

Communication Strategies in Interaction between Korean EFL Learners

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Uhm, Chul Joo. 1998. **Communication Strategies in Interaction between Korean EFL Learners.** *Linguistics*, 6-1, 487-502. This case study examines the characteristics of communication strategies(CS) in non-native/non-native interaction. The Korean EFL learners' use of CS in interaction does not differ from that of native/non-native interaction observed previously in terms of holistic strategies and analytic strategies. On the other hand, the absence of linguistic strategies such as literal translation and foreignizing may underscore a distinction between NNS/NNS and NS/NNS interactions. In addition, since the difference between High and Low fluency groups in terms of the number and the kind of CS is observed, the transitional directionalities in interlanguage can be also proved. (Kwangju University)

1. Introduction

Since L2 learners lack basic grammar and vocabulary, their communicative success relies entirely on their "ability to communicate within restrictions" (Savignon, 1983, p. 43) by using communication strategies (hereafter, CS). Complete agreement has not been reached on the definition of CS, but many researchers agree that CS are "a systematic technique employed by a speaker to express his/her meaning when faced with some difficulty" (Corder, 1981, p. 103).

Methodologically speaking, most related studies have a laboratory approach that elicits artificial communication and doesn't reflect "real-life" (Dornyei, 1995) or "real-time" (Rost, 1996) conversation. A study's design influences the strategies chosen by the speakers, and

many studies have resulted in "a focus on individual words rather than on subjects' more general communicative behavior" (Faerch, 1984, p. 59). I hope to overcome this artificiality and study real communication.

Another problem in CS research is the scarcity of studies on non-native/non-native speakers' interaction. Someone might ask, "Why study non-native/non-native interaction?" Simply because English has become the international *lingua franca*, English learners at different fluency levels often must speak with one another. Yet while speaking English, do they use communication strategies in the same way with one another as when talking with a native speaker?

This case study, therefore, tries to establish natural conversation and to answer two research questions: (1) Do non-native speakers at different fluency levels use communication strategies differentially? (2) Does non-native/non-native interaction differ from native/non-native interaction?

2. Method

In an attempt to produce real conversation, the two speakers were asked to imagine that they had been friends for some time and were engaging in their own day-to-day conversation. Yet if they spoke about just any subject, there would be no standard by which to compare the different pairs (Tarone and Yule, 1990). So I chose a wordless cartoon from the Kassel corpus (see Appendix) to be the standard for two reasons; (1) It contained clear items and actions (dog, blackbird (or crow), pole), and (2) its natural humor and intrinsic interest should help stimulate real conversation.

One problem in the study concerned observing the communication strategies. That is, advanced learners may be able to plan their discourse in advance and so hide their strategies. Merely looking at the verbal records of conversation will not reveal them; we need to access their thoughts. Since mental processes cannot be observed, "there has

therefore developed a new focus in research on strategies: the collection of learners' reports of their own insights about the strategies they use" (Cohen 1987, p. 83), or what is called introspection and/or retrospection (Faerch, 1984; Poulisse, Bongaerts, and Kellerman, 1987).

Of course, some skepticism has been raised concerning the reliability of introspective techniques. One criticism is that the reports may result from inference and/or generalization rather than the learner's actual thought processes. In response, Faerch and Kasper (1987) point out that "confrontations provide reactivate traces in short term memory and counteract informants' tendency to conflate different events or confound them in retrospect" (p. 17). And although the experimenter may affect a retrospective study (Faerch and Kasper, 1987), this can be checked by Ericsson and Simon's guidelines¹ (cited in Poulisse, Bongaerts, and Kellerman, 1987).

2.1. Subject

Ten native Korean speakers studying in the U.S. took part in the study. Three were attending high school, two, a major American university in the Midwest, and the last five were learning English at the university's language center. The subjects ranged in age from

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1. Their guidelines are:
 - a. the data should be collected immediately after task performance, when memory is still fresh;
 - b. the subjects should be provided with contextual information to activate their memories;
 - c. all the information asked for must be directly retrievable;
 - d. for the same reason the information asked for should relate to specific problems, or a specific situation;
 - e. no leading questions should be asked, to minimize the effects of "researcher bias";
 - f. the subjects should not be informed that they will be asked for retrospective comments until after task performance, so as not to affect their performance on the task. (PBK, 1987, p. 217)

eighteen to forty. The average length of living in the U.S. was 2 years and 2 months, and the range of TOEFL scores was from 503 to 620. Since the difference of the ability of speaking English between high and low TOEFL scorers could be observed, I assigned five of them who earned 580² and the above on the TOEFL and the next five to High Fluency Group and Low Fluency Group, respectively.³

2.2. Procedure

Each pair of high fluency speakers and low fluency speakers were randomly grouped and were instructed to imagine that they were friends naturally conversing and that one of them would describe a cartoon to his/her friend as if s/he had witnessed the event a day or two ago. No mention was made of the forthcoming retrospection session. For each pair, I deliberately handed the cartoon to the low fluency speaker.⁴ I had planned to alternate between more and less proficient speakers retelling the cartoon incident, but decided not to when discovering that in the second and fifth pairs, the high fluency speakers seemed to approach native fluency.

The videotaping portion differed slightly between the first three and the last two pairs in two ways. One way was that the first three pairs used only English in their retrospection. Not satisfied with their ability to tell me their thoughts in English, the last two pairs had the option of retrospecting in Korean. (For the most part, though, they spoke English.) For the second difference, the first three pairs were videotaped on the university campus in rooms with see-through mirrors.

2. I used this score as a cut-off point since many American colleges used it for a part of requirements for the foreign student's admission.

3. Interestingly, all subjects who attended high school and college scored 580 and above, while the rest at the language center earned less than 580 on the TOEFL.

4. However, for the fourth pair, I had to give the cartoon to the high fluency speaker, since the low fluency speaker refused to accept it.

For these days, I left the room to be with the video camcorder and returned after their conversation ended. The second two pairs were videotaped at the language center, which did not have rooms with see-through mirrors. Consequently, my fellow graduate student, a native speaker of English and I remained in the room to operate the video camcorder.

After their conversation ended, the subjects were informed that we would watch their conversation on videotape so that they could tell us what they had been thinking during the first task (this portion was recorded on cassette tape). Again, the first three and the last two pairs' procedure varied slightly: the former had no remote control. So I instructed them to have me stop the tape anytime they wanted to say something. The latter group had a remote control between them so they could stop the tape at any time. In addition, I would stop the VCR on my own initiative when they hesitated, repeated themselves, laughed, or did anything else that might suggest they were having trouble conveying their meaning and had to resort to a communication strategy, although as Poulisse, Bongaerts, and Kellerman (1987) recommend, I didn't do it everytime in order not to cause irritation or boredom with the subjects.

3. Results

Transcriptions of the cassette and videotapes were examined for the various communication strategies used by the subjects. In determining

5. typology of CS I used here was from Tarone (1981):

- Paraphrase
 - Approximation
 - Word coinage
 - Circumlocution
- Borrowing
 - Literal translation
 - Language switch

which strategies were used, some were obvious by their nature, such as *appeal for assistance*, *message abandonment*, or *mime*. Another obvious use of a communication strategy occurred when an unusual term was used. For instance, the third low fluency speaker used "tree" for "wooden pole." At other times, the intended meaning of the speaker was needed to ascertain if a communication strategy had been used. In the second pair, for example, the low fluency speaker used "cry" for "bark" during the video session. While reviewing the videotape, she asked, "how to say this?" referring to the barking situation. Even though she had used, "cry," she felt that it was not correct and so had used *approximation* (or *paraphrase*) to convey her meaning. Intent also helped in determining *topic avoidance* during the videotaping. For instance, during the videotape review, the high fluency speaker (H1) said that he had wanted to ask when the incident occurred, but not knowing how, he didn't.

Once the various communication strategies had been identified from both the videotape and retrospective sessions, they were then compiled together into the appropriate categories. Here in this study the following five categories were detected:

Approximation: Using words or structures which, though are not quite right, are close enough to the desired meaning to be understood (e.g., "cry " for "bark")

Mime: Using nonverbal strategies to convey his/her meaning (e.g., moving around the listener to indicate chase)

Message abandonment: A sudden stop of talking in mid-utterance because of unexpected difficulty

Appeal for Assistance
 Avoidance
 Topic avoidance
 Message abandonment
 Mime

Topic avoidance: Avoiding talking about concepts for which the target language vocabulary or other meaning structure is not known

Appeal for assistance: Asking for the correct term or structure by using expressions such as "What is this?," "How can you say this?"

For each category the frequency data were calculated as shown in Table 1.

Approximation was the preferred strategy of both groups: Low fluency speakers used it 50% of the CS, and high fluency speakers, 54% of the CS. The second and third most favored strategy for high fluency speakers were *appeal for assistance* and *mime*, each comprising 14% and 12% of their strategies. For the low fluency speakers, *appeal for assistance* and *message abandonment* were the second and third most frequently used strategies, each accounting for 18% and 14% of their total strategies. The least used categories, *topic avoidance* and *mime* were observed nine and six times each among the low fluency speakers. On the other hand, for the high fluency group *message abandonment* and *topic avoidance* were the least used strategies.

Focusing on the strategies *appeal for assistance* and *topic avoidance*, we find that the retrospective sessions were quite useful. Out of the thirteen occurrences of *topic avoidance*, ten, which occurred during the videotaping, were detected only during retrospection. Also during retrospection, fifteen of the twenty-one *appeal for assistance*, which

Table 1

Subject	Approximation	Mime	Message Abandonment	Topic Avoidance	Appeal for Assistance	Total
L1	5	1	5	3	2	16
L2	8		1	1	3	13
L3	17	2	3	2	6	30
L4	8		1	1		10
L5	5	3	2	2	4	16
Total	43(50%)	6(8%)	12(14%)	9(11%)	15(18%)	85(100%)

H1	5	1	1	1	2	10
H2	1				1	2
H3	4		1	2	1	8
H4	11	4	2	1	1	19
H5	1				1	2
Total	22(54%)	5(12%)	4(10%)	4(10%)	6(14%)	41(100%)

mainly focused on the correct name for the bird, occurred. Since the subjects had already used a plausible term for the bird, it would have been impossible to determine without retrospection if the speaker was using a communication strategy or was simply transferring a more general expression (that the subject considered correct) for the more specific one.

Looking again at Table 1, we note that no strategies of *circumlocution*, *literal translation*, *language switch*, or *word coinage* occurred (cf. Paribakht (1985), who posits that more advanced learners use L2-based strategies instead of L1). *Circumlocution*, an analytical strategy was most unlikely to emerge since holistic strategies (*approximation*) are preferred (Kellerman, Ammerlaan, Bongaerts, and Poullisse, 1990) unless detailed information is required (Poullisse, 1987), and I posit especially so in normal, everyday conversation. Tarone and Yule's (1987) NNS-NNS study did have *circumlocution*; however, the study's design demanded it not only because one subject was describing objects to the other, but also because the listener was not allowed to respond—which is quite unlike normal conversation. Most probably, the last three (*literal translation*, *language switch*, *word coinage*) weren't used since Korean and English are unrelated languages. Conversely, many past studies that elicited these strategies involved related languages as, for example, Dutch and English in the Nijmegen project – which fact may encourage the use of linguistic strategies. Consequently, all the strategies used were either reduction or compensatory strategies, and the later were either L2-based (according to a product approach) or holistic (from a process approach). Thus in this study, the only distinction (besides emphasis) between product and process approaches would be that in a process approach *approximation* and *mime* would be combined into one category: holistic.

Moving our attention from the strategies to the people using them, we see that the low fluency subjects used more than twice as many communication strategies as the high fluency ones (85 to 41). These results are most likely skewed by several factors. First, the person (H4) depicting the cartoon spoke only three times in Korean. In his description, he used nineteen communication strategies—almost two more than the 17.2 Low Fluency Group average. No doubt, a person actively describing an incident will use more CS than a listener who merely needs to passively understand. Accordingly, Table 1 shows that

the one low fluency speaker (L4) not describing the cartoon used the least number of CS (ten) among the low fluency group.

The second factor is conversational proficiency. Studies (e.g., Poulisse, 1987) have shown that the closer second language learners near the target language, the less they use communication strategies. Of course, living in a country of the target language greatly helps language learners attain fluency. In fact, two of the high fluency speakers (H2 and H5), I felt, had nearly native fluency. Focusing on the period of living in the U.S. (see Table 2 below), we find that the high fluency group almost triple the time of the low fluency group: a total of 16 years and 11 months to 6 years and 2 months. This disparity in time is reflected by the high fluency subjects using 41 communication strategies to 85 by the low fluency subjects.

Table 2

Subject	CS used	TOEFL score	Time in U.S.(years/months)	Years of Formal Study	Age
L1	16	536	1/6	11	24
L2	13	550	1/0	10	25
L3	30	503	1/0	14	40
L4	10	545	1/6	8	21
L5	16	540	1/2	6	19
H1	10	598	1/6	11	26
H2	2	620	6/5	7	19
H3	8	618	2/0	6	18
H4	19	582	1/6	11	24
H5	2	618	5/6	7	19

In addition to the amount of time in the U.S., the amount of formal

English study perhaps influenced CS use. According to Poulisse (1987), formal study increase one's vocabulary, which in turn lessens the need for CS. Therefore, when faced with unknown items, an enlarged vocabulary will likely give an individual more words at his/her command to *approximate* them. Since the average length of subjects' formal study in this study was not too short (9 years), the salient existence of *approximation* could be expected. And the results show that the low fluency group, who formally study longer, used more CS. This was intertwined with the influence of age. Notice that three younger high school students who studied English at American secondary school in the context of ESL were among the high fluency group.

A rationale for H2's lack of CS, and so also H5's, may lie in their personalities (Kleinmann, 1978). For the most part, H2 and H5 seemed to merely respond to their partner rather than initiate anything on their own. And, of course, the less said, the fewer CS that will appear. In contrast, L3, who accounted for one third of the low fluency group's strategies, talked much and exuberantly. Although the more CS used generally indicates a smaller vocabulary or less proficiency, I feel that her self-confidence permitted her to speak more: she was more interested in communicating than in worrying about looking foolish.

Factors that didn't seem to influence the CS were age beginning formal study of English, and language experience. There just were no correlations for these factors. In Bialystok's (1990) study, CS ability was tied to language experience if the person spoke three or more languages and had traveled extensively. None of the participants had traveled much, and only one individual (L5) had studied three other languages, but for only one year each. So she probably didn't speak them well.

4. Conclusions and Discussion

In attempting to draw conclusions, the various factors - time spent in

the U.S., the TOEFL score, period of formal study, age, etc- may affect one's speaking ability. Related to the first research question, data show that the high fluency group uses a significantly smaller number of CS than the low fluency group, and, of course, the characteristics of CS used are quite different from each other. In other words, the results suggest possible "transitional directionalities," which can be consequently translated to the nature of L2 acquisition.

Turning now to my second research question, it does not appear from the present study, at least in some respects, that non-native/non-native(NNS-NNS) interaction differs from native/non-native(NS-NNS) interaction: Approximation or holistic strategies are the preferred strategies of use in this case as in previous studies (See Haastrup and Phillipson, 1983; Poulisse, 1987; Kellerman, Ammerlaan, Bongaerts, and Poulisse, 1990; Bialystok and Kellerman, 1987). Nor does the absence of analytic strategies, though they have been seen in previous studies. On the other hand, the absence of linguistic strategies such as literal translation and foreignizing may underscore a distinction between NNS-NNS interaction and NS-NNS interaction. That is, in a NS-NNS exchange, the non-native speaker assumes that the native listener has a greater capacity to understand him/her and so may venture more linguistic strategies, and conversely, uses fewer with a non-native listener.

In at least one respect, though, the two types of interaction do differ. Fifteen of the twenty-two appeals for assistance occurred in the retrospective section and were directed to the experimenter. Similarly, there were no appeals for assistance in Tarone and Yule's (1987) NNS-NNS study, who posit that the subjects most likely did not look upon their co-speaker, a non-native speaker, as someone to whom they could appeal for assistance--unlike a native speaker such as the experimenter. More data should be gathered to see in what other ways non-native speakers diverge from natives in using communication strategies.

On the whole, the results support Canale & Swain's (1980) view that "strategic competence" exists as one of the components of communicative competence. We may, therefore, conclude that due to the restrictions placed on the foreign language learner's knowledge of the target language, there is a constant need for CS to bridge the gaps in the course of communication.

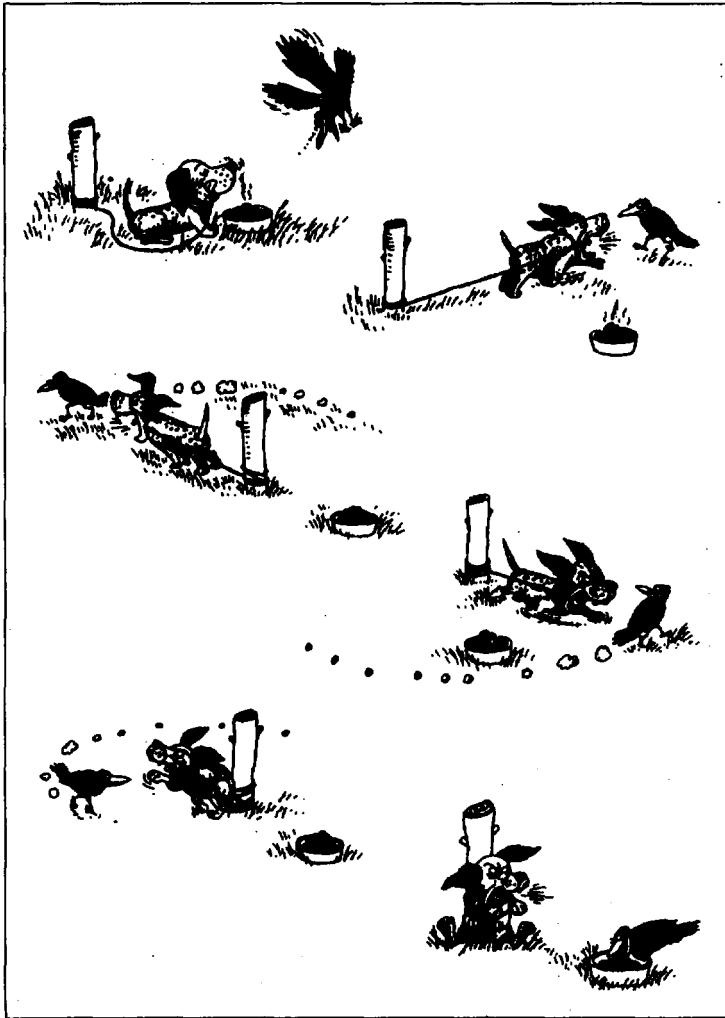
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Appendix



(Source: H. Dechert *et al.* (1984). *Second Language Production*, p. 240)