Oral Communication Strategies Used by English Major Undergraduates during the Internship Program

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Abstract—This study discusses the challenges that English major learners encountered, and the strategies they applied when communicated orally with others during the sixteen-week internship using English language. The participants were sixty-seven final year English major students (NNES) enrolling in co-operative education course at a public university in Thailand, and also on their period of work placements. The questionnaire adapted from Nakatani (2006)'s Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI) was employed to collect the quantitative data. The results were analyzed and interpreted to find out the frequency of communication strategies used by the subjects to overcome the difficulties they coped with when performing speaking and listening tasks.

Keywords—English major students, Oral communication strategies, listening strategies, Speaking strategies

I. INTRODUCTION

With the growth of regional and global competition and due to industrial transformation, English proficiency is undoubtedly vital for all Thai graduates, especially those who are majoring in English, particularly in this era of ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), to compete with other graduates in the same group of countries (ASEAN) in the labor market. Concurrently, in order to properly prepare the current English major students (non-native English speakers) to get ready for the high competitive labor market, the co-operative education (CO-OP) or internship program is therefore set by most of Thai universities for the main purpose of enhancing graduates' communication skills of English and employability as well as providing them opportunity to gain some experience in the real workplace environment. As suggested by the recent study, Kassim and Ali [1] pointed out that numerous employers were reluctant to hire graduates with low language proficiency, despite the fact that their academic performances were exceedingly qualified. More specifically, Jackson [2] in the mean time stresses that "oral communication dominates assurance of learning standard and is frequently cited as one of the most desired graduate employability skills." In response to the earlier mentioned, Clagett [3] agrees that oral communication skill in English is deemed as the most significant one among all communication skills which all graduates should possess in order to function

efficiently at the workplace. With above discussed, English communicative competency is therefore essential and obliged for all graduates to master and perform the tasks effectively, particularly when they are placed in potential organizations as the internship position ([4], [5], [6]). On the contrary, whether majored in English or not, only a few foreign language learners can communicate perfectly using English language. Many of them, in reality, "sometimes struggle to find appropriate expressions or grammatical structures when they intend to get their meaning across [7]". Due to this fact, in order to overcome those problems when communicate verbally with foreigners, communication strategies (CSs) therefore are unavoidable for non-native English speakers. As also argued by Moattarian and Tahririan, "these strategies keep speaker's flexible, and confident, and make their communication more effective. [8]".

Given the importance of the ability to communicate orally in English, this study therefore discusses the challenge that senior-year English major undergraduates (NNES) encountered, and the strategies they applied when engaged in a conversation during the sixteen-week internship period. The results were analyzed and interpreted to find out the frequency of communication strategies used by the subjects to overcome the difficulties they coped with when performing speaking and listening tasks.

A. *Purpose and Significance of the Present Study*

The aim of this study is to explore the factors influencing oral communication strategies employed by the fourth year English major undergraduates in coping with speaking and listening problems when communicated with the foreigners during their sixteen-week internship period at different types of workplaces. More specifically, the present study attempts to answer the following questions: (1) what are the overall communication strategies used by the trainees during the speaking tasks? , and (2) what are the overall communication strategies used by the trainees during the listening tasks?

It is hoped that the outcomes of the present study will help promote a more genuine reflection on the speaking and listening proficiency of the certain university's English major students. In the meantime, the study is also beneficial for the relevant courses' instructors in developing the courses' contents in order to enhance the students' communicative competency based on the results revealed in this paper.

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II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A. Communication Strategies

The term 'communication strategies (CSs)' has been defined differently by many scholars over the past decades. For instance, as proposed by Faerch and Kasper [9], it is recognized as the ways learners utilized to avoid communication breakdown. For Canale [10], communication strategies (CSs) are employed for an attempt to boost the interaction effectiveness. Similarly, Bygate [11] sees it as methods for accomplishing communication by utilizing language in the most effective way.

B. Oral Communication Strategies

Developed by Nakatani in 2006 [12], the Oral Communication Strategies Inventory (OCSI) is widely used nowadays as a tool for statistical analysis to identify the learners' general perceptions of strategies for oral interaction.

As proposed by the same researcher, "the term oral communication strategies is used instead of communication strategies in order to avoid terms that might exacerbate the confusion regarding the taxonomies". Specifically, oral communication strategies concentrate more on "strategic behaviors that learners use when facing communication problems during interactional tasks".

Divided into two main sections, the first part of the OCSI includes eight strategies for coping with speaking difficulties (32 items), while the second part comprises seven factors influencing strategies used to cope with problems when performing listening tasks (26 items).

Strategies for coping with speaking problem

- **Social Affective Strategies** concern with learners' affective factors in social context.
- **Fluency-Oriented Strategies** are related to fluency of communication.
- **Negotiation for Meaning while Speaking** are related to the participants' attempt to negotiate with their interlocutors.
- **Accuracy-Oriented Strategies** are concerned with a desire to speak English accurately.
- **Message Reduction and Alteration** represents strategies that the learners use to avoid a communication breakdown by reducing an original message, simplifying their utterances, or using similar expressions that can be used confidently.
- **Nonverbal Strategies while speaking** concern with nonverbal strategies used to achieve communication goals.
- **Message Abandonment** associates with message abandonment by learners in communication.
- **Attempt to Think in English** involves thinking as much as possible in the foreign language during the actual communication.

Strategies for coping with listening problem

- **Negotiation for Meaning while Listening Strategies** are characterized by negotiating behavior while listening.
- **Fluency-Oriented Strategies** include focusing on fluency of the conversational flow including speakers'

rhythm, intonation and pronunciation.

- **Scanning Strategies** involve getting some hints about the speakers' intention by focusing on specific point of speech, such as subject and verb, the interrogative, and the first part of the speakers' utterance.
- **Getting the gist Strategies** involve focusing on general information contained in speech rather than to specific utterances and considering the context and the speakers' previous sentences to guess overall meaning.
- **Nonverbal Strategies** include making use of nonverbal information, such as speakers' eye contact, facial expression, and gesture.
- **Less Active Listener Strategies** represent negative attitudes towards using active listening strategies for interaction.
- **Word-Oriented Strategies** reflect a learner's tendency to capture the meaning of speech by paying attention to individual words.

III. METHODS

A. Participants

The subjects of the study were 67 Thai final-year students (9 males and 58 females), majoring in English at a public university in southern Thailand, working as trainees at various workplaces in academic year 2015.

B. Instrument

In order to gather the quantitative data, the questionnaire was employed as a major tool in this study. Following Nakatani (2006)'s Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI), the questionnaire was adapted and designed before translating into Thai language, and distributed to all fourth-year students. This is to avoid any confusion which might occur during the process of completing all items listed in the survey as all research subjects' first language is Thai despite they majored in English. Divided into two main parts, the first part of the questionnaire was designed to gather the subjects' general information as well as the workplaces and positions they were placed in during the ten-week period of internship. The next section consists of 58 items (32 ietms from 8 categories of strategies coping with speaking problems, and 26 items from 7 categories of strategies coping with listening problems) based on Nakatani (2006)'s inventory.

C. Data Collection

The copies of Thai version questionnaires were distributed to all participants during the short break of the 'After Internship Seminar' on 8 May 2017 in order to collect the data. The completed questionnaires were then returned and collected by the researcher on the same date.

D. Data Analysis

In answering the research questions and accomplishing the research's objective, the returned questionnaires were calculated and analyzed as follows:

First, in response to the questions regarding the general information about the subjects and their work placements, to the frequency and percentage were applied to present the main data.

Next, to identify the frequency and range of strategies used by the subjects to overcome the difficulties they coped with when performing speaking tasks, descriptive data, namely mean and S.D. are used.

IV. RESULTS

A. What Are the Overall Communication Strategies Used by The Trainees During the Speaking Tasks?

Based on the outcomes of the data analysis, the overall communication strategies used by the trainees during the speaking tasks are presented using mean, standard deviation (S.D.) and rank. (as shown in Fig. 1)

Factor Name	N=67		
	Mean	S.D.	Rank
Social Affective Strategies	4.25	0.70	4
Fluency-Oriented Strategies	3.94	0.78	6
Negotiation for Meaning while Speaking	4.31	0.76	3
Accuracy-Oriented Strategies	4.12	0.71	5
Message Reduction and Alteration Strategies	4.34	0.62	2
Nonverbal Strategies while Speaking	4.49	0.61	1
Message Abandonment Strategies	3.54	0.91	7
Attempt to think in English Strategies	3.45	0.78	8

Fig. 1 Students' overall speaking strategies use while working.

As illustrated in Fig. 1, according to the subjects, the most used strategies while speaking with others in the workplace is *'nonverbal strategies'* (I try to give a good impression to the listeners) with X = 4.49 (S.D. = 0.61), followed by *'message reduction'* (I use words which are familiar to me) (X = 4.34, S.D. = 0.62), and '*negotiation for meaning while speaking strategies*' (while speaking, I pay attention to the listeners' reaction to my speech) (X = 4.31, S.D. = 0.76). In this regard, in consistent with the above, the least used strategies as reported by respondents is '*attempt to think in English*' (X = 3.45, S.D. = 0.78) where only a few of them agreed that they thought of what they wanted to say in Thai first and then constructed the English sentence.

B. What Are the Overall Communication Strategies Used by The Trainees During the Listening Tasks?

Factor Name	N=67		
	Mean	S.D.	Rank
Negotiation for Meaning while Listening Strategies	4.31	0.66	3
Fluency-Maintaining Strategies	3.90	0.72	6
Scanning Strategies	4.63	0.49	1
Getting the Gist Strategies	4.06	0.78	5
Nonverbal Strategies while Listening	4.40	0.72	2
Less Active Listener Strategies	3.33	0.98	7
Word-Oriented Strategies	4.22	0.71	4

Fig. 2 Students' overall listening strategies use while working

The overall communication strategies used by the trainees during the listening tasks also are outlined using mean, standard deviation (S.D.) and rank. (as shown in Fig. 2)

As can been seen in Fig.2, '*scanning strategies*' was the most used strategies and always employed by the participants (X = 4.63, S.D. = 0.49) where they tried to catch the speaker's main point while engaged in listening tasks. In addition to that, the trainees also appeared to apply '*nonverbal and negotiation for meaning*' as the second and third ranks strategies which almost always used by them during the period of working as a trainee (X = 4.40, S.D. = 0.72, and X = 4.31, S.D. = 0.66 respectively). On the contrary, only the minority of the students reported that they tried to translate what they heard into the native language little by little to understand what the speaker had said. This can therefore be interpreted that the least applied strategies while listening was '*less active listener strategies*' with X = 3.33 (S.D. = 0.98).

V. CONCLUSION

A. Summary of The Study

The purpose of the present study is to explore the factors affecting oral communication strategies employed by the fourth year English major undergraduates in dealing with speaking and listening difficulties when communicated with the foreigners during their sixteen-week internship period at different types of workplaces.

The method applied in this study was self-reported questionnaires adapted from Nakatani (2006)'s Oral Communication Strategies Inventory (OCSI). The study was conducted on a sample of 67 fourth year English major students completing the internship program in academic year 2015 and participating the 'After Internship Seminar' on 8 May 2016. All research subjects completed and returned the questionnaires during the mentioned period.

In order to answer the two research questions, the data obtained from the questionnaires were calculated and analyzed using Microsoft Excel.

B. Summary of The Results and Discussions

(1) What are the overall communication strategies used by the trainees during the speaking tasks?

The outcomes of the present study revealed that all out of eight factors affecting oral communication strategies were applied by the respondents in coping with the difficulties while speaking English during the internship period.

However, the top three strategies used by the trainees are *nonverbal*, *message reduction and alteration*, and *negotiation for meaning while speaking* respectively.

According to Nakatani [12], the students applied the nonverbal strategies to attract the interlocutors' attention by using eye contact (Item 15) in order that they can achieve the goal of communication. Moreover, to avoid communication breakdown, the participants tend to use message reduction and alteration strategies to reduce the original message, simplify their speeches, and turn those into their own words and expressions that they felt confident and comfortable with (Item 3). In addition to that, by applying negotiation for meaning while speaking strategies, the students seemed to also focus on the listeners' reaction to see if both could come to the

same understanding (Item 19). This particular factor (negotiation for meaning) is, according to the same researcher [12], considered as active kind of strategies and important for the EFL to enhance their ability in speaking the target language.

(2) What are the overall communication strategies used by the trainees during the listening tasks?

To accomplish the communication goals, the results also disclosed that all seven factors were used by the research subjects to overcome the problems in listening. To be more specific, most of the participants as English major students tended to "get some hints about the speakers' intentions [12]" by employing 'scanning strategies while listening'. As it might be too difficult for the EFL learners to understand every single word and sentence that the interlocutors spoke in English, they therefore needed to check to discover the main point of what they just heard from the other end so they could comprehend and give them response (Item 12).

Apart from that, the following strategies: nonverbal and negotiation for the meaning while listening were used frequently by the respondents as well. This can be interpreted that using nonverbal information such as making eye contact, studying the speakers' facial expression and gestures can improve the students' listening comprehension. Additionally, in order to cross-check their understanding, the participants would also repeat or even ask the speakers for clarification (Item 21).

Interestingly, the results also shown that less active listener strategies, least frequently used by the respondents, signifies "negative attitude towards using active listening strategies for interaction [12]". These certain strategies (less active strategies), as pointed out by Huang and Van Naersan (cited in Nakatani) [12], are most likely be employed by less successful EFL learners when performing the oral communication tasks.

VI. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATION

It is suggested that, based on the results of this present research as well as the previous studies, to effectively raise the students' awareness of the communications strategies, the relevant courses' instructors should consider adding CSs training in the classroom or activities in the program or curriculum ([13], [14], [15]). As also iluttrated by Faerch and Kasper [9], "by learning how to use communication strategies appropriately, learners will be more able to bridge the gap between pedagogic and non-pedagogic communication situations".

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