

Communication Strategy Research Among Japanese EFL Learners

日本人学習者間のコミュニケーション戦略の研究

BURROWS, Christian

Faculty of Education for Future Generations

Department of Classroom Management

次世代教育学部学級経営学科

C. バロウズ

抄録 : This research represents a year-long longitudinal study into the affects of communication strategy instruction on speaking proficiency. The paper replicates research carried out by Nakatani (2005) and aims to equip Japanese EFL learners with the linguistic and problem-solving skills to overcome linguistic barriers. The findings indicate clearly that influence of prominent socio-cultural factors have to be considered in order to maximize the full effectiveness of strategy use.

キーワード : communication strategies, speaking proficiency, problem-solving ability

Overview

A small-scale pilot study was conducted to refine the research instruments and data collection procedures to be employed in the full-scale Ph.D. experiment. The objective was the replication of Nakatani's 2005 paper examining the extent of communication strategy use on Japanese EFL learners speaking proficiency. The research replicated Nakatani's paper in terms of research objectives, methodological procedures, and teaching targets. Additionally, it examined the extent communication strategy-based instruction influenced Japanese EFL learners in their attempts to overcome linguistic barriers. Unlike much of previous research, often conducted with task-determined activities, this research paper evaluated the relationship between communication strategies and their application during authentic interaction. Adhering to Nakatani's strategy training, students participating in the experiment group received additional instruction on CS use and its practical benefits, in addition to standard English instruction. Findings, however, contrast with those of Nakatani, and only tentatively support the teaching of communication strategies. It is proposed this results from an over-reliance on reduction-type communication strategies due to cognitive retrieval

difficulties which stem from socio-cultural influences.

Introduction

Recognition of variance within 'transitional competence' (Corder, 1967 : 166) prompted initial research into learner techniques employed during language development. The resulting isolation of internal strategies resulted in the identification, classification, and description of communication strategies (CSs) representing a learner reliance on compensatory techniques to accomplish their communicative goal. Early empirical studies (Selinker, 1972 ; Tarone et al, 1976) focused on the types of learner compensation due to inadequate linguistic competence, predominantly addressing structural or descriptive analysis of error analysis. Recognition of this competence, termed communicative competence by Hymes (1972), derives from Chomsky's distinction between the underlying knowledge of a language structure, from the application of that knowledge to language use. Subsequent research (Rubin, 1990) advocated teaching the techniques to those less proficient in order to reveal the processes undertaken by more prodigious learners. Considerable research into CS acquisition, in addition to the influence exerted on language development

has been conducted predominantly with learners from individualistic countries (Hofstede, 2005), whose L2 (both grammatically, typologically) and learning experiences share common features with those from the L1 country. The distinction drawn between these two culture models proposed by Hofstede (2005) shows that individual differences in patterns of CSs use can be attributed to cognitive style (Littlemore, 2001), for example, Japanese learners' lack of "procedural knowledge" to assist the management of interactions proactively and effectively (Ross, 1998). Therefore, learners more versed in teacher-centered learning approaches, and faced with a grammatically opposite L1, are likely to experience more difficulty adjusting to the demands in the use and acquisition of these skills.

Although substantial evidence (Faerch & Kasper, 1983; Willems, 1987; O'Malley, 1987; Tarone & Yule, 1989) corroborates CSs teachability and acquisition, the order of acquisition, how the CSs are systemized, and the selective process remains less explored. It remains unclear if some are acquired and employed at the same rate, or in stages according to their cognitive difficulty, ease of use, or learner familiarity. Does a selective cognitive process occur which differentiates between the different skills due to cognitive, cultural or linguistic complexity? Are some selected at the expense of others, and do any pose difficulties for Japanese learners? The extent to which Japanese learners select, use, and acquire linguistic CS and the rationale (if any) behind their choices are the focus of this research paper.

Research Questions

Four major research questions addressed the effects of CS instruction to Japanese EFL learners engaged in authentic interaction. Multiple data procedures were employed to assess the presence of comparable similarities among learners for strategy acquisition. While the assumption that learners can acquire CSs, the degree of their effectiveness on speaking performance is not within the scope of this research. The specific research questions address:

1. CSs influence on improvement in linguistic proficiency.
2. The degree of CSs utilization during authentic interaction.
3. If improvement be accounted for by the use of CS.
4. Japanese EFL's CS adoption and the extent of socio-cultural influences on this choice.

Setting and subjects

The replication study was conducted from October 2010 to August 2011 at the private International Pacific University (IPU), Japan. Twenty-five third-year undergraduate students (ten males and fifteen females; average age: 20) participated as subjects in the experiment. All students were enrolled in a 15-week Advanced Oral Communication class (90 minutes per week). IPU university equates to a British teacher-training college, with the majority of graduates receiving teaching licences and progressing to positions in primary education. The Advanced Oral Communication course aims at equipping students with the language competency to become English language teachers, in addition to the linguistic competence to teach in the L2. English language classes at the university are streamed according to student placement scores on a written English exam (SLEP) taken at the commencement of the semester. Overall English speaking proficiency ranged from high-beginner to low intermediate, (TOEIC scores ranging from 350 to 450; 0-990 score range). Consistent with false-beginners, a detailed knowledge of English grammar rules belies weak speaking proficiency, despite increasing emphasis placed on communicative language classes at secondary schools in Japan. Each student, who had completed 6 years English study prior to university, took a speaking proficiency test (IELTS scale) conducted by the author, with results being verified by a fellow native English speaking teacher. Results from the level check ($t=1.437$, $p=0.159$) indicate an even level distribution between both the control and the experiment class. The correlation between the

oral pretest and the placement test was 0.123 using the Pearson product-moment correlation statement of the statistical relationship between the two sets of scores. The average score for both the experimental and control groups was 83% (mean : 68%, SD : 8.2).

Teaching procedures

The Advanced Oral Communication syllabus was adhered to for both groups, in addition the experimental group also undertook supplementary training in CSs instruction throughout the course. CSs instruction was explicit, and students informed that CSs represent skills which can be employed to assist speaking performance. Each skill was incorporated into activity training and practiced to overcome linguistic barriers during interaction. These skills included achievement and reduction strategies and were chosen as they covered the widest range of CSs. Upon course completion interaction from both groups was evaluated.

Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

The nature of authentic interaction necessitates a combination of multiple assessment methods for empirical data collection. Statistically proven measurements of linguistic features (e.g. word count) addressed the observed interaction, while underlying cognitive processes were evaluated through extensive student feedback. Although the limitations of assessment procedures are recognized, each provides important insights regarding the observable and unobservable data required an overall evaluation of linguistic and cognitive influences exerted during CSs use.

The Pretest Interview.

Initial evaluation of overall linguistic proficiency took place through paired student interaction. To allow an impressionistic evaluation of student English speaking proficiency the elicitation method composed of student interviews. The questions, provided in advance, elicited opinions on topics with

immediacy to university life. It was explained that no 'correct' answer existed in terms of opinion, and students were encouraged to express themselves freely. To relieve affective factors (student anxiety, nervousness) it was also clarified that the data contributed to the author's private research and would not affect final assessment. The interviews were video-recorded and carried out in a separate classroom with only the author observing the interaction. All interactions were later transcribed and details of the discourse were analysed for the following quantitative data :

- a. The quantity of speech produced per student per answer (words per c-unit)
- b. The extent to which CSs use was exhibited in student responses

The rating assigned represented an impressionistic rating of the student's overall linguistic proficiency according to the IELTS grading scale which evaluates performance on a 1~9 scale (the scale focuses on the learner's fluency, ability to interact with the interlocutor, and flexibility in developing dialogue). As the author took part in the evaluation, and in recognition that several years' residence in Japan enables me to comprehend aspects of communication someone unaccustomed to Japanese learners may not perceive, one independent native English teacher at the same university was asked to co-rate using an identical scale. The teacher rated a sample of audio recordings of the interactions to minimize student recognition student influencing evaluation.

The posttest interaction.

Upon course completion a final observed interaction was carried out. In identical conditions to pretest interviews, interactions were conducted in a separate classroom with only two students and the author present. Video-recording allowed score verification by independent raters. To combat the significance of rehearsed answers, a significant factor which occurred in the initial interview,

only general topic outlines which would be asked about were provided in advance. Without an element of preparation it was felt that linguistic proficiency would not be sufficient to provide the data required. An identical scale employed to assess language ability was employed in both interviews. Independent raters were asked to watch a sample of interactions and allocate a score from 0~9. No information was provided beforehand and the raters were informed to only offer an impressionistic assessment of students' overall speaking proficiency. Students were not advised how to answer in order to ensure the elicitation of the kind of data sought in the study. Different tasks for the pre- and posttest were employed to avoid improvement of scores through familiarization with the test content. Cards contained hypothetical situations, and students were expected to continue the interaction until an acceptable conclusion had been reached. The interrater reliability of the pre- and posttest estimated by Cronbach's alpha was 0.863 and 0.765, a high degree of coefficient.

Stimulated recall interview.

The unobservable nature of numerous CSs dictates that comprehensive data collection is unobtainable through observation entirely. Surface evidence from observations fail to yield insight into the covert strategic thinking of the speaker as :

[...] it is not easy to get inside the 'black box' of the human brain and find out what is going on there. We work with what we can get, which, despite the limitations, provides food for thought [...] (p.54) (Grenfell and Harris, 1999)

To reveal the underlying cognitive processes and cognitive functioning a further cognitive assessment method was additionally employed. Immediately upon completion of the interaction students were asked to reflect on their thought processes, strategic thinking and how they answered during the discourse. The questions related to CSs use and any

communicative problems encountered, particularly regarding the message they wished to convey and what was eventually conveyed. Students were informed to verbalise only what they clearly remembered without guessing or inferring. The immediacy of the questionnaire was to record initial reactions when the information was most salient. Students were also informed only to provide details of thought processes during the interview, and not assessment of the interaction. The questions pertained to communication problems and CSs during the interview stage.

Results and Discussion

Results of the quantitative analysis of data attained are presented below. These pertain specifically to the four research questions already stated. That is, CSs influence ; CSs utilization ; the extent of CSs adoption.

Research Questions 1 :

The impact of strategy use on overall improvement in linguistic proficiency.

Analysis of language proficiency modification during both pre- and posttest was conducted using paired-samples t test (two-tailed) (see Table 1). The findings reveal that, unlike Nakatani's conclusions showing significant training group improvement (gain : 1.38), results show a more modest gain in speech scores (mean gain : 0.63, $t=3.03$, $p<0.4$). Revealingly, the average gain for the control group surpassed that of Nakatani's research (gain : 0.25) which suggests improvement without the need for CS instruction. The difference between the gains for Nakatani for the two groups was 1.08 compared with 0.47 which reveals less CSs acquisition and use among the experimental group. This appears despite the fact that Nakatani's students appear to be considerably lower level.

An alternative means of quantitatively assessing performance includes analyzing the length and grammatical complexity of test responses. Speech production refers to the quantity (words) students use in their answers. The duration of answers (c-unit) has been shown as a means of assessing overall oral competence. The results (see Table 2) indicate the problem of under-elaboration among students. Reflecting a socio-cultural influence it illustrates a reluctance of learners to use the test opportunity to display their linguistic ability. Conversely, without constant questioning, the learner relies on the minimum information to convey their message.

Research Questions 2 :

Student CSs use during interaction

As part of the analysis of student speech production, the extent to which recordable CSs were employed was also measured. It is recognized that the reliability of measurement is partially subjective and that reliability and accuracy of CSs use can significantly influence data analysis. However, results indicate a clear preference for reduction-type strategies. Whether this represents a deliberate choice of the learners, or the result of lack of success at cognitive retrieval processing ability requires clarification.

Table 1. Results of *t* tests on Test Score Gains between the Two Groups

Group	Df	Pretest M(SD)	Posttest M(SD)	Gain n	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Strategy Training Group (<i>n</i> =20)	21	4.00 (0.86)	4.63 (0.72)	0.63	3.03	.04
Control Group (<i>n</i> =20)	18	3.65 (0.67)	4.03 (0.60)	0.38	0.89	0.87

Table 2. Comparison of the Two Group's Production Rate on Pre- and Posttest by *t* tests

	Strategy Training Group (<i>n</i> =20)		Control Group (<i>n</i> =20)		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	M	SD	M	SD		
Pretest	1.89	0.51	1.67	0.58	0.9	<i>ns</i>
Posttest	1.99	0.47	1.88	0.67	0.87	<i>ns</i>

Table 3. Means and Standard Deviations of Strategy Use on Pre- and Posttest

	Strategy Training				Control			
	Pretest		Posttest		Pretest		Posttest	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Achievement Strategies :								
Help-seeking	0.45	0.6	0.85	1.5	0.55	1.1	0.49	0.7
Modified interaction	1.35	1.8	2.52	1.5	2.99	2.5	1.09	2.1
Modified Output	0.59	0.8	1.55	1.9	0.66	0.5	0.7	80.9
Time-gaining	0.45	0.9	1.58	1.0	0.23	1.0	1.04	0.9
Maintenance	1.36	2.1	3.22	2.1	1.78	2.7	2.86	3.2
Self-solving	0.83	0.6	1.59	1.0	1.85	1.4	1.10	1.1
Total	4.98	6.8	11.31	9.0	8.06	9.2	7.36	8.9
Reduction Strategies :								
Message Abandonment	15.3	3.5	11.9	5.5	16.8	7.8	15.1	4.9
First-Language-Based	1.58	2.2	1.5	0.8	3.7	2.3	5.2	2.5
Interlanguage-Based	5.53	3.8	6.2	3.8	3.5	4.4	2.4	1.9
False Starts	4.86	4.2	4.3	5.0	5.4	4.1	2.8	1.2
Total	27.27	13.2	23.9	15.1	29.4	18.6	25.5	10.5

Research Questions 3 :

Can any improvement be accounted for by the use of CS?

If so, how does CS use effect speaking proficiency.

In order to assess whether any correlation existed between students who performed well on the posttest (scores over 85%) and CS use, a correlation study was conducted. The results (see Table 4) indicates a strong correlation between the students' test performance and CSs employment. This supports the theory of the beneficial influence on speaking performance through CSs use.

Table 4.
Correlation between posttest scores and communication strategy use

	Achievement strategies	Reduction strategies
	r	r
Experimental group	3.02	4.56
Control group	2.96	3.59

Research Questions 4 :

Japanese EFL's CS adoption and the extent of socio-cultural influences on this choice.

Within the framework of psycholinguistic theory of speech production, the learners experienced problems in all phases of speech production, from conceptualization to articulation (Levelt, 1989, 1993, 1999 ; de Bot, 1992 ; Dornyei & Kormos, 1998). Based on the definition of CSs as the learners' "conscious plans" to deal with communication barriers, the identification of CSs (based on the student feedback) clearly indicated their intention to deal with the problem. However, the data shows a high preference for avoidance strategies which is consistent with other research findings. The author hypothesizes that this is the result of a conscious decision to overcome mental retrieval difficulties that could be more prevalent in collectivist countries. Based on the lexical access to syntax and morphophonology in Levelt's model, learners could avoid using the problematic lexical item and employ avoidance techniques as compensation for this failure.

Conclusion

It is proposed that if Japanese EFL learners are aware to use CSs it can offer greater opportunities to improve their speaking proficiency through development of an understanding of how to overcome these barriers. However, counteracting this theory exist numerous socio-cultural factors which also exert a significant influence on the language learning process. The language distance between English and Japanese ensures that learners of both languages will encounter numerous difficulties during discourse due to the lack of similarity which exists between the two languages. From the results of this paper and other research into communication problems it is clear that most problems occur due to linguistic related difficulty. As many as 90% of CSs (Satou, 2008) are selected to deal with lexical problems. How learners cope with these difficulties depends on their ability to process word retrieval during the planning stage of word production. The extent to which socio-cultural factors influence this process requires clarification, especially in terms of collectivist learner learning experiences.

References

- Corder, S. P. (1967). The significance of learners' errors. *IRAL*, 5, 161-170.
- Færch, C., & Kasper, G. (Eds.). (1983a). *Strategies in interlanguage communication*. London : Longman.
- Dornyei, Z., & Kormos., J. (1998). Problem-solving mechanisms in L2 communication : A psycholinguistic perspective. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 20(3), 349-3 85.
- Hofstede, G. (2005). *Cultures and organizations. - software of the mind* (2nd ed.). New York : McGraw Hill.
- Hymes, D. (1972). On communicative competence. In J. B. Pride & J. Holmes (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics* (pp.269-293). Harmondsworth : Penguin.
- Littlemore, L. (2001). Metaphoric competence : A language learning strength of students with a holistic cognitive style? *TESOL Quarterly*, 35, 459-491.
- Levelt, W. J. M. (1989). *Speaking*. Cambridge, Mass. :

M.I.T. Press.

- Levelt, W. J. M. (1993). The architecture of normal spoken language use. In G. Blanken, J. Dittmann, H. Grimm, J. C. Marshall, & C. W. Wallesch (Eds.), *Linguistic disorders and pathologies : An international handbook* (pp.1-15). Berlin : Walter de Gruyter.
- Nakatani, Y. (2005). The effects of awareness-raising training on oral communication strategy use. *Modern Language Journal*, 89, 76-91.
- Selinker, L. (1972). Interlanguage. *IRAL*, 10(3), 209-231.
- Tarone, E. (1977). Conscious communication strategies in interlanguage : A progress report. in
- H. Brown, C. Yorio & R. Crymes (Eds.), On TESOL '77 (pp.194-203). Washington, D. C. : TESOL.
- Tarone, E., & Yule, E. (1989). *Focus on the language learner*. Oxford : Oxford University Press.