

Research Summary

Utilizing Communication Strategies and their Impact on Oral Proficiency in an EFL Context

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Overview of the study

Communication strategies are conscious thoughts and behaviors that language learners use to solve problems in expressing themselves and interacting with others. They can be positive (“achievement”) strategies, such as asking for clarification and actively responding to what someone said, or negative (“reduction” or “avoidance”) strategies, such as leaving a message unfinished or cutting out difficult parts of sentences. This study looks at whether using specific communication strategies is related to improvements in learners’ communicative proficiency. The researchers compared the students’ conversation test scores before and after a 12-week English course which included strategy training and reviewed students’ reports on their own strategy use.

Research method

The participants included in this study consisted of 62 female students at a Japanese college who had already finished one semester of college-level English lessons. They received a five-phase strategy training—review, presentation, rehearsal, performance, and evaluation—in each class for the second semester, through twelve 90-minute classes. A 7-minute conversation test was given to each student before and after the twelve weeks, and the researcher videotaped and transcribed the interactions in the videos. Two different assistants graded the conversation tests, and the researcher analyzed the video interactions regarding factors such as how many words the students used per answer, how many errors they made, and what kind of strategies they used. The students also filled out a questionnaire about what kinds of strategies they used, and they were asked to comment on their strategy use and communication issues when the audio of their posttests was played.

Results

The two types of communication strategy that were used by participants who had the highest posttest scores were “response for maintenance” strategies and “signals for negotiation” strategies. Response for maintenance strategies are strategies such as actively responding and shadowing (i.e., copying some of what someone else said when responding), as well as signals for negotiation strategies are strategies such as checking what someone said, checking what someone meant, and checking if someone understood what you said. Through the students’ reports on their own strategy use, the researchers also found that the more successful participants consciously tried to use strategies in order to lower their stress and enjoy the conversations, while less successful participants recognized that they used message abandonment strategies more frequently.

Practical Implications/Significance

This study showed that there is a significant relationship between using communication strategies (particularly with response for maintenance strategies and signals for negotiation strategies) and conversation test scores, and that high-proficiency students were aware of their own use of these strategies to communicate more effectively. While more research is necessary to provide deeper insights on the relationship between strategy use and oral

performance, it is reasonable to assume that using these kinds of strategies could contribute to the oral proficiency development of English learners and incorporating these kinds of strategies in English classrooms could be helpful for students' language learning.

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<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2009.00987.x>