

FACTORS INFLUENCING THE USE OF COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES BY ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS: A NARRATIVE REVIEW

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Abstract

This review study identified factors that instructors of English as an additional language (EAL) could consider when designing peer interaction-based activities to promote learners' use of effective communication strategies (CSs). In addition, we investigated how the identified factors might benefit inclusive EAL classrooms where learners with special needs participate in peer interactions. This review study aimed to equip EAL instructors with information that could be considered to promote the use of effective CSs by learners in the classroom. To follow the guidelines of the narrative literature review method outlined by Green et al., (2006), articles were extracted from the ERIC, Linguistics, Education, and Arts and Humanities databases, and the information from the articles was reviewed to answer two research questions. Our review identified two factors that EAL instructors should consider: the personal factors of learners and the types of tasks. The first factor includes learners' levels of proficiency, level of anxiety, as well as self-efficacy, learning attitude, and gender, while the second factor suggested three types of tasks that could elicit the use of CSs in classrooms: information gap, reasoning gap, and opinion gap activities. Our discussion led to the conclusion that assigning peers to college/post-secondary learners with autism, based on their personal profiles and elaborating on the instructions for assigned tasks, would better prepare them to participate in peer interaction-based activities in the EAL classroom. In addition, it was suggested that future research investigate inclusive EAL classrooms that include learners with special needs.

Keywords: *Communication Strategies, English As An Additional Language, Learners With Autism, Peer Interaction-Based Tasks, Strategic Competence*

Introduction

Since learners' second language (L2) competence is still developing, problems in communication are inevitable. Therefore, equipping EAL learners with strategic competence, which learners require when trying to manage problems, is important. Despite many classrooms having taught communication strategies (CSs) to develop learners' strategic competence, not a few learners still utilise ineffective CSs (Maldonado, 2016; Rabab'ah 2016; Sato et al., 2019; Su-Hie et al., 2017; Ugla et al., 2019). Therefore, it is crucial to equip EAL instructors with information that might promote the use of effective CSs by EAL learners so that these learners can benefit from effective negotiation when managing issues in L2 communication. In addition, the

increasing number of inclusive EAL classrooms involving EAL learners with special needs in interaction, such as those with autism, might increase the urge for instructors to acquire the information.

Strategic Competence

Various components contributing to the understanding of L2 communicative competence in second language learning (SLL) have appeared in the literature with strategic competence being linked directly to the other components of communicative competence (see Celce-Murcia, 2007). Prior to the introduction of strategic competence, the SLL field viewed linguistic competence as the sole component of L2 communicative competence (Chomsky, 1965). This idea was further developed by Hymes (1967), who introduced sociolinguistic

competence as an additional component. Later, scholars added new communicative components, such as strategic competence (Canale & Swain, 1980), discourse competence (Canale, 1983), actional competence (Celce-Murcia, 1995), interactional competence, and formulaic competence (Celce-Murcia, 1995). Among these competencies, strategic competence is often utilised by L2 learners when communicating in the L2. Canale and Swain (1980) define this strategic competence as “verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient competence.” (p. 30). The definition might indicate that L2 learners with better strategic competence would likely have stronger L2 communication skills, as they might better cope with issues resulting from other components of their communicative competence which are still developing.

Communication Strategies

The importance of teaching communication strategies (CSs) in L2 classes is recognised in SLL (Canale & Swain 1980; Nakatani, 2010; Rabab’ah 2016) and previous studies have documented its positive impact on learners’ L2 performances (Al-Garni & Almuhammadi, 2019; Rabab’ah 2016; Saeidi & Farshchi, 2015; Sukirlan, 2014). Despite these encouraging findings related to L2 CS teaching, Rabab’ah (2016) focused on CSs considered ineffective by L2 learners, especially those in early L2 development. They found that these learners avoided the use of interactional CSs and frequently employed abandonment, message reduction, and L1-based strategies such as code-switching. Interactional CSs, such as appeals for help, clarification requests, confirmation checks, asking for repetition, self-repair, and guessing, are

listed as effective CSs to be taught in L2 classrooms (Rabab’ah, 2016). L2 instructors, therefore, need to establish a learning environment that encourages L2 learners to interact with others. We argue that involving L2 learners in peer interaction-based activities can benefit their interactional CSs.

Peer interaction

Peer interaction is seen as a medium that provides valuable learning opportunities because when learners engage with their peers, they can learn from others (Vygotsky, 1978). Scaffolding from peers (in which peers assist each other) and self-appropriation (adjusting own performance with their peers) might lead to negotiation (see the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) concept introduced by Vygotsky, 1978). Therefore, peer interactions are an ideal strategy to stimulate the use of interactional CSs as learners are in a context that encourages engagement with others. In addition, they also suit the learning context at the college or post-secondary school levels, where the interactions of learners and instructors are not as intensive as they are when younger learners are involved.

Inclusive learning setting

Despite the documented benefits of peer interaction, some recent studies have shown that new learning environments in the L2 classroom can pose challenges for peer interactions. One of the new contexts we observed is the inclusive learning environment. A growing number of L2 classrooms are transforming into inclusive classrooms for L2 learners with disabilities as a result of improved educational access for college learners with special needs. However, EAL-specific research on inclusive interaction between learners with and without special needs in the EAL learning social interactions is limited (Muharikah, et al., 2022). This limitation could pose a significant obstacle for instructors who

want to design peer-based interaction activities involving learners with diverse educational needs.

EAL learners with autism are one group of learners who may encounter challenges in group interactions. Autism is characterised by repetitive behaviours, restricted interests, and challenges in social interaction, according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (2013) of the American Psychiatric Association. Since autism is a spectrum, autistic individuals may have varying degrees of challenges in social interaction. Notably, teaching communication strategies to this group of learners would not only improve their EAL communication levels, but could also increase their exposure to inclusive communication. We argue that inclusive communication could expand the communication repertoires of all participants, whether or not they have special needs. Previous research has demonstrated the efficacy of peer-mediated communication programmes for individuals with autism (Siew et al., 2017; Watkins, et al, 2015).

This section presents three important considerations for EAL instructors when planning lessons or activities to assist learners in developing their communicative competence through EAL classroom activities. First, it is vital that instructors understand that strategic competence should be taught as early as possible (see its role as defined by Canale & Swain, 1980). The negotiation in L2 communication might lead to learning (see the concept of ZPD of Vygotsky, 1978) that could potentially develop the other elements of communicative competencies (e.g., linguistics, discourse, or formulaic competencies). Secondly, we argue that peer interaction-based activities are the ideal environment for learners to practise using communication strategies that are considered effective.

Thirdly, we also shed light on factors related to new learning contexts, such as inclusive classrooms, which could challenge teaching design. We believe that some variables documented by previous studies need to be considered when planning to teach communication strategies in L2 classrooms, especially in EAL settings. Therefore, this review study addresses the following questions:

1. What factors should be considered when planning peer interaction-based classroom activities that encourage the use of L2 learners' CSs during face-to-face communication with peers?
2. How might the identified factors influence the design of peer interaction-based activities in inclusive classrooms involving college learners with autism?

Research Method

This study is a narrative literature review, which follows the guidelines outlined by Green et al. (2006). We involved several research databases to search for relevant articles that could help us answer the questions formulated for this study. The findings from the synthesis became the themes used in the report presentation.

The following keywords were used to search for previous studies in four educational research databases, namely ERIC, Linguistics, Education, and Art and Humanities databases.

("communicati* strateg*") OR
 ("compensat* strateg*") AND
 ("communication breakdown*") OR
 ("communication failure*") OR
 ("communication problem*") AND (EFL
 OR "English Foreign Language" OR
 TESOL OR "Teaching English to
 Speakers of Other Languages" OR
 "English Language Teaching" OR ELT
 OR ESL OR "English Second Language")

OR EAL OR “English Additional Language”)

We restricted the search to English-language articles with publication dates between 2010 and 2020 and selected only those with full-text access. To help us choose the most relevant papers to include, we applied the following criteria to the extracted articles from the databases:

1. Articles are required to be written in EAL contexts.
2. Articles must be about college EAL learners or EAL teaching or learning at the college or university level in a traditional communication setting (face-to-face communication).
3. The article's research must not have been conducted in English of Art or Literature contexts (English for L1 learners).

In addition, after identifying potential findings from some articles, we also included some additional keywords on the same databases to support our review. These were: “Communication Strategies” AND “Task”, “Communication strategies” AND “Autism”. We then applied the same criteria to the papers we retrieved from our search using the additional keywords.

Multiple themes emerged from the reviewed information; hence, the article's report was presented under these identified themes.

Results and Discussion

As a result of the review, we have identified two important factors that EAL instructors should consider when designing peer interaction-based activities in order to enhance the use of effective CSs. These are the personal factors of the learners and the task types. The personal factors of the learners

include their proficiency, anxiety, self-efficacy, attitude, and gender. The following sections explain how the personal factors of learners may be considered to retrieve learners' use of effective CSs.

Learners' Proficiency Levels

It has been suggested that the proficiency level of EAL learners influences their use of CSs. On the one hand, learners with greater English proficiency tended to employ language-based strategies (Razmjou & Ghazi, 2013). Reportedly, they paid close attention to their accuracy, employed more interactional strategies, and were able to think in a second language (Tan, et al., 2012; Zhou & Li-Shih, 2018). Su-Hie et al. (2017), for example, noted that learners with higher proficiency often employed clarification requests and confirmation checks in the L2. The uses of these interactional CSs were noted by Su-Hie et al. (2017) as an indication that learners were aware that communication is a process that is jointly negotiated. Moreover, these learners engaged in frequent self-repair as they concentrated on their linguistic performance (Tan et al., 2012). As they frequently think in the L2, highly proficient learners may encounter fewer processing-time-related communication issues. This is because translation frequently consumes more time when speaking, which can result in communication breakdowns (Zulkurnain & Kaur, 2014).

On the other hand, learners with less proficiency were reported to avoid interactional strategies to negotiate meaning. Some learners with poor proficiency might employ *let-it-pass* strategies, in which these learners abandoned the problems that had to be managed (Sato et al., 2019; Su-Hie et al., 2017). In addition, some less proficient learners were reported to frequently utilise L1-based strategies such as code-

switching and literal translation (Maldonado, 2016) or employ clarification requests and ask for repetition in the L1 (Ugla et al., 2019). These CSs, however, are commonly viewed as being ineffective (Rabab'ah, 2016).

Learners' Anxiety Level

The anxiety level of EAL learners may also influence their classroom use of CSs. Liu (2018) discovered in her study of 1,091 Chinese first-year undergraduates that anxious learners were more likely to employ ineffective strategies. These learners frequently utilised message reduction and translation. In a similar vein, Zhang and Liu (2013) found that learners with higher anxiety levels employed these two strategies in addition to message abandonment. In contrast, both studies found that learners with lower anxiety are less likely to abandon messages. Typically, these learners exerted substantial effort to understand and be understood by their interlocutors. They verified their own accuracy and negotiated for meaning during communication. Learners with less anxiety employed more interactional strategies, whereas those with greater anxiety avoided them (Liu, 2018; Zhang & Liu, 2013). Additionally, learners with less anxiety were reported to use CSs more frequently than those with anxiety (Shirkhani & Mir Mohammad Meigouni, 2020).

Learner's Self-efficacy

Another personal factor that influences learners' use of CSs is self-efficacy. It is the learner's perception of his or her ability to complete assigned tasks (Bandura, 1997). According to Shirkhani and Mir Mohammad Meigouni (2020), Iranian young adult EAL learners with a higher level of self-efficacy employed more CSs than those with a lower level of self-efficacy. These learners' frequent use of CSs during communicative tasks

demonstrated their ability to address communication issues that arose. This finding is also supported by Abbasi and Nosratinia (2018), who hypothesised that EAL learners with high self-efficacy would be motivated to employ conversational strategies to complete the tasks.

Learners' Attitude

Like self-efficacy, attitude is also another personal factor associated with the use of CSs in EAL classes. Gardner (1985) stated that learning attitude is one of the ingredients of motivation. Eagly and Chaiken (1993) defined attitude as "a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favour and disfavour" (p.1). In brief, the attitudes of learners in oral communication may relate to their evaluations of the activity. Evidence indicates that learners' attitudes toward learning English may have a strong correlation with motivation. Toomnan and Intaraprasert (2015) found that, compared to those with lower attitudes in speaking English, Thai undergraduate learners with positive attitudes employed CSs with significantly more frequency and variety. The notable discrepancy in the frequency of CS uses between the two groups was in the use of strategies to convey a message to the interlocutors. Learners with positive attitudes tended to expand, repair (self and others), and guess. In addition, learners with a positive attitude were reported to be less worried about trying new expressions while speaking and believed that people do not need to understand every single word to understand the message (Toomnan & Intaraprasert, 2015).

Learner's Gender

Gender is also another personal factor believed to influence the use of CSs in EAL classrooms. Female learners may tend to employ message reduction and non-verbal strategies. Jindathai (2017)

studied 361 Thai EAL learners and noted that female learners used message reduction and alteration more than their male peers. With this strategy, they used words that they were already familiar with. They also relied on gestures more. Female learners often mimed the words they could not think of while speaking. The superiority of EAL female learners in the use of message reduction and non-verbal strategies was also confirmed by Sadripour and Motallebzadeh (2016). They found that female learners often left the message unfinished when encountering communication breakdowns (message abandonment). Moreover, Jindathai (2017) found that females used circumlocution strategies less than male learners. Male learners often created new words when they found it difficult to access the words they wanted to express. However, it was confirmed that there was no significant difference in the frequency of CS use between the two groups.

Thus, it can be seen that a learner's proficiency, level of anxiety, self-efficacy, and attitude impact their use of CSs. However, the reviewed literature does not indicate that one gender utilises more effective CSs than the other, although the gender variable may influence the use of specific CSs.

It has been reported that learners with greater English proficiency, a lower anxiety level, greater self-efficacy, and a more positive attitude towards English learning use classroom CSs more effectively. When creating groups, this information would aid EAL instructors in selecting the appropriate learners. Before assigning tasks and grouping learners, EAL instructors must be able to identify their learners' characteristics. Members of an inclusive group would contribute to an improved learning environment where the ZPD (see Vygotsky, 1978) could be effectively activated. Those with lower

English proficiency, self-efficacy, and learning attitude could be grouped with those with higher levels. This may enable lower-performing learners to engage in self-regulation and appropriation (Vygotsky, 1978).

In addition, it may be advantageous for learners' self-efficacy if they are assigned tasks that can boost their confidence. EAL instructors could select topics that are familiar to all group members, enabling learners to concentrate more on the use of their language and less on the topic's content. The reviewed articles in the present study also indicate that learners with less anxiety perform better in the classroom (Liu, 2018; Shirkhani & Mir Mohammad Meigouni, 2020; Zhang & Liu, 2013). When designing peer interaction-based classroom activities, it is crucial for EAL instructors to select appropriate tasks. When designing peer-based classroom activities with the objective of eliciting the use of effective CSs, EAL instructors should also consider the type of task.

We categorised the task type-related data into three distinct activities. These include information, reasoning, and opinion-gap activities (for further discussion about these types of activities, see Prabhu, 1987).

Information-gap Activities

It appears that information-gap activities elicit CSs that tend to result in repetitive communication acts. These activities require learners to construct meaning from the provided information. For example, jigsaw readings and describing images. Several studies found that learners frequently employed repetition and other repetition strategies when performing these tasks (e.g., Abdullah, 2011; Champakaew & Pencingkarn, 2014; Ghout-Khenoune, 2012). In addition, other studies have identified the frequent use of confirmation requests,

clarification requests, and self-repairs by EAL learners engaged in comparable activities (e.g., Baharun, 2018; Khan & Victori, 2011). These strategies frequently require learners to repeat the transferred meaning, either in a similar formulation or a different form. The strategies of requesting confirmation and clarification require interlocutors to repeat the information. In the meantime, self-repair strategies anticipate that the speakers will reformulate the language to express the previous meaning. When engaging in information-gap activities, it has been reported that learners frequently use CSs that encourage repetitions in communication. This finding is consistent with one of the characteristics of information-gap activities, described by Prabhu (1987) as repetition.

Reasoning-gap Activities

Activities involving reasoning gaps appear to elicit CSs that promote meaning negotiation. These activities allow learners to construct their own meaning alongside the information provided. In contrast to information-gap activities, which require learners to express the given meaning (which is fully provided by the tasks), reasoning-gap activities require learners to synthesise the provided information with their own ideas. Consequently, construction or negotiation is likely to occur during these activities (Prabhu, 1987). Khan and Victori (2011) examined the CSs of 22 EAL undergraduate learners in Spain. They discovered that learners only used the language they were comfortable with and avoided unfamiliar expressions. This demonstrated that learners negotiated meaning by evaluating their own language proficiency and the information provided. Learners frequently used confirmation checks when negotiating the meaning of group tasks with their peers (Champakaew & Pencingkarn, 2014). Similarly to information-gap activities, reasoning-gap activities provide learners

with the opportunity to employ negotiation strategies. Baharun et al. (2018) discovered that Malay undergraduates employed similar strategies in both information and reasoning-gap tasks (jigsaw reading versus decision-making tasks). However, they observed that negotiation episodes occurred more frequently in reasoning-gap tasks.

Opinion-gap Activities

Nearly identical to reasoning-gap activities, opinion-gap activities also encourage the use of meaning-negotiation strategies. The difference is that opinion-gap activities offer EAL learners more opportunities to utilise a wider variety of CSs. This is due to the subjective nature of the meaning constructed during opinion-gap activities. Opinion-gap activities include debates, unstructured discussions, and interviews. In these activities, EAL learners frequently employed code-switching, especially when their peers shared a similar L1 (Fitriani, 2019; Saidah et al., 2020; Shtavica, 2018; Tan, et al., 2012). This may occur because EAL learners have a tendency to prioritise meaning over form and frequently seek task completion despite limited proficiency (Hosni, 2014).

However, code-switching seems to occur infrequently (in conversation) when EAL learners with high proficiency collaborate with non-L1-speaking peers. During free conversation tasks, intermediate level Chinese and Indonesian EAL learners in Australia frequently employed other-repetition, confirmation check, and self-repetition (Abdullah, 2011). In addition, Zhou and Li-Shih (2018) found that EAL Chinese learners with intermediate and upper intermediate speaking proficiency utilised L1-based strategies infrequently. Fillers, self-correcting, gesturing, and exemplifying were among the most frequently used strategies by these learners in a debate task. In addition,

Ghout-Khenoune (2012) reported the use of repetitions and reformulation in a free discussion task. In conclusion, EAL learners employed a greater variety of strategies (including those predominantly employed in information and reasoning gap tasks) in opinion-gap tasks than in other types of tasks (e.g., Baharun et al., 2018; Ghout-Khenoune, 2012; Shtavica, 2018). This may be because the meaning derived from opinion-gap activities is highly unpredictable. According to Prabhu (1987), the unpredictability of these tasks presents learners with additional challenges.

Among the three types of tasks discussed previously, the opinion gap is the one that promotes the use of CSs the most. When the information that learners are required to provide in a task is not strictly determined, they appear to employ more effective CSs during discussions. In addition, if familiar topics are used in these types of tasks, the self-efficacy of the learners might be enhanced, and their anxiety may be reduced. Therefore, we recommend that the selection of task types take into account the individual characteristics of the learners.

Involving Learners with Autism

We did not find any identified articles specifically discussing the use of communication strategies in EAL classrooms by EAL learners with autism or peer communication involving EAL learners with autism. However, we believe that taking into account the personal factors of learners in the classroom and the task types would also benefit autistic EAL learners.

According to Muharikah et al. (2022), classroom routines would benefit EAL learners with autism. If EAL instructors had access to information about their learners' personal circumstances prior to the start of class, they would be better able to establish a routine. EAL

instructors could create a profile of each learner, including their proficiency and attitude towards EAL learning, at the outset of the study and map out the optimal grouping of learners in advance. The groupings could be revealed much earlier, allowing autistic learners to identify the learners they will be working with. Additionally, instructors could determine the nature of class assignments and, if possible, provide specific instructions. If learners with autism (or perhaps all learners) were less anxious as a result of predictability and routine, it would be possible to create a safer learning environment.

Recognising that EAL learners with autism struggle with inference skills (Alison et al., 2017; Kuparinen, 2017; Padmadewi & Artini, 2017; Sagia, 2015), instructors should vary the types of tasks. Learners with autism may find information-gap activities less challenging than opinion-gap activities. However, opinion-gap activities may encourage the use of a wider variety of CSs among other peers. Regardless of the types of tasks assigned in the classroom, we recommend that learners be given task instructions, materials, and information about their group members prior to class. This would allow all learners, including those with autism, to familiarise themselves with the topic at home, allowing them to concentrate on language usage during practice.

Limitations of The Review

There may be several limitations of this study, but we have identified the two main ones. First, though our narrative review involved a systematic search and applied some criteria to select the most relevant literature, the bias in applying the inclusion criteria of the extracted articles was quite high as it was conducted by the author only. Ideally, a systematic search is accompanied by a systematic screening

by two or three reviewers, which could reduce the bias in the review. Second, this study review did not critically appraise the identified article. The research questions in this study required more descriptive answers, which allowed little room for the author to critically appraise the identified articles.

Future Directions

As mentioned in the introductory section of this article, research on EAL teaching and learning for learners with special needs, such as those with autism, is still growing. Future research examining how learners with special needs participate in inclusive peer interactions in EAL classrooms would benefit EAL instructors in designing more effective peer interaction-based activities to promote the use of effective CSs. In addition, to address the limitations of the current study, a more systematic review study with the same topic could be conducted to reduce the bias and provide room for critically appraising the identified articles.

Conclusion

The current review provided information about the CSs used by EAL learners during face-to-face communication. We extracted from the information that two factors could be considered to elicit the use of effective CSs in the classroom: the personal factors of the learners and the task types. None of the articles extracted from the databases addressed communication in EAL classrooms involving learners with special needs, especially learners with autism. However, the consideration of the two identified factors might assist instructors in preparing more inclusive peer interaction-based tasks when involving learners with and without autism in the class. In addition to answering the two

questions, our report also noted the limitations of the study and future directions.

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