

# “Once I get stuck...”

## A Study of Communication Strategies of Undergraduate English Language Learners

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**Abstract**—This study set out to examine communication strategies, the strategies that learners employ when they confront a problem in communication as they possess inadequate competence in presenting their ideas. It also explored the communication strategies produced by 1st and 4th year Arts students so as to compare the strategies of the two groups. A new communication strategy typology was created to facilitate the interpretation of the video-recorded data derived from a spoken corpus of 40 participants, who were asked to retell a provided Buddhist parable to their partner. The result from the findings was that the 1st year participants made use of all kinds of communication strategies, such as ‘code switching,’ ‘approximation,’ ‘partial borrowing’ as well as ‘non-linguistic strategies.’ However, the 4th year students did not utilize the strategies such as ‘literal translation’ and ‘word coinage,’ which might be likely to cause miscommunication. They tended to maintain the conversation in English and demonstrate the process of negotiation of meaning. Overall, the 4th year English majors produced more comprehensible and appropriate communication strategies than the 1st year students. In addition, the findings provided suggestions for English pedagogy to probably help less competent 1st year students express themselves in class and become less awkward when communicating in English.

*Keywords*-communication strategies; English Language Learners; English pedagogy

### I. INTRODUCTION

Thinking back to the time when I was a freshman at the university, I remember the hard time that I was struggling in my first English class. Formerly, every English class that I attended at school was mainly taught in Thai by Thai teachers. I, therefore, was startled when I found out that I had to actually speak English with a native teacher in the English class at the university although I understood English grammar quite well and knew a substantial amount of lexicon. In the class, there were many times that I mumbled, stuttered, or did not spoke articulately because I could not express my thought

at will. Instead of having interactions with the teacher or other friends, I sometimes chose to be quiet and passive.

On the other hand, teachers may also have hard times dealing with students like me and many others who have the same problem. For many teachers, the problem that students do not participate or do not speak in class is considered quite serious. In fact, there may be various factors that contribute to the reasons why students do not speak in class. For instance, it is because of the students’ personality, that they may be too shy to speak in class in front of many people, or students may be afraid that what they say will turn out to be wrong. Another possibility is that they may be unable to use communication strategies, which is an attempt of learners to overcome communicative problems in the situation when appropriate or systematic language is not available for them. In this study, the idea of communication strategies is explained along with a case study of 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year Arts students, Chulalongkorn University in order to suggest English learning implications for both teachers and learners of English.

#### An overview of communication strategies

In the field of language learning, communication strategies study has been receiving considerable attention from researchers and linguists, especially in second language acquisition or foreign language study as it may help contribute to the development in the field. The study of communication strategies was promoted by the rise of communicative approaches to second or foreign language teaching. Communication strategies were developed from the Canale and Swain framework (1980) reflecting the characteristics of communicative competence consisting of grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. The strategies directly involve with the last competence mentioned. That is, a person will be considered to possess strategic competence if he or she can master communication strategies. With the strategies, people can stretch their ability to communicate effectively in the new language although they have not yet mastered all the grammar and vocabulary of the language.

Many educators and linguists such as Tarone (1977 and 1983), Færch and Kasper (1983), Scarcella and Oxford (1992), Bygate (1993), Poullisse (1996), Jordens and Lalleman (1996), Asao (2002), Fulcher (2003), and Ellis (1987, 1992, 1994, 1997, and 2003) have paid attention to communication strategies, which may also be known as ‘compensation strategies.’ Although each of these researchers may have approached the strategies from different perspectives, communication strategies in their configurations can be defined as various kinds of problem-solving methods in communication. To be more specific, communication strategies “may be called into action either to enhance the effectiveness of communication or to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to limiting factors in actual communication or insufficient competence in one or more of the other components of communicative competence” (Swain, 1984, cited in Scarcella & Oxford, 1992, p.72).

#### Limitations of former taxonomies of communication strategies

Even though the taxonomies of communication strategies have been developed through times, problems still occur in that there are, actually, a lot of overlapping categories from each taxonomy. For instance, Tarone’s *conscious transfer* and Færch and Kasper’s *code-switching* and *interlingual transfer* are similar phenomena. Furthermore, Tarone’s *paraphrase*, which also appear as a member of analytic strategise in the Nijmegen Project’s typology, and Færch and Kasper’s *interlanguage-based strategies* refer to the same thing. Also, Tarone’s *approximation*, Færch and Kasper’s *generalization* and *exemplification*, and Bialystok and Fröhlich’s *semantic contiguity* are not quite different in nature. As a result, the classification of communication strategies by different researchers is like an old spirit in the same bottle because many times, the same types of strategies appear in various taxonomies either with a similar name or different names although the researchers perceived the strategies from different perspectives or used different approaches. Then, sometimes, the so-called ‘best’ taxonomy may not be the most suitable one for each piece of research. Poullisse (1996) suggested that because the application of existing taxonomies was unlikely to be plausible, many researchers often adapted traditional taxonomies or build up completely new ones in order to suit their own data (p.145).

The present research, then, presents another typology so as to be appropriate in terms of making generalizations and analyzing the data. The taxonomy was derived from two sources. One was the former taxonomies; the other was the data from the study. In other words, it is both an adapted version of previous taxonomies and a data-driven version, particularly created for this study. Of all the three well-known typologies consisting of that of Tarone (1977), Færch and Kasper (1983), and the Nijmegen Project, Tarone’s typology was the main model because it was easily comprehensible and quite clear-cut. Also, the nature of Tarone’s work was toward interactional approaches, which might be similar to the present study. On the other hand, Færch and Kasper’s was too detailed and difficult to make generalization. Still, some of the strategies’ name in the present study might be similar to that appearing in Færch and Kasper’s model. Although the Nijmegen

Project seemed to be unique, its sub-types actually had some similarities to Tarone’s model. However, Tarone’s version was not likely to provide a satisfactory classification. Some adjustments, consequently, had to be made. The detailed typology of the present study appears in the ‘result and discussion’ section.

#### The purpose of the study and research questions

Communication strategy is an interesting and plausible topic to conduct an empirical research on second or foreign language acquisition, which may prove to be useful for English pedagogy. There seem to be a tenuous but close connection between communication strategies and the problem of some students who did not speak in an English or foreign language class as mentioned earlier. That is, in my opinion, the reason why some students are quiet in language classrooms is partly because they lack the fully-developed competence in the target language to express some ideas, and do not know the way to deal with the problem. As a result, the present study of communication strategies was conducted.

The purpose of the research was to explain communication strategies observed from 40 Arts students, and to answer the following questions:

1. What are communication strategies employed by the 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year students?
2. Would there be any difference between the strategies of the two groups of participants?
3. Which group would reply more on the strategies?
4. Which group would be a better communicator according to their use of the strategies?

In addition, it was anticipated that the research would provide some implications for English language learning as well.

## II. METHOD

### A. Participants

Unlike other studies on communication strategies of Thai learners of English, whose participants were students from the secondary level of education, this study focused on the strategies of Thai students in the university level. In addition, it is different from other studies in that it is a comparative study of students from different levels whereas the previous studies were that of a controlled and an experiment group of students from the same level.

Chosen on a voluntary basis, the participants in this study were all students from Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University. They were divided into two groups. The first one consisted of twenty 1<sup>st</sup> year students; the other was twenty 4<sup>th</sup> year English majors. The participants in each group were paired up. There were twenty pairs total: ten pairs of 1<sup>st</sup> year students, and ten pairs of 4<sup>th</sup> year students.

Compared to students from other faculties, it is believed or it is the expectation of people in general that Arts students are better at English because language is considered their main subject. Therefore, it is interesting to find out how people who are supposed to master the language very well will do when they have a problem in English communication. Also, the

reason why these two groups of participants were chosen was because they were both similar and different in that although the participants were all considered university students, there was a three-year gap between them. This three-year gap signified the discrepancy between the amount of knowledge, experience, and overall competence of the students in the two groups. Furthermore, the 4<sup>th</sup> year students majored in English whereas the freshmen have not chose their major yet. Consequently, it was expected that the two groups would provide different outcomes.

### B. *Research instrument*

Concerning the test for the participants to take, generally, there are two major types of tests or activities designed for communication assessment. One is topic-based activities; the other is task-based activities. In a speaking context, for example, a topic-based activity asks participants to talk about a subject, so the discussion process is the main objective. On the other hand, a task-based activity asks them to perform a task, so the discussion process is a means to reach the goal (Ur, 1996, p.123).

In this case, a task-based test was chosen because doing a task-based test is, in a way, controlling participants to follow or complete the task they are assigned. The test helps in measuring the points of attention or the points that the students' competence is tested. Asao (2002) has raised an interesting point about a proper test for communication strategy study. He said that formerly, learner corpus was mostly topic-centered as learners would be asked to write about a certain topic. However, a task-based corpus was built up from the data in his research because he found that the traditional type of topic-centered learner corpus had certain drawbacks for the study of communication strategies. Asao wanted to prevent his participants from residing to the strategy that was widely used when a learner faced a problem in communication, which is the avoidance strategy. That is, a learner simply skipped a troubling topic (p.292). As a result, it is agreeable, like Asao's work, that a task-based test is more suitable for communication strategy study.

Task-based activities that are frequently used in communication strategy research are, for instance, picture descriptions (Váradi, 1973; Tarone, 1977; the Nijmegen Project), conversations (Færch & Kasper, 1983; the Nijmegen Project), giving instructions (Bialystok & Fröhlich, 1980), acting as interpreters (Galván & Campbell, 1979), etc. One of the most preferable tests among researchers is story-retelling like the work of Poulisse (1981), the Nijmegen Project, and Asao (2002). The present study uses a story-retelling test. There were two stories, specifically two parables or /cha:-dòk/, a story ending with Buddhist teaching. One was *Two Khak-tao Birds*; the other was *The Naga and the Garuda*.

### C. *Procedures*

The main instruction for the test of the experiment was to tell a story to the other person. In other words, each pair of the participants was asked to retell the provided story to his or her partner. Specifically, first, the participants go the input, which was in a form of a printed sheet. They could read the story for eight to ten minutes. As they read the story, they were allowed to take notes before performing the task because the printed

sheet would be returned to the investigator. Then, while a participant was retelling the story, the partner would be able to ask, respond, or interact with him or her. The overall conversation between each pair, which might last from twenty to thirty minutes, was video-recorded. In addition, there would be a follow-up interview if certain points seemed to be unclear, or if the investigator wanted to have more information for the analysis.

Unlike Asao's work, whose purpose was to investigate communication strategies in written discourse, the present research aimed to explore spoken discourse. Although writing is a kind of productive skills for communication, when people talk about communication, they tend to think of the other productive skill, which is speaking. Therefore, instead of a written corpus, a spoken corpus from the conversation of 40 participants was collected. Consequently, the taxonomies used in this study were different from the taxonomies used with a written corpus. Certain strategies involving non-linguistic features like 'getting help,' and 'mime and gesture' were included in the present typology as well.

After the data derived from video-recording had been completely collected, it was all transcribed. Salient points concerning communication strategies in the participants' performance from both the transcription and the video were selected. Then, those items were categorized and analyzed accordingly.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The taxonomy of the present study is divided into two main categories including several subcategories, but it is not too detailed to cause a problem of making generalizations, understanding, and memorization. Before presenting this study's taxonomy, the preliminary stage should be clarified. Tarone and Yule (1999) have proposed that a person would use communication strategies when the following conditions occurred:

1. a speaker desires to communicate meaning  $x$  to a listener, *and*
2. the speaker believes the language from he or she wants to use to communicate meaning  $x$  cannot be produced, *and*
3. the speaker chooses to:
  - (a) avoid (not attempt to communicate meaning  $x$ ),  
*or*
  - (b) attempt alternate means to communicate meaning  $x$ . (The speaker stops trying alternatives when it seems to him or her that there is shared meaning.) (p.104)

The conditions presented contributed to the classification of communication strategies in this study. That is, at the third step, a person could either try to find a way to solve the problem in communication, or just abandon it, resulting in two major types of communication strategies: *achievement strategies*, and *avoidance or reduction strategies*. In each type, there are some subcategories, which would be described later on. The communication strategies used by the participants in this study can be classified as follows:

1. Achievement strategies
  - 1.1 Code switching
  - 1.2 Literal translation
  - 1.3 Word coinage
  - 1.4 Analogy
  - 1.5 Approximation
  - 1.6 Circumlocution
  - 1.7 Partial borrowing
  - 1.8 Cooperative strategy
  - 1.9 Non-linguistic strategies
2. Avoidance strategies
  - 2.1 Topic avoidance
  - 2.2 Message abandonment

Overall, the participants in this study have been studying English for more than ten years. Most of them started learning the language in kindergartens. Some started when they were in grad vive at a primary school. In general, 1<sup>st</sup> year participants have fifteen years of experience in studying the language whereas 4<sup>th</sup> year participants have eighteen years. May participants have spent some times studying abroad, which lasted from many weeks to several months, but more than a year. Only one 1<sup>st</sup> year student lived in America for three years. Apart from their English in class, most of the participants only use the language when they go on the Internet, and watch some English programs.

The findings revealed that 1<sup>st</sup> year participants used all kinds of communication strategies, but 4<sup>th</sup> year participants did not use the strategies namely *literal translation*, *word coinage*, and *analogy*. There were, indeed, differences between the strategies of the two groups. It can be said that 4<sup>th</sup> year students could present the idea more comprehensibly. For instance, they did not employ communication strategies as much as 1<sup>st</sup> year students as 35% of the 4<sup>th</sup> year studnes chose the correct usage of the words such as *the king of Nagas*, *the king of Garudas*, *swallow*, and *hermits*. On the other hand, considering the same group of words, only 10% of the 1<sup>st</sup> year students could find the appropriate words. Moreover, 4<sup>th</sup> years students could incorporate Thai words with English grammatical features in order to express the concept. They, also, slowed the process of negotiation of meaning, and almost all of them made an excuse before introducing something of which they were uncertain. It seemed that 4<sup>th</sup> year students were willing to maintain the conversation in English rather than many of 1<sup>st</sup> year students who were ready to jump Thai as 50% of the 1<sup>st</sup> year participants switched to their mother tongue, but 40% of the 4<sup>th</sup> year participants used different communication strategies.

Considering the strategies employed, which group, then, would be a better communicator? From the data, it was clear that 4<sup>th</sup> year students made use of more comprehensible strategies than the 1<sup>st</sup> year as they did not choose the strategies like *literal translation* or *word coinage* to help express their thought. Because in using *literal translation* or *word coinage*, students took as risk that the listeners might not understand the word they literally translated or coined. Next, considering the reliance on the strategies, Scarcella and Oxford (1992) observed that “the

more competent learners are in their second language, the less likely they are to depend on communication strategies” (p.74). This observation seemed to be very convincing because logically, when learners gained more knowledge, they were able to find the correct expression without having to rely on the strategies. For this study, there was a tendency that the 1<sup>st</sup> year students relied more on communication strategies than the 4<sup>th</sup> year students. Still, in terms of quantity, the difference between the amount of communication strategies used by the two groups of participants was not very explicit. But, what if the participants are junior high school students and 4<sup>th</sup> year Arts students? It is very interesting to find whether the amount as well as the types of communication strategies employed by these two groups will be radically different.

In addition, normally, in real communications, it is possible that learners may use various strategies at a time. Ellis (1987) referred to this kind of phenomena as ‘*the cyclic nature of strategy application*’ since learners might employ strategies embedded within other strategies, or hierarchically related to each other (p.107). The participants in this study tackled a problem by using a lot of strategies in a cyclic manner as well. A student might first use *mime*, *circumlocution*, and *code switching*. For instance, “He’s a monk. He has no clothes, nothing on him. He’s what we call /chi:-pluaj/,” and “Two birds, I don’t know the name, but it called /nók-khè:k-taû/, /khè:k-taû/ bird.”

Another key issue to which should be paid attention in the study of communication strategies was what motivates learners to use one type of the strategies rather than the others either in a cyclic manner or as a single strategy. This could be explained by the idea of ‘*cooperative principle*,’ which is the cooperation in communication. The cooperation principle consisted of four maxims proposed by Grice (1975). He claimed that normally people should give an appropriate amount of information (*Maxim of Quantity*), tell the truth (*Maxim of Quality*), be relevant (*Maxim of Relevance*), and be brief and orderly (*Maxim of Manner*) (cited in Yule, 1996, p.37). Because the participants wanted to be briefed and informative, they chose *approximation*, which is the nearest thing to represent the correct word. If their partner did not understand the approximation, the participants needed to give further information by *circumlocution*. After the explanation, if the partner still did not get the idea, the participants, then, had to switch to their mother tongue as the last resort. Fulcher (2003) supported that if a learner was speaking to someone with whom he or she had a language in common, a word or phrase taken from the common language might be used to overcome a communication difficulty (p.32).

Furthermore, sentence like “I don’t know how to translate into English,” or “I don’t know the word for (a Thai word)” were common among 4<sup>th</sup> year participants. This can be explained in terms of the maxims as well. The participants did not want to violate the maxim of quality so they had to say that the information they were going to provide to their partner might be wrong. This is because as learners become more advanced, they are aware of using the language. In other words, they have negotiation of meaning.

In his paper, Asao (2002) concluded that the choice of communication strategies depended on the type of discourse whether it was written or spoken, and *circumlocution* belonged to spoken discourse whereas *switching to mother tongue* belonged to written one (p.303). However, that is not always the case. The findings from this study proved that although this was spoken discourse, *code switching* was frequently used as well. Actually, there were other important reasons involving in learners' choices of communication strategies. Tarone and Yule (1999) noted that the speaker's assessment of the listener's knowledge had an obvious effect upon the strategies employed (p.111). For example, as the participants knew that they themselves and their partner understood some languages in common, they could switch to the other languages that they knew. They might also refer to some kind of information that they shared like a student used the *approximation* strategy for the word *storm* by choosing the word *tsunami*, which could be put in the same category of natural disasters. Moreover, according to Ellis (1997), the choice of communication strategies reflected in the learners' stage of development (p.61). As in this case, 4<sup>th</sup> year participants or the advanced group did not have to literally translate or coin a new word in order to express an idea whereas the less advanced group still relied on these strategies as 1<sup>st</sup> year participants' interlanguage was still far from the target language compared to that of the 4<sup>th</sup> year.

#### English language learning implications

Now, the question is what could one benefit from the study of communication strategies, especially in terms of teaching English as a second or foreign language. Based on the findings from their research, the investigators from the Nijmegen Project challenged the '*uniqueness of fallacy*,' which was the claim that communication strategies were particularly a phenomenon in second language acquisition. They also argued that learners did not have to specially build second language strategic competence because they could instantly apply their first language strategic competence because they could instantly apply their first language strategic competence (Ellis, 1994, p.402). Two possible objections to actually teaching the strategies in the second language classroom were that they were universal and that they were picked up in mastering the first language (Canale, 1984, p. 11). In other words, when people cannot find word in their own language, they can explain it to others by paraphrasing or giving examples concerning the intended message as well. Many researchers have tried to find out about the relation between communication strategies and second language acquisition, and the necessity to teach second language learners communication strategies. For example, Kellerman (1991) said that teachers should focus more on teaching the language and "let the strategies look after themselves" (cited in Ellis, 1994, p.402). whereas Ellis (1994) pointed out that there was not enough evidence to support either side.

However, some researchers like Færch and Kasper (1983) thought that communication strategies should be taught to English learners because the strategies helped make input comprehensible, and according to a substantial modification of input theory, comprehensible input was a crucial condition for second or foreign language acquisition (p.6). Also, Scarcella

and Oxford (1992) claimed that strategic competence was especially significant for beginners of English like how a Japanese student who just arrived America and had no English proficiency would do if her room caught on fire, and she had not yet memorized some expressions such as 'I need your help!' or 'Fire!' (p.74). This corresponds to Terrel (1977) who strongly argued that communication strategies are crucial at the beginning stages of language learning (cited in Canale, 1984, p.11). The findings from the present research also suggests that it is desirable to introduce students, particularly the less advanced students, communication strategies, and to guide them to use the strategies properly and efficiently because compared to 4<sup>th</sup> year students, 1<sup>st</sup> year students somehow were more awkward when they faced a communicative problem, and the strategies they used were inappropriate, which might cause failure in communication.

I support the idea that communication strategies should be incorporated in English language pedagogy. Ironically, from my own experience, without being taught the strategies, I could manage to speak in class when I was a sophomore, and especially a senior. Although it seems that communication strategies are something that can be learned by oneself without any instruction, I still believe that students who have a chance to be recommended how to use communication strategies will increase self-confidence as they feel assured that they have tools to handle a communicative problem. And, they will not have hard times in their early year of studying the university's English courses or English communication in general. Moreover, as students are aware of communication strategies since they are young, they can probably master the strategies in the future. Therefore, communication strategies are beneficial not only for a short period of time but also in the long run.

How, then, can communication strategies be incorporated in English language pedagogy? Canale (1984) stated that learners must be shown how the strategies can be implemented in the second language learning, must be encouraged to use the strategies, and must be given the opportunity to use them (p.11) as well as Poulisse (1996) who suggested that since teachers came to realize that learners could not possibly be well equipped with all the linguistic means they might need for future communication, the teachers should encourage their students to practice communication strategies both inside and outside classroom (p.136). Smith, Meyers, and Burkhalter (1992) explicitly guided that when learners were unable to think of the English word for what they want to say, they could explain the meaning of the word, give an example instead of using the word, and use a gesture or a demonstration to illustrate the word.

Besides, the findings from this study can be applied in teaching communication strategies as well. For example, firstly, there are some strategies that are less preferable and sometimes may cause further problems in communication such as *literal translation* and *word coinage*. Teachers should emphasize that the strategies may work with people who share the same mother tongue with the students, but they may not with native speakers. Secondly, if it is possible, *switching to*

mother tongue can be adjusted and become *partial borrowing* so that the language is effectively transferred and, at the same time, cultural meanings can be preserved. Thirdly, teachers should point out the benefit of the *cooperative strategy* as the idea of communication is that the two parties should help get the meaning across. Next, if they are used appropriately, *mime* and *gesture* help in communication as well. Finally, students can avoid certain topics if they think that they do not violate the understanding of the whole message because *topic avoidance* helps students maintain communication. On the other hand, *message abandonment* interrupts the flow of the conversation. Still, it is better than remaining silent when a problem occurs. Students, especially 1<sup>st</sup> year students will benefit from learning communication strategies because if students learn how to use communication strategies, they will be equipped with the tools for dealing with problems in communication, which may occur at any place even in an English classroom. This idea can be connected to the problem of quiet students, which is posed at the beginning of the research. It is, then, expected that if 1<sup>st</sup> year students have communication strategies, at least, they know the methods to express difficult ideas in class instead of being silent, which does not help in learning a language at all.

In addition, since the quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *communicative language teaching* and the notion of *communicative competence* have been promoted so learners who study English as a second or foreign language nowadays are expected to possess the competence, which will enable them to be “active participants in interpretation, expression, and negotiation of meaning” (Savignon, 2001, p.13). Teaching communication strategies, which is a major part of strategic competence, one of the four components of communicative competence, can help learners become active participants in communication as mentioned. In other words, learners will be more proficient in English as being expected according to the communicative approach.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

It can be said that the use of communication strategies and language learners are actually inseparable. Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) mentioned that all communication strategies were helpful for acquisition because they enabled learners to keep the conversation going (cited in Kasper and Kellerman, 1997, p.6). Also, as learners develop their interlanguage, it is unavoidable that they will face problems in communication. Communication strategies can be an answer to the problems as they equip learners with tools to overcome communicative difficulties.

To summarize, this comparative study of communication strategies was conducted to find out more about the strategies of twenty 1<sup>st</sup> and twenty 4<sup>th</sup> year Arts students who majored in English. And, because former taxonomies were not applicable with the spoken corpus from the study, another taxonomy was created to analyze the data. The findings provided a lot of interesting issues concerning English language learning. Especially, it was expected that by introducing the idea of communication strategies to 1<sup>st</sup> students, the strategies might help some quiet students overcome communicative problems so that they would be able to talk and interact with their teacher and friends in class and

ultimately become active and competent learners as representatives of today’s world of effective English education with communicative language teaching approach.

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