

## **The Relationship between the Use and Choice of Communication Strategies and Language Proficiency of Iranian EFL Learners**

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Communication strategies (CSs) are systematic attempts by language learners to encode or decode meaning in a target language in situations where the appropriate target language rules have not been formed. Based on this view, communication strategies can be seen as compensatory means for making up for linguistic deficiencies of second or foreign language learners. Within the conceptual framework outlined, this paper is a report on a research conducted at Azarbaijan Teachers Education University on the students majoring in English Language and Literature. The main aim was to seek a relationship between the subjects' use of communication strategies in solving communication problems and their proficiency levels in English as a foreign language. The data was collected by means of one-to-one interviews with the participants, and were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. The results indicated that the frequency of communication strategies applied by the participants varied according to their proficiency levels, i.e. low proficient learners tended to employ more communication strategies in comparison with high and moderate ones. The type of communication strategies employed also varied according to their oral proficiency level. It was revealed that high level participants employed more L<sub>2</sub>-based communication strategies where the low proficient learners used more L<sub>1</sub>-based ones.

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In the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the context of language teaching has experienced many great turning points both in its theory and consequently in its practice. One of these was the rise of communicative language teaching, a phenomenon which has been under the influence of many insights from more established disciplines such as linguistics, education, and psychology. Perhaps the start of this innovative outlook to language and language teaching was rooted in an approach to the study of language, namely Chomskyeen Linguistic, which had the least interest and claim of any sort in the world of language teaching. Among many of Chomsky's revolutionary ideas was the distinction he made between competence and performance. Chomsky (1965). The notion of competence referred to the underlying knowledge one has of his/her native language system, while performance was reserved to talk about the actual occasions when that underlying knowledge was put into communicative use. Of course, Chomsky's preference was competence at the expense of seemingly complicated nature of language use. Soon, however, reactions emerged in form of emphasis on the equal status and salience of performance and the need to understand the way people use language to communicate. One of the pioneers of this movement, Dell Hymes (1972) proposed the concept of 'communicative competence', which comprised of different but interrelated components namely 'linguistic competence', 'social competence', 'discourse competence', and 'strategic competence'. It is the latter component which is central for our purpose here. According to (Brown 1994, p. 114) strategic competence can be divided into 'communication strategies', and 'learning strategies', the latter referring to those strategies employed by second or foreign language learners during the process of learning the target language, while the former, communication strategies refer to those strategies required for the initiation, repair and maintained, and closure of an act of verbal communication.

It is this aspect, i.e. communication strategy, of strategic competence, which is the focal point of the present paper. We have

tried to delve into and understand the relationship between the use of different types of communication strategies by EFL learners and their level of proficiency.

Communication strategies can be defined as “mutual attempts of two interlocutors to agree on meaning in situations where the requisite meaning structures do not seem to be shared” (Tarone 1980, p. 420). To identify a communication strategy from a non-communication strategy the following criteria have been suggested by Tarone (1981):

- a. the desire of one speaker to communicate meaning x with another speaker
- b. the belief by the speaker that linguistic or sociolinguistic sources required for exchanging meaning x is not available, adequate, or shared with the listener
- c. the decision of the speaker not to communicate meaning x, or
- d. the decision to choose alternative ways of communicating meaning x

To put it in other words, the need for the use of any type of communication strategy in a given communicative context drives from the following conditions:

- There is a problem in communicating one’s meaning
- There is a degree of awareness of the strategies need to solve the problem
- The speaker can control (make use of) the strategies needed

Inherent in the first condition is the assumption that there always exists some degree of disparity between the intended meaning and the means to realize this end (Corder 1981, p.420), which constitutes the rationale for the existence of communication strategies. Although definitions as what these strategies are may vary from one perspective to another, the fact that communication strategies deal with problems that arise during the process of

communication remains central (Corder, 1983; Farech & Kasper, 1983; and Paribakht, 1985).

The criterion of problemacy clearly links with the fact that communication strategies have generally been studied within the domains of interlanguage, a developing language of second or foreign language learners (Selinker, 1972). This should not mean, by any means, that the study of communication strategies in native speaker contexts is pointless, because we all agree that even native-speaker communicative competence is not perfect either. Besides, as Farech and Kasper (1983) rightly point out communicative problems can occur due to contextual and psychological pressures such as fatigue, anxiety, and lack of concentration that could create barrier in the communication of native speakers.

In spite of all this, it is obvious that second and foreign language learners experience more difficulties in expressing their thoughts due to their limited linguistic resources. Thus, the study of communication strategies is more central in second or foreign language learning contexts than first language contexts.

Also, inherent in most of the literature dealing with communication strategies is the assumption of intentionality, i.e. the assumption that the speaker has control over the strategy selected and that the choice is responsive to the perceived communication problem (Bialystok, 1990). The point raised by Bialystok presupposes consciousness on the part of the speaker since without some degree of awareness it would be difficult to conceive speaker control and choice in the strategy used.

Apart from these construct related issues concerning communication strategies, one should also take into account the fact that the kind of communication strategies used by interlocutors seems to be subject to contextual factors such as gender, cultural background, proficiency level, etc. Among the previous research, the relationship between strategic competence and proficiency level has been studied by Paribakht (1985). Wannaruk (2003), too, has studied communication strategies in a second language context. Yet, no research work has studied the relationship of

communication strategies with any of these factors in Iranian EFL context.

This paper, therefore, reports an investigation on how Iranian university students majoring in English use communication strategies to solve their communication problems and if their choices of these strategies are determined by their level of proficiency in English. The research questions addressed in this study were:

- What communication strategies do the students use in oral communication when they are in need of making up for their inadequate linguistic competence?
- Do communication strategies vary according to the level of oral proficiency?

In order to provide reliable answers to these questions, the following null hypotheses were formulated:

- Students do not use communication strategies to compensate for their deficient foreign language competence.
- The choice of communication strategies used to compensate for deficient linguistic competence are not determined by the students' level of oral proficiency.

In the following section, issues regarding the design of the study have been accounted for.

### Method

The choice and use of communication strategies in relationship to language proficiency level was the aim of the study, for which the following sampling, data gathering and analytic procedures were taken.

### *Participants*

The subjects for conducting the study were selected from second term students majoring in English Language and Literature Course at Azarbaijan Teachers Education University. 51 students participated in the study. They were divided into three groups, namely, advanced, average, and low according to the levels of oral language proficiency which was determined by calculating the average of the marks they got in their language lab (with emphasis on oral skills), grammar, reading and writing courses.

A point should be made regarding the grouping procedures taken. We acknowledge that perhaps the most effective and standard way of determining our subjects' oral proficiency level was to administer a pre-test. However, it should be mentioned that due to administrative reasons and contextual constraints, a pre-test was not a possible option to be taken.

### *Procedure*

The data was collected from the one-to-one interviews with the participants. To determine the authenticity of the questions, they were selected from the "IELTS Speaking Book". The questions were mostly about participants' studies, background education, free time, interests, and plans for future, etc. After transcribing the recorded interviews, the frequency of communication strategies employed by our subjects were counted and recorded for later analysis and discussion.

### *Taxonomy of Communication Strategies*

The taxonomy of communication strategies used in Wannurak (2003) was the basis for the current study as well (see Appendix A for a complete list of communication strategies used in the present work). Wannurak's work was preferred due to the fact that it was, in fact, an integration of earlier taxonomies, namely those of Tarone (1980), Bailystok (1990), and Dornyei (1995), thus proved to be more comprehensive, explicit, and informative. The only difference between the taxonomy used in the current work with that of Wannurak's is that we omitted miming

strategy from our list since in order to preserve the natural setting of the interview and to keep minimum the participants' stress, we only tape recorded the interviews and avoided video recording, which otherwise could have increased participants' anxiety. Therefore, there was no need to include miming strategy in our list.

### Data analysis and discussion

In this section, the analyses of the data obtained from our subjects through structured interviews have been presented followed by relevant discussions and interpretations.

#### *The frequency distribution of communication strategies*

The first information obtained as the result of the analysis of the data concerned the frequency of distribution of communication strategies (CSs) for each of the three groups of subjects, which has been shown in Table 1.

Table 1

#### *The Frequency Distribution of CSs for Each of the Three Groups*

Type of CSs	Proficiency Level			Total
	High	Moderate	Low	
Modification Devices	64	89	146	299
L <sub>2</sub> -based	12	11	3	26
L <sub>1</sub> -based	3	5	22	30
Avoidance	3	5	31	39
Total	82	110	202	394

As it shown in the table, the number of communication strategies used by the low level group exceeded those of other groups. In order to show that the differences in the number of communication strategies used by the three groups were significant, the ANOVA test was administered. According to Hatch and Farhadi (1982), the ANOVA test enables us to compare the means of more than groups on one variable.

While employing the ANOVA test, the researchers had to deal with the *F distribution value*. The F value can be obtained by calculating the ratio of the two sources of variability \_ between group variance over within-group variance. Therefore, if the F value is 1 or less, it represents no treatment effect, whereas when it is above 1, inefficacy of the treatment cannot be concluded. The F value should be large enough due to the number of groups and the size of the groups.

In the following, the results for the ANOVA of group differences regarding the use of communication strategies have been displayed.

Table 2  
*ANOVA Results of Group Differences in the Number of CSs Employed*

Group	Mean	S.D.	F	Outcome
High	4.88	2.147	27.741	High<Moderate<Low
Moderate	6.53	2.239		
Low	12.18	4.157		

After the application of one-way variance on the means of CSs of the three groups, a significant difference was obtained, i.e. the number of communication strategies used by low level proficiency group was noticeably more than the number of CSs by high and moderate groups.

To justify this result, it can easily be suggested that the third group, due to their low level of oral proficiency in comparison to the other two groups, had to resort to communication strategies more often during the process of expressing their opinions in order to compensate for their linguistic inabilities.

As for the frequency and type of communication strategies employed by each group, what can be concluded by re-examining Table 1 is that the most frequently used communication strategies were *modification devices*, *avoidance*, *L1-based*, and *L2-based* strategies respectively. Of course, it should be said that the



application of ANOVA made it possible to establish a relationship between the participants' proficiency level and each of these strategies. It was noticed that the relationship between the two variables in each of the cases was meaningful.

*Results of the analysis of individual strategies and their sub-strategies*

As said before, the analysis of the data revealed that modification devices was the most frequently used communication strategy. Table 3 takes the issue further by displaying the frequency distribution of subcategories of modification devices for each group.

Table 3  
*The Frequency Distribution of Subcategories of Modification Devices for Each Group*

Type of CSs	Proficiency Level			Total
	High	Moderate	Low	
Pausing	30	40	81	151
Clarification request	13	29	50	92
Confirmation checks	1	2	2	5
Self Repairs	17	14	5	36
Comprehension Checks	3	4	8	15
Backchannel cues	-	-	-	
Total	64	89	146	299

At this stage, to shed more light to the discussion, we will take into account these sub-strategies one by one. The first sub-strategy to be elaborated on in more detail is *pausing*.

### *Pausing*

As shown in Table 3, the sub-strategy of pausing has been employed by all the three groups. This simply means that all the three groups needed time to concentrate and allow their mental processes to deal with the information received or produced. But, as the table clearly shows, the number of pauses by low level proficiency group were more than those made by the other two groups. Obviously, linguistically less competent participants were in need of more time to process information both at receptive and productive stages of their communication. An interesting point in the analysis of this strategy was the strategy markers used by the participants. Our data revealed that less proficient participants used more intentional markers such as “uh...” and “er...” than other types of gap fillers such as “well...”, “let me see ...”, etc., which were more evident in the data obtained from the more proficient participants.

### *Clarification request*

The second sub-strategy under *modification devices* was *clarification request*. As evident in Table 3, the use of this sub-strategy was the least in number among high proficient group than the other two groups, a fact that can be attributed to their high command of the target language. Although this group employed fewer *clarification request strategies*, their utterances signaling them had more linguistic variation than the production of the other groups, i.e. the high proficient participants produced more various forms such as “*what do you mean?*”, “*again please*”, “*pardon*”, etc., to signal *clarification request* strategy.

### *Confirmation check*

The third sub-strategy under *modification devices*, *confirmation check*, is a strategy in which the speaker’s utterance is repeated by the listener for comprehension check. The analysis of data, as shown in Table 3, indicated that, throughout the interviews with the three groups, this strategy occurred only in five occasions. One possible explanation for this shortage of use can lie

in the lack of awareness of this strategy among the participants, implying the need for strategy training. Another possible explanation may lie in cross-cultural differences. That is, whereas in English speaking communities, confirmation check, i.e. repetition of speaker utterance, may function, on the part of the listener as a confirmation check, in Iranian culture it is either non-existent or a very rare pragmatic strategy.

### *Self-repair*

*Self-repair*, as the next sub-strategy in our study was used 36 times altogether, which was the third most frequent sub-strategy used by the participants. However, the three groups varied in the distribution of this sub-strategy. As Table 3 shows the participants in the high proficiency group were able to use this strategy more frequently (17 out of 36 cases) than the other two groups, particularly the low proficient group (only 5 out 36 cases). This can be due to the fact that using *self-repair strategy* requires a higher knowledge of the target language both in identifying the mistake and later in its correction.

### *Comprehension check*

The sub-strategy of *comprehension check* is normally realized in utterance like “Ok?”, “right?”, “do you see what I mean”, etc., in order to check a partner’s comprehension of what has been said by the speaker. Altogether, only 15 such uses were reported in our data, which means a low degree of awareness among the participants on the use of this sub-strategy. The low level proficiency group used it more than twice the times than each of the other two groups. One possible explanation is that a less proficient student usually being aware of his/her deficient linguistic competence tries to compensate by checking whether the other party has understood the message. This explanation also justifies low frequent use of this strategy by the high and average level groups since they were not under this stressful assumption that their utterances are unlikely to be understood by their interlocutors due to insufficient linguistic competence.

### *Back channel cues*

The last sub-strategy under modification devices was *back channel cue*. Backchannel cues are usually realized in comments such as “uh”, “yeah”, “really”, etc. which are uttered as feedback while the speaker is talking in order indicate the listener’s cooperation or his/her understanding of what is said. The analysis of our data reported no use of this strategy. One probable explanation is that since back channeling cues involves some sort of moderately interrupting the speaker, it was not employed by Iranian subjects as a way of avoiding a behavior normally considered rude, especially when speaking to a person superior in age or social status or opposite sex. Another explanation can reside in the observation that since the participants were expected to produce utterance during the data collecting interviews, they had little chance of using this strategy which is normally associated with listeners rather than speakers. A more focused research would definitely shed more light on the use of this sub-strategy among foreign language learners.

### *L2-based communication strategies*

L2-based communication strategies are those strategies such as *circumlocution*, *approximation*, and *appeal*. The analysis of the data on this category has been shown in Table 4.

Table 4

#### *The Frequency Distribution of the Subcategories of L2-Based CSs*

Type of CSs	Proficiency Level			Total
	High	Moderate	Low	
Circumlocution	10	10	1	21
Approximation	-	-	-	-
Appeal	2	1	2	5
Total	12	11	3	26

### *Circumlocution*

*Circumlocution* is the use of additional utterances of any form (single words, phrases, sentences) to describe the features, function, location, or purpose of a seemingly unfamiliar concept. This strategy was used 21 times in the whole data, with very uneven distribution. That is, as is clear in Table 4, whereas its use in the low proficient group was reported only once, the other two groups employed 10 times each, which is a good indicator of linguistic ability and confidence in producing more language where a need is felt to do so.

### *Approximation*

Approximation, or the use of an L2 word which shares the essential features of the target word, was not employed by any of our participants. This was either due to lack of awareness of this strategy among the participants, or lack of opportunity during the data gathering procedure to use this strategy. If the second case is true, it implies further research with more extensive data both in terms of the number of participants and the duration of interviews.

### *Appeal*

This strategy involves appealing for assistance during communication, usually by non-native speaker from a native speaker, and is realized in the form of utterances like “*what do you call it in English*”. It was reported only 5 times in the whole data, with no significant difference among the three groups in terms of frequency of its occurrence. One possible reason for the low frequency of use of this strategy might be the fact that both the participants and the researchers were non-native speakers. However, further research with more concentrated data on this strategy is needed to yield more vivid results and interpretations.

### *L1-based communication strategies*

Two L<sub>1</sub>-based strategies, i.e. *language switching* and *foreignizing* were examined in our data. The analysis of data on these two strategies has been summarized in Table 5.

Table 5

*The Frequency Distribution of the Subcategories of L1-Based CSs*

Type of CSs	Proficiency Level			Total
	High	Moderate	Low	
Language Switch	3	3	22	28
Foreignizing	-	-	-	-
Total	3	3	22	28

*Language switch*

22 cases of the total of 28 occurrences of language switch were reported to belong to the low proficiency group. This is, more than anything, due to the group members' low level of proficiency. However, different research circumstances, for example, whereby a native speaker is involved in collecting data, may yield quite different data in this regard.

*Foreignizing*

*Foreignizing* is the use of an L<sub>1</sub> word or phrase with L<sub>2</sub> pronunciation. No case of *foreignizing* was reported in our data. One possible explanation may lie in the participants' area of studies. Being all students of English Language and Literature probably prevented them psychologically from deliberately employing mixed pronunciation strategies. However, more focused studies are needed to yield more thorough results and explanations.

*Avoidance communication strategies*

Avoidance communication strategies are of two types: Message avoidance strategies which enable a person to give up a particular topic because he/she does not feel confident enough in terms of required background knowledge to be able to engage in communication; and topic avoidance strategies which enable a person to refuse to enter or continue a discourse because of inadequate linguistic competence. Table 6 summarize the analysis of these two types of avoidance strategies in our data.

Table 6  
*The Frequency Distribution of Subcategories of Avoidance CSs*

Type of CSs	Proficiency Level			Total
	High	Moderate	Low	
Message avoidance	4	5	27	36
Topic Avoidance	-	-	4	4
Total	4	5	31	40

### *Message avoidance*

As shown in Table 6, message avoidance strategy was used far more often (27 out of 36 cases) by the low proficiency group than the other two groups. The obvious explanation is that in the case of not being able to express their ideas effectively, the students resorted to avoidance by refusing to take the conversation any further. On the whole, it can be said that there seems to be a negative correlation between the participants' proficiency level and use of avoidance strategies.

### *Topic avoidance*

The other sub-strategy in this category, topic avoidance, was only used four times in the whole process of interviews. This may be due to a couple of reasons. The first factor can be the lack of awareness among the participants, but this needs further enquiry into the issue. Another reason can be cultural. Iranians are normally known to be very outspoken and less reserved, and willing to express their opinions on almost every topic. This is especially true for the younger generations who often take any opportunity to express themselves.

## Conclusion

### *Summary*

This study revealed that Iranian EFL learners manage to convey their intended meanings and attain their communicative goals by using communication strategies (CSs) in spite of their limited knowledge of the target language.

As the frequency distribution tables showed in previous sections, the frequency of communication strategies (CSs) applied by Iranian EFL learners varied according to their proficiency levels, that is, low proficient learners tended to use more communication strategies in comparison with high and moderate ones.

The type of communication strategies (CSs) employed by Iranian EFL learners also varied according to their proficiency level. On the basis of the qualitative and quantitative analysis of the data, it was made clear that the high and moderate level participants employed more L<sub>2</sub>-based communication strategies whereas low proficient learners used more L<sub>1</sub>-based communication strategies. The other point worth noting was about avoidance strategies. The data revealed that avoidance strategies employed by low proficient participants outnumbered moderate and top groups. About modification devices which were employed more than others by the participants, it was noted that those kinds of modification devices which need more L<sub>2</sub> knowledge and skill were extensively used by high proficient participants and vice versa.

### Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study are supposed to have implications in the field of foreign language teaching including the areas of syllabus design, and curriculum development.

#### *Syllabus Design:*

Since strategic competence is one of the important components of communicative competence, it should be included in the goals of foreign language syllabus. Specifically a syllabus should be designed to create conditions, which will promote the development of learners' strategic competence, and the ability to use communicative strategies to deal with different communication problems that might arise.

As mentioned by Si-Qing (1990:197), the development of learners' communicative competence is built upon the



unrealistic hope that the syllabus will be able to predict and therefore include all of the learners' communicative needs. Such a syllabus in fact does not exist. Communication exists as life exists, and communicative needs are as numerous and unpredictable as are life experiences. What is more, learners' communicative needs differ from each other. Therefore, to develop learners' communicative competence, we should increase their strategic competence, their ability to use communication strategies to cope with various communicative problems they might encounter. So they should be guided toward greater communicative success through effective use of CSs. But unfortunately, most EFL syllabuses are designed to prevent learners from running into problems. They remove problems in advance by providing meaning of difficult words and grammatical knowledge. Such syllabuses will not support the development of communicative competence because it is precisely when problems are encountered that learners employ CSs. Since the prerequisite for the use of CSs is the existence of problems, our syllabuses should be designed to pose problems and suggest ways to deal with them. So the kind of syllabus provided for learner can influence the learners' development of strategic competence.

### *Curriculum Development*

In EFL situations like Iran, learners have few chances to communicate freely with each other inside the classroom, for most EFL classes are grammar oriented, *i.e.* more attention is paid to accuracy rather than fluency. So arranging some kinds of talk shows among learners as a regular part of a course in order to make them to express themselves in the required language is a good way to engage learners in communication and using communication strategies.

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## Appendices

### *Appendix A: Taxonomy of communication strategies:*

#### **1. Avoidance CSs:**

- 1.1 Topic Avoidance:* A refusal to enter into or continue a discourse because of a feeling of linguistic inadequacy.
- 1.2 Message Avoidance:* The learner tries to talk about a particular topic but gives up because it is too difficult.

#### **2. L<sub>2</sub>-based CSs:**

- 2.1 Approximation :* A use of an L2 word which shares the essential feature of the target word.
- 2.2 Circumlocution :* A use of an L2 phrase to describe the property, function, duty, its purpose or an example.
- 2.3 Appeal:* An appeal for assistance either implicit or explicit.

#### **3. L<sub>1</sub>- based CSs:**

- 3.1. Language switching:* A use of a word or phrase from the first language.
- 3.2 Foreignizing :* A use of a word or phrase from L1 with L2 pronouncing.

#### **4. Modification Devices :**

Communication devices employed in order to keep the conversation going smoothly:

- 4.1. *Comprehension Check*: A use of expressions such as “Okay”?, “Right”? to check a partner’s understanding .
- 4.2. *Clarification Request*: request made for repetition or explanation.
- 4.3 *Backchannel Cues*: use of short utterances such as ” *uh-huh, yeah* right to show participation or understanding.
- 4.4. *Self–Repair*: correction of own mistakes
- 4.5. *Confirmation Check*: repetition of the partner’s statement in order to check understanding.
- 4.6 *.Pausing*: use of pauses or pause fillers.

*Appendix B: Examples of communication strategies use*

**a. An instance of pausing strategy:**

A: *Do you like to take a trip?*

B :Uh.... *Yes, I like to go to the countryside.*

**b. an instance of clarification request strategy:**

Á: *Are you good with your siblings?*

B *You mean getting along with them?*

A: *That is right.*

B: *Yes, I have a very good relationship with them*

**c. An instance of confirmation check strategy:**

A: *What is your dream house like?*

B : *My dream house?*

A: *Yes, your dream house?*

B: \* *I want it to be at the sky on the clouds.*

**d. an instance of self repair strategy:**

Á: *How many people are you altogether in your family?*

B: \* *We are four. I have a brother .She no he two years old.*

A: *What do you like to in future?*

B: *I wanted to be a musician, but **I can't sorry couldn't**, because my family did not allow me to go music classes.*

**e. An instance of comprehension check strategy**

A: *What language do you usually speak?*

B: *When I am at home, I speak Turkey, No Turkish, right?*

**f. An instance of circumlocution strategy:**

A: *Where do you like your dream house to be?*

B: *Pardon ?*

A *Your dream house.*

B: *Oh. Ok. Near the coastline **I mean near the sea.***

**g. An instance of appeal strategy:**

A: *Are you good with your siblings?*

B: *We are not bad and not good. We are how can I say, uh... we are uh.... **What do we call in English?** We are uh....*

A: *You mean average, yes?*

B: *Yeah, yeah. That is right.*

**h. An instance of language switching strategy**

A: *Where do you like to teach?*

B: *uh... I like to teach in English آموزشگاه.*

**i. An instance of message avoidance strategy:**

A: *Are you good with your siblings?*

B: *\* Yes, but because our ages are uh... are not like each other, uh... how can I say ? **It is difficult to say. I don't know how to explain.***

**j. An instance of topic avoidance strategy**

A: *How many brothers and sisters do you have?*

B: *I have two brothers and a sister.*

A: *Are you good with your siblings?*

B: *\*uh.... **I have a good family.***