

Ting, S. H., & Lau, C. E. L. Y. (2007, April 12-14). *The influence of sociocultural context on the discourse structure of telephone enquiries and the use of communication strategies*. Paper presented at the Conference on Social and Cognitive Aspects of Second Language Learning and Teaching, University of Auckland, New Zealand.

The influence of sociocultural context on the discourse structure of telephone enquiries and the use of communication strategies

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Transactional interactions such as telephone enquiries are governed by business communication norms. In business communication courses in Malaysia, Western norms of formal interactions are usually taught. However, learners often have difficulties exhibiting desired interaction patterns and professional language use. This study investigated the influence of sociocultural context on the structuring of telephone enquiries and the use of communication strategies in the negotiation of meaning by learners of English as a second language (ESL). In other words, this study sought to examine the mediating role of sociocultural competence in the demonstration of discourse and strategic competence. Oral data from 28 ESL learners, aged 20 to 40, were analysed to determine the accomplishment of the communicative purpose of telephone enquiries about tour packages, restaurant reservations and products. The results showed that ESL learners tended to omit the opening self-identification stage and simplify the closing stage of the telephone enquiry. Such practices, deemed unprofessional in Western business communication, are acceptable in Malaysia. This gives rise to the question of what is considered 'effective' achievement of communicative purpose in cross-cultural communication. The preliminary results also revealed that those pairs who successfully negotiated meanings tended to be more proficient in English and they used more communication strategies, particularly discourse-based strategies. The unsuccessful encounters were characterised by skeletal exchange of information and the lack of joint-construction of meanings. The unsatisfactory exchange of information is linked to factors related to the context of situation, namely, inadequate knowledge of the field, inability to adopt roles and relationships of interactants in the simulated situations and unawareness of discourse features of oral interactions mediated by the telephone. Poor proficiency in English also contributed to communication gaps, which