

# An Exploration into English Language Teachers' and Students' Perceptions on the Importance of Practicing Strategic Competence in Communicative English Lessons: Focus on WSU English Language and Literature Department

Muluken Gebre Lanka\*

Department of English Language and Literature, Wolaita Sodo University

Wondimu Tegegne Bidu

Department of English Language and Literature, Wolaita Sodo University

## Abstract

Strategic competence is the ability to recognize and repair communication breakdown. It is said that second or foreign language learners may face language competence problem while communicating in English. Thus, it is inevitable to use strategic competence in EFL/SL classrooms. Strategic competence enables students to overcome the communication breakdown they encounter in such contexts. It also helps learners to stay on the conversation. To make our students effective in using/practicing strategic competence, they should learn or should be taught clearly the techniques of strategic competence. However, teachers teaching of strategic competence and students' use of strategic competence depend upon the positive perception of English language teachers and students towards the issue. Hence, the main purpose of this study was to explore English language teachers' and students' perception on the importance of practicing strategic competence in communicative English lessons. Descriptive research design was employed to achieve the objectives of this study. Besides, English language teachers and students were the participants of the study. Purposive sampling technique's was used to select 8(eight) English language teachers and 106(one hundred six) students as samples of this research project. Then, data were obtained via semi-structured interview and questionnaire. The quantitative data gathered from the close ended questions of questionnaire were coded and filled into SPSS. Then, different statistical analysis such as frequency and percentage were applied to the SPSS data. Beside, the data obtained via semi-structured interview, were transcribed the data into textual form and then, were analyzed the data qualitatively. From the data analysis different findings were obtained. The study divulged that the participants have positive perception on the importance of strategic competence. The perception of an individual towards some issue has its own effect on the implementation or practice of what is going to be done. Thus, teachers' and students' positive perception about the importance of strategic competence would facilitate the teaching as well as the learning of strategic competence in their communicative English lessons. Finally, the recommendations were given based on the findings of the study.

**Keyword:** English Language, perception, strategic competence, communicative English, English language teachers'

## 1. Background of the Study

Communicative language teaching (CLT) was originated from the changes in the British Situational Language Teaching Approach in the late 1960s (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). CLT emphasizes on meaning and communication which has a goal to develop learners' communicative competence. According to Littlewood (2007), CLT has been introduced to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting to improve students' abilities to use English in real contexts. To compensate for the limitations of the traditional language teaching methods which were only on structural view of language teaching, teachers of English as a foreign language have been encouraged to implement CLT to develop their students' English language abilities.

Currently, CLT has given attention in Ethiopia, and the new English language teaching textbooks were produced for secondary schools on the basis of the communicative approach (MoE, 1997). The current 'New English for Ethiopia' books and curricula seem to be in contrast to the traditional, structural, grammar based materials which had been used in the country with the intentions to develop students' communicative competence. To achieve this competence, learners are expected to develop four major competences: sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, grammar competence and strategic competence (Dornyei and Thurrell, 1990). Among all the components strategic competence is the focus of this study.

According to Rababah (2002) strategic competence means the individual's ability to use strategies such as paraphrase, circumlocution, literal translation, lexical approximation, and mime to get their communication transversely and to compensate for a limited or imperfect knowledge of rules or the interference of such factors as fatigue, distraction and inattention. It is also the ability to recognize and repair communication breakdown. Strategic competence can largely determine the learner's fluency and conversational skills (Dornyei and Thurrell,

1990).

There are various techniques that are used for achieving strategic competence. Some of these techniques are the use of synonyms to substitute for words that the speaker cannot recall or has not yet learned, resorting to physical gestures to convey meaning, asking for clarification from the listener (asking for help), raising one's voice in order to be heard, and feigning (faking) comprehension in order to listen for context clues (word coinage), paraphrasing, circumlocution when someone is unable to say the exact word (Dornyei and Thurrell, 1990).

English Language and Literature Department of WSU offer several course categories to its students of different level. One of the course categories is communicative English courses. These courses are Spoken English I, Spoken English II, Communicative English skill and Advanced speech. The goal of providing communicative courses is to help the students to become communicatively efficient or competent (Savignon, 1971). As mentioned above the techniques of strategic competence is decisive to achieve the communication efficiency of learners. Bachman (1990) stated that teaching or learning communicative lessons should go in line with techniques of strategic competence.

Therefore, strategic competence should be taught, explicitly or implicitly, in communicative English courses. Accordingly, the department of English language and literature (DELL) at WSU has been providing different English communicative courses with the intention to make its students communicatively competent. The current study explores teachers' and students' perceptions on the importance of strategic competence in their Communicative English lessons.

## **2. Statement of the Problem**

Communicative language teaching is used to develop the learners' communicative competence which will enable them to communicate successfully in the real world (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). Experienced English language teachers believe that a prevalent problem that a lot of language learners' face is reluctance to use strategic competence while learning English as a foreign language (Dornyei, 1995).

Rababah (2002) stated that all teachers and learners need to understand that successful language learning is not only a matter of developing grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence and discourse competence, but also strategic competence which involves the use of communication strategies and their role in transmitting and comprehending messages successfully.

According to Bachman (1990) second or foreign language learners may face language competence problem while communicating in English. Since a large part of English as foreign language or second language communication is problematic, language classes should prepare students to cope with communication performance problems. Thus, it is inevitable to use strategic competence in EFL/SL. Strategic competence enables students to overcome the communication breakdown they encounter in such contexts. It also helps learners to stay on the conversation.

To make our students effective in using/practicing strategic competence, they should learn or should be taught clearly the techniques of strategic competence. After being taught the techniques, students should practice or use strategic competence when they face breakdown in communication (Rababah, 2002). However, teachers teaching of strategic competence and students' use of strategic competence depend upon the positive perception of English language teachers and students towards the issue. That is, the perception of an individual towards some issue has its own effect on the implementation or practice of what is going to be done. If a person has negative perception obviously he/she will not genuinely practice the expected thought/practice. Hence, the current study attempted to explore the perceptions of teachers and students towards the importance of practicing strategic competence in communicative English lessons.

Furthermore, no study has been conducted on English language teachers' and students' perceptions' on the practice of strategic competence in communicative courses as far as the reading of the researchers is concerned. This is one of the rationales that initiated the researchers to conduct present study. By doing so, the current research project is believed to fill the research gap.

## **3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The main objectives of this study was to explore English language teachers' and students' perceptions on the importance of practicing strategic competence in communicative English lessons

## **4. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

### **4.1. Research Design**

Research design refers to writing research questions and its operational entities to final analysis (Kithara, 2004). It is also about how the research is conducted. The researchers used descriptive research design so as to achieve the research objectives. Descriptive research design is important to present and determine the status of the phenomena under investigation (Mohammed, 2004). As this study is aimed to explore English language

teachers' and students' perception of strategic competence in communicative English lessons, descriptive research design was reasonably selected.

#### 4.2. Research Setting

This study was conducted at Wolaita Sodo University, Department of English Language and Literature in 2008 E.C. It is chosen because it is closer to the researchers and the researchers has been learning in the department for the last 8 (eight) years in undergraduate and post graduate. This helped the researchers to collect necessary data for this study easily. Another reason is that strategic competence is advanced and practical aspect in teaching English as a foreign language and also it is neglected English language teaching aspect (Dornyei, 1995). Therefore, tertiary level or university (WSU) is reasonably selected. WSU is found in Ethiopia, SNNPR government particularly at Wolaita Sodo town.

#### 4.3. Participants and Sampling Techniques of the Study

As mentioned above, the study is conducted in Wolaita Sodo University English Language and Literature Department. Teachers who have offered the four communicative courses: Spoken English I and II, Communicative English Skills and Advanced Speech and also four other ELT who had experience of teaching communicative courses; totally 8(eight) teachers were the participants of this study from the department. Since they are offering communicative courses, teachers can provide the data needed for this study and thus, they were selected as participants of the study.

The number of students who were enrolled in English Language and Literature Department in the three consecutive years (2008 E.C.) 53 in the first year and 32 in the second year and also 32 students in the third. From these students 10 (ten) students are isolated because they were pilot tested. Therefore, totally, 107 students were taken for this study as participants because they are concerned body on the issue strategic competence. Thus, it was believed that they could provide the data needed for this study. No sampling techniques were used for the students in this study. Below is the background information of the study participants.

**Table: 1; Demographic Information of the Participants of the Study**

No.	Items		In number	Percentage
1.	Students	1st year	46	44.3
		2nd year	30	28.3
		3rd year	28	27.4
		Total	104	100
2.	Sex of the Students	Female	58	55.7
		Male	46	47.3
		Total	104	100
3.	English Language Teachers	Male	7	87.5
		Female	1	12.5
		Total	8	100

As it can be depicted in above table: 1, in item one, 46 (44.3%) of participants of the study were first year students, 30 (28.3%) were second year and 28 (27.4%) were third year students. The data of table: 1, in items two, regarding sex of students, 58 (55.7%) of students were female whereas 46 (47.3%) of students were male. Whereas in item three 7(87.5%) are male teachers from teacher participants and 1 (12.5%) is a teacher participant. As in teachers category total of eight teachers were participant of this study.

The teachers were selected in the purposive sampling technique. It is the most common sampling strategy one redeeming feature of this sampling strategy; that is usually results in willing participants (Dornyei, 2007). The most common sample type in foreign language research is the purposive sampling; where an important criterion of sample selection is the convenience or opportunistic for the researchers; members of the target population are selected for the purpose of the study and to meet certain practical criteria such as, geographical proximity, availability at a certain time, easy accessibility, or the willingness to the volunteer. And also all the students were taken for the study without sampling techniques because they were manageable.

#### 4.4. Instruments of Data Collection

To collect the necessary data for this study, the researchers have used questionnaire and semi-structured interview.

##### A. Questionnaire

The researchers developed questionnaire to collect data from students. The researchers prepared open-ended and close-ended questionnaires to all first, second and third year students to assess their perception of strategic competence in communicative English lessons. The questionnaire was developed based on reviews of related literature of this study. The questions are organized based on research question. Among 117 students, 106

students responded the questionnaire.

### **B. Semi-structured Interview**

According to Merriam (1988), semi-structured interview gives a researchers ample opportunity to probe for clarification and ask questions appropriate to the respondents' knowledge status. Different scholars believe that interview is relevant to get information concerning perception, or emotion and practice to certain questions which is not possible through focus group discussion and classroom observation.

The researchers employed semi-structured interview to know the perception of ELT on the practice of strategic competence. Based on the respondents' permission, the researchers interviewed the teachers. The researchers employed semi-structured interview with the eight English language teachers who had given communicative English courses.

### **4.5. Method of Data Analysis**

Data analysis embraces a whole range of activities of both the qualitative and quantitative type. It In line with the current research the researchers used both qualitative and quantitative methods of data analysis. The researchers analyzed the data obtained via the questionnaire after checking the consistency and completeness of the data and the researchers analyzed the collected data by using quantitative and qualitative method of data analysis. The researchers used SPSS version 20 to analyze close ended item of questionnaire using descriptive statistics such as frequency and percentage and revealed the processed data in tabular form. Regarding the analysis of data obtained via semi-structured interview, the researchers interviewed some selected ELT's of DELL transcribed the data into textual form and then analyzed the data qualitatively.

### **4.6. Pilot Test**

The instruments were piloted in the selected at Wolaita Sodo University English Language and Literature Department. The researchers selected ten students from English majoring students and two English language teachers. The respondents were selected randomly. The pilot study was carried out on 10 (ten) students to check the clarity and relevance of the questions to achieve the objectives of the study. After the questionnaire was completed, it was assessed. From the assessment of the questionnaire, different lessons were learned.

For instances, some questions were not clear to the respondents while others limited questions were not relevant. Hence, based on the result of pilot study, necessary improvements were made on the tools and questions. Finally, after modifying and improving the tools, they were used to collect the main data from the target population.

### **4.7. Ethical Consideration**

At the time of data collection, the researchers requested permission from concerned bodies in order to gather relevant data from intended sources. Ethical procedures such as having permission from ELTs and students to observe the class and distribute the questionnaire were considered.

Each data collection instrument included an introductory part requesting the respondents' cooperation in providing the required information for the study. The respondents were assured of confidentiality of the information provided and that the findings were used only for academic purpose. The respondents were further assured of their personal data protection and their authority to refuse or accept to participate in the study.

## **5. RESULT AND DISCUSSION OF DATA**

As it was stated earlier, the perception of an individual towards some issue has its own effect on the implementation or practice of what is going to be done. If a person has negative perception obviously he/she will not genuinely practice the expected thought/practice. Accordingly, eight English language teachers who have taught the communicative English courses were interviewed to know their perception about the importance of SC. Besides, the data was gathered from students who took English communicative courses for the same purpose. Next, the analysis of their response is presented as follows.

### **5.1. Students Perceptions on the Importance of Strategic Competence to Communicative English Lessons**

Since the students are expected to practice strategic competence in their communicative English lessons in particular and in their real life communication in general, it is important to know their perceptions. Therefore, attempts were made to explore students' perceptions using different items of the questionnaire.

**Table 2: Students' Perceptions on the importance of strategic competence**

No.	Items	Responses	Number	Percentage
1.	Do you think it is important to practice strategic competence in communicative lessons?	Yes	76	73.3
		No	28	27.6
		Total	104	100
2	Do you think teachers' initiation is necessary to explain an idea on your own word?	Yes	75	70.8
		No	29	29.2
		Total	104	100
3.	Gender can affect ones language proficiency level	Strongly Disagree	44	42.3
		Disagree	42	40.4
		Agree	18	17.3
		Total	104	100

As shown in (table-3), item 1, 73.3% of students responded that strategic competence is important to practice in communicative classroom, whereas 26.7% of respondents replied that it is not important or worthless to practice strategic competence in their communicative English lessons. As it can be seen in the table the majority of students have positive perception. As perception precedes the practice the students perceived strategic competence important to communicative lessons. Whereas in item 2, 70.8% of students responded that English language teachers initiation is necessary to paraphrase (to express in their own idea), whereas 29.2% of the respondents replied that teachers' initiation is not important to practice strategic competence in communicative English lessons. If the students do not want teachers' initiation to practice strategic competence, they don't want their teacher to teach them the technique of strategic competence: paraphrasing as a technique of SC.

In item3, 42.3% of students responded that they strongly disagree on the gender effect on language proficiency level and 40.4% of the students disagree on language proficiency variation on gender (gender disparities) whereas 17.3% of the students responded that they agree on language variation on gender. Furthermore the majority of students mentioned that being female or could not affect language proficiency of a learner. This indicates that students' perception on language proficiency level is natural. Strategic competence is used when there is low level of language proficiency (Dornyei, 1995). According to Maleki (2010) gender based underestimation to language proficiency can affect the way to practice or master strategic competence. If the students perceive gender as not a factor for communication/ language proficiency that is important and paved way to implement strategic competence at advanced level.

Therefore, from the data presented in table four it can be deduced the conclusion that the majority of English Language Literature department students positively perceived the importance of strategic competence to communicative English lessons. This may imply that the students can use strategic competence when they face communication difficulties. Besides, their positive perception on strategic competence can facilitate English language teachers teaching of strategic competence in actual classroom setting.

### **5.2. English Language Teachers' Perceptions on the Importance of Strategic Competence when used in Communicative English Lessons**

In addition to students, the researchers interviewed eight English language teachers who taught communicative English lessons. These communicative English courses are Spoken English, Advanced Speech, and Communicative English Skills. The English language teachers were asked about the importance of strategic competence to communicate English lessons. In response the teachers forwarded two different views.

Seven from the interviewed ELT perceives that strategic competence is important for communication in line with communicative English lessons. However, one among them teacher-A, responded that "the issue of strategic competence should not be concerned much and it is not important to communicative English lessons. The courses themselves are adequate enough." This indicates that teacher-A does not perceive strategic competence positively. Besides, when teacher -A' is asked whether he teach SC or not he responded that 'No' the reason he mentioned is because, it is not a lesson. The researchers could understand from ELT's facial expression that they have good perception and the regression not practicing the competence.

Therefore, from these responses it can be said that most of the teachers positively perceive the importance of strategic competence to communicative English lessons. The responses of teachers also similar with the responses of students presented earlier.

Accordingly, the analyses of teachers and students response revealed that majority of both teachers and students have positive perception about the importance of strategic competence to communicative English lessons. The positive perception of teachers and students about strategic competence can facilitate the teaching and practicing of strategic competence in communicative English lessons.

## 6. SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 6.1. Summary

This study was conducted to explore English language teachers' and students' perception on the importance of strategic competence in communicative English lessons focusing on Wolaita Sodo University English Language and Literature Department. To achieve this objective data was collected from students and teachers using questionnaire and interview. The collected data were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively. Different findings were obtained from the analysis of data. Regarding ELTs' and students perceptions on the importance of practicing Strategic Competence to communicative English lessons, the following findings were derived:

- English language teachers who have taught communicative courses: Spoken English, Communicative English and Advanced Speech positively perceive the importance of Strategic Competence to communicative English lessons. But they have not been practicing it.
- After the orientation students responded their perception on Strategic competence. Almost all the students responded that they have positive perception on Strategic Competence. In their open ended part they mentioned that even though they don't know anything about Strategic Competence, they believe that anything which helps their English communication is important.
- It can be said that both English language teachers and students perceive Strategic Competence positively. This indicates that it is paved way for the implementation of the competence.

### 6.2. Conclusions

Based on the analysis of data and the findings of the study, the following conclusions are derived. It is said that one's understanding can affect the practice of an individual on certain activities. Accordingly, the understanding of English language teachers and students can affect the implementation of strategic competence in communicative lessons. Even though, almost all the participants have positive perception on importance of practicing strategic competence in communicative courses (lessons), they don't clearly know how to practice or implement the techniques. The reason for their positive perception towards strategic competence is may be the desire of achieving communication competence. Since, they have positive perception to practice strategic competence.

### 6.3. Recommendations

Based on the findings obtained and conclusions derived, the following recommendations are given:

- A. Practicing strategic competence in communicative courses or lessons is important to fix communication breakdown. Since the students are EFL/SL it is must to directly implement strategic competence techniques. The following stakeholders have dual responsibilities to practice Strategic Competence:
  - Ministry of Education should focus on strategic competence when designing curriculum of communicative courses. As Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), part teaching communicative courses must be seen in the verge of strategic competence. This can be done at early stage on the preparation and organization of the courses in higher education level. The MoE should scaffold ELT by providing trainings to teachers and the now students of DELL.
  - As Wolaita Sodo University is one of the higher education should initiate the scholars to do further study on the issue of strategic competence. As far as the experience of the researchers concerned the University has not been worried in the entire and technical matters. Simply, the department provides courses and then the teachers teach accordingly and finally grades are given. Therefore, the University should work entirely on the issue because the quality of communication/language can matter the quality of education. It is said that English language is a missing link between teachers and students.
  - WSU, DELL should initiate the ELT to focus on strategic competence when teaching communicative courses. The initiation can begin from providing training to including it as a mandate on teaching communicative courses.
  - English Language Improvement Centre (ELIC) should work hard on the implementation of strategic competence, since the center is working on the issue of language improvement.

Finally, since this area of study is a new phenomenon in the Ethiopian context, the researchers would like to suggest further research to be carried out in different aspects.

## 7. References

- Bachman (1990). *Fundamental considerations in language testing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dorneyi, Z. (2007). *Research Methods in Applied Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford U: Press.
- Dorneyi, Z. & Thurrell, S. (1990). Strategic Competence and How to Teach it. *ELT Journal*, 45(1), 16 - 22.
- Dorneyi, Z. (1995). On the Teachability of Communication Strategies. *TESOL Quarterly*, 29, 55-85.
- Faerch, C. and G. Kasper. (1986). *Strategic Competence in Foreign Language Teaching*. Arhus: Arhus

- University Press.
- Huang (2010). *Exploring Factors Affecting the Use of Oral Communication Strategies*. . Taiwan: Luangwa University .
- Khodadady, E. & Shamsaee, S. (2012). ). Formulaic Sequences and their Relationship with Speaking and Listening Abilities. *English Language Teaching*, 5(2), 39-49.
- Kothari, C. (2004). *Research Methodology, Methods and Techniques, Second Revised Edition*. New Delhi : New Age International Ltd Publisher.
- Littlewood, W. (2007). *Communicative Language Teaching*. 29 (3) (pp. 317-330). New York: Cambridge U Press.
- Maleki, A. (2010). *Techniques to teach communication strategies*. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 1(5), 640-646.
- MOE. (1997). *New English for Ethiopia*. Addis Ababa: Ethiopia.
- Rababah, G. (2002). *An Investigation into the Strategic Competence of Arab Learners of English at Jordanian Universities*. UK: Unpublished PhD Dissertation in the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. .
- Richards, J. C. (2006). *Communicative Language Teaching Today*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Richards, J.C. & Rodgers, T.S. (2005). *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching Second Edition*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Savignon, S. J. (1971). *Communicative Competence: An experiment in Foreign language teaching*. Philadelphia, PA: The Center for Curriculum Development.
- Tereshchuk, D. (2003 ). *Assessing Students' Strategic Competence in Speaking English* . Ukraine: National Pedagogical University.