

Oral English Communication Strategies among Vietnamese Non-majors of English at Intermediate Level

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Abstract English communicative competence is now considered as a golden key to the successful integration into the world. However, it is widely accepted that oral communicative competence of English non-majors in Vietnam is far from expectation at the completion of university education. Meanwhile, studies on communication strategies (CSs) are insufficient in Vietnam as most previous communication-related studies in Vietnamese context appeared to mainly focus on linguistic or methodological factors influencing communicative competences of Vietnamese students. Thus, this paper reports a study which generalizes communication strategies by Vietnamese non-majors of English whose English proficiency is intermediate. The study was both quantitative qualitative in which an integrated CS framework by Malasit, Y. and Sarobol, N. (2013) [1] combining those of Tarone (1980) [2], Faerch & Kasper (1983) [3], and Dornyei & Scott (1997) [4] was used to analyse and identify students' use of CSs in their recorded speaking performance. Data from recordings and informal interviews with the students will help provide recommendations for English teaching and learning for communicative competence in Vietnam.

Keywords: *oral communication strategies, English non-majors, intermediate*

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1. Introduction

For the past few decades, the teaching of English in Vietnam has shifted towards communicative-focused instruction due to the important status of English as an international language. This has impacted strongly on the teaching and learning of the language. However, it is widely accepted by most employers in Vietnam that oral communicative competence of non-English majors at the completion of university education in Vietnam is far from their expectation of the labor force. Thus, the effectiveness of communication in the target language is still both English learners and teachers' deepest concern since learners who have already spent significant periods of time on learning the language to communicate as the main goal of their learning but then most of them encounter too many difficulties in communicating in the language. Besides, Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam (MOET) passed strict materials which strictly define requirements of English for undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate students. The current implementation of National Foreign Languages 2020 Project at different colleges and universities throughout Vietnam has been an effort of the MOET to prepare Vietnamese young labor force with sufficient foreign language competence in order to better integrate into the world. In reality, a number of studies have been conducted in order to improve communicative competences of Vietnamese students but

most of them appear to mainly focus on linguistic, methodological, or ICT factors influencing communicative competence of Vietnamese students and communicative activities for communicative competence. These studies do not cover situations in which students have communication breakdowns due to the lack of a very important factor – oral communication strategies (CSs).

In reality, CSs have been the research topic of interest of language and researchers and teachers around the world for several decades. There have been a number of researches on the nature, the use, the teaching of CSs as well as factors influencing the use of CSs. These studies, to a great extent, have given pedagogical implications for teachers, course designers, and educators to take in to account in order to improve English learners' communicative competence. However, there has been little empirical research on CSs in the context of Vietnam. A few studies have been conducted by Vietnamese researchers and these have involved very limited variables and have focused on learners' characteristics only. A case study carried out among eight university students in Hue – a city in the Central of Vietnam conducted by Le (2006) [5] was the first research on these and has, so far, been the only one expanding CS instruction. The study found positive outcomes for strategy training and suggested that "fostering CSs in language learners might help improve their strategic competence and thus might enhance their fluency in language use" (Le, 2006). The research of Bui (2012) [6] research on CS employment by university English majors in the South of Vietnam showed that

students' frequency and use of CS was greatly influenced by their gender, attitudes towards speaking English, high school background, exposure to oral communication in English, and types of English major concentration. Dinh (2013) [7] investigated CS employment by Vietnamese students of English and its relationship to gender and found no obvious relationship between the two.

Thus, investigating the types of CSs used by Vietnamese non-majors of English through communication tasks, especially of a particular group of students is considered as of great importance in terms of developing their oral English communication skills which are high demand of the labor market in Vietnam. This study will provide recommendation for the teaching and learning of English to EFL learners as well as the English curriculum at tertiary level.

The proposed research aims to investigate the reality of oral English CSs use by Vietnamese non-English majors at intermediate level and put forward ways of considering oral English CSs in to ELT in Vietnam for the purpose of improving Vietnamese students' English communicative competence. It also attempts to fill the gap of the current limited research on oral English CSs of Vietnamese learners and seeks answers to the following questions:

1. What is the frequency use of CSs by non-English majors whose English is at intermediate level?
2. What are the students' perceptions towards the use of CSs?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Definitions of CSs

Four the past four decades, CSs have been the topic of many studies on linguistics and second language acquisition. Several definition regarding CSs of language learners have been proposed by different scholars and experts based on their personal perceptions and beliefs in their research contexts. CSs have been variously described as: "a systematic attempt by the learner to express or decode meaning in the target language, in situations where the appropriate systematic target language rules have not been formed" (Tarone, Cohen and Dumas, 1976, p. 78) [8]; "all attempts to manipulate a limited linguistic system in order to promote communication" (Bialystok, 1983, p. 102) [9]; "verbal and non-verbal strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in actual communication due to limited conditions in actual communication or to insufficient competence in one or more of the other areas of communicative competence, and to enhance the effectiveness of communication" (Canale, 1983, p. 10) [10]; "techniques of coping with difficulties in communicating in an imperfectly known second language" (Stern, 1983, p. 411) [11]; "strategies which a language user employs in order to achieve his intended meaning on becoming aware of problems arising during the planning phase of an utterance due to (his own) linguistic shortcoming" (Poullisse, 1900 [12]; cited by Ellis, 1994 [13], p.44); "ways of achieving communication by using language in the most effective way" (Bygate, 2000, p. 115) [14]; "tactics taken by L2 learners to solve oral communication problems" (Lam, 2006, p. 142); [15] "strategies that learners employ when

their communicative competence in the language being learned (L2) is insufficient. This includes making themselves understood in the L2 and having others help them understand" Williams (2006, p. 2) [16].

A review of CS definitions reveals that CS researchers have not yet reached a consensus on a definition of CSs. It can be said from the above samples that CSs are defined differently. Notwithstanding the differences, according to Bialystok (1990) [17], CS definitions share three common characteristics: (1) *problematicity* (CSs are only utilized when communication problems occur), (2) *consciousness* (learners are aware of the fact that a CS is being adopted for a particular purpose), and (3) *intentionality* ("learners' control over a repertoire and deliberately applied to achieve certain effects" (Bialystok, 1990) [17]. Generally speaking, CS use involves the decision of the speakers in an effort to communicate to achieve their communicative goal (Bui, 2012) [6]. As a result, in the present study, CSs are referred to as "strategies which a language user employs in order to achieve his intended meaning on becoming aware of problems arising during the planning phase of an utterance due to his/ her linguistic shortcoming".

2.2. Classifications of CSs

The available research on CS typologies and classifications reveal that CSs have been classified differently according to the principles of terminology and categorization of different researchers. Their classification may be generated from their own CS investigation (e.g., Tarone, Cohen and Dumas, 1976; Færch and Kasper, 1983 [3]; Paribakht, 1985[18], Poullisse, 1987 [19]; Bialystok, 1990 [17]; Nakatani, 2006 [20]; Mariani, 2010 [21]; and Somsai and Intaraprasert, 2011) [22], or from reviewing and modifying other research works (e.g., Bialystok, 1983 [23], Willems, 1987 [24]; Dörnyei, 1995 [25]; and Dörnyei and Scott, 1995 [26]) (Bui, 2012) [6]

The review of CS classifications has provided a guideline for the present study. For the present investigation purpose, the researcher has made use of the proposed CSs from the most recently established typologies suggested by Malasit, Y. and Sarobol, N. (2013) [1], which was adapted from Tarone (1980) [2], Faerch & Kasper (1983) [3]; Dörnyei and Scott (1995) [4], and is described as follows.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

Participants consisted of 20 non-English majors whose English proficiency is intermediate. The participants are third year students of People's Police University whose ages were from 20 to 22. They were selected based on convenience, availability and their willingness to participate and on their level of English proficiency.

3.2. Research Method

Both qualitative and quantitative methods are used in this study to gather empirical data from different groups of participants (non-major students of English at intermediate level) in Vietnam.

Table 1. Taxonomy for Analysis of Communication Strategies integrating those of Tarone (1980), Faerch & Kasper (1983), and Dornyei & Scott (1997)

| | |
|--|--|
| 1. Avoidance strategies | |
| 1.1. Topic avoidance (TA): | To avoid talking about a concept |
| 1.2. Message abandonment (MA): | To stop in mid-utterances |
| 2. Compensatory strategies | |
| 2.1 Intra-actional strategies | |
| 2.1.1. Word coinage (WC): | To make up a non-existing new word to communicate |
| 2.1.2. Code-switching (CS): | To switch the language to L1 without bothering to translate |
| 2.1.3. Foreignizing (For): | To adjust L1 to L2 phonologically and/ nor morphologically |
| 2.1.4. Use of non-linguistic means (Uon): | To replace a word with non-verbal clues |
| 2.1.5. Self repair (SR): | To make a self-correction of one's own speech |
| 2.1.6. Mumbling (Mum): | To mumble with inaudible voice |
| 2.1.7. Use of all-purpose words (UA): | To extend a general, empty item to the exact word |
| 2.1.8. Approximation (App): | To substitute the L2 item with the item which shares the same meaning |
| 2.1.9. Circumlocution (Cir): | To describe the properties of the object instead of the exact target item |
| 2.1.10. Literal translation (LT): | To translate word from L1 to L2 |
| 2.1.11. Use of filters/ hesitation devices (UF): | To use filling words to gain time to think |
| 2.1.12. Self-repetition (SR): | To repeat words or phrases of one's own speech |
| 2.1.13. Other repetition (OR): | To repeat something the interlocutor said to gain time |
| 2.1.14. Omission (Omi): | To leave a gap when not knowing a word or continue as if it was understandable |
| 2.2 Interactional strategies | |
| 2.2.1. Asking for repetition (AR): | To ask for repetition when having comprehension difficulty |
| 2.2.2. Appeal for help (AH): | To request direct or indirect help from the interlocutor |
| 2.2.3. Clarification request (CR): | To request for more explanation to solve a comprehension difficulty |
| 2.2.4. Asking for confirmation (AC): | To request confirmation that something is understood correctly |
| 2.2.5. Comprehension check (CC): | To ask questions to check interlocutor's understanding |
| 2.2.6. Expressing non-understanding (EN): | To show one's own inability to understand messages |

Recording: The participants were asked to participate in a group discussion which was meant to be casual. The oral group discussion reflects learner's oral performance in a communication setting where it is possible to observe spontaneous speech production (Gradman & Hanania, 1991) [27]. The students were asked similar questions for discussion and were not informed that their oral discussions were recorded. Each group discussion lasted around 15 minutes. The recording was then transcribed for data analysis. A questionnaire suggested by Malasit, Y. and Sarobol, N. (2013) [1] was used to analyse and identify students' CSs. The questionnaire was in Vietnamese version when delivering to the participants and then was translated into English for data analysis.

Informal interview with students: An informal interview was conducted by the teacher/ researcher in order to find out additional information about the students' awareness and perceptions towards CSs.

3.3. Procedure

The quantitative analysis involving frequency count of CSs by the participants used a questionnaire of CSs suggested by Malasit, Y. and Sarobol, N. (2013) [1]. The qualitative dimension, on the other hand, was manually analysed by their actual CS use in their recorded oral

discussion and their answers to the teacher's interview questions.

4. Results and Discussion

The results are discussed in accordance to the two research questions.

Research Question 1: What is the frequency use of CSs by non-English majors whose English is at intermediate level?

Table 2 below illustrates the overall use of CSs by intermediate learners of English. As can be seen, the students resorted to compensatory strategies (92 %) which greatly overweigh avoidance strategies (8 %) in their oral communication. This indicates that the students attempted to keep the conversation flowing and maintain their interaction with their partners. Out of a total of 92 percent of compensatory strategies, 70 percent was allocated to intra-actional strategies and only 22 percent to inter-actional strategies. Several studies (Wannaruk, 2003 [28]; Lam, 2010 [29]; Aliakbari & Karimi Allvar, 2009) [30] indicated that learners at different proficiency levels employ CSs at varying degrees. If participants are fully equipped with linguistic resources, they make less use of compensation strategy than those who have less linguistic access.

Table 2. Students' overall use of CSs

| Communication Strategies | | No | % |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------|----|------|
| Avoidance | | 5 | 8% |
| Compensation Strategies | Intra-actional strategies | 45 | 70% |
| | Inter-actional strategies | 14 | 22% |
| Total | | 64 | 100% |

Table 3 below shows the frequency of use of each CS by the students.

Table 3. Students' use of specific CSs

| Communication Strategies | | No | % | |
|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|------------|------|-------|
| Avoidance strategies | 1.1 TA | 2 | 3.1% | |
| | 1.2. MA | 3 | 4.6% | |
| Compensatory strategies | <i>Intra-actional strategies</i> | 2.1.1. WC | 1 | 1.5% |
| | | 2.1.2 CS | 5 | 7.8% |
| | | 2.1.3 For | 0 | 0% |
| | | 2.1.4 Uon | 3 | 4.6% |
| | | 2.1.5 SR | 8 | 12.5% |
| | | 2.1.6 Mum | 0 | 0% |
| | | 2.1.7 UA | 1 | 1.5% |
| | | 2.1.8 App | 0 | 0% |
| | | 2.1.9 Cir | 0 | 0% |
| | | 2.1.10 LT | 3 | 4.6% |
| | | 2.1.11 UF | 15 | 23.4% |
| | | 2.1.12 SR | 7 | 10% |
| | | 2.1.13 OR | 0 | 0% |
| | | 2.1.14 Omi | 2 | 3.1% |
| <i>Interactional strategies</i> | 2.2.1 AR | 3 | 4.6% | |
| | 2.2.2 AH | 2 | 3.1% | |
| | 2.2.3 CR | 4 | 6.2% | |
| | 2.2.4 AC | 4 | 6.2% | |
| | 2.2.5 CC | 1 | 1.5% | |
| | 2.2.6 EN | 0 | 0% | |

It is revealed from the findings that not all the strategies were employed by the students. Not a single student resorted to use such CS as *foreignizing*, *approximation*, *circumlocution*, *other repetition*, or *expressing non-understanding* in their speaking task. The least frequently *foreignizing* can be explained that it was unusual to adjust L1 both morphologically and phonically to L2 because L2 (English) has different characteristics from L1.

Among the 22 strategies, *use of fitters and hesitation devices* (23.4%) was the most frequently used strategy. This is partly because these students needed to maintain the control of the conversation and to give themselves some time to think about what to say next. The results obtained are consistent with previous studies such as that of Nakatani, Makki and Bradley (2012). It was followed by *self-repair* (12.5%), *self-repetition* (10%), and *code-switching* (7.8%) respectively. Possibly, the students were accustomed to using *self-repair* and *self-repetition* in speaking Vietnamese in their daily communication and *code-switching* happened mostly when the students could not recall a word in English, so they usually abandoned speaking in English and said in the whole sentence in Vietnamese. *Clarification request* and *asking for confirmation* accounted for the same percentage (6.2%). It indicated that because of limited knowledge of encountering certain lexical difficulties, thus they needed to make use of a larger number of assistance. The rank of CSs was closely followed by *message abandonment*, *use of non-linguistic means*, *literal translation*, *asking for repetitions* which were all 4.6%. Few students used *topic avoidance*, *omission*, and *appeal for help* which were only 3.1% in their communication. It is noticeable that *word coinage*, *use of all-purpose words*, and *comprehension check* were used only once.

Research Question 2: What are the students' perceptions towards the use of CSs?

Information from informal interview with the students provides some valuable information for the research. When being asked by the teacher whether they have any ideas of CSs or why they use certain types of CSs more often than the others, most of the students did not hesitate to reveal that they do know anything about CSs except for some filters which are sometimes mentioned by their teacher in the lesson.

5. Conclusion and Implication

The frequency of CSs used by intermediate students of English in this study (64 CSs by 20 learners) was much lower in comparison to previous studies (Wannaruk, 2003; [28] Rabab'ah & Bulut, 2007 [31]; Chen, 1990 [32]; Bui, 2012 [6]; Dinh, 2013 [7]). This data together with the students' answers to the interview questions prove that in their communication tasks, those students use CSs in a very unconscious nature and it is partly due to the occurrence of such strategies in their mother tongue. Therefore, raising students' awareness of CS use in their oral communication along with incorporating a formal instruction on CSs in school curriculum is recommended. By this way, students can have more chances to expose to the use of CSs in class activities as some previous researchers (e.g., Dornyei, 1995 [25]; Nakatani, 2005 [33]; Kongsom, 2009 [34]) have confirmed that CS training in

the classroom could literally help students to communicate more effectively, raise students' awareness of CSs, and enhance students' confidence in speaking English. Besides, formal training or formal discussion on CSs and the teaching of CSs will be useful among English teachers.

The recent study was carried out among a small population of students of one university and was aimed to generalize types and frequency of CS use by intermediate students of English. Thus, further research on CSs carried out within Vietnamese settings should take into account CSs in the relationship with other variables like native language, motivation, personality, or major of the students. Furthermore, as most of previous studies focus on CS use in educational settings where the learners' communication purpose is learning the language, future research on CSs should take into account graduates' employment of CSs in actual communication.

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