

Sociocultural Causes of Non-lexicalized Pauses for Japanese Test-takers in the TOEFL ITP Speaking Section

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Abstract Communication strategies (henceforth, CSs) represent a linguistic competence whose primary function is the management of language production problems between available linguistic resources and communicative intention. Substantial evidence corroborates their teachability as well as their effectiveness in mitigating prosodic features (e.g. hesitation) related to the perception of language fluency [1,2,3]. Within the Japanese setting, however, exist potential sociocultural causes that can adversely impact Japanese EFL learners' CS reliance, and consequently speaking evaluation as measured on standardized English language proficiency tests. Results from a three-month quasi-experimental study into the instruction of 12 wide-ranging CSs assessed the relationship between CS application during authentic interaction. While findings confirm higher levels of CS reliance for the experimental group, they also highlight how expectations and beliefs prevalent among Japanese learners are linked to CS selection, employment, and reliance in managing emergent or surfaced communicative problems. Specifically, a preponderance of first language and avoidance-based communication strategies represents a determination to construct symmetrical L1-L2 constructs without acceptance of a degree of ambiguity or diminution of the optimal meaning. This exacting attention to detail can extend non-lexicalized pauses which reduces speaking rate as evaluated on TOEFL's AI-powered SpeechRater.

Keywords: Non-lexicalized pauses, Under-elaboration, Speaking fluency, TOEFL Speaking test

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1. Introduction

CSs are problem management devices whose purpose is restricted to managing perceived or emergent communicative problems [4]. Restricted to the means employed when facing difficulty verbalizing a mental plan, attention shifts to an alternative representational system for means of expression. Their use has come to represent not an overarching tactic but a technique in selection of the best resources to minimize or transcend communication breakdown. Substantial evidence corroborates their teachability as well as their effectiveness in developing strategic competence and mitigating prosodic features related to the perception of language fluency that represent temporary elements of hesitation (i.e., filled pauses, repetitions, repairs, and restarts) [1,2,3]. However, within the Japanese setting exists potential sociocultural causes of non-lexicalized pauses and under-elaboration that can adversely impact Japanese EFL learners' CS reliance and resulting speaking evaluation as measured on standardized English language proficiency tests.

2. The Background

The educational goal of *** University (henceforth, JU) states that 50% of first-year students are to achieve a TOEFL ITP score of 543 (equivalent to CEFR level B2) upon completion of a four-month intensive English program (henceforth, IEP). Pre-IEP TOEFL scores average 443 at matriculation (equivalent to CEFR B1), with the supplementary speaking section (the TOEFL ITP only contains listening, structure and written expression, and reading comprehension sections) averaging the second lowest among the four skills (proficiency scores ranged from high beginner to intermediate level, average score: 44.6). The TOEFL speaking section is an AI-powered application that provides instant evaluation of an examinee's fluency by their ability to deliver their experiences and opinions in a cohesive, coherent manner. Hesitation in language production (i.e., conceptualization, formulation, and articulation) is often accompanied by prosodic features related to the perception of language fluency: extended pauses (both lexicalized and non-lexicalized), repetition (own-repetition or other-repetition,

i.e., part of the interlocutor's utterance) are evaluated as a lack of fluency and scored accordingly [5]. These features of speech demonstrate a degree of problematicity [6] and often indicate a gap between communicative intention and available linguistic resources. In one's first language it demonstrates the difficulty of retrieval or partial recall due to temporary inaccessibility of a stored item [7]. For EFL learners the linguistic, retrieval, or proficiency shortfall represents a perceptible indicator of an impediment to a communicative goal. Strategic language competence (i.e., employing individual communication strategies) is the means by which communicative problems (henceforth, CPs) are managed. Selected upon realization of an impediment their primary function is to overcome language production problems between available linguistic resources and communicative intention.

3. The Research

In order to investigate CS reliance during the management of CPs, a four-month, quasi-experimental study was undertaken in the instruction of 12 wide-ranging CSs. The study, conducted at JU, took place between April 2024 and August 2024. First-year undergraduates (quasi-experimental group $n = 21$, comparison group $n = 20$; average age: 20 years old) participated as subjects. All students were enrolled in a four-month (14 weeks) pre-intermediate English oral communication class (90 minutes, twice a week), a compulsory class as part of a language curriculum which aims to equip students with the required language proficiency to undertake English-medium instruction classes. In addition to oral communication class all students ($n = 41$) were also enrolled in TOEFL test preparatory classes. All English oral communication classes are streamed according to written placement scores taken at commencement of the academic year. Proficiency scores ranged from high-beginner to high-intermediate level, (TOEFL ITP scores between 440 to 600; 310–677 score range); average score: 443 points (CEFR: B1 equates to IELTS speaking section band 4~5). TOEFL ITP test scores (April 2024) show no significant difference in English proficiency level between the groups. At the

time of the pretest interaction the mean test score for both the experimental and comparison group was 448 and 440 (SD = 56.39 and 41.89) respectively. Group homogeneity was verified by Levene's test for equality of variance ($F(1,39) = 0.527$, $p = <.811$). The two classes were randomly assigned as the quasi-experimental class or the comparison class. All subjects had completed eight years compulsory English language education, yet, consistent with false-beginners (the term is used to denote learners with knowledge of syntax and morphology, but which is not displayed in their speaking proficiency) detailed grammar knowledge belied weak speaking proficiency. The makeup of both groups is presented in Table 1.

The findings based on quantitative analysis of the interactions reveal changes in CS employment recorded for the experimental group (most significantly relating to sharp increases of interaction and reduction-based CSs) were greater for those CSs associated with a more active approach and functional determination to achieve a communicative intention. However, for subjects during the final phase of the informal, semi-structured interviews (also known as non-standardized or qualitative interviews; [8], when engaged in more cognitively demanding questions (Phase 3 addressed reasons for choosing JU) a lack of reciprocal interlocution resulted in contrived, orderly exchanges that appeared tense and rehearsed. A noticeable increase in lexicalized and non-lexicalized pauses (from a mean of 4 seconds to 7 seconds between Phase 1 and 3) affected prosodic features of responses, with speech becoming less fluent and noticeably more irresolute. One possible explanation for this anomaly is that pressure to perform due to the linguistic demands of the task necessitate reliance on certain strategies; as mentioned, Phase 3 yields higher problematicity due to topic content, also conversely, an increase in hesitation combined with the extensive employment of avoidance strategies results in a perceptible increased level of dysfluency among subjects. This restrictive under-elaboration directly challenges the naturalness of the interaction and validity of data elicited, and qualitative assessment indicates that certain sociocultural and existential factors characteristic of Japan must additionally be acknowledged as relevant in CS reliance.

Table 1. English proficiency level and education background of subjects

Group	Proficiency level	No. of years of English education	Males	Females	Total no. of subjects
Experimental	pre-intermediate	7-8	7	14	21
Comparison	pre-intermediate	7-8	5	15	20
Total			12	19	41

4. Communication Strategies

Equipping Japanese learners with solely the required language constructs is recognized as insufficient for adequate development of communicative competence [9,10] due to prominent linguistic and sociocultural factors in Japan. For example, the grammatical dissimilarity of Japanese to English furnishes additional difficulties as language distance leads to impediments involving both

linguistic typology (e.g., structural, phonological) and lexical dissimilarity [11]. [12] calculate linguistic dissimilarity on a range from 1.0 (1.0 represents 'harder to learn') to 3.0 ('easier to learn') for native English speakers. Japanese is classified as being the most distant (from English) and scores 1.0, followed by Mandarin which scores 1.5. To offer comparison, French is rated 2.5. The nature of discourse further exacerbates matters as Japanese interaction favors fewer interjections and more indirect or apparently vague types of expression (in the perception of non-Japanese) [13]. Additional competences

are considered necessary in enabling Japanese EFL learners to use language effectively in determining the most efficient means of conveying an intended communicative intention. For these reasons educators [3,14] highlight the need for strategic competences to enable effective strategy ability and assist with the demands of L2 production generally and CP management specifically. This has been the motivation behind the author's attempts to foster a strategic language competence among students taking English conversation classes at the universities he has taught. In addition to the constructs themselves the sociocultural and existential factors [15] that shape the character and content of classroom discourse must also be acknowledged. For communicative strategy acquisition to remain an achievable ambition instruction must recognize the complex competing expectations and beliefs prevalent in the Japanese EFL classroom. If the findings for similarly focused studies into CS instruction are applicable to the Japanese setting [1,16] any reduction of inhibiting sociocultural influences through strategic competence is likely to propitiously impact fluency and communicative language proficiency. It is hypothesized that these factors can potentially reduce the effectiveness of CS employment in the Japanese setting and adversely impact valuation as measured on standardized English language proficiency tests. The factors are:

1. Second language proficiency
2. Existential competence
3. Sociocultural factors

It is the influence of these factors that the author's research has attempted to highlight as influential in the success of CS instruction conducted among Japanese EFL learners. The above factors will be related to the findings from the latest TOEFL speaking section to offer an insight into non-lexicalized pauses and under-elaboration in managing communicative problems. Although every effort has been taken to validate the accurate representation based on post-test video-stimulated recall (henceforth VSR), the author acknowledges that a level of interpretation and inference in representing accurately subjects' recollections-

4.1. Second Language Proficiency

Determinative variables on the extent of CS employment primarily relate to learner proficiency [2] as the frequency of encountering linguistic problems for which CSs have to be employed is higher for less proficient speakers. Research [17] conducted among learners of all ages and nationalities, regardless of elicitation settings, highlight a disparity in CS employment between varying levels of proficiency. Intuitively, an inverse relationship between L2 proficiency and frequency of CS reliance would exist: learners of higher proficiency should require resorting to less linguistically demanding but also communicatively less-effective strategies (e.g., varying degrees of omission or first language (henceforth, L1) reliance) more infrequently than lower proficient learners. Their more advanced repertoire of L2 linguistic knowledge allows them to exploit alternative varieties that require more elaborate manipulation of their linguistic resources and recourse to

more L2-based CSs dependency (e.g., reliance on lexical strategies such as circumlocution, approximation) [18] in producing an altered subject matter. For learners of lower proficiency, attempts at tailoring the communicative intention to available resources lead to a diminution of the optimal meaning through avoidance or omission of linguistic forms. CSs represent a continuum in terms of the extent to which the goal is compromised: from total avoidance (i.e., message abandonment; although topic avoidance contains neither conceptual nor linguistic processes, the importance of avoidance behavior has been demonstrated in revealing learners' psychological and linguistic reasoning for avoidance, [19]) to less compromising avoidance techniques (phonological, morphological, syntactic, lexical, [4]), and finally through to less disruptive message reduction strategies.

The implication for performance on the TOEFL ITP test for learners at JU is that less effective CSs (i.e., L1 knowledge-based and reduction CSs) will be relied on over more effective CSs. As has been highlighted [4] L1-based strategies are more commonly employed by Japanese EFL learners of lower proficiency level in managing problematcity. Particularly, a determination to construct symmetrical L1-L2 constructs without acceptance of a degree of ambiguity in translation is cited [20] as contributory to a preoccupation with direct conveyance from the L1 to L2. This seems to support findings of some degree of sequential order or patterns of preference in CP management among Japanese learners. However, as mentioned above, the grammatical dissimilarity of Japanese to English furnishes additional difficulties as language distance leads to impediments involving both linguistic typology (e.g., structural, phonological) and lexical dissimilarity [11]. This can often result in lengthy non-lexicalized pauses as students construct word-for-word translations of their communicative goal.

4.2. Existential Competence

Selfhood factors linked to the personal traits of identity (e.g., attitudes, values, beliefs) represent constituents of a user's emotional, affective, cognitive and social attitude [15] relate the competence to strategic language reliance by demonstrating how differences in patterns of CS selection can be attributed to individual cognitive style. Holistic learners (i.e., those who view situations in their overall context) for example are predominantly dependent on holistic CSs (mainly comparison-based strategies) compared to analytic learners (i.e., those who analyze information into its composite parts). Manifestations of this dichotomy mean learners either describe target items in terms of a componential comparison or analogically relate to a concept which shares critical features [21]. As mentioned above, Japanese learners focus on symmetrical L1-L2 constructs compels attempts at analytic translations that result in extended pauses. This is especially evident when talking about the cuisine or Japanese traditions when a holistic overview or outline would reduce the need for problematic detailed translations.

In addition, familiarity with the target culture has also been shown to be a factor in CS selection. Learners from a single L1 background which is close geographically,

historically and socioculturally, to English as the L2, will not generalize to the larger, extremely diverse, population of L2 learners around the world [4]. Furthermore, CS reliance can also vary according to the learner's native language (i.e., language distance), with perception of typological distance between the L1 and L2 influencing CS employment [4]. Non-cognateness between the Japanese and English languages (especially in terms of particles, verbal morphology, honorifics, etymology) ensures that not only grammatically but also phonetically language distance can also reduce the tendency to depend on CSs [1].

4.3. Sociocultural Influences

Even within the TOEFL test setting, the situation is not only determined by cognitive, affective and language proficiency factors, but also a social dimension [20]. In the same way discourse strategies are cross-culturally variable and a potential source of intercultural miscommunication, appropriate CS employment is likewise culturally constrained. The cultural values of the learners' society can therefore be expected to exert influence on choice and acceptability of CS employment. Specifically, within the classroom interactions are governed by the face-saving principle and evidence that intra-personal strategies (i.e., interaction-based CSs) are often affected by discursive and interactional features [22]. These rules and norms governing L2 interactional patterns take on new dimensions depending on the learner's disposition and effort to surmount communicative difficulty [23]. Inhibitions regarding making mistakes are likely to impact on the reliance on risk-taking strategies, for example, the presence of L1-based strategies may form an indicator of learners' commitment and willingness to employ strategic language constructs [24]. Manifestations of this can be observed during communicative language lessons as learners prepare scripted answers rather than mentally constructing ideas simultaneously as the conversation takes place. A common justification for this practice is that it allows for ideas and opinions to be formed without the constraints of L2 construction while interacting. This exacting attention to detail, what [25] terms *ambiguity avoidance*, extends non-lexicalized pauses, and combined with Japanese culture's greater tolerance of silence can result in lengthy interruptions at the planning stage. More specifically, the use of silence within the classroom can often be the result of rule-conflict between English and Japanese conversation style; when confronted with questions which learners cannot answer a common recourse is to resort to silence as a face-saving measure or convey unfamiliarity by remaining silent. The dynamics of this conflict mean that uncomfortable silences can be a common feature in EFL classrooms in Japan and one of the most challenging aspects of classroom management for non-Japanese language teachers. During post-test interviews several subjects cited the fear of making mistakes and appearing incompetent as the greatest cause of their anxiety during the interactions. This may help explain a reluctance to interact freely and uninhibited and the tendency for defensive reactions to error correction [10]. The extent to which fear of making mistakes or the shyness factor can

determine the level of risk the learner is prepared to undertake in order to transcend a communicative barrier. Such risks, however, are an inherently unavoidable part of language learning for learners who must be made aware that they can never be completely avoided, merely reduced.

5. Summary

The purpose of the author's research over the past decade has been to investigate the efficacy of CS instruction in equipping Japanese EFL learners with the strategic tools to be able to effectively manage communication barriers. Empirical results [1] confirm anecdotal evidence and theoretical assumptions that strategic competence exists fairly independently of the other components of communicative competence. Through repeated exposure learners' declarative knowledge of CS options can be automatised (see [26] process of 'proceduralising declarative knowledge' through practice) to become observable, procedural knowledge of strategic competency. While the effect of CS awareness-raising training may not be fully reflected in observable performance data, the value of CS training may also lie in its assistance in acquiring declarative knowledge about strategy use, the first step to proceduralization on the learning continuum. CS training can therefore manifest in ways which may not be observable and from the increase of CS reliance among both groups learning can be either implicit or explicit [27,8]). A possible explanation for the increase in the reliance of these CSs may be attributed to an alignment between the proficiency level and the corresponding linguistic and cognitive demands of the strategy. This is consistent with the notion that CSs that demand only surface processing tend to be favored by elementary learners and enable speakers to formulate and express ideas in a relatively effortless way may serve as 'bedrock strategies' [28] in oral communication. It should also be acknowledged that the TOEFL test format itself negates the use of certain strategies (interaction-based CSs) employed by more by extroverted learners, while conversely reduction strategy reliance is utilized by introverted learners who are more reluctant to ask for assistance [29].

Despite the objectives of CS instruction highlighted above, the learner characteristics highlighted in this paper represent products of centralized curricula, didactic and expository teaching styles, concentration on knowledge acquisition, and examinations emphasizing reproductive knowledge over genuine thinking [30]. The Japanese school system, consistent with the values ingrained in Japanese society, places great emphasis on the evaluation paradigm adding to language anxiety concern regarding evaluation of performance [31]. It also helps explain the predominance of convergent thinking [32] and the focus on the production of a single 'right' answer in L2 production. [33] highlights how, in contrast, a culture that prizes individual competition organizes its educational system around competitive tasks, resultantly, successful language learners prefer strategies that allow them to work alone rather than social strategies that call for collaboration with others.

While some researchers have attempted to negate the

significance of these sociocultural influences [34], factors that are presented as mitigating these are themselves culturally bound phenomenon (e.g., student reticence, low confidence levels, and fear of making mistakes).

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