

Fillers as Precedents of Communication Strategy: Evidence from limited English proficiency learners in Sabah

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Abstract

Communication strategy has been identified as a concept through which language users, particularly second language users get their intended meanings across whenever they are having difficulties and are confused about the right choice of words or phrase for a particular message. Strategies which ranged from self solving strategies to interactional strategies including the use of fillers have been identified by scholars. This study examines the use of fillers which were traditionally identified as lacking of any significant function among a group of limited English proficiency speakers who are health care trainees in an institution in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. Sessions were conducted where the participants were taught strategies to fulfil specific tasks in relation to medical situations and crisis management where the participants made individual as well as dyadic technical presentations. Transcriptions of dialogues and presentations from the participants were initially analysed for Achievement Strategies such as self solving, help seeking, modified interaction and output, maintenance of interaction and time gaining strategies. The results revealed that the subjects used the filled pauses “umm” and “uhh” as well as filler words like “ok”, “actually” and “you know” not just as a time gaining strategy but as discourse markers to indicate communication strategy use. This could mean that teaching particular phrases while taking into account features of conversational fillers which learners may utilise to quickly achieve a communicative aim would become a new pedagogical approach.

Keywords: communication strategies, conversational fillers, Limited English Proficiency learners

Introduction

The strategic use of communication strategies to bridge communicative gaps (Faerch & Kasper, 1980) or to enhance negotiation of meaning (Tarone, 1980) is referred to as strategic competence. Strategic competence is a component of communicative competence (Canale, 1983). Numerous researchers (Bialystock, 1990; Dörnyei & Scott, 1997; Færch & Kasper, 1983b; Paribakht, 1985; Poulisse, 1993; Tarone, 1977; Willems, 1987) found that communication strategies (CS henceforth) are used to overcome gaps