Investigating Iranian Language Learners' Use of Circumlocution for Culture-Specific Referents

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Abstract

This study investigated Iranian English language learners' use of circumlocution for culture-specific referents. A discourse completion test (DCT) was designed in English and Persian, consisting of items dealing with Iranian culture-specific notions and distributed among 3 groups. The Persian language group received the Persian version, whereas the English language learners, divided into high and low, received the English version of the DCT. Data were analyzed according to Salazar's (2006) categorization of circumlocution, namely description, function, superordination, location, and combination. Results revealed that the high group had a stronger tendency to use circumlocution, in general, and in terms of its categories of description, function, and combination, in particular, as compared to the low group. Furthermore, cross-linguistic analysis suggested signs of linguistic transfer with regard to circumlocution. Our findings revealed that it is not so much the familiarity of learners with cultural concepts as it is their knowledge of linguistic and communicative strategies that enables them to overcome communicative problems. Finally, this study points to the facilitative role of compensatory strategies, particularly circumlocution, as a tool to cope with communication breakdowns in an L2.

***Keywords*:** Communication Strategies; Compensatory Strategies; Circumlocution; Culture-Specific Notions

1. Introduction

Given that one of the major functions of spoken language is transferring information, it is necessary that interlocutors involved in a conversation express what they really mean. However, the transition of meaning is not always without problems, particularly in nonnative speech. Their usual problem lacks appropriate L2 words in their vocabulary repertoire to express their meanings. When communication breaks down, the types of repairs that occur are mainly lexical, as words are vital elements for successful communication (Salazar, 2006). One of the

most frequent lexical compensatory strategies (CSs) is circumlocution. Circumlocution is defined as "the learner's description of the characteristics or elements of the object or the action" (Tarone, 1980, p. 62) and is regarded as a communication strategy or a lexical repair strategy (Tarone, 1983, as cited in Faerch & Kasper, 1983), or "the effective use of coping strategies to sustain or enhance communication" (Savignon, 1983, p. 310). Canale and Swain (1980) consider circumlocution as an element of strategic competence, which together with grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and discourse competence constitute communicative competence. Strategic competence is one's ability to employ CSs to redress an incomplete or deficient linguistic knowledge and still imply their intended meaning.

Bearing in mind the deficiency in the context of English as a foreign language (EFL), such as limited contact hours or the lack of authentic and natural language use, which cause students to have many difficulties in communicating effectively, EFL learners should be provided with strategies and solutions to break the communication impasse. Enigmatic words are perhaps the most challenging and intimidating area for language learners. To overcome such linguistic hurdles, circumlocution is one of the most important and most frequently used CSs employed by L2 language learners when they wish to express themselves using unambiguous vocabulary.

Research on compensatory strategies is voluminous. Some of these studies have provided an analytical description of the detailed steps employed in developing students' circumlocution strategies (e.g., Chen, 2006). Others have shown the extreme efficiency of circumlocution in filling communication gaps in the flow of conversation (e.g., Salazar, 2006), or in interviews or picture cued narrations (e.g., Asuncion, 2010). A few studies have also surveyed the relationship between language proficiency and L1- or L2-based compensatory strategies (e.g., Llach, 2010). Still, a growing number of studies have explored the effects of language proficiency level and task types on the use of communication strategies (e.g., Binahayeearong, 2009; Tajeddin & Alemi, 2010).

These studies have, generally, pointed to the interaction between different variables with circumlocution use. However, research provides limited information about whether cultural knowledge can determine understanding of circumlocution. Poulisse (1990) maintains that some communication factors play important roles in affecting CS use. Most important is the role of mutual knowledge, that is, shared knowledge among the interlocutors. This mutual knowledge enables speakers to leave lots of things unsaid and to reduce their references to topics they have already referred to in earlier discourse because a common ground of understanding has now been established between both parties. Related to mutual knowledge is the role of

cultural knowledge. Most literature on communicative strategies has focused on CSs use according to the speaker's level of proficiency. The concept of culture seen in CSs research is usually accidentally derived from data analysis. For instance, Tarone and Yule (1987, as cited in Wongsawang, 2001), focusing on specific CSs used between Asian and South American nonnative speakers of English, noted the use of culturally bound information in the participants' CSs. Similarly, Paribakht (1985) reported that Persian-speaking participants made use of translated L1 idioms and proverbs for some notions, supporting the idea that the CSs choices pertaining to some specific concepts appear to be context or culture bound, although this was not the main focus of the study.

To supplement the knowledge in this area, the current study explored culture-bound notions as an appropriate way to elicit circumlocution which can be employed by EFL learners in order to overcome their communication breakdowns and to see if familiarity with cultural concepts can help them convey meaning. In investigating their pragmatic behavior, the study also looks for the effect of the learners' language proficiency in using circumlocution when facing culture-bound referents. Thus, the following research questions were addressed in this study:

1. In describing culture-bound notions, does language proficiency affect/determine the use of the circumlocution strategies?
2. Does any language transfer occur from Persian to English when using circumlocution in describing culture-bound referents?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants were 90 male and female Iranian university students majoring in English translation from Islamic Azad University, Abadan Branch. They formed two groups based on their performance in a language proficiency test. Those participants whose scores fell above the mean in the test constituted the high-proficiency group (57 participants), and those whose scores fell below the mean comprised the low-proficiency group (33 participants). The obtained mean of the scores was 47 on a scale of 90, with a standard deviation of 11.

A third group of 30 undergraduates majoring in electronics were asked to answer a translated version of the DCT so that their answers in Persian could be compared against the English answers provided by the other two groups in an attempt to find possible traces of L1 transfer in the selection of circumlocution strategies in an EFL context. Because the number of participants in the groups was not the same, the data representing the low and the Persian groups were normalized (see Appendix A).

2.2. Instruments

The present study benefited from the following instruments: (1) A retired TOEFL exam (TOEFL Actual Tests, 2005) used for selecting the participants, including 40 writing and 50 reading items (the listening section was omitted for reasons of impracticality and nonfeasibility); (2) A discourse completion test (DCT) developed by the researchers consisting of items dealing with Iranian culture-specific items and notions. The DCT was piloted to obtain the reliability index (see Appendix B for a sample); (3) a translated version of the same DCT in Persian.

The DCT was the main data eliciting device used in this study. Many other studies conducted in this area have also favored DCT as their main research instrument and, in fact, research has acknowledged the usefulness and practicality of DCT as a research tool. Nelson, Carson, Al-Batal, and El-Bakari (2002) relate DCTs' abundance of use to three factors: First, by using this method, the participants vary their strategy use based on the nature of the given items. Second, incorporating the same situations for cross-cultural studies will facilitate the comparison of the strategies used by the participants to check for similarities/differences in the number and type of strategies utilized. Finally, compared to natural speech, DCTs lead to a greater number of strategy productions. In sum, a high degree of control over variables as well as simplicity constitutes the main reasons for the ubiquitous use of DCTs. DCTs are not without frailties, however. Rose (1994), for example, criticizes DCTs interactions. The nonrealistic interactional settings form another problem of DCTs. As Nelson et al. (2002) state, "what people *claim* they would say in a hypothetical situation is not necessarily what they actually *would say* in a real situation" (p. 168). In research terms, nevertheless, the data gathered through this method do not reflect natural data, which is a shortcoming of all other data eliciting devices, as well (Kasper & Dahl, 1991; Rose, 1992).

The DCT used in this study comprised 16 situations devised to elicit CSs, particularly circumlocution. In all these culture-specific situations, an American who has never been to Iran before is interested in the Iranian culture but has little or no knowledge about Iranian culture-bound concepts and the participants are assumed to inform him or her about them via answering the prompt dialogue questions. Among the 16 DCT situations, items 1, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9 and 16 refer to different occasions in the Iranian culture. Items 6, 12, 13 and 14 are beliefs common in the Iranian culture, mostly rooted in religious thoughts. Item 10 refers to a symbolic character with a traditional origin. And, items 2, 5, 11 and 15 are references to concrete objects, thus being different from the other items which are conceptual and abstract.

2.3. Procedure

Before administering the main phase of the study, 12 English students of the abovementioned university were requested to respond to the DCT in a pilot study. Their responses were rated by the researchers of the current study and then the Cronbach's alpha correlation was calculated, estimating the reliability to be 0.781 (see Appendix C). In order to see eye to eye on the method of analysis, the responses that were a conundrum for the two researchers were discussed, and an agreement was reached for the subsequent analysis of the responses pertaining to the main DCT.

Following the results of the pilot, the main phase of the research included four sessions. In the first session, the participants took the retired language proficiency test introduced above based on which 90 students were selected. The English DCT was administered to the participants in two 8-item sets in the next two sessions. In the final session, the Persian version of the DCT was also given to a comparable Persian group of undergraduate electronic majors which allowed the tracing of any L1 transfer in the selection of strategies in the context.

First, the frequencies of the occurrence of circumlocution strategies were calculated for each group in each situation. Then, the circumlocutions were assigned a circumlocution type according to Salazar's (2006) categorization. Salazar has classified circumlocutions into five categories of function (the purpose for which the intended object is provided or an activity is done), description of the properties of the item, superordination (the use of a general word), location (the place where an item is usually placed), and combination (a mix of the above categories). An example from the participants' elicited data clarifies how the circumlocution types were assigned. One of the participants' typical responses to item 5 of the DCT, *Ashe Poshte Pa*, was analyzed as follows:

- *Ashe Poshte Pa is some kind of food* (superordinate*) which is made when one of the family members travel to a far place and served to relatives and neighbors* (description) *in order to guarantee the health and safe back of the passenger* (function).

Having calculated the frequencies and percentages of the different types of circumlocution, a chi-square test was run to see whether the differences in the frequencies of the circumlocution strategy used by the low-proficiency and high-proficiency groups as well as the variations between the frequencies of the circumlocution strategy employed by the two groups and the Persian group were statistically significant or not.

3. Results

3.1. Circumlocution and Relative Effect of Language Proficiency

The results promulgated that out of the total 1,460 elicited circumlocution instances observed in the questionnaires filled by the translation students, 890 cases (61%) were used by the high-proficiency group, whereas the lower group showed a lower rate of circumlocution use with 570 instances of use (39%).

Table 1 displays the percentage of the use of each circumlocution category. The chi-square test results, showing a value of 12.428 and a *df* of 3, revealed statistically significant differences:

Table 1. *Strategy Group Cross-Tabulation*

			Groups		
			High	Low	Total
Strategy	Combination	Count	432	298	730
		% within group	48.5%	52.3%	50.0%
	Description	Count	373	227	600
		% within group	41.9%	39.8%	41.1%
	Function	Count	84	38	122
		% within group	9.4%	6.7%	8.4%
	Subordination	Count	1	7	8
		% within group	.1%	1.2%	.5%
Total		Count	890	570	1460
		% within group	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

The variation in circumlocution types was also calculated between the high and the low-proficiency groups. Combination vies for the highest frequency position used by both the high- and low-proficiency groups. Of the total 730 cases of "combination" within the participants' data, 432 instances were used by the high group (48.55 of all cases) as compared to 298 instances (52.3% of all instances of circumlocution) observed in the low group's data. With a value of 24.597 and a *df* of 1, the chi-square analysis indicated a significant difference in the use of this item.

The second most preferable strategy type used by the two groups was "description." Of the total 600 "description" instances within the participants' elicited data, 373 instances (i.e., 41.9% of all instantiations of circumlocution) were employed by the high group, whereas 227 instantiations (i.e., 39.8%) appeared in the low-proficiency group. The observable difference between the high and the low groups in recruiting this circumlocution category was also proved statistically significant (35.527, *df* = 1).

Compared with the former circumlocution types, there was a marked drop in the use of "function," with an occurrence rate of 84 times for the high group and 38 for the lower group. With a value of 17.344 and a *df* of 1 on this item, the results pointed to a significant difference. "Superordination" was hardly ever used by the participants in the high-proficiency group (.1% of all instantiations used by the high-proficiency group), though it occurred in seven instances (1.2%) in the low-proficiency group.

In sum, though our contrastive analysis revealed important differences in the frequency of circumlocution types between the two groups, regardless of proficiency, the pattern of use remained unchanged, with "combination," "description," "function," and "superordination" in a descending order of presentation, that is, from the most to the least favored strategies.

3.2. Language Transfer, Circumlocution, and Proficiency Level

We can now turn to an analysis of the second question of the research that addressed the apparent linguistic transfer from Persian to English in using circumlocution. The overall frequencies of circumlocution strategies used by the English and the Persian groups were juxtaposed (889 versus 1,460 instances). The results pinpointed a significant difference in using circumlocutions (42.086, *df* = 3). For further and deeper analysis, a comparison was made between the high-proficiency group and the Persian group and then between the low-proficiency group and the Persian group. Interestingly, 890 instantiations of circumlocution were found to be used by the highly proficient English group as compared to 889 instances used by the Persian group (overall 1,779 instances), whereas the low-proficiency group and the Persian group utilized 1,459 circumlocutions overall. The chi-square test results showed a value of 69.747 (*df* = 1), attesting to a meaningful difference.

Table 2. *Strategy Group Cross-Tabulation*

			Groups		
			High	Low	Total
Strategy	Combination	Count	432	524	956
		% within group	48.5%	58.9%	53.7%
	Description	Count	373	256	629
		% within group	41.9%	28.8%	35.4%
	Function	Count	84	108	192
		% within group	9.4%	12.1%	10.8%
	Subordination	Count	1	1	2
		% within group	.1%	.1%	.1%
Total		Count	890	889	1779
		% within group	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

As shown in Table 2, "combination," the most favored circumlocution type of the two groups, occurred 956 times in the elicited data. Of this sum, 45.2% was used by the high group and 54.8% by the Persian group. What follows are the responses to item 9 of the DCT (Shabe Yalda), one by an English language learner and one by a Persian participant:

- *It is the longest night of the year* (superordinate) *at which Iranian families stay awake all night and try to take joy by celebrating the night* (description). (Using "to take joy" instead of "to enjoy" which is literal translation.)
- *Shabe yalda axarin shabe paeez ast ke dar an iraniaha dore ham mineshinand va az mosahebate yek digar va khordan e tanaeqolat lezzat mibarand.*

The tendency of both groups in adopting "description" as the second most frequent circumlocution type was also similar. The overall utilization of this category was 629 instances with 59.3% and 40.7% by the high and Persian groups, respectively. For example, for item 7 of the DCT, which looks for a description of "Khanehtakani," a high-proficiency participant answered as follows:

- *It means cleaning the house at the beginning of the New Year which is mostly done by house women* (description).

In the above example, the participant utilized the word *women* instead of *wives* (literal translation), what is also clearly seen in the answer of a Persian participant to item 8 of the DCT (hanabandan):

- *Hanabandan yek shab qabl az aroosi bar gozar mishavad ke dar bazi manateq e Iran avvalin shabi bud ke damad zan e xod ra midid.*

Similarly, with an overall occurrence of 192 in the data, "function" was the third most favored circumlocution type, and "superordination" stood at fourth being employed only once by the participants of each group. The variation observed between the low and Persian groups in recruiting circumlocution categories is mirrored in Table 2:

Table 3. *Strategy Group Cross-Tabulation*

			Groups		
			High	Low	Total
Strategy	Combination	Count	298	524	822
		% within group	52.3%	58.9%	56.3%
	Description	Count	227	256	483
		% within group	39.8%	28.8%	33.1%
	Function	Count	38	108	146
		% within group	6.7%	12.1%	10.0%
	Subordination	Count	7	1	8
		% within group	1.2%	.1%	.5%
Total		Count	570	889	1459
		% within group	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

As seen in Table 3, "combination" proved the most preferred circumlocution category for both groups. Note the answers by two low-proficiency participants to items 6 (Fale Hafez) and 10 (Haji Firooz) of the DCT:

- *Fale Hafez is important <u>near</u> Iranian people. They read a poem of Hafez book and discuss it for finding its meaning.* (Employing literal translation.)
- *Haji Firooz is a symbol of New Year who sings songs and takes <u>eidi of</u> people.* (Employing the language switch "Eidi" and the literal translation of "*of*" instead of "*from.*") Eidi refers to some money which is gifted as a new year present.

We consider the above types of errors to be rooted in the participants' L1 as they were observed in the answers to items 16 (Seroozeh and Hafteh) and 10 (Haji Firooz).

- *Se ruze va hafte do maraseme sonnati hastand ke nazde Iranian jaygahe vizhe i darand vadar suge mordegan bar pa mishavad.*
- *Haji Firooz mard e qermez push e xandedari ast ke xandan dar xiabanha az mardome idi migirad.*

Both groups adopted "description" as their second most favored circumlocution category. The overall utilization of this category by the low and Persian groups was 438 instances. That is, their shares were 47% and 57%, respectively. In a similar way, the third most observed circumlocution category was *function*. This item comprised 26% of the overall "functional" use by the low group and 74% by the Persian group. Note the following responses for item 12 of the DCT (Kheiraat dadan) that represents the low-proficiency group and the Persian group, respectively:

- *It is done to help <u>without home</u> people.* (Using *without home* instead of *homeless*, i.e., literal translation.)
- *Xeirat dadan dar vaqe eh da kardan e qazaya xorma be niaz mandan va <u>bi xaneman</u> ast.*

"Superordination" constituted the least frequent strategy, with seven instances occurring in the low-proficiency group and only one instance in the Persian group. Note the responses of three low-proficiency participants for item 11 of the DCT (cheshmzaxm):

- *Cheshm zaxm is a type of horse <u>na'al</u>.* (Employing language switch. *Na'al* is a Persian word for *horseshoe.*)
- *Cheshm zaxm is a sort of babaquori ring*. (Employing language switch. *Babaqouri* is a Persian name of a stone.)
- *It is some kind of Ayeh of Quran.* (Employing language switch. *Ayeh* is an Arabic word for *verse which is also used in Persian*.)

As shown in the examples above, language switching and literal translation were two major linguistic strategies employed by the participants when they felt

stuck for words in explaining the DCT items. However, whereas literal translation was the preferred strategy, especially in the case of "combination" and "function" categories, when "superordination" was used in isolation as the response, the main strategy used was language switching. Tasks like our DCT required the participants to provide explanatory answers rather than replying with one or two-word responses. Therefore, it is no surprise that the low-proficiency group was outperformed by the high-proficiency group.

4. Discussion

A confirmation for the findings of our first research question comes from Bialystok's (1990) and Liskin-Gasparro's (1996) studies who found that the less proficient learners hired fewer L2-based strategies and had a higher tendency towards L1-based strategies in comparison to the learners with a higher level of proficiency. Their findings also attest to the learners' proficiency level as the most crucial factor in adopting communicative strategies.

Our findings are also in consonance with Nakatani (2006) who concluded that whereas the proficient learners showed more interest in keeping the flow of conversation via using compensatory strategies, the less proficient participants showed fewer tendencies towards these positive strategies and resorted to avoidance strategies. The inclination of high-proficiency learners towards compensatory rather than avoidance strategies can also be seen in the works of Ting and Phan (2008), Mei (2009) and Tajeddin and Alemi (2010), to name only a few.

Poulisse (1993, as cited in Aliakbari & KarimiAllvar, 2009) maintains that substitution strategies (SSs; i.e., the substitution of one lexical item for another, like language switching) and reconceptualization strategies (RSs; i.e., changes in the preverbal message which involves more than a single chunk, like circumlocution) require different psycholinguistic processes, and that RSs are assumed to be more demanding. That is, when processing the intended meaning for production, RSs impose a heavier burden on the mind than SSs. Therefore, it can be concluded that circumlocution, as an RS, is psychologically more laborious than SSs which were employed frequently by the low-proficiency participants in their answers to the DCT (e.g., language switching and literal translation). Because high-proficiency participants enjoy a richer and more sophisticated linguistic repertoire, the ease and fluency in processing lexical items reduce the processing load of speech production; thus, they forge ahead by exploiting more circumlocutions. In contrast, circumlocution is too demanding for low-proficiency participants who possess an insufficient linguistic command because the overall processing demands of speech production are too high. In other words, lower-level learners have to concentrate on the process of speech production itself as circumlocution becomes too challenging for them and they resort to SSs. Therefore, our study shows that with the increase of

language proficiency, language learners tend to use RSs more (in this study, circumlocution) and they less often try to use SSs. Note the following examples which offer descriptions for item 9 of the DCT (ShabeYalda):

- *The longest night of the sun year, Yalda, is actually the last night of autumn which is celebrated by Iranian. The reason behind the celebration is that life is too short that one minute longer should be celebrated. At this night families and friends get together and stay awake all night, eat fruits and nuts and tell traditional stories.* (An example from the high-proficiency group.)
- *Shabe Yalda is final night of Azar and people don't sleep to morning.* (An example from the low-proficiency group.)

Irrespective of the quantity of the description given, the quality of the elicited data manifested in areas like correct grammar usage, choice of words, coherence, and cohesion mark the difference between the two groups. "Description," as a widely used individual circumlocutory act, is usually used to describe abstract notions like love and justice (Paribakht, 1985). With abstract notions, speakers rely on contextual support and world knowledge. On the contrary, when the focus of circumlocution studies is on concrete objects, the category of "function" proves the most desired circumlocution type. This predominance of functional descriptions for reflection on concrete objects which are expected to be communicated via the L2 is reported in the studies of Bialystok (1983, as cited in Faerch & Kasper, 1983), Kellerman, Bongaerts, and Poulisse (1987, as cited in Ellis, 1987), as well as Salazar (2003). However, mirrored in the words of Kellerman et al., if a learner has to explain an abstract notion, the characteristics of function is not likely to appear much. This justifies accounts in relation to those items whose most prominent feature is not their function and not normally so described by the learners. For example, in describing item 1 of the DCT, asking the participants to describe "Norooz," which is an abstract concept, none of the elicited responses reported a case of functional use; on the contrary, "description" was used as the main category for this notion.

The low tendency for "superordination" at the bottom of the list can be related to the nature of the DCT items that necessitate explanatory answers from the participants rather than single word, telegraphic ones. Accordingly, the DCT style reduced the probability of using "superordinates" in isolation in the form of a short answer to DCT items. In other words, the participants' use of "superordinates" was shrouded by the "combination" category of circumlocution as they provided explanatory answers to the DCT items and, consequently, had to employ "superordinate" combinations of "description" and/or" function."

If we accept that writing is a socially constructed act embedded in culture, the lower record of circumlocution by novice learners suggests that they adopt more L1-based strategies like interjecting an L1 term. For example, the answers of a high- and a low-proficiency participant to item 12 of the DCT (Kheiratdadan) were as follows, respectively. Whereas the proficient learner produced a linguistically sophisticated answer to describe the cultural-religious concept using "combination" and self-repetition, the low-proficiency learner, over-relying on the principle of economy (Widdowson, 2002), employed the L1 infinitive "amorzidan" (forgiveness), an example of language switching, to maintain the free flow of information:

- *Kheiraatdadan is a religious custom* (superordinate*) in which people make or buy some* <u>*sweets or dates*</u> *and give them to* <u>*poor families*</u> (description). *The purpose of giving* <u>*sweets or dates*</u> *is requesting those* <u>*poor families*</u> *to pray for their dead relatives* (function).
- *It means ask* <u>*from*</u> *God to amorzidan dead family members.*

Contrary to the first three categories, "superordinates" had a higher frequency of use among the low group, who resorted to the simpler, more inclusive category, in which the L2item is replaced with a general word—what is also true in the case of child language acquisition—usually termed as overgeneralization. For example, two low-group participants provided responses for item 15, "korsi," as follows:

- *It is a table.*
- *Korsi is a big fire.*

The low-recorded frequencies for "superordinates" should not mislead us from the fact that this category was included in "description" and/or "function" and was, thus, camouflaged in the "combination" category of circumlocution. Whereas the low-proficiency participants employed "superordinates" mostly as a means of opening the conversation, usually as an avoidance strategy, the high-proficiency participants exploited it not only as a means of opening the conversation, but also as a means of maintaining the flow of conversation. Note the following examples in response to item 15 of the DCT, "korsi":

- *Korsi is a* <u>*table*</u> (superordinate) *that use in winter for making home warm* (function).
- *Korsi is a kind of* <u>*table*</u> (superordinate) *which is used in winter to keep home warm* (function). *This kind of* <u>*traditional device*</u> (superordinate) *consists of a blanket on and a fire under this* <u>*table*</u> (superordinate) *which conveys a sense of intimacy among family members as they sit around it during long nights of winter* (description).

Interestingly, Kellerman et al. (1987, as cited in Ellis, 1987) found that the learners provided shorter responses at very advanced levels and longer responses at intermediate levels of proficiency. Liskin-Gasparro (1996) considers an inverse relationship between proficiency level and communication strategy use: The less proficient participants produced more communication strategies than did the more proficient speakers. Therefore, a particular linguistic base is usually required to be able to circumlocute, but as the learners' proficiency increases, their lexical knowledge develops and a more native-like status is achieved, circumlocution becomes almost redundant and, consequently, more linguistically precise L2 vocabulary evolves (Salamone & Marshal, 1997). In other words, contrary to low-proficiency learners, for the native-like language learners, the principle of economy, which necessitates speakers to produce their intended meaning with the least possible effort, corresponds directly to the principle of clarity, which demands the interlocutors to produce clear comprehensible messages.

In general, the analysis developed here suggests that the relationship between language proficiency and circumlocution use is negative from lower- to higher-proficiency levels. Because of insufficient linguistic knowledge of lower learners, employing circumlocution is psychologically demanding for them. But for those whose level of proficiency is more advanced or even native-like, the relationship is positive because being linguistically competent decreases the psychological strain of circumlocution on the mind. Interestingly, at a native-like level of proficiency, again the relationship is likely to change into negative because the learner is far more unlikely to make excessive use of words to convey his or her intended meaning. This latter issue remains to be simply a speculation, and so further research is required to substantiate the claim.

In relation to language transfer, the results showed no significant difference between the high-proficiency group and the Persian group in employing circumlocution, in general. This is in consonance with the findings of Bu's (2012) study stating that L1 pragmatic transfer decreases with the increase of L2 proficiency due to the student's appropriate mastery of the L2. Against this backdrop, the relationship between the low-proficiency learners and the electronics majors in terms of circumlocution use was found significant, indirectly supporting Lucas and Katz (1994) who argue that for students with little or no proficiency in English, their L1 is the only effective means for providing access to content area development.

Circumlocution as a compensatory strategy is a part of strategic competence and, therefore, constitutes a part of the learner's general cognitive ability. Communication breakdowns occur and must be overcome not only in an L2, but in one's L1, as well. Generally, our findings support Paribakht (1985) who found

that strategic competence in L1 is transferable to L2 learning situations. She concluded that this is why adult language learners often enter the L2 learning contexts with a relatively developed strategic competence.

5. Conclusion

When L2 learners do not possess a proper L2 word for a specific notion in their linguistic repertoire, they can choose to use a holistic approach, relating a concept to a more general one, or an analytic approach to describe the concept (Poulisse, 1990). The concrete objects included within the DCT items prompted the participants to prefer an analytic rather than a holistic strategy.

The findings of this study proved culture-bound notions as an appropriate way to elicit communicative strategies, particularly circumlocution. Culture-specific notions are difficult to express in English. This difficulty forces speakers to convey their meaning by exaggerating the features, functions, purposes, or instances of the notion and, thus, in employing circumlocution automatically. In other words, speakers attempt to imply their intended meanings by describing the attributes of a culture-specific notion as a replacement for a nonexisting English equivalent which results in an automatic use of circumlocution. The study points to the facilitative role of compensatory strategies, particularly circumlocution, as a tool to cope with communication breakdowns in an L2 because what matters here is their knowledge of how to describe the items of which they already have a full understanding. Accordingly, instruction should address the issue of how to cope with the problematic vocabulary when facing it. As Bialystok (1990) suggests, "any instruction that helps students to master part of the language or to become more comfortable using it is to be commended and not criticized" (p. 141). More technically, for a language learner to be competent, in addition to declarative knowledge (i.e., the knowledge of a concept), procedural knowledge (i.e., the knowledge of how to explain a notion) should be highly promoted, as well.

Despite its merits to the steadily growing body of knowledge, this study suffers from a number of limitations. First, our data eliciting device was a DCT which is sometimes criticized for the lack of contextual variation and simplifying complex interactions. Second, the obtained results may neither be surprising nor unexpected because the DCT mostly focused on abstract notions and, therefore, the predominance of "description" over "function" might reflect our selection of abstract notions for description.

In order to make the results of this study more generalizable as well as applicable to a larger population, similar studies are required to spark debate on this issue. Research can also be conducted on participants discriminated by their gender

and age. These characteristics may represent different aspects of circumlocution and have a bearing on the context within which resources are embedded.

6. Implications

The status of communication strategies in language teaching has been a source of remarkable controversy ranging from strong support for training language learners in the classroom to the totally opposite notion based on the claim that strategic competence evolves in one's L1 and can be transferred to the L2. Language experts are in favour of promoting the learners' awareness of the nature of communication strategies available in their linguistic repertoire and of making them sensitive to the proper situations. Instruction should address learners and concentrate their attention on these strategies. As Karimnia and Salehizadeh (2007) point out, "the use of a communication strategy is not an indication of communication failure; on the contrary, it can be very successful in compensating for the lack of linguistic knowledge" (p. 297). Another emphasis on EFL learners' requirement to master the skill of description as a type of circumlocution can be sought in the words of Robinson (1989) who insists on teaching learners strategies for paraphrasing the meaning of specific or technical words, so improving their strategic competence. The aim of this study was to suggest culture-bound notions as an appropriate way to elicit circumlocution used by language learners as a means to avoid communication failure. Further research is called for to gain a better insight into the way in which speakers in various types of context employ circumlocution and to validate results within current theories of language learning and to reach agreement among researchers as to what should be counted as effective communication strategies.

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Appendix A
Real Data

	High	Low	Persian
Combination	432	173	276
Description	373	132	135
Function	84	22	57
Superordination	1	4	1
Location	0	0	0

Group	Number
High	57
Low	33
Persian	30

Appendix B
English Discourse Completion Test

Instruction: *Please read the following situations carefully and answer the prompt dialog questions at the end. Feel free to write as long as you want and you can stop when you think you have already given enough information that is needed in the task.*

Situation: Imagine that your American friend, who has never been to Iran before, is interested in Iranian culture and has just a little or no knowledge about some Iranian culture-specific concepts and you have to explain to him or her about them.

Prompt Question # 1:

Your American friend: I am interested in Iranian feasts and celebrations; I've heard that one of them is called "Norooz." Could you please tell me what "Norooz" is?

You: First of all, I should say that ………. .

Prompt Question # 2:

Your American friend: Would you please tell me what "Haft Sin" is?

You: Sure, ………….. .

Prompt Question # 3:

Your American friend: Could you please give me some information about "Sizdah be dar"? I just know that it is a special day, but I don't know what day it is.

You: Definitely, ………. .

Prompt Question # 4:

Your American friend: What is "Chaharshanbeh"?

You: It is an equivalent for Wednesday.

Your American friend: Ok, is every "Chaharshanbeh" a "Chaharshanbeh Soori"? What is "Charshanbeh Soori"?

You: Aha, it is ………. .

Prompt Question # 5:

Your American Friend: I've read somewhere that Iranians cook a food for on-the-way passenger(s) called "Ashe Poshte Paa." Could you please explain to me what kind of food it is? I wonder why Iranians cook it for a passenger.

You: Well, ………. .

Prompt Question # 6:

Your American Friend: I know that one of the most famous Iranian poets is "Hafez," but I don't know what is "Fale Hafez."

You: Let me make it clear to you, ………. .

Prompt Question # 7:

Your American friend: Could you please tell me what "Khaneh takani" is? I know the meaning of each of these words by its own, but I can't understand the meaning of the whole phrase. Do Iranians really move their homes? How?

You: No. It has nothing to do with moving ………. .

Prompt Question # 8:

Your American friend: I've heard that one traditional Iranian ceremony is called "Hanabandan." What is it?

You: You know, ………. .

Prompt Question # 9:

Your American friend: December 25th is Christmas; I've read somewhere that some day before our Christmas, and Iranians hold a ceremony called "Shabe Yalda." Could you please give me some information about it? What kind of ceremony is it? What do Iranians do in this ceremony?

You: Well, ………. .

Prompt Question # 10:

Your American friend: You know Papa Noel is a lovely character in our new year's celebration; I know that Iranians have such a character in their culture called "Haji Firooz." I would like to know more about that.

You: Sure, ………. .

Prompt Question # 11:

Your American friend: last month, one of my Iranian friends sent me a gift. It was beautiful, but a bit strange to me. I know nothing about it, except the name, which is "Cheshm zakhm." Could you please tell me more about it?

You: Why not? ………. .

Prompt Question # 12:

Your American friend: I've heard from one of my Iranian friends that Iranians respect their dead people very much. Besides, I've heard that Iranian people have a custom in every and especially in the last Thursday of the year called "Kheiraat dadan." What is it?

You: Well, ………. .

Prompt Question # 13:

Your American friend: I wonder what "Nazr kardan" is in Persian? I have no idea about it.

You: Let me make it clear to you ………. .

Prompt Question # 14:

Your American friend: I've heard that sometimes some Iranians burn some fragrant seeds on the fire, and this is called "Espand dood kardan." Why do they do this? Do they use it as a kind of air freshener?

You: In fact, ………. .

Prompt Question # 15:

Your American friend: Last year I watched an Iranian movie. In one of the scenes of it, the whole family was sitting around a kind of short table which was being called "Korsi." Could you please tell me what "Korsi" is?

You: Of course! ………. .

Prompt Question # 16:

Your American friend: I know that Iranians respect their dead people very much, and I also know they hold two memorials called "Seroozeh" and "Hafteh" for them. What kind of customs are they?

You: You're right. ………. .

Appendix C
Reliability of Discourse Completion Test

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	*N* of Items
.781	.747	16