An Investigation of the Transactional Competence of International University Students Performing Task-based Communication

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Abstract

Task-based communication is an inescapable fact of university life, both inside and outside the classroom. The research of this study is interested in how international university students perform closed oral tasks by exploring the communication strategies used to complete such "transactions." This study used a task-based pre-test/post-test methodology to examine if the treatment of teaching communication strategies affects transactional competence. Through a qualitative and quantitative assessment of task-based communication, this study observed ten international university students throughout twelve weeks while investigating their ability to negotiate meaning to complete the tests. The investigation focused on achievement strategies such as asking for clarification or confirmation and interactional strategies such as comprehension checks. The research found that the referential nature of the task and the directive function of language instigated a variety of Language Related Episodes that varied in their complexity depending on the interlocutors. These episodes demonstrated that there is a necessity for greater awareness of communication strategies to enhance the transactional competence and resulting communicative performance of international university students.

Keywords: Transactional Competence, Strategic Competence, Communication Strategies, Communicative Performance, Language Related Episodes

1. Introduction

English as a medium of instruction is standard in international universities. As such, students who are not native speakers of English need to be confident in giving directives and must be able to negotiate meaning or express nonunderstanding in situations where understanding is vital to passing a course or performing duties. The risk of miscommunication depends on the language skills of the interlocutors as some may lack the linguistic resources that they would have when communicating in their L1. These hindrances to communication could be because of phonetics and phonology or rooted in cognitive issues with regards to the processing and understanding of syntax, or some combination of these factors. Research by Kim (2012)

observed a higher number of Language Related Episodes (LREs) during complex tasks. These types of LREs are " instances of feedback, negotiating for meaning, questioning the meaning of a word or the correctness of a structure, as well as a request for assistance" that require specific strategies to be implemented to keep the doors of communication open (Swain & Lapkin 1998, p.326) as quoted in Mackey (2012, p.133). If such episodes are perceived to be too formidable to overcome, it creates obstacles to the negotiation of meaning, and as a result, communicative performance is affected. The stakes become even higher when traversing these limitations requires a specific task to be performed or a problem to be solved. Thus, the transactional function of language is essential because this is the language of doing, and as such, relies on illocutionary meaning. These interactions require achieving the desired result which will depend on an even more significant understanding of one another and a higher degree of strategic competence that can be acquired through exposure to task- based communication and communication strategies. Therefore, the directive and informative functions of language are of the utmost importance because of the roles they play in problem-solving as it relates to task-based communication. In international universities, the pedagogic tasks of the classroom need to prepare students by being transferrable to the real world and should aim "to assess student s ability to perform the target task, for it consists either of a genuine example of the target task or a virtual proxy" (Long, 2015, p.226).

1.1 Objective

The objective of this research is to demonstrate how the teaching of communication strategies affects the completion of closed tasks.

1.2 Research Question

How are the task outcomes of international university students affected by being taught achievement based communication strategies?

2. Literature Review

The complexities and interrelatedness between communicative, strategic, and transactional competence are all bound by their effects on communicative performance. Brown and Yule (1983) as found in Yule (1997, pp.12-13) were interested in the transmission of "factual or propositional information" where "the receiver is expected to understand clearly what was in the message" thus " transactional language is message oriented. " In transactional

communication and hence transactional competence, a clear understanding of giving and receiving directives is imperative and requires the use of Communication Strategies (CSs). Therefore, transactional communication is more demanding than conversational or even interactional communication because avoidance strategies are a hindrance to performing the task while the proper use of achievement strategies is most likely a necessity.

2.1 Communication Strategies

The research herein follows the two perspectives of CSs considered to be either *Interactional* or *Psycholinguistic.* Tarone (1981, p.49) as quoted in Ellis (2008, p.503) provides an interactional definition of CSs as "a mutual attempt of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in situations where requisite meaning structures do not seem to be shared." Within this interactional paradigm, Tarone (1980, p.420) explains that "CSs are seen as tools used in the joint negotiation of meaning where both interlocutors are attempting to agree as to a communicative goal." This explanation differs from the *Psycholinguistic* perspective where CSs are used in two phases for speech production. The first step is planning, which requires the speaker to determine what to say with regards to achieving their communication goals. After a plan has been contrived, the second phase, correct execution, takes place. This execution requires the speaker to be able to convey the intended meaning and purpose of the plan. If there is a failure to communicate as a result of problems with the plan or execution, CSs may be called upon to try again by modifying the existing plan or starting anew. This modification is known as an *Achievement Strategy* where the original goal is still sought. If a new plan cannot be conceived or executed, and the initial goal disregarded, this lack of attempt is considered an *Avoidance Strategy.* As a result, avoidance strategies are a hindrance to task-based communication (Faerch & Kasper, 1983). The following strategies were the focus of the treatment in this research because of their transactional function in remediating the LREs of the director and receiver when dealing with and negotiating directives. The following table represents the strategies provided by Dornyei and Scott (1997) that enhance transactional communication. Based on their compatibility with transactional communication and the requirements of task-based communication, strategies that enhance the comprehension of directives are imperative while avoidance strategies like message abandonment, mumbling, or omission are absent.

Expressing Confirmation (EXC) which was not included in Dornyei's typology, is a term coined by the present author for the maintenance strategy which represents what Nakatani

(2005, 81-82) describes as "providing active response and shadowing." For both the encoder and decoder, being involved in the interlocution are necessary, and this can be demonstrated by the responses given. Active responses are words or actions like "yes, ok, got it," that demonstrate engaged communication. Shadowing is where the listener repeats what was said showing that the details are correct and nothing has been missed.

Table 1 Communication Strategies (Dornyei and Scott 1997, 188-192)

Communication Strategies	**Abbreviation**	**Usage**
Circumlocution	CIRC	To illustrate or describe the properties of the target object or action.
All-purpose Words	APW	Nonspecific word substitutes.
Mime	MIME	To describe concepts nonverbally or with a visual illustration.
Self-repair	SR	Self-initiated corrections in one's own speech.
Other-repair	OR	Correcting another speaker's speech.
Comprehension Check	CC	To check if the interlocutor is following.
Asking for Repetition	REP	To request repetition when not hearing or understanding something correctly.
Asking for Clarification	CLAR	To request an explanation of an unfamiliar meaning structure.
Asking for Confirmation	CON	To request confirmation that one heard or understood something correctly.
Expressing Misunderstanding	EXM	To express that something was not correctly understood.
Verbal Strategy Markers	VSM	Phrases used "before or after a strategy to signal that the word or structure does not carry the intended meaning."

2.2 Language Related Episodes

As a conversational language assessment was not the objective of this research, an understanding of the LREs initiated by transactional communication is necessary. Such triggers are not necessarily just one cause but rather a combination of factors that initiate the usage of CSs.

2.2.1 Referential

Referential (REF) aspects of communication rely on the participants' ability to recognize each other's perspective and make inferences based on these perspectives while attending to and monitoring feedback. These perceptional aspects of "Spatial Dialogue" depend on the interlocutors' ability to establish "common ground" (Tenbrink et al., 2017, pp.318-319). This

spatial dialogue cannot exist without what Yule (1997, p.10) identifies as "a basic intention to identify" and "a recognition of this intention" by both the director and receiver. Therefore the referential LREs that lead to communication strategies involved triggers where participants were not identifying the same referential object because of shape, colour, or size. Referential also means establishing the same location and understanding the details about the referential positioning within the location.

2.2.2 Pronunciation

LREs referring to pronunciation (PRO) are triggers based on how they affect intelligibility between the interlocutors. Some problematic elements that are recognized by Swan and Smith (2001) to affect the communicative ability of second language speakers are consonant phonemes and their clusters along with appropriate vowel length with short and long vowel contrasts.

2.2.3 Grammatical Knowledge / Code Complexity

The author refers to Grammatical Knowledge (GRAM) as defined by Bachman and Palmer (2010, pp.44-45) which focusses on vocabulary and syntax for "producing and comprehending formally accurate utterances or sentences." This research is interested in how these utterances affect "Code Complexity" which is how complicated the syntax and vocabulary are to process by the interlocutors based on the structure and form (Skehan, 1998). This code complexity is directly related to Cognitive Complexity.

2.2.4 Cognitive Complexity of Processing

Cognitive (COG) LREs focus on task performance where the familiarity of the task can determine how much information needs processing. Such "cognitive familiarity" eases the demands of the "cognitive processing" needed to complete the task. When there is a lack of "Clarity and Sufficiency" because inferences cannot be made, due to the poor syntax for example, then confusion or an LRE ensues (Skehan 1998, p.101).

2.2.5 Communicative Stress

Communicative stress (STRESS) is the result of "performance conditions" and the time pressure as perceived by the interlocutors. In this research, there is a time component which must be managed by the participants as it may affect the "rate of speech, or opportunities to control the interaction" by the participants if time is running out or if one participant uses too

much time. Timing also compounds with issues where the "type of response" may not meet the communicative needs of the receiver and result in a lack of tact or frustration (Skehan 1998, p.101).

2.2.6 Combined LREs

LREs may not be isolated events and may have a combination of factors regarding the referential nature of task-based communication. Referential/Cognitive (REF/COG) LREs occur when there are signs of confusion regarding the clarity or sufficiency of the referential information. This confusion is usually the result of both interlocutors not sharing the same location or object of reference. Referential/Cognitive/Grammatical (REF/COG/GRAM) LREs are signs of confusion regarding the clarity or sufficiency of the referential information because of vocabulary or syntax causing both interlocutors not to share the same location or object of reference. Thus far, the CSs and LREs as a basis of this study have been defined. The next section explores the methodological rigor that was followed to garner an understanding of transactional competence and the resulting model.

3. Research Design

The methods devised for this research focus on transactional competence through English as the medium for referential communication. The research lasted a total of 12 weeks. In week 1, a pre-test measuring was conducted and was followed by ten weeks of treatment that culminated in a post-test in week 12. Through qualitative transcription and quantitative frequency counts of LREs and the use of CSs, the author tested which communication strategies were preferential to international university students using English as a mode of communication to complete closed tasks.

3.1 Participants

The participants in this research consisted of ten students from an International University's freshman second level English course. These university courses are ranked based on the equivalent IELTS and TOEFL test scores. From a testing perspective, these students would rank in the 5.5 to 6 range in IELTS or 525 to 550 in TOEFL. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that a variety of L1 nationalities were represented, thus making for a more representative study where five Thai students, two Chinese, one Vietnamese, and two Burmese

students were chosen. Each Thai student was then randomly placed with a non-Thai to make up five dyads.

3.2 Treatment

For the treatment to be successful, it required that the participants be able to acquire CSs in order to perform better when giving directives and dealing with the LREs that arose. Since "task-based language teaching constitutes a strong version of Communicative Language Teaching," (Ellis, 2003, p.30) and since tasks were already being used as an assessment tool, the author believed that tasks were also pertinent as tools of instruction. Nunan (2004, p.4) stated this pertinence in that "a pedagogical task is a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning." Thus, with regards to the treatment, the target language of transactional competence needed to factor in reciprocality where directives and CSs were the focus, and the meaning to be expressed needed to be comprehensible in order to complete the task at hand. Nunan (2004, pp.31-35) proposes a six-step procedure that requires schema building, controlled practice, authentic listening practice, focus on linguistic elements, freer practice, and finally, the introduction of the pedagogical task.

3.3 Method of Assessment

The study proposes two interdependent methods of assessment where transcriptions of the closed tasks were evaluated for qualitative and quantitative data through discourse analysis. The pre and post tests were assessed according to the same variables of timing, attempts, and the completed test scores. Therefore, communicative performance was measured by combining these factors while considering the LREs and which CSs were used.

3.4 Research Instruments and Data Collection

The tests adapted Yule's (1997) reference model combined with the research model of Shortreed (1993). The tests of this study used 54 objects of reference that were shapes of different colours and sizes to be placed on a five by five grid. 10% was assigned for each correct answer while 5% was allocated for partially correct answers where one aspect was incorrect like the wrong size or colour of shape for example. 0% was assigned to completely incorrect answers or nonstarters where the incorrect grid location was used.

Answer Sheet TEST 1, 2, 3, etc. Objects of Reference

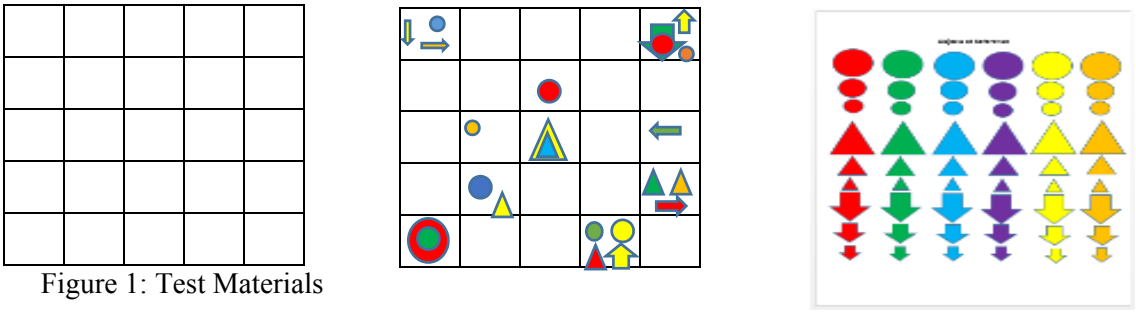


Figure 1: Test Materials

To collect the data, the tests were set up according to Figure 2. Each of the five dyads had their interactions recorded with a camera and an MP3 recorder and were allocated a maximum of 20 minutes in total to complete one test for each participant. This aspect of time management played a crucial role in that it added to the urgency of performing the tasks promptly. The objective of the task was for both interlocutors to play the roles of director and receiver. The receiver had to complete the directives as quickly and as accurately as possible. The completed tests were then evaluated for accuracy by comparing the answers to the instructions.

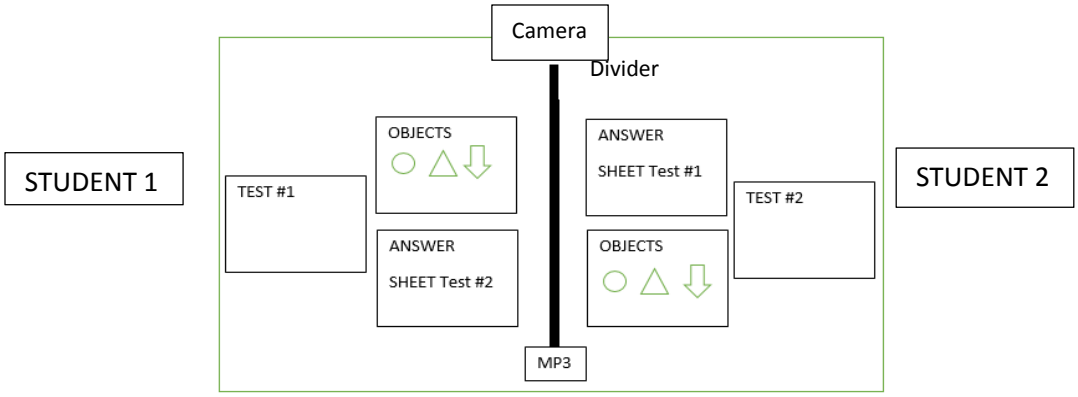


Figure 2: Test Layout

3.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis was done by transcribing the recorded information so that the author could conduct a discourse analysis to look for the LREs that caused repair sequences and the corresponding CSs that were used. The CSs were tallied through content analysis into quantitative data concerning their frequencies of use. The completion times and the test scores of the completed tasks were also calculated for a measure of answer correctness based on the

test results. This information allowed different dyads, and the interlocutors within those dyads, to be assessed for similarities and differences based on their communicative performance of the closed task.

3.6 Limitations

The methodology is limited by the small sample size due to the limited human resources to collect the data and the time-consuming complexity of the data analysis. The task used to collect the data also add limitations as the tasks were designed in complexity to create LREs and elicit CSs. Real world tasks would be beneficial to both this research and to the participants.

4. Findings

The research compares three results of time, attempts, and test scores when considering what changes in communicative performance had occurred and ultimately whether it had improved. Timing refers to the total amount of time that it took each dyad to complete the twenty tasks that made up each of the pre and post-tests. Attempts are the number of tasks out of twenty attempted where each interlocutor had ten tasks to complete as the decoder. Test % is the total of each interlocutor's test score combined and then divided by two to get the average test score. These combined scores are a better representative than individual scores because they are more indicative of communicative performance where interaction is imperative.

Table 2 Differences in Time, Attempts, and Test Scores

Pre-Test	Timing	No. of Attempts	TEST %	Post-Test	Timing	No. of Attempts	TEST %	Differences	Timing	No. of Attempts	TEST %
Dyad 1	0: 20: 00	17/20	12. 5 %	Dyad 1	0: 20 :00	13/20	35. 0 %	Dyad 1	0: 00 :00	-4	+22.5%
Dyad 2	0: 20: 00	17/20	40. 0 %	Dyad 2	0: 20 :00	20/20	80. 0 %	Dyad 2	0: 00 :00	+3	+40.0%
Dyad 3	0: 20: 00	16/20	42. 5 %	Dyad 3	0: 16 :41	20/20	77. 5 %	Dyad 3	0: 03 :19	+4	+35.0%
Dyad 4	0: 20: 00	17/20	40. 0 %	Dyad 4	0: 20 :00	20/20	85. 0 %	Dyad 4	0: 00 :00	+3	+45.0%
Dyad 5	0: 20: 00	20/20	75. 0 %	Dyad 5	0: 18 :05	20/20	92. 5 %	Dyad 5	0: 01 :55	0	+17.5%

Table 2 shows that of the three results, the timing was the least affected. All the dyads took the full twenty minutes allotted to them for the pre-test while only Dyads 3 and 5 took less time in the post-test. The ability to manage time is an important factor in timed tasks because it determines the number of smaller tasks accomplished, or as in the second factor, how many

attempts there are to complete the whole task. Of the five dyads, only Dyad 5 attempted 20/20 tasks on the pre-test while Dyad 3 only made 16/20 and the others 17/20. These attempts also have a direct effect in the Test % in that each attempt not made is a loss of points in the assessment. In the post-test, each dyad except Dyad 1, made more attempts.

The Pearson Correlation Coefficient was used to measure the linear correlation between the variables of single CSs, such as Expressing Confirmation, to the total strategies used, Language Related Episodes to total strategies used, and total CSs to the Test Scores. The correlations were tested for significance at $p \leq 0.05$ to indicate the strength of the relationships between the variables. Paired sample two-tailed t-tests of the individual pre and post-test frequencies are used to compare the changes that have occurred with CSs, LREs, and the pre and post-test scores. Similar to the Pearson Correlation Coefficients, the t-test scores also sought a significance of ≤ 0.05.

Table 3 Pre-Test Frequency of Communication Strategy Use

CSs	CIRC	APW	MIME	SR	CC	VSM	OR	REP	CLAR	CON	EXC	EXM	TOTAL
Dyad 1	7	0	22	10	6	1	3	1	59	18	58	19	204
Dyad 2	4	4	73	19	5	4	13	4	58	41	146	11	382
Dyad 3	1	13	80	10	10	1	14	1	35	20	120	10	315
Dyad 4	2	0	14	20	26	2	10	2	30	39	143	8	296
Dyad 5	0	1	106	30	28	6	16	3	25	34	191	6	446
Total:	14	18	**295**	89	75	14	56	11	**207**	**152**	**658**	54	**1643**

The frequency data in Table 3 demonstrates that before the treatment there was a tendency to favour some communication strategies over others. *Expressing Confirmation* was utilized the most with 658 occurrences followed by *Miming* with 295, *Asking for Clarification* with 207, and *Asking for Confirmation* with 152. The rest of the communication strategies fall well behind in their usage. When the Pearson Correlation Coefficient was calculated with regards to the relationship between the Total Communication Strategies and Expressing Confirmation, it found that **r = 0.94**, and there is a strong positive correlation where **p = 0.02.**

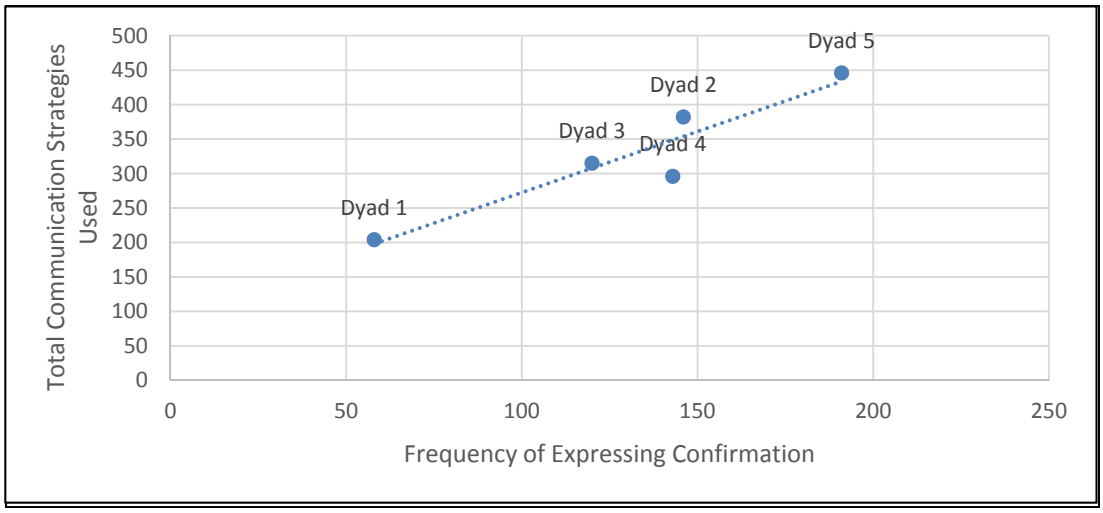


Figure 3 Pre-Test Correlation of Expressing Confirmation and Total Communication Strategy Use

The graph in Figure 3 reiterates the correlation as the results sharply increase from left to right as the trend line rises from Dyad 1's 204 total strategies, 58 of which being EXC, to Dyad 5's 446 total strategies with 191 being EXC. None of the other strategies showed any significant correlation with the total strategies used.

Table 4 Pre-Test Frequency of LREs

LREs	**REF**	**REF/ COG**	**REF/COG/GRAM**	**PRO**	**COG**	**GRAM**	**STRESS**	**TOTAL**
Dyad 1	24	67	20	0	11	6	20	148
Dyad 2	61	108	31	14	0	17	8	239
Dyad 3	70	85	33	7	12	13	22	242
Dyad 4	50	66	17	4	16	14	21	188
Dyad 5	40	139	20	7	16	2	46	270
Total:	245	465	121	32	55	52	117	1087

From the pre-test frequencies for CSs in Table 3 and LREs in Table 4, the Pearson Correlation Coefficient found a strong positive correlation between the CSs used and the total number of LREs. The results found the value of **r = 0.93** where **p = 0.02**.

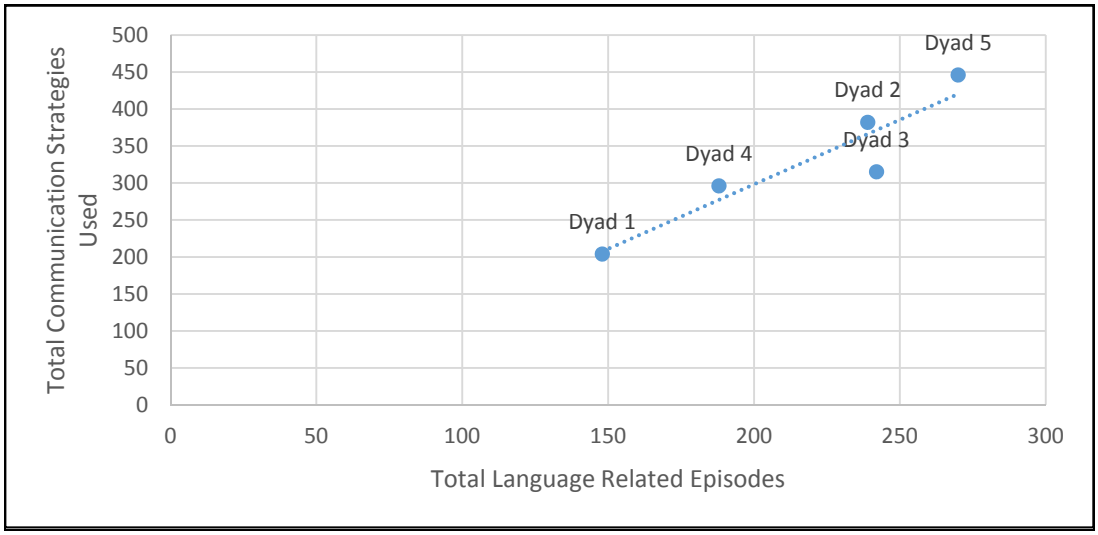


Figure 4 Pre-Test Correlation of Total Communication Strategies and Language-Related Episodes

As expected, the graph in Figure 4 delineates a strong positive correlation indicating that there is a tendency of co-occurrence between the CSs and LREs. This concomitant relationship is also demonstrated in the post-test frequencies.

Table 5 Post –Test Frequency of Communication Strategy Use

CSs	CIRC	APW	MIME	SR	CC	VSM	OR	REP	CLAR	CON	EXC	EXM	TOTAL
Dyad 1	2	13	36	10	17	0	16	0	27	51	89	3	264
Dyad 2	0	0	33	29	24	6	17	1	76	29	207	4	426
Dyad 3	1	6	75	24	24	5	20	10	46	17	135	10	373
Dyad 4	0	3	29	44	23	1	8	5	19	48	196	3	379
Dyad 5	0	0	123	26	25	2	8	0	15	27	222	4	452
Total:	3	22	**296**	**133**	**113**	14	69	16	**183**	**172**	**849**	24	1894

From the frequencies in Table 5, the communication strategy of Expressing Confirmation was also the dominant strategy during the post-test. The value where **r = 0.93** is a strong positive correlation and is significant where **p = 0.02** in relation to the total communication strategies used.

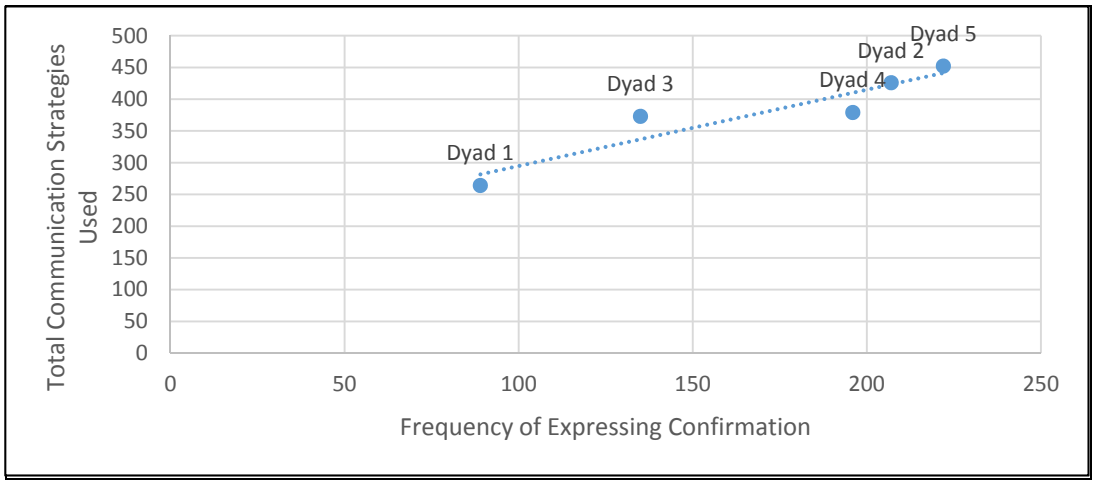


Figure 4 Post- Test Correlations of Expressing Confirmation and Total Communication Strategy Use

Table 6 Post-Test Frequency of LREs

LREs	REF	REF/COG	REF/COG/GRAM	PRO	COG	GRAM	STRESS	TOTAL
Dyad 1	17	114	26	0	8	2	14	181
Dyad 2	75	105	24	19	8	1	7	239
Dyad 3	65	80	27	5	8	10	17	212
Dyad 4	53	75	23	0	11	3	19	184
Dyad 5	40	140	25	1	5	6	25	242
Total:	250	514	125	25	40	22	82	1058

The Pearson Correlation Coefficient calculated that the communication strategies used with the number of LRE in Table 6 also showed a strong positive correlation where the value of **r = 0.84** with **p = 0.08**.

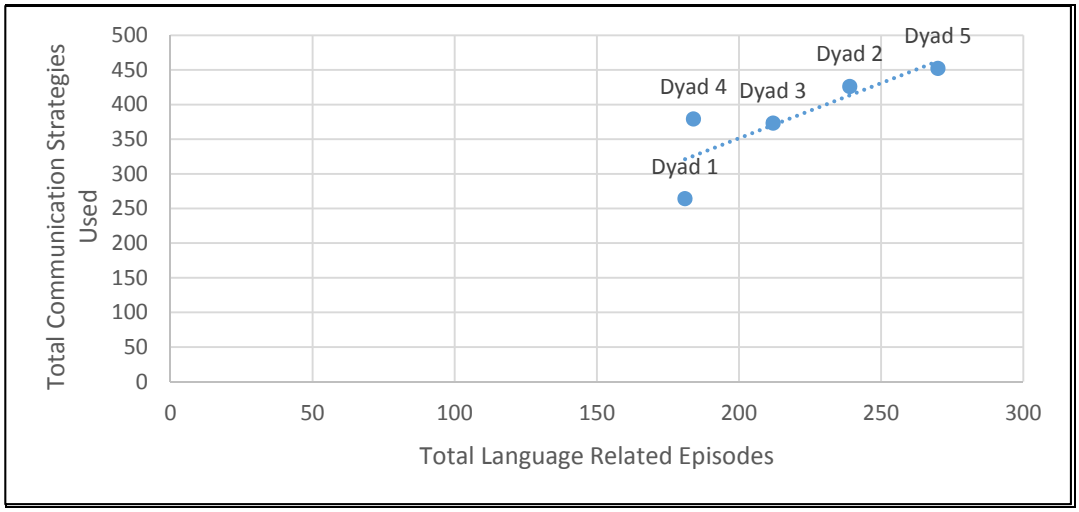


Figure 5 Post- Test Correlation of Total Communication Strategies and Language- Related Episodes

In the graph of Figure 5, a noticeable shift up and to the right is observed as the minimum LREs represented by Dyad 1 have increased along with the total CSs by each dyad.

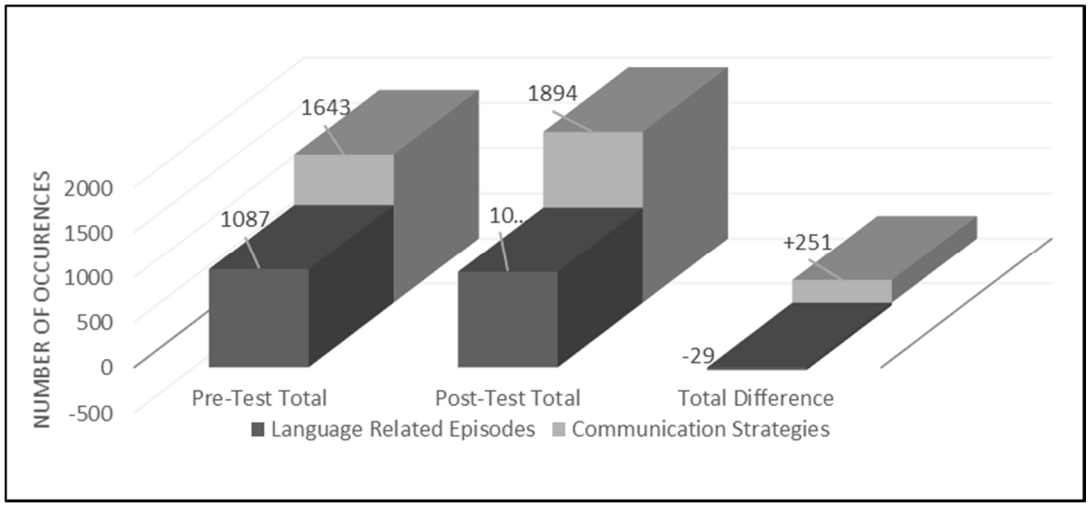
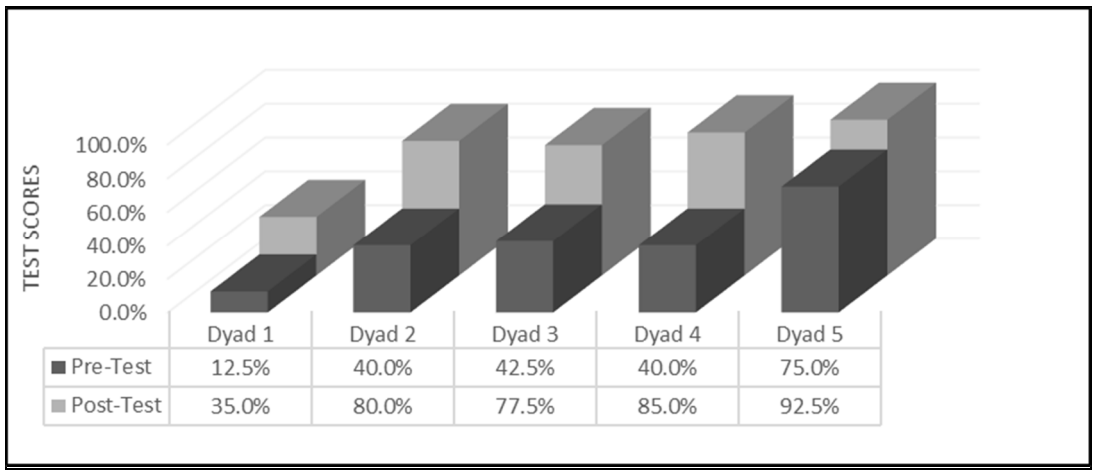


Figure 6 Pre / Post-Test Totals and Differences

In Figure 6, it can be seen that the number of CSs used is consistently more than the LREs from the pre-test to the post-test. The preponderance of CSs to LREs can be attributed to the nature of CSs and their usage in that they facilitate communication and are not only used when a problem arises. Facilitation instead of remediation explains why the most common strategy is Expressing Confirmation which is used for *maintenance*. While on the other hand, LREs are always representative of the occurrence of a problem in which one or more CSs may be used to overcome.



	Dyad 1	Dyad 2	Dyad 3	Dyad 4	Dyad 5
Pre-Test	12.5%	40.0%	42.5%	40.0%	75.0%
Post-Test	35.0%	80.0%	77.5%	85.0%	92.5%

Figure 7 Dyad Test Scores on the Pre and Post-Tests

Figure 7 illustrates the improvements that occurred with each dyad from the pre to post-tests with the greatest differences being an impressive 45% increase for Dyad 4. A two-tailed *t*-test for dependent means was used to compare the difference in Test Scores from Figure 7. The value of $\mathbf{t = 6.14}$ is significant where $\mathbf{p = 0.004}$. So as a result, if one were to base the improvement of communicative performance on test scores alone, then the treatment was a success.

5. Discussion

The frequency data in Table 2 demonstrates that before the treatment there was a tendency to favour some communication strategies over others. *Expressing Confirmation* was utilized the most with 658 occurrences followed by *Miming* with 295, *Asking for Clarification* with 207, and *Asking for Confirmation* with 152. The rest of the communication strategies fall well behind in their usage. The reasons for the predominance of these strategies can be made based on the following deductions:

1. The strategies used had been taught to the students before.
2. The strategies are a natural consequence of *Transactional Communication* or communication in general.
3. The strategies are seldom used independently of one another.

As far as the strategies being taught before is concerned, there were no indications from the educational experiences discussed in the subjects' biographical data or treatment observations. Before testing about any prior explicit instruction in communication strategies, all the students reported that no such training or lessons had occurred. Therefore, if no students have had any explicit instruction, it may be assumed, that as in speculation #2, that the strategies used are a natural consequence of verbal communication in general, or as in this study, transactional communication.

To answer the research question, CSs are specific to one's transactional competence with regards to communicative performance in task-based communication. The difference in pre and post-test scores provides the clearest evidence that there is a symbiotic relationship between learning CSs and the improvement of performing transactions. It can be seen that the relationship between LREs, and CSs are complex and based on each interlocutor's performance within their dyad. The frequency data demonstrates that the key types of LREs that occur are with regards to referential objects, location, and position. Such LREs tend to be cognitively demanding and result in a cycle of LREs and CSs until mutual understanding

through the negotiation of meaning is reached or not. Therefore, the teaching of task-based CSs is a necessary component in the development of transactional competence.

6. Conclusion

As part of developing transactional competence, the use of CSs is essential for students to be able to give, receive, and understand directives. The findings indicate that some students are already capable of successfully using CSs to navigate unfamiliar situations. This study investigated the transactional competence of ten international university students. It started with an exploration of transactional competence and its relationship to the LREs that trigger the necessity for strategic competence to negotiate meaning. Through referential communication, simple to complex transactions were examined for communicative deficiencies. The indications suggest that that teaching of CSs is an avenue for further development of metacognitive skills. The value of such skills to international university students is that it makes them more competent in transactional situations where the results are the difference between success and failure whether it be in class or the workplace.

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