

Investigating the Relationship between Iranian Students' Language Proficiency Performance and Their Communication Strategies Usage Pattern

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Abstract:

Iranian universities expect students to demonstrate solid English language proficiency performance by taking standardized English language proficiency tests such as TOEFL iBT and IELTS tests; however, some students experience complications during communication despite getting ideal scores. This correlational study aims to investigate the relationship between Iranian students' language proficiency performance and their communication strategies usage pattern. Besides, the relationship between the washback effect of IELTS and TOEFL iBT tests and students' communication strategies usage pattern is discussed. The other objective of the study is to investigate the relationship between the constructs underlying language proficiency and students' communication strategies usage pattern. Three hundred and eighty four Iranian students having TOEFL iBT and IELTS test scores and pursuing their Ph.D. degrees participated in the present study. The researcher used Nakatani's (2006) Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI) to collect data. The findings showed negative and significant correlation between the washback effect of both IELTS and TOEFL iBT tests and participants' communication strategies usage pattern. Likewise, significant and weak positive correlation has been found between participants' language proficiency performance and their communication strategies use. Additionally, the outcomes displayed significant and weak positive correlation between the constructs underlying language proficiency and communication strategies usage pattern. Moreover, the pedagogical implications of the study are discussed.

Keywords: *Communicative language proficiency; Construct validity; Language proficiency; Strategic competence; Washback*

Introduction

The notion of communication strategies (CSs) seemed quite interesting to applied linguistics researchers for decades despite defining CSs from different perspectives (Canale & Swain, 1980; Celce-Murcia, 2007). According to Dong & Fang-Peng (2010), some applied linguistics researchers (e.g., Bagaric & Djigunovic, 2007; Bhattacharyya, 2012; Seydow, 2012) concentrated their studies on comparing different approaches toward the concept of CSs. However, other researchers (e.g., Bachman, 1990; Adegbile & Alabi, 2005) were eager

to broaden their understanding of CSs by relating it to the notion of language proficiency. Despite many studies focused on the interdependence of language proficiency and CSs (e.g., Hyde, 1982; Paribakht, 1985; Dobao, 2002; Ting & Phan, 2008; Chuanchaisit & Prapphal, 2009), very few comprehensive studies examined the issue in depth. These studies, according to Khan (2010), were founded on task-based approach by comparing the CSs usage pattern of low ability learners with that of high ability learners. In the study conducted by Marzuki, Ting, Jerome, Chuah, and Misieng (2013), they found that showing mastery in language proficiency does not necessarily mean that it has positive correlation with use of CSs. Although some students demonstrated good command of language proficiency by taking TOEFL iBT or IELTS test, they faced serious difficulties in managing authentic communication (Chen & Sun, 2006).

The researcher contemplates that the issue still needs attention despite all efforts. Therefore, in order to fill the gap in the current literature and provide a holistic view toward the relationship between the students' language proficiency performance and their CSs usage pattern, the researcher considers two major aims for this study. The first objective is to investigate the relationship between the washback effect of both IELTS and TOEFL iBT tests and Iranian Students' CSs usage pattern. The second goal is to figure out if there is a relationship between students' language proficiency performance and their communication strategies usage pattern.

Literature review

Language proficiency

Spolsky (1995) viewed language proficiency equal to language ability. Poehner (2008) believed language proficiency could be elucidated based on individuals' interaction but through an individual functioning. Bachman (1990) suggested real-life and component ability approaches toward the concept of language proficiency. According to Bachman's (1990) understanding, the former refers to the real-life performance of language users in different contexts similar to those of routine life, and the later refers to the interaction of language user based on the competencies included in Canale's & Swain's (1980) model of communicative competence. Accepting either of these approaches leads us toward the Bachman's (1990) theory of communicative language ability, which is the broader definition of language proficiency. Furthermore, Adegbile & Alabi (2005) related the concept of language proficiency to communicative competence from the aspects of formalist and functionalist approaches.

Communicative language proficiency

Bachman (1990) interpreted communicative language proficiency as communicative language ability (CLA) that comprises "of both knowledge, or competence, and the capacity

for implementing, or executing that competence in appropriate, contextualized communicative language use” (P. 84). In other words, Bachman (1990) believed that language proficiency entails the awareness of language user on “how skills and knowledge are related” (P. 82). Likewise, Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB, 2012) regarded CLA as an ability of communicating message appropriately in a given context.

Notion of communicative competence

Celce-Murcia (2007) outlined strategic competence as “the ability to compensate for problems or deficit in communication and do various types of planning” (P. 42). CLB (2012) explained strategic competence as “the ability to manage the integration and application of all other components of language ability to the specific context and situation of language use” (P. 14). Additionally, Dobao (2002) and Paribakht (1985) linked CSs use to language proficiency by asserting that learners’ choices of CSs might be associated with their level of language proficiency.

Construct validity

Caldwell (2008) defined construct validity as “the extent to which a test measures something that cannot be observed directly but must be inferred from patterns of behavior. A pattern of behavior is called construct” (P. 177). Messick (1989) related the concept of validity to the test scores rather than to the test itself. Meanwhile, Kane (2001) viewed the issue from the extent scores correspond with the underlying theory. Van der Walt & Steyn (2008) shed light on the importance of construct validity by stating the study of construct validity would help us to attain proper understanding of candidate’s ability.

Concept of washback

Poehner (2008) elucidated washback as “the power of high-stakes assessment” (P. 10). In the other study, Fulcher & Davidson (2007) illustrated washback as “the effect of a test on learning and teaching” (P. 377). Brown (2005) conceptualized the notion of washback as “the degree to which a test affects the curriculum that is related to it” (P. 242). Davies (1985) related washback study to learning strategies by stating that the items reflected in tests define the test-takers’ choices of particular learning strategies as well as particular content embedded in the curriculum. The washback effects or what Gipps (2003) called them consequences could be beneficial or harmful. According to Green (2007), a test with the utmost authenticity would promote positive washback effect.

Research questions

With the purpose of addressing the objectives of the study and attaining a comprehensive picture on the issues, the researcher posed the following research questions.

- 1) Is there any significant relationship between the washback effect of IELTS test and students' communication strategies usage pattern?
- 2) Is there any significant relationship between the washback effect of TOEFL iBT test and students' communication strategies usage pattern?
- 3) Is there any significant relationship between Iranian students' language proficiency performance and their communication strategies usage pattern?
- 4) Do the constructs underlying language proficiency have any significant relationship with students' communication strategies usage pattern?

Methodology

Participants

The researcher sampled randomly from the accessible population of Iranian students having IELTS and TOEFL iBT test scores and studying at the Iranian universities in 2016. To estimate the size of population from which the sample was to be taken, the researcher used the data declared by Institute for Research and Planning in Higher Education (IRPHE, 2014) that estimated the number of Iranian postsecondary students studying on fulltime bases in Iran around 73437 students. Therefore, based on formula of Krejcie & Morgan (1970), the sample comprises 384 students studying at the Iranian universities to ensure 0.05 degree of accuracy with the 95% confidence interval. The participants were both male and female Iranian students who are at least 25 years old and pursuing their Ph.D. degrees in different fields of study.

Since all Iranian universities require a proof of English language proficiency from the students as an admission requirement, the researcher maintains that all students studying at the Iranian universities have met the minimum requirement for language proficiency level. To justify for including students having scores from TOEFL iBT and IELTS tests in the sample of the study, which might lead to illusion of inhomogeneity in the sample based on the level of language proficiency, the researcher predicated his rationale on Educational Testing Service (ETS, 2010) findings. According to ETS (2010), IELTS and TOEFL iBT tests "were built from different frameworks and different test blueprints [; however,] they have the same number of sections measuring similar skills and underlying constructs" (P. 14). Likewise, ETS (2010) reported a moderately high correlation of (0.73) between the two test total scores. Hence, the researcher ensures the homogeneity of participants based on their language proficiency level.

Instrument

The researcher used the Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI) proposed by Nakatani (2006). OCSI is divided into two sections: Strategies for Coping with Speaking Problems and Strategies for Coping with Listening Problems. The first part contains 32 items and the latter includes 26 items that are constructed on 1-5 points based on the Likert scale. Moreover, Nakatani (2006) reported the Cronbach's alpha of (0.86) for the first part and internal consistency of (0.85) for the latter part.

Data collection procedures

The researcher contacted the universities across the country to access the list of Iranian students having TOEFL iBT and IELTS test scores with the permission of their respective departments. Then, the researcher attended in every university to distribute the print version of OCSI among participants and explain the directions required for completion of the questionnaire. The researcher coded every questionnaire to facilitate matching the participants' test scores reported by the respective departments to participants' completed questionnaires. The researcher clarified for the participants that taking part in the study is optional and their answers will not affect them in anyway. Afterwards, participants were allotted 10 minutes to complete questionnaires.

In the next phase after scoring the completed questionnaires, the researcher divided participants based on their scores into two groups: group "A" representing those having IELTS and OCSI scores and group "B" symbolizing those having TOEFL iBT and OCSI scores. The researcher used the SPSS software to analyze the data and answer the research questions.

The researcher used the Pearson correlation coefficient test to scrutinize the relationship between the participants' IELTS scores and their OCSI scores in group "A". Likewise, the researcher adopted the same procedure to study the relationship between the participants' TOEFL iBT scores and their OCSI scores in group "B". The researcher maintains that the results coming from the two analyses will provide an explanation to probable relationship between the washback effect of both IELTS and TOEFL iBT tests and the participants' CSs usage pattern. Next, the researcher calculated the Z-score of all participants' language proficiency scores and used the linear regression analysis to investigate the relationship between language proficiency performance of participants and their communication strategies usage pattern. The researcher believes that the coming results will provide a holistic view toward the likely relationship between the participants' language proficiency performance and their communication strategies usage pattern as well as helping us to understand if the constructs underlying language proficiency are related to participants' usage pattern of communication strategies.

Results

The focus of this section is on the findings related to the proposed questions. Firstly, the relationship between the washback effect of both IELTS and TOEFL iBT tests are compared to participants' communication strategies usage pattern through the Pearson Correlation Coefficient test. In this part, the relationship between participants' responses to OSCI and their scores on all sections of IELTS and TOEFL iBT tests is measured. Secondly, the findings on the global relationship between the participants' language proficiency performance and their communication strategies usage pattern obtained from the completed OCSI are presented using the linear regression analysis.

H₀1: There is no significant relationship between the washback effect of IELTS test and students' communication strategies usage pattern.

Table 1 shows the outcome of the study for the first null hypothesis with 0.05 degree of accuracy and 95% confidence interval. According to the data presented in Table 1, the researcher found no significant relationship between the CSs usage pattern and participants' IELTS speaking score ($r = -.043$, $p = .278$). The same is true for the reading score ($r = -.110$, $p = .064$) and writing score ($r = -.111$, $p = .062$). However, the result in Table 1 indicates negative correlation and yet significant relationship between the CSs usage pattern and the IELTS listening score ($r = -.183$, $p < .01$) as well as IELTS total score ($r = -.170$, $p < .01$). Therefore, the first research hypothesis indicating there is no significant relationship between the washback effect of IELTS test and students' communication strategies usage pattern is rejected.

Table: 1

Relationship between washback effect of IELTS test and communication strategies usage pattern

		IELTS Speaking Score	IELTS Listening Score	IELTS Reading Score	IELTS Writing Score	IELTS Total Score
Communication Strategies	Pearson Correlation	-.043	-.183**	-.110	-.111	-.170**
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.278	.006	.064	.062	.009
	N	192	192	192	192	192

$p < 0.05$

H₀2: There is no significant relationship between the washback effect of TOEFL iBT test and students' communication strategies usage pattern.

Similarly, Table 2 provides information on the extent participants' TOEFL iBT scores are related to their CSs usage pattern. Table 2 shows only TOEFL speaking score ($r = -.126$, $p < .05$) has significant negative correlation with CSs usage pattern. Therefore, the null

hypothesis indicating there is no significant relationship between the washback effect of TOEFL iBT test and participants' communication strategies usage pattern is rejected.

Table: 2

Relationship between Washback Effect of TOEFL iBT Test and Communication Strategies Usage Pattern

		TOEFL Listening Score	TOEFL Reading Score	TOEFL Speaking Score	TOEFL Writing Score	TOEFL Total Score
Communication Strategies	Pearson Correlation	-.097	-.005	-.126*	-.110	-.113
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.091	.474	.041	.064	.060
	N	192	192	192	192	192

$p < 0.05$

H₀3: There is no significant relationship between Iranian students' language proficiency performance and their communication strategies usage pattern.

In order to test the third hypothesis, Table 3 helps to foresee participants' language proficiency performance by their CSs usage pattern. According to Table 3, language proficiency performance and CSs usage pattern are correlated positively but the strength of this relationship seems rather weak ($R = .142$). Hence, it is possible to reject the null hypothesis. In addition, the R-Square that is .020 shows that 2% of change in participants' CSs usage pattern is due to their level of language proficiency. In other words, R^2 indicates that the relationship between the language proficiency performance and CSs usage pattern is moderately weak.

Table: 3

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.142 ^a	.020	.018	4.899

a. Predictors: (Constant), Language Proficiency Performance

By looking at Table 4, it is evident that both R and R^2 concerning language proficiency performance and CSs usage pattern are statistically significant ($p < .01$). Therefore, the researcher rejects the null hypothesis and concludes that there is a significant relationship between Participants' language proficiency performance and their CSs usage pattern.

Table: 4

ANOVA^b

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	188.466	1	188.466	7.852	.005 ^a
	Residual	9168.510	382	24.001		
	Total	9356.977	383			

a. Predictors: (Constant), Language Proficiency Performance

b. Dependent Variable: Communication Strategies Usage Pattern

Moreover, based on Table 5, the prediction of participants' CSs usage pattern is in accord with 247.992 - .701 (language proficiency performance) scores when language proficiency performance is measured in scores. In other words, results indicate that the average score of CSs usage pattern is about 248 when language proficiency performance is held constant. Therefore, participants' CSs usage pattern score will decrease by -.701 for every further variation in score of language proficiency performance.

Table: 5

Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	247.992	.250		991.941	.000
	Language Proficiency Performance	-.701	.250	-.142	-2.802	.005

a. Dependent Variable: Communication Strategies Usage Pattern

H₀4: There is no significant relationship between the constructs underlying language proficiency and students' communication strategies usage pattern.

According to the findings drawn from Table 3 and Table 4, there is a moderately weak positive correlation between the participants' language proficiency score and their CSs usage pattern score ($R = .142$), and this relationship is still statistically significant ($p < .01$). Based on Kane's (2001) understanding of construct validity, the researcher interprets that if the scores on language proficiency positively correlate with CSs usage pattern, then it can be concluded that the theories and the hypotheses upon which the language proficiency test is constructed are related to CSs usage pattern as well. Therefore, the researcher rejects the null hypothesis by concluding that there is a significant relationship between the constructs underlying language proficiency and participants' CSs usage pattern despite the strength of this relationship is moderately weak.

Discussion

The rejection of the first and the second hypotheses indicated that there is a significant inverse correlation between the washback effect of both IELTS and TOEFL iBT tests, specifically in IELTS listening, IELTS total and TOEFL iBT speaking sections, and participants' CSs usage pattern. This inverse relationship projects the negative influence IELTS and TOEFL iBT preparation courses in Iran have on participants' CSs usage pattern. Messick (1996) asserted that inappropriate test bounded classroom preparation produces negative washback effect. This might be the situation reflected in results about the IELTS and TOEFL preparation courses in Iran. Therefore, the focus of IELTS and TOEFL preparation courses in Iran is generally on the concept of proficiency rather than the skills and abilities required to be proficient (Shohamy, 1992).

Besides, this negative correlation might be due to the Green's (2007) idea stating if the test-takers' language abilities are developed due to the effect of the test, washback is called beneficial; otherwise, the washback is harmful. Hence, regarding to the results presented in Table 1 and Table 2, the researcher ascertains that the communication strategies participants acquire in IELTS and TOEFL preparation courses are not in line with the actual and authentic communicative skills they needed to be successful in IELTS and TOEFL tests (Green, 2007). Similarly, Bailey (1999) believed that one of the reasons of witnessing negative washback is that teachers in IELTS and TOEFL preparation courses have the inclination to teach textbooks offering samples of previously administered tests instead of "introducing more authentic materials" (P. 31). In addition, in line with Pearson's (1988) point of view, the findings exhibited that the changes in participants' test scores in IELTS and TOEFL iBT tests were not encouraged by the CSs pattern they acquired in IELTS and TOEFL preparation courses in Iran.

The rejection of the third hypothesis disclosed that there is a significant and moderately weak positive correlation between participants' CSs usage pattern and their language proficiency performance if the language ability is viewed from the holistic point of view. This is supported with Dobao (2002) and Paribakht (1985) findings stating that the relationship between language proficiency and CSs use is widely established; however, the degree of this relationship is the prominent question that worth further researches. In addition, Dobao (2002) found that participants' level of language proficiency affects the use of CSs though some researchers (e.g., Ting & Phan, 2008) reported no significant relationship between the two variables.

Paribakht (1985) found similar positive correlation between language proficiency performance of participants and their use of CSs that fits with the findings of the current study; however, she did not report the strength of this correlation. According to Table 3, the strength of such correlation is moderately weak indicating that any improvement in participants' language proficiency performance increases the use of CSs among participants;

however, this amount of positive change will be very diminutive and equals to two percent. Interestingly, Hyde (1982) found somehow similar results indicating that students with higher level of language proficiency, similar to participants who took part in this study with mean of 6.77 for the IELTS test overall score and 98.67 for the TOEFL iBT test total score, might use CSs less than those with lower level of language proficiency might.

Therefore, as shown in Table 3, this moderately weak correlation between language proficiency and use of CSs might be related to other variables such as participants' level of language proficiency. Despite uncovering no significant correlation between language proficiency and use of CSs, Ting & Phan (2008) reported "high proficient group used 132 and the less-proficient group used 142 [number of communication strategies]" (P. 32). In addition, other researchers found similar results between participants' language proficiency and CSs usage pattern (e.g., Liskin-Gasparro, 1996; Labarca & Khanji, 1986; Poulisse & Schils, 1989). Consequently, the level of language proficiency might be the reason for the presence of moderately weak positive correlation between the language proficiency performance and CSs usage pattern.

In line with the findings of the present study, it is possible to reject the forth hypothesis based on the significant correlation as well as the positive association found between scores of participants in language proficiency and their CSs usage pattern. This viewpoint is supported with the idea justifying the understanding of construct validity in test scores (Messick, 1989). According to Bachman (1990), the study of construct validity is checking of participants' performance on the proficiency test against the theories upon which the test is constructed. Therefore, due to the positive correlation between participants' performance in language proficiency and their use of CSs, the researcher comes to the point that the constructs underlying language proficiency are significantly related to CSs usage pattern. However, since the strength of the correlation between the language proficiency and use of CSs is moderately weak, it is possible to assume that the correlation between the constructs underlying language proficiency and CSs usage pattern tends to be moderately weak as well.

According to Brown (2004), the low level of authenticity in standardized test of language proficiency refers to the consequence of high degree of reliability and practicality these tests exercise. The researcher maintains that not sufficiently authenticated language proficiency tests lead IELTS and TOEFL preparation courses to focus on instructional materials with an undesirable degree of authenticity (e.g., past test papers and questions) instead of competencies leading to actual language proficiency (Shohamy, 1992). This might also be the reason of observing weak correlation between CSs use, based on data in Table 3 very minugia amount of two percent, and the constructs underlying language proficiency performance. Therefore, according to the current findings, the researcher claims that achieving high language proficiency performance among Iranian test-takers might be related mostly to the competencies other than strategic competence introduced in Canale & Swain (1980) model of communicative competence.

Conclusion

The influence of tests on the process of language learning and teaching can be positive or negative (Bailey, 1999). The negative correlation between the washback effect of both IELTS and TOEFL iBT tests and use of CSs specifies that there is a need to pay more attention to communicative competencies and skills that are prominent in expansion of CSs use among Iranian students. Likewise, the other places to look for the reasons leading to negative washback effect of both IELTS and TOEFL iBT tests on CSs use would be the curriculum according which IELTS and TOEFL preparation courses are founded. Shohamy (1992) believed that if a mismatch exists between the intended curriculum and the real life needs of the test-takers, the negative washback would be expected. Therefore, IELTS and TOEFL iBT preparation courses should revise their current objectives on communication strategies to meet the ranges of authentic along with related strategies required for the IELTS and TOEFL iBT tasks, respectively.

The strength and the form of correlation between language proficiency and the use of communication strategies are still vague despite huge body of literature and research studies in behind (Paribakht, 1985; Dobao, 2002; Liskin-Gasparro, 1996; Labarca & Khanji, 1986; Poulisse & Schils, 1989; Ting & Phan, 2008). This might be the result of multi-dimensional nature of language proficiency (Farhady, 1982). Despite the outcome revealed meaningful positive correlation between language proficiency and CSs use, the findings must be interpreted with utmost care since the strength of this correlation does not tend to be strong. In addition, the generalizability of the outcomes of this study must be done with careful consideration since the participants who participated in this research were Iranian Ph.D. students studying on full-time bases in different fields of study.

Pedagogical implementations

The researcher maintains that the outcomes of this study help applied linguistics researchers to achieve comprehensive understanding about the relationship between the students' communication strategies usage pattern and the concept of language proficiency as a whole. In addition, the results of this study benefit English language teachers instructing IELTS or TOEFL iBT preparation courses to perceive the extent communication strategies are prominent in evolving students' language proficiency performance. Moreover, the understanding of test designers about the probable impact of standardized tests of language proficiency on test-takers' communication strategies usage pattern enriches.

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