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ABSTRACT

Three experiments from the late 1970s concerning second language communication strategies are studied for evidence supporting their classification as either avoidance or achievement strategies. The experiments had as subjects native English-speaking children in a French immersion program, adult second language learners of English who were native speakers of Spanish, Turkish, or Mandarin, and intermediate-level American students learning Russian. The studies show that language learners use avoidance strategies to different extents, irrespective of age, native language, or target language. They also give only very general clues about the overall use of avoidance at different learning levels and suggest that reliable classification of communication strategies is difficult. It is recommended that researchers take greater care to report details of task, context, and subject characteristics in their investigations. (MSE)

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ON THE USE OF LEXICAL
AVOIDANCE STRATEGIES
IN FOREIGN-LANGUAGE COMMUNICATION

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Introduction and aim

According to Pit Corder, a foreign-language learner facing language difficulty in a foreign-language communication situation may adopt either of two principal "macro-strategies" (Corder 1978). He may have a strong motivation or need to express meaning in the foreign language, and therefore use all the linguistic resources at his disposal, often at the risk of failing to reach his communicative goal, i.e. the successful passing on of precise information to his interlocutor. To these resources, which include paraphrasing, the invention of new words, guessing, and borrowing from the mother tongue, Corder gave the collective name "risk-taking" or "resource-expansion" strategies. Throughout this paper, however, they will be referred to as "achievement strategies" (so termed by Faerch and Kasper 1980).

In the opposite case, the learner ignores or abandons the target concepts for which he lacks the appropriate vocabulary. Due to inability to express meaning in the foreign language, he prefers to resort to one "escape route" (Ickenroth 1975) or another, at the cost of informative preciseness. These escape routes, commonly referred to as "avoidance strategies" in the recent literature, have also been termed "risk-avoiding strategies" (Corder 1978), "message-adjustment strategies" (Váradi 1980), and "reduction strategies" (Faerch & Kasper 1980).

The aim of the present paper is to present a typology of lexical avoidance strategies, to interpret the results as to the proportion of avoidance strategies and achievement strategies used by the learners in three different experiments conducted in the field of communication strategies, and to comment on some of the problems involved in the study of communication strategies in general and avoidance strategies in particular.

A typology of avoidance strategies

Although there exists some terminological and classificatory disagreement in the typologies established for communication strategies, most of them derive from the typology originally presented by Váradi (1980) and enlarged upon by Tarone (1977). In these typologies it has been customary to distinguish between three different avoidance strategies:

(a) *Topic avoidance* (Tarone & al. 1976a, 1976b, Tarone 1977, Corder 1978) occurs when the learner does not talk about concepts (or "topics") for which the vocabulary is not known. In extreme cases this may result in no communication at all.[1] In less extreme cases the learner directs his conversation away from the troublesome topic, e.g. by omission.

(b) *Message abandonment* (Tarone & al. 1976a, Tarone 1977, Corder 1978) occurs when the learner starts expressing a target concept and suddenly realizes that he does not know how to go on. He then stops in mid-sentence, chooses another topic, and continues his conversation. In both topic avoidance and message abandonment, therefore, the troublesome topic is completely dropped by the learner.

(c) In *meaning replacement* (Váradi 1980), unlike in topic avoidance and message abandonment, the topic is, in fact, not dropped but preserved by the learner. However, instead of trying to expand his linguistic resources and overcome his communicative problem, he deliberately chooses to be less specific than he originally intended to be. This kind of "semantic avoidance" (so termed in Tarone & al. 1976b) always results in some degree of vagueness.

In an experiment designed to elicit the communication strategies that Finns and Swedish-speaking Finns adopt when communicating in English (Palmberg 1979), 103 learners were asked to describe a series of pictures, the first two of which depicted a cave in the mountains and a caveman coming out from the cave. The following examples are taken from the data collected, and illustrate how three learners chose to avoid the target item *cave*:

(1)	"I can see three mountains."	TOPIC AVOIDANCE
(2)	"A man is coming out from a . . . er . . . it's a stone aged man . . ."	MESSAGE ABANDONMENT
(3)	"A man comes out from his . . . home."	MEANING REPLACEMENT

Faerch and Kasper define strategies as "potentially conscious plans . . . for solving what to the individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular goal" (1980:60). The strategy of topic avoidance is adopted exclusively by learners perceiving problems in the planning phase of reaching their communicative goal. Message abandonment and meaning replacement, on the other hand, may also be adopted by learners confronted by a planning or retrieval problem at a later stage, i.e. in the realization phase. The three avoidance strategies, therefore, should be seen as a continuum rather than three separate categories, because, as Faerch and Kasper point out: "At the one end, the learner says 'almost' what she wants to say about a given topic (= meaning replacement), at the other end she says nothing at all about this (= topic avoidance)" (1980:91).

Establishing the learners' optimal meaning

A great problem in the study of avoidance strategies is to know when learners actually avoid. In other words: How do we know when learners say anything rather than what they wanted to say? This is a problem well-known to those studying learners' errors (see e.g. Schachter 1974, 1979). In a critical paper on the uses of Error Analysis, Stig Johansson objects both to tests of free production (e.g. compositions) and to translations as reliable, error-eliciting devices. In the former, he points out, "the choice of words and constructions can be controlled by the learner" (1975:331). In the latter, on the other hand, "an error is often avoided by an inexact translation or a translation which is correct from the viewpoint of the foreign language but is not a correct rendering of the original text" (p. 250).

In the study of communication strategies, the first attempt to systematically solve the problem of pinpointing learners' avoidance behaviour was that of Váradi. In an experiment designed to find out how close foreign-language learners came to producing what they actually wanted to produce, Váradi asked Hungarian learners of English to describe in writing a series of pictures, first in English, then in Hungarian. The rationale behind this procedure was that the mother-tongue version, written immediately after the English version, would reveal exactly what each learner wanted to produce, i.e. his "optimal meaning" (Váradi 1980).

Learners' use of avoidance strategies in three different experiments

Váradi's methodology was soon adopted by other investigators in the field of communication strategies. There were often modifications in the elicitation techniques used, the most important of which was a shift of interest from written to oral communication strategies. Three different experiments are presented below, those conducted by Tarone & al. (1976b), Tarone (1977), and Erwin (1979). Throughout the presentation of the results, the main emphasis will be on learners' use of avoidance strategies.

Experiment 1 (Tarone & al 1976b)

In an attempt to show patterns of stability or instability in children's use of communication strategies in a foreign language over a period of time, Tarone & al. used a "native-language base-line" to establish the learners' optimal meaning. Their elicitation instrument was a cartoon, and in addition to asking the learners, who were English-speaking children in a French immersion school in Toronto, to tell the events of the cartoon in French, they asked a control group consisting of monolingual English-speaking children of the same age group (viz 7 1/2 years) to tell the story in English. Tape-recordings were made of the narratives.

Table 1 (interpreted and modified from p. 130) shows the frequency of avoidance strategies used by six children, as compared to their use of achievement strategies and their use of correct French for the target items. The specific target items were verbs as well as objects decided upon in the semantic content of the cartoon (as judged by the native-language versions provided by the control group).

Table 1. Interpretation of Tarone & al:s data

Macro-strategies or correct French	Number of occurrences	%
Avoidance strategies	13	26
Achievement strategies	9	18
Correct French	28	56
Total	50	100

One year later, the same children were asked to perform the same task (with the same pictures) again, and their production was analysed as to their use of communication strategies.

For the 13 occurrences of avoidance strategies at Time I, the results are as follows: There were 11 shifts to correct French at Time II, one shift to an achievement strategy, and one occurrence of stabilized avoidance. Furthermore, there was a shift from correct French at Time I to avoidance at Time II.

Experiment 2 (Tarone 1977)

In Tarone's study of the use of communication strategies by adult foreign-language learners, the frequency of avoidance strategies was fairly small. Following Váradi Tarone set out to isolate the learners' optimal meaning with the aid of a story-telling task in both the native and the foreign language. The stories performed by the nine learners (who spoke Spanish, Turkish, and Mandarin as their mother tongue) were recorded on tape.

Table 2 (modified from p. 201) shows the strategy preferences for seven semantic target concepts by each learner (identified by their initials).

Table 2. Interpretation of Tarone's data

Learner & L1	Spanish			Turkish			Mandarin			Total
Macro-strategies	GU	RD	CT	DR	AH	BL	MR	JO	MS	8
Avoidance strategies	1	1	2	0	0	0	0	4	0	8
Achievement Strategies	8	6	4	7	6	9	10	4	5	59
Total	9	7	6	7	6	9	10	8	5	67

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Experiment 3 (Erwin 1979)

Somewhat different results were obtained by Erwin in his study of communication strategies used by 14 intermediate-level American students learning Russian as a foreign language. He elicited his data through oral narratives in English and in Russian, and each student provided his version of three different picture stories, containing in all 32 specific semantic target items.

In Erwin's study, the total number of occurrences of avoidance strategies and achievement strategies used in the task were 108 and 159 respectively. Moreover, assuming that the non-use of a communication strategy (as reported by Erwin) presupposed the knowledge of the correct Russian word, we get the results shown in Table 3 (interpreted and modified from p. 331).

Table 3. Interpretation of Erwin's data

Macro-strategies or correct Russian	Number of occurrences	%
Avoidance strategies	108	24.1
Achievement strategies	159	35.5
Correct Russian	181	40.4
Total	448	100.0

Discussion

As the three studies show, it is obvious that foreign-language learners make use of avoidance strategies to different extents, irrespective of age, mother tongue, or target language. It is equally obvious that these studies can only give very general directions as to the overall use of avoidance strategies by foreign learners at different levels of language proficiency. Great caution should be shown when interpreting such results, for several reasons.

First of all, reliable divisions of communication strategies even into either of the two macro-strategies suggested by Corder are very difficult to make. This has been demonstrated in Palmberg (1981 & 82), and was also pointed out by Erwin, who used a panel of four judges to classify and to decide on the communicative efficiency of the learners' productions (1979).

Secondly, it is clear that a final typology of communication strategies has not yet been achieved (see e.g. Bialystok & Fröhlich 1980, Erwin 1979). Therefore, in Tables 1-3, the interpretation and classification of communication strategies have been made according to the definitions of strategies given by the individual researchers, not according to their choice of terminology (cf. e.g. the principles of avoidance/paraphrase categorization in Tarone & al. 1976b and in Tarone 1977).

Thirdly, there is not yet any generally accepted way by which the frequency of different communication strategies could be accounted for. Tarone, to give but one example, clearly regards the use of *two* different communication strategies used by *one* learner to communicate *one* target item, as *two* occurrences of communication strategies. This may be seen in Table 2 e.g. for learner GU, who used, in all, *nine* communication strategies to communicate *seven* target items.

Fourthly, the number of factors governing the choice of communication strategies on the part of the learner is fairly large. These factors seem to be dependent on two main variables: a *learner* variable and a *situation* variable. The learner variable includes factors such as the learner's age, his learning level or stage of proficiency, his mother tongue, his knowledge of languages other than the mother tongue and the foreign language being communicated, and, finally, his personality characteristics. The situation variable, on the other hand, includes factors such as the foreign language being communicated, the target items being communicated (lexical vs. syntactic), the type of communication (real-life vs. test situation, motivated vs. unmotivated, written vs. spoken, one-way vs. two-way communication), and the language background of the interlocutor/experimenter (native speaker of the learner's target language vs. fellow foreign-language learner).

Therefore, as pointed out by Tarone (1979), it is essential that researchers take more care when reporting on their experiments, including for example the following information:

(a) What exactly was the testee asked to do?
(b) Who was present in the experimental situation?
(c) What was their relationship to the testee?
(d) What were their age and sex (experimenter as well as testee)?
(e) Was it a formal or informal situation?

Final comments

Avoidance behaviour is, by definition, an "easy way out" for the foreign-language learner who is unable to communicate a desired meaning due to vocabulary difficulty. Paradoxically, avoidance strategies may also be used by the learner to *ensure* correct comprehension by his interlocutor. Japanese learners who are tired of being constantly misunderstood when trying to pronounce an English word containing an /l/ or /r/ sound, may therefore deliberately avoid that word and instead use a synonym which causes them less difficulty in pronunciation. Although this phenomenon is claimed to be extremely rare (Schachter 1974), examples are provided in the literature. Cohen, for example, reports that Celce-Murcia's 2 1/2 year-old daughter would at times borrow a word from her second language rather than using a mother-tongue word with a sound that she had not yet mastered (Cohen 1975:121-122). Avoidance of this type presupposes a choice, and has therefore been referred to as "true avoidance" (Levenston & Blum 1977). In addition to second- or foreign-language learners, true avoidance in the lexical field is frequently adopted by e.g. teachers, translators, and editors of Simplified Readers intended for foreign-language learners.

FOOTNOTE

1. The reluctance on the part of the learner to engage in any conversation at all in the foreign language due to anxiety could, as suggested by Jaakko Lehtonen during the discussion following this paper, be seen as an avoidance strategy in its own right. If so, *conversation avoidance* would perhaps be the appropriate term to describe this kind of behaviour.

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