An Investigation of Communication Strategies for Overcoming Lexical Problems in ELF Situation

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates whether communication strategies can that assist Thai students and Cambodian students to overcome their lexical problems in their communication. The participants were twenty students, comprising 10 Thai students and 10 Cambodian students who enrolled at a university that used ELF context in the classroom. Observation and a semi-structured interview were used to collect data. The findings of the study found that the majority of both Thai and Cambodian use clarification requests to solve their lexical problems in their communication. Moreover, these communication strategies encouraged students to have more confidence to speak English.

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Introduction

English plays an important role in many countries around the world. It is widely employed as a medium language for communication from different countries and different cultures. At present, English is not only used by native English speakers, but also used by non-native English speakers [11]. In the situation where non-native speakers use English as a medium language for communication, English plays a role as lingua franca language (ELF). Baker stated that English is employed as interactionally a global lingua franca across boundaries in intercultural communication among people whose first languages are often not English [1]. In the line of internationalization, international students cross borders for studying in higher education, such as Cambodian students who register to study at a Thai university. They use English for communicating with their Thai classmates. However, English is not the first language of both Thai students and Cambodian students. Communication problems often occurred between them. According to the preliminary study, it was found that the major problems are lexical problems and pronunciation problems. Although, pronunciation is one of the major problems for Thai students and Cambodian students, in ELF emphasizes negotiating. Many ELF researchers, such as Canagarajah [4], Galloway and Rose [6], pointed out that communication strategies are essential because they allow one to adjust to the communicative behavior of the other and facilitate the negotiation of meanings in communication. The importance of communication strategies has led many researchers to argue that they should be used in a variety of contexts. Galloway and Rose [6] discuss the need of teaching students' communication strategies, and Matsumoto, Frank and Hwang [10] suggest that nonverbal communication can also assist ELF in achieving communicative goals. However, research in this field is not adequate in tertiary level in ASEAN context [8]. Hence, this study focuses on lexical problems for ELF tertiary students in ASEAN context. Dornyei and investigate their study about communication strategies for overcoming communicative problems in ELF situation. They found that lexical problems are one of the main communicative problems of ELF users. They also recommend that communication strategies can assist non-native speakers to overcome these lexical problems in their communication [4], [5]. These strategies cannot only solve lexical problems, they can also help to make conversations run smoothly [8]. Therefore, communication strategies for solving lexical problems will be studied and trained for the students in order to help non-native speakers reach their communicative goals. Hence, the objective of this study was to investigate communication strategies that can assist Thai students and Cambodian students to overcome their lexical problems in their communication.

Research methodology

The purpose of this study was to investigate communication strategies can assist Thai students and Cambodian students to overcome their lexical problems in their communication. The process of this study was that the participants were trained in 3 communication strategies lesson plans: circumlocution, approximation, and clarification requests. After the training, they were assigned to do conversational

tasks. Then, they were interviewed in order to know if communication strategies could assist them in overcoming communication strategies.

Participants

The participants in this study were 10 Thai students and 10 Cambodian students. Purposive sampling was used to select the students who enrolled to participate at a university that used ELF context in the classroom. All participants were freshmen students.

Instruments

1. Communication strategies lesson plans contained 3 communication strategies: circumlocution, approximation, and clarification requests. They were designed and checked for validity by three experts. The experts were asked to rate the Item Objective Congruence (IOC). According to Brown, the Item Objective Congruence (IOC) is a validation method used to measure the relevancy of the content and the objectivity of the questionnaire. The criteria of IOC index ≥ 0.5 are accepted as congruent [3]. IOC index of this study was 0.83.

2. Conversational task was designed for encouraging students to work in pairs and in groups. Moreover, this task was also validated by using IOC from the three experts. The IOC index of this study was 0.67.

3. Observational note was written by the researcher during class. The events related to interesting aspects of the conversation were documented in detail and verified with video transcripts.

4. Video recorder was used for recording while students were doing conversational tasks and interviewed. The researcher viewed the video-taped for observing the context of the strategies used and verifying the notes.

5. Semi - structured interviews were designed to encourage as much flexibility and spontaneity as possible to assist students in express their perspectives.

Data collection

The researcher aimed to investigate communication strategies that can assist Thai students and Cambodian students to overcome their lexical problems in their communication. The participants were trained in 3 communication strategies lesson plans: circumlocution, approximation,and clarification requests by using communication strategies lesson plans. After the training, they were assigned to do conversational tasks. While they were doing the task, an observational note and a video recorder were used to collect data. Then, they were interviewed in order to know if communication strategies could assist them in overcoming communication strategies.

Data analysis

Data from observational notes and interviews were transcribed professionally and rechecked the accuracy with a VDO recorder. Then, the data were coded and categorized.

Research results

This section reported the data after the students were trained communication strategies lesson plans and completed conversational tasks. It was found that most of the students frequently used clarification requests. The second was circumlocution and the third was approximate. Clarification requests were frequently used from both Thai students and Cambodian students in order to clarify unclear points or when they did not understand the interlocutors' message,

For example:

    Conversation 1

    <u>Example</u>

    C1: How about Nakhon Ratchasima famous food

    T1: The famous food is Pad Mee Korat

    C1: Pad Mee Korat, *what is that?*

    T1: It is like noodles.

    C1: Noodles?

    T1: Yes, it is a kind of noodle which is cooked by stir fry in Korat style.

<div align="right">(Researcher, observational note)</div>

    Conversation 2

    C8: In primary school, my teacher taught me to carve fruit.

    T8: *Carving? What do you mean by carving?*

    C8: It refers *to cutting or taking away parts of a material to create something*.

    T8: OK. That is a good course.

<div align="right">(Researcher, observational note)</div>

Circumlocution was used when the students did not know the exact word for something. They students attempted to describe or give example the interlocutors

For example:

    Conversation 1

    C5: I eat noodles with… err… *two pieces of wood*.

    T5: It is not a spoon and fork?

    C5: Umm… no.

    T1: Uhh.. *Chopstick.*

<div align="right">(Researcher, observational note)</div>

    Conversation 2

    C7: Hey, I have seen that teacher show us a science tool.

    T7: Which tool?

    C7: Err… I do not know what it is *called. It is a kind of container, that is made of glass. I have seen the teacher use it to contain chemical substances.*

T7: Uhh... It is calling *Beaker*.

<div align="center">(Researcher, observational note)</div>

Approximation was used when the students use a single target language vocabulary item or structure, which the speaker knows is incorrect, but shares enough guessing meaning.

For example:

Conversation 1

C3: Pang, do you see my drawing picture? I will send it to the teacher after this class.

T3: What picture?

C3: Umm...car...err a big car which can contain in many tons

T3: Truck?

C3: Yes, truck.

<div align="center">(Researcher, observational note)</div>

According to the data from the interview, six Thai students and five Cambodian students stated that this training was particularly useful since it can assist them to understand and convey the meaning of the interlocutors rather than say only "again, please?" or keep quiet as in the past.

<div align="center">*"I can understand what my Cambodian friends said more"*</div>

<div align="center">*(Cambodian student, interview)*</div>

<div align="center">*"I have learned something new, and I never know how to reach my communicative goal; I always keep quiet or smile if I do not know how to make my friend understand my expression."*</div>

<div align="center">*(Cambodian student, interview)*</div>

<div align="center">*"I had a big communication problem I often misunderstand with the Cambodian friends' sentences, after I finish these lessons, I think it can help me to comprehend them more."*</div>

<div align="center">*(Thai student, interview)*</div>

It was very surprising. One of the Thai students said the clarification request can assist them to understand the different culture between Thai and Cambodian. Since Thai and Cambodian students had different cultural backgrounds, the ways they communicated and delivered their messages were still rooted in their cultural beliefs and first language repertoire. Therefore, their messages in the information could be interpreted as having many different meanings according to their sociocultural backgrounds. For example, in their conversation during class time, Thai students and Cambodian students were working in pairs. The direction of the game was guessing the word that the interlocutor wrote down in the paper. A Cambodian student wrote the word metal basin. He gave the hint to Thai students that it was a kind of vehicle, used for transporting in the lake or river. Thai students could not guess this word until the time was up. A Cambodian student gave the answer as metal basin. Thai students were surprised to learn how metal basins were used as transportation. He said that water transportation should be only by ship or raft. He also stated that in Thai culture the basin in only used for containing something, such as water to wash the clothes. The Cambodian student ensured that in

his country, children use metal basins as boats to go to nearby places. In this case, the problems occurred because of the different cultural backgrounds.

Another aspect involves students' confidence to speak English. Most Thai and Cambodian students had more confident to speak English with interlocutors

"At first, I was afraid of speaking English with friends because I had limited   vocabulary. I think I may not understand what my interlocutor said. After the lesson, I am more confident to speak with my Cambodian friend, I had just learned how to make my friends understand my message."

(Thai student, interview)

"These lessons make me confidence to communicate with Thai friends."

(Cambodian student, interview)

Conclusion and discussion

This study investigates whether communication strategies can assist Thai students and Cambodian students to overcome their lexical problems in their communication. The study's finding presented that most of the students employed clarification requests, which is one of communication strategies to overcome communicative problems. Moreover, they had more confidence to speak English after the training. The discussion point of this study is about clarification requests that were frequently used by ELF users in communication to solve their lexical problems and unclear points. The findings of this study are consistent with previous studies by Bjorkman [2]; Kennedy [7]; Kirkpatrick [8]. Previous scholars conducted research on communication strategies used for solving communication problems in the ELF context. They found that clarification requests were frequently employed by ELF users when they faced with communication barriers in both lexical and unclear point. Moreover, clarification requests are crucial to encourage mutual understanding. In addition, Canagarajah [4] and Galloway & Rose [6] confirmed that communication strategies are a possible approach to assist students to improve and maintain oral communication in conversation to reach their communicative goals, which ELF speakers should know [4, 6]. Moreover, these communication strategies encouraged students to have more confidence to speak English. Communication strategies were also recommended for maintaining and solving communication problems. However, the limitation of this study is the small size of the participants and longitudinal study is recommended in further study in order to see the qualitative changes in students' communication strategies use. The pedagogy implication, students' comprehension of communication strategies for assisting them in achieving their communication goals was evaluated using more varieties of communication strategies activities following the training in communication strategies.

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