
COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES EMPLOYED BY THAI UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN THE FACULTY OF LIBERAL ARTS IN ENGLISH FOR BUSINESS MANAGEMENT AT KHON KAEN UNIVERSITY, NONG KHAI CAMPUS

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Abstract: Communication strategies (CSs) allow EFL/ESL learners not only to convey and negotiate the message but also to maintain the conversation when communicating with interlocutors. The purposes of the present study were to examine the frequency of use of communication strategies employed by 46 undergraduate students majoring in English for Business Management, studying at the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Khon Kaen University, Nong Khai Campus (KKU, NKC) in the Northeast of Thailand and to scrutinize the relationship between the use of communication strategies and students' strategy awareness. A communication strategy questionnaire (CSQ) was conducted. The data obtained through the questionnaires were analyzed by the descriptive statistics, the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and the Chi-square tests. The results indicated that significant variations were found according to students' strategy awareness. There were significant variations under the SCM and SMC categories. Pedagogical implications of the study are presented and discussed.

Keywords: Communication Strategies, Strategy Awareness.

Introduction: Nowadays, the use of English language as lingua franca by non-native speakers has spread around the world. English is not only a subject to be learnt in the classroom but also a medium for social use. In order to serve the purpose of English language teaching and learning in terms of improving students' communicative competence, the communicative approach has been adopted in language teaching nationwide. For universities in the NE of Thailand, one of the main goals of the English courses is to improve English major students' skills in developing their communicative competence in both academic and non-academic English. In doing so, students are expected to be able to efficiently express themselves in the target language and successfully communicate in real-life situations (Lightbown and Spada, 1999).

Communication strategies are important for language learners at the beginning stages of second language learning (Terrel, 1977). CSs are used to cope with communication breakdowns and enhance their personal autonomy in learning and using a language (Hatch, 1978 cited in Mariani, 2010). These strategies allow language learners to convey an intended message to the interlocutor, to understand messages, and to maintain the conversation (Canale, 1983; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; and Toomnan, 2014). As supported by Zheng (2004) CSs not only enhance language learners confidence, but also their flexibility and effectiveness in oral communication.

Several past research works have been explored on use of communication strategies and teaching communication strategies (e.g. Dörnyei, 1995; Lam, 2006 and 2010; Lee, 2007; Nakatani, 2005 and 2010; Mariani, 2010; Mei and Nathalang, 2010; Rastegar and Gohari, 2016; Ahmed and Pawar, 2018). Scholars have attempted to scrutinize other factors that are possibly related to the use of CSs employed by language learners, for example, gender, language proficiency level, academic major, age, course level, nationality, motivation, tolerance of ambiguity, language achievements, importance of English, oral

language output, attitude towards speaking English, etc. Most of them (e.g. Dörnyei, 1995; Nakatani, 2005 and 2010; Lam, 2006 and 2010; and Rastegar and Gohari, 2016) discovered that language learners who received instruction through CSs made a significant improvement correlated to both quality and quantity in their oral performance and communication strategy use. Meanwhile, in Thailand, a number of studies (e.g. Somsai, 2011; Kaewla-iad, 2012; Toomnan, 2014; Jindathai, 2017; and Phonhan, 2019) have been conducted to examine university students' use of CSs. However, few past research works (e.g. Kaewla-iad, 2012; and Gomaratut, 2016) have been conducted on CS use among English majors. Particularly, there are no studies carried out on the relationship between strategy awareness and English major students' CS use.

The Faculty of Liberal Arts, KKU, NKC has provided the Bachelor of Arts in English for Business Management since 2015. The main aim of the curriculum is to produce undergraduates who are able to be 'ready to work'. Students are required to acquire not only theory but also practice their field of study. Learning and practicing are essential in their learning. They are highly expected to be able to apply knowledge in real situations. Although English majors generally have more exposure to English than do non-English majors. However, they still encounter problems or difficulties in their face-to-face oral communication. This may be partly due to a lack of confidence in expressing themselves in English, an incorrect use of grammar, and a deficiency in students' listening and speaking skills.

As a result, this research aims to fill this gap. In consideration of the relationship between use of communication strategies and students' strategy awareness, the present investigation aims to explore the frequency of CS used by undergraduate students majoring in English for Business Management, studying at the Faculty of Liberal Arts, KKU, NKC. Also, the present study attempts to offer insights to help English teachers have more knowledge of students' communication strategy use, to improve learners' efficiency in English learning, and help them become autonomous learners. Students, teachers and researchers in Thailand, particularly KKU, NKC, should be alerted to the importance of strategy awareness, even strategy training in the classroom through the findings of this study. For teachers of English, they may make use of the results of this present study as a practical guideline for designing effective communication activities focusing on appropriate CSs for English major students. Also, the results of the study may give English majors a hint at which strategies are appropriate for their oral communication, so that this may help them to improve their oral communication skills. Finally, its findings may allow related parties to get not only better understanding, but also better information about CS use of EFL learners when communicating with the interlocutor.

Methodology of the Study:

Research Questions:

1. What is the frequency of the CSs reported being employed by Thai undergraduate students majoring in English for Business Management, studying at the Faculty of Liberal Arts, KKU, NKC?
2. Do student's choices of strategies to deal with communication breakdowns vary significantly according to their strategy awareness?

Variable: Students' strategy awareness was chosen as an investigated variable for the present study. The respondents were asked to respond to the question with regard to each item of CSs: 'Did you know or think about this strategy before?' by making the dichotomous choice: 'Yes' or 'No' before making the choice of frequency of strategy use. If respondents choose "Yes", it indicates they have such strategy awareness and will get the score of "1"; if they choose "No", it means they do not have such strategy awareness, and will get the score of "0". As there are altogether 43 strategy items, the total score is 43. Participants who get the scores from "0" to "22" belong to those who have low strategy awareness, while participants who get the scores from "23" to "43" belong to those who have high strategy awareness.

Research Instrument: The researcher adopted the Communication Strategy Questionnaire (CSQ) by Toomnan (2014) in order to explore students' strategy awareness according to communication strategy use. Her questionnaire was suitable to the present study, regarding, the research context, the research subjects, and the focal point of the study.

Importantly, before administering the questionnaires, the respondents were informed to ensure that they knew the objectives of the study, the importance of the study, the organization in charge of investigating the study, stating there is no right or wrong answer, requesting honest answers, promising confidentiality, and expressing appreciation. Particularly, their responses did not affect their grades as they were kept confidential.

Subjects: In the present study, the studied population was first-year undergraduate students majoring in English for Business Management, studying at the Faculty of Liberal Arts, KKU, NKC. They took 944101 Basic English Course in the first semester of Academic Year 2017. Forty-six participants took part in the survey and responded to the written questionnaires. They were divided into 2 groups: 36 students with high strategy awareness and 10 students with low strategy awareness.

Data analysis: Descriptive statistics, ANOVA, and Chi-square tests were employed to analyze data.

Results:

A. Variation in Frequency of Student’s Overall Reported CS Use:

Table 1: Variation in Overall CS Use by Strategy Awareness

Strategy Awareness	High (n=36)		Low (n=10)		Sig.	Comments Pattern of Variation
	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D		
Overall CS Use	2.86	.31	2.60	.23	P < .05	High>Low

Note: S.D.: standard deviation; Sig. level: significant level; N.S.: not significant

Regarding the strategy awareness, the ANOVA result shows a significant difference between high and low strategy awareness students. Their mean frequency scores are 2.86 and 2.60 respectively. This indicates that in the overall use of CSs, students with high strategy awareness reported employing strategies significantly more frequently than did the counterparts with low strategy awareness.

B. Variation in CS Use in the Three Categories according to Strategy Awareness: Table 2 demonstrates the significant variations in the mean frequency score of students’ CS use by the three categories in terms of strategy awareness.

Table 2: Variation in CS Use in the Three Categories by Strategy Awareness

Strategy Category	High (n=36)		Low (n=10)		Sig.	Comments Pattern of Variation
	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D		
1) SCM	2.74	.37	2.48	.24	P <.05	High > Low
2) SUM	2.92	.35	2.69	.47	N.S.	-
3) SMC	3.04	.39	2.74	.46	P < .05	High > Low

Note: S.D.: standard deviation; Sig. level: significant level; N.S.: not significant

The results from ANOVA in Table 2 indicate that significant differences were found in the use of CSs by students to convey a message to the interlocutor (SCM) and to maintain the conversation (SMC). Students with high strategy awareness reported employing strategies significantly more frequently than those with low strategy awareness. However, no significant variations were found in the use of CSs to understand the message (SUM) according to this variable.

C. Variation in Students’ Reported Use of Individual CS Use by Strategy Awareness: The Chi-square test results demonstrate that ten out of forty-three CSs varied significantly according to this variable. Table 3 shows the variations in students’ individual CSs use according to their strategy awareness.

Table 3: Variation in Individual CS Use by Strategy Awareness

Individual Communication Strategies	% of high use (3 and 4)		Observed χ^2
	High	Low	
Used more by students with high strategy awareness (10 CSs)			
SMC10 Apologizing if one has said or done something inappropriate and trying to correct (cultural) misunderstandings	94.4%	60%	$\chi^2 = 8.186^*$
SUM1 Trying to catch every word that the speaker uses	91.7%	50%	$\chi^2 = 9.457^*$
SMC2 Paying attention to the speaker's eye contact, facial expression and gestures	86.1%	50%	$\chi^2 = 5.998^{**}$
SMC4 Feeling all right for taking risks while speaking	77.8%	40.0%	$\chi^2 = 5.275^{**}$
SUM5 Paying attention to one's pronunciation and intonation	75.0%	20%	$\chi^2 = 10.161^*$
SCM8 Correcting one's own pronunciation, grammar and lexical mistakes	72.2%	30%	$\chi^2 = 5.988^{**}$
SCM12 Using synonym, antonym familiar words, phrases, or sentences	66.7%	30%	$\chi^2 = 4.340^{**}$
SCM4 Repeating words, phrases, or sentences a few times	63.9%	20%	$\chi^2 = 6.076^{**}$
SCM16 Appealing for assistance from other people around to clarify the interlocutor's message	55.6%	20%	$\chi^2 = 3.956^{**}$
SCM2 Using circumlocution (paraphrase)	44%	10%	$\chi^2 = 3.985^{**}$

Note: Sig. level: significant level; *: $p < .01$; **: $p < .05$

The results from the Chi-square tests shown in Table 3 reveal the significant variations in students' use of individual CSs related to their strategy awareness. A significantly higher percentage of students with high strategy awareness, than those with low strategy awareness, reported high use of all 10 CSs. Examples are: "SMC10: Apologizing if one has said or done something inappropriate and trying to correct (cultural) misunderstandings" (94.4% students with high strategy awareness, 60% students with low strategy awareness); "SUM1: Trying to catch every word that the speaker uses" (91.7% students with high strategy awareness, 50% students with low strategy awareness); and "SCM8: Correcting one's own pronunciation, grammar and lexical mistakes" (72.2% students with high strategy awareness, 30% students with low strategy awareness)

Discussion: The results in the present study show that students with high levels of awareness of strategy use are significantly more likely to use communication strategies than those with low awareness of strategy use, both measured overall and in SCM and SMC categories.

One possible reason that may explain the significant variations between learners with high and low strategy awareness is the role of strategy awareness itself. Communication strategies not only allow language learners to solve their communication problems but also to enhance their communication effectiveness. Strategic awareness is a prerequisite for strategy use (Wichadee, 2011). Learners can actively transfer a given strategy to a new learning situation only when there is strategy awareness (Pressley et al, 1989). That means a learner can make use of communication strategies properly when their awareness has been elevated.

Another possible factor affecting both groups of students' choices of CS strategy is prior knowledge and language learning experiences. In Thailand, although all Thai learners have been studying English since

the primary level, they still face oral communication difficulties. This may be partly due to the outcome of learning English. Students are required to study grammar rules for examination, not for communication. This leads Thai learners have serious difficulties in sufficient command of English skills for real-world communication and may hinder them in the improvement of their English speaking skills because of the mismatch of language policies and practices (Choomthong, 2014). According to the results of past research works (e.g. Robertson et al, 2000; Hellsten, 2002; Wong, 2004; and Sawir, 2005), language learners who lack the confidence to speak English often have prior language learning experiences in which their teachers of English mainly focused on grammar and reading skills, not conversational skills (Wong, 2004; and Sawir, 2005). As suggested by Lany et al (2007) learners' prior experience could simplify acquisition of new language structure. As a result, students' prior knowledge and language learning experiences can affect their choices and awareness of strategy use.

To sum up, strategy awareness has strong effect on the students' choices of communication strategies within the main positive variation patterns. The possible reasons for this may be due to the role of strategy awareness and students' prior knowledge and language learning experiences.

6. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications: From the research findings, it was found that Thai undergraduate students majoring in English for Business Management, studying at the Faculty of Liberal Arts, KKU, NKC, mostly used CSs at the moderate level. There is a relationship between students' strategy awareness and their strategy use at all three levels: overall use of CSs, CS use in the SCM and SMC category, and individual CS use. It is advisable that the importance of CSs should be taken into consideration for both teachers and language learners. In order to meet students' needs on CS use, teachers of English need to consider and design their language teaching activities focusing on appropriate CSs for language learners. Teachers should stimulate and encourage language learners, particularly those who have low strategy awareness to use a wider range of CSs.

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