

ISSUES OF SPEECH FLUENCY AND THE USAGE OF COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES BY HUNGARIAN TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

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Abstract: *The international demand of having speakers who are fluent in a multitude of languages is a significant one. The term 'fluent', by default, means that the speaker can continue a conversation (or their speech) without any possible hesitation or with only marginal ones. However, this is often not the case, as it can be seen both in everyday conversations with foreigners or delivering a speech at an international conference. Many non-native speakers of a language are facing difficulties when in a verbally challenging situation and as a result, come across the phenomena of a 'communication breakdown' or an episode of TOT (tip of the tongue). These two phenomena can be rather embarrassing for the speaker, resulting in a weakened self-esteem and may lead to the start of a negative spiral; a spiral that, in extreme cases, makes the speaker avoid communicating with foreigners all together. To help non-native speakers avoid such unpleasant situations, the usage of communication strategies should be carefully considered. In the following paper, the results of an online questionnaire will be presented, regarding the usage of communication strategies by Hungarian students and teachers of a secondary and tertiary level of education. The aim of the research was to shed light on the usage of communication strategies in modern offline conversations occurring between native speakers of a language and non-native speakers of the same language within Hungary. Some of the arguments presented in this paper are concerned with the most frequently used communication strategies used by Hungarians on such occasions; the research findings here seem to contradict that of common experience. Regarding taking the initiative if facing a foreigner in a conversation Hungarian speakers again seem to present a contradiction to popular belief. Furthermore, the notion of communication strategies and their likely conscious use is also dissected only to present some expected end results. In addition, the paper examines the possibility of teaching communication strategies in a school environment, while also considering the likely hindering factors and obstacles that could prevent students from acquiring above said strategies. It is worth noting, that teachers of a foreign language might want to pay attention to the question of teachability when it comes to communication strategies, both inside and outside the language classroom for the sake of a more effective future of language education. For this purpose, a section about this issue is also presented in this paper.*

Keywords: speech fluency; communication issues; communication strategies; language education, interlanguage.

1. Introduction

The term communication strategies (short form: CS), has been in the focus of second language acquisition research since the 1970s. After its first appearance in Selinker's article on Interlanguage (1972) it has had a tremendous effect on a number of fields of research including:

- bilingual/multilingual education
- foreign/second language acquisition
- language testing
- discourse analysis
- applied linguistics

Due to its elusive nature, the term itself is hard to determine. Accordingly, the following definitions have been suggested to describe the phenomena over the course of the years: Communication strategies are "... mutual attempts of two interlocutors to agree on meaning in situations where the requisite meaning structures do not seem to be shared" (Tarone, 1980), or "potentially conscious plans" (Faerch and Kasper, 1983). A more recent interpretation characterises communication strategies "...as an individual's attempt to find a way to fill the gap between their communication effort and immediate available linguistic resources" (Maleki, 2007). Regarding a language educational setting concerning communication strategies, my interpretation is as follows: communication strategies are unconscious techniques developed either internally (by the students themselves, usually - but not exclusively - by means of trial-and-error) or externally (with the help of teachers, trainers, or by other people in contact with the student) that are applied during conversations in a foreign language in order to avoid speech disfluency or in the worst case, a total communication breakdown i.e. the inability to continue a conversation with the participant(s). In my approach, communication strategies are a necessity for any student of a foreign language during communication. This is due to the high probability that these students are presented with a linguistic and or cultural inadequacy when the conveyance of meaning occurs between one another. In other words, language users of (both) different linguistic and socio-cultural backgrounds are likely to apply these techniques during conversation, if the phenomena of communication breakdown are to be avoided.

2. Taxonomy of Communication strategies

In the 1970s, several studies set the foundations for the study of communication strategies. Selinker's (1972) article on interlanguage introduced the notion of second language communication strategies which was followed by Váradi's (1973) and Tarone's (1977) articles the latter two aiming at providing a systematic analysis of communication strategies. Their analysis was based on the following notion: "if the fossilised aspects of interlanguage are the result of an identifiable approach by the language learner to communication with native speakers of the target language, then we are dealing with strategies of second language communication (Selinker, 1972, p. 33.).

Váradi and Tarone later introduced a classification of communication strategies that would be used in subsequent research. However, according to Bialystok (1990), the single most important difference between various categorisations proposed by researchers, lies in labelling and the principle behind the label, rather than in the substance of each specific strategy. This means that regardless of the labels used to specify the same parts of a phenomenon, the very essence will remain unchanged. Communication strategies can be divided into five main categories and a number of subcategories which produce the following list:

Paraphrase: Paraphrase includes three subcategories which are:

- *Approximation:* The use of such native language (L1) vocabulary items or structures, - that the language learner is aware of not being used correctly in that given position - which share certain semantic features with the desired item, thus satisfying the speaker's intention (e. g. *a big rock* instead of *boulder*, or *pipe* instead of *water pipe*).
- *Word coinage:* The language learner is making up a new word – most often on the spot – in order to communicate a desired concept (e. g. *airball* for *balloon* or *smoking leaf* for *cigar*).
- *Circumlocution:* The language learner describes the major characteristics or elements of an object, action or person instead of using the target language (TL) equivalent (e. g. *She is, uh, smoking something. I don't know what's its name. That's, uh, Cuban, and they smoke it in other countries, too*).

Transfer: Transfer has two subcategories:

- *Literal translation:* The language learner is translating word for word from L1 to L2 (e. g. *He invites him to drink.* replacing *They toast one another.*).
- *Language switch:* The language learner uses the L1 term without attempting to translate it into L2 (e. g. *léggömb* instead of *balloon* or *Verkehrsmittel* replacing *means of transport*).

Appeal for Assistance: This refers to the language learner asking for the correct term or structure from an exterior source of information, most likely a teacher or a fellow student (e. g. *What is this?* or *What do you call that in English?*).

Mime: Mime is related to the speaker using non-verbal strategies substituting an expression (e. g. *clapping one's hands to illustrate applause, or rubbing one's eyes to indicate crying or tiredness, boredom*).

Avoidance: Avoidance strategies consist of:

- *Topic avoidance:* The language learner is omitting concepts for which their vocabulary is lacking at the time of speaking.
- *Message abandonment:* The language user begins to talk about a concept but being completely unable to continue doing so, due to a lack of verbal resources and thus ends up stopping in the middle of an utterance.

The above outlined typology of communication strategies is summarised in Table 1 and is based on Tarone's work (Tarone, 1977) on the topic.

3. On the teachability of Communication strategies

Research on foreign language output (for example, Faerch and Kasper, 1986, Willems, 1987, Tarone and Yule, 1989, Dörnyei and Thurrell, 1991, 1994, Mali,

2007; Maleki, 2007) shows that any form of language production is best learned through interaction. This is especially valid regarding verbal interaction and communication strategies. Since communication strategies are unconscious techniques their conscious realisation in any communicational situation demands a significant amount of practice and drilling. This practice was shown by Mali (2007) to be an effective way of enhancing students' language productivity, as far as verbal output is concerned. Mali also points out that language teaching materials with communication strategies have great potential in improving current language education. As it was also clarified by supporters of the theory (for example, Dörnyei and Thurrell, 1991; Eszenyi, 2001; Maleki, 2007, 2010; Mali, 2007; Lewis, 2011), communication strategies can be and should be taught in foreign language education and require a more emphasized position within the language education curriculum. The main reason to teach these strategies is that they are part of the communicative competence, while creating the sub-branch of strategic competence (see Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, Thurrell 1995). The focus of strategic competence is to use strategies in order to avoid communication breakdowns while their education should concentrate on improving present day language teaching through their usage. For the purpose of teaching such strategies, Faerch and Kasper (1986) recommend the following three activities:

- communication games with visual support
- communication games without visual support
- monologues

It needs to be pointed out that the practice of 'Just a minute!' about a given topic or a favourite topic can also be considered here for improving speech fluency. During this session, the speaker is asked to talk as fluently and continuously about either a specific topic (usually chosen by the teacher) or about a favourite topic for a single minute, as possible. In the latter case, the intrinsic motivation lying within the speaker's domain of personal interest obviously gives a great push for the students in choosing their personal favourites, while also impelling them to share as much information with the other within the set time as possible. In addition to the above-mentioned methods, I consider it a well-established fact that current language learners come across new vocabulary outside classrooms, mainly in films and music (Kovacevic and Kovacevic, 2015). In order to tap these rich sources of verbal ammunition, students may attempt to cite lyrics of their favourite songs or memorable lines of their most enjoyed films as communication strategies. Thus, by borrowing from said artistic products their verbal communication will achieve a double-fold goal: firstly, they avoid the situation where silence is simply unacceptable – with certain exceptions –, secondly, they use material that is more preferable for them and are likely to be more easily evoked when needed. Therefore, lyrics or memorable lines can be considered a possible linguistic foundation for a likely reply. As such, the act of citing also needs to be regarded as a valid communication strategy, because it allows speakers to gain some time to plan their next move in the process of communication. For further aspects of communication strategies (taxonomy, role, local feedback, etc.) the following references should be consulted: Bátyi (2015), Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005), Grace (2013), Kellerman (1991), Littlemore (2001), Oxford (2001), Paribakht (1985), Poulisse (1993, 1994), Salomone and Marshal (1997), Schmidt (1983), Tarone (1984) and Váradí (1983).

4. The current Hungarian scene

As Medgyes (2015) pointed out, current foreign language education in Hungary still has issues with increasing speech fluency of its students, regardless of their level of study. As such, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) needs to focus more on verbal communication and L2 output for conveying messages between one another, while not disregarding the other skills (reading, listening, writing). As such, teaching and practising communication strategies should earn more appreciation inside and outside classrooms, since these techniques can actually enhance the verbal language output of each individual to a currently unknown extent. The most ideal situation, for any language speaker, would be for students to practise the (freshly) acquired vocabulary outside the classroom on their own: either with their classmates or, preferably, native speakers of the language. Unfortunately, the latter can be seen as a form of privilege for some, especially those living in rural Hungary. Therefore, the use of online communication and language learning sites (e.g. Babbel.com, Memrise.com, or Duolingo.com) can act as a go-between for aforementioned language learners until a native or near-native speaker appears on their horizon. Communication strategies are also related to competency-based education. Since the foundation of communicative competence by Hymes (1972) and its application to L2 proficiency by Canale and Swain (1980) the competency-based model has undergone a number of changes. One such shift was the reorganisation of the original model by placing cultural competence in the middle of said model. This transition of the model, conceived by Bárdos (2002), clearly indicated that cultural competence is ought to be considered as the primary element of the model in the future, and not just as a marginal notion as it was before. Regardless of the cultural component, the model itself is invaluable for us because of the strategic competence. This competence is the core of all communication strategies (or evasion strategies). It is closely related to all competences within the triangle of discourse competence, but it also acts on its own, aiding the speaker in maintaining their speech fluency (see Figure 1).

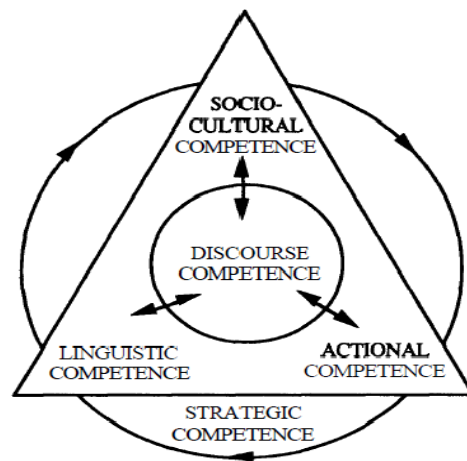


Figure 1: Schematic representation of communicative competence (Celce-Murcia, M., Dörnyei, Z. & Thurrell, S., 1995, pp. 5-35.)

5. The Role of Communication strategies in Language Education

For the above given purposes (increasing speech fluency, requirements of competency-based education), a number of possible communication strategies should be implemented in the language classroom. For instance, Willems (1987) suggests focusing on activities for practicing paraphrase and approximation. Brooks (1992) on the other hand, prefers circumlocution and appealing for assistance. However, since there is no single communication strategy that can be used in all likely situations, the possibility of combining these methods for a far better outcome than focusing on just one or two techniques, is ever-present. While circumlocution and paraphrasing require a larger and better organised mental vocabulary to work with – and as such are far more suitable for students possessing a higher-level knowledge of a language –, such techniques as miming, appealing for assistance or approximating are less demanding and serve the same goal, nonetheless. Furthermore, Rabab'ah's (2005) research on the topic claims that teaching communication strategies is beneficial for students for the following reasons: firstly, usage of communication strategies can lead to evoking previously forgotten vocabulary from both participants, especially when appealing for assistance. In my observation and classroom experience, the same can be said about circumlocution or paraphrasing as well as the use of synonyms and antonyms. Secondly, by implementing such techniques, both parties have a greater chance of carrying on with their conversation, without losing face. Finally, students can solve a communicational challenge on their own, while achieving their goal. It must be also stated, that by achieving the desired communication goal on their own or by asking for assistance, the usage of communication strategies has a high likelihood to lead to a more conscious use of language, while boosting one's self-confidence, adding to the autonomy of the students (see Holec, 1981, Benson, 2001, Harmer, 2007).

6. Subject, material and methods

In the present study I have conducted an online query using social media. This was due to the fact that most students are active social media users and spend quite a significant amount of time online and are also willing to participate in filling in online surveys. I chose two different groups on Facebook to reach out to a large number of would-be participants. Group one consisted of students, ranging from high school to higher education, while group two was that of the teachers. In addition to social media, I have also asked for the assistance of MANYE (Hungarian Association of Applied Linguists and Language Teachers) members who also participated in filling in the survey. The goal of the survey was to gain a better insight into the possible background knowledge of Hungarian students and teachers regarding communication strategies and their usage when the speaker comes into contact with a speaker of a foreign language. I was probing into the participants' actual practice of communication strategies, their attitude towards foreign language usage and the possible initiative they take if the opportunity presents itself in contacting a speaker of a foreign language. Due to a previous

assumption that students at a primary school are – most likely – not yet active and fluent participants in a foreign language conversation, while that expectation is – at least allegedly – met by students in high school or higher education during the final examination or language examinations. As far as teachers are concerned, neither my theories or previous experience related to the issue, nor any references I have read before suggest that teachers of primary education provide a role model or influence students of a foreign language in acquiring communication strategies – although they clearly have an influence on their language learners. The teachers of group two were teaching all possible school subjects at every specific level of education. While I firmly believe that communication strategies are almost exclusively used in subjects that require a high-level of verbalisation – such as foreign languages and humanities – there might be other likely communication strategies used by teachers of other subjects, hence their inclusion in the survey. I created the online survey using Google Forms and recorded their answers using the same website. For data analysis I employed a statistical data analysis software (IBM SPSS Statistic21) in order to extract, analyse and visualise the data provided by the participants. Both students and teachers were expected to answer almost identical questions in the survey with only minor alterations involved. For example, teachers were asked about their major and the time span spent teaching up to the current moment. Students, on the other hand, were asked about their field of specialisation in education and the time span of their language education. I was searching for a correlation between the linguistic background knowledge (likely extension and depth of mother tongue's and foreign language's vocabulary, approximate level of activity in both languages, i.e. how often does the speaker use their knowledge of said languages) and that of communication strategies (level of transparency of its notion and its usage).

7. Results and Discussion

My research population consisted of 91 teachers and 219 students, a total of 310 (n=310). Answers provided to background-related questions indicate that the majority of the students (44,3%) live in cities, 39,7% in the capital city and 16% in the countryside (Figure 2). 76,7% of the population is female and 23,3% of the population is male (Figure 3).

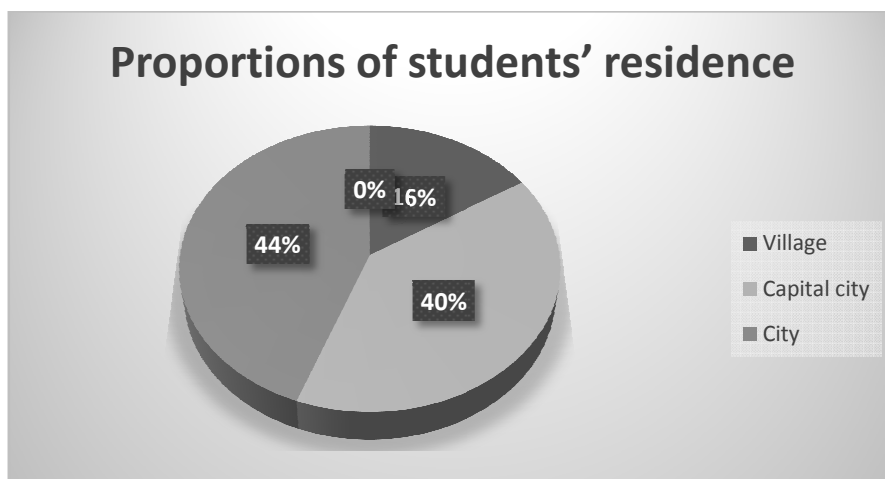


Figure 2: Proportions of students' residence

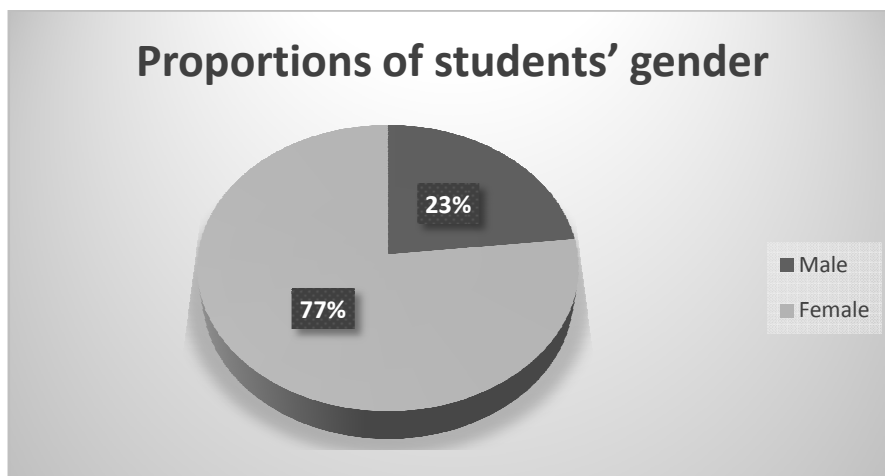


Figure 3: Proportions of students' gender

On the other hand, teachers' gender proportions were built up of 79,5% female and 20,5% male participants (Figure 4). In addition, 60,2% of the teachers live in cities, 27,7% in the capital city and only 10,8% in villages. (Figure 5).

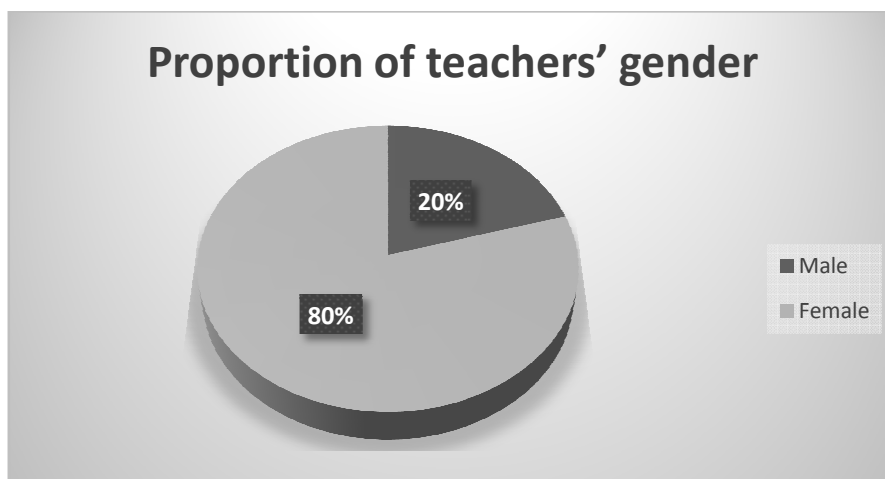


Figure 4: Proportion of teachers' gender

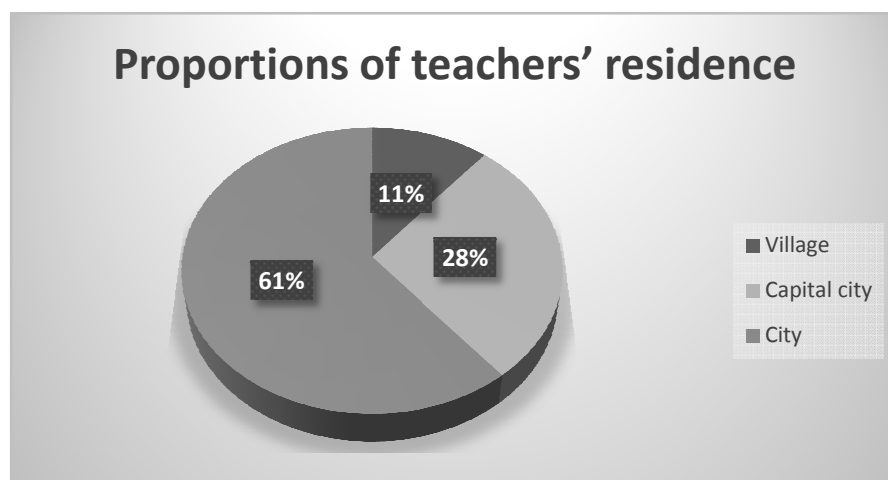


Figure 5: Proportions of teachers' residence

Before the actual survey took place I had the following research questions to seek an answer to: Firstly, *what were the most commonly used communication strategies* by the two groups, regarding both domestic and foreign language usage? As far as my presumption was concerned, I had assumed that mimicking, approximation or switching languages will be the most common techniques used due to their quick and easy access by almost any participant. Secondly, I wanted to probe into the *understanding of the participants related to the notion of communication strategies*, i.e. how could the members of the research population define the term of

communication strategy or other related terms, like circumlocution? This was to establish a clear position whether these strategies were truly unconscious plans used by the interlocutors or not. Thirdly, there was the question of *taking the initiative when presented with a native or near-native level speaker of a language*, or how willing the participants were to engage in a conversation with someone of the language they have learnt before, if given the opportunity? Finally, I sought to enquire into *the matter of attitudes regarding both the usage of mother tongue and a foreign language in such situations*. This was due to the presumption that those who are eager to initiate a conversation with a native or near-native level speaker of a previously studied language, are bound to have a more positive relationship with the language in question. To my knowledge, literature related to the issue of communication strategies does not state clearly *which is the most commonly or frequently used communication strategy*. As such, I was assuming that members of the research population are highly inclined to use such simple techniques as mimicking or other forms of gestures, approximation, and language switch. However, the answers of the participants did not reflect that. Instead, the results showed a significant percentage of teachers using *circumlocution* (62,5%) and *synonyms* (25,2%) in case they had difficulties expressing themselves in a foreign language. These results are supported by their answer to the following question: *Please finish the sentence: What do you do when you cannot remember a word in Hungarian?* 40,9% of the teachers claimed they use *circumlocution*, while 20,4% allegedly applies *synonyms*. Students' results in connection with the same issues are as follows: 41,6% of them stated that they prefer using *circumlocution*, and 13,5% said that they use *synonyms* when lacking the proper word in Hungarian. This translates to 62,7% for *circumlocution* and 16% for *synonyms* in the foreign language counterpart. As we can see, the results clearly show that *circumlocution is the most frequently used* and preferred communication strategies by both groups followed by the *use of synonyms*, - but not antonyms - in the research population. As far as the definition of communication strategies is concerned, the data is in accordance with the literature presented at the beginning of this study: there were a number of vague attempts at defining the term by both groups, however, none of these answers were significantly present. Most students gave an answer reflecting upon their lack of knowledge regarding the topic (*"I don't know."*, *"I have never heard about this before."*), while only an insignificant number were able to approximate the notion itself (*"A list of possible choices that enable the act of communication to become realised."*, *"The conscious planning and structuring of a conversation."*, *"A carefully designed speech-plan that helps to avoid the possible manifestation of any lexical deficiency."*). Although teachers were more focused and had a slightly clearer notion related to communication strategies their definitions were still lacking some fundamental elements (*"The acquisition and use of such strategies that enable the student to become able to express things in a foreign language they are otherwise unable to do so."*, *"All the techniques applied in a successful communication collectively."*, *"The conscious application of tested schemes tailored to the specific situation."*). The fact that the current generation also uses more advanced and verbally demanding techniques, - such as circumlocutions or synonyms - to prevent a possible communication breakdown is a positive sign: it indicates that a number of the research population is ready and willing to take the risk of failing when conversing with a (non)native speaker of a foreign language. I hypothesise that said participants are liable to use these more

complex and demanding communication strategies more frequently, than those using different, less demanding techniques to express themselves when needed. Additionally, this attitude is reflected in the third previous assumption I shall discuss later. The attitude behind foreign language usage was also questioned: the general population may have an aversion regarding using a foreign language outside the classroom (as a student) or simply wish to avoid putting what was learnt in school into practice (as an adult). Research, however, proved the contrary: 71,5% of the teachers and 74,8% of the students tend to have a positive attitude towards foreign languages and foreign language usage in general. This poses another question: would a significant increase in the volume of the online survey support or contradict the current results regarding attitude?

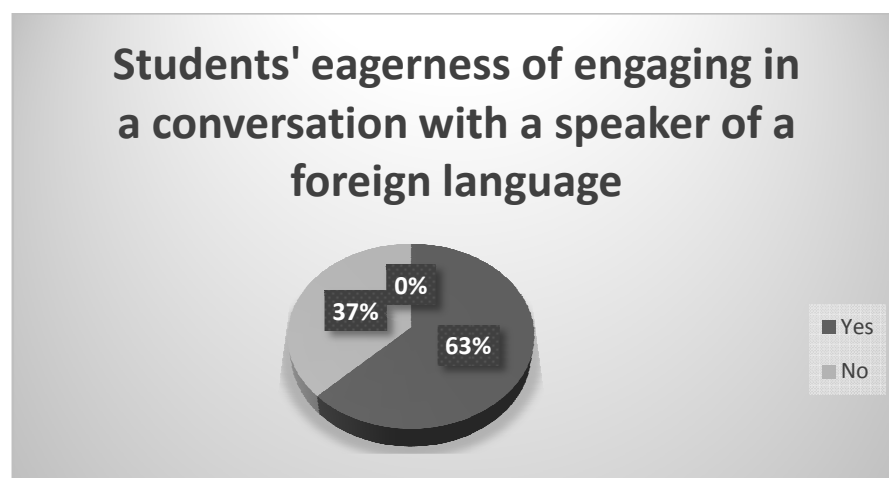


Figure 6: The eagerness of students regarding the usage of foreign languages (*Do you eagerly engage in a conversation with a foreigner in a previously learnt language?*)



Figure 7: The eagerness of teachers regarding the usage of foreign languages (*Do you eagerly engage in a conversation with a foreigner in a previously learnt language?*)

With respect to general tendencies, Hungarian speakers of a foreign language easily avoid taking the initiative when faced with such a communicational situation, for example, when giving directions or delivering a speech or a presentation in front of an audience. As such, Hungarians in general, can be described as passive or reluctant speakers of any foreign language. On the other hand, the answers provided clearly indicate that such generalisation is just partially acceptable. 59,3% of teachers and 44,3% of students claimed that they actually take the initiative during a conversation with a foreigner.



Figure 8: Students' frequency of taking the initiative in a conversation with a foreigner (*Do you take the initiative when engaging in a conversation with a foreigner?*)



Figure 9: Teachers' frequency of taking the initiative in a conversation with a foreigner (*Do you take the initiative when engaging in a conversation with a foreigner?*)

Despite the rather large number of feedback provided by the targeted population I still have two issues concerning the current state of research: the first being the actual reliability of the replies, and the second is the possible future methods and material needed for further studying the subject matter at hand. Firstly, the question presents itself, whether the subjects of this survey gave an actual and honest answer to the questions asked, or were they influenced in any possible way to give such replies. In order to reinforce the present research findings, I wish to re-run another online survey in the future, but with an increased number of participants. Social media sources, such as Facebook, provide a great opportunity to pull in an incredibly large number of participants for further studies. Secondly, I am going to extend my research in the near future to teacher trainers and trainees of foreign languages. On this occasion, however, a series of interviews will be conducted in order to compare the results with previous findings. The two groups need to answer how they prepare/are prepared for their future career as teachers of languages or as trainers of would-be language teachers, the methods employed during communication training/teaching, and the possible background knowledge related to that of communication strategies. Another group of future interviewees will be students and teachers of secondary education: the goal here is to map out the trends in acquiring and teaching vocabulary and putting it into practice within a classroom environment. I wish to inquire about the possible methods that were taught during teacher training to current foreign language teachers and how they apply the previously acquired theory. On the other hand, I seek students' position on the matter, too: whether they employ any communication strategies during a classroom conversation or outside school, and if so, what types are their most frequent ones.

8. Conclusions

In this descriptive study I presented data on the background knowledge of Hungarian students and teachers regarding communication strategies. The findings indicate that –although the research population was not a substantial one and thus requires a larger pool of participants to establish a significant trend related to the issue – both Hungarian students and teachers have a vague definition and understanding of the notion of communication strategies. This resonates with the findings of previous research related to this field, claiming that these strategies are most likely to be unconscious. Despite having far more easy-to-access-techniques for solving a communication issue in a foreign language, most of the research population still tended to rely on more complex methods of solving the issues when presented with the opportunity; i.e. using circumlocution and synonyms instead of mimicking, switching to another language or using approximation. This indicates that there is a will within the language speaking community to take the effort and answer the call of a foreigner properly, if needed. In addition, the population is inclined to see the positive side of learning and using a foreign language and in many cases is able to take the initiative when it comes to conversing with a (non)native speaker of a foreign language. These results give way to ground for further research and are especially needed in order to find a solution to the issue of

fluency in foreign languages in Hungary, since Hungarians are still struggling with speaking a foreign language.

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Appendix

Table 1: A typology of communication strategies

Type of Strategy	Example
Avoidance Topic avoidance	The language learner is omitting concepts for which his/her vocabulary is lacking at the time of speaking.
Message abandonment	The language user begins to talk about a concept but being completely unable to continue doing so due to a lack of phrases and expressions and thus ends up stopping in the middle of an utterance.
Paraphrase Approximation	a big rock instead of boulder pipe instead of water pipe
Word Coinage	airball for balloon smoking leaf for cigar
Circumlocution	She is, uh, smoking something. I don't know what's its name. That's, uh, Cuban, and they smoke it in other countries, too.
Conscious transfer Literal translation	He invites him to drink replacing They toast one another. léggömb instead of balloon Verkehrsmittel replacing means of transport
Language switch	
Appeal for assistance	What is this? or How do you call that in English?
Mime	clapping one's hands to illustrate applause rubbing one's eyes to indicate crying or tiredness, boredom

Appendix

Please read the questions carefully and respond to the questions in detail and as accurately as you can, taking into consideration your experience and expertise as an ESP practitioner.

Do you consider materials and the process of materials selection to be important in ESP? <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>

Do you use a textbook in your ESP classes? If yes, what are the benefits? If no, what are the reasons?

When choosing a textbook for your ESP classes, what are your selection criteria?

Do you use authentic materials in your ESP classes? If yes, what are the benefits? If no, what are the reasons?

When choosing authentic materials/ authentic academic texts for your ESP classes, what are your selection criteria?

Do you use a combination of materials in your ESP classes? If yes, what do you combine? If no, what are the reasons?

What is the most notable obstacle when compiling teaching materials for your ESP courses?
