# Communication Strategies Used by EFL Students with High and Low Self-Esteem

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This study aimed to investigate communication strategies (CSs) used by EFL students with low and high self-esteem in speaking English. Methods employed were questionnaire, observation, and interview. Findings showed that students with low self-esteem employed fewer CSs compared to those with high self-esteem. Students with low self-esteem only used the strategies such as non-linguistic means, appeal for help, and fillers or hesitation device, while the students with high self-esteem level used six kinds of communication strategies such as message abandonment, non-linguistic means, literal translation, code switching, appeal for help, and fillers or hesitation device. The study suggests that EFL practitioners pay attention to self-esteem aspect to obtain the optimum results of teaching-learning processes.

*Keywords:* communication strategies, low self-esteem, high self-esteem

*Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui strategi komunikasi yang digunakan oleh siswa yang memiliki self-esteem tinggi dan rendah. Metode yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini adalah questionnaire, observasi, dan wawancara. Penemuan dari penelitian ini menunjukan bahwa siswa dengan self-esteem rendah lebih sedikit menggunakan strategi dibandingkan dengan siswa dengan self-esteem tinggi. Siswa dengan self-esteem rendah hanya menggunakan strategi seperti non-linguistic means, appeal for help, and fillers or hesitation device, sedangkan siswa dengan self-esteem tinggi menggunakan enam jenis strategi, yaitu message abandonment, non-linguistic means, literal translation, code switching, appeal for help, and fillers or hesitation device. Penelitian ini menyarankan para praktisi EFL agar memberikan perhatian pada aspek self-esteem untuk mendapatkan hasil pembelajaran yang optimal.*

## INTRODUCTION

The importance of English can be seen from the fact that English in Indonesia is taught from kindergarten up to university level. Even though Indonesian students have been learning the language for years, they still seem to have difficulties in using the language, especially spoken

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English. At the university level, particularly at Economics faculty, English course is important to equip students for the business world.

With regard to English courses at Economics faculty, I have conducted a small-scale study at a private university. It found that the majority of second semester students majoring in management felt reluctant, shy and worried when speaking English; only a few students were willing to speak English in the classroom. However, students willing to speak English still got difficulty in expressing ideas and thoughts. They need to know communication strategies (CSs) to overcome their limitations. CSs are considered as one of fundamental factors in promoting students' ability to improve their speaking skills, and CSs can help them overcome communication difficulties such as lack of vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar and other linguistic factors.

CSs are strategies that learners use to overcome problems in order to convey their intended meaning. Besides this, CSs are considered to play an important role in language acquisition (Huang, 2010). Dornyei (1995) divides CSs into some categories, among others, avoidance/reduction strategies, achievement/compensatory strategies, and stalling/time-gaining strategies. In reduction strategy, speakers leave unfinished message as they do not know how to say a word, for example. While in compensatory strategy speakers paraphrase or describe a topic or thing, in time-gaining strategy, they use fillers or pauses.

Problems in communication are faced by all EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students. The problems can be categorized into linguistic and non-linguistic problems. Linguistic problems can be difficulties in pronunciation, vocabulary, or grammatical, while non-linguistic problems relate with learners' personality. Learners' personality could be the barrier to speaking proficiency, so teachers need to think about some aspects related to the problems. One of the learners' personality aspect is self-esteem. Based on the preliminary study, students with high self-esteem can be associated with successful language acquisition; conversely, students with low self-esteem may be associated with students whose language acquisition is less successful.

Self-esteem can be defined as how one sees, judges, and respects himself. It is therefore very important to know self-esteem to find out if there may be emotional and social effects, including in the field of EFL. Some studies (Bagheri & Faghih, 2012; Fahim & Rad, 2012; Ghaith, 2010; Juyandegan; 2016; Mei & Nathalang, 2010; Nakatani, 2010) have investigated communication strategies and self-esteem. Nakatani (2010) conducted a study at a Japanese college to investigate if the application of specific communication strategies help increase EFL students' proficiency in communicative tasks. It found that 'maintaining discourse' and 'meaning negotiation' strategies helped promote students' communicative ability. On the other hand, Mei and Nathalang (2010) investigated non-English-major undergraduate students studying English at a Chinese university. The study investigated CSs used by the students, and it found the CSs were affected by three aspects: the type of task, their language proficiency, and academic major.

Regarding self-esteem, Bagheri and Faghih (2012) and Juyandegan (2016) conducted a correlational study investigating the relationship between self-esteem and reading comprehension in Iran. With the samples of EFL students being 55 in Bagheri and Faghih's study and 45 in Juyandegan's study, both studies found a positive relation between reading comprehension and self-esteem. Another correlation study was conducted by Fahim and Rad

(2012) who investigated the relationship between self-esteem and paragraph writing. The study also found that there was a relationship between the variables. On the other hand, Ghaith (2010), who conducted the study on the effects of 'Learning Together' teaching model in improving EFL students' reading achievement and academic self-esteem, argues that there is no significant difference between the model and self-esteem, while there is a significant difference between the model and reading achievement.

The studies above show that knowing communication strategies and self-esteem benefits EFL students; however, the studies, especially on self-esteem, are conducted using quantitative approach. Besides this, there is very little information on the study investigating communication strategies and self-esteem in the EFL setting in Indonesia. This study is therefore interested in exploring the topic qualitatively, and it poses the following research questions: (1) What are the differences in communication strategies between students with high and low level of self-esteem? (2) What are possible strategies used for low self-esteem students in improving their speaking skill?

**METHODS**
This study adopted the principles of qualitative inquiry and took place at the Economics faculty at a private university in Jakarta, Indonesia. Six students participated in the study. Data collection methods adopted were observation, speaking test, interview, and questionnaire. This study focused on communication strategies in speaking. In the observation stage, the researcher investigated the students' behavior, for example, what students do in the classroom during speaking class, do they look confident or shy when speaking English etc. In the speaking test, the researcher analyzed data from video recording to find out kinds of communication strategies. The data were matched with the data from questionnaire and interview. To determine students' self-esteem, questionnaire from Rosenberg was used.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**
**Communication strategies used by students with high and low levels of self-esteem**
There were six students with low self-esteem and three students with high self-esteem. The students with low self-esteem tended to be passive and reluctant to speak English both to the lecturer and friends in the classroom. The findings showed that when they had to speak English in the classroom, they often used non-linguistic strategies such as asking for help.

On the other hand, the students with high self-esteem level tended to be more active and to have motivation to learn or speak English in the classroom both to the lecturer and friends. In group discussion, students with high self-esteem level were more active to give opinion to the other groups about the topic being discussed, while low self-esteem students used literal translation, non-linguistic means, code switching, and asking-for-help strategies. The following table lists the CSs used by low and high self-esteem students.

*Table 1: CSs used by students with low and high self-esteem*

| Communication Strategies | Low Self-Esteem | High Self-Esteem |
|---|---|---|
| **Avoidance or reduction:** Message abandonment Topic avoidance | √ | √ |
| **Achievement or compensatory:** Circumlocution Approximation | | |
| Use of all-purpose words Word coinage | | √ |
| Use of non-linguistic means | √ | √ |
| Literal translation Foreignizing | | √ |
| Code switching or language switch | | √ |
| Appeal for help | √ | √ |
| **Stalling or time-gaining:** Use of fillers/hesitation device | √ | √ |

The table above shows that students with high self-esteem employed more CSs compared to those with low self-esteem strategies. This may be because they are more confident and motivated, so even though they found difficulty in speaking English, they could find some strategies to express their language. The findings of this study support findings of previous studies showing that self-esteem can influence students' language performance. This finding could bring further investigation which relates self-esteem and motivation.

**The possible strategies used for low self-esteem students to improve their speaking skill**
The findings of this study showed that students with high self-esteem often practiced speaking English outside the classroom. Compared to low self-esteem students, students with high self-esteem may have stronger motivation in learning the language. This motivational aspect may encourage their level of self-esteem, thus contributing to positive results.

Low self-esteem students, based on the interview, showed that they never practiced speaking English outside the classroom, as seen in the excerpt below:

*Interviewer: How often do you practice speaking outside the classroom?*
*Student: Never*

Another finding of this study showed that low self-esteem students did not like learning English as according to them it was difficult to learn the language, as seen in the excerpt below:

> Interviewer: Do you feel you fail or succeed in learning English?
> Student: There is very little progress. In fact, I am shy to speak English and don't really like the language because it is difficult. I have taken the language course, but I didn't finish it because I was bored.

The low self-esteem students' reluctance to practice speaking English and their boredom to learn the language may be related to low motivation as has been mentioned; therefore, their CSs were also fewer than those of high self-esteem students. Unfortunately, previous studies did not touch or explore this issue.

Since high self-esteem students apply various kinds of CSs to speak English, low self-esteem students can also apply the CSs. However, asking them to apply the strategies are not easy if there is no motivation. The crucial issue here, therefore, is how to encourage low self-esteem students to learn the language in order that they are willing to apply different kinds of CSs.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study found that students with low self-esteem used limited kinds of CSs compared to those with high self-esteem. Students with high self-esteem used more various kinds of CSs: message abandonment, achievement or compensatory strategies (non-linguistic means, literal translation, code switching, appeal for help), and stalling or time-gaining strategies (fillers or hesitation device). The possible strategies used for low self-esteem students in improving their speaking skill are adopting CSs used by students with high self-esteem. However, it is easier said than done. Building their motivation is also important to improve their self-esteem.

Findings of this study suggest several points to the EFL practice. Firstly, self-esteem needs to be considered by EFL practitioners. Also, students with low self-esteem need attention from teachers in order that they also get the optimum results of teaching-learning processes. Finally, this study only adopted a few numbers of participants, so the results might not really reflect the EFL condition in Indonesia. Therefore, further studies need to consider more participants and different EFL setting.

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