

# **Communication Strategies among Indonesian Emergent Bilinguals in Mainstream EFL Classroom**

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## **Abstract**

*This study aims to enrich the already large body of research on communication strategies which is still, to the best of my knowledge, lacking in rich description about the use of CSs among emergent bilinguals. This qualitative study provides an insight to language practitioners that CSs among emergent bilinguals develop in accordance with their age. Some minor findings also suggest that CSs is influenced more by cognitive development and willingness to communicate (WTC).*

**Keywords:** communication strategies; emergent bilinguals

## **1. Introduction**

The term communication strategies has undergone decades of changes since its first emergence in 1972. Along with those, communication strategies (commonly referred to as CSs) have also been seen from various angles. Some argue that it is a part of negotiation of meaning, some others believe that it is a part of compensatory and learning strategies. CSs have also been investigated in terms of their breadth and depth as well as their relation to several mental factors affecting language learning and acquisition. In depth, many experts have tried to classify the types of CSs by developing taxonomies (Tarone, 1980; Faerch & Kasper, 1983; Bialystok, 1988; Dornyei, 1995) but in general, there are two types of CSs, L1-based and L2-based. Following those development, studies on the characteristics of CSs in relation to effectiveness, age groups, gender, task type, and teachability have been carried out in myriad ways. Similar to that, CSs have also been linked to proficiency level, willingness to communicate (WTC), learning context, learners' experience, and media.

This research looks to identify the following aspects of CSs use among Indonesian emergent bilinguals:

1. To find out the tendency of CSs among EBs in different age group
2. To find out whether learners rely on certain types of CSs to communicate certain words

## **2. Literature Review**

So far studies on CSs has been approached in two different ways, the interactional (Corder, 1978; Varadi, 1973; Tarone, 1977) and the psycholinguistic (Faerch & Kasper, 1980; Bialystok, 1990; Poulisse, 1997). For example, CSs are seen as mutual attempts of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in situation where

required meaning structure is not shared (Tarone, 1977). From the psycholinguistic view, CSs are conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal (Faerch & Kasper, 1983). Other than the two, CSs are often seen as compensatory strategy which involves individual attempts to find a way to fill the gap between their communication effort and immediate available linguistic resource (Maleki, 2007). However, Dornyei & Scott (2002) defines CSs as key unit in a general description of problem-management in L2 communication. These approaches led to the development of CSs taxonomy and research on the linguistic features, influencing factors, and teachability of CSs at many different levels. The most comprehensive taxonomy of CSs was compiled by Dornyei & Scott (2002) with more than 33 types of CSs. These classifications have been widely used as an instrument for data analysis.

The analysis of the use of CSs does not stop at the point at which it is characterised based on the taxonomy. Kaivanpanah, Yamouty & Karami (2012) found that language proficiency does not influence the frequency of the CSs, but the task type has significant influence on the types of CSs employed and the influence of gender differences is only significant for several types of CSs. Another study conducted by Gallardo-del-Puerto, Basterrechea & Martinez-Adrian (2019) revealed that there are no differences emerged regarding the total number of CSs as a function of TL proficiency despite the fact that subjects produced some paraphrasing which is typical of advanced learners and that more proficient learners were found to draw on non L2-based strategies to a lesser extent than less proficient learners. More specifically, Maldonado (2015) examined the influence of proficiency level on CSs use among English L2 learners at tertiary level in informal oral interaction with English native speaker and found that learners' linguistic competence is not only related to the frequency of the CSs used, but mostly to the type of CSs with beginner learners tend to favour avoidance and transfer type while intermediate learners tend to use approximation.

Furthermore, the influence of learning context, experience, and age on the use of CSs among L2 learners was also examined by Montero, Serrano, Llanes (2013) with students with study abroad experience shown to have a better ability in generating effective CSs and reduced proportion of L1-based CSs and that this does not apply among adults. The influence of setting and context in which CSs are employed by learners also became an object of study especially in CLIL and EFL task-based classroom. Garcia Mayo & Ibarrola, 2015 found that CLIL learners negotiate more often than mainstream EFL learners and older children in both contexts tend to negotiate less as they use L1 more frequently. Similar study was conducted by Azkarai & Agirre (2015) to find the differences between younger and older learners in both mainstream and CLIL setting with fourth-grade learners employing certain negotiation of meaning strategies significantly more than sixth-grade learners. Another interesting thing is the fact that 10-year-old children might have the same ability as adults to communicate, but they still share plenty in common with younger learners (Pinter, 2007). As an addition, experts have been arguing about to teach or not to teach CSs. Poulisse and Bongaerts (1989) firmly believe that CSs are not teachable. Yet, CSs training was proven to be able to improve WTC (Willingness To Communicate) in study carried out by Mirsane & Khabiri (2016). In content-based classroom, Saeidi & Farshchi (2015) found that CSs are teachable through the use of some teaching techniques and are able to increase oral language production. In line with that, Maleki (2010) also proposed

some techniques for teaching CSs such as: paraphrasing, transfer, appeal for assistance, mime, and avoidance.

Despite the many studies on CSs conducted, the use of CSs among emergent bilinguals is rarely investigated. The scarcest thing to find in this field is the influence of age factors to the type of CSs employed among emergent bilinguals in different age groups and its relation to the meaning or purpose of the communication. Therefore, it is worth to investigate the characteristics of CSs among EFL young learners in mainstream EFL classroom without any specific strategy training as we might be able to find the pattern of tendency in using CSs among YLs. The second possibility is to find out whether the naturally emerging CSs among YLs are productive or counter-productive in relation to their L2 learning. In relation to improving communicative competence and investigating the teachability of CSs, research must aim to characterise the natural use of CSs among YLs in first before concluding whether CSs should be explicitly taught or not.

### 3. Method

This research takes qualitative approach as it aims to generate additions to the existing theories of CSs through rich data interpretation. Data were analysed in four steps, namely: codification, taxonomy analysis, matrix analysis, and inductive analysis. This research involved fifteen Indonesian EBs aged 6 – 11. All the participants in three classes were selected purposefully based on their level of proficiency. They were all below the A2 CEFR level based on the coursebook they use in the class. Data were collected in three months of participatory observation as I acted as the teacher in three classes. Students’ utterances were transcribed verbatim as soon as they emerged during any phase of the lesson, inside and outside the classroom. No manipulation or explicit elicitation were employed during this stage. The taxonomy used for analysing the data was the compiled version by Dornyei & Scott (2002).

### 4. Findings & Discussions

The results of the data analysis in this study are shown below.

Table 1. Types of CSs found among the Indonesian EBs aged 7-8 are presented on the tables below:

Types	Occurrence (utterances)	Excerpts
Mime	53	Umm... Arriety’s mom is... syuuutt.. aaaa... bluggg... <b>(fainted)</b>  Shawn ee hh.. krrrkkk krrkkk the kitchen and then syuuutt... bummm... *gesturing a person lifting something.. <b>(replaces the kitchen)</b>
Omission	27	She..... cake.. <b>(she likes cake)</b>

		My mom cannot..... car, just motorbike ( <b>my mom cannot drive</b> )
Code switching	19	No.. no go out.. I ... takut ghost.. ( <b>I'm afraid of ghost</b> )  My father like 'terong' ( <b>my father likes aubergine</b> )
Mumbling	15	He.. sssttn.. ik... cheese ( <b>probably: He doesn't like cheese</b> )  There are two... wrbb.. eh.. wa.. ummm... in my bedroom. ( <b>There are two wardrobes in the bedroom</b> )
Approximation	10	My brother body is hot.. ( <b>my brother's got fever</b> )  I go to Bandung because the school is... eeheh.. no school.. ( <b>I'm on holiday</b> )

Based on the table above, it appears that EBs aged 6-7 relied heavily on paralinguistic strategies with the lowest number of strategies used (124 times). They were quite precise in aiming for what word to use, yet their lack of verbal power seemed to have influence their tendency to use mime, omission code switching, mumbling, and approximation. As employing CSs means using the available linguistic resources (Maleki, 2007) it can be inferred that children who are still in the middle stage of their L1 development are prone to using code switching, mime, and approximation unconsciously. Besides, there are other factors that might influence the use of CSs among young learners like interference in form of direct translation from L1 such as 'no school' which can literally be translated to Bahasa Indonesia as 'tidak sekolah'. Faerch & Kasper's (1983) claim that CSs employment involves conscious plans can therefore be questioned based on the consideration above.

Table 2. Types of CSs found among the Indonesian EBs aged 9-10 are presented on the tables below:

Types	Occurrence (utterances)	Excerpts
Approximation	43	This animal is like raccoon but it can fart... ( <b>a skunk</b> )  That green vegetable, mister.. you know.. the smell is bad.. ( <b>stinky beans</b> )
Circumlocution	39	Lucas falls and <b>the cake is on the floor.. (the cake is dropped)</b>  I know her.. she is my... <b>friend from very little and in kindergarten too (childhood friend)</b>
Exemplification	31	His job is like <b>Deddy Corbuzier, Limbat, and... (exemplification)</b>

		I like to buy drink from umm... like ChaTime, Teh Upet, and ya like that.. <b>(Stall and small shop)</b>
Appeal for assistance	24	This is aaarrghh.. <b>how do you say musholla in English ?</b>  I always ride a bike... umm... <b>what's keliling in English ?</b>
Mime	19	No, he is not cutting.. <b>he is zrrrrttttttt..*acting out a chef chopping something.... and very fast.. (chopping)</b>  He is... <b>umm.. duarrrrrr... the thunder.. (is hit by the thunder)</b>
Code switching	17	Mister, if we cannot find the spices, can we ask the <b>mbak – mbak SPG</b> in the supermarket ? <b>(shop attendant)</b>  My father's leg was... <b>umm.. jebol..</b> then he went to Singapore to see a doctor... <b>(punctured)</b>
Message abandonment	10	My great grandma, said the doctor, got.... <b>eeeehhh ah..</b> it's because of her brain damage.. she cannot remember anyone <b>(amnesia)</b>  The old lady stop shooting because the gun..... <b>arrrgghhh</b> what's that.. heh you answer that.. <b>(ran out of bullets)</b>

This age group is the most creative one with most types of CS employed and with the largest number of strategies employed (184 times). This finding is in line with Azkarai & Agirre (2015) that the younger learners, in their fourth grade at school, produce certain types of CSs more significantly than the older ones. This might be caused by their improved ability to communicate verbally as they grow more mature cognitively. However, this group also has the highest level of WTC seen from the length and number of their utterances. Mirsane & Khabiri (2016) found that CSs training can increase learner's WTC and this finding supports theirs in somewhat different manner. It's not always the ability to employ CSs that increases WTC, but the level of WTC also has a strong influence on the learners' ability to use of CSs.

Table 3. Types of CSs found among the Indonesian EBs aged 11-12 are presented on the tables below:

Types	Occurrence (utterances)	Excerpts
Appeal for assistance	46	Ahhh.. sprout.. I like eating... <b>How do you say 'rebung' ?</b>  My friend only eeeehhh.. <b>What's main hape in English ?</b>
Message	39	At the beach I play hotwheels and then <b>the wave....</b> my

abandonment		hotwheels is gone...  My mom goes to the market and at the market there are many sellers.. They sell a lot of bananas <b>and.....</b> so my mom buy many..
Code switching	34	In my family, we cook <b>biji duren..</b>  When we go to the beach, we must not touch <b>bulu babi..</b>
Approximation	21	This food is <b>like jackfruit, but small (artocarpus integer/cempheadak)</b>

In the third group, it was found that EBs aged 10-11 used less variety and less number (140 times) of strategies. This might be caused by their sense of meaning and very much improved verbal power that they were no longer satisfied with the approximation or mime. As Pinter (2007) claimed, 10-year-old children might have the same ability as adults to communicate, but they still share plenty in common with younger learners. The similarity they share with younger learners is their tendency to use message abandonment and a little approximation. This finding is in line with Garcia Mayo & Ibarrola (2015) in which older learners were found to use less strategies and tend to use L1-based strategies. This also indicates that what Montero, Serrano, Llanes (2013) found was somewhat true as the older learners’ ability to employ CSs is not affected by their experience.

Another finding of this study is the different way learners communicate different meanings in different word classes. The data are presented in the tables below:

Table 4. The different way learners communicate different meanings in different word classes

Word Class	Mostly used strategies		
	1 <sup>st</sup> group	2 <sup>nd</sup> group	3 <sup>rd</sup> group
Verb	Mime, omission, code switching	Approximation, circumlocution, mime, code switching	Appeal for assistance, code switching, message abandonment
Noun	Mime, code switching, approximation	Exemplification, approximation, message abandonment	Approximation, appeal for assistance, message abandonment
Adjective	Mime, omission, mumble	Circumlocution, appeal for assistance, exemplification, code switching	Appeal for assistance, message abandonment, code switching
Adverb	Omission	Appeal for assistance, circumlocution	Code switching, appeal for assistance

From the table, we can infer that in the group of youngest learners, miming serves a prominent role for them to convey all kinds of meaning. However, in the other two groups, there is no single strategy that serves all purposes of communication. In the second group, the diversity of CSs types for communicating four classes of content words is higher than in both first and second group. The third group is the one with consistency in employing CSs. They show the same tendency in terms of general use of CSs and specific use of CSs for communicating certain words.

In general, and in regard of the subjects who are of the same proficiency level, the findings in this study are very much in line with what Kaivanpanah, Yamouty & Karami (2012) found, the use of CSs is not influenced by proficiency level. These findings also may provide an addition to Gallardo-del-Puerto, Basterrechea & Martinez-Adrian's (2019) and Maldonado (2015) studies in which the number of CSs employed were not affected by the proficiency level while here, the different number of CSs produced seemed to be influenced by age.

## 5. Conclusion

Overall, these findings may shed light to the field of children's language development as it shows that children have a somewhat natural ability to compensate their lack of linguistic resources in order to convey meanings and to keep communication going. Another thing to address is that there is no need to teach CSs explicitly to EBs, as Maleki (2010) and Saeidi & Farshchi (2015) suggested, especially to those under the age of 11 as their tendency to employ CSs develops over time, from L1 based to more L2 based. Despite all these things, we should remain neutral and not fall into one of the two extremes whether CSs are not teachable as Poulisse & Bongaerts (1989) claimed or that they are teachable (Maleki, 2010; Saeidi & Farshchi, 2015). The last conclusion is that task type does not seem to significantly affect the use of CSs, but cognitive development and WTC may do.

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