The Relationship between Ideal L2 Self and Oral Communication Strategies

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Abstract

Oral communication strategies can foster communication in the target language and also can help compensate for the shortcomings in communication. At the same time, an ideal L2 self as the desired future self can aspire a learner to become a fluent L2 speaker. The present study aimed to investigate the relationship between EFL learners’ ideal L2 self and their use of oral communication strategies. To this end, at first the Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI) and Ideal L2 Self Questionnaire (IL2SQ) were piloted with a sample of 278 participants. Then, 320 university students filled out the questionnaires. Next, a semi-structured interview was conducted with 32 participants who were purposefully selected based on their high levels of ideal L2 self. Statistical analysis of the data indicated that there is a positive relationship between ideal L2 self and oral communication strategies. Analysis of the interview data also revealed that learners with a high level of ideal L2 self preferred to use more social-affective strategies, fluency-oriented strategies, and accuracy-oriented strategies and fewer reduction strategies and message abandonment strategies. The findings imply that teachers should help learners to use oral communication strategies through motivating them to shape their ideal L2 self. Furthermore, teachers and students should know that the level of ideal L2 self can play a role in the type of oral communication strategies students prefer to use.

Keywords: Ideal L2 self; Oral communication strategies; Communication abilities.

1. Introduction

The way language learners can improve their communication abilities in the target language has been of growing interest. This has led many second language acquisition (SLA) researchers to focus on oral communication strategies (OCSs). Typically, oral communication strategies are considered as attempts between interlocutors to manipulate a limited linguistic system in order to promote communication (Corder, 1983; Poushelle, 1990; Taron, 1977). In fact, the goal of using OCSs is to maintain the stream of oral communication and overcome communication difficulties. Therefore, they are considered as a vital factor in improving speaking ability.

Moreover, many studies have indicated that OCSs are useful tools for learners to fill the gap between their communicative needs and the limited linguistic knowledge resources (Bialystok, 1990; Canale & Swain, 1980; Kasper & Kellerman, 1996; Nakatani & Goh, 2007). Research has promulgated that OCSs can act as a catalyst to enhance oral communication ability (Faerch & Kasper, 1983; Willems, 1987). Accordingly, Dornyei (1995) pointed out that the use of OCSs is a way of solving communication problems and therefore, they are vital for all language learners.

In fact, all language learners may face communication problems like retrieving a word or using an idiomatic expression in important communication situations. Nakatani (2010) has mentioned that OCSs can be used to “highlight interlocutors’ negotiation behavior for coping with communication breakdowns as communication enhancer” (p. 118). Consequently, one of the important issues in SLA research is the language learners’ use of OCSs, since they have a potential to compensate for communication deficits (Dornyei & Kormos, 1998; Kasper & Kellerman, 1996). As such, it is significant of paramount importance to study the role of OCSs in solving oral communication difficulties in the target language.

However, studies have demonstrated that different learners may employ OCSs differently to compensate for the gaps in communication (Bialystok, 1990; Nakatani & Goh, 2007; Paribakht, 1985; Taron, 1977). This is because many factors may play a role in developing and using oral communication strategies. Previous studies have revealed that the use of OCSs can be influenced by factors like language proficiency, gender, and individual differences.
Therefore, it is important to examine the variables that can influence the development and use of OCSs. In this line, Ellis (1994) mentioned that it is worth to investigate how language learners use OCSs differently by considering learners’ differences as well as situational and social factors. Accordingly, investigation of OCSs among language learners can prove useful for educators and teachers in order to choose appropriate methods for developing the use of OCSs.

Among numerous factors, it is assumed that an ideal L2 self as an affective factor might influence the use of OCSs. Dornyei (2005) in his L2 Motivational Self-System Model defines the ideal L2 self as “the desired future self that a learner aspires to become as a fluent L2 speaker” (pp.9-10). It is worth highlighting that the ultimate ideal L2 self is to be like the native speaker of an L2. Thereby, it might act as a powerful motivator for promoting communication in the target language.

Dornyei and Csizer (2002) have stated that an ideal L2 self can be like L2 motivation. As a result, it can act as a motivator for developing language proficiency (Taylor, 2013). The ideal L2 self as a future self-image motivates hope for future success. In this fashion, the relationship between the ideal L2 self and motivated L2 learning behavior has been evidenced by many studies (Al-Shehri, 2009; Csizer & Kormos, 2009; Dornyei & Chan, 2013; Kim and Kim, 2014; Kormos, Kiddle, & Csizer, 2011; Papi, 2010; Ryan, 2009; Taguchi, Magid, & Papi, 2009). Although the ideal L2 self can act as a motivator to encourage the learner to be a successful L2 speaker, in order to reach this dream, learners require to employ oral communication strategies.

Despite the fact that the ideal L2 self as a motivator can inspire hope, growth, advancement, and accomplishment in language learning, the role that the ideal L2 self can play in the use of OCSs is still understudied in SLA research. Of course a couple of studies have shed lights on the role of ideal L2 self in willingness to communicate. For instance, Munene (2013) found ideal L2 self as a predictor of L2 WTC and Bursali and Oz (2017) found a significant relationship between the ideal L2 self and willingness to communicate. But no study, to the best of the researchers’ knowledge, has focused on the role it may have in the use of OCSs. As such, the main objective of the current study was to investigate the possible relationship between the ideal L2 self and OCSs. Moreover, the study aimed to examine whether a higher ideal L2 self is associated with a higher use of OCSs among language learners. To this purpose, the following research question was addressed in the present study:

1. Is there any significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners’ ideal L2 self and their use of oral communication strategies?

2. Which oral communication strategies do the students with higher levels of ideal L2 self tend to use?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Oral Communication Strategies (OCSs)

For the first time, Selinker (1972) coined the word “strategy”. He noticed that some learners in interlanguage processes achieved complete meaning in communication without having adequate linguistic knowledge. After that, Varadi (1973 Cited in Tarone, 1977) utilized the term “communication strategy”. Subsequently, many researchers tried to define oral communication strategies from their own perspectives. Tarone (1977) defined it as a mutual attempt between interlocutors to agree on a meaning in contexts where communication breakdowns occur. Faurch and Kasper (1983) described it as “conscious plans in reaching a particular communicative goal” (p. 36). A while later, O’Malley and Chamot (1990) stated that through communication strategies, learners can negotiate meaning where linguistic or sociolinguistic problems hinder communication. Moreover, Dornyei and Scott (1997) pointed out that oral communication is an interactive process in which interlocutors interchangeably take the roles of speaker and listener in order to overcome the speaking problems. Recently, Nakatani (2010) mentioned that OCSs can be used to “highlight interlocutors’ negotiation behavior for coping with communication breakdowns as communication enhancer” (p. 118).

Generally, OCSs can be investigated from two perspectives. The interactional perspective views OCSs as linguistic devices for the negotiation of meaning. Language use and interactional function are fundamental components in this perspective. Moreover, OCSs are not entirely considered as part of the speaker’s linguistic
knowledge. They, however, are considered as the interaction process between both interlocutors who are involved to agree on communication goals. Totally, the researchers in this camp classify OCSs as the approximation, word coinage, circumlocution, literal translation, language switch, appeal for assistance, mime, and avoidance (Dornyei & Scott, 1995; Nakatani, 2006; Tarone, 1981). On the other hand, the psycholinguistic perspective views OCSs as verbal plans along with a speech production framework. The researchers in this view, emphasize the underlying thought processes that speakers undergo in using OCSs (Faerch & Kasper, 1983). In this respect, OCSs are classified as analysis-based strategies and control-based strategies. The former deal with circumlocution, paraphrase, transliteration and word coinage and the latter include code switching, appealing for assistance, ostensive definition and mime (Bialystok, 1990). It is argued that the interactive approach is more comprehensive than the psycholinguistic approach due to the fact that the interactional approach takes account of both interlocutors’ attempts for the efficient communication.

The investigation of OCSs in four decades has resulted into the development of several OCSs classifications by Tarone (1977), Faerch and Kasper (1983), Bialystok (1990), Paribakht (1985), Willems (1987), the Nijmegen Group (based on Pouliisse, 1987; Kellerman, 1991), Pouliisse (1993), and Dornyei and Scott (1995). Apparently, there is no agreement among these classifications. Following these classifications, Dörnyei and Kormos (1998) classified OCSs as lexical, grammatical, phonological and articulatory categories. This classification is considered the most comprehensive classification.

Broadly speaking, OCSs can be divided into two categories as avoidance or reduction strategies and achievement or compensatory strategies. Avoidance or reduction strategies deal with message abandonment, topic avoidance, meaning replacement. Practically, learners change away from unfamiliar topics, avoid solving communication problems, and reduce or abandon the messages they intended to convey. In contrast, achievement or compensatory strategies are employed when learners tend to tackle communication problems by an alternative plan for reaching their original goals. This category consists of cooperative strategies like appeal for help and non-cooperative ones such as L1-based strategies involving code switching, foreignizing, and literal translation; interlanguage-based strategies, such as substitution, generalization, exemplification, word-coinage, and restructuring; non-verbal strategies, such as mime and imitation. Also, time-gaining strategies (applying fillers to gain time to think), and prefabricated patterns (applying memorized stock phrases, usually for survival purposes) belong to this category.

In order to study OCSs, different tasks such as picture description, speaking tasks, topic description, cartoon description, definition formulation, jigsaw, object description, and narrative tasks have been used. However, it is argued that the type of task might impact not only the quantity but also the quality of OCSs use (Lee, 2004).

To take account of the deficiencies in investigating OCSs, Nakatani (2006) developed Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI). The questionnaire consists of two parts. The first part involves strategies for coping with speaking problems and the second part deals with strategies for coping with listening problems. The result of factor analysis indicated eight factors for 32 speaking items as social-affective, fluency-oriented, negotiation for meaning while speaking, accuracy-oriented, message reduction, nonverbal strategies while speaking, message abandonment, and attempt to think in English and seven factors for 26 listening items as negotiation for meaning while listening, fluency-maintaining, scanning, getting the gist, nonverbal strategies while listening, less active listener, and word-oriented. According to literature, OCSI is regarded as comprehensive research tool and has been used in many studies.

2.2. Ideal L2 Self

Dornyei (2005) introduced the L2 Motivational Self-System model with three components: (1) The ideal L2 self, as a fundamental component in the system, refers to the L2 specific aspect of one’s ideal self and is the representation of all the attributes that a person would ideally like to possess (2) the ought to L2 self-concerns the attributes that one believes one ought to possess and (3) the L2 learning experience stands for “situated”, “executive” motives related to the immediate learning environment and experience. Later, Dornyei (2009) explained ideal L2 self is a “vivid and real image that one can see, hear and feel one’s ideal self”. In this sense, the ideal L2 self is the image a learner would like to have in the future.
It is also worth highlighting that the ultimate ideal L2 self is to be like the native speaker of the L2. Thereby, it might act as a powerful motivator for promoting communication in the target language. However, some conditions must be provided for its establishment. Dornyei (2009) has mentioned nine key conditions for establishing an ideal L2 self: learner “has the desired future self-image” and that the desired future L2 self “is sufficiently different from the current self”, “is elaborate and vivid”, “is perceived as plausible”, “is not perceived as comfortably certain to reach”, “is in harmony or at least does not clash with other parts of the individual's self-concept”, “is accompanied by relevant and effective procedural strategies”, “is regularly activated in the learner's working self-concept” and “is offset by a counteracting feared possible self in the same domain” (pp. 9-10).

In order to study the ideal L2 self, various scales have been designed by researchers (Csizer & Kormos, 2009; Papi, 2010; Ryan, 2009; Ueki & Takeuchi, 2013). However, it is argued that the ideal L2 self scales represent only the key theoretical construct to examine learners' visions. In this way, Taylor (2013) has criticized that they are just the shadow of Dornyei's central hypothesis. They do not operationalize the construct in sufficient detail. Moreover, Taguchi et al. (2009) explained that the ideal L2 self has a dynamic nature and the self is multifaceted and constantly changing and evolving while goals, attitudes and potentials for the future change. For this reason, ideal L2 self scales must be very sensible.