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Students' Methods of Interaction in a Facebook Forum Discussion

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Abstract

Learners' use of communication strategies (CS) to supplement their limited language repertoire and improve their online discussion (OLD) in Facebook groups is the focus of this research. The research included 28 students from a communication course at a public institution who were selected using a purposive sample technique. Within the instance, ten willing students were chosen at random to participate in an in-depth study of the phenomena. Threaded OLD, interviews, retrospective sessions, and reflective diaries were used to compile the data. According to the results of the thematic analysis, students used several different CS (including direct, digital media, paralinguistic, and interactional techniques) to complete the job.

Keywords: *Language students; chat rooms; Facebook groups; communication tactics 1.*

Introduction

Many second-language learners struggle greatly with interpersonal communication because of their limited linguistic abilities. When learning a second language, students often have to make do with a limited vocabulary in order to get their points through. Some students may attempt to compensate for their lack of TL vocabulary or phrases by altering or shortening the scope of their communications. While others may find that figuring out a different way to express themselves helps them accomplish their communication objectives and gets their words through. Communication strategies

(CS) is a typical term for this kind of strategic action. Computers, cell phones, and other forms of electronic communication have made it possible to conduct a wide variety of interactions remotely. In recent years, there has been a meteoric growth in young people's use of Web 2.0 technology, especially social networking platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. These technologies have become more important in the lives of today's college students because they facilitate communication among students, faculty, and staff in a variety of settings.

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Some language teachers, despite initial pushback and scepticism, have begun investigating and making use of social networking tools to enhance their teaching and their students' language acquisition (Lockyer & Patterson, 2008; Nakatsuka's, 2009). However, little is known about how ESL students utilize CS in an OLD through Facebook groups, despite the fact that a rising number of recent studies have been undertaken on the educational use of Facebook (Bozzetto More 2012, Mellor&Hadid 2012, Selwyn 2009). There is a lack of research on students' usage of CS in a digital setting, especially in the Malaysian educational system. Because CS is the technique by which students compensate for and overcome their language deficit in order to achieve their communicative objective, research into its usage is of the utmost importance. If students could get insight into their peers' coping mechanisms, they could be better equipped to deal with their own language barriers and make better use of their prior knowledge to achieve their communication goals. Exploring students' CS on FB would help provide light on the challenges they face in face-to-face interactions, given that virtual discourse may have distinctive characteristics despite its similarity to or blend of writing and speaking. This article, therefore, seeks to provide insight on how college-level language learners utilize CS to make up for their language deficiencies and improve their OLD in the context of a group-based information-sharing assignment conducted on Facebook.

Analysis of the Literature

In most cases, CS is seen as a way for students to get around their limited vocabulary and improve their communication skills. Both the communicative competence framework of

Canali and Swain (1980) and the communicative ability model of Bachman (1990) include these skills under the heading of "Strategic competence," indicating that they are subsumed under communicative competence. It refers to the capacity to employ alternative methods and means of overcoming communicative challenges or boosting the efficacy of communication through the use of strategies. Slinker (1972), who initially established the idea of CS, considered strategies in L2 communication as one of the essential processes in second language acquisition (SLA). There is a clear divide in how CS is conceived of, and as a result, several definitions have been presented. As Tirone (1980: 420) puts it, "a mutual attempt of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in situations where requisite meaning structures do not seem to be shared" lies at the heart of CS. Therefore, CSs are seen as interpersonal phenomenon, with an emphasis on the two parties' combined attempts to express a common meaning. The psycholinguistic perspective, on the other hand, sees CS as introspective and internal, cantering on the mind. According to Fierce and Kasper (1983:36), "potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal" best characterize CS. As a result, CS may be used by language users who are having trouble communicating without assistance from their counterparts. By include "every potentially intentional attempt to cope with any language-related problem of which the speaker is aware during the cause of communication," Dorney and Scott (1995, 1995a quoted in 1997: 179) broadened the scope of CS. In contrast to the aforementioned methods, Canali's (1983)

conception of CS is the most comprehensive.

Any method that "enhances the effectiveness of communication" (Canali 1983:11) falls within the purview of CS, therefore the field isn't limited to tools for problem-solving. Most of the older taxonomies of CS in the literature (Bialystok 1983, 1990; Fierce & Kasper 1983a; Pariah 1985; Paulissen 1990; Tirone 1977) are included into Dorney & Scott's (1997) taxonomy. In their extensive taxonomy of issue-solving methodologies, the CS category represents the approach to problem management. Direct, indirect, and interactional approaches are the three primary classes presented. Direct techniques, such as circumlocution or approximation to make up for the lexical gap, are "alternative, manageable, and self-contained means of getting the (sometimes modified) meaning across" (Dorney & Scott 1997). Conversely, indirect methods (such as using fillers and repeats to avoid breakdowns and keep the communication channel open) help in the transmission of meaning by setting the stage for mutual comprehension. Cooperative problem-solving conversations may be facilitated by interactional methods, such as pleading for assistance or asking for clarification. Studies of second language acquisition and instruction have focused heavily on CS for almost three decades. However, much theoretical and empirical research on SLA has focused on CS used offline, i.e., in face-to-face (FTF) oral production (Bialystok 1983; Chen 1990; Kanji 1996; Tirone 1980; Wanneroo 2003) and written work (Ali Akbari & Alvar 2009). In spite of the fact that there is some computer science literature on virtual context (Chun 1994; Smith 2003), these studies were carried out in an SCMC setting in which the participants spoke with one another in real time using the technology in question (for example, instant messaging or chats). However, Facebook was chosen for this

research as a place where students may communicate with one another. One must investigate the discourse or interactions that take place inside them differently from the ways one would analyse regular classroom interactions, as correctly indicated by Mohamed Amin and Ranjit (2009:4).

Methodology

The research method used here is a single-site, multiple-case descriptive case study. Purposive sampling was used to pick a homogeneous group of 28 students from a communication course at the National University of Malaysia. These students took part in an online information-sharing activity using Facebook groups, where they discussed and debated broad or specialized themes and issues chosen by the students and the teacher. Each team had to decide one of three potential subjects for the OLD—Beauty and Health (BH), Technology in Education (TE), or Unusual Vacation (UV)—they would research and share with the others. Each of the six groups consisted of four or five people, and there were two groups for each subject (BH1, BH2, TE1, TE2, UV1, and UV2). Based on their scores on the Malaysian University English Test (MUET), the participants' command of the English language varied from non-user to intermediate. Band 3 moderate users of English made up just 17.9 percent of the total, whereas Band 1 and 2 learners (82.1 percent) accounted for the vast majority.

All of these students were enrolled in courses offered by the Faculty of Education, the Faculty of Business and Economics, the Faculty of Science and Technology, or the Faculty of Technology and Information. For the sake of debate, we included students from a range of competence levels in each group. Participants were expected to provide a summary of the article, questions, and answers to questions posed by their group

members, as well as a minimum of 10 substantive posts within three weeks after commencing debate on the issue. The ALT who doubles as a researcher ran the OLD. This included informing students on the task's logistics, inviting students to Facebook discussion groups, fielding questions, and sometimes nudging bystanders into more active participation. Ten students (2 males and 8 females) agreed to be a part of the case study's sample in order to understand more about the phenomena. This information was gathered via semi-structured interviews, debriefing sessions, and reflective diaries with these students. Participants were asked to record their thoughts and feelings about the OLD activity and their experiences engaging with others online in notebooks immediately after their participation. Each participant's top 3–5 diary entries were gathered for examination. As soon as the OLD job was over, semi-structured interviews and debriefing sessions were held. In this analysis, we used the CS taxonomies developed by Dorney and Scott (1997) and Smith (2003, with some modifications to account for new CS that appeared from the data). In order to determine how often CS occurred in the OLD, a descriptive statistical study was conducted.

Discussion and Results

The results showed that the students used several different CS while solving the OLD problem. However, only the most popular varieties of the four CS categories—direct, digital media, paralinguistic, and interactional—are covered in this study. Table 1 details the subcategories of each technique and the frequency with which it is used in the OLD. Learners' CS use pattern is shown by highlighting its prevalence as revealed by the OLD scripts. However, a more in-depth investigation of 10 people (P1-P10)

utilizing retrospective remarks, semi-structured interviews, and reflective diaries revealed other forms of CS.

Table 1. CS used by the learners in the OLD via FB Groups

Types of CS	Sub-categories	Frequency
Direct Strategies	Resource deficit-related strategies:	
	• Literal translation	536
	• Approximation	73
	• Code switching	9
	Own performance problem-related strategies:	
	• Self repair	4
Digital Media	Other performance problem-related strategies:	
	• Other repair	2
	Facebook Features:	
	• Like button	281
	• Tagging	227
	Hyperlinks	54
Paralinguistic Strategies	Videos	10
	Pictures	8
	Onomatopoeia	234
	Substitution	195
	Using Emoticons	159
Interactional Strategies	Capitalizing words for stress	85
	Punctuation	69
	Asking for clarification	7
	Appeals for help	4

Planned Actions

Table 1 shows shockingly many instances of verbatim translation. Due to the fact that most of the participants were less-capable ESL learners, they relied on their L1 to assist them come up with hypotheses and rules of the TL to make up for their deficiencies in these areas. 'Thing that create us health and beauty is what we chat about' is a direct translation of a phrase found in the group BH1 script. She made an exact word-for-word translation from the original language into the target language. In-depth interviewees admitted to using literal translations of words, phrases, and sentences while they thought in L1 while conversing in L2. Participant P4's remark, "I actually constructed the sentence in Bahasa Malaya and I translated word for word to English," reveals that she used this method. After interpolation, approximation is the most often used approximation CS. To make up for the lack of vocabulary, the participants had to think outside the box, coming up with a phrase that is similar to the target word in structure but not in meaning. The participants, for instance, referred to "hotel guests" as "consumers." Findings from

introspection and interviews also revealed that, when faced with a lexical gap, people opted for known, simpler terms and phrases. I attempted to reduce the statement using simple terms that I know and regularly use," P2 writes in her reflective diary after using this method. Since the OLD job may take some time, students had to depend on whatever language resource was readily accessible to them.

Electronic media

It was also clear from the OLD that the participants made extensive use of digital media. The students utilize five distinct forms of digital media, with Facebook features accounting for a significant portion of their activity. Table 1 displays the frequency with which users engaged with Facebook's unique 'like' button. It shows agreement with the views made by other group members and gratitude for their participation. Second most common was using members' names as tags. Participants may draw the attention of other group members by sending an email alert. In addition, the students made frequent use of internal connections inside their contributions to facilitate better group communication. To further demonstrate and explain the themes or subjects covered, videos and photographs were also uploaded and shared in the OLD. All ten participants reported extensive use of online translators, either downloadable software or translations built directly onto websites, in addition to the CS indicated above that featured in the OLD. Google Translate (translate.google.com) seems to have been the most popular, followed by Chitchat (citcat.com) and Language Translator Software (<http://free-language-translator.en.softonic.com/>).

Methods of Paralinguistics

Table 1 shows that the students made extensive use of paralinguistic methods

including onomatopoeia, replacement, and emoticons while communicating in the OLD. Symbols and textual equivalents were used to make up for the lack of indications like intonation, tone, and facial emotion in a virtual setting (table 2). The usage of onomatopoeia tends to mirror spoken communication in FTF cultures. Because OLD is written in a style somewhat dissimilar to chats, its users often shorten longer sentences and words in favour of more efficient keyboarding. Emoticons were used to replace the users' real smiles and good spirits in an effort to foster an upbeat and encouraging atmosphere for the group's members.

Table 2. The description and examples of paralinguistic strategies

Paralinguistic Strategies	Description	Examples (data from the present study)
Onomatopoeia	Devices which take place of oral cues in FTF interaction	Wooooo!, oohh...hehehe...ZZZZzzz haaa...
Substitution	The use of abbreviated forms of a word	before= lol, can u = can u; as soon as possible= asap, laugh out loud= lol
Emoticons	The use of symbols to represent emotions	= =) ☺☺ P =:]
Capitalized words for stress	Learners capitalize some words to show emphasis	TRULY innocent... THANKS a lot... PEACE; WHY?
Punctuation	The use of excessive punctuation marks	!!! ???

As shown in the OLD, all participants (with the exception of P7) included emoticons (such as smiley symbols) at the conclusion of their remarks. The interview and retrospective session data, however, showed that this tactic was not used to compensate for language barriers, but rather to show approval of and admiration for the work of their peers. Affectively-motivated writing from group members might increase with the use of such a warm symbol and environment. P4 said that she had used emoticons in the past "to show my happy mood at that time," "to know more about the topic discussed," and "to have Suria provide more explanation."

Methods of Interaction

Learners seldom used interactional methods such as asking for clarification or

seeking assistance from peers in the OLD scripts. One member of Group UV2 used this tactic by asking, "Can you explain to me more about solo vacation?" while a member of Group BH2 used it by asking, "What is meant by lanolin?" Participants might review the OLD's posted messages as many times as they needed to in order to fully grasp the material. Since the scripts are probably going to stay on the OLD platform, asking for help and clarification from the group members in writing is somewhat awkward. Interestingly, however, they often resorted to acquaintances who were more fluent in L2 even if their use of this method was limited and went unreported in the OLD. Important to note is that no one approached their friends or roommates for help with vocabulary until P10. In her notebook, P4 reflected on how she sought help from individuals around her, including her English-speaking roommate. Each participant was found to use at least 6 CS across the 4 broad categories, regardless of whether they specifically used those sub-categories or not. Some forms of CS were clearly preferred over others, including direct translation, the use of online translators, emoticons, short and simple phrases, and requests for assistance. P4 and P6 used 10 different CS categories, testing out many of the possible ways to improve group dynamics. Most people used a broad range of CS, reflecting their own unique communication styles and preferences, independent of their linguistic ability. Though she was just a moderate L2 user, participant P10 solved her communication issues by drawing on her pre-existing linguistic system rather than turning to her friends or roommates for help.

Conclusion

The results of the research show that students choose to use a variety of CS to make up for their language proficiency

gaps. However, our research has evoked several novel CS in addition to the other forms of CS already present in the literature. Learners in Facebook groups for the elderly got access to Facebook features and other online resources. Therefore, it would be very beneficial for language teachers to raise students' understanding of the many different kinds of CS they may use while engaging online, with a special focus on the capabilities and tools provided by the most cutting-edge emergent technologies. Learners require guidance on the best method to use translation tools to ensure correct translations. We agree with Chen (1990) and Pariah (1985) that enhancing students' strategic competence may help them improve their communication competence. Improving one's command of CS to make up for one's linguistic shortcomings might inspire original use of one's L2 expertise. More time and energy might be devoted to activities that foster learners' strategic competence since OLD enables them to zero in on form and meaning, which may assist to encourage and accelerate L2 development.

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