Improving English for tourism and hospitality by teaching communication strategies to describe Thai culture-specific concepts

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Abstract

Describing Thai culture-specific concepts is a compulsory task in tourism and hospitality context. However, with no equivalent English words and terms, these concepts are difficult to describe, particularly to people from different cultural and language backgrounds. The objective of this research is to explain the value of teaching communication strategies to help Thai students solve their communication problems and enhance oral communication performances when describing Thai culture-specific concepts to Chinese students. The study was conducted with 10 Thai undergraduates who volunteered to be partners of Chinese students in an academic exchange program in Thailand. The data were collected in four phases: Phase 1 Pre-assessment, Phase 2 Direct teaching of communication strategy, Phase 3 Independent learning, and Phase 4 Post-assessment. In each phase, the participants were asked to complete the self-reflection questionnaires. The results showed that the participants' scores for describing Thai culture-specific concepts in the post-assessment were higher than those in the pre-assessment, particularly in terms of fluency and vocabulary. Based on students' self-reflection, they appeared to have more difficulties in describing abstract concepts than concreate concepts. They tended to use the taught communication strategies more frequently, particularly describing characteristics and properties. They also found these CSs useful and wanted to take risk using more CSs. The study suggests that the combination of direct teaching and independent learning enabled students to be more aware of the use of communication strategies and therefore improve their oral communication performances in describing Thai culture-specific concepts.

Keywords: English for hospitality, communication strategies, Thai culture-specific concepts,

1. Introduction

Tourism and hospitality are important industries and rapidly growing economic sectors in Thailand. Consequently, there have been great demands for graduates who have outstanding communication skills in English and other foreign languages in these industries. Many educational institutions in Thailand, therefore, have promoted practice of and experience in English language skills. Among the language skill sets, oral communication training, in particular, has a

high priority in the hospitality context. According to Leclerc and Martin (2004), hospitality-related work deals mainly with on-site communication between guests and hosts, where intercultural contexts extensively occur. When hosts are interacting with foreign guests from different countries and cultures, they are required to speak clearly, deliver explicit messages, and deal with some problem-related intercultural communication (Blue & Harun, 2003).

Describing culture-specific concepts is a compulsory task in hospitality. Hosts are inevitably required to explain a number of culture-specific situations and terminology, many of which are difficult to equate to an English word or expression (Magablih, Abulhaiha, & Saleh, 2010). These situations are usually challenging for people who have different language and cultural backgrounds to understand. Miscommunication may lead to a negative image and reputation of the host countries. Perhaps, teaching students strategies to deal with communication problems and establish mutual understanding in communication would enable them to describe and explain Thai culture-specific concepts effectively and help avoid misunderstanding of the message.

Communication strategies (CSs) are commonly known as language devices that help solve communication problems and establish mutual understanding in communication (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997; Nakatani, 2010). Many types of CSs help compensate for linguistic gaps and lead to the meaning being conveyed successfully. According to Wongsawang (2001), circumlocution involves describing the properties of and giving examples of unknown words. Approximation is employed when speakers replace the unknown words with superordinate and related words such as *bowl* for *cup*. Some CSs help keep the conversation channel open (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997). For example, lexicalized fillers (e.g., *well*, *I think*, and *that's a good question*) help speakers gain time to think about what to say. Other CSs, such as asking for help and asking for clarification, are known as communication enhancers (Nakatani, 2010). They help establish mutual understandings between the speakers and interlocutors. With these significant roles, CSs are recommended to be taught to improve oral communication performance, particularly in the English as a second language (ESL) and English as foreign language (EFL) contexts.

Many previous studies have demonstrated the usefulness of teaching CSs, especially increasing learners' awareness of strategy use, enhancing language proficiency and acquisition, as well as encouraging positive attitudes towards communication (Kongsom, 2016; Lam, 2010; Maleki, 2007; Nakatani, 2010). In the last decade, only a few research studies into teaching CSs have been conducted in regards to the Thai context where English is taught as a foreign language. These studies include Chuanchaisit and Prapphal (2009), Konchiab (2015) and Kongsom (2010). Most of them focused on delivering direct teaching (e.g., explaining usefulness of each strategy), supported by practice using a variety of CSs through communicative tasks. These studies showed Thai EFL students were more aware of strategy use. They also used CSs more effectively after the CS training. In addition, Kongsom's (2010) re-

search showed that students had positive attitudes towards the CS instruction. As can be seen, direct instruction provides learners with guidelines for using specific strategies properly while communicative tasks help stimulate learning by applying their knowledge to deal with communicative circumstances.

However, as recommended by Maleki (2007) and Nakatani (2010), it is essential to promote independent learning so that students can develop communication strategies by reflecting on their own learning process and performance. Therefore, in developing effective strategy training, the current study combined direct teaching and independent learning to encourage students to bridge the gaps between formal and informal learning situations, from classroom to a real-world context.

2. Objective

The objective of this research was to explain how teaching CSs help improve students' oral communication performances.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Participants

Participants were 10 male and female EFL students at an intermediate level of English language proficiency. They were from the Faculty of Business Administration and Liberal Arts. They voluntarily participated in an international exchange program in 2016 as academic partners of Chinese students. These students were invited to attend the current research based on their willingness and availability. They were informed about the purpose of the study, procedures, their roles and intended outcomes of the study, before making a decision to be participants. Once they agreed to participate, allocated study time and classroom arrangement were negotiated. However, these participants had the right to withdraw from participation and non-participation would not affect their studies as teaching were carried out as complementary lessons for interested students, not as part of the regular class.

3.2 Data collection methods

3.2.1 Pre- and Post- assessments

The Pre- and Post- assessments were a parallel performance test, adopted from Konchiab (2015). Each of them required students to describe one abstract noun and one concrete noun and tell a story about a Thai culture with the English speaking teacher. The pre-assessment included "San Praphum" (spirit house), "Wai" (Thai manner to pay respect to others), and Loy Krathong festival (a kind of water festival). The post-assessment contained "Poung Malai" (Garland), "Alms giving" (Food offering to monks), and "Songkran festival" (Traditional Thai New Year). Their performance was rated, focusing on five language features: fluency, coherence, vocabulary, language structure, and pronunciation. This rubric was adapted from IELTS speaking band scores.

3.2.2 Self-reflection questionnaire

A self-reflection questionnaire was used to track students' learning progress throughout the research pro-

ject. It was comprised of three parts. The first part involved open-ended questions asking about Thai culture-specific concepts students described. The second part included the rating scale of the frequency of CSs and the last part contained open-ended questions about the results of using CSs. The participants were required to complete the self-reflection questionnaires after the pre-assessment, two lessons of CS instruction, eight weeks of independent learning, and the post-assessment.

3.3. Framework of communication strategies

The framework of communication strategies was adapted from Dörnyei and Scott (1997), Wongsawang (2001) and Konchiab (2015). It comprises nine strategies that help speakers compensate for linguistic gaps, stall time, and establish mutual understanding. As outlined in Table 1, use of related term, superlative term, describing characteristic and property, giving an example, circumlocution, and literal translation are selected CSs to help compensate for linguistic gaps. Lexicalised fillers are strategies for stalling time while asking for help and confirmation checking were taught to help students establish mutual understanding with the interlocutors.

Table 1 *Selected Communication Strategies and Descriptions*

CSs	Description
Use of related term	Using words that share semantic features, e.g., using "*climate*" for "*weather*"
Use superlative term	Using more general terms or broad explanation, e.g., using "*tradition*" for "*merit making*"
Describe characteristic/ property	Describing shapes, sizes, and materials, e.g., describing "*krathong*" as "*banana leave cup*"
Giving an example	Giving examples of the target words, e.g., "*people such as aunt, uncle, and grandparents*" for "*relatives*"
Circumlocution	Explaining or defining a concept instead of saying the specific words, e.g., describing "*firework*" as "*something that we put the fire and it burst*".
Literal translation	Translating words by word from L1 to L2, and false cognates, e.g., using "*the monk day*" for "*Buddhist day*"
Lexicalised fillers	Using gambits, e.g., "*I think*" or "*Well*" to fill pauses, to stall, and to gain time when thinking what to say
Asking for help	Asking the interlocutors for clarification, repetition, e.g., "*Could you repeat that?"* and "*What do you call that?*"
Confirmation check	Checking the interlocutor's understanding, e.g., "*Do you see what I mean?*" and "*OK, so far?*"

3.4 Communication strategy instruction

This research combined two approaches to teaching CSs. Direct teaching was delivered for two weeks, followed by independent learning for eight weeks. Direct teaching included two lessons, describing objects and explaining proverbs, which were adapted from Konchiab (2015). Key activities were introducing key CSs, language scaffolding, and practice with the English speaking teachers. In independent learning, students were required to explain Thai culture- specific concepts to their Chinese partners once a week and complete the self-reflection questionnaires.

3.5. Data analysis

The process of data analysis was conducted in two ways. Firstly, the scores of oral communication performances from the pre- and post-assessments were compared to explain the impacts of the CS instruction on the improvement in students' oral communication performance. Secondly, the transcription data of students' oral communication performances were observed, utterances represent each CS were coded, categorised, and extracted as examples to explain changes in using CSs after the instruction.

4. Results and discussions

A comparison of students' scores in the pre- and post- assessments reveals improvement in students' oral communication performances after teaching CSs. As shown in Table 2, eight of 10 students improved their scores while only two had scores unchanged. Among the five criteria for performance evaluation, the majority of students were likely to improve their scores of fluency and vocabulary.

Table 2 *Students' Scores of Oral Communication Performances in the Pre- and Post- Assessments*

Students	Fluency		Coherence		Vocabulary		Pronunciation		Grammar		Total	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
1	2	2	2	2	3	3	4	4	3	3	14	14
2	4	4	4	4	3	3	4	4	3	3	18	18
3	**3**	**4**	3	3	**3**	**4**	4	4	3	3	16	18
4	**3**	**4**	3	3	**3**	**4**	4	4	3	3	16	18
5	2	2	2	2	**2**	**3**	3	3	3	3	12	13
6	2	2	2	2	2	2	3	3	3	3	12	12
7	3	3	**3**	**4**	3	3	**3**	**4**	3	3	15	17
8	**3**	**4**	**3**	**4**	**3**	**4**	**3**	**4**	3	3	15	18
9	**2**	**3**	2	2	**3**	**4**	4	4	3	3	14	16
10	**2**	**3**	2	2	**2**	**3**	3	3	3	3	12	14

These results are supported by examples of transcription data. The majority of students appeared to speak more fluently. As shown in Example 1, Student A was only able to provide short answers to the interlocutor's questions and sometimes left message unfinished in the pre-assessment. However, in the post-assessment shown in Example 2, Student A tended to provide more information about the concept with fewer turns.

Example 1: Describing "spirit house" in the pre-assessment

Interlocutor: *Ok, you got one minute to think about the spirit house. What is that? What is it like? What is it for? How do Thai people use it? OK?*

Student A: *In my opinion I think it's a building that make the people ah pray pray for the god of the own house that like so something like that and…*

Interlocutor: *Where do people put it? Can you put it in the garden in your house? Where do you put a spirit house?*

Student A: *Ah.. We put it in the house but inside the house*.

Interlocutor: *Inside the house?*

Student A: *And ah may be we put it in the front of the house*.

Interlocutor: *In front too, Ok*

Example 2: Describing "alms giving" in the post-assessment

Interlocutor: *Think about giving alms. What is it? What is it done? Why the Thai people do it? You got 1 minute to prepare yourself ok?*

Student A: *Giving alms is Thai culture and tradition. We do to respect or to pray ourselves. We do it in morning and we are… do actually in the morning. The monk will walk around maybe in front of house so we can giving alms for them and do it on the ceremony like build the new house. We have to pray and giving alms so we bring the monk come to the house and give alms and someday on Wednesday at midnight. I'm not sure but some midnight on Wednesday it a lot of monk on the street and we can go to make merit.*

In addition, the observation of utterances representing CSs from the transcription data showed that the majority of students attempted to describe Thai culture-specific concepts by describing characteristic and property, giving an example, and circumlocution more often. For example, in the pre-assessment Student B described "spirit house" as "*a place to...for people… Thai people… Buddha Buddhism people they respect the spirit*". This description seemed unclear. However, Student B appeared to use these CSs more effectively in the post assessment by describing the characteristic and the function of "garland" as "*It's made from jasmine flower or roses…or another kind of flower and it is for give to people you respect*". Furthermore, many students commonly used more general terms to describe concrete

nouns in the pre-assessment while using more appropriate word choice in the post-assessment. For example, they used "*little house*", "*place*" and "*building*" to describe "spirit house" in the pre-assessment while describing "garland" as "*a wrench of flowers*" and "*a circle of mixed flowers*" in the post-assessment.

The analysis of students' self-reflection contributed to three key findings. Firstly, regarding their use of CSs across 12 weeks, students tended to describe characteristic and property more frequently over 12 weeks while using little or no fillers. Secondly, in terms of Thai culture-specific concepts, they were more likely to deal with difficulties in describing abstract concepts (e.g., Fortune telling, Karma, and Funeral) than concrete concepts (e.g., *Tung*, a northern style vertical flags; *Khantoke*, a small dining table shaped like a round food tray; and Buddha amulet, a small Buddha statue worn around the neck). Lastly, regarding the usefulness of CSs and plan in using CSs, the majority of the students reported that describing characteristic and property, giving examples, and using related words, as well as using gestures were most useful CSs. Interestingly, students also reported that they planned to use some other strategies that they seldom used such as lexicalised filler and clarification checking.

From the findings, it is likely that CS training helped improve students' oral communication performances when they described culture-specific concepts, particularly in terms of increasing fluency and vocabulary. Fluency may have resulted from their constant practice of and reflection on using CSs when describing culture-specific concepts with their Chinese partners in the independent learning phase. Reflection on their own practice allowed students to be more aware of their communication problems and find their own ways to solve them. Also, they had many chances to take risk experimenting with alternative CSs and gradually became tolerant to language mistakes, and confidently stayed in the longer conversation (Cohen & Dörnyei, 2002; Manchón, 2000).

The most commonly used strategies were describing characteristics and properties, giving examples, and circumlocution. Learning and practicing to use these strategies allowed students to create a wider choice of vocabulary to provide a clearer picture of what has been described (Wongsawang, 2001). Particularly, describing physical components, properties, and characteristics also helped prevent misunderstandings derived from cultural differences (Littlemore, 2003). Using these strategies, therefore, reflects students' lexical resource which is one of the positive features of oral communication performances (Konchiab, 2015).

To conclude, the present study provides some evidence to support the value of teaching CSs. The combination of direct teaching and independent learning appeared to raise learners' awareness of strategy usage and promote the effective and appropriate use of CSs to cope with communication problems when describing Thai culture-specific concepts. Therefore, these two approaches to teaching CSs should be integrated into the tourism and hospitality education programs to improve Thai EFL learners'

oral communication performances.

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