

# Communication Strategies and their Role in English Language Learning

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## ABSTRACT

The globalization of English and higher education and its accompanying neoliberal narratives affirm that the development of oracy skills in English as a lingua franca is high on the agenda. Japan's English language education is also subject to this trend. The article raises the proposition that teaching communication strategies in the classroom deserve more attention in the language curriculum in order to nurture oracy. It argues for the asset of direct strategy training, presenting some examples of communication strategies in second/foreign language learning—strategies that second language learners use to overcome oral communication problems caused by a lack of linguistic resources.

**Key Words:** *communication strategies, oracy, English as a lingua franca, foreign language education*

**キーワード:** コミュニケーション・ストラテジー, オーラシー, リングア・フランカとしての英語, 外国語教育

## 1. Background

The ever-increasing interdependency among modern nation-state communities has compelled them to respond to the need for a common, transnational language—English as a lingua franca (Jenkins, 2007; Seidlhofer, 2004), and it is now more promoted than ever before both in Japan and worldwide (Jenkins, 2012). Although taught in secondary education throughout the post-war period, it is only since 2011 that English has been installed as part of the extra-curricular ‘foreign language activities’ at primary level, which starts from grade 5 (Machida & Walsh, 2015). Further to the launching of English at elementary school, an official blueprint has lately been laid out that the English language be made a ‘standard’ curricular subject at primary level (MEXT, 2013). Despite the fact that fostering speaking skills or ‘oracy’

in English has been privileged in Japan's language education policy, it has long been noted that many high-achieving students are taught English grammar in preparation for tertiary admission tests (e.g., Sakui, 2004; Yoshida, 2003). The result of this convention is the wash-back effect that receptive skills, such as reading and sentence-construction, have been emphasized. Currently, quite a few students study English for paper tests and go onto higher education with neither sufficient oracy nor independent-study skills for real-world verbal communication.

Among the latest reform proposals, however, some commercially available proficiency test systems—such as TOEFL and IELTS which do measure one's real-world oracy skills—have been nominated for inclusion as part of the existing tertiary admissions test. Should this proposal be implemented, it might bring considerable effects not only to the tertiary admissions system itself but also to the micro-level, classroom teaching practice such that English lessons nurture more functional, performative oracy skills in English as a lingua franca. In this educo-social outlook, this article raises the proposition that there is a pedagogic

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vacuum to be filled in Japan's English language teaching—'communication strategies' (CSs). The term communication strategies emerged based upon the observation of second language (L2) learners' verbal performance which evinces the gap between their linguistic resources and communicative intentions (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997). It has been inferred that this gap renders systematic linguistic phenomena whose aims are to enable an uninterrupted verbal performance where the L2 speaker's linguistic resources are insufficient.

Meanwhile, research involving an L2 oral discourse demonstrates that CSs are resorted to by first-language (L1<sup>1</sup>) as well as L2 learners alike (Ellis, 1985). It has been noted that the use of CSs is more widely observed among adult language learners than toddlers. An explanation for this may be that toddlers are acquiring their L1 while undergoing greater cognitive and social developments simultaneously. On the other hand, adult L2 learners who have mastered their L1 to a fuller extent are always having needs to express themselves for which they lack the means to do so in an L2 (Cook, 1996). It is therefore construed that adult L2 learners' insufficiency of linguistic resources motivates them to resort to a wider range of CSs with more frequency than toddlers. Instructing CSs means providing these learners with strategies to maneuver in troubling situations. For these reasons, CSs as manifestations of strategic language use deserve greater attention as part of language curricula for adult learners. Whilst there is controversy over the potential of explicit instruction of CSs, the worth of providing such training has been advocated with empirical data. Dörnyei and Scott (1997), among others, demonstrated that developing effective CS training activities was possible, and these rendered positive evidence for the teachability and usefulness of didactic CS instruction. Their CS training experiment improved some of the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of the way learners use CSs.

In brief, whilst CSs are observed across language

learners irrespective of whether they are learning an L1 or L2, this article focuses on the asset of CSs and CS training for improving oracy in adult L2 learning. The article discusses three examples of CSs; *appeals for help*, *use of fillers* and *analytic strategy*. The article closes by arguing that CSs in adult language learning, of English in particular, has a non-negligible potential in raising learners' awareness of strategies that help them emerge as more competent communicators.

## 2. Communication strategies in language learning

CSs are mobilized primarily in the two situations that follow (Ellis, 1994, p. 396). They are used to deal with insufficient vocabulary, as when a learner coins 'picture place' instead of saying 'art gallery' which he or she does not know. CSs are also resorted to when the learner lacks morphological knowledge of a verb, such as when the learner tactically uses 'ask' instead of 'make' to get around the problem over the uncertainty regarding the form of the infinitive—the null + infinitive or 'to' + infinitive. The theme CSs constitutes an area of study which encompasses a wide spectrum of methodological approaches. One common concern, however, was placed on L2 speakers' use of vocabulary since "word-finding difficulties are much easier to identify and investigate than other communication problems" (Mitchell & Myles, 1998, p. 95). The three CSs that follow also represent such strategic use of language.

### 2.1 Appeals for help

When faced with problems in communication, a learner may turn to some authority, such as a bilingual dictionary, a language teacher, and the native target language speaker (Tarone, 1977 as cited in Ellis, 1994, p. 397). This strategy is known as *appeals for help* (Tarone, 1977; Færch & Kasper, 1983; Willems, 1987, as cited in Dörnyei & Scott, 1997). It has been suggested that there are sub-categories to the appeal-for-help strategies. These are known as *direct* versus *indirect* appeals for help. The former emerges in a situation where a learner turns to his or her interlocutor for

<sup>1</sup> L1 refers to the first language(s) that a child learns from birth; a L1 child refers to one who learns his or her language(s) from birth.

assistance with explicit questions which indicate a gap in his or her L2 knowledge (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997, p. 191). When the learner cannot retrieve a certain word or phrase that he or she believes is necessary, he or she may directly ask his or her interlocutor for the correct form, say, ‘What do you call *screw driver* in Japanese?’ The learner might resort to a word which he or she is not fully confident of. On such an occasion, he or she might ask for confirmation by saying ‘Is this the correct word?’ Meanwhile, the indirect appeal for help is observed when the learner intends to elicit assistance by indicating a lack of the needed L2 item verbally or non-verbally (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997, p. 191). The learner could show the need for help by means of indirect behaviors such as a pause, prosody (verbal), and eye contact (non-verbal). Such appeals for help may emerge as the learner saying ‘I don’t know the name’ with a rising intonation (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997, p. 191).

## 2.2 Use of fillers

A language learner’s *use of fillers* is another way to maneuver in troubling times in communication:

Using gambits to fill pauses, to stall, and to gain time in order to keep the communication channel open and maintain discourse at times of difficulty. Examples range from very short structures such as *well; you know; actually; okay*, to longer phrases such as *this is rather difficult to explain; well, actually, it’s a good question* (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997, p. 190).

Thus, the range of language behaviors identified as use of fillers is broad, and these include chunks of words and phrases that are used to fill pauses, cover for hesitations, make time, pave possible breakdowns, and keep communication going without faltering. The function of such gambits is ‘safe islands’ which the learner can jump onto when facing communication problems (Rohde, 1985 as cited in Dörnyei & Scott, 1997). Although fillers have several discourse roles, some of them are not apparently problem-oriented. It is therefore difficult to draw a clear

line between strategic and non-strategic uses. The use-of-fillers strategy may play a role in the classroom as when the learner indicates to the interlocutor that he or she is experiencing some problem by inserting irregularities in the interaction, such as showing hesitation, signaling a lack of knowledge, and pondering on the appropriate word selection. These irregularities may in turn induce the interlocutor to notice that the learner is facing a problem and offer help, such as giving words or expressions that are probably needed by the learner.

## 2.3 Analytic strategy

The assumption that an L2 learner lacks adequate vocabulary for communication entails that he or she needs to compensate this lack by resorting to alternative solutions. Forming part of these alternative strategies, or compensatory strategies (CpSs), is *analytic strategy* (Cook, 1996). This strategy has appeared under different labels such as *circumlocution* or *paraphrase* in pioneer works by Tarone, Færch, and Kasper. Resorting to this strategy, the learner maps the semantic content of a word which he or she does not know onto a substitute linguistic structure which conveys that semantic content. This can be done by, say, describing the characteristics of that referent instead of using a single lexical item. This strategy thus is conceptual in nature and involves an ‘analytic’ process (Ellis, 1994, p. 401). An example may be saying ‘something with which you open a can’ for ‘tin-opener’. Use of this strategy can be more likely observed among L2 learners since they have less vocabulary than native target language speakers do (Cook, 1996). CpSs allow the learner to communicate without prior knowledge while giving him or her an opportunity to learn an L2 in the form of vocabulary building in situ (Cook, 1996).

## 3. Discussion

CSs have important functions in a range of language learning situations, such as foreign language learning. Other situations may include an immersion program where not only the language of the content but also the medium

of instruction is an L2. Elsewhere, CSs also serve as an important device in an L2 classroom where the medium of instruction is solely an L2. In these circumstances, both learners and teachers are expected to make every utterance in an L2. All verbal interactions among both learners and teachers will be performed in an L2, where fully developed L2 resources cannot be anticipated. Thereby, CS training makes learners aware of alternatives to the ‘correct’ forms in order to execute their intentions and/or substitute the words and phrases they do not know or cannot retrieve on the spot.

There is a body of research which evinces the asset of CSs in adult language learning. Cohen and Aphek, to name a few, confirmed that “successful learners in their study made use of word association and generating their own rules” (as cited in Brown, 2000, p. 130). Rost and Ross corroborated that “learners benefited from asking for repetition and seeking various forms of clarification” (as cited in Brown, 2000, p. 130). Ample evidence has been submitted in favor of drawing on CSs to help develop adult learners’ language skills in carrying through L2 communication. Cook (1996) argues that “[if learners] are to succeed in conversing with other people through the L2 then they need at least practice in the skill of conducting conversations in which they are not capable of saying everything they want” (pp. 88-89). This affirms that CSs are a useful tool kit for adult L2 learners to complement their insufficiency of skills and knowledge, thereby sustaining communication which involves an L2.

In sum, CSs have potential to emerge with an important place in English language learning. Currently, CSs remain under-represented in English language teaching in Japan. In a typical language classroom, meaning, form, and function as well as vocabulary and reading strategies tend to be emphasized due to curricular and time constraint. However, learning English for a real-world communication purpose is now a vital part of the education policy agenda (MEXT, 2013). I argue that CSs deserve attention in English language learning and should be allocated a legitimate place in the curriculum. By providing only a fraction of the time for CS training in each lesson,

learners will be encouraged to emerge as a more functional and competent communicator. It will also help build the base for autonomous, life-long learning after course completion. Dörnyei and Scott (1997) indicate the procedures for CS training as follows (p. 80):

- Raising learner awareness about the nature and communicative potential of CSs
- Encouraging learners to be willing to take risks and use CSs
- Providing L2 models of the use of certain CSs
- Highlighting cross-cultural differences in CS use
- Teaching CSs directly by presenting linguistic devices to verbalize them
- Providing opportunities for practice in strategy use

To reiterate, CS training in the L2 classroom does not directly build up learners’ communicative competence but does help them become aware of potential ways of deploying CSs to fill in gaps in their competence, while facilitating autonomous L2 learning. A heightened awareness of CSs will prompt learners to take more risk in real-world communication, and this renders more opportunities for learning in situ. CSs work as a means for learners without sufficient linguistic resources to approximate their interlanguage to the target L2.

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## 要 旨

英語による口頭表現力の養成は、グローバル化との関連において外国語教育政策のなかでも優先事項とされる。本論は、第二言語・外国語学習者が言語的資源の不足に起因するコミュニケーション上の問題克服のために用いる方略であるコミュニケーション・ストラテジーを、口頭表現力養成の観点から外国語カリキュラムにおいて訓練することの効用について論じる。

**キーワード:** コミュニケーション・ストラテジー, オーラシー, リングア・フランカとしての英語, 外国語教育