

**COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES AND COLLABORATION OF
MALAYSIAN ESL LEARNERS IN ORAL INTERACTION**

by

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CS	Communication Strategy
ESL	English as a Second Language
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
L1	First Language
L2	Second Language
MUET	Malaysian University English Test
NL	Native Language
NS	Native Speaker
SLA	Second Language Acquisition
UiTM	Universiti Teknologi MARA

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**STRATEGI KOMUNIKASI DAN KOLABORASI DALAM KALANGAN
PELAJAR MALAYSIA BAHASA INGGERIS SEBAGAI BAHASA KEDUA
DALAM INTERAKSI LISAN**

ABSTRAK

Laporan kajian di dalam tesis ini merupakan analisis penggunaan strategi komunikasi dan kolaborasi dalam kalangan pelajar Malaysia Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua dalam interaksi lisan. Ia menyiasat bagaimana pelajar Malaysia Bahasa Inggeris dapat menyampaikan mesej mereka di dalam interaksi lisan bersemuka bahasa kedua apabila item leksikal atau struktur yang dikehendaki untuk menyampaikan maksud tidak kedapatan. Kajian ini khususnya bertujuan menganalisa bagaimana pelajar dan teman bicara mereka menyampaikan maksud melalui penggunaan strategi komunikasi apabila item leksikal atau struktur tidak diperolehi. Ia juga menganalisa bagaimana komunikasi dapat dicapai melalui usaha kolaboratif bersama dalam kalangan pelajar dan rakan bicara mereka serta sejauh mana penggunaan strategi komunikasi dan usaha kolaboratif menyediakan input item leksikal baru kepada pelajar. Kajian ini menggunakan kajian kualitatif yang berbentuk kajian kes deskriptif interpretatif. Pelajar yang terlibat di dalam kajian ini terdiri daripada 16 pasangan pelajar yang mengikuti pengajian Applied Language Studies di Universiti Teknologi MARA Shah Alam dalam tugas mencari perbezaan dalam cerita bergambar. Dalam kajian ini, penggunaan strategi komunikasi dan kolaborasi pasangan ini dianalisis semasa mereka berkomunikasi mengenai 32 set pra- pilihan referen yang sama. Satu wawancara rangsangan mengingati semula dijalankan di akhir tugas melalui mainan ulangan data video rakaman. Ulasan terhadap masalah linguistik yang dialami dan strategi yang

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digunakan mereka semasa tugas tersebut dirakamkan. Analisis penemuan menunjukkan pelajar dan rakan bicara mereka menggunakan strategi komunikasi dalam bentuk tunggal atau dalam bentuk kombinasi. Strategi komunikasi lisan juga berlaku bersama strategi komunikasi tanpa lisan. Strategi komunikasi pencapaian telah lebih digunakan berbanding strategi komunikasi pengelakan apabila pelajar cuba menghasilkan cara pengucapan alternatif bagi menyampaikan makna yang dimaksudkan bagi menggantikan ketiadaan item leksikal atau struktur bahasa antara yang di ingini. Bagi sesuatu penyampaian makna berhasil, pelajar menggunakan strategi komunikasi bagi membentangkan kandungan yang ditambah kepada mereka dan rakan bicara mereka dalam perkongsian persamaan asas yang sedia ada. Pelajar-pelajar dan rakan-rakan bicara telah bekerja rapat mewujudkan satu kepercayaan saling di mana makna yang dinyatakan difahami melalui prosedur-prosedur asas. Melalui usaha kolaboratif dan tindakan bersama kedua-dua rakan bicara, pelajar Malaysia bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua berkolaborasi dalam mewujudkan kepercayaan saling dan persetujuan pada makna dalam komunikasi strategik. Penggunaan strategi komunikasi dan kolaborasi di kalangan pelajar-pelajar dilihat dapat mencungkil proses kognitif yang menggalakkan pembelajaran bahasa kedua.

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES AND COLLABORATION OF MALAYSIAN ESL LEARNERS IN ORAL INTERACTION

ABSTRACT

The study reported in this thesis is an analysis of the use of communication strategies and collaboration of Malaysian ESL learners in oral interaction. It examined how Malaysian ESL learners manage to communicate their message in second language face-to-face oral interaction when the intended target language lexical items or structures to express meaning are unavailable. More specifically, the study aimed to analyse how learners and interlocutors convey meaning through the use of communication strategies when the desired lexical items or structures are unavailable. It also analysed how communication was achieved through joint and collaborative efforts of the learners and interlocutors and the extent to which communication strategy use and collaborative efforts provided new lexical input for the learners. The study utilized a qualitative research design of a descriptive interpretative case study. Participants were 16 dyads of university students majoring in Applied Language Studies at Universiti Teknologi MARA Shah Alam working on a picture-story narration of spot-the-difference task. In this study, the dyads' usage of communication strategies and collaboration were analysed when they communicated the same set of pre-selected 32 referents. A stimulated recall interview was carried out at the end of the task through the replay of video recorded data. Comments made on the encountered linguistic difficulties and strategies they employed earlier in the task were audio recorded. The analysis of the data findings revealed that learners and interlocutors used communication strategies in singles or

in combinations. Oral communication strategies also co-occurred with nonverbal communication strategies. Achievement communication strategies were used more than avoidance communication strategies when learners attempt to develop other means of expression to communicate the desired meaning as to compensate for the gap of the intended interlanguage item or structure. For communication of meaning to be successful, learners used communication strategies to present the information to be added to their and their interlocutors' shared common ground. Learners and interlocutors worked together to establish a mutual belief that the meaning uttered was understood through grounding procedures. Through collaborative efforts and joint actions of both interlocutors, Malaysian ESL learners collaborate to establish mutual belief and agreement on the meaning in the strategic communication. The use of communication strategies and collaboration among learners was seen to elicit cognitive processes that promote second language learning.

CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

1.0 Introduction

Oral communication has long been our core means for communicating with one another. It has been the ultimate goal of any language learning or teaching of the target language (Ellis, 1996; Hopson, 2001; Bradbury and Reason, 2006; Eadie, 2009). However, to speak in a language other than one's own mother tongue is never easy as it might seem (Gao 2001, Davies 2003). Second language learners do not only need to produce specific numbers of linguistic skills such as grammar, pronunciation or vocabulary, but they also need to understand just exactly when, why and in what ways to produce language (Hymes, 1972). At various times, there can be any amount of insufficient competence in any of these areas. The learners may find it necessary to use various kinds of verbal or nonverbal strategies to compensate for breakdowns in communication. These are all crucial for second language learners as communication involves all these skills. Nevertheless, oral mastery of the target language as a second language could not be acquired within a short time (Hakuta, Butler and Witt, 2000; Fortune and Tedick, 2003; Isarji Sarudin and Ainol Madziah Zubari, 2009) as speaking is deemed to be the most complicated and difficult skill to master (Murphy, 1991; Tarone, 2005).

According to Lam (2007) and Myles (2009), learners of English as a second language occasionally display some linguistic difficulty in oral interaction. At formulating utterances or in finding lexical items in speaking, they may have several hesitations, sound stretches, pauses and restarts (Makarova and Zhao, 2006). At times, they may even exhibit several repetitions and stutters while in some cases,

utterances are left incomplete and the complement in the utterance is not produced. However, when there is a response, choice of words and sentence structures are uttered inaccurately and frequently at the undesirable time (Levelt, 1989; Blackmer and Mitton, 1991). All these markers of hesitancy and inaccurate acts of expressions contribute to breaches of mutual understanding and communication may not be strategically achieved.

It is the intention of all language learners to have successful communication regardless of the inadequate command of linguistic resources they have (Palmberg, 1982). Despite the limited grasp of the target language, learners are generally able to manage second language communication (Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991). In order to maintain the communication flow, learners sometimes obviate linguistic difficulties by altering or minimizing the content of their message. They avoid reference to certain concept or simplify their contributions in order to overcome the lack of the target language term or expression needed to convey their message as originally intended. More often however, they manage to keep their communicative intentions and develop an alternative means of expression to convey the content of these messages. They make use of synonyms, descriptions, native language transfers or even gestures to compensate the unavailable target form and allow for communication of the originally intended idea (Littlemore, 2003; Williams, 2006). All these different techniques language learners use to communicate in a second language despite of their shortcomings are known as *communication strategies* (CSs henceforth).

These “first aid” devices enable learners to stay active partners in communication when dealing with problems or breakdowns in communication (Cohen and Dornyei, 2002). Regardless of these deficiencies, language learners

involved in a conversation are in the pursuit of one common goal: successful communication of their messages. Attaining a successful communicative act in oral interaction requires its participants to coordinate with one another (Clark, 1985, 2004) as communication breakdowns occur in second or foreign language interaction are usually result from lack of coordination of the participants (Wilkes-Gibbs, 1997). Communication, defined by Clark (1996), is then to be a joint and collaborative activity while Clark and Brennan (1991: 128) defined it as “a collective activity”.

¹When a learner speaks to an interlocutor, he must do more than merely plan and issue utterances and she must do more than just listen and understand. They have to coordinate on content (Grice, 1975; 1978). They must reach a mutual belief of what is being referred to and coordinate on the process. Therefore, this particular study is an investigation into the use of CSs and collaborative efforts in face- to -face oral interaction. Essentially, it is a study of strategic communication of learners in achieving successful communication.

This introduction chapter goes on to describe the importance and the need to conduct a study on strategic communication. Given the background to the study and the postulated statement of the problem, the related research questions are stated. The scope and significance of the study are then presented.

1.1 English Language Development in Malaysia

The fact that English plays a special role in the Malaysian context is beyond dispute. The development of the English language in Malaysia can be traced back to its long historical presence in the country, formerly known as Malaya where it was

¹ Throughout this thesis, the initiator of the oral interaction will be always referred to as ‘the speaker’ and treated to as a male and the partner as ‘the addressee’ is referred to as a female, independently of their actual sex (Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs, 1986).

spread through colonialism, trade and Christian missionary activities (Asmah Omar, 1992). During the colonial days, the early role of English was that of lingua franca in government administration and educational institution. After Malaya gained independence from British rule in 1957, Bahasa Melayu was made an official language. This was the instrument used by the government to forge its own national identity. With the phasing out of English to the second language, English is no longer the language of instruction in most Malaysian schools and tertiary levels. The medium of instruction in these institutions, with the exception of Chinese and Indian schools, had changed from English to Bahasa Melayu. Nevertheless, the conversion does not affect the status of the language being “the second most important language in the national education system” as it has been given a special status to help in nation building (Asmah Omar, 1992:65).

To date, constitutionally, English is still the official second language of the country, taught at primary, secondary and tertiary levels and widely used in business and technology. It is a compulsory subject (Ministry Of Education, 2003) as students in the entire primary and secondary schools will have to sit for the English paper in the following national exams: UPSR (Primary School Achievement Test), PMR (Lower Secondary Assessment) and SPM (Malaysian Certificate of Education). English language is seen as nothing more than a school subject as it is not a mandatory subject to pass. Conversely, at tertiary levels, English language is a requisite for students to pass upon graduation. This policy has been exercised as the ministry realized that knowledge and competence in English would not only update Malaysians with the global scientific and technological developments, but would also get them to participate meaningfully in international and business trade (Government of Malaysia, 1976; Asiah Abu Samah, 1994; Gill, 2005). Thus, the need for effective

communication is becoming vital in securing success in today's globalized and interconnected world.

1.2 English Language Teaching in Malaysia

It was during the late 1970's and early 1980's when the Malaysian government adopted several English language programmes to improve the teaching of and learning in Malaysia. These include the TESL/TEFL (Teaching English as a Second Language/ Teaching English as a Foreign Language) programme at all levels of educational studies in Malaysia. These programmes went through a number of innovations, from a structural syllabus which emphasized on grammar to a communicational syllabus after KBSR (The Integrated Primary School Programme) in 1982 and KBSM (The Integrated Secondary School Programme) in 1988 (Gaudart, 1994).

Two years later, the nation saw a strong decline in the level of English proficiency among school leavers. The KBSM was revised and it explicitly stated the importance of English language. In contrast to the earlier KBSM English language syllabus which only highlighted on the four main skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), this new KBSM (Revised) English Language Curriculum places more emphasis on communication skills. The justification for including this new feature in the English language curriculum is to reflect the way English is actually used in Malaysian society in everyday life. Therefore, the Communicative Language Teaching approach has been implemented since then (Ministry of Education, Malaysia, 2003).

At tertiary institutions, students are expected to have attained a level of proficiency in the English language which enables them to cope with the demands of

academic life. Therefore, the primary concern of teaching English at the tertiary institution is not so much to enable students to speak or write effectively but rather to enable them to extract information from reference materials which are mostly in English. Normally a pass in the English subject in the SPM examinations is the minimum English requirement for a university entry. At the university, students are required to enroll in appropriate English proficiency courses for a minimum of three semesters with the aim of enabling them to cope with demands of academic life. It is the requirement of the university for students to pass all the English courses upon graduation.

1.3 Context of Study

In this section, the researcher will present a brief description of Universiti Teknologi MARA and the department where the fieldwork took place and this is then followed by a further explanation of the Applied Language Studies programme.

Universiti Teknologi MARA or formerly known as MARA Institute of Technology, is a leading government-funded higher institution in the nation. It was established in 1956 to cater to the needs of the bumiputra (Malay and other indigenous groups) population of Malaysia. Situated in Shah Alam, the university has expanded nationwide with 3 satellite campuses, 12 branch campuses, 6 city campuses and 25 franchise colleges. Its main objective is to produce competent and marketable graduates who are able to compete in the borderless global market of various academic disciplines. It comprises 25 faculties and 250 academic programmes spread over Science *and* Technology, Social Sciences *and* Humanities and Business *and* Management. The degrees offered range from a pre-diploma course to a doctoral (PhD.) course. Currently, the university has an enrolment of

nearly 100,000 students spread throughout the country registered in all the different modes of study and disciplines (<http://www.apb.uitm.edu.my/>)

To enter the university, applicants are required to have at least an SPM certificate (equivalent to GCE 'O' levels) with credits in Bahasa Melayu, Mathematics, a satisfactory knowledge of the English language and another subject relevant to the field of studies. For the sixth form, matriculation and diploma students, they are required to sit for the Malaysian English University Test (MUET), a language proficiency test, which is a pre-requisite to gain entry to a degree programme (David, Cavallaro and Coluzzi, 2009).

At Universiti Teknologi MARA, the learning of English is an integral part of its curriculum. This is to prepare students for opportunities in eventual careers in the commercial and public sectors where English language is widely used. For that matter, the Academy of Language Studies was established in 1972 for the purpose of coordinating the learning and teaching of English as a second language to all students of Universiti Teknologi MARA.

In July 2006, a new programme called Applied Language Studies with a focus on English for Professional Communication was developed to meet the growing demand for graduates with excellent language and communication skills who are able to perform in a competitive workplace (Koh, 2009). The programme combines core programme courses with a minor in Business Management. Its combination of four elements namely language, communication, business and technology emphasizes on areas of linguistics, critical thinking, cross-cultural interaction, management, entrepreneurship, computer literacy and organizational behaviour (<http://www.apb.uitm.edu.my/>). The programme extends over 6 semesters (3 years). Students are to complete 105 credit hours including 12 weeks of industrial

training, an academic project and 21 credit hours in Business Management courses upon graduation. Graduates of this programme eventually have great potential to venture into various career prospects from management to corporate services and journalism to public relations as they are fully trained in interpersonal and business communication.

1.4 Statement of the Problem

Oral communicative abilities have been acknowledged as the main goal of tertiary-level communication classes for English as a second language (ESL, hereafter) students since these students may need a certain level of oral proficiency in English for interpersonal, academic achievement (Kaur, 2003) and occupational reasons (Kaur and Clarke, 2009). However, communication difficulties have been one of the challenges facing ESL students at tertiary level (Grayson and Stowe, 2005; Hargie, 2006; Smith and Frymier, 2006; Zhao Na, 2007; Ting and Lau, 2008). When attempting to communicate meaning in the target language, learners occasionally struggle to find the appropriate expression or lexical items to prevent potential misunderstanding and breakdown of communication (Faucette, 2001; Dobao 2005). Inability to retrieve or to access the correct lexical item due to the limited command of the target language (Bialystok, 1990; Poulisse, 1990) is the common problem that learners encounter in oral interaction. This problem is compounded when learners are not aware of the existence of communication strategies.

In the local context, it has been reported that Malaysian learners of English at the tertiary level often encounter difficulties when communicating in face-to-face oral interaction (Lo, Lajuni and Chin, 2007). Preliminary interviews in July 2009

with two English language lecturers teaching an Oral Interpersonal Communication course in Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam revealed that oral face-to-face communication among undergraduate students was frequently unsuccessful due to the learners' limited proficiency in English and knowledge of strategic communication. One of the lecturers interviewed stated that students experience a considerable number of difficulties using and retrieving appropriate lexical items in saying what they want and in understanding meaning. Their lexical limitations are bound for a halting, non-fluent advance and their inadequate English language proficiency frequently disrupts oral communication. Moreover, the students' tempo of utterances is to a certain extent slow and short. These lecturers recommended that for communication to flow smoothly, more dyad practice is required and students must be made aware of CSs to compensate for these shortcomings.

While CSs are widely discussed in the literature on second language acquisition (SLA, hereafter) there is a dearth of specific research in Malaysia on exactly what is necessary for strategic communication. Within the last two decades, a number of research studies embarked in the oral communication skills areas of undergraduate students. Among these were a few studies on CSs. However, they were mainly approached from the perspective of psycholinguistics where CSs were the product of learner-centred, cognitive processes (Choo, 1990; Gunasegaran Subramaniam, 1994 and Shamala Paramasivam, 1998). These studies have not been able to explicate how the messages are actually communicated in face-to-face interaction. In other words, some of these studies provided much evidence on the cognitive and linguistic aspects of CSs, but not on their interactional and communicative functions –that is, on how, through CS use, learners and their interlocutors manage to establish a mutual agreement on meaning and achieve the