

Strategies For Coping With Face-to-face Oral Communication Problems Employed By Thai University Students Majoring In English

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Abstract

Nowadays, it is undeniable that the communicative approach plays an important role in language teaching especially in the context where English is a foreign language and the ultimate goal of language teaching is to improve the communicative competence of language learners. Language learners can significantly improve their communicative competence by developing their ability to use communication strategies (CSs) or strategies for coping with face-to-face oral communication problems. The present study, which is exploratory in nature, primarily aimed at investigating how university students majoring in English for International Communication (EIC) cope with their face-to-face oral communication problems. The participants were 48 students studying at three different Rajamangala Universities of Technology in Thailand. A semi-structured interview was used for data collection. The obtained data were transcribed unfocusedly verbatim and translated from Thai into English. The translated data were then validated and analysed. Based on the role of the language learners when engaged in a conversation, i.e. as the message sender and as the message receiver, the results show two main categories of strategies for coping with face-to-face oral communication problems. The two groups of strategies employed for conveying a message to the interlocutor as the message sender: continuous interaction and discontinuous interaction subcategories and one group of strategies for understanding the message as the message receiver were reported.

Keywords: English-major students, communication strategies, oral communication problems, continuous interaction strategies, discontinuous interaction strategies.

Introduction

In the age of globalisation, English has played an increasingly important role as the medium of communication among people from different non-English speaking countries and Thailand is no exception. English is no longer a mere subject to be learnt in the classroom but also a medium for social and practical use (Foley, 2005). In order to serve the purpose of English language teaching and learning in terms of improving students' communicative competence, the communicative approach has been adopted in language teaching nationwide. At the tertiary level in Thailand, most students are required to take at least four English courses, i.e. two foundation courses and two English for academic purposes (EAP) or English for specific purposes (ESP) courses (Ministry of Education, 2002). The main goal of the English courses on offer is to develop students' communicative competence in both academic and non-academic English. In doing so, language learners are expected to be able to efficiently express themselves in the target language and successfully communicate in real-life situations (Lightbown & Spada, 1999).

Regarding the students majoring in English, they generally have more exposure to English than do non-English majors, except those who attend international programs where English is the medium of instruction. Despite a more or less regular use of the English language both inside and outside the classroom settings, they still encounter problems or difficulties in their face-to-face oral communication. According to Yarnrukka (1997), this may be partly due to a lack of confidence in expressing themselves in English. Additionally, communication suffers a considerable breakdown in the absence of correct use of grammar (Abdulwahed Ahmed Ismail, 2010). Ya-ni (2007) states that most EFL students in the context of English as a foreign language have a problem in communicating efficiently. Further, the students' listening and speaking skills are deficient when compared with their reading and writing skills. Zheng (2004) suggests that communication strategies are feasible and to some extent inevitable for language learners to use in their oral communication. These strategies can enhance language learners' confidence, flexibility, and effectiveness in oral communication. According to Dörnyei (1995), communication strategies can help learners obtain English language practice. Additionally, they may help learners remain in a conversation and so provide the learners with more input, more opportunities for checking and validating their hypotheses, and therefore, more chances to develop their interlanguage system (Mariani, 2010). We can see that through the use of communication strategies, learners may be able to maximise their English-speaking practice opportunities. That is to say, when language learners interact with other people in English and a communication breakdown occurs due to their linguistic deficiencies. To deal with the communication problems, the language learners tend to rely on some sort of strategies to help convey a message to the interlocutor or understand the message successfully. As a result, the conversation can continue.

Theoretical Background

What is communication?

Communication is a fundamental activity in our daily life and there are different methods or channels by which we can communicate our messages, such as face-to-face meetings or emails. According to Lynch (1996, p. 3), “Communication involves enabling someone else to understand what we want to tell them, what is often referred to as our message.” That means, in a communication situation, three factors are involved: 1) a speaker or a message sender, 2) a message, and 3) a listener or a message receiver. The main purpose of communication is to transmit an intended message to the listener successfully. In so doing, communication necessarily requires the use of language (Lynch, 1996). It is the responsibility of a message sender to make the message clear and comprehensible for the receiver so that both the message sender and the receiver can reach the communicative goal. However, it is not easy to achieve the communicative goal especially in a situation where the message sender and the message receiver have different native languages. As a result, English is likely to be used as the medium of communication presumably the conversational partner has no linguistic gaps while the language learner does. Attempts must be made by the message sender with linguistic gaps, when the message is being transmitted and when the message is being received, as the message receiver, so the communicative goal will be achieved.

Definition of communication strategies

Regarding a CS definition, different researchers have defined CSs differently. For example, Tarone (1980, p.420; 1983, p.65) defines communication strategies as “a mutual attempt of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in situations where requisite meaning structures do not seem to be shared.” Similarly, Færch and Kasper (1983a, p.36) define CSs as “potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal.” Further, Canale (1983, p.10) sees CSs as “verbal and non-verbal strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to limiting conditions in actual communication or to insufficient competence in one or more other areas of communicative competence, and to enhance the effectiveness of communication.” Based on the sample definitions, we can see that CSs are defined based on two main perspectives: the interactional and the psycholinguistic. CSs under the interactional perspective (Tarone, 1980, 1983) have been considered as elements of discourse. The interlocutors also play a role in an oral communication. Meaning negotiation and repair mechanisms between the interlocutors are crucial to the concept of CSs. In the psycholinguistic perspective (Færch & Kasper, 1983a), CSs have been regarded as internal and individual mental plans that language learners employ to solve their oral communication problems. CSs under this perspective are explained based on the cognitive models of speech production (Færch & Kasper, 1980).

In addition, Canale (1983) and Bygate (2000) argue that CSs are used not only to cope with any language-related problems of which the speaker was aware during the course of

communication, but also to enhance the effectiveness of communication even if there is no problem or difficulty involved in an oral communication. Besides, Dörnyei (1995) proposes an extension of the existing definitions including non-strict meaning-related devices, i.e. fillers and hesitation devices. A few researchers have highlighted the importance of using fillers and hesitation devices as a conscious means to maintain communication in difficult situations (Canale, 1983; Haastrup & Phillipson, 1983; Ellis, 1994). Thus, it can be said that CSs are commonly used not only to bridge the gaps between the linguistic and sociolinguistic knowledge of the foreign language learners and those of the interlocutors in any communication situation but also to keep their talk flowing within their available linguistic knowledge, and eventually manage their oral communication. For the present investigation, the term ‘strategies for coping with communication problems’ has been defined as ‘an attempt or attempts made by language learners while engaged in a face-to-face verbal interaction in English to convey a message to the interlocutor or to understand the message.’ In this case, the interlocutor is presumably the conversation partner with no linguistic gaps or deficiencies.

It is noted that, in the present study, ‘communication strategies’, ‘strategies for coping with face-to-face oral communication problems’ and ‘strategies for coping with communication breakdowns’ are used interchangeably.

Types of communication strategies

CSs are generally used by the L2 learners when the linguistic or sociolinguistic knowledge of a message is unavailable. Two types of CSs are available for them to use: 1) “achievement” strategies (Færch & Kasper, 1983b; Willems, 1987) or “compensatory” strategies (Poulisse, 1987) and 2) “avoidance” strategies (Tarone, 1980; Dörnyei, 1995) or “reduction” strategies (Færch & Kasper, 1983b; Dörnyei, 1995). The strategies of the former type are, for example, word coinage, language switch, paraphrase or circumlocution, paralinguistic devices, or appeal for help. Language learners employ these strategies in an attempt to deal with the communication problems directly by using alternatives in order to get the message across. On the other hand, the learners may rely on the avoidance strategies, such as topic avoidance or message abandonment to change, replace, or reduce the content of the intended message so that they keep the message within their communicative resources.

The available research on CS typologies and classifications reveal that CSs have been classified differently according to the principles of terminology and categorisation of different researchers. This means that there is no agreement yet for CS types and classification. Additionally, problems of English use of language learners, e.g. a lack of opportunity to expose themselves to English communication, a fear of being blamed for making mistakes by teachers or classmates, or a feeling of being shy to speak English, are likely to affect different types of CS use of learners. Accordingly, the present study aims at exploring what types of strategies are being employed by Thai university students majoring in EIC to cope with their oral communication problems.

Research Methodology

Participants

The participants of the investigation were 48 students majoring in EIC at three different Rajamangala Universities of Technology (RMUTs) in Thailand, namely RMUT Thanyaburi, RMUT Isan Nakhon Ratchasima, and RMUT Isan Sakon Nakhon. The informants included 4 students from each year of study, i.e. first-year to fourth-year from each of the three universities. Their ages ranged from 18 to 22. They were selected through the purposive sampling method on the basis of convenience and availability.

Data collection

The data for the present study were obtained through one-on-one semi-structured interviews which were carried out in Thai. Through the interview, the informants reported the strategies they have used to cope with oral communication problems in English. Prior to the actual stage of data collection, the questions proposed in the interview guide were piloted with RMUT students majoring in EIC in order to see whether or not the questions worked properly or if there was anything wrong with the wording, question sequences, timing, recording, or other technical problems that may occur in the actual data collection scheme (Intaraprasert, 2000). Then, the interview questions were rechecked and refined so that the researcher could use them to elicit as much information as possible about strategies for coping with oral communication problems. Examples of the questions are: “When communicating in English, if someone does not understand what you are trying to say, do you attempt to make yourself understood? If so, how? If not, why not?” or “Could you convey the message to the interlocutor as intended whenever you were engaged in an English conversation? If not, what problems did you encounter?” and in case the answer is ‘No’ “How did you attempt to convey the intended message to the interlocutor?”

Data analysis

After the interview process was completed, the researcher started transcribing the interview recordings unfocusedly verbatim, that is to say, the transcription involves outlining the basic 'intended meaning' of a recording of speech without attempting to represent its detailed contextual or interactional characteristics (Gibson & Brown, 2009). The data were then translated from Thai into English for the purpose of the data analysis. The translated data were then cross-checked for accuracy by two Thai lecturers teaching English at the university. The translated data were then analysed through the following steps:

- (1) Reading through all the interview data obtained from the 48 RMUT students majoring in EIC in order to get an overall picture of what they reported doing to cope with their oral communication problems in English.
- (2) Looking at each interview transcription carefully and making a list of statements showing an attempt or attempts to cope with their oral communication problems in English. Eventually 560 statements were listed.

(3) Grouping these 560 reported statements considering the similarities of the attempts or a course of action reported being made. We found that the attempts were reportedly made to achieve a particular purpose in their oral communication. Therefore, we decided to categorise the reported statements according to the purpose to be achieved as suggested in Intaraprasert (2000). Consequently, the reported statements were initially classified into 46 groups.

(4) Coding the individual forty-six groups of statements. It was not easy to find a suitable name that neutrally covered the characteristics of the reported statements in the same group. Eventually, all the individual groups of the reported statements were identified.

(5) Regrouping all the identified forty-six strategy items. When considering each individual strategy, we found that every strategy was initially used to achieve a certain purpose, for example, to convey a message to the interlocutor or to understand the message. At this stage, the working definition for the present study was also taken into consideration when classifying the emergent strategies.

(6) Reclassifying the initial reported strategies under the three main purposes to be achieved. These include: a) to convey a message to the interlocutor, b) to understand the message, and c) to maintain the conversation.

(7) Reconsidering the emergent strategy categories based on the operational definition, the researcher decided to exclude the strategies for maintaining the conversation as they were not in line with the proposed definition. Also, certain individual strategy items were merged because they either overlapped or shared similar characteristics. This made the proposed strategies more compact. Eventually, two main categories were deleted and 24 individual strategy items remained.

(8) Classifying further the strategies for conveying a message to the interlocutor into two subgroups. The main characteristic of the strategies under this category was the continuation of the interaction with the interlocutor. One group of the strategies showed that the message sender made an attempt or attempts to convey a message to the interlocutor without an intermission while for the other group the message sender made an attempt or attempts with an intermission by doing something else so that he/she could gain some time to think of how to convey the intended message to the interlocutor.

It is noted that the present categorisation process was very tedious, time-consuming, and reiterative. Further, the reported statements were the translated version which the researcher kept closest to the original statements in Thai.

Results

Based on the results of the data analysis, the emergent strategies for coping with face-to-face communication problems were identified and classified into two main categories. The 24 individual strategies were eventually classified under two main categories: 1) strategies for conveying a message to the interlocutor and 2) strategies for understanding the message. The main category 1 was further subcategorised into two groups: 1.1) continuous interaction and 1.2) discontinuous interaction. The continuous interaction category comprises 11 individual strategies, 7 discontinuous interaction, and 6 individual strategies for understanding the message, respectively.

Category 1: Strategies for conveying a message to the interlocutor

Strategies for conveying a message to the interlocutor' are the strategies that a student, as a message sender, reported employing to get the intended message across to the interlocutors successfully either at the first attempt or after the first attempt with or without an intermission or a pause. While attempting to get the message across to the interlocutor, the student may or may not stick to the same topic of the conversation. The message sender could make more than one attempt before the intended message was successfully transmitted. Each attempt could be the repeated action or a series of different actions. This main category was further subdivided into two subcategories based on the continuation of the interaction with the interlocutor while the message sender was attempting to convey a message to the interlocutor. The two subcategories are: continuous interaction and discontinuous interaction. It should be noted that the sequences of strategy use were not necessarily fixed. Also, the strategies under the two subcategories could be used interchangeably. It depended entirely on the individual message sender, how difficult the message was, and the context in which the verbal interaction reportedly occurred.

Subcategory 1.1: Continuous interaction strategies for conveying a message to the interlocutor

The strategies under this subcategory were employed to deal with communication breakdown and the student, as the message sender, demonstrated that he/she attempted to convey the intended message to the interlocutor without an intermission or a pause by using one of the strategies or a series of strategies under this subcategory to achieve the communicative purpose. In this subcategory, altogether eleven strategies emerged. The strategies include:

- Switching some unknown words or phrases into Thai
- Correcting his/her own pronunciation, grammar and lexical mistakes
- Using familiar words, phrases, or sentences
- Using circumlocution
- Using non-verbal expressions such as mime, gestures, and facial expressions
- Referring to objects or materials
- Drawing a picture
- Repeating words, phrases, or sentences a few times
- Spelling or writing out the intended words, phrases, or sentences
- Using fillers
- Appealing for assistance from the interlocutor

Subcategory 1.2: Discontinuous interaction strategies for conveying a message to the interlocutor

'Discontinuous interaction strategies for conveying a message to the interlocutor' refers to the strategies that students reported employing when they failed to manage to get the message across to the interlocutor. The students reported using these strategies as an alternative. In using the strategies in this subcategory, the student was likely to

discontinue the interaction with the interlocutor for a while in order to seek a way to convey the intended message to the interlocutor. Eventually, he/she could successfully get the message across to the interlocutor. The emergent strategies in this subcategory include:

- Keeping quiet while thinking about how to get a message across to the interlocutor
- Speaking more slowly to gain time to think
- Talking about something else to gain time to think
- Appealing for assistance from other people around
- Making a phone call to another person for assistance
- Consulting a dictionary, a book, or another type of document
- Thinking in Thai before speaking

Category 2: Strategies for understanding the message

The strategies under this main category are those reported being employed in an attempt to understand the interlocutor's message. These strategies could be employed either while the message was being transmitted or after the message had already been transmitted. Seven strategies were reported being employed to achieve this purpose. They include:

- Trying to catch the interlocutor's main point
- Noticing the interlocutor's gestures and facial expression
- Asking the interlocutor for a repetition
- Asking the interlocutor to slow down
- Appealing for assistance from other people around to clarify the interlocutor's message
- Asking the interlocutor to simplify the language

Discussion of the findings

The main objective of the present study was to investigate how RMUT students majoring in EIC deal with their face-to-face oral communication problems. The findings show different emergent strategies were reportedly employed to handle communication problems due to the students' limited linguistic knowledge. In this case, they relied on various strategies to cope with the problems and get the intended message across to the interlocutor. What follow are the discussions of certain strategies reported by the research subjects to cope with their face-to-face oral communication problems.

'Using non-verbal expressions to convey a message to the interlocutor' was reported by the research subjects when engaged in the conversation as the message sender. This finding is consistent with that of Nakatani (2006) who found that in the Japanese context, 'non-verbal strategies while speaking' was also reportedly employed by Japanese students to attract the listener's attention or to give hints and help the listener guess what they want to say. Gullberg (2006, p.162) states that "Gestures are good candidates for strategies...They are exploited to solve lexical problems, typically in conjunction with speech to solicit lexical help from the native interlocutor. Gestures are also used

metacommunicatively to manage problematic interaction by flagging ongoing word search, floor keeping, and so forth.” In addition, Ning (2009, p.59) points out that “The facial expressions, the body pose, the gestures, the movements are in accordance with the oral sounds. They are in harmony and complete the task to express the emotions and ideas of the communicators.” Non-verbal expressions seem to be understandable in terms of their meanings. Employing these strategies is likely to help promote mutual understanding of the message in the oral communication. Therefore, we can say that non-verbal strategies are likely to be significant for language learners to resort to when they encountered some sort of oral communication problems for better communicative effects, especially for getting a message across to the interlocutor.

Regarding ‘switching some unknown words or phrases into Thai’, Qian et al. (2009) indicate that this strategy is a discourse strategy that can be used to promote interaction of language learners and also help cultivate and reinforce good habits of language learning. When the students faced difficulties in expressing themselves in English and they realised that they were in the contexts where they and their interlocutors were likely to have the same knowledge of one language, they then occasionally switched to that language, i.e. Thai in this study. The students switched into Thai for words or phrases that they did not know in English. Through the use of this strategy, the students did not stop expressing the meaning. The conversation continued and the communication did not break down. Qian et al. (2009, p.729) state that “Sometimes simple explanations in L1, accompanied with non-verbal hints, can serve the purpose, but other times it would be cumbersome and futile to explain a word or highlight a point in the target language.” This strategy is likely to provide another positive effect on language learning. It possibly helps to develop the language learners’ confidence in sending a message. This may be because although the learners encountered problems in oral communication, they did not give up the conversation. They attempted to reach their communicative goals by switching some unknown words or phrases into Thai. They believed that with this strategy, they could convey the intended meanings to the interlocutors. If they were successful, they would feel more confident to communicate with other English native speakers (Zheng, 2004).

‘Making a phone call to another person for assistance’ was another reported strategy by one student to convey a message to the interlocutor. A mobile phone is considered as one of the extremely attractive devices for social message exchange with the potential to send information to people instantaneously (Goggin, 2006). He reported that he called his friend for help with the problematic lexical items or expressions. As a result, he was successful in conveying the intended message. It is plausible to argue that language learners can make use of a mobile phone to call other people for help in an attempt to communicate a message to the interlocutors. This is because most people, nowadays, especially teenagers, have their own mobile phones which can be taken almost everywhere so that it is not difficult to contact friends or a person who could help with the oral communication problems.

With respect to ‘appealing for assistance from the interlocutor’, Ya-ni (2007) found that language learners sometimes directly ask the interlocutor about an unknown word, e.g. ‘What do you call this...?’ Based on the findings of the present investigation, the students

also reported asking for help from the interlocutor. Consequently, the interlocutor helped the students with the words or phrases that could be used to convey the meaning. In this regard, Dörnyei (1995, p.58) suggests that learners can “turn to the conversation partners for help either directly, e.g. ‘What do you call...?’ or indirectly, e.g. raising intonation, pause, eye contact, puzzled expression.” The participants reported appealing for help from their interlocutors when they had difficulty in expressing their ideas because they trusted in the language knowledge of the interlocutors. Appealing for assistance from the interlocutor is considered a compensatory strategy (Dörnyei, 1995). This means that instead of avoiding the topic, language learners, when confronted with oral communication problems, choose to resort to this strategy in order to try to communicate the intended message. Another benefit for the students through the use of this strategy is that the students are likely to learn more of the language in terms of the correct forms or expressions offered by the interlocutors.

With regard to the strategies to understand the interlocutor’s message, ‘asking the interlocutor for a repetition’ was reported. Bygate (2000, p.33) states that “Knowledge of various ways of getting things repeated, or clarified, or indeed how to repeat and clarify things themselves, is likely to be highly useful.” He also mentions that, for language learners, asking for a repetition from the interlocutor may be considered as an important strategy involved in all kinds of oral communication. It is useful when the students’ lack of experience in using English makes it difficult for them to understand easily and clearly the intentions of other interlocutors. Based on the interview data, the students reported asking the interlocutor for a repetition when they could not understand the messages clearly due to their unfamiliarity with various English accents or their limited linguistic knowledge. The research findings revealed that among a wide range of strategies, the students also relied on this strategy to understand a message and reach a mutual understanding. Dobao and Martínez (2007, p.88) assert the importance of building a mutual agreement of the meaning: “For communication to succeed, speakers and addressees need to work together and coordinate their individual actions and beliefs in order to build a mutual agreement on the content of their messages.” We could see that if the messages are not clearly understood by the students, they might ask for a repetition from the interlocutor in order to reach the communicative goal.

Implications for English language teaching and learning

From these research findings, some pedagogical implications for the teaching and learning of English for Thai students regarding strategies to cope with face-to-face oral communication may be drawn. Both language teachers and language learners should be aware of what and how important CSs are in their oral communication. For language teachers, who are seen as the most important resource persons in the Thai learning culture (Intaraprasert, 2006), in order to raise their students’ awareness, the teachers should set up a mini-conference for the English staff members, probably at least once a semester, to brain-storm and discuss CSs for their awareness of how important CSs are and how CSs can enhance their students’ communicative competence. The teachers should recognise that different CSs may differently beneficial for students. Furthermore, they should be

encouraged to introduce CSs as part of classroom lessons to their students and, in the meantime, encourage the students to use CSs for situational classroom practice. This will provide the students opportunities for practice in CS use. As Dörnyei (1995, p.64) points out that “Providing opportunities for practice in strategy use appears to be necessary because CSs can only fulfill their function as immediate first aid devices if their use has reached an automatic stage”. They should also be asked to examine the CS classification for the present study discussing what should be added so that the present CS classification will be more comprehensive and offer a wider selection for students. For language students, a mini-seminar on CSs should be held for them in order to encourage and help them to become aware of the potentials of CSs in their oral communication in English. During the seminar, the students should be provided opportunities to use CSs, and then identify and discuss the CSs that they have used based on the CS classification for the present study. They may also be asked to provide opinions on the CS classification for the present study in terms of usefulness and workability as well as add to the list some CSs which they think are missing. In addition, an informal talk with students about CSs should be held occasionally.

Conclusion

The present study attempts to explore strategies for coping with face-to-face oral communication problems employed by Rajamangala University of Technology students majoring in English for International Communication. Based on the results of the data analysis, 24 emergent strategies for coping with oral communication problems were identified and classified into two main categories: 1) strategies for conveying a message to the interlocutor and 2) strategies for understanding the message. The main category 1 was further subcategorized into two groups, i.e. 1.1) continuous interaction and 1.2) discontinuous interaction. The continuous interaction category comprises 11 individual strategies, the discontinuous interaction 7, and 6 individual strategies for understanding the message respectively. The implications of these findings are not exhaustive. It is suggested that language teachers can play an important role in raising students' awareness and encouraging their students to make use of strategies to cope with communication difficulties. As a result, the students' communicative competence may improve.

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