

Enhancing the Communication Skills of Higher Education Students through International Student Mobility Programs

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Abstract

The main goal of this paper is to investigate the communication strategies used by both the local and international students while joining formal and informal activities. Using thematic analysis, the responses of the 10 local and 14 international participants in the semi-structured interview conducted after joining the formal and informal activities in the international student mobility project were independently and iteratively categorized into the communication strategies proposed by Nanta-umpond and Soontornwipat (2016). The findings showed that the Thai students mostly used the communication strategy of topic avoidance (80%) while the Indonesian students employed the communication strategy of asking for clarification (64.29%) in formal activities. In the informal activities, both the Thai and Indonesian students resorted to use the communication strategy of mime with almost identical percentages of 60% and 57.14%, respectively. Most participants from both groups claimed that their communication strategies were enhanced by informal more than the formal activities since the former were more conversational and the topics were non-academic.

Keywords: *communication skills, communication strategies; higher education students; international student mobility*

1. Rationale and Statement of the Problem

The advent of globalization has witnessed the convenience of traveling overseas for the purpose of sightseeing, visit friends and relatives, education or a combination of any of these. Low-budget airlines, low-budget accommodations and accessible food sources have proliferated. Alongside with these are changes in the educational sector such as the shift to international student mobility.

International student mobility involves movement of people (students and faculty), and, more recently, to educational programmes and institutions, with the ultimate goal of participating in international knowledge flows, being exposed to new ideas or technologies, including the tacit knowledge associated to their use (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development or OECD, 2010). It can be argued that the changes to the student population resulting from increasing student mobility are a valuable resource for the creation of an “open, tolerant and cosmopolitan university experience” (Kalantzis & Cope, 2000, p.31).

Most of the world’s international students are self-funded, that is, they and their families pay for their own academic work. “Students are therefore the largest source of funds for international education—not governments, academic institutions, or philanthropies” (Altbach & Knight, 2007, p.294). Among these self-funded students supporting international mobility or cross-border higher education, Asians form the largest group and is still continually increasing (Beine, Noël, & Ragot, 2014; Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007).

Over the last 10 years, the literature on international student mobility (ISM) has increased markedly (e.g. Altbach & Knight, 2007; Guruz 2008; Solimano 2008; Varghese 2008; Williams & Balaz, 2008). These studies, however, are confined to “a framework that

separates study abroad from the wider life-course aspirations of students” (Findlay, King, Smith, Geddes & Skeldon, 2012, p.118). Not much research has been conducted on what really happens when students arrive in host institutions.

An interesting aspect to investigate is the goal of the international student mobility, the activities undertaken to achieve that goal and whether or not the facilitated activities are useful in achieving that goal. One of the goals of an international mobility programme is to enhance the communication skills of the participants, with an assumption that the host institution is at least capable of providing such development training. Such communication skills trainings are included in both the formal and informal activities prepared them. Briefly, Leask (2009) argued that a combination of formal and informal activities may enhance interactions among international and local students. The formal and informal activities provide opportunities for the local and international students to have authentic arena for improving their communication skills. Thus, it is paramount to understand what communication strategies are used during these activities.

2. Objectives

Specifically, the study has a two-fold objective:

2.1 To identify the communication strategies used by both the local and international students while joining the formal and informal activities.

2.2 To find out whether the communication strategies used in the formal and informal activities conducted during academic visits are useful in enhancing the communication skills of both the local and international students.

3. Related Research

In defining the communication strategies’ taxonomy, Dornyei and Scott (1997) had reviewed the point of view from various researchers in related field, especially language acquisition and psycholinguistics aspects. Their work based on the works of Tarone (1977, 1980) and Faerch and Kasper’s (1983a, 1983b) and so on. The taxonomy had been developed through the studies of learners’ behavior and reaction to manage the inter-language communication obstacles consciously.

The communication problems can be categorized as follows (Dornyei and Scott, 1997)

1. Own-performance problems relate to the mistakes that speakers made by him/herself. The self-repairing, self-rephrasing and self-editing would be used.

2. Other-performance problems were made by the interlocutor according to the lack of knowledge or understanding.

3. Processing time pressure occurs when speakers want some more time to define the speech. Some fillers and repetitions would be the used strategies.

Some of the taxonomies’ description made by Dornyei and Scott (1995a, 1995b) may share the same idea, but in different name, with the taxonomies of other researchers as Tarone (1977), Faerch and Kasper’s (1983b), Bialystok (1983, 1990), Willems (1987) and Nijmegen group. Then Nanta-umpond and Soontornwipat (2016) proposed the 15 communication strategies taxonomy used for Thai students based on the work of Dornyei and Scott (1997), Tarone (1977) and Poulisse (1993). The description of each strategy would be given in part 5, materials and methods.

There have been many studies about the use of communication strategies in Thai ESL/EFL learners. The taxonomies that often employed in the research are based on Dornyei and Scott

(1997), Tarone (1977), Faerch and Kasper (1983) and so on. The followings are some related research.

Malasit and Sarobol (2009) studied the communication strategies employed by the Mathayom 3 (Grade 9) English program students and effects of task type and English speaking proficiency on their CS use by interviewing and narrating the picture story. The result shows that the strategies students mostly used are fillers/hesitation devices, self-repetition and code switching. The English speaking proficiency does not affect to the CS use and there are more CSs used in interviewing than in picture story narrative.

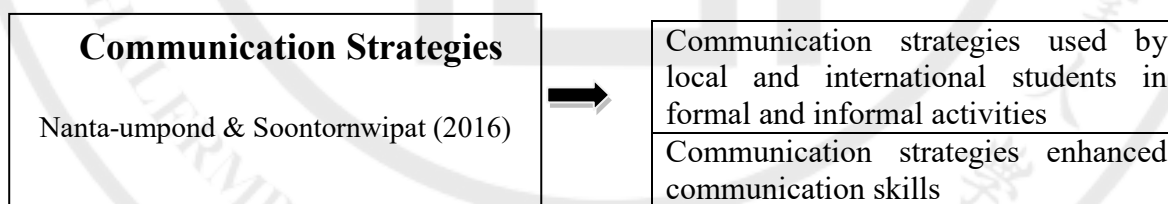
Nanta-umpond and Soontornwipat (2016) had studied the relation between levels of proficiency and gender on English communication strategies used by Mathayom 3 students at Kurumitprasitsil School. The findings showed that the high proficiency students employed the use of fillers strategy, while the low proficiency students used code switching as their tool to communicate. However, the proficiency does not influence the use of communication strategies, but the task types do.

Panggabean and Wardhono (2017) had investigated the communication strategies used by EFL students in their presentations. The data was collected when the students had oral presentations. The taxonomies of Dornyei (1995) and Tarone (1980) were used to identify the communication strategies used in the presentation. The results revealed that less proficient students employed more strategies than the more proficient ones. The students employed compensatory strategies much more frequent than avoidance strategies. The above research studies showed some nature of the learners particularly on how they cope with the problems in communication in English in limited situations. However, how Asian learners deal with the communication obstacles when they face fellow Asians who speak different languages is still an undermined issue and interesting to study.

4. Conceptual Framework

To shed light on the objectives of this research study, the conceptual framework of Nanta-umpond and Soontornwipat (2016) as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Conceptual Framework: Communication Strategies (Nanta-umpond & Soontornwipat (2016))



From their research study, Nanta-umpond & Soontornwipat (2016) examined the communication strategies of Thai high school students in formal setting while these students are joining classroom activities. Combining communication strategy concepts of Dornyei and Scott (1997), Poulisse (1993) and Tarone (1977) in their analysis, they found 15 communication strategies commonly found among high schools students in formal classroom setting.

Their 15 categories are applied in the analysis of the communication strategies used by both the local and international participants while joining the formal and informal activities. It is argued while the other group of participants is composed of international students, they are from the ASEAN region, so it is assumed that they may use similar strategies to those of the locals regardless of whether they are in formal or informal settings.

The terms of each strategy were defined as follows:

Asking for clarification is an interactional device strategy used to request clarification, elaboration or explanation of an unfamiliar word (Dornyei & Scott, 1997).

Code switching is a direct strategy to use a word or phrase from L1 including final particles but excluding proper noun into L2 while engaging in a conversation (Dornyei & Scott, 1997).

Circumlocution is a direct strategy used to describe, exemplify, spell out or specify characteristics of the target words or actions (Dornyei & Scott, 1997).

Literal translation is a direct strategy used to literally translate a lexical item, an idiom, a compound word or structure from L1 to L2 (Dornyei & Scott, 1997).

Literal comparison is a substitution strategy used to compare the target item to another object in a non-metaphorical way (Poulisse, 1993).

Message abandonment is a direct strategy used when beginning to talk about a concept but unable to continue then leave or stop the message in mid-utterance (Tarone, 1977).

Message reduction is a direct strategy used to reduce the message by avoiding certain language structures or topic considered problematic language-wise or leaving out some intended elements for lack of linguistic resources (Dornyei & Scott, 1997).

Mime is a direct strategy used to describe whole concepts non-verbally or accompany a verbal strategy with a visual illustration because of linguistic limitation to explain the target vocabulary or sentences (Dornyei & Scott, 1997).

Other - repair is a direct strategy used to correct something in the interlocutor's speech to check their understanding. (Dornyei & Scott, 1997).

Other - repetition is an indirect strategy used to repeat something the interlocutor said to gain time (Dornyei & Scott, 1997).

Pausing based on use of fillers is used to make a gap with silence for a while to gain time to think of the next word or expression and continue until finish (Dornyei & Scott, 1997).

Self - repair is a direct strategy speakers used to correct themselves during the conversation (Dornyei & Scott, 1997).

Self - repetition is an indirect strategy used to repeat the word just immediately said while thinking of the next word or expression (Dornyei & Scott, 1997).

Topic avoidance is not talking about certain topics considered problematic language and leaving out some intended elements because the lack of their linguistic resources (Tarone, 1977).

Use of fillers is an indirect strategy to use gambits to fill pauses in order to think of the next word or expression and continue until finish (Dornyei & Scott, 1997).

5. Materials and methods

3.1 Participants

The participants of the research are composed of 10 local Thai students from the Department of Tourism of the Faculty of Liberal Arts of Huachiew Chalermprakiet University and 14 Indonesian students from Ilmu Sosial Dan Manajemen STIAMI, a tertiary education institution located in Jakarta, Indonesia. The Indonesian students are from different areas of specialization such as tourism, management and language education. Among a number of Thai and Indonesian participants not all of them were able to join the research project due to several reasons. First, the participants were not ready and some were scared. Some of them were quite busy preparing for other activities. Moreover, due to time constraints other Thai and Indonesian participants decided to withdraw.

3.2 Data

The data was taken from the responses of the participants in the semi-structured interview. There 10 Thai and 14 Indonesian participants who agreed to be interviewed.

3.2 Research Instruments

The main research instrument of the research study is semi-structured interview. In this research, semi-structured interview was useful since the objectives of the study were clear from the start and there is a need to probe deeper into the experiences of the participants so that they the researchers can examine the communication strategies they employed while joining the activities.

3.3 Data Analysis

The responses of the participants were independently iteratively categorized by the four researchers as one of the communication strategies using the framework of Nantaumpond & Soontornwipat (2016) as follows:

1. Asking for clarification
2. Code switching
3. Circumlocution
4. Literal translation
5. Literal comparison
6. Message abandonment
7. Message reduction
8. Mime
9. Other-repair
10. Other-repetition
11. Pausing
12. Self-repair
13. Self-repetition
14. Topic avoidance
15. Use of fillers

The categorizations were compared using Fleiss' kappa (Shrout & Fleiss, 1979), a statistical measure of inter-rater agreement for qualitative (categorical) items, which is more robust when compared to simple percentage calculations as it takes into account agreements occurring by chance. Inter-rater agreement is interpreted as proposed by Landis and Koch (1977):

< 0	Poor agreement
0.01 – 0.20	Slight agreement
0.21 – 0.40	Fair agreement
0.41 – 0.60	Moderate agreement
0.61 – 0.80	Substantial agreement
0.81 – 1.00	Almost perfect agreement

5. Results and Discussion

Huachiew Chalermprakiet University (HCU) is one those universities with vibrant international students. On November 2017, the Faculty of Liberal Arts of Huachiew Chalermprakiet University accepted the responsibility to facilitate both formal and informal activities for 29 Indonesian students as part of the Memorandum of Understanding signed between HCU and its Indonesian higher education institution counterpart. This event was attended by 27 local students and teachers.

5.1 Communication strategies used by both the local and international students while joining the formal and informal activities

The independent categorization of the responses of the participants by the five researchers showed the communication strategies used by Thai and Indonesian students in both formal and informal activities with substantial inter-rater agreement ($\kappa = 0.714$) as presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2 Communication Strategies in Formal and Informal Activities by Thai and Indonesian Students

Communication Strategies	Thai students (10 students)				Indonesian students (14 students)			
	Formal		informal		Formal		informal	
	number of use	Percentage	number of use	Percentage	number of use	Percentage	number of use	Percentage
1. Asking for clarification	2	20%	2	20%	9	64.29%	3	21.43%
2. Code switching	-	-	5	50%	2	14.29%	6	42.86%
3. Circumlocution	-	-	3	30%			6	42.86%
4. Literal translation	-	-	2	20%	1	7.14%	3	21.43%
5. Literal comparison	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	21.43%
6. Message abandonment	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
7. Message reduction	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	14.29%
8. Mime	4	40%	6	60%	-	-	8	57.14%
9. Other-repair	-	-	1	10%	-	-	-	-
10. Other-repetition	-	-	-	-	1	7.14%	-	-
11. Pausing	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
12. Self-repair	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
13. Self-repetition	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
14. Topic avoidance	8	80%	3	30%	8	57.14%	1	7.14%
15. Use of fillers	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Table 2 shows that the communication strategies used mostly in informal activities by the Thai participants are (1) Mime (60%), (2) Code switching (50%), (3) Topic Avoidance, and Circumlocution (30%), while in formal activities, they used mostly the communication strategy of Topic avoidance (80%). Conversely, the Indonesian students prefer to use the communication strategy of Asking for clarification (64.29%) in formal activities. For informal activities, however, the Indonesian students were similar to their Thai counterparts when they used the communication strategy of Mime (57.14%).

Followings are some sample responses on communication strategies (CS) students used and the analysis of the four raters.

Table 3 Responses and Categories of Communication Strategies

Statement from students	Raters' Agreement on CS categorizing	Communication strategy used
(1) I ask what the Thai person mean. She/He explains and if I can't understand I ask again. [<i>sic</i>]	All agree	Asking for clarification
(2) I am afraid. But I try. I can get some words. I try writing words and looking at the dictionary. I asking Ajarn also. [<i>sic</i>]	2	Asking for clarification
	2	Mime
(3) If I don't understand a Thai, I look at the face and ask for repetition [<i>sic</i>]	2	Asking for clarification
	2	Mime
(4) We had talk about a small project. Difficult to understand Thai English but we surviving by hand signaling. [<i>sic</i>]	3	Mime
	1	Code switching
(5) I sometimes speak in English mixing in Bahasa Indonesia. It's nice if they learn about my language and culture [<i>sic</i>]	All agree	Code switching
(6) I don't know what to say in beginning, so I keep quiet and pretend I know. In the end I feel good. [<i>sic</i>]	All agree	Topic Avoidance
(7) The topics are difficult and it's about research. Some topics I don't know even if I can speak English but I can learn the speaking style of the speaker, so I just keep quiet and listen. [<i>sic</i>]	All agree	Topic Avoidance

From the findings, it can be seen that both local students and Indonesian students prefer using Mime as their communication strategy in the informal activities due to underdeveloped communicative skill and convenience of using it. In the formal activity, Indonesian students tried to communicate by asking for clarifications since they need to finish a task that requires everyone to participate and share their knowledge. These findings conform to the study of Panggabean and Wardhono (2017), where they found that students tried to overcome communication problems using compensation strategies (e.g. asking for clarifications) more than avoidance strategies. In contrast, Thai students preferred to keep quiet and avoided the topic, particularly those with low English proficiency. These responses of the Thai students conform to the study of Nanta- Umpond & Soontornwipat (2016) that the low English proficiency Thai students are likely to avoid communicating in English because they lack of communication training and practice. Moreover, linguistic limitations are the important causes of communication blockage. Many students, both Thais and Indonesians, tried to talk to each other, but they could not engage in longer conversations since they could not produce

timely utterances that sufficiently and appropriately fit a given topic, so conversation abruptly ends.

When compared between the strategies used in formal and informal activities, both local and Indonesian students applied more communication strategies in informal activities than in the formal ones. They tried to make each other understand what they said by using code switching, circumlocution, literal translation and comparison, and so on. These results are consistent with the findings of Nanta- Umpond & Soontornwipat (2016) that language proficiency does not affect communication strategy use but task type influences the use of the strategies.

5.2 Usefulness of the communication strategies in enhancing the communication skills of both the local and international students in the formal and informal activities

Both groups of participants claimed that their communication strategies are enhanced by both the formal and informal activities but most especially by the latter activities. For instance, Thai Student # 4 explained for the formal activity that “I don’t know what to say in beginning, so I keep quiet and pretended I did not hear.” She added further that “In the end I feel [*sic*] good”. When asked about her thought about the informal activity, she replied that in the informal activity “I [*sic*] speaking in Thai with many signals of my hand. I am surprising [*sic*] because Indonesian [*sic*] understand me. Amazing mak mak kha.” Indonesian Student# 6 explained that “knowing what to say and what to do or how to behave in advance and when to use them enables someone with limited English language ability to continue a conversation when confronted with difficult words.” In brief, regardless of the origin of the students and regardless of whether the task assigned task falls under a formal or informal setting, communication strategies are helpful in keeping a conversation move forward.

6. Conclusion

The ultimate goal of this research study is to examine the communication strategies used by both the Thai and Indonesian higher education students while participating in the formal and informal activities conducted during an international student mobility project. Overall, the main findings reveal that there were three communication strategies (topic avoidance, asking for clarification, and mime) that were employed both by the Thai and Indonesian students mostly in activities of informal settings because the participants dealt with topics that are commonly used in daily living. Regardless of whether the students are faced with formal or informal situations, the students need to be encouraged to use more compensatory strategies to achieve their communication goal. There are two major limitations of this research project: limited number of activities and limited period of time to join the activities. These limitations might have influenced both the quantity and quality of communication strategies the participants used during the activities. Despite of these limitations, however, some evidences showed that informal and formal activities facilitated during international student mobility project are useful in enhancing students’ communication strategies regardless of whether they are local or international participants. Future research enterprise aiming to examine communication strategies in the context of international student mobility may examine communication strategies from a longitudinal perspective or compare the different communication strategies used by Asian international mobility students, given the increasing exodus of students to Asian and neighboring countries instead of going to Western countries. We hope that this simple research enterprise inspires the conduct of more academic endeavor on this matter.

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