



Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human  
Development

**INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL CONTEXT ON THE USE OF COMMUNICATION  
STRATEGIES AMONG TESL UNDERGRADUATES IN UNIMAS**

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AMONG TESL UNDERGRADUATES IN UNIMAS

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STRATEGIES AMONG TESL UNDERGRADUATES IN UNIMAS**

by

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This final year project is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
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This project entitled **Influence of social context on the use of communication strategies among TESL undergraduates in UNIMAS** was prepared by Jennifer Sim Sing Ee and submitted to the Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Science with Honours (Teaching English as a Second Language).

It is hereby confirmed that the student has done all the necessary amendments of the project for acceptance.

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL CONTEXT ON THE USE OF COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES AMONG TESL UNDERGRADUATES IN UNIMAS.**

Jennifer Sim Sing Ee

Communication strategies (CS) are strategies used by the speakers to overcome linguistic inadequacies in their communication and to enhance negotiation of meaning in interaction. This study investigates the influence of social context on the use of communication strategies. It examines the types of CS used by the TESL undergraduates in UNIMAS in three different contexts, namely, presentation, discussion and casual conversation. It also studies how the types of CS are associated with certain language functions in order to achieve communication purposes. The utterances of 25 TESL undergraduates in the three contexts were audiorecorded in natural settings, transcribed and analysed in light of the interactional perspective of CS (Tarone, 1978) and the pragmatic perspective (Clennell, 1995). The findings of the study indicate that social context does influence the use of CS, particularly, in the use of CS as communication-problem-solving device. In the presentation, only target-language based CS, prominently, restructuring, were used. On the other hand, language switch and restructuring dominates the data set in the discussion. As for casual conversation, language switch is extensively used. The use of language switch mounts as the context shift from formal to informal along the continuum. The result that reveals the greater use of CS to enhance message than to overcome communication difficulties also lends supports to Clennell's suggestion to expand the functions of CS by recognising its use as message enhancer in lieu of its sole function on resolving communication problems. Overall, the discourse-based strategies were used mainly to mark key information whereas the avoidance strategies were resorted in the participants' attempts to avoid unknown concept. In order to gain thinking times, fillers or hesitation devices as well as the lexical repetition were sought. Additionally, lexical repetition, offering help and appealing for assistance were used to maintain conversational topic besides retaining an interaction.

## **ABSTRAK**

### **PENGARUH KONTEKS SOSIAL TERHADAP PENGGUNAAN STRATEGI KOMUNIKASI DI KALANGAN SISWA-SISWI TESL UNIMAS**

*Jennifer Sim Sing Ee*

*Strategi komunikasi (CS) ialah strategi yang digunakan oleh pengucap untuk mengatasi kesukaran yang dihadapi semasa berkomunikasi. Selain itu, ia juga digunakan untuk meningkatkan kefahaman pendengar terhadap mesej yang disampaikan. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengenal pasti pengaruh konteks sosial terhadap pilihan strategi komunikasi. Bilangan dan jenis CS yang digunakan oleh 25 orang siswa-siswi program TESL dalam tiga konteks yang berlainan, iaitu pembentangan, perbincangan dan perbualan kasual, dikaji. Selain itu, kajian ini juga menyelidik penggunaan CS yang berkaitan dengan fungsi bahasa untuk mencapai tujuan komunikasi. Pertuturan subjek dalam ketiga-tiga konteks dirakam, ditranskrip dan seterusnya dianalisa berdasarkan perspektif interaksi (Tarone, 1978) dan perspektif pragmatik CS (Clennell, 1995). Hasil kajian membuktikan bahawa konteks sosial sememangnya mempengaruhi pilihan CS. Hanya CS yang berasaskan bahasa pertuturan digunakan oleh subjek dalam pembentangan. Sementara itu, dalam perbincangan, CS yang berasaskan bahasa pertuturan dan 'language switch' digunakan. Manakala dalam konteks perbualan, 'language switch' digunakan secara meluas. Kajian ini turut menunjukkan bahawa CS lebih kerap digunakan sebagai strategi untuk meningkatkan kefahaman pendengar terhadap mesej yang disampaikan. Ini turut menyokong cadangan Clennell agar meperluas definisi CS dengan mengiktiraf fungsi CS untuk meningkatkan kefahaman pendengar. Keseluruhannya, 'discourse-based strategy' biasanya digunakan untuk menunjukkan informasi yang penting. Manakala 'avoidance strategy' digunakan untuk mengelakkan konsep yang tidak difahami. Subjek menggunakan 'fillers or hesitation devices' dan 'lexical repetition' apabila masa untuk berfikir diperlukan. Di samping itu, 'lexical repetition', 'offering help' dan 'appealing for assistance' digunakan untuk mengekalkan topik percakapan.*

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

CS	Communication Strategies
L1	First language
L2	Second language
TESL	Teaching English as Second Language
UNIMAS	Universiti Malaysia Sarawak

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.1 Background of research problem**

Second language acquisition has been the popular topic of study for years. Some of the researchers approached it from the perspective of teaching whereas some studied the cognitive process occurring during the acquisition. There are two types of second language (L2) knowledge that the learners possess, namely, the declarative knowledge that involves the ‘knowing that’ which is made up of the memorised language chunks and the internalised L2 rules; and the procedural knowledge which involves ‘knowing how’ that comprises the strategies and procedures that are employed to process L2 data for acquisition and for use (Færch & Kasper, 1983). L2 learners need to have access to both in order to be regarded competent. Nonetheless, interlanguage (Selinker, 1972), an intermediate grammar that is characteristically distinct from both the L1 and L2, may evolve as learners learn their L2. This happens because native-like proficiency in the target language is yet to be acquired by the learners. Hence, in oral communications that involve the L2, numerous strategies are used by the learners to overcome the communication problems that are caused by

their inadequacy in L2. These strategies are categorised as communicative strategy (CS), which is one of the processes that is involved when the L2 knowledge is being used. Besides, it is also suggested from a previous study (Clennell, 1995) that the reclassification of CS which allows for descriptions of more broad-based strategies instead of being confined to the current narrow lexically-based strategies is needed as there are traces of the discourse type of CS used by the L2 learners to communicate meanings. Additionally, it also suggested that besides serving as a tool to compensate for the lack of L2 knowledge to communicate the intended meaning function, CS could be used to enhance message transmitted in the target language.

A number of researches on communication strategies, from various aspects, have been carried out. The previous researches have proved that there is a significant relationship between the choice of CS and the language proficiency of an L2 learner (Bialystok & Frölich, 1980; Paribakht, 1985). In addition, previous research also indicates that L2 learners favour certain types of CS when conducting discussion (Kwok, n.d.).

Moreover, past research has shown that the language spoken has no impact on the choice of CS (Poulisse & Schils, 1989). Speakers employ the same strategies regardless of the language used.

Furthermore, Lafford (2004) also showed that the context of learning indeed influenced the frequency of the CS use in a research that compared the CS used by L2 learners who study abroad to L2 learners who study at home.

Although it has been suggested that there is effect of the learning context on the frequency on the use of CS (Lafford, 2004) and it has been proven that the L2 learners are fond of using particular patterns of CS while engaging in discussions (Kwok, n.d.), there has been few researches done to find out the influence of social context on the choice of CS. In order to further validate the findings of the studies that suggest that context does influence choice of CS, it is essential to explore in greater depth on the use of CS, regardless of the language used, along the continuum of formal and informal contexts, and across tasks of different purposes. Few previous studies have examined the influence of so many aspects of the social context on the use of CS in naturalistic conditions. Hence, the present study investigates the influence of social context, particularly the purpose and formality of a task, on the choice of CS.

## **1.2 Statement of problem**

In certain situation where the setting is casual and the tenor consists of people of equal status, for instance, in daily conversation, the topic of communication is often casual. Thus, there is less need for reformulation of message because the accuracy of a message in terms of language would not be as essential as those communications

that occur in formal setting. However, when it comes to formal situations like presentation, and when the interlocutors are someone with higher status, the subject matter is then paid attention to. Nonetheless, the impromptu characteristic of an oral communication where the speakers need to plan and give form to their ideas on the spot and in a limited duration of time often leads to the situation where the speakers find difficulties to gain access to all the lexical and language structures that they may need to communicate their intended meaning to the interlocutors. Therefore, to overcome the communication breakdown as well as to enhance message, CS is often sought.

In University of Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS), it is noticed that a number of undergraduates have indeed employed CS unconsciously during their oral interaction. The phenomenon is especially obvious when they lack the lexical resources required to express intended meanings in the language used. Besides, it is also noted that there is a shift in the register used by the undergraduates across oral interactions that serve to achieve different purposes. This shift of register is often identified via elements such as the speakers' choice of vocabulary and their tone of speaking when there is change in either the field or tenor of interactions. It will be interesting to figure out if the choice of CS could be one of those indicators of register change.

By integrating the phenomena on the use of CS by the undergraduates and the change of registers used according to the formality and the purpose of an oral interaction, the

present study aims to find out the influence of social context on the choice of communication strategies used by the TESL undergraduates in UNIMAS.

Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Identify and compare the type of CS used by the TESL undergraduates across three different situations: (i) while conducting a presentation (ii) while having a discussion (iii) while having casual conversation with their peers.
2. Determine whether the TESL undergraduates favour certain types of CS over others in a particular context.
  - Is there any CS that is frequently used in a particular context?
  - What is/are the possible factor(s) that lead to the preference?
3. Find out the type of CS associated with certain language functions to achieve communicative purposes.

### **1.3 Operational definitions of terms**

#### *1.3.1 Social context*

Social context can be subdivided into two, context of situation and context of culture.

The former is characterised by a particular register of language in an immediate social context whereby the latter has “recognisable patterns of structure and language within texts [and] these patterns develop to achieve particular purposes” (Feez, 1998).

For context of situation, the field (topic of interaction), tenor (relationship between the interactants), and mode (channel of linguistic communication) affect the register,

or the vocabulary and grammar in a communication (Hammond & Freebody, 1994). On the other hand, context of culture incorporates values, attitudes and share experiences of any group of people living in one culture. Different genres are conventionalised to have own schematic structure in order to achieve common goals or purposes (Halliday, 1985).

### *1.3.2 Communication strategies*

Communication strategies are used when there is “a mutual attempt of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in situation where requisite meaning structures do not seem to be shared” (Tarone, 1981). CS is regarded to serve two different purposes in this study, firstly, to overcome communication difficulties and secondly, to enhance message (Clennell, 1995).

The following are the types of CS provided by Tarone (1978, as in Tarone 1981) in a taxonomy which is used to compensate for language deficiencies. These criteria are used for the analysis of findings in this study.

#### 1. Paraphrase:

##### a) Approximation:

Use of a single target language vocabulary item or structure, which the learner knows is not correct, but shares enough semantic features in common with the desired item to satisfy the speaker.

For instance, the use of “animal” for “elephant”.

b) Word Coinage:

The learner makes up a new word in order to communicate a desired concept.

For instance, the coinage of “air” and “ball” for “balloon”.

c) Circumlocution:

The learner describes the characteristics or elements of the object or action instead of using the appropriate target language (TL) item or structure.

For instance, the description of “thing to rub off the wrong words we write with pencil, made from rubber” to indicate an eraser.

2. Borrowing:

a) Literal translation:

The learner translates word for word from the native language.

For instance, the direct translation from Mandarin, “people mountain people sea” to indicate “a lot of people”.

b) Language switch:

The learner uses the native language term without bothering to translate. However, in this study, as long as there is occurrence of code-switching, it will be regarded as language switch.

For instance, “her hair is kerinting” to mean “curly”.

### 3. Appeal for assistance

The learner asks for the correct term.

For instance, “Ah, What do you call that?”

### 4. Mime:

The learner uses nonverbal strategies in place of a lexical item or action.

For instance, clapping one’s fist and hit on something to indicate punching.

### 5. Avoidance:

#### a) Topic avoidance:

The learner simply tries not to talk about concepts for which the TL item or structure is not known.

For instance:

Teacher: Why do you think the poet is happy with his choice?

Student: I think...he is happy...why is the wood yellow?

#### b) Message abandonment:

The learner begins to talk about a concept but is unable to continue and stops in mid-utterance.

For instance, “From what I have read, it is important because ur ur..umm..” [smile]

### *1.3.3 Language function*

Three functions of language are enumerated in the literature (Schumann, 1978, as cited in Ellis, 1985). The first function refers to the communicative function of language that comprises the “transmission of purely referential, denotative information” (P. 273). The second is the integrative function. It concerns the use of language so as to identify the speaker as belong to certain social group. The third is coined as the expressive function. It involves language use to indicate one’s linguistic skill.

### *1.3.4 Presentation*

Presentation is a rule-bound interlocution of in which the scope and language of communication for the speech is fixed. Besides, there is presence of interlocutors whose social status is higher than the speakers in this context. In the context of this study, English is the sole medium of interaction for presentation and the lecturers are the interlocutors. The speech of the speaker is also assessed. As a result, it is normally planned beforehand, and may be rehearsed, before the articulation. It is more inclined to be monologue, with questioning and answering as the only form of interaction that may occur between the speaker and the listeners.

### *1.3.5 Discussion*

Discussion is regarded as a talk among two or more people on certain topic so as to reach decision. In this study, discussion refers to the exchange of ideas and

knowledge among the participants in small group in order to reach a consensus on the coursework assigned. The topic of a discussion is usually preselected. However, occasional digressing from the scope may take place. There is no restriction of language use being imposed in a discussion.

#### *1.3.6 Casual conversation*

Casual conversation is viewed as an informal spoken exchange of ideas between two or more people. In the present study, it refers to the sharing of thoughts between two or more participants on various kinds of topic. This type of discourse is totally unrestricted in a sense that the speakers own autonomous liberty on choosing language and topics of interaction. Hence, the flow of the speech is often unorganised, and the occurrence of dynamic topic shifts is normally evident.

### **1.4 Significance of the study**

There have been researches done on the relationship between speakers' choice of CS and language proficiency (Bialystok & Frölich, 1980; Paribakht, 1985), language choice (Poulisse & Schils, 1989), age level , topic of conversation and the learning context (Lafford, 2004). However, little attempt has been made to investigate the influence of social context, particularly, the tenor in the communication, the purpose, and the formality of tasks, on the choice of CS. Therefore, the result of this study may contribute to the field of CS whereby the researchers may develop further understanding on the relationship between the CS used and the social context.

Moreover, the identification of the patterns of CS used among the speakers when engaging in tasks with different level of formality and purposes may verify the suggestions of the previous findings that the context do influence the choice of CS used in a communication.

Furthermore, in a verbal communication, the immediate context and the language use is often inseparable. The ability to use language appropriately in conformity with the purpose of task and tenor determines the effectiveness of the communication. Hence, the findings of this study may shed some light on the appropriate use of CS across context, so as to serve as reference for a speaker to enable a speaker to be more efficient user of the strategic repertoire as well as more skilful in coping with varied communicative situation.