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Communication Strategy Use and Proficiency Level of ESL Learners

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Introduction

Strategic competence is the ability to use verbal and nonverbal communication strategies “to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to limiting conditions in actual communication or to insufficient competence in one or more areas of communicative competence” (Canale, 1983, p. 12). The two main perspectives on communication strategies have been the psycholinguistic framework (Faerch & Kasper, 1980, 1983a, 1983b, 1984), which focuses on problem-solving, and the interactional framework (Tarone, 1980, 1981), which focuses on joint negotiation of meaning. Clennell (1994, 1995) proposed three discourse strategies which advert breakdowns in communication: lexical repetition, tonicity and topic fronting. Ting and her co-researchers integrated Clennell’s (1994, 1995) discourse strategies with the two main frameworks to determine their relevance to ESL learners. Their findings show the usefulness of lexical repetition in conveying a variety of meanings (Soekarno & Ting, 2016; Ting & Kho, 2009; Ting, Musa, & Sim, 2013; Ting & Phan, 2008; Ting & Sim, 2013).

Self-reports have been a relatively unexplored data source on communication strategy use because most researchers have kept to the mainstream interest in actual strategy use. There are some validity issues related to self-report questionnaires on communication strategy use (Nakatani, 2006, pp. 152-153). For example, Politzer’s (1983) items did not focus on “actual strategy use in a real learning task” and his subsequent study did not use a “unified psychological construct” (Politzer & McGroarty, 1985). Similarly, Huang and Van Naerssen (1987) included “learning strategies unrelated to oral communication” but Cohen, Weaver, and Li (1998) excluded “interactional aspects of communication”. Some recent studies (Kaivanpanah, Yamouty, & Karami, 2012; Uгла, Adnan, & Abidin, 2013) used Dörnyei and Scott’s (1995) inventory, but no information is available on its reliability. To deal with the criticism that self-reports might not reflect actual strategy use, Nakatani (2006) designed the Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI) and asked Japanese ESL learners to perform a simulated conversation task before giving them the OCSI. The findings on actual and reported strategy use are almost consistent (Nakatani, 2010). Nakatani (2010) also correlated both sets of data with oral communicative ability, as measured by