

Quantitative and Qualitative Views of EFL Learners' Strategies: A Focus on Communication Strategies

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate how Thai undergraduate students used their communication strategies while they were communicating in English. Factors considered were (1) the types of communication strategies (CSs) commonly used by the students, (2) the use of strategies by high and lower achievement groups, and (3) factors related to their strategy use.

The participants were 200 second-year students taking a listening & speaking English course at Thammasat University in the first semester of the academic year 2003.

Data was collected via (1) questionnaires, (2) video tapes of three different tasks in which the students were required to communicate with their partners, (3) observations and (4) retrospective interviews. Questionnaires were used to obtain information about the types of communication strategies commonly used by the students and the use of strategies by higher and lower achievement groups whereas the tasks and retrospective interviews were designed to elicit information on factors related to their strategy use.

The findings of the study reveal that while communicating in English, the participants often used the following strategies (in order of frequency): (1) appeal for help, (2) approximation, (3) avoidance, (4) nonlinguistic signals, (5) circumlocution, and (6) code-switching. The lower achievement group of students was likely to use strategies that were less dependent on the knowledge English (i.e., appeal for help, avoidance and code-switching) significantly more often than their counterparts with levels at the .05, .05, and .01 respectively. Moreover, the high achievers were found to resort to circumlocution (i.e., describing aspects of unknown words) significantly more frequently than the lower achievement group at the .05 level.

Finally, factors found to be closely related to the use of CSs are:

- (1) levels of achievement in the listening-speaking course*
- (2) participants' perceptions about proficiency in English of the interlocutors*
- (3) types of tasks they were engaging in*
- (4) types of vocabulary that the participants had problems with*
- (5) what the participants gained through the strategies*
- (6) time and effort that the strategies required*
- (7) satisfaction from being able to communicate precisely as well as concisely.*

Rationale

To be able to communicate successfully through listening and speaking, one needs to have *communicative competence* which includes (1) knowledge and ability regarding vocabulary, pronunciation, grammatical structures and word forms, (2) socio-cultural rules for using language appropriately, (3) discourse rules for linking parts of a language text coherently and cohesively, and (4) verbal and non-verbal strategies which can compensate for communication breakdowns due to lack of linguistic resources (Canale and Swain, 1980).

A focus of the present study is on communication strategies (CSs) partly because there have been numerous studies on other aspects of communicative competence among Thai learners, particularly linguistic competence, due to the popularity of the traditional approaches of language teaching. Apparently, attempts have been made to raise their linguistic knowledge while it is not clear that other aspects of communicative competence have been dealt with adequately. Some studies indirectly suggest that beginners and intermediate learners of English may lack communication strategies. For instance, the National Institute for Educational Research (1994) reveals that, in general, high school teachers in Thailand maintained tight control over all classroom activities, especially speaking activities, which dominate the entire class period. There are not many interactions between teachers and students other than that of the traditional question-and-answer activity.

There is an urgent need to help Thai learners, beginners in particular, to be able to use their limited knowledge of English strategically. Strategic learners know how to compensate for their lack of language knowledge during the communication process. When facing problems in communication, they are able to deal with the situations strategically in order to maintain their conversations. As a result, these learners can avoid communication breakdown (Oxford, 1990). For example, when they do not understand what they have heard, they are able to ask for clarification. Or when the learners do not know what words in the target language to use to refer to certain objects, they may describe them until the listeners understand. In this way, such learners do not miss a chance to learn English and to be exposed to other elements of communicative competence through interacting with others. They may also be able to overcome their fear of communicating in English with others, particularly with native speakers. In fact, many scholars have confirmed that language use and interaction play important roles in second language learning (Long, 1996; Swain, 1995).

Most studies on communication strategies of students in Thailand employ questionnaires as the main research instrument. While these studies yield valuable findings – overviews of strategies used by the participants – they do not reveal exactly how the participants employed these strategies. In my view, it is essential to systematically investigate how Thai undergraduate students use communication strategies. Knowledge gained from such studies could clearly direct of how to properly develop this aspect of communicative competence among our students.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to investigate how Thai undergraduate students use their communication strategies when they communicate in English.

Research Questions

1. What are the types of communication strategies commonly used by Thai undergraduate students while they are communicating in English?
2. Do students at a high achievement level in the listening and speaking course use their strategies differently from those at a lower achievement level?
3. What are the factors related to their strategy use?

Participants

The participants of the study were 200 second-year students who were taking a listening & speaking English course at Thammasat University in the first semester of the academic year 2003.

Operational Definitions

- Communication strategies: Verbal and non-verbal strategies a student employs while communicating in English to solve communication problems in order to reach his/her communicative goals
- High achievement group: Participants who received A or B+ in EG 241 (Listening and Speaking I)
- Lower achievement group: Participants who received B, C+ or C in the course

Relevant Theories and Research

In this section, theories and research studies dealing with communication strategies (CSs) will be reviewed. Issues that have been considered to be relevant to this area of study are (1) definitions of communication strategies, (2) types of communication strategies, (3) teaching communication strategies, and (4) data elicitation techniques.

Definitions of Communication Strategies

A rigorous definition of CSs which all researchers have agreed upon is still unavailable. Numerous definitions have been proposed for the term. The following definitions offer an insight into the nature of CSs:

- potentially conscious plans for solving what, to an individual, presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal (Faerch and Kasper, 1983: 36)
- techniques of coping with difficulties in communicating in an imperfectly known second language (Stern, 1983: 411)
- Learners' attempt to bridge the gap between their linguistic competence in the target language and that of the target language interlocutors (Tarone, 1983: 288)
- ...strategies which a language user employs in order to achieve his intended meaning on becoming aware of problems arising during the planning phase of an utterance due to his own linguistic shortcomings (Poullisse, 1990: 88)

- Communication strategies pertain to the employment of verbal or nonverbal mechanisms for the productive communication of information
(Brown, 2000: 127)

In the present study, Faerch and Kasper's (1983: 36) definition of CSs was used as a guideline to form an operational definition of CSs. First, the definition is specific enough (compared to Brown's for example). Second, the definition is quite concrete. Faerch and Kasper clearly associate CSs with solutions to problems language users encounter. That is, they rely on these strategies when facing problems so that they can communicate successfully.

The operational definition for CSs in the present study is as follows:

Verbal and non-verbal strategies a student employs while communicating in English to solve communication problems in order to reach his/her communicative goals

Types of Communication Strategies

Below is a list that reflects accepted categories over several decades of research.

Communication strategies (Brown, 2000 – adapted from Dornyei 1995: 58)

Avoidance Strategies

1. Message abandonment: Leaving a message unfinished because of language difficulties.
2. Topic avoidance: Avoiding topic areas or concepts that pose language difficulties.

Compensatory Strategies

3. Circumlocution: Describing or exemplifying the target object or action (e.g., *the thing you open bottles with* for *corkscrew*).
4. Approximation: Using an alternative term which expresses the meaning of the target lexical item as closely as possible (e.g., *ship* for *sailboat*).
5. Use of all-purpose words: Extending a general, empty lexical item to contexts where specific words are lacking (e.g., the overuse of *thing*, *stuff*).
6. Word coinage: Creating a nonexisting L2 word based on a supposed rule (e.g., *vegetarianist* for *vegetarian*).
7. Prefabricated patterns: Using memorized stock phrases, usually for 'survival' purposes (e.g., *Where is the ___?* or *Comment allez-vous?*, where the morphological components are not known to the learner.)
8. Nonlinguistic signals: Mime, gesture, facial expression, or sound imitation.
9. Literal translation: Translating literally a lexical item, idiom, compound word, or structure from L1 to L2.
10. Foreignizing: Using a L1 word by adjusting it to L2 phonology (i.e., with a L2 pronunciation) and/or morphology (e.g., adding to it a L2 suffix).

11. Code-switching: Using a L1 word with L1 pronunciation or a L3 word with L3 pronunciation while speaking in L2.
12. Appeal for help: Asking for aid from the interlocutor either directly (e.g., What do you call ...?) or indirectly (e.g., rising intonation, pause, eye contact, puzzled expression).
13. Stalling or time-gaining strategies: Using fillers or hesitation devices to fill pauses and to gain time to think (e.g., *well, now let's see, uh, as a matter of fact*).

Teaching Communication Strategies

Language educators hold two different views as to whether CSs can be taught. Bialystoke (1990) states that CSs are a reflection of underlying psychological processes; therefore, it is unlikely that focusing on the surface will enhance strategy use or the ability to communicate. A number of researchers (e.g., Faerch and Kasper, 1986; Yule and Tarone, 1990), however, support the idea that CSs are teachable. First, by teaching CSs, learners may become aware of the nature and potential of CSs to help them communicate. Second, this kind of awareness encourages students to take risks and use available language knowledge without being afraid of making errors. Finally, CSs such as fillers or topic avoidance offer a sense of security in the L2 by allowing them room to plan in times of difficulty. As a result, rather than giving up their message, learners may decide to remain in the conversation and finally achieve their communicative goal.

It is reasonable for EFL instructors to draw their students' attention to CSs because EFL learners do not usually have a chance to develop these strategies naturally outside their classes due to the fact that they do not usually have direct contact with native speakers in their environment.

There are many ways EFL instructors can encourage students to be strategic in using their limited knowledge of English.

1. Topic avoidance:

The instructor asks a question for specific information like "How old are you?" The students must respond in two or three sentences without actually giving particular information. For example, a student may say: "I'd rather not tell you that." (Dornyei, 1995)

2. Circumlocution:

2.1 In order to use circumlocution, one needs basic core vocabulary and sentence structures such as words for shapes of items at hand like *bowl-shaped, triangular, circular* (Tarone & Yule, 1989). Basic structures to be taught might be *a kind of, the thing you use for, It is something you do/say when ...* (Dornyei & Thurrell, 1991)

2.2 Students are in groups of three. Each group is given a card with one very difficult word and its definition on it. Students must invent two convincing but false definitions of the same word. Then, they read out the three definitions for the other groups to decide which the real one is. (Dornyei, 1995)

3. Circumlocution, approximation, use of all-purpose words, word coinage, nonlinguistic signals, literal translation, and an appeal for help:

Students work in pairs. Each student is given cards with carefully selected pictures (e.g., a sailboat, a tank). They are to take turns telling the other students what is in each picture.

4. Nonlinguistic signals:

The instructor may use a pair-work activity called 'The speechless tourist.' In each pair, one student plays the role of a Japanese tourist shopping in an American department store. The other student acts as a store clerk. The tourist wants to buy something using only his/her nonlinguistic signals. The store clerk tries to figure out the message the tourist wants to convey. (adapted from Ogane, 1998)

5. Appeals for help and circumlocution:

Students work in pairs. Student A asks Student B questions written on a handout. In answering the question, B is not allowed to say certain words. Instead, B has to make A say the word. Then, they switch roles: this time, B asks questions and A answers them.

(Example:

Question: Which season do you like the best?

Words not allowed to use: spring, summer, fall, winter

A: Which season do you like the best?

B: Well, I like July, August ... (Circumlocution)

A: You like summer? (Appeal for help)

B: Yes.

(Ogane, 1998)

6. Stalling or time-gaining strategies:

In pairs, students compose short nonsense dialogues that consist almost entirely of fillers; they may use names of cities, for instance, as content words. For example,

A: You know, I thought maybe London.

B: Well, I see what you mean, and don't get me wrong – that's very Chicago – but actually, as a matter of fact, I was thinking more along the lines of Montreal ... if you see what I mean.

A: Really? But that's Istanbul!

(Dornyei, 1995)

Data Elicitation Techniques

Techniques used to elicit information about CSs can be categorized into two groups: direct and indirect. In some studies, the participants were assigned to engage in communicative tasks designed to elicit CSs whereas in other studies, researchers asked their participants to report about their strategies by putting check marks on questionnaires or answering interview questions.

The use of tasks allows researchers to observe their participants' behaviors directly while they are solving communication problems. Various tasks have been used to elicit CSs. Some are quite efficient in eliciting strategic behaviors but seem far from real-life communication. For example, in Bongaerts and Poulisse's (1989) study, the participants were asked to describe abstract shapes. In one of Bialystock's (1983) studies, the learners had to describe some pictures so that the listeners could pick out the matching pictures. Moreover, related series of drawings were used to elicit narrative-like speech (e.g., Green 1995; Lotfalla and Sharzad, 1992). Other researchers video-taped conversations between participants, allowing researchers to observe their participants' behaviors in more realistic situations (Faerch and Kasper, 1983; Hastrup and Phillipson, 1987).

Even though the use of tasks is a direct and efficient way to tap into the learners' CSs, it is a time-consuming and tedious process, both in terms of data collection and analyses.

Besides the use of tasks, several researchers have resorted to indirect techniques such as using interview questions or questionnaires. In these studies, the participants report about strategies they use to solve communication problems. An advantage of using questionnaires and interview questions is that these techniques can easily be used with larger groups of participants. However, they do not show exactly how the students engage in the problem-solving process.

Taking into account advantages and limitations of these direct and indirect techniques, a combination of various research instruments was used in the current study so that the findings from various sources could compensate for limitations of each other. (See the section, Data Collection, for more details)

Approach to the Study

Pilot study

One semester before collecting my data, I reviewed literature on communication strategies and related issues. Various types of data collection methods used by other researchers to elicit CSs were tried out and found to yield different types of results. In other words, even though these methods led to consistent findings, some (i.e., questionnaires and interviews) rendered broader views of the phenomena whereas others (i.e., observations and tasks) led to more specific outcomes. For example, while questionnaires and interview questions showed what strategies the students had been using and why they were using them during communication, they did not clearly reveal how these strategies were used. However, observations and tasks not only revealed the types of strategies that had been employed but showed step by step how students were using these strategies. Yet, observations and tasks we used in a particular study might not be practical tools to collect data from a large number of participants the way questionnaires and interviews can do.

Therefore, in the main study various methods were combined together: questionnaires, tasks, observations and interviews. The use of multiple research instruments proved to be useful in retrieving complementary pieces of information which could then be pulled together to form an understanding of CSs used by Thai undergraduate students.

During the pilot study, a list of CSs used frequently among the target group was formed. This list was then used as a guideline for the main study.

Data collection

Research instruments used in the current study include: (1) questionnaires, (2) tasks, (3) observations and (4) interview questions.

First, all students enrolling in the listening-speaking course were asked to fill out questionnaires about their backgrounds and their use of CSs.

Then, 46 students were asked to engage in each of the following pair-work tasks that I designed to elicit CSs.

In the first task, the students were assigned to make a conversation about planning a trip. They were allowed to prepare the conversation in advance before presenting it to me.

In the second task, each pair of students was asked to take turns telling his/her partner about an incident that made him/her feel happy, excited, embarrassed or frightened. They did not have time to prepare the conversation in advance.

Finally, each pair engaged in a picture task in which they took turns looking at some pictures and communicating ideas in the pictures to their partner. While the students were engaging in these activities, they were observed and notes of relevant points were made.

All tasks were video-recorded for further analyses. Also, after they had completed the three tasks, students were interviewed about the strategies they used in order to convey their messages during the tasks and their use of CSs in the classrooms. Lastly, at the end of the semester, students' grades were collected for analyses.

Data analyses

The data obtained from the questionnaires were statistically analyzed to establish frequencies and percentages for all items. Then, t-tests were conducted to investigate whether the difference in the use of CSs between the two groups was statistically significant.

As for the data from the tasks, observations and interview questions, while watching the tapes, I transcribed my field notes, interviews, video tapes and documented behaviors relevant to the study using text-processing software, Microsoft Word. Secondly, the data files from Microsoft Word were then transferred to computer software for qualitative data analysis, NVivo. The main functions of this program were to keep a record of the data and to assist in searching for specific segments in the data. I then reread the transcripts and my notes four times in order to identify categories from what the students expressed about the use of communication strategies. I noticed that participants' reports of their experiences could be segmented into meaning units ranging from one sentence to a whole paragraph. Therefore, the definition of each 'unit' in this study is the text from a data file that contains one comprehensible key idea about CSs.

The two main categories selected in order to answer the research questions were: (1) communication strategies and (2) factors related to the use of CSs. Each category had its own subcategories which were carefully selected to answer the research questions stated previously.

To check the reliability of the coding procedure, the coding scheme were explained to another Thai EFL instructor who was asked to code 10% of the transcribed data after a practice session. In preparing sample segments for the reliability check, each category was given three sample segments. When data were retrieved from different sources ((i.e., students and the researcher (in his observation field notes)) three sample segments were provided for each source. I then compared

her coding with my own and found that in 86% of the cases she had used the same codes to code the data. In addition, eight months after the initial coding, I re-coded 10% of previously coded data. Comparison of the two sets of coded data showed an intra-coder reliability of 91%.

Findings

In answering each research question, I restate the topic in the question and pull together relevant categories from one or more data sources as appropriate. When possible, I offer additional detailed information about the findings accompanied by sample segments from the transcripts.

Participants' Background Information

The participants of the study were 200 second-year students taking a listening & speaking English course at Thammasat University in the 1st semester of the academic year 2003. (Note that there were a total of 440 students enrolled in the course in the semester.) The participants were from various faculties: Commerce and Accountancy, Economics, Journalism and Mass Communication, Law, Liberal Arts, Political Sciences, Sociology and Anthropology, and Social Welfare.

The students were categorized into two groups: the high achievement group and the lower achievement group. The high achievement group were the 99 participants who received grades A or B+ from the course. The lower achievement group were the 101 participants who received grades B, C+ or C from the course.

Textbook and Classroom Context

The textbook, which was written by Jitsajee Pibulnakarin and Yupin Pokthitayuk, contains 8 units. Each unit has 5 sections:

- I **Warm-up** gives some ideas of what is going to be covered in the unit.
- II **Language study** reviews some basic grammar as well as specific problem areas in grammar and vocabulary.
- III **Pronunciation** focuses on stress, intonation, contraction, and sound contrasts.
- IV **Dialogs** show how the language in focus is used in context and contains 'conversational focus,' which presents functions, conversational expressions, and socio-cultural information.
- V **Practice** provides a variety of listening – speaking activities which are carried out in different modes – individual, pair work, group work or whole class. The activities move from controlled to freer practice.

In the textbook, some sections describe how students might use certain CSs to help them achieve communicative goals. The CSs found in the textbook are (1) *appeal for help* and (2) *time-gaining strategies*.

Appeal for help:

1. Please try to use English when you speak to your instructors and classmates. Here are some expressions that will be useful to you.
"I'm sorry. What did you say?"
"May I ask a question, please?"

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand.”

“Could you repeat that please?”

“How do you pronounce this word?”

“What does ... mean?”

“Please speak more slowly?”

“How do you spell them?”

2. You can check whether you have heard the speaker correctly by repeating a key word from what he / she had just said.

A: Are you free tomorrow?

B: **Tomorrow?** I’m afraid not.

Time-gaining strategies:

The following are some of the ways you can show that you need more time to think about the answer to a question.

1. Make sounds like *Hmm ...* or *Uh...*
2. Say *Well*, *let me think ...*, *I’ll have to think about that ...*, *I guess ...*, or *That’s a very interesting question ...*

(Pibulnakarin and Pokthitiyuk, p 3, 48, and 67)

A typical class for the listening and speaking course takes place in a spacious, air-conditioned classroom well illuminated by fluorescent lights. The students are always seated next to one another in a semicircle facing the whiteboard. This proved to be facilitative since a majority of class time was spent on instructor-led whole class discussions and pair/group work activities. The whiteboard and an overhead projector were used as main instructional tools. Sometimes, when students were asked to work in small groups of 4 – 5, they moved their chairs together to form small circles throughout the room.

Types of strategies commonly used by Thai undergraduate students

Based on the findings from the questionnaire, the 200 participants reported that the types of CSs commonly used (in order of frequency) were (1) appeal for help, (2) approximation, (3) avoidance, (4) nonlinguistic signals, (5) circumlocution, and (6) code-switching.

Table 1 shows frequencies and percentages of the use of CSs among the participants.

Table 1: Frequencies and percentages of the use of communication strategies among participants

Strategy	Appeal for help	Approximation	Avoidance	Non-linguistic signals	Circumlocution	Code-switching
Frequency						
(i) Never	5	1	14	28	16	35
(%)	2.50	0.5	7	14	8	17.50
(ii) Sometimes	66	72	77	90	105	126
(%)	33	36	38.50	45	52.50	63
(i + ii)	71 (35.50%)	73 (36.50%)	91 (45.50%)	118 (59%)	121 (60.5%)	161 (80.5%)
(iii) Often	92	96	76	64	57	29
(%)	46	48	38	32	28.50	14.50
(iv) Most frequently	37	30	32	18	22	9
(%)	18.50	15	16	9	11	4.50
(iii + iv)	129 (64.50%)	126 (63%)	108 (54%)	82 (41%)	79 (39.5%)	38 (19%)

Factors related to strategy use

Qualitative and quantitative findings reveal that seven major factors are related to the use of CSs: (1) levels of achievement in the listening-speaking course, (2) participants perceptions' about the proficiency in English of the interlocutors, (3) types of tasks they were engaging in, (4) types of vocabulary that the participants had problems with, (5) what the participants gained through the strategies, (6) time and effort that the strategies required, and (7) satisfaction from being able to communicate precisely as well as concisely.

Quantitative findings

Table 2: The use of communication strategies by students from high and lower achievement groups

Strategies	Mean Scores from High Achievement Group	Mean Scores from Lower Achievement Group	t value
Appeal for help	1.67	1.94	2.48*
Approximation	1.73	1.81	0.73
Avoidance	1.52	1.76	2.31*
Non-linguistic signals	1.34	1.38	0.35
Circumlocution	1.56	1.28	-2.51*
Code-switching	0.83	1.28	4.70**

1. The use of strategies marked * is significantly different between the two groups at 0.05
2. The use of strategies marked ** is significantly different between the two groups at 0.01

Based on the information from the questionnaires, the two groups used CSs quite differently. The students in the lower achievement group were more likely to use strategies that are less dependent on knowledge of English: *appeal for help*, *avoidance* and *code-switching*. However, the high achievement group resorted to *circumlocution* (i.e., describing or exemplifying the target words), which is more demanding in terms of linguistic knowledge, significantly more often than their lower achievement counterparts.

The use of *non-linguistic signals* and *approximation* were not significantly different between the two groups.

Qualitative findings

As mentioned earlier, even though questionnaires offer an overview of strategies used by a large number of students, they do not clearly reveal to us clearly how and why the participants used these strategies. Therefore, I now turn to the findings from video tapes, interviews with the participants, and my research notes to help describe the ways the students employed these strategies and the reasons they used them.

It appears that the use of strategies is closely related to **the types of tasks** the participants were engaging in. When they had time to prepare for a conversation, no strategies emerged because the students had time to look up words they needed in dictionaries before hand. Therefore, the students did not show any hesitation or signs that they were trying to solve problems while communicating their ideas.

However, the task which required the students to tell their partners about an incident produced various types of CSs due to the fact that they had to solve communication problems spontaneously.

The picture task, in which the students had to communicate ideas in some pictures to their partners, produced the largest number of strategies. This is because only pictures that would cause communication problems among the students were selected for the task (e.g., an abacus, a bottle opener, slapping).

(1) Appeal for help:

Factors that appeared to be related to the use of *appeal for help* are (1.1) the types of tasks and (1.2) participants' perceptions about the proficiency in English of the interlocutors.

In Task 2 (Talking about an incident), *appeal for help* tended to be accompanied by *code-switching*. That is, the students switched to Thai so that their partners would know the words they did not have English vocabulary for.

Excerpt from Task 2:

(Words spoken in Thai were translated into English and underlined.)

- Arporn: On my birthday, my friends bought a cake and gave it to me at midnight. (Earlier) I went to 7/11 but I didn't know that you ... you (in Thai) How do you say 'hide'? (laughs) ... you
- Ladda: I'm below the dormitory (She meant to say: "I was on the first floor to surprise you on your way back from 7/11.")

In Task 3 (Picture task), *appeal for help* was likely to come from the students who had to guess for words in English that matched the pictures. They used *appeal for help* for checking their comprehension.

Example from Task 3:

(Picture: a person tiptoeing – target word: tiptoeing)

Vorakorn: When you like to make your friend shocked, you act it.

Pratan: **Surprise him, right?**

Vorakorn: Walk slowly ... walk slowly. When you see your friend, you waaaa! (loudly)

Vorakorn: **Trick him?**

During the interviews, several students confirmed that they had a tendency to use *appeal for help* the most. They might ask their peers and the teacher when they were in class. Interestingly, one often made a phone call to ask people outside the classroom (i.e., her parents.) In addition, students could ask for help either verbally or nonverbally. For instance,
(All words from the interviews were translated from Thai to English.)

Researcher: How did you usually ask for help?

Boon: I used gestures. And sometimes I used my eyes to suggest that I needed help ... give me the word.

Researcher: Your eyes ... your facial expressions?

Boon: Yes, because I did not know some words.

Whether *appeal for help* would help them achieve their communicative goals or not depends largely on who they asked for help. Many students reported that more capable peers and the teacher always came up with the words they needed. However, when they turned to students with the same level of proficiency, they usually did not get help. For example,

I asked for help the most. Sometimes, I asked other students. Sometimes, I asked the teacher. This strategy is quite satisfactory ... especially, when I asked the teacher. But when I asked another student, he/she might not know the word I wanted as well. (Siripim)

(2) Approximation:

Major factors in the use of *approximation* are (2.1) the participants' vocabulary knowledge and (2.2) what they gained from the strategy.

Based on the findings from the video tapes, some students were capable of using an alternative term which expressed the meaning of the target lexical item as closely as they could:

Excerpt from Task 2:

(Pratan talking about a gecko in his bathroom)

Err ... In the morning ... in the next morning, I ... err check again in the bathroom it's clear. But I don't go to that bathroom about one month. And I take em ... **sticker** to close the window so it won't get ... come to my bathroom.

Example from Task 3:

(Picture: 2 people; one slapping the other – target word: slap)

Nat: Someone *claps* your face.
Sirin: (in Thai) Slap, right?

In the 2 examples above, both participants dealt with their problems strategically and successfully. Pratan used the word *a sticker* for the word *a tape* while Nat used the word *claps* for the word *slap*.

Interestingly, sometimes *approximation* and other strategies like *non-linguistic signals* were combined.

Example from Task 3:

(Picture: A doorknob)

Pimol: *Handle* (Gesture: Acting like he is twisting the doorknob)

Kiat: (in Thai) A doorknob

Interviews with the participants revealed that they seemed to have positive attitude about *approximation*. They thought even though sometimes they could not use exact words to convey certain messages, using *approximation* could lead to some levels of understanding. For example, "I used *approximation* most often. Sometimes, I could make my partner understand me though my messages were not completely clear." (Suchart) In addition, this strategy may lead to learning of new words. For instance, "When I used *approximation* in class, the teacher might understand and gave me the exact word." (Sithikorn)

Sometimes I could not come up with words that were appropriate for certain situations such as *crazy, mad or maniac*. I would pick words that might not fit the contexts perfectly but had similar meaning. When I did this, other people would give me the exact words. (Suchart)

(3) Avoidance:

The use of *avoidance* was proved to be closely related to (3.1) the lack of linguistic knowledge for the topics the participants wanted to discuss and (3.2) what they gained from the strategy.

The participants were sometimes inclined to avoid discussing the topic for which they felt they lacked vocabulary vital to success in getting their messages across.

Excerpt from Task 2:

(Than talking about an accident)

Than: I don't know to do anything. It was my first accident.

Wipa: And what happened?

Than: I crash a motorcycle. *Hm ... err ...*

But it's my way. It's not my fault. It was the motorcycle's fault.

The retrospective interview revealed that Than meant to say that the collision was so severe that the motorcycle jumped onto her car's hood. But she did not know the relevant key vocabulary; therefore, she quickly shifted to the issue regarding who had caused the accident instead.

Although the students reported that *avoidance* allowed them to maintain a conversation with their partners, most of them pointed out that they were not quite

satisfied with the outcomes. Patcharee stated “I missed a chance to say or to express my ideas the way I wanted.” In addition, the source of their dissatisfaction was from the fact that, unlike other strategies, *avoidance* did not lead to language learning through interaction. For example, Nipharat commented that “I used *avoidance* often by saying “I don’t know.” I think I was not successful because I could not practice speaking and listening (in the area that I avoided talking about). I think the more I practice, the better these skills will become.”

(4) Nonlinguistic signals:

Types of vocabulary that the participants had problems with were observed to be important factors related to the use of *non-linguistic signals*.

They tended to use *non-linguistic signals* when they were dealing with objects and actions for unknown English words. The concreteness of what they wanted to refer to prompted them to turn to *non-linguistic signals*. For instance,

Excerpt from Task 2:

(Ladda was talking about her accident.)

- Ladda: In the evening I try to ride a scooter because in my first time.
Arporn: Are you injured?
Ladda: Oh, yes. I really hurt. My friend try to tell me ... that ... to ... to
(*Gesture: Acting as if she’s trying to start a motorcycle*)
Arporn: Start?
Ladda: Yes start, start it. Start and ride it and then crash in the tree.

It appears that students turned to *non-linguistic signals* very often while working on Task 3.

Example from Task 3:

(Picture: A person yawning)

- Duen: I can’t think of an English word for this. Hmm ... Haaaw
(*Gesture: Yawning*)
Supawan: (in Thai) Yawning

In fact, the participants themselves were aware of their use of this strategy. Boontharika stated that “I communicated quite successfully by using *non-linguistic signals* when I was trying to describe objects.” Moreover, Naphasorn revealed that “I used *non-linguistic signals* while giving directions or describing objects so that my partner got an idea of what I was trying to communicate.”

Based on information from the video tapes, it is clear that using *non-linguistic signals* is particularly suitable for words dealing with objects and actions and failure to use this strategy might make communication rather difficult.

Task 3: (Picture: A person yawning)

- Pitiya: A baby wants to sleep. Before sleep ... must ... act.
Kanjana: (in Thai) a mother breast-feeding her baby
Pitiya: A baby wants to sleep. The action before sleep that make you know he want to sleep.
Kanjana: (in Thai) crying
Pitiya: No, no

Kanjana: The baby is sleepy and his mother is taking him to bed.
Pitiya: You will see when he wants to sleep.
Kanjana: (in Thai) sleep?
Pitiya: Not quite ... not quite
Kanjana: (in Thai) I know. Yawn yawn.

It took Duen and Supawan only 2 turns in the previous dialog to successfully communicate 'yawning.' However, in the episode above, Pitiya and Kanjana had to take as many as 10 turns to convey the same message. Apparently, if Pitiya had used *non-linguistic signals* as opposed to *circumlocution*, it would not have taken Kanjana this long to figure out the correct word.

(5) Circumlocution

The factors that were found to play an important role in the participants' ability in using *circumlocution* are (1) the proficiency in English of the participants, (2) what the participants gained through the strategy (3) time and effort that the strategies required and (4) satisfaction from being able to communicate precisely as well as concisely.

In using this strategy, the participants had to resort to their linguistic ability more than other strategies. When they lacked English vocabulary, they would turn to simple English words to describe or exemplify the target meaning. In the current study, the episodes that reflect the use of *circumlocution* emerged in Task 3.

Example from Task 3:

(Picture: A group of people in the water with lifebuoys)

Kiat: It makes you float on the water.

Pimol: Again?

Kiat: When you wear this, you do not sink in the water.

Pimol: Again.

Kiat: It's a round thing. When you wear it in the water, you float.

Pimol: (in Thai) lifebuoys (laugh)

Since linguistic ability plays a crucial role in the use of *circumlocution*, the lack of such an ability could interfere. For instance,

Example from Task 3:

(Picture: A tank)

Varin: It can ride on the road. But it's used in the wall (war).

It can ride on the road. But it's used in the wall.

Boontharika: Wall ... wall ... wall (Gesture: pointing at the wall)

Varin: The second wall (World War II), the first wall (World War II). When attack ... Iraq attack America ... It's used in the wall (war).

Boontharika: Ok. I know. It's ... uh (in Thai) What? ... a tank?

Apparently, the fact that Varin could not pronounce the word 'war' correctly interfered with her ability to use *circumlocution* to achieve her goal. That is, the episode could have ended much earlier, if she had been able to pronounce the word 'war' correctly.

Several episodes revealed that the use of *circumlocution* during a conversation might be conducive to the learning of English words and that the participants are aware of the possibility to learn language through this strategy. For example, Chan said that “Sometimes, I describe what I don’t have a word in English for by describing it using phrases. This strategy is particularly helpful because the person I talk to might give me the exact word in English I was looking for.”

Episodes from the picture task (Task 3) show how exactly this happened:

Example from Task 3:

(Picture: A hand trying to reach for a star; Target word: ‘reach for’)

Araya: Want to catch the star.

Natcha: Reach for the star.

Araya: Yes.

Example from Task 3:

(Picture: A screwdriver)

Orm-awee: It’s a kind of equipment. When someone ... err ... screw screw

Wisarin: Screwdriver, right?

Example from Task 3:

(Picture: A tank)

Sirinun: It’s a car that the soldier used in the war.

Pisit: Tank

Interestingly, students suggested that *circumlocution* might be more conducive to language learning than *approximation* in that the former gave the interlocutor a chance to try to understand what the exact word the person who used *circumlocution* really wants and delivers it while the use of *approximation*, though helpful for message transmission, may not as often give rise to the same type of learning.

Even though *circumlocution* has proved to enhance the participants the ability to learn language and to communicate, they might not necessarily use it due to the time and effort that the strategy requires and lack of satisfaction from being able to communicate precisely and concisely. This is evident in the following student’s report:

I used *circumlocution* too. And sometimes it’s helpful but sometimes, no matter how hard I try, the other person still cannot understand me. I am somewhat satisfied with it. But I want to speak English more efficiently so that I won’t have to keep giving long and confusing descriptions the way I did to communicate. It takes so much time before my partner can understand me.
(Phatra)

(6) Code-switching

As mentioned earlier, *code-switching* that was observed tended to accompany *appeal for help*. In other words, while speaking in English, sometimes a student used a Thai word in the process of asking for an unknown English word equivalent to the Thai word. In this case, *code-switching* is embedded in *appeal for help* which has already been discussed. Therefore, in this section, I will describe *code-switching* that the students used as a stand-alone strategy.

There are very few episodes in which *code-switching* emerged as a stand-alone strategy. Apparently, the students turned to this strategy as their last resource when they could not come up with other strategies. This is signified by a long pause and signs of frustration before they finally shifted to Thai words. For example,

Jak talking about a basketball match in which he shot the ball into the 'loop' of his own team:

- Jak: While ... err begin quarter 3, I rebound ball in my area, and shoot the ball in my loop.
Asipon: Your loop?
Jak: I feel sad and ...
Asipon: Did you win this match?
Jak: Win the match ... My coach chased me out.
Asipon: What happened after that?
Jak: What happen ... The attendants is (a long pause; then in Thai) booed me ... sound hoo. I'm am very sad.

The retrospective interview with Jak confirmed that he was really at his wit's end; therefore, he switched to Thai, even though he knew that he was supposed to use English throughout the conversation.

Ladda talking about the incident in which she was taken to the hospital after a car accident.

- Ladda: (Nodding) I go to the Thammasat Hospital. She ... err the nurse has ... (a long pause; then she moves her mouth without using her voice) (in Thai) gave a prescription. The nurse gave a prescription
Arporn: What medicine?
Ladda: Paracetamol
Arporn: Paracetamol?
Both: (laugh)

The retrospective interview confirms that Ladda could not come up with other solutions and reluctantly switched to Thai, despite her realization that this was not a good option.

According to the students, *code-switching* offered them far less satisfaction than other strategies because they realize they would not be able to use it with native speakers of English as interviews with the following students reveal:

I used *code-switching* sometimes and I can say that I'm not satisfied with it. The class members could understand me because they also know Thai. I'm not satisfied because I should be able to use English only in a conversation. (Phasawan)

I used *code-switching* when I was talking to my partner in class only or when the person I'm talking to is Thai. If the other person is not Thai, I will NEVER switch to Thai. (Supawan)

Discussion

Findings with Respect to Previous Research

Brown (2000) suggests that a strategy commonly found among second language learners is a direct appeal for help. They may directly ask a native speaker or the teacher for the form (“How do you say?”). Alternatively, they might try to guess the target word and then ask the interlocutor if it is correct.

Consistent with his suggestion, the current study reveals that the students turned to *appeal for help* most often when they had communication problems. Interestingly, the ways they used *appeal for help* is quite similar to what Brown described. When they did not know the exact word they wanted to use, they might ask: “How do you say + (the target word in Thai)?” (e.g., How do you say ‘hide’?) However, they tended to ask this question in Thai. Moreover, in line with Brown’s description, after coming up with a word in English or Thai that matched a picture in the picture task, they asked their interlocutors if the word they gave was correct or not by using rising intonation (e.g., Trick him¹?)

In a study to determine the connection between CSs and the participants’ levels of achievement, two groups of Thai undergraduate students, a high achievement group and a low achievement (determined by grades from previous courses), were asked to answer a questionnaire and some interview questions. Both groups were found to use most communication strategies equally as frequently: (1) guessing meaning of new words during a conversation, (2) word coinage, (3) circumlocution, (4) avoidance, (5) lowering anxiety by smiling and laughing, and (6) trying out new words though uncertain about whether they can use those words (ศรี นราวัฒน์ และ จิตต์บรรจง, 2544).

It was also found in the current study that Thai undergraduate students often used *avoidance*, *circumlocution*, and *code-switching*. However, strategies that occurred internally (e.g., guessing meaning) did not emerge in the present study because I focused on strategies observable while students were trying to solve problems during communication whereas they studied strategies that occurred both internally (e.g., guessing meaning) and externally (e.g., circumlocution).

Moreover, it was found that the low achievement group used code-switching significantly more often than the high achievement group (ศรี นราวัฒน์ และ จิตต์บรรจง, 2544). Similarly, other researchers also confirmed that more advanced speakers make greater use of L2 based CSs (rather than native language [L1]) (Bialystok, 1983; Lafford, 1995; Paribakht, 1985).

Consistent with the findings of the previous studies mentioned above, this present study found that the lower achievement group shifted from English to Thai in order to solve their language problems significantly more often than the high achievement group.

A number of factors have been proposed in the literature as affecting the speaker’s use of CSs: the learners’ personality (Tarone, 1977), the nature of the interaction, age, social background, attitude towards the culture related to the language and knowledge of the topic of conversation (Corder, 1978), form of language instruction, the speaker’s perception of the listener (Tarone, 1981), tasks and target items in the experimental situation (Bialystok & Frohlich, 1980) and aspects of target language (i.e., concrete and abstract nouns) (Paribakht, 1984).

The findings of the present study show various factors that have a potential in influencing the participant’s decisions in using CSs. Some of the factors are similar to those mentioned in the literature stated in the previous paragraph: (1) the speaker’s

perception of the listener (2) the types of tasks used to elicit CSs and (3) types of vocabulary that the participants had problems with.

First, the undergraduate students were aware of who would be able to help them solve language problems successfully. They preferred to get help from more capable peers or the teacher due to the fact that they could give them the words in question.

Second, types of tasks sometimes determined the way the participants used CSs. For example, in telling their partners about an incident, many students resorted to *appeal for help* accompanied by *code-switching*. In other words, the students switched to Thai in the process of asking for the words they did not have English vocabulary for. However, when they were required to guess for words in English that matched the pictures that their partners were trying to describe in the picture task, they turned to *appeal for help* to ask their partners to verify their guesses.

Lastly, the picture task used in the present study confirmed that learners choose strategies that fit the types of vocabulary they are dealing with. The participants found *non-linguistic signals* particularly helpful in conveying messages dealing with objects and actions. Moreover, failure to use this strategy made communication rather difficult.

Suggestions and Implications for EFL Education

The current study has implications for (1) classroom management, (2) instruction, (3) material development, and (4) future research.

Classroom Management

Based on the finding that levels of proficiency of the interlocutors is an important factor that determines how much students can learn language through CSs (especially *appeal for help*) instructors should be able to administer classroom activities for students in ways that maximize their language learning. For example, sometimes students with low proficiency levels could be paired up with those with high proficiency so that they can learn language from them. In fact, research shows that second language learners could learn from their more capable peers when they are allowed to work together (Vygotsky, 1978). Interestingly, some researchers confirm that peers can simultaneously be experts and novices (Brooks & Swain, 2001; Kowal & Swain, 1997) who support each other by asking questions, providing alternative solutions, disagreeing, repeating, and controlling activities and behaviors (DiCamilla & Anton, 1997; Donato, 1994; Swain & Lapkin, 1998; Tocalli-Beller, 2001). In other words, while students with low proficiencies benefit from students with high proficiency as described earlier, those with high proficiency levels still learn thorough working with their peers who might be strong in some other aspects.

Instruction

1. The finding that the low achievement students tended to use strategies that do not require much knowledge of English (i.e., *appeal for help*, *avoidance and code-switching*) suggests the need to introduce various strategies to this group of students, possibly through classroom activities mentioned earlier in Chapter 2, in order to enhance their ability to communicate. The instructors should raise students' awareness of the possibilities of using other more advanced strategies and offer some linguistic support discussed in suggestion 3 in this section.

2. The finding that sometimes when students work in pairs they may not be able to learn new words from their peers during communicative tasks, emphasizes the need for teachers to monitor their classes to check if students need help and to give appropriate corrective feedback. After a pair-work activity has been completed, the teachers may ask some pairs to demonstrate what they did during the task so that the class can give them helpful feedback and learn from their problems.
3. The findings from the current study confirm that in order to use *circumlocution*, learners need basic vocabulary (e.g., words to describe shapes of items like *bowl-shaped*, *triangular*, *circular*) and sentence structures (e.g., *a kind of*, *the thing you use for*, *It is something you do/say when ...*). Therefore, it might be helpful if teachers draw students' attention to these words and structures.
4. During the interview, the participants suggested that the use of *circumlocution* had good potential in promoting the learning of English words. Therefore, the instructors may point this out to their students when such situations arise. The way they might learn through *circumlocution* is consistent with what Swain (1995) described as 'the role of output in language learning': when learners make an effort to produce the target language, they may face a linguistic problem allowing them to notice what they do not know, or know only partially. Stated another way, output raises learners' awareness of gaps in their knowledge and the need to close those gaps. In the present study, not only did the participants notice the gaps, sometimes their interlocutors also offered them the target words, which might result in language learning.

Materials Development

1. The findings that students can learn language through the use of CSs and that CSs can help them communicate more efficiently confirm the value of strategy instructions, particularly in EFL contexts where learners do not usually have a chance to develop these strategies naturally outside their classes due to the fact that they do not usually have direct contact with native speakers in their environment. Therefore, material developers should include activities like the ones described in the literature review in their textbooks to promote CSs among EFL learners.
2. The present study has also highlighted the importance of the ability to choose appropriate strategies. For example, students should learn to choose CSs that match the types of vocabulary they are dealing with. Based on information from the video tapes, it is clear that using *non-linguistic signals* is particularly suitable for words dealing with objects and actions and failure to use this strategy might make communication rather difficult. These findings suggest the need to include various types of vocabulary (e.g., abstract and concrete nouns, words dealing with actions or objects) and to guide students to use appropriate strategies.
3. It was found that the types of tasks determined how the participants used their strategies. That is, when they had time to prepare for a conversation, no strategies emerged because the students had had time to look up words they did not know. No signs of problem-solving were shown in this type of

activity. But when they had to spontaneously tell their partners about an incident, various CSs emerged. Interestingly, the largest number of strategies was observed in the picture task because the goal of this task was to force students to produce difficult words instantly. Therefore, material developers may include these various types of tasks in textbooks for listening and speaking courses. Tasks that allow students to prepare their conversations together before delivering them should encourage students to carefully reflect on language usage, to give them a chance to talk confidently, and to lower their anxiety. On the other hand, tasks that have been proved in this study to promote the use of CSs (e.g., describing an incident or pictures) should encourage them to learn to use language strategically. Other types of tasks with a potential to encourage students to use CSs recommended by Faucette (2001) are as follows:

- Describing abstract shapes, strange gadgets, unfamiliar cultural concepts
 - Video/audio tape analyses
 - Spotting differences among similar drawings
 - Jigsaw tasks
 - Role playing
 - Crossword puzzles
 - Assembling parts
 - Giving directions
 - LEGO
4. Students found the picture task (as described in the previous section) quite amusing. Some stated that it should be used in the classroom because it is challenging and offers them a chance to use language creatively and strategically. This type of task should be included in textbooks for listening and speaking courses along with other recommended activities. Instructors may also use them to change the dynamics of the class.

Future Research

Previous research on communication strategies tended to view each CS as a stand-alone strategy. However, the present study has shown that some strategies were more likely to be used together such as *appeal for help* and *code-switching*. To be more specific, *code-switching* is embedded in *appeal for help*. The participants switched from English to Thai in order to ask for an equivalent English word of a Thai word. Researchers who plan to study CSs should be aware of this kind of behavior so that studies will be properly designed and findings interpreted accurately.

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Thai

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