

Applying Speaking Strategies to Overcome Communication Difficulties in Thai EFL Learners

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Abstract

Previous studies indicate that using different strategies lead to different learning performance; and the types of strategies used by language learners depend on the kinds of learners and settings in which the learning occurred. Besides, many educators and researchers have agreed that communication strategies (CSs) are an important factor to determine the success or failure in foreign language learning. These strategies are effective tools to enable foreign language learners to overcome their communication hardships. Thus, this study aims to investigate the different types and levels of English speaking strategies or communication strategies used by Thai EFL learners at Thai technical university; and to examine whether their fields of study affected their strategy use. The participants were 107 students whose ages ranged from 18-22 years old. There were 54 female and 53 male students from three different faculties at Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology (TNI), Thailand. The 35-item communication strategy questionnaire and open-ended questions were employed to collect the data. Then descriptive statistics, independent-samples T-Test, an analysis of variance (ANOVA), and content analysis were used to analyze the data. The findings revealed that the use of English communication strategies of 107 undergraduate students at TNI was moderate ($M = 3.49$). Male students used higher communication strategies than females did (Males: $M = 3.51$, Females: $M = 3.47$). Communication strategies which most Thai students preferred using while having the difficulties in English communication were strategies to understand the interlocutor's message (UIM); for example, trying to catch the interlocutor's main point ($M = 4.61$), asking the interlocutor for a repetition ($M = 4.61$), and guessing the meaning of what the interlocutor has said ($M = 4.57$). Furthermore, there was no significant difference between fields of study or participants' faculties and their use of communication strategies.

Keywords: *communication strategies, EFL learners, speaking strategies, Thai undergraduate students*

Introduction

One of the language skills which language learners must be mastered is the ability to speak or communicate in the target language. Speaking skill is considered as an important skill that can be measured the success of the language learners. Harmer (2001) states that the ability to speak fluently is not only about the knowledge of language features, but also about the ability to process information and language while people are speaking. Consequently, the ability to speak a foreign language is a complex task for language learners to achieve. Brown (2001) indicates that there are some features that make speaking become as a difficult skill for language learners to develop such as reduced forms, colloquial language, stress and intonation, and cultural and social rules of communication setting. Moreover, Alderson and Bachman (2004) explain that in order to speak a foreign language, learners must master the

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sound system of the language, have almost instant access to appropriate vocabulary, be able to put words together intelligibly with minimal hesitation, understand what is being said to them, and be able to respond appropriately to maintain amicable relations or to achieve their communicative goals. Most importantly, language learners must have linguistic competence or the ability to use language correctly. Therefore, it is important for language learners to possess an effective tool which enables them to communicate their target language efficiently and appropriately, that is, communication strategies.

Communication is simply defined as a process in which a message is sent from senders to receivers. According to Lynch (1996, p. 3), “communication involves enabling someone else to understand what we want to tell them, what is often referred to as our message.” That means, in a communication situation, three factors are involved: 1) a speaker or a message sender, 2) a message, and 3) a listener or a message receiver. The main purpose of communication is to transmit an intended message to the listener successfully. Thus, it is the responsibility of a message sender to make the message clear and comprehensible for the receiver so that both the message sender and the receiver can reach the communicative goal.

There have been many educators and researchers defining communication strategies of second/foreign language learners. For example, Tarone (1980, p.420; 1983, p.65) defines communication strategies as “a mutual attempt of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in situations where requisite meaning structures do not seem to be shared.” Later, Faerch and Kasper (1983) explain that communication strategies are potentially conscious plans for solving communication’s problems, and they can make an individual reach his/her particular communicative goal. Finally, Canale (1983) states that communication strategies consist of both verbal and non-verbal strategies which language learners use to compensate their communication difficulties in order to enhance their understanding through the conversations. Language learners use these strategies due to their limited knowledge in the target language. However, Bialystok (1990) points out that although research scholars offer various definitions for communication strategies, these definitions seem to share three main features: 1) Problematicity includes strategies that are not normally used during routine language operations. These strategies are adopted when problems in either learning or production are perceived – problems that may interrupt communication. 2) Consciousness refers to either the learner’s awareness that a strategy is being employed for a particular purpose, or the awareness of how that strategy may lead to an intended effect. 3) Intentionality refers to the learner’s control over those strategies so that particular ones may be selected from a range of options and deliberately applied to achieve certain effects. To conclude, communication strategies are helpful methods for an individual to use consciously when he/she encounters communication problems. With these strategies, he/she can overcome their difficulties in communication and make meaningful and purposeful conversations.

Furthermore, Canale and Swain (1980) developed a widely cited framework of communicative competence which consisted of three elements: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. Later, Canale revised the 1983’s framework by allowing for the inclusion of four main areas of competence: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, strategic competence and discourse competence. Compared with the first three components, strategic competence seems to be the most relevant to communication strategies since it consists of interlocutor’s ability to utilize communication strategies to compensate for lack of knowledge in other competencies. Typical examples of strategic competence include the use of paraphrase, avoidance of

difficulties, and requests for repetition, simplification, clarification or slower speech. In addition, several educators and researchers (Faerch & Kasper, 1983; Dornyei, 1995; Dornyei and Scott, 1997; and Nakatani, 2006) have purposed the similar classifications of communication strategies. The strategies comprise of two main strategies – reduction or avoidance strategies and achievement strategies or compensatory strategies. Reduction or avoidance strategies are identified as topic avoidance (or message reduction), message abandonment, and message replacement. Language learners rely on them for reducing the content of the intended message from the interlocutor and helping them keep speaking or communicating to the interlocutor. Achievement or compensatory strategies include word coinage, language switch, paraphrase or circumlocution, paralinguistic devices, or appeal for help. Language learners employ these strategies in an attempt to deal with the communication problems directly by using alternatives in order to get the message across.

In Thailand where English is considered as an important foreign language, Thai learners have experienced some problems and difficulties in communicating in English. According to Weerarak (2003), the speaking problems of Thai learners can be classified into two main types: the lack of grammatical knowledge and vocabulary limitations, and the lack of self-confidence in using English. The participants revealed that they sometimes lacked sufficient linguistic and strategic knowledge to maintain the conversation. When they did not know the vocabulary or structure to use, they left the message unfinished and avoid talking about the topic. In addition, they were too shy to speak English and they lacked confidence in speaking English even though they had studied English for more than ten years. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the different types and levels of English speaking strategies or communication strategies used by Thai EFL learners at Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology; and to examine whether their fields of study affected their strategy use. Since communication strategies can be taught explicitly in language classes, it is imperative for language teachers to realize the importance and to identify the types and level of communication strategies that the learners use or lack while speaking. Moreover, previous studies indicated factors affecting the use of communication strategies such as task type and language proficiency (Weerarak, 2003; Nakatani, 2005; Rost and Ross, 1991), but there are few studies examining the fields of study.

Research Questions

The research questions in the present study are following:

- 1) What types and level of communication strategies do the undergraduates at Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology use while they are having English communication problems?
- 2) Does learners' gender affect their use of communication strategies?
- 3) Do learners' fields of study affect their use of communication strategies?

Methodology

Participants

The participants were 107 students whose ages ranging from 18-22 years old. All of them were the second year students. There were 53 males and 54 females from three different faculties – Faculty of Engineering (45), Faculty of Information Technology (27), and Faculty of Business Administration (35) in the academic year 2015 at Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology (TNI).

Instruments

The instrument used in this study was the communication strategy questionnaire (CSQ) which was developed by Zhao and Intaraprasert (2013). They employed the typologies of communication strategies proposed by Dörnyei and Scott (1997), Mariani (2010), Nakatani, (2006), and Somsai and Inatarprasert (2011). This questionnaire is considered as the most recently established communication strategy questionnaire which has high reliability (α) at .84. The questionnaire was made up of 35 items, including 20 items of strategies for coping with communication problems (CCP) such as using synonym or antonym, using familiar words, phrases or sentences, correcting one's own pronunciation, grammar and lexical mistakes, speaking the first language instead when one doesn't know how to say in English, and using simple expressions; 10 items of strategies for understanding interlocutor's messages (UIM) such as asking the interlocutor to slow down, asking the interlocutor for a repetition, asking the interlocutor to simplify the language, asking the interlocutor to write out the key word, and asking the interlocutor to give an example; and 5 items of strategies for carrying on the conversation as intended (CCI) such as trying to enjoy the conversation, sending continuation signals to show one's understanding, and feeling all right for taking risks while speaking. The participants were asked a choice of five Likert-scale responses to each communication strategy ranging from 1 to 5, that is, 1 = never use, 2 = rarely use, 3 = sometimes use, 4 = frequently use, and 5 = always use. The criteria for assessing the types and level of communication strategy use are: lowest frequency use (1.0 – 1.49), low frequency use (1.5 – 2.49), moderate frequency use (2.5 – 3.49), high frequency use (3.5 – 4.49), and highest frequency use (4.5 – 5.0).

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) for Microsoft Windows 11.5 was used. Descriptive statistics including frequencies, means (M), standard deviations (SD) were implemented to examine the participants' demographic data, the types and level of participants' communication strategies. Next, Independent-Samples T-test was used to determine whether there is a significant relationship existed between participants' gender and the types and level communication strategies. Finally, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) or F-test was used to examine the relationship between field of study or the faculties that the participants are studying and their use of communication strategies.

Results

1) What types and level of communication strategies do the undergraduates at Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology use while they are having English communication problems?

Descriptive statistics was employed to investigate the frequency use of communication strategies of the second year students in the three faculties at Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology (TNI), Thailand. Table 1 illustrates the mean of frequency of overall communication strategy use was 3.49, which was considered as a moderate level ranged from 1 to 5. The most frequently used strategies was strategies for understanding interlocutor's messages (UIM; $M = 3.76$), followed by strategies for coping with communication problems (CCP; $M = 3.41$), and finally strategies for carrying on the conversation as intended (CCI; $M = 3.30$).

Table 1: Descriptive Statistic Results on the Frequency of Communication Strategy Use among the Second-Year Students at TNI (N = 107)

Rank Order	3 Types of Communication Strategies	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Frequency of Use	Level of Use
1	UIM	3.76	.27	usually	high
2	CCP	3.41	.19	sometimes	moderate
3	CCI	3.30	.40	sometimes	moderate
Overall Communication Strategy Use on Average		3.49	.18	sometimes	moderate

2) Does learners' gender affect their use of communication strategies?

Descriptive Statistics was used to examine the use of communication strategies regarding the gender difference among the second year students. As shown in Table 2, the mean of frequency of male learners in overall communication strategy use was 3.51, which was considered as high strategy users, whereas the mean of frequency of female learners was 3.47, which was considered as moderate strategy users. However, in each type of communication strategies, it was revealed that females used higher strategies for understanding interlocutor's messages (Females: $M = 3.77$, Males: $M = 3.74$) and strategies for coping with communication problems than males did (Females: $M = 3.43$, Males: $M = 3.40$). Strategies for carrying on the conversation as intended were found to be the least strategies that both males and females used. Males used these strategies higher than females did (Males: $M = 3.38$, Female: $M = 3.22$). Then Independent-Sample T-test was used to analyze the relationship between participants' gender and their communication strategy usage. The results of the t-test analysis indicated that there were no significant difference between gender and overall communication strategy types at .05 significant level ($p = .312$) However, there was a significant difference between gender and strategies for carrying on the conversation as intended at .05 significant level ($p = .031$) which female students used these strategies while speaking English lower than males did.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistic and the Relationship between Communication Strategies and Students' Gender Results (N = 107)

Types of Communication Strategies	Gender	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
CCP	Male	3.40	.16	-.843	.401
	Female	3.43	.22		
UIM	Male	3.74	.23	-.544	.588
	Female	3.77	.30		
CCI	Male	3.38	.38	2.183	.031**
	Female	3.22	.39		
Total of Communication Strategies on Average	Male	3.51	.17	1.016	.312
	Female	3.47	.18		

**p* < .05

3) Do learners' fields of study affect their use of communication strategies?

To examine the relationship between learners' communication strategies and their fields of study, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) or F-test was used in this study because there are three faculties, that is, Faculty of Engineering, Faculty of Information Technology, and Faculty of Business Administration. As shown in Table 3, Faculty of Information Technology used the highest level of communication strategies (*M* = 3.51), followed by Faculty of Business Administration (*M* = 3.50), and lastly, Faculty of Engineering (*M* = 3.47). Furthermore, the results indicated that there was no significant relationship between learners' communication strategies and their fields of study (*p* = .653) as shown in Table 4.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistic Results on the Frequency of Communication Strategy Use among Three Faculties at TNI (N = 107)

Rank Order	Fields of Study (Faculty)	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Frequency of Use	Level of Use
1	Information Technology	3.51	.15	usually	high
2	Business Administration	3.50	.18	usually	high
3	Engineering	3.47	.18	sometimes	moderate
Overall Communication Strategy Use on Average		3.49	.18	sometimes	moderate

Table 4: Comparing the Fields of Study and the Use of Communication Strategies of the Second-Year Students (N = 107)

Communication Strategies					
Fields of Study	<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>
Between Groups	.028	2	.014	.428	.653
Within Groups	3.422	104	.033		
Total	3.450	106			

**p* < .05

Discussion

1) What types and level of communication strategies do the undergraduates at Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology use while they are having English communication problems?

The results from the data analysis revealed that the second year undergraduate students at Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology (TNI), Thailand were moderate communication strategy users ($M = 3.49$). Ellis (1994) mentions that the strategies that learners selected to use in each situation can reflect their general stage of second language learning. The successful language learners are the strategic person who can use strategies more greatly and appropriately to the learning tasks. For this reason, it cannot be concluded that the participants in the study were strategic users and proficient in English yet. However, Lightbrown and Spada (1999) state that in Long's theory, second language acquisition takes place through conversational interaction, and in Vygotsky's theory, all cognitive development including language development arises as a result of social interactions between individuals. The most frequently used strategies in communication strategies was strategies for understanding interlocutor's messages (UIM; $M = 3.76$); for example, trying to catch the interlocutor's main point ($M = 4.61$), asking the interlocutor for a repetition ($M = 4.61$), and guessing the meaning of what the interlocutor has said ($M = 4.57$). These strategies are classified as social strategies which involve the interaction with others. Lightbrown and Spada (1999) explain that when second/foreign language learners face communicative problems and they have the opportunity to negotiate solutions to the interlocutors such as making the comprehension checks by the native speakers or more fluent speakers, making clarification requests by the learners themselves, and making self-repetition or paraphrase by the native speakers or more fluent speakers; the learners are able to acquire new language or develop their target language effectively. Therefore, it can be stated that although the learners have not been English proficient and still have communication problems, they have much effort to make themselves comprehend what the interlocutors are speaking and have a positive motivation to master their speaking abilities.

2) Does learners' gender affect their use of communication strategies?

The result indicated that male learners used the overall communication strategies more frequently than female learners (Male: $M = 3.51$; Female: $M = 3.47$). This finding is different

from Mori and Gobel's 2006 study which Zhao and Intaraprasert (2013) cited in their study that female learners used communication strategies more frequently than male learners did. Females are more active in language classes than males are. However, the findings in this study revealed that females used higher strategies for understanding interlocutor's messages and strategies for coping with communication problems than males did. Zhao and Intaraprasert (2013) explained that female learners were more interested in interaction and intended to make themselves understand the conversations. Moreover, females had more desire to practice English with their friends, and they had greater interest in making a direct contact with English speaking people than their male counterparts. Nevertheless, the findings found that males used strategies for carrying on the conversation higher than females did. Males tend to be more self-confident in communicating in English than females. According to Maubach and Morgan (2001, p. 44), they explained that "males seem much more self-reliant in keeping a conversation going, tending to follow their own instincts, sometimes even under-preparing material due to an over-confidence in their oral abilities".

3) Do learners' fields of study affect their use of communication strategies?

The results indicated that fields of study did not show the significant differences in the use of students' communication strategies. Faculty of Information Technology used the highest level of communication strategies, followed by Faculty of Business Administration, and lastly Faculty of Engineering. The students in both Faculty of Information Technology, and Faculty of Business Administration were considered as high strategy users. Based on this finding, it cannot be concluded that these students can speak fluently. They use many types of strategies because they are facing some difficulties in speaking English. Canale (1983) states that language learners use verbal and non-verbal strategies to compensate their limited knowledge in communicating the target language. In addition, since these faculties had the similar frequency use of communication strategy, the possible explanation is that the students may have similar learning achievement or English proficiency. Therefore, fields of study slightly relate to the use of students' communication strategies. In other words, they do not influence much on strategy usage of the students.

Pedagogical Implications

It is recommended that it is useful to incorporate communication strategies into language classrooms. Language teachers should teach these strategies explicitly because they can enable the students to overcome their communication difficulties and strengthen their speaking skills and confidence in English efficiently. Moreover, language teachers should employ the negotiation techniques in their teaching methods. These can raise students' awareness in learning a second/foreign language and improve students' language acquisition.

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