



Faculty of Cognitive Science and Human Development

**COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES OF ESL LEARNERS :  
PROBLEM SOLVING OR MESSAGE ENHANCING ?**

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Bachelor of Education with Honours  
(English as a Second Language)  
2005

PE  
1128  
E56  
2005



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**BORANG PENGESAHAN STATUS TESIS**

JUDUL : COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES OF LEARNERS :  
PROBLEM SOLVING OR MESSAGE ENHANCING?

SESI PENGAJIAN : 2002/2005

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**COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES OF ESL LEARNERS: PROBLEM  
SOLVING OR MESSAGE ENHANCING?**

by

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**March 2005**

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SOLVING OR MESSAGE ENHANCING?**


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**Final Year Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Bachelor of Education (ESL)**

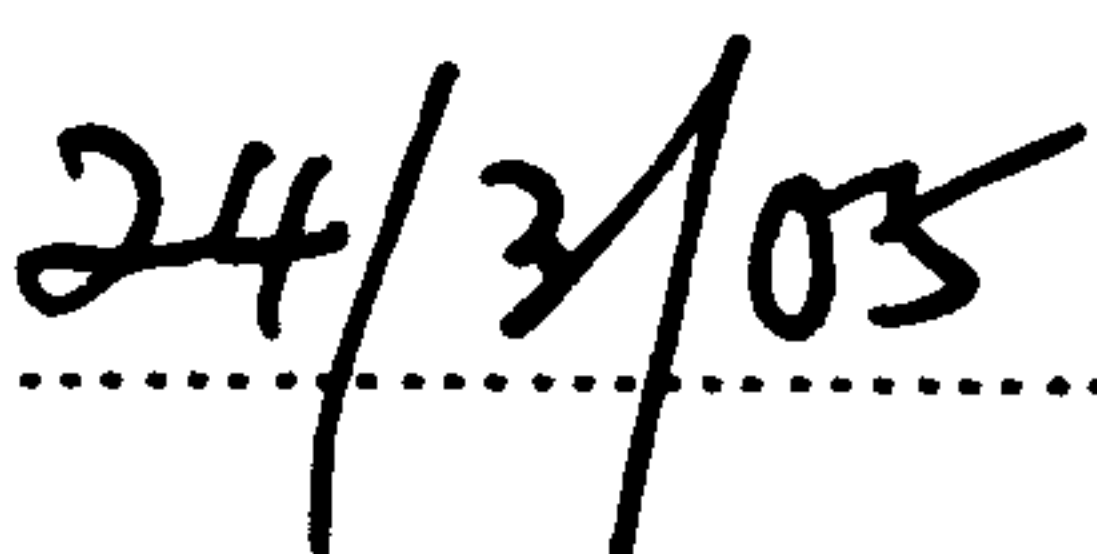
**Faculty of Science Cognitive and Human Development  
Universiti Malaysia Sarawak  
2005**

**The project entitled ‘Communication Strategies of ESL Learners: Problem Solving Or Message Enhancing?’ was prepared by ENJILA ALES and submitted to the Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Bachelor of Education (ESL)**

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

I would like to express my greatest appreciation to my supervisor, Dr. Ting Su Hie, for her professional guidance and encouragement in assisting me to carry out this project. It is through her genuine guidance, advice and constructive comments that had enabled me to successfully complete this project. Doing this project under her supervision had also exposed me to valuable experiences in carrying out a research.

I would also like to thank the sixteen subjects who had participated in this project. Their willingness in sparing their time and contributing ideas in the discussion session is very much appreciated.

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

Abbreviations used in the study are listed here in alphabetical order for easy reference by the reader.

<b>CS</b>	<b>Communication Strategy</b>
<b>CSs</b>	<b>Communication Strategies</b>
<b>ESL</b>	<b>English as a Second Language</b>
<b>IL</b>	<b>Interlanguage</b>
<b>L1</b>	<b>First Language</b>
<b>L2</b>	<b>Second Language</b>
<b>MUET</b>	<b>Malaysian University English Test</b>
<b>UNIMAS</b>	<b>Universiti Malaysia Sarawak</b>



## **ABSTRACT**

### **Communication Strategies of ESL Learners: Problem Solving or Message Enhancing?**

**Enjila Ales**

This study sought to investigate the use of communication strategies by adult learners of the second language (L2) when performing a discussion task. The study aims: (1) to find out the different types of communication strategies used by L2 learners,; (2) to find out the reasons learners use certain types of communication strategies in their oral communication; and (3) to find out whether the communication strategies use by learners vary from one learner to another, according to their level of oral proficiency in the L2. A task is prepared for the discussion to elicit a natural kind of communication, similar to those in a real-life oral communication. The interactional data collected for this study are analyzed to identify the different types of communication strategies employ by the sixteen subjects. The different types of communication strategies are from the taxonomy formulated for the study and it is based on the approaches by Tarone (1978) and Faerch and Kasper (1983). The analysis is further validated through the participants' retrospection on the reasons as to why they had used certain utterances at significant points of the interaction. The results of this study are discussed in the light of the relationship between the frequencies of use on the different types of communication strategies with their communicative success and between the choices of the different types of communication strategies with the learners' level of oral proficiency in the L2. The results show that learners use different types of communication strategies and their frequent use of communication strategies are affected by their low level of oral proficiency in the language. The findings on the role of communication strategies have implications for second language learning and teaching.

## **ABSTRAK**

### **“Communication Strategies of ESL Learners: Problem Solving or Message Enhancing?”**

**Enjila Ales**

*Kajian ini dijalankan bertujuan untuk menyiasat penggunaan strataegi komunikasi di kalangan pelajar dewasa yang menggunakan Bahasa Inggeris sebagai Bahasa Kedua berdasarkan kepada perbincangan yang dijalankan. Selain itu, kajian ini juga bertujuan untuk: (1) mengkaji penggunaan pelbagai strategi komunikasi oleh para pelajar berkenaan; (2) menyiasat sebab-sebab pelajar menggunakan pelbagai jenis strategi komunikasi dalam perbincangan; (3) menyiasat sama ada penggunamen pelbagai strategi komunikasi berbeza di kalangan pelajar berdasarkan kepada tahap keupayaan bertutur dalam Bahasa Kedua tersebut. Tajuk isu telah disediakan untuk tujuan merangsang perbincangan yang serupa dengan yang dilakukan dalam kehidupan seharian. Data yang dikumpul daripada perbincangan tersebut dianalisis untuk mendapatkan pelbagai jenis strategi komunikasi yang digunakan oleh enam belas orang subjek. Pelbagai strategi komunikasi tersebut diperolehi daripada taxonomi yang telah disediakan untuk kajian ini dan ia adalah berdasarkan kepada yang telah disediakan oleh Tarone (1978) dan Faerch dan Kasper (1983). Analysis data juga diperkukuhkan dengan penjelasan para subjek sendiri yang diperolehi semasa sesi soal-jawab selepas sesi perbincangan tentang isu dijalankan. Keputusan kajian adalah dibincangkan berdasarkan kepada hubungan antara kekerapan penggunaan pelbagai strategi komunikasi tersebut dengan kejayaan komunikasi serta juga pilihan strategi komunikasi dengan tahap keupayaan pelajar-pelajar tersebut bertutur dalam Bahasa Kedua. Keputusan kajian memunjukkan bahawa para pelajar telah menggunakan pelbagai strategi komunikasi dan kekerapan mereka menggunakan strategi tersebut adalah berkaitan dengan tahap keupayaan bertutur mereka yang rendah dalam bahasa tersebut. Keputusan kajian memberi implikasi kepada pembelajaran dan pengajaran Bahasa Kedua dalam bilik darjah.*



# **CHAPTER I**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **1.0 Introduction**

This chapter will reveal the background in the study that is related to main focus of the study. That would be followed by the statement of the problem in which the aims and objectives of the study will be stated. From there, the importance of carrying out this study will be explained in the significance of study. As some terms are rather new and have definitions which are mainly for this context of study, thus definition of terms are also provided in this chapter.

### **1.1 Background to the Study**

In the history of human communication, there have been different ways of making meaning, which included the use of smoke, signs, gestures, musical sounds and language. Of all those different types, language has been the most successful system for making meaning in a face-to-face oral communication. Language is defined by Feez and Joyce (1998, p. 12) as “a functional, meaning-

making system, which is systematically linked to the context in which it used". Thus, the use of language is influenced by certain aspects of the context in which it is being used and it also changes along with what the speakers are talking about and who they are talking to. With that, language is a social practice and the success of an oral communication requires the successful use of a language.

Oral communication is an integrated process involving both a speaker and a listener. It is an ongoing process and obviously a vital part of our lives as almost all daily activities involve oral communications. An oral communication is usually spontaneous, which does not require rehearsal and preparation on the part of a speaker. For that reason, a speaker often faces problems in making meanings clear when communicating ideas to a listener, especially for second language (L2) learners. In relation to that, a listener also faces problems in making sense of what is being said. Problems in communication occur due to the inadequacy and competency in a language that causes a speaker to fumble. With that, when using the second language, learners need to use communication strategies (CSs) in order to make themselves clear to the listeners.

In the context of this study, the type of language to be studied as being used by learners in an oral communication is English. In Malaysia, English language is recognized as a Second Language in the Federal Constitution. This has taken into consideration that majority of population in Malaysia are still using the English language as a medium of communication in their daily interaction. Apart from that, various areas such as in communications and commerce still require wide use of the language.



However, despite its status, great emphasis is being placed on the importance of mastering English among Malaysians due to several reasons. Many situations call for proficiency in English, especially in accessing sources of references, which are still widely available in English. This is much related to the acquisition of knowledge, especially for those who are studying in institutions of higher learning. This is due to the fundamental reason as posited by Nesamalar, Siratha, & Teh, (1995, p. 4), in which they claimed that having the proficiency in the L2 helps learners to “gain access to the vast amount of literature and information in all fields of learning”. Thus, having high levels of proficiency in L2 is deemed necessary among learners in order for them to gain more knowledge from the wide array of resources which are normally produced in L2.

Apart from that, the mastery of L2 among learners is also important in the area of oral communication. This is due to the fact that oral communication plays an important role in extending learners’ knowledge. Many decisions of crucial importance such as presenting ideas and exchanging of information require verbal interactions among learners at higher institutions. Consequently, the issue of an efficient and effective oral communication when using the L2 as a means to extend knowledge by learners is crucial in any social function where the medium of communication is in L2. Gill (2002, p. 14) points out on the importance of “acquiring effective communication”, which she equates as “the oil that lubricates and moves all other components effectively and efficiently in the society and workplace”. In this context, ‘efficient’ refers to learners’ ability to use L2 with the correct grammatical structures and appropriate choice of lexical

items, whereas 'effective' refers to the learners' ability to convey their intended message when using the L2 as the *lingua franca*.

In addition to those reasons, Malaysia has also made a strong commitment towards the wave of globalization. In order to enable Malaysia to keep abreast with the challenges of the globalization, particularly in the development of science and technology and also to be able to participate actively in the international trade and commerce, there is a need for Malaysians to have a high proficiency in the English language. Thus, it plays a very significant role in the country.

However, efficient and effective oral communication when using the L2 does not always occur among L2 learners. One reason for this is learners' poor mastery of L2. This may be caused by learners' lack of exposure to L2 or simply because they are not motivated to master it as they can always communicate with others using the first language (L1) or other language, such as <sup>1</sup>*Bahasa Malaysia*, in the case of Malaysian learners. Whatever reasons for the cause of learners' poor mastery in L2, the fact is that it frequently resulted in <sup>2</sup>*communication disruptions* during their oral communication. Apart from those, it can also cause a <sup>3</sup>*mismatch* on the part of the learner's understanding to the speaker's intended message.

Therefore, in order to overcome the problems in their communication, there is a need for the L2 learners to use CSs effectively when they are faced by a production problem as these would enable them to communicate their intended message effectively to the hearers. The production problem in this case refers to L2 learners' failure to convey their intended message successfully to the hearers



which may be caused by their lack of lexical resources, inability to pronounce a particular word correctly, inability to structure their message grammatically correct or when they are unable to generate an idea to be presented to the hearer. From the literature, there are various types of CSs, in which L2 learners usually use to solve their production problems. These would be mentioned in great detail in Chapter Two of this study.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

As in the case of Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS), the university emphasizes on the importance of learners to have mastery of the L2, which is evident in its wide and frequent use in lectures and also in other functions in the university. For that reason, learners are required to master and use the language in their course endeavours. In addition to that a wide array of the resources in the university, in terms of references books, journals and other publications are available in L2. Thus, learners are required to use L2 not only in writing their assignments and projects, but also when presenting them orally. From such communication as well as from their interactions with their lecturers and peers, there would be incidents where learners would inadvertently face disruptions in their communication, and they would either consciously or unconsciously use CSs in order to enable them to convey their intended message successfully. Thus, it is important to find out on learners use of CSs in their oral, spontaneous and real-life communications.

### **1.3 Research Objectives**

For the purpose of investigating L2 learners' use of the various CSs, a group of learners from UNIMAS are selected for this study. These learners come from various L1 backgrounds, in which they are of the multi-ethnic groups in Sarawak (one of the state in Malaysia) and they also possess different levels of proficiency in L2. Thus, the aims of this study are:

- a) to find out the different types of CSs used by L2 learners when performing a discussion task in L2,
- b) to find out the reasons learners use certain types of CSs in their oral communication, and
- c) to find out whether the CSs use by learners vary from one learner to another, according to their level of proficiency in the L2.

Based on the first aim the researcher's focus is to investigate the different types of CSs potentially employed by L2 learners when performing a discussion task. For the second aim, the researcher's focus is to identify whether the strategies are used by learners more for coping with disruptions in their communications or for enhancing the negotiation of shared meanings in an interaction. Thus the disruptions in the communication will be identified as whether caused by the learners' lack of lexical resources, inability to pronounce a particular word correctly, inability to structure their message grammatically correct or inability to generate an idea to be presented. As for the third aim, the researcher's focus is to investigate whether or not there are any relationships between the learners' choice of CSs and their level of proficiency in L2. In an



attempt to address the three aims as stated above, the following questions are used to focus the study. Each question is to address each of the aim of this study.

- a) Which types of CSs are <sup>4</sup>*potentially favoured* by individual learners to compensate for the loss of information they intend to convey during an oral interaction?
- b) Why do learners use certain types of CSs?
- c) Do the choices of CSs among learners vary according to their level of oral proficiency in English?

#### **1.4 Significance of the Study**

The research problem was identified as being important due to its implication on theory and application to practice. Firstly, the findings of the study would contribute to the existing *Interlanguage(IL) Theory*, which encompasses the types of language produced by L2 speakers when interacting using the language which is not their own. This is supported by Ellis (1985, p. 42) who states that the language produced by learners is “independent of both the learner’s L1 and the L2 systems”.

When L2 learners communicate using the L2, the fluency in language is constantly shattered by some gaps in their linguistic knowledge of L2. These gaps are overcome by the use of various CSs. Thus, IL theory contains the explanation as to why, and when communication takes place and what constitute the CSs.

CSs are deemed important and they play significant roles in the second language acquisition. They are substitute plans used by learners when encountering problems in using L2 in communication. For some reason, there is

an interesting phenomenon which occurs when L2 learners attempt to communicate their intended message using L2. The result from this study, therefore, would be useful and also supply for the required information as a contribution to the existing theory.

Secondly, the findings of the study are considered having an application to the pedagogy. An understanding of the various features of the CS in which learners employ in order to get their message across when using the L2 in communication may improve our understanding of learners' learning process. In the classroom practice, particularly in teaching the speaking skill, it is important to focus on comprehensibility rather than on accuracy. Also that teachers are aware that in oral speech, it is usually not possible to talk in complete, accurate sentences and CSs are used to get the meaning across.

In addition, making learners aware of the elements of CS they can employ is vital in order to motivate them to speak confidently and fluently. The knowledge of the various CSs among teachers can be used as guideline for them to follow learners' progress in using L2. The description of learners' performance will be of immediate relevance to teachers of English and can also be of great importance in the assessment of learners' proficiency in oral assessment.



## **1.5 Definition of Terms**

The terms below are worth noting in this study:

*Achievement strategies* are learners' attempts "to solve problems in communication directly by developing an alternative plan" (Faerch & Kasper, 1983, p.36). They are one of the CSs.

- a) *Achievement strategies* are learners' attempts "to solve problems in communication directly by developing an alternative plan" (Faerch & Kasper, 1983, p.36). They are one of the CSs.
- b) CSs are strategies employed by L2 learners when having difficulty with communicating the intended message. When there is a disruption in communication, CS are used as "spare tyres for emergencies" (Cook, 1993, p. 119).
- c) *Compensatory strategies* are strategies used by L2 learners to "cope with gaps in their lexical repertoires" (Kellerman, Ammerlaan, Bongaerts & Pouhisse, 1990, p. 162).
- d) *Interlanguage (IL)* refers to L2 learners' system that has a "structurally intermediate status" between the learners' first language (L1) and the target language (L2) (Selinker, 1972, cited in Brown, 1987, p. 169). It is originated from the *IL Theory*.
- e) *Interlanguage Theory* reveals "the stages of development" through which the L2 learners go through "in their attempt to have L2 (or near L2) proficiency" (Ellis, 1985, p. 42)
- f) *Learner* refers to "those in the process of acquiring a second language (L2)" (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991). In this study, the term *learner* is chosen as

it is synonymous with the definition and the context of Second Language Acquisition. In this study, the term learners refer to the adult ESL learners.

- g) *L1* refers to the first language, the language used by L2 learners which is acquired during childhood. In this study, the learners' L1 includes Malay, Chinese, Iban, Bidayuh, Kayan, Kelabit and Kenyah
- h) *L2* refers to the second language. In this case the second language is English and it is mastered by learners through stages of learning.
- i) *Taxonomy*, also known as typology is a term used for a systematic way of organizing the list of CSs to be used as a reference in investigating the different CSs employed by L2 learners. The CS taxonomy in this study is based on the framework formulated by Tarone (1978) and Faerch and Kasper (1983).



## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

#### **1.6 Introduction**

In this chapter, the related literature or the concepts to be reviewed are such as: *Interlanguage Theory and the Underlying Assumptions*, *Defining Communication Strategies (CS)*, *the Underlying Approaches and Related Studies*, and *Taxonomy of Communication Strategies and Factors in the Selection of Strategies*.

#### **2.1 Interlanguage Theory and the Underlying Assumptions**

In real-life communication, the smooth flow of ideas and fluency in the language use experienced by the L2 learners as they interact with others in their L1 is frequently shattered due to some gaps in their linguistic knowledge of the

L2. Bialystok (1990, p. 1) points out that the gaps in learners' knowledge can take up many forms, which include "a word, a structure, a phrase, a tense marker and an idiom".

As a result, the gaps often cause <sup>1</sup>*communication disruptions* in L2 learners' communication process. These disruptions are caused by their inability to convey their intended message successfully during an interaction with others. In order to overcome problems or disruptions in communication, consequently L2 learners need to execute spontaneous strategies as to solve their problem in linguistic production. Such strategies resulted in the production of a new system of language, which is independent from both the learners' L1 and L2 systems. The new system of language produced by L2 learners is known as interlanguage (IL) and it is placed in the continuum between L1 and L2. This is supported by the claim made by Brown (1987, p. 169) who states that the IL is having the "separateness in terms of structures", which is between the L2 learners' L1 and L2 systems of language.

In addition, Corder (1967, as cited in Ellis, 1985, p. 47) claims that the IL system as a series of "interlocking systems", which an L2 learner constructs at any stage of his or her oral communication. From the claim made by Corder, an assumption can be made, in which as L2 learners constructs the IL, it may change with the time and context of an oral communication. There is indeed an interesting phenomenon regarding L2 learner's IL system. According to Corder (1971, as cited in Brown, 1987, p. 169), IL rules produced by L2 learners are exclusive and atypical to a particular individual alone.