

Communication Strategies to Solve Lexical Problems in Writing

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Abstract

The successful use of communication strategies in writing can help the writer communicate in difficult situations, including that of insufficient vocabulary. This study aims to investigate what communication strategies in writing students use to solve problems at the lexical level. Since this was a qualitative study and the researchers wanted to collect in-depth information from the subjects, there were only three subjects who were assigned to do a written task for which, in order to observe how they tackled their writing problems, they could not use dictionaries or ask other people for assistance. The results show that the students usually used literal translation and approximation. The reasons for using these strategies are awareness of language accuracy, fluency of writing and the audience's comprehension.

Introduction

The teaching of writing in the classroom has often focused on either product-oriented or process-oriented approaches. The former focuses on written products in terms of quality of writing; students are expected to create a good product of writing. On the other hand, the latter looks at writing in terms of process and encourages students to write as many ideas as they can with less anxiety about correctness (Nunan, 1991). Nevertheless, teaching writing skills in the classroom has ignored the ways students themselves tackle the difficulty caused by a lack of the necessary linguistic knowledge in writing or how they use communication strategies to convey their meaning (Blair-Kerr, 1993). Consequently, it might be worthwhile to investigate which communication strategies students use to complete a written task. One of the problems students have when trying to communicate in English is not having enough vocabulary. Therefore, this research aimed to investigate the communication strategies used in writing in order to answer the research question: what communication strategies in writing do students use to solve problems at a lexical level? It is expected that the exploration of this study would help teachers organise student training on how to use communication strategies successfully.

Communication strategy types investigated in this study

A communication strategy is a method which learners consciously use when they are facing a problem about their insufficient command of the target language in order to keep their communication going (Faerch & Kasper, 1983; Tarone, 1977, cited in Tarone, 1983). Typologies of communication strategies proposed in this study are applied from Bialystok's, Faerch & Kasper's and Tarone's classifications (Bialystok, 1983; Tarone, 1977, cited in Tarone, 1983; Faerch & Kasper, 1983) (see figure below). Communication strategies regarding writers' behaviour when they cope with problematic words while writing consist of two main types: *achievement strategies* and *avoidance strategies*.

Avoidance strategies are employed when writers encounter problems and try to get over them instead of avoiding them and are divided into *L2-based strategies*, or strategies

which require writers to apply their knowledge of the target language to employ those strategies; and *L1-based strategies*, or strategies which require writers to use their native language to deliver the message. L2-based strategies, are also classified into three sub-strategies: *circumlocution*, in which writers describe the characteristics or actions of unknown words in English instead of using the exact vocabulary (e.g. ‘someone who tells you about news on TV’ for a news reporter); *approximation*, in which writers use an English word which has roughly the same meaning as the one they want to write, or a synonym (e.g. ‘pipe’ for waterpipe); and *word coinage*, in which writers create a new word based on English language system (e.g. ‘airball’ for balloon). L1-based strategies, on the other hand, are composed of two sub-strategies: *literal translation*, in which writers create a new word based on Thai language system (e.g. ‘big part’ (ส่วนใหญ่) for most) and *language switch*, in which writers write a Thai term directly without translating it into English, or phonologically transfer the sound from Thai word (e.g. เจ้าหน้าที่ฝ่ายทะเบียน for registrar).

Avoidance strategies, on the other hand, are used when writers decide to avoid or stop delivering the message. There are two sub-strategies in this category: *message abandonment*, in which writers try to write first but finally skip writing it, that is, they make a linguistic attempt to tackle the problem word, and finally leave an incomplete word (e.g. ‘seri---’ for serious); and *topic avoidance*, in which writers do not even try to write the difficult word and move on to the next point immediately. An overview of communication strategy types focused on in this study is shown in the figure below.

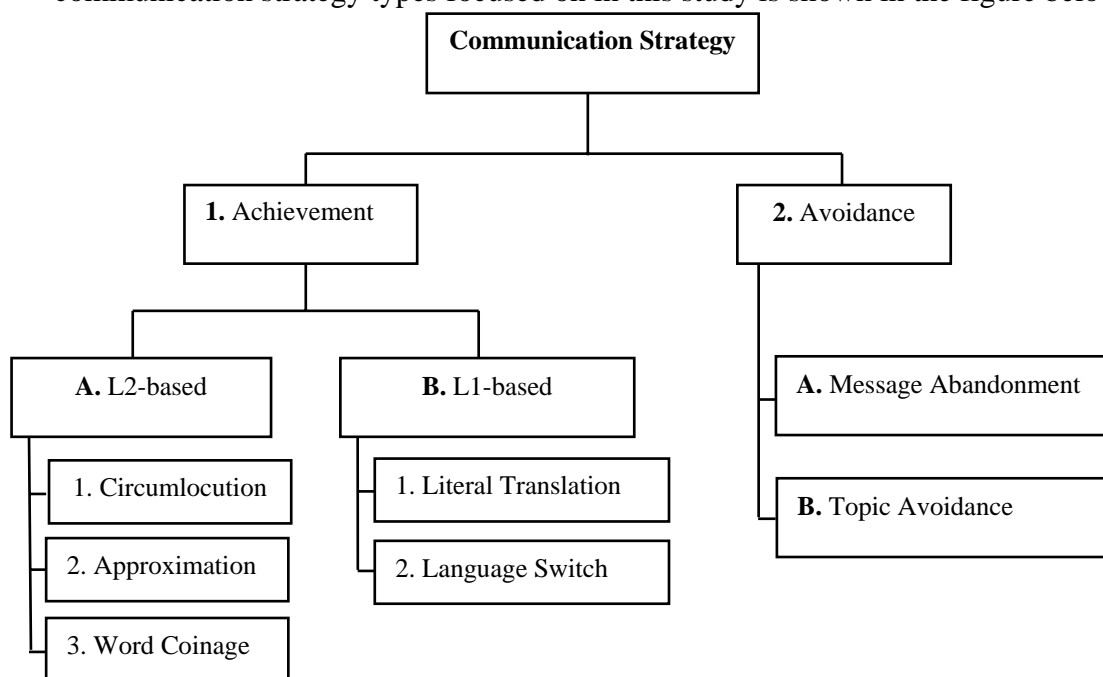


Figure: An overview of communication strategy types

Methodology

Subjects

The subjects were three students whose English was at intermediate level. They had an expressive personality; that is, they tended to talk about their feelings. This trait was necessary as think-aloud methodology requires subjects to verbalise what they think.

Instruments

In order to investigate the use of communication strategies, three instruments were employed: think-aloud protocols, subjects' written assignments and semi-structured interviews.

Think-aloud protocols: The think-aloud technique was used in the form of 'concurrent verbalisation'; that is, the subjects had to report what they were thinking while writing their assignments.

Subjects' written assignments: The tasks were considered along with the think-aloud protocol and the interview in order to detect the communication strategies employed. The material was one assigned written task of 700-800 words. The topic was 'What do you think about LNG 101?' (LNG 101 is the English course the subjects took with the first researcher). The instructions in the task were in Thai so that the subjects could understand clearly what they had to do. The think-aloud protocols were used as the main instrument in parallel with the subjects' written assignments. If there were unclear points, the interviews were used to probe for clarification.

Semi-structured interviews: Each interview consisted of around twenty questions, was conducted in Thai and audio-taped. The subjects were interviewed individually after they had submitted their written work with their cassette tapes containing their think-aloud protocols to the first researcher. After analyzing the data gained from the think-aloud protocols and the subjects' written assignments, the interview was used to probe for further information about any strategies that were not reported in their think-aloud protocols and to find out their experience of English learning because it could affect their choice of communication strategies.

Procedures

The three main stages in the study are presented as follows:

a) Training stage

Before writing, the subjects, together in a group, were trained to think aloud. The training was applied from Ericsson & Simon (1987) and consisted of three main steps as follows:

Step 1 *Asking the subjects to play an activating memory game:* In a group, the subjects were asked to play a game to activate their memories. They had to take turns saying the names of fruits. The next subject repeated the previously nominated fruits and added another fruit. The game could enable the subjects to be more alert for the real training session.

Step 2 *Introducing communication strategies to the subjects by elicitation:* The first researcher introduced the communication strategies by asking questions (e.g. what should you do if you cannot think of a vocabulary item while writing an essay?) in order to check the subjects' background knowledge of communication strategies.

Step 3 *Teaching the subjects how to think aloud:* The subjects were trained how to express the strategies through the think-aloud technique. The first researcher began by describing the think-aloud technique, its usefulness and how to make an effective think-aloud protocol. Then, she demonstrated how to think aloud while writing. Next, in order to plan what to write in the sample task, the subjects were given two minutes to think about their English courses at high school. After that, the subjects were trained

individually how to think aloud while writing about their English courses at high school. The short paragraph took around 15 minutes to finish. While each subject was writing, the researcher sat with them; if they said little, she tried to encourage them to say more.

b) Writing stage

The subjects had to do the written task individually and think aloud while writing. There were three requirements: they could not use outside resources, such as their dictionaries or peers; they had to write around 700-800 words; and they could not stop the tape recorder while writing.

c) Interviewing stage

After transcribing and analysing the protocols, the first researcher prepared the interview questions. The subjects were interviewed individually 3-4 days after they handed in their written tasks. The questions were about how the students coped with the problems while writing the task in order to check the strategies the subjects used.

Data analysis

The data from the think-aloud protocol and the semi-structured interviews were analysed by grouping the same strategies together.

Data presentation and interpretation

The think-aloud protocol revealed that all the subjects in this study usually thought in Thai first, then, tried to translate their ideas orally into English before writing them down; in other words, they tended to use literal translation as a basis for writing every English sentence. This might be because they were thinking aloud in Thai, so the researcher was not certain whether they were employing literal translation or whether it was the influence from the think-aloud protocol. Therefore, the researcher decided not to count this strategy in this study; however, when they were not successful in using literal translation, they turned to other communication strategies. The table shows the strategies the subjects chose to use.

Table: Communication strategies reported

Types of communication strategies		Number of strategies used			Total
		Subject A	Subject B	Subject C	
Achievement L2-based	Circumlocution	3	9*	4	16
	Approximation	13	14*	8	35*
	Word coinage	0	6*	2	8
L1-based	Literal translation	every sentence	every sentence	every sentence	every sentence
	Language switch	0	1	4*	5
Avoidance	Message abandonment	1	9*	2	12
	Topic avoidance	3*	2	0	5
Total strategy use		20	41*	20	81

* the highest number reported for each strategy

From the table, the subjects employ both achievement and avoidance strategies. Considering the use of achievement strategies, L2-based strategies outnumber L1-based ones. In looking at L2-based achievement strategies, the subjects used approximation the most (35 times), followed by circumlocution and word coinage (16 times and 8 times, respectively); significantly, for L1-based strategies, the data show that literal translation was used in every sentence, while language switch was used 5 times. For avoidance strategies, message abandonment was used the most (12 times), followed by topic avoidance (5 times).

Regarding each subject's strategy use, the findings show that Subject B used all L2-based achievement strategies the most as well as message abandonment. Topic avoidance was employed the most by Subject A while Subject C relied more on the L1-based strategy, language switch. The fundamental goals of using communication strategies were on the product which focused on accuracy of the language, fluency of writing process and awareness of the audience who would read the written assignment.

The choices of communication strategies employed by each subject depended on various factors: learners' learning experience (e.g. being taught directly by teachers and transferring from other skills or other courses), learners' behaviour (e.g. risk-taking and making an attempt to communicate) and the writing situation (e.g. time constraint and lack of permitted outside resources). The use of L2-based achievement strategies (circumlocution, approximation and word coinage) was mostly affected by being taught directly, as reported by Subjects B and C; meanwhile, avoidance strategies (message abandonment and topic avoidance) were employed with respect to time constraints as reported by all three subjects.

From the interviews, it transpired that Subjects B and C, who tended to use L2-based and L1 based strategies the most, learnt the use of communication strategies from their teachers in high school; in contrast, Subject A, who relied more on avoidance strategies, had never been taught them before. This could show that, in order to train students to use communication strategies, teachers should take their students' learning experience into account so that they can provide suitable training. This point is now pursued in the discussion.

Discussion and implications

From the results, two main points are discussed, training in communication strategies and teaching the writing process.

Training in communication strategies

Basically, communication strategies can be taught through two approaches: direct training and embedded training (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990).

To conduct direct training, first, the teacher needs to assess students' strategies in order to link a new strategy with the ones students already possess by interviewing them, asking them to think aloud while performing a particular task, or asking them to answer questionnaires. Then, the teacher should explain the use of communication strategies, explicitly including the name, the purpose of the strategy use, its usefulness, etc. (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990). Finally, the teacher should demonstrate how to use the strategy by verbalising her own thinking process

while employing a particular strategy as a model for students to see how to use communication strategies.

In embedded training, students are provided with activities aiming to elicit the use of that strategies that teachers intend to teach but are not explicitly told the reasons why they are being trained (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). To conduct embedded communication strategy training, Tarone & Yule (1989) suggest that, firstly, teachers should ask students to observe an example of communicative exchanges which has problematic points; next, they identify which strategy is employed to solve each problem; lastly, they are asked to evaluate the degree of success of each strategy used.

As the data also reveal that the subjects were also aware of their audience while writing, which is a focus of the writing process, the process of writing should be taken into consideration.

Teaching the process of writing

The process of writing is often separated into three steps: *pre-writing*, *writing and rewriting* and *editing* (Hedge, 1988). It is also possible that teachers present each communication strategy while teaching each step of the writing process, as suggested below.

Pre-writing is the first step where writers plan and generate ideas before writing. Good writers should possess two senses: a sense of purpose and of audience. One way to help raise students' awareness of audience is to provide them with contextualizing tasks, writing tasks that give contexts. Hedge (2000) suggests that teachers can assign a role to each student before asking them to write to each other.

The second step where writers make the first attempt to write is writing and rewriting. The outcome is a first draft. From the findings, the subjects learned how to use communication strategies by observing their peers. Therefore, teachers should use collaborative writing in class where students can observe how their friends plan and make a draft and learn how their friends solve writing problems by using communication strategies (Hedge, 1988).

The editing step is the final stage, where surface details like grammar, spelling and punctuation are considered. Regarding the data, some of the subjects used some communication strategies because they wanted to make their tasks more accurate. Therefore, the concept of *self-correction* appearing in the editing step, in which students are asked to assess and correct their own language use, should be taken into consideration as it could help students become accurate in their own use of language (Edge, 1989).

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate communication strategies used for solving lexical problems in writing. The reasons for employing these strategies are awareness of language accuracy, fluency of writing and the audience's comprehension. The factors affecting the use of strategies are learners' learning experience, learners' behaviour and the writing situation. The data also reveal the subjects' process of writing, that is, they were aware of audience and they evaluated whether their language use was correct. This study therefore recommends that, in writing classes, teachers should train students how

to use communication strategies and to focus on the process of writing including the technique of self-correction.

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