



Communication Strategies Used by Middle Eastern Postgraduate Students at Service Encounters in University of Malaya

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DOI : 10.26417/zj8sf528

Abstract

Communication strategies are important in helping L2 learners to communicate successfully when they are faced with a problem in speech production. This study looked at one of the components in Communication Competence, i.e strategy competence or the use of Communication Strategies (CS) in oral interactions among Middle Eastern students and counter staff in institute of postgraduate studies (IPS) at University of Malay. Data collected from video-tape and interviews were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. It was found that the most frequently used communication strategy was the use of "modification devices". The other strategies used frequency were "interaction strategies", "compensatory strategies" "avoidance strategies" and "L2-based strategies". The results showed that students used different communication strategies to overcome their communication difficulties. The main aim of using the communication strategies is to avoid communication breakdown. Consequently, Second language learners should be encouraged to use communication strategies to develop their oral skills and help them more effective in oral communication with their limited English language proficiency. The implications and suggestions from this study towards development the teaching and learning of ESL were also presented.

Keywords: Communication Strategies Used by Middle Eastern Postgraduate Students at Service Encounters in University of Malaya

Introduction

Communication strategies are strategies that learners employ when their communicative competence in the language being learned (L2) is insufficient. This includes understanding in the L2 and having others help them understand L2.

Learners use communication strategies to offset any inadequacies they may have in the grammar of the language and, also in vocabulary. Communication strategies aid learners in participating in and maintaining conversations and improving the quality of communication. This, in turn, enables them to improve their exposure to and opportunities to use the L2, leading to more opportunities to test their assumptions about the L2 and to receive feedback. Research in communication strategies began in the early 1970s. In the early 1980s, the real study of communication strategies has become the concern of many researchers. Canale and Swain (1983) as cited in Dornyei and Scott (1997) included communication strategies in their model of communication competence as part of strategies competency, which is the learner's ability to use communication strategies and cope with various communication problems they may encounter.

International students in University of Malaya face several problems when trying to communicate in English. In the process of communication, these students have often found themselves in a position, whereby they have to improvise in order to get their messages across and overcome any momentary inadequacies. Usually the obstacle in communication is the lack of vocabulary items, which either has not been learnt, or cannot be recalled at that point in time.

Another problem faced by International students is the inadequate knowledge or competence in the grammar of the English language. Problems arise among international students who have to communicate in English. This research describes the communicative strategies used by international postgraduate students at the University of Malaya when communicating with the front desk officers of the Institute of Postgraduate Studies (IPS).

The objective of this study is to study the problems faced by international students of Middle Eastern origin when communicating in English. The study will describe strategies used by international students from Saudi Arabia, Syria, Oman, Iran, Iraq, and Yemen when communicating with officers of the Institute of Postgraduate Studies (IPS) in the University of Malaya. The language is strategic when it is used for a purpose. In this study, I consider CSs to be used by Middle Eastern non-native English speakers to overcome communicative lexical problems. In this case, the analysis has been restricted to lexical problems which may be occasioned by the lack of knowledge of L2 terms the speaker wishes to communicate, by retrieving problems or by insecurity as to lexical item selected to express a meaning.

Research questions

In order to fulfill the objectives of the study as stated above, the study aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ 1: What are the strategies used by postgraduate Middle Eastern students in the University of Malaya to overcome communication problems with staff (in service encounters in the Institute of Postgraduate Studies)?

RQ 2: Which are the types of communicative strategies most frequently used by them?

Research Methodology

The participants were enrolled with the Institute of Postgraduate Studies division of the University of Malaya. The participants (student) were from 6 different Middle-East countries, namely: Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Syria and Yemen. Out of 90 participants, 28(31%) participants were from Iran, 24(27%) participants were from Iraq, 15(17%) from were Saudi Arabia and 8 (9%) were from Oman, 8 (9%) were from Syria and 7(7%) from Yemen. students being chosen randomly to participate in this research. These participants were doing their Master's degree or Doctoral degrees at the University of Malaya. All of them had to take an English placement Test set by the university. Permission was granted by both the counter staff and students to conduct video-recording at the service counters at IPS.

A SONY Video camera has been used in this study because of its high quality and ability to record clear and good quality images and sound. Mini Video tapes were used to record the conversations. A Personal Computer with Power DVD program was also used. This made it easy for the writer to view the data that has been collected. Data for this study was collected in two different ways. In order to obtain information about the language learners and their background, interviews were conducted with the participants to gather information pertaining to their nationalities, the Universities where they did their first degree, the medium of instruction in their previous university/institute/college, their first language, the number of years they had been learning English and their own evaluation about their English proficiency. In order to get a clear picture of verbal as well as nonverbal communication strategies, the conversations between postgraduate students and counter staff at the IPS were video recorded.

A qualitative analysis was carried out Simple frequency counts were made according to the types of communication strategies used. The finding was presented using tables. The frequency counts were converted into percentages for ranking. In addition relevant extracts from the transcriptions were used to help explain the findings. The data were analysed as soon as they were collected. This was done in order to avoid lapse of time, which might affect remembering details from the interview conducted. The analysis is descriptive in nature.

The tabulation of the data in figures and percentage was done in order to count the number of times the participants used a particular strategy. The tabulation is presented. Table also represents the percentage of the frequency distribution of communication strategies employed by the participants. Throughout the study, the types of strategies used by the participants to solve their communication problems were also observed. This study was concerned only with communication strategies used when participants lacked lexical items. It can be described as:

“The common factor to all communication strategies is that the inter language learner has to deal with not knowing a word in the target language. It is vocabulary lack that is crucial. The strategies exit the plug gaps in the learners” vocabulary by allowing them to refer to a things orwhich they don’t know the target language.”(Cook, 1991:69)

Data analysis and finding

The study examined the interactions between International postgraduate Middle-Eastern students with IPS counter staff in the University of Malaya. The study was based on data that video recoded natural conversation which took place while the participants were acquiring information. The use of triangulation method of data collection supported the finding that emerged from the study. The data were collected through the use of video recordings, an informal interview, and transcriptions. The study shows that language learners were able to maintain the flow of their conversation by using different types of communication strategies.

The study answered the following research questions:

How do postgraduate Middle Eastern students at University Malaya overcome communication problems with staff at service encounters in the Institute of Postgraduate Studies (IPS)?

Generally, the researcher found that the language learners employed different types of communications strategies to avoid conversation breakdown. The strategies used by the participants were determined by the knowledge of the language they possessed. The learners fell back on strategies as a result of the imbalance between communicative needs and their actual ability to use the target language.

It also appears that in solving their communication problems, the learners drew on other knowledge sources such as, non-verbal communication strategies to compensate for their deficiencies in the target language. The use of non-verbal communication strategies enable learners to convey messages which their linguistic resources do not permit them to express successfully.

The study shows that although the learners faced communication problems, this did not prevent them from attempting to solve these problems. The learners were able to use different communicative strategies to improve their chances of being understood.

What are the types of communicative strategies used by postgraduate Middle Eastern students at University Malaya in oral communication with staff at service encounters at the

Institute of Postgraduate Studies (IPS)?

In order to answer this question, qualitative analyses were carried out. The data used in the analysis were taken from the recordings of strategies used by 90 Middle Eastern post graduate students at service counters in IPS.

The Overall Frequency Distribution of Communication Strategies employed by Participants shows as following table:

Communication Strategies	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Ranking
Modification Devices	236	49	1
Interactional Strategies	87	18	2
Compensatory Strategies	85	17.5	3
Avoidance Strategies	59	12	4
L2-based strategies	17	3.5	5
Total	483	100	5

The Overall Frequency Distribution of Communication Strategies employed by Participants

Based on the transcriptions, the researcher identified the frequency use of communication strategies used by the participants. Modification strategies were most frequently used by participants, followed by interactional strategies, compensatory strategies, and avoidance strategies and non-verbal communication strategies.

Clennel (1994) study indicates that compensatory strategies are the most commonly used by the L2 learners, while Kebir (1994), Chen (1990) and Whilliam et al.(1997) report that interactional strategies are the most popular among L2 learners.

The finding on the use of compensatory strategies among the participants revealed that when communication problems occurred, the students preferred to get their ideas across by themselves rather than ask for some help from their interlocutors or abandon the conversation. They usually tried to fill the conversation gaps by making an effort to convey the intended message meaningfully, so they took risks to explain, create or guess the problematic word(s).

The finding supports Wenden's (1991:41) statement that "the good language learner is willing to take risks". These students are willing to take risks in order to communicate, using any meaning at their disposal to convey meaning. This often involves the use of circumlocution, paraphrases, gestures, and may sometimes involve the creation of new words by analogy with familiar forms.

In order to avoid interruption in the conversation and to achieve mutual understanding, interactional strategies were used by the participants to ensure that their interlocutors understood the intended messages completely. In conversations,

communication problems might occur but the use of interactional strategies help the speakers expand their conversation through smooth turn-takings.

After compensatory strategies, avoidance strategies were the next most frequently used. When the participants could not transmit their intended message, they avoid those problematic messages. In order to avoid making mistakes and increase fluency in conversation, the participants occasionally used avoidance strategies, namely message avoidance. Topic avoidance was not found in this study.

Faerch & Kasper (1983) as cited in David (1999) explain the reason for using avoidance strategies:

In order to avoid producing non-fluent or incorrect utterances by using sufficiently automatised or hypothetical rules/items, learners may decide to communicate by means of a reduced system focusing on stable rules and items which have become reasonably well-automatised.

David (2003) proposes that elimination of certain formal elements of the target language do not always interfere with the transmission of meaning if the learners use them appropriately. In fact, the learners benefit from the use of avoidance strategies because they do not need to stop the conversation immediately, but try to remove the problematic word(s) or sentence(s) with a new one.

Non-verbal strategies were also used in the study to compensate the participants' lexical gap of the TL. Most of the use of these strategies aimed to replace their messages to make them clearer and more understandable

Recommendation

The findings have implications in the field of second language teaching. These include teaching of CSs, syllabus design and material design

Teaching CSs

There are many studies show that strategies of communication in the teaching learning context can help learners improve their skills in real life language use. Savignon (1990), Taron (1984), Tarone and Yule (1989) believed that it is possible and desirable as strategic competence is part of the learner's communication competence. It involves the transferring of L1 skills, bridging the gap between classroom and real life communication and contributing to the students' sense of security, self-confidence and motivation to communicate. The teaching of CSs may also involve raising learners' awareness about the nature and communicative potential of CSs and encourage students to be willing to take risks and use CSs (Dornyei 1995, p.80). This study showed that the participants are able to employ some of the CSs. Unfortunately, they are not able to use all the types of CSs and thus they are unable to use them effectively and spontaneously. Hence, if EFL teachers can make learners more aware of the range of communication strategies, learners can utilize a wide range of CSs creatively and effectively.

Curriculum and Course Design

In situations where language curriculum and course contents are to be designed for the non-native speaking background learners, strategies of communication can be taught for effective use in real life. This will improve learners' confidence in selecting and implementing appropriate strategies in communication (Dornyei and Thurrell, 1994); Dornyei, 1995; Corder, 1983; Bialystok, 1981). Since strategic competence is one of the important components of communicative competence, it should be included in the goals of teaching English language course.

David (1999) argued the possibility of consciousness-raising of communication strategies as a tool to improve language proficiency of L2 learners. Therefore, a course should be designed to create situations which will promote the development of learners' strategic competence, and the ability to use communication strategies to deal with different communication problems they might encounter.

Material design and teaching

Williams (2006) suggested that teachers should make students aware of communication strategies and teach students to use communication strategies in the classroom. Teaching material should be chosen and developed to provide learners opportunities to identify potential communication breakdown and ways to overcome them. Teachers can devise exercises and activities whenever possible for learners to practise and use the CSs. The use of video recordings will be useful in helping learners become more aware of their communication performance. Playback will allow learners an avenue for analyzing, discussing and getting feedback regarding their oral communication. Playback is also important for learners to understand the non-verbal signals such as gestures, eye contact, and body movement also play a role in oral communication.

Conclusion

Communication strategies play an important role in oral communication. It is also an important aspect for English language learners to learn towards achieving successful communication and competence. It encourages language learners to find ways of avoiding communication breakdown with their interlocutors to achieve their communication goals.

This study shows that ESL learners are able to overcome their communication problems by using communication strategies during their interaction with the counter staff. There are limitations in this study. However, the information and knowledge can contribute to the EFL learners particularly UM international students on how to communicate even when they lack lexical items.

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