

RELATIONSHIP OF TARGET LANGUAGE COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES TO COMPREHENSIBILITY OF ORAL NARRATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The students' oral narrations on 3 picture stories were tape-recorded. Background questionnaires were administered to the students, and the comprehensibility of the English oral narrations were evaluated by 16 selected judges. Analysis of the data revealed that a) the students widely employed communication strategies in their oral narrations; b) the mean comprehensibility level of the students' narrations was below average; c) there was a significant relationship between the extent of use of communication strategies and oral language proficiency, as well as the use of communication strategies and message comprehensibility; and d) among the personal variables, the type of school, pronunciation, age, years in school, nervousness and sex were found to be significant predictors of the students' comprehensibility level. On the other hand, among the types of communication strategies, topic avoidance, simplification-reduction, circumlocution, modeling, code-switching, message abandonment, approximation and word coinage were found to be significant predictors of the students' comprehensibility level.

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INTRODUCTION

The difficulty of most, if not all second-language learners lies on "how to communicate" rather than

"what to communicate" a given concept in the English language (Ervin, 1979). Oftentimes, how they say in their interlanguage (a language unidentical to their first

language nor their second language) is subordinated to what they intend to say in that language. Thus, when the learners' interlanguage is inadequate to meet their communicative demands, they employ certain types of communication strategies. If a language teacher is sensitive to the existence and use of strategies by learners, he may capitalize on this linguistic information for classroom teaching-learning purposes (Tarone, 1979).

This study dealt with the following questions: 1) What target language communication strategies are employed by selected freshman high school students in their oral narrations? 2) How often do freshman high school students use these strategies in their oral narrations? 3) How comprehensible are the students' oral narrations to a group of judges? 4) Is there a significant relationship between the extent of use of communication strategies and students' oral language proficiency, as well as the extent of use of communication strategies and message comprehensibility? 5) Do male and female students differ in their use of target language communication strategies? 6) What are the best predictors of students' comprehensibility level scores?

METHODS

The subjects of this study were 30 randomly chosen freshman high school students of the Visayas State College of Agriculture during the school year 1980-81. Only those subjects whose first language at

home was Cebuano were included in this study.

The subjects' oral narrations on 3 picture stories were tape-recorded. Taping was done only after all the subjects felt relaxed and had been fully oriented on what to do. After all of them had rendered their oral narrations, they immediately filled up background information questionnaires.

Sixteen judges were chosen to evaluate the comprehensibility level of the subjects' oral narrations. Cassettes containing the narrations were dubbed and distributed together with a rating scale. Before the evaluation, the judges were informed about the nature and objectives of the study and how the rating scale would be used. They were given 2 weeks to evaluate the oral narrations.

The rating scale, modified and patterned after the one used by Ervin (1977), is shown below:

Rating	Description
0	Tape was interrupted; the judge had no chance to evaluate a specific key concept.
1	Very Low Comprehensibility; the subject attempted to relate a key concept but he was <i>not understood</i> by the judge.
2	Low Comprehensibility; the subject attempted to relate a key concept and he was <i>hardly understood</i> by the judge.

- 3 Average Comprehensibility; the subject related a key concept and he was *fairly understood* by the judge.
- 4 High Comprehensibility; the subject related a key concept and he was *fairly well understood* by the judge.
- 5 Very High Comprehensibility; the subject related a key concept and he was *fully understood* by the judge even though the subject's grammar or vocabulary may have been faulty.

Data analysis was done in 3 stages. In the first stage, a descriptive analysis of the identified communication strategies based on the transcribed target language utterances (transcribed without phonetic details) and the follow-up interviews with the subjects were done. The instances of use were isolated and then tallied by strategy. In the second stage, the results of the judges' evaluations were subjected to statistical analysis. The third stage was the analysis of the personal variables and the individual uses of specific types of communication strategies in relation to the subjects' comprehensibility level scores as determined in the second stage of the data analysis.

The 5% level of significance was used in all the statistical tests as follows: a) Kendall's coefficient of concordance which determined the

intragroup reliability of the judges evaluation; b) Kruskal-Wallis one-way analysis of variance by ranks which tested the differences in the ratings of the judges on the students' oral narrations; c) Chi-square test which determined the relationship between the extent of use of communication strategies and message comprehensibility; d) Pearson's product-moment correlation which determined the relationship between personal variables and comprehensibility level scores, as well as the relationship between the individual uses of specific types of communication strategies and comprehensibility level scores; and e) Stepwise multiple regression analysis which determined the significant predictors of the subjects' comprehensibility level scores. In this analysis, a criterion of 1% additional increase in the accountable variance was prespecified. It means that a variable which added less than 1% to the accountable variance was considered a significant predictor.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Personal Characteristics and Perceived Problems of Subjects.

The ages of the subjects ranged from 12 to 26 years, with a mean of 13.5 years. About two-thirds of the subjects graduated from rural elementary schools; the remaining one-third from urban elementary schools.

The major problem perceived

by the subjects during their oral narrative tasks was the use of grammar. Other problems perceived by them in the descending order were: lack of vocabulary, faulty pronunciation and nervousness.

administrative experiences were 16.19 years and 4.13 years, respectively.

Personal Characteristics of Judges.

The 16 judges who rated the oral narrations of the 30 subjects were proficient speakers of English. Female judges outnumbered the male judges, and slightly more than one-half of the judges were single. The mean age of the judges was 39.8 years. Their mean teaching and

Target Language Communication Strategies and Frequency of Use.

Table 1 shows the communication strategies employed by the subjects in their oral narrations. Of the total 1,574 communication strategies observed, 1,171 (74.4%) were verbal and 403 (25.6%) were nonverbal.

The simplification-reduction strategy ranked number one (241, or 20.58%) among the verbal commu-

Table 1. Rank-order of communication strategies observed based on frequencies.

Communication Strategy	Rank	Total	
		Number	%
Verbal			
Simplification-reduction	1	241	20.58
Repetition	2	202	17.25
Approximation	3	112	9.56
Self-correction	4	104	8.88
Topic avoidance	5	97	8.28
Modeling	6	95	8.11
Literal expression	7	86	7.34
Message abandonment	8	84	7.17
Code switching	9	78	6.67
Circumlocution	10	39	3.34
Word coinage	11	24	2.05
Appeal for assistance	12	9	0.77
Nonverbal			
Pause	1	389	96.53
Groan	2	11	2.73
Sigh	3	2	0.49
Total: Verbal		1171	74.4
Nonverbal		403	25.6
All		1574	100.0

nication strategies observed, such as the following: "The bamboo pole () are very greasy," "He () was one of the contestant () of the Miss Universe;" and, "The queen bringing () her trophy."

The repetition strategy ranked second (202, or 17.25%). It was not unusual for the subjects to process their impromptu ideas by repeating words, phrases or even sentences before they could express a given concept in English. Examples observed were as follows: "there were/there were...;" "The boys go/go/go to/to..."

The third ranking strategy identified was approximation (112, or 9.5%). For instance: "parade" for "procession," "house" for "tent," "trumpets" for "bands," "they parade" for "they walk."

Self-correction strategy ranked fourth (104, or 8.8%). In this study, the subjects corrected themselves whenever they noticed any lexical or syntactical error in their oral narration. Cases like "was" to "were" and "the girl" to "the boy" were most common.

The fifth frequently observed verbal strategy was topic avoidance (97, or 8.28%). One student who simply did not know how to express in English the scene on carnival activities totally avoided that topic in his oral narration.

Modeling strategy ranked next to topic avoidance (95, or 8.11%). When the students were asked who their model was, their common reply was the teacher. Corder (1970) once said that it is through teachers talking to learners that they learn

language. Examples of these were as follows: "Next," "okey," "Once upon a time."

The seventh frequently used strategy was literal expression accounting for 86, or 7.34%, as in:

"We have there are... race carabao," in the students' Cebuano, "Duna usab kita'y lumba sa kabaw."

Other verbal strategies noted were message abandonment (84, or 7.17%), code switching (78, or 6.67%), circumlocution (39, or 3.34%), word coinage (24, or 2.05%) and appeal for assistance (9, or 0.77%).

On the other hand, the nonverbal vocalic communication strategies employed by students were: a) Pause strategy - 389 cases or 96.53%; b) groan strategy - 11, or 2.73%; and c) sigh strategy, where only 1 case was noted. Furthermore, the only nonverbal nonvocalic communication strategy observed was "facial expression" where 2 instances were observed.

Comprehensibility of Oral Narrations.

It was found that the judges significantly agreed on their evaluations. Likewise, there were no significant differences in the individual ratings of the judges. Granting that there were biases in the judges' evaluations, it would seem that their influence could be very limited.

Results also revealed that the male subjects obtained a higher mean comprehensibility rating than the females. However, a t-test showed that there was no significant

difference in their comprehensibility scores.

Relation of Use of Communication Strategies with Students' Oral Language Proficiency and Message Comprehensibility.

Statistical analysis showed that there was a significant relationship between the students' use of communication strategies and their oral language proficiency. There was also a significant relationship between the use of communication strategies and message comprehensibility.

Differences in Use of Communication Strategies.

The male subjects employed more verbal and nonverbal communication strategies than did the females. However, a chi-square test revealed that both sexes did not differ significantly in their use of communication strategies.

Predictors of Comprehensibility Level Scores.

The regression analysis indicated that among the personal and related variables, type of school, pronunciation, age, years in school, nervousness and sex were found to be significant predictors. On the other hand, among the specific types of communication strategies, topic avoidance, simplification-reduction, circumlocution, modeling, code switching, message abandonment, approximation and word coinage

were also found to be significant predictors. It must be noted, however, that of these 8 significant predictors, 7 were negatively correlated and only 1 was positively correlated with comprehensibility level scores. This generally implies that the more frequent the use of these strategies in oral narrations, the lower the comprehensibility level score; and conversely, the less frequent the use of these strategies, the higher the comprehensibility level score.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Identifying and recognizing the existence of communication strategies, which either promote or hinder message comprehensibility in the spoken form of a target language, seems to be *sine qua non* for second-language teachers. While the use of these strategies may result in deviances in the learners' interlanguage, they must be treated as developmental in process, and therefore must be exploited rather than corrected.

A positive reinforcement is essential for strategies which enhance high message comprehensibility, while gradually and deliberately reducing the students' use of strategies which promote low message comprehensibility. Concomitant to this, it is imperative for second-language teachers to examine critically the communication needs and goals of their students, and subsequently simulate

situations which encourage functional communication.

Furthermore, among the problems perceived by the students during their oral narrations, the "use of grammar" had been felt to be a major problem. This suggests that in the process of developing communicative competence among language learners in their target language, grammatical accuracy should not be relegated to the background. Thus, one of the crucial issues to be tackled in any innovative approach to second-language teaching should focus on linguistic accuracy as it affects the communication process.

Pronunciation as a problem encountered by students during their oral narrations was found as the best predictor of comprehensibility level score. This indicates that the teaching of sounds of words, phrases and sentences should be done in a more meaningful and functional context.

Moreover, the use of communication strategies can be deduced from the second-language learners' interlanguage. Therefore, knowing the learners' output along this area, it is possible to predict their target language proficiency. Consequently, this knowledge may be used as basis for improving teaching methodologies and evaluation procedures.

Lastly, the obtained comprehensibility level of students involved in this study points to the need of improving the kind of linguistic inputs that should be made available to them, i.e., they should not only be exposed to formal structured learning environment which is limited in both content and context but also to informal situations where functional communication may be used to develop fluency skills and help learners focus on the content of language.

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