.

Results and Discussion

Results of the Questionnaire

There were 24 questions in the questionnaire based on five point scale from 'Strongly Agree' to 'Strongly Disagree'. The two tables 1 and 2 (Appendix I) present the results of the questionnaire in percentages. As an example item 12 (Table 2), which are not significant at $\rho<0.05$ for both genders, deals with using gestures if learners can not remember one or more words in English. In other words, this item refers to using some kind of 'compensation strategies' by learners. Investigating the frequency of responses to each choice shows that 51% of female in contrast to 43% of male learners were 'agree' or 'strongly

agree' to use such a strategy. However 31% of females and 26% of males pointed out their disagreement to use such strategy. 18% of female and 31% of male learners were 'undecided'.

Table 2: *Item #12, Chi-square results for both gender groups*

12. I use gesture if I can't remember some words		
Male		Female
Chi-Square	2.870	5.487
df	4	4
Asymp. Sig.	.580	.241

In contrast, in item 14 (Table 3), which refers to paraphrasing, 100% of females and 94% of males showed that they considered it important; this is also supported by significant result of Chi-square which reveals to be significant at $\rho<0.05$ level of significance. If we compare this item with the previous one, it is revealed that learners seem to prefer paraphrasing rather than mime to get their meaning across. In practice, however, frequent use of avoidance strategies was reported by the same learners, which is in contrast with their response to this item.

Table 3: *Item #14, Chi-square results for both gender groups*

14. If I can't remember a word I try to use other words or expressions to convey the same meaning		
Male		Female
Chi-Square	12.870	20.462
df	2	2
Asymp. Sig.	.002	.000

Diary Study

The main part of the present study, as the name suggests, is the diary study. As mentioned earlier, all the learners in R&R1 level had accepted to take part in the project. Naturally, there were some absentees in each session during the term. So they 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 were 310. The following tables show the frequency of avoidance strategy use, once based on the gender solely and once again based on both age and gender.

Table 4: *Frequency of entries in which learners showed avoidance strategy use and their percentage based on gender type*

	Topic avoidance	Message abandonment	**Total**
Female	52 =16.7%	9 =2.9%	**61** **=19.6%**
Male	4 =7.1%	3 =5.3%	**7** **=12.4%**

Table 5: *Frequency entries in which learners showed avoidance strategy use and their percentage based on age and gender*

	Topic avoidance	Message abandonment	**Total**
Teenager Female	41 =13.2%	8 = 2.5%	**49** **=15.7%**
Male	3 =5.3%	2 = 3.5%	**5** **=8.8%**
Youngster Female	10 = 3.2%	1 = 0.32%	**11** **=3.52%**
Male	1 = 1.7%	1 = 1.7%	**2** **=3.4%**
Adult Female	1 = 0.32%	---------	**1** **=0.32%**

Male	----------	----------	-------

As can be seen from table 4, the frequency of using avoidance strategies (in its both types) is not very high. It can be attributed to learners' high motivation to learn English and to use it to make communication. Totally, the frequency of avoidance strategy use by male learners is less than female learners. As mentioned earlier, females use strategies more frequently than males (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989) especially compensation and affective strategies (Gob & Foong, 1997).

However, it is interestingly noticeable that male learners used less 'topic avoidance' than female learners while, they used more of 'message abandonment' than their female counterparts. As Gass and Varonis (1986) asserted, men tend to produce more output in their interactions than women do. Male learners, therefore, seemed to start speaking more frequently than females but then they quit for various reasons which are to be discussed in next section.

The second table shows clearly that as the age increases, the frequency of avoidance strategy use decreases. The frequency of using avoidance strategies was higher for teenagers than young learners. In turn young learners used more of this strategy than adults. Particularly, no use of such strategies was reported by male adults (Table 5).

In the next step two other tables, i.e., tables 6 and 7, were formed in which the reasons of using avoidance strategies were investigated.

According to the diaries, different reasons for avoidance strategies were found by three raters: lack of knowledge, the effect of fellow students, stress, and lack of confidence, the effect of teacher, score, and fatigue. There were also some other reasons which were either less important or difficult to categorize. As it was mentioned earlier, 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. The next section deals with these reasons in more details.

Table 6: *Various reasons of avoidance strategy use and their frequencies based on gender*

	Lack of knowledge	Fellow students	Stress	Lack of confidence	Teacher	Score	Fatigue	Other
Female	14	12	8	8	4	2	1	15
Male	1	--	1	1	--	--	1	2

Table 7: *Various reasons of avoidance strategy use and their frequencies based on age and gender*

	Lack of knowledge	Fellow students	Stress	Lack of confidence	Teacher	Score	Fatigue	Other
Teenager Female	12	10	8	4	4	2	--	10
Male	1	--	1	1	--	--	1	1
Youngster Female	1	2	--	4	--	--	1	5
Male	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	1
Adult Female	1	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Male	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

An Investigation of Avoidance Strategies and the Related Reasons

In this section what have been found in the previous section are discussed by giving some extracts of the diaries for each reason.

As mentioned earlier, three raters reviewed all the diaries to find any examples of using avoidance strategies. The first and most frequent reason which was mentioned directly was lack of knowledge. As intermediate learners, it was mentioned, they sometimes tried to say something and sometimes even started saying that, but since they lack grammatical and/or vocabulary knowledge to express themselves in the very situation, they either avoided the topic or abandoned what they had started.

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 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 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 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".

In one entry, problems regarding pronunciation played a role to use Avoidance Strategy.
Week 10 (Female, 14)
• I'm not willing to answer any questions because my pronunciation is poor.

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.

Week 3 (Male, 14)
• I am a shy student and I don't usually speak very much. I am also afraid of asking any questions.

The effect of fellow students was a reason which was often mentioned in subjects' diaries. 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 5 (Female, 16)
• When the students participate in a group discussion, I wonder if my opinion is a repetition of what they just said.

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.

In one entry, however, the subject mentioned that the students may feel unable to say anything due to their fellow students.
Week 1 (Female, 15)
• Some of the students felt themselves weak in front of other students, and it put me in a bad mood.

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.

Week 3 (Female, 14)
• Most of the time when I start speaking, suddenly, I forget everything and can't continue any more. Besides, I fear my teacher.

There were some interesting exceptions 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 to 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.

It seems interesting that none of male learners mentioned anything about the effect of fellow students, the teacher and the score.
Stress also plays a role which leads students to use some avoidance strategies.
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 (Female, 17)
• I think I knew many vocabularies, but this stress didn't let me be a volunteer.

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.

Stress, therefore, shows an influence in learning and trying to learn another language, which was also indicated by Cowie (2004).
Another reason which was more frequent in the male class than in the female class was fatigue.
Week 8 (Female, 26)
• Last night 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.

Week 8 (Male, 14)
• That night I was really unhappy, because my cassette had been broken and I couldn't do my homework. Besides I was very tired. Therefore that night in class I thought my mind was locked and I couldn't speak a word.

In addition to the aforementioned reasons, there were some other reasons which were classified under the name 'other'. They are as follow:
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!

Week 1 (Female, 24)
• Because I saw that my 'general information' was so poor, I got angry.

Week 4 (Female, 15)
• Some of my friends discussed about shopping. Again I couldn't say what I had prepared beforehand (No reason is provided).

Week 6 (Female, 13)
• I try not to say anything before I think about it, so I remained silent.

Week 7 (Female, 23)
• I think one of the important reasons for which I don't speak a lot in class is that, when you introduce a topic to us to talk about, as soon as I want to speak a fellow student ask me some questions. As a result I forget what I wanted to say.

Week 5 (Female, 17)
• I feel when the teacher asks one of students a question, he, then, wants to elicit everything from that student about that question.

Week 10 (Female, 16)
• Most of the time, I'd like to speak, but I just don't know why I can't.

Week 12 (Female, 21)
• I was able to say that this comparison was impossible (about cities), *but unfortunately, I avoided to speak for a reason which is vague for myself.*

Week 10 (Female, 34)
• The teacher wrote something on the board and then asked for students opinions. Since I thought that was a nonsensical discussion, I preferred not to participate in that.

Week 15 (Male, 16)
• I was absent-minded that session, so I made mistake and then said nothing.

Week 11 (Male, 24)
• I didn't prepare myself for that exercise because I was absent-minded. Besides I had no idea to make up a new conversation.

From what was mentioned earlier, regarding the reasons of using avoidance strategies, and based on some extracts just mentioned, it seems the result of the study is in line with studies mentioned by some researchers (Dörneyi, 2003; Rossiter, 2003, to name a few).

Conclusion

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. 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.

Three 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?
3. What is the relationship between Age and Avoidance Strategy use?

The first one 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. There were also some other reasons which were listed under the general name 'other', for they were either difficult to categorize or less important (the examples were provided in the previous chapter). It should be indicated again that, most diaries were brief or they provided some superficial information.

As with the second question, that is, the effect of Gender on using avoidance strategies, female learners appeared to be more avoidance strategy users. One should be conscious, however, that in practice, male learners used more of 'message abandonment' while female learners used more of 'topic avoidance'. Generally speaking, it seemed, gender had no significant influence on the use of avoidance strategies.

With regard to the effect of age on using avoidance strategies, that is the third question, it seemed that age had a marginal effect on the use of avoidance strategies, in that, as the age increased, the use of avoidance strategy decreased.

Implications of the Study

This study was done based on diary writing by learners. Self-assessment, therefore, played an important role in this study. As a result, the main implication of the study can be considered as enabling learners to set their own goals, monitor their own progress, and assess their own learning progress, as they are indicated as major purposes of self-assessment.

It was revealed that different factors played role in using avoidance strategies. Affective filters such as stress, confidence, etc., as well as different styles and strategies seemed to play an influential role in learning. Therefore, this study implies that language teachers should take into account the role of the affective dimension of language learning.

Another, yet, important implication of the study is for learners to get familiar with different types of communication strategies and particularly avoidance strategies and to learn when and how to use proper strategies, while avoiding 'avoidance strategies'. In doing so, teachers could help their learners.

Suggestions for Further Research

The present study was an attempt to find out which motives learners have, when they use avoidance strategies, taking into account, the influence of gender and age on the pattern and amount of using these strategies. Although in this study just these two variables were involved, other variables such as ethnic and regional ones can be investigated. Considering as many variables as possible will enable teachers and researchers to draw a more accurate and perfect picture of what is happening in the process of learning.

In this study, the participants were chosen to be intermediate learners of English. This choice has been justified by the fact that intermediate learners are somewhere in a middle of a continuum which renders dependency on the teacher on the one end (beginners) and independency from him on the other (advanced learners). Investigating the pattern and reasons of avoidance strategy use by beginners and/or advanced learners can be the focus of further study.

The focus of this study was diary writing as the main source of data. Other types of data collection tools (like interviews, think aloud…) or a combination of them can also be used in further research.

Finally, although the participants in this study were language learners, teachers can also be chosen, to find out their attitudes, preferences and strategies they would use to deal with learners' problems, needs, attitudes and feelings –with focus on using communication strategies generally and avoidance strategies particularly.

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