THE INVESTIGATION OF COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES USAGE AMONG HIGH AND LOW PROFICIENCY LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN UITM JOHOR

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THE INVESTIGATION OF COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES USAGE AMONG HIGH AND LOW PROFICIENCY LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN UITM JOHOR

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A project report submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Education (Teaching English as Second Language)

Faculty of Education
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JUNE 2013
I declare that this thesis entitled “The Investigation of Communication Strategies Usage Among High and Low Proficiency Language Learners in UITM Johor” is the result of my own research except as cited in the references. The thesis has not been accepted for any degree and is not concurrently submitted in candidature of any other degree.

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To my beloved family,
My dearest friends,
And my cherished students.
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Communication strategies are the conscious plans taken by speakers in dealing with communication breakdown in conveying intended message. The pattern of communication usage differs between language learners of different proficiencies due to several reasons. Therefore, this study was carried out to investigate the communication strategies usage among high and low proficiency learners during group discussion. Qualitative approach was utilized, and case study was employed as the main design. Direct observation of a group discussion was implemented, and the task was video recorded. The transcribed data was analyzed by thematic coding analysis using the checklist of communication strategies based on Dornyei’s (1995) taxonomy. In general, the findings indicated various usage of communication strategies among all speakers of both high and low proficiency. The most common communication strategies used by the learners during the group discussion were the use of fillers/hesitation devices, specifically non-lexicalized fillers, repetition and short pause; message abandonment, use of non-lingual means, self-repair and message replacement. The findings also exemplified the differences in terms of strategies used by learners of high and low proficiency. High proficiency learners used more lexicalized fillers, L2-based and interactional strategies, while low proficiency learners used more long pauses, L1-based and avoidance strategies in their communication.
ABSTRAK

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Communication is defined by the exchange of information between two speakers, and language plays a major role in being the medium of the information transfer. As stated by Moulton (1974; cited in Adejimola, 2009), language is a wonderful and rich vehicle of communication. A process of communication is only deemed successful when the message is correctly presented and understood by the listener. Regardless of the undisputable fact that vocal and visual, non-verbal means also play significant part in achieving successful communication, the culmination of true articulate communication is through the language use by the speakers; as suggested by Ghose (2004). Thus, apart from the associated skills such as gestures and other possible non-verbal skills, language skills and strategies are also important for the speaker to be an effective communicator.

The effectiveness of communication has always been associated with how the speakers present their set of information, and it is related to strategic approach used. Strategic competence, as suggested by Canale and Swain (1980) in their concept of ‘communicative competence’ is “verbal and nonverbal strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient competence”. Thus, communication is not only about the
knowledge about the language, but also in terms of knowing the strategies that could be utilized to enhance the effectiveness of the communication.

In short, the knowledge of communication strategies is needed by the speakers of the language to enhance their effectiveness in communication. As suggested by Corder (1981; cited in Dornyei, 1995), the idea of communication strategies is related to language use when the speaker faces some difficulties in expressing their meaning, hence the employment of systematic strategies to cope with it. This is stated by Dornyei as the generally acceptable idea of the important concept of communication strategies.

With regard to English language learning, especially during the previous years where communicative aspects were given not so much priority, language teachers are too concerned about language knowledge and not so much on the communicative aspect of it. Language knowledge, such as the mastery of vocabulary and grammar structures were perceived as the main highlights and the learners sometimes were given the input only for these features. Yuanyuan (2011) has addressed this problem and argued that language lesson with too much focus on language knowledge led to teacher-centered and rote learning, which later caused the students to be great memorizer of the words and structure, but have major difficulties in practical aspect especially in communicating using the language.

The focus on grammatical competence, or the language knowledge should not only be the only focus in language learning. In learning a language, the ability to reproduce the language in a meaningful way ought to be the given major consideration not only by the learners, but especially to the teachers as the ones who expose the language to the learners, and also provide the platform for the learners to practically use the language. Following Canale and Swain's (1980) notion of communicative competence, language learners should achieve competence in sociolinguistic, discourse, and finally strategic; which highlights the importance of knowing the communication strategies.
The ability to speak in the language is one of the most important objectives in learning a language, be it the second or foreign language, as stated by Ya-ni (2007). In Malaysia, English is taught and learned as the second language. Generally, at every level of education, the learners are expected to be able to use the language in all productive and receptive skills, with speaking as one of them. Following the instruction in language class, the learners are tested with speaking test to measure their ability to speak and communicate as one part of the whole assessment. In the context of language teaching and learning, the knowledge of strategies in communication is deemed needed by the learners for them to be able to communicate better, and to be understood by the interlocutors. Previous researches have found that communication strategies are teachable, and the knowledge of the strategies is indeed helpful in improving the learners’ speaking.

A research done by Nakatani (2005) proved that strategy training managed to increase general awareness among the language learners of oral communication strategies and the use of specific strategies, hence the improvement of their oral proficiency. Relatively similar findings were also found in Maleki’s (2007) study which proposes that the teaching of communication strategies is pedagogically effective in which it is conducive as it facilitates language learning. From the language lessons which incorporate the communication strategies, the learners were able to improve the use of interactional strategies; effectively and extensively. Last but not least, consistent to the findings stated above, Teng (2012) suggested that communication strategies instruction facilitates the students in improving the use of strategies and help them to achieve better communicative competence.

Nonetheless, some researchers are against the idea of direct instruction of communication strategies. They argue that it is not needed, as the strategies have already existed in the first language system, and the learners do not have to learn the strategies, but more language (Kellerman, 1991). One related idea of this notion is the learners may already have been using the strategies in their communication with
others, but they are not aware of what the strategies are, when they have used it, and more importantly how their communication can be enhanced with the correct use of the strategies, together with other strategies that they have not aware yet. The importance of awareness in improving language learners is discussed in Yuanyuan (2011), and it is stated that the learners should be more aware of the strategies for them to be able to use them correctly, thus helping them to be better speakers of the language.

1.2 Background of the Study

Language learning in educational institution is generally designed to cater the need for the students to be proficient in using the language, and to provide language and communication and service training. Language competency among the students is seen as a valuable attribution for the students in their preparation for the ever competitive edge in job market. The objective of language learning is also projected towards producing communicatively competent professionals, who will contribute to the human and consequently national development.

Therefore, in language learning courses, students are provided with the exposure and training of integrated language skills, such as writing, reading, listening and speaking. In order to achieve the aforementioned objectives and outcomes of language learning, language knowledge and practices are made available according to the specific needs appropriate to their field of study. As for speaking, set of skills and strategies are projected towards producing proficient language users for certain uses, such as professional group communication, as well as academic discussion.

However, approaches in speaking instruction for the learners have not focused much on the importance of communication strategies. Communication will ideally involve information transfer, and problems are bound to occur, and language
barrier is one of the most relevant issues when it comes to English as the learners’ second language. Lack of language knowledge among them is usually the cause of such problem. Thus, strategies are needed by the students to be a good speaker in engaging in real-life communication, which ideally involves dealing with problem-solving in communicating ideas and arguments.

Nevertheless, some speakers of second language can still communicate effectively in spite of the fact that they lack the knowledge of the vocabulary and the grammar rules. This is when the communication strategies play the role in assisting the speaker to convey his or her messages. Dornyei (1995) discusses about this very example in his study, and relates the idea of strategic competence; where the main focus is given to verbal and non-verbal strategies used to compensate communication breakdown.

Strategies come along and assist the achievement of skills, and consequently the application of skills itself. While skills are acquired ability to perform a complex act and take place automatically, strategies are more deliberate and systematic, which consciously adapted and monitored (Afflerbach et.al., 2008). Effective communication needs skills, together with the complement from strategies. Speaking task such as group discussion requires language learners to be able to make use of the strategies in assisting the communication as an outcome of their language proficiency.

With the concern regarding the importance of communication strategies in the teaching and learning of English as the second language, this study is projected towards finding out the extent of usage of communication strategies among the learners, specifically during group discussion as the speaking task. The findings will soon be able to provide the educators with the inside view of learners’ knowledge about communication strategies, and perhaps become the basis of rectification that can be done to improve the language teaching and learning at the institution.
1.3 Statement of the Problem

Communication is inevitably important and it is a major part of what is happening in people’s life. The effectiveness of the information and message that are meant to be transferred is significant in order to make sure that the objective of such communication occurrence is achieved. In the context of language learning, especially English as the second language to Malaysian students, the problem in mastering the language knowledge; such as the vocabulary and grammar structures, is seen as one possible cause of communication breakdown among the learners, and lack of strategies used to rectify the process of communication become the additional factor that lead to their unsatisfactory achievement in their language proficiency.

The awareness and knowledge of communication strategies among language learners are important to assist them in enhancing their ability to use the language and communicate effectively with others. Such knowledge could be the kind of assisting tools that will be handy for them in recuperating their limited mastery of the language knowledge itself, but still will be able to communicate with others. As discussed in Faucette (2001), awareness among the learners about communication strategies could be increased by in-class instruction by the educator. This notion is related to the argument against the teaching of communication strategies in class. Regardless of the fact that learners could have already been equipped with communication strategies from their L1, the situation might be different when they are communicating in L2; which in this case, English. The learners may not use them as enough, properly and appropriately than in L1 communication.

English language course, as part of the language learning in educational institution is one possible and ideal platforms for the students to be exposed with skills and strategies with regard to communication. Various language activities, such as group discussion is made as part of the course programme to expose the learners to the knowledge and skills regarding communication. In fact, being a good communicator is one of the outcomes expected from the learners. Speaking task such
as group discussion is made as the method in making the learners familiar with situation that requires them to be a good communicator; who is not only able to make themselves understood by the others, but also to discuss the given situation and finally achieve the best choice as the solution.

However, regardless of the importance of communication strategies in achieving successful interaction, little is known about to what extent have actually the strategies being utilized by the learners in the communication, specifically during group discussion. For instance, pertaining to the pattern of communication strategies usages, similarities and differences could possibly take place when learners of high and low proficiencies are being compared. Some strategies could be more prominent among learners of certain proficiency level compared to the other. As proficiency levels are concerned, the differences in terms of the strategies used by the learners could be justified with certain related reasons. The strategies may have or have not been taught explicitly, and the usage of the strategies among the learners could be naturally occurring as the result of the strategies that they have used in their first language communication. Thus, the knowledge regarding communication strategies should be imparted to the learners as a way of raising their awareness to the strategies. The incorporation of communication strategies as part of the programme in language courses, specifically regarding different proficiency levels of the learners could help the learners to be better language users, as well as good communicators, which could be initiated by the exposure to the specific knowledge in communication. As such knowledge and skills regarding communication strategies are made available to the learners; they can use the knowledge and skills to prepare themselves for the future needs, such as the expertise pertaining to professional communication in the workplace.

1.4 Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study is to find out the communication strategies used by the learners in group discussion, specifically the second semester diploma
students taking English course in Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Johor. The study offers the accounts of description pertaining to the communication strategies used by the learners in their language task, namely group discussion. This study also compares the usage of communication strategies between the high and low proficiency learners. The findings from this study exemplify the knowledge and the actual usage of the strategies among the learners, and can be the benchmark of the future approach by educators in the context of communication strategies exposure to the learners.

1.5 Objectives of The Study

The objectives for this study are:

a) To identify the communication strategies used by individual learners in group discussion
b) To identify common communication strategies used by learners in group discussion
c) To compare and describe the strategies used by learners of high and low proficiency

1.6 Research Questions

The research questions formulated for this study are:

a) What are the communication strategies used by individual learners in group discussion?
b) What are the common communication strategies used by learners in group discussion?
c) Are there any differences in terms of strategies used by learners of high and low proficiency?

1.7 Scope Of The Study

The study is done in the scope of higher education institution, specifically in Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Johor, among the diploma students. The task chosen for the study was a group discussion, and the situation, as well as the questions given to the learners was tailored to suit their level, especially in terms of expected responses from the situation given, as well as the level of language competence. This study focused on communication strategies usage generally by the students in academic-based group discussion, and specifically compared the use between students of different proficiency; high and low. The situations chosen for the group discussion generally revolved around the issue which were relevant to the learners as teenagers and young adults, and consequently as university students.

1.8 Significance of the Study

The findings from this study will be useful in providing the extent of usage regarding communication strategies among the students during their speaking task. It will also present the information about the possible connection between the uses of the strategies for students of different proficiencies. Based on the findings of the previous research, direct instruction and training of communication strategies are proven to have positive outcomes in improving learners’ language knowledge skills and command. Therefore, future teaching for the lesson can be improved with the infusion of such strategies in the language class. This study will also benefit the educators in planning the lesson with consideration given to communication strategies as an approach for the course. Consequently, it could be a descriptive way of gauging the current approach used by the educators, especially pertaining to speaking. In general, the findings from this study could possibly offer some
contribution to the improvement of language teaching and learning in the institution and consequently enhance the quality of English education in Malaysia.

1.9 Definition Of Terms

1.9.1 Communication Strategies

Communication strategies are a set of systematic plans used by language user as the means to encounter problems in communication, as defined by Teng (2012). The two main concepts in communication strategies are the efforts by the speaker to communicate his message and the language resource that are available. Maleki (2007) and Dornyei & Scott (1997) state that communication strategies aid the speaker in bridging the gap between the readily available, immediate linguistic resources and the communicative intentions that he has to convey to other speakers. Communication strategies can be both verbal and non-verbal, as stated in Maleki (2007) in relation to the notion of strategic competence; originally proposed by Canale & Swain (1980). The speakers might incorporate the use of first language, related words or explain about the intentional word or phrase; as well as body gestures such as hand movements to achieve the objective of expressing the idea.

For this study, the term ‘communication strategies’ is defined as any form of action done by the learners during the group discussion in their attempts to deal with the language difficulties that they faced in communicating their ideas to the others. The communication strategies used by the learners are defined mainly based on the taxonomy proposed by Dornyei (1995), as well as some other taxonomy (Willems, 1987; Dornyei & Scott, 1995a, 1995b; Faerch & Kasper, 1983).
1.9.2 Language Learners

Language learners can be defined as the individuals who learn a language with the objective of being a competent language user of the language in all skills, such as writing, reading, speaking, and listening. In the context of this study, ‘language learners’ refer to diploma students in Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Johor who enrol in English language course (BEL 260 – Intermediate English) offered by the Academy of Language Studies. English is learned as the second language, and the learners’ first language is Bahasa Melayu. The course is made compulsory for the students, and they need to pass the course as part of the requirement to complete their studies in UiTM.

1.9.3 Group Discussion

Group discussion can be defined as a discussion among participants, who talk about a subject in detail. It is also referred as a communicative situation that allows its participants to express views and opinions and share with other participants. It consists of oral exchange of information regarding a topic, issue, or situation which is done systematically, among the members of a group. In the context of this study, it refers to a speaking task, approximately done in 30 minutes; which involves the language learners as the speakers, with a given stimulus topic based on the social and academic context or settings.

1.9.4 High Proficiency Learners

The term ‘high proficiency learners’ refers to the students who have good knowledge, command, and ability in English language. They are also characterized by their good achievement in English language examination as well as speaking test. For this study, the students chosen to represent high proficiency learners are those
who scores good grades (A, A-, B+) in the previous English language examinations, and get high marks in the speaking test (scored above 12 from 15).

1.9.5 Low Proficiency Learners

The term ‘low proficiency learners’ refers to the students who have average to low ability with regard to the language knowledge and command. Their achievement in the English language examination and the speaking test is moderately low. For this study, the students chosen to represent low proficiency learners are those who score averagely low grades (B+, B, B-), as compared to those with high proficiency. As for the speaking test marks, they scored moderately low marks (scored 11 marks and below from 15).