Adjusting communication strategies to language proficiency
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ABSTRACT
The study that is the focus of this article examined how the use of communication strategies was influenced by the target language proficiency of speakers of English as an Additional Language and their interlocutors. The oral interaction data from 20 participants in Malaysia were analysed to identify the choice of communication strategies and the type of communication strategy category, using an integrated framework comprising psycholinguistic (Faerch and Kasper 1980), interactional (Tarone 1980) and discourse (Clennell 1995) perspectives. The results showed that the two groups did not differ in the total number of communication strategies used, and the preference was for strategies based on the second language (L2). Less proficient speakers inclined towards strategies based on first language (L1), language switch in particular, to overcome communication difficulties. More proficient speakers were able to use tonicity to show salience of information to enhance the negotiation of meaning. The proficient speakers compensated for lack of linguistic ability in their interlocutors, and the conversational adjustment was characterised by the diversified use of lexical repetition to maintain the conversation.

Introduction
In L2 learning contexts, research on strategic competence has focused on the effect of different variables on communication strategies used to compensate for breakdowns in communication and to enhance communicative effectiveness. Target language proficiency is one of the most researched variables. The findings of available research suggest that less-proficient learners use more communication strategies (Labarca and Khanji 1986; Poulisse and Schils 1989; Liskin-Gasparro 1996), prefer reduction strategies (Ellis 1983, cited in Ellis 1985) and rely more on L1 strategies compared to more proficient learners (Bialystok and Frohlich 1980; Bialystok 1983; Haastrup and Phillipson 1983; Paribakht 1985). These studies have provided a good understanding of how the use of communication strategies might change as learners improve mastery of the target language. From this vantage point, the question posed in this paper is whether and how learners accommodate their communication strategies to the level of proficiency in the target language of interlocutors.

This has not been the focus of earlier studies, where learners have been required to use the target language either in the presence of native speakers of the language in picture–object description tasks or with them in interview tasks in the target language environment. The communication strategies identified in these studies are produced under circumstances that stretch language ability, as the learners have to use their restricted language resources to navigate not only the language but also the cultural gap. In non-native speaker environments interlocutors may not have the same language background but interaction may be facilitated by shared cultural knowledge. In view of the large numbers of learners who learn languages in non-native speaker environments, research on communication strategies used in these environments may yield different preference patterns, and an expanded understanding of how such speakers use communication strategies in such contexts would be beneficial.

The study outlined in this article aimed to examine how the use of communication strategies is influenced by learner and interlocutor proficiency in a simulated oral interaction. The specific objectives of the study were:

• to identify the types and number of communication strategies used by proficient and less-proficient speakers
• to describe adjustments in communication strategies in response to the language proficiency of interlocutors.
Typology of communication strategies
The task used to obtain data on communication strategies was a simulated pair interaction. The integrated framework used to identify the choice of communication strategies included the following approaches.

- **Psycholinguistic problem-solving (Faerch and Kasper 1980, 1983)**
  Although Faerch and Kasper are noted for their psychological problem-solving view of communication strategies, these researchers, in fact, recognise that planning can take place to alleviate potential communicative problems and to bring about a higher degree of transitional smoothness and overall fluency in the speech. ‘Advanced learners, who are capable of planning longer units, can often predict a communication problem well in advance and attempt to solve it beforehand, as part of the normal planning process’ (Faerch and Kasper 1984: 60–61). This notion of advanced planning formed the basis for Clennell’s (1994) pragmatic discourse perspective of communication strategies.

- **Interactional (Tarone 1980)**
  Tarone (1980: 419) defines communication strategy as ‘a mutual attempt of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in situations where requisite meaning structures do not seem to be shared’. The central concept is the joint negotiation of meaning. Tarone’s typology comprises the following categories: paraphrase (approximation, word coinage, circumlocution), transfer (literal translation, language switch), appeal for assistance, mime and avoidance (topic avoidance and message abandonment).

- **Discourse (Clennell 1995)**
  The discourse perspective classifies strategies defined by Faerch and Kasper (1980, 1983) and Tarone (1980, 1981) as serving a short-term conversational repair role, and proposes three strategies that operate as facilitators or enhancers of the message – lexical repetitions plus tone to indicate topic prominence, appeal for assistance, request for clarification and discourse and topic maintenance; and topic plus comment syntactic structures to parcel up information; and tonicity, which is a systematic use of stress and pitch to mark given from new information (Clennell 1994, 1995). Clennell (1995) pointed out that the non-native texts in his study showed evidence of lexical repetition and topic fronting, acting in the same way as the use of tonicity by native speakers to mark salience of information. Non-native speakers have to use substitute strategies to show informational significance because they use more or less equal stress and pitch (Clennell 1996). This observation was supported by Ting and Lau’s (2007) findings on the frequent use of lexical repetition by learners in a simulated telephone enquiry interaction, particularly by those with higher linguistic ability. In view of this, Clennell’s discourse-based message-enhancing communication strategies are included in the typology used in this study.

The restructuring strategy from Faerch and Kasper (1980) can be added to Tarone’s typology to take account of the reformulation of the syntactical structure of the message in the absence of linguistic means or difficulty in retrieving the relevant item or rule (see also Lafford 2004). This psycholinguistic perspective defines communication strategies as ‘potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal’ (Faerch and Kasper 1980: 81). To compensate for the linguistic means that are not available or accessible, the productive strategies that language users may have recourse to are categorised as:

- reduction strategies (eg topic avoidance, message abandonment, meaning replacement)
- achievement strategies, which include cooperative strategies (eg appeals)
- uncooperative strategies (eg mime, restructuring, language switch, borrowing, literal translation, exemplification, word coinage).

Cooperative strategies involve the participation of interlocutors in solving the communication problem, whereas uncooperative strategies do not. Faerch and Kasper (1984) note that achievement strategies, which serve to preserve the original communicative goal, constitute the largest subset of communication strategies reported in the literature. Table 1 outlines the typology of productive strategies that L2 users may use to deal with communication breakdowns and indicates the analytical approach from which they come.

**Participants**
The participants were 20 Malaysian undergraduates from Chinese-speaking backgrounds, aged between 21 and 25 years. They did not share the same L1, as they came from different Chinese subgroups (eg
Hokkien and Hakka), and not all spoke standard Chinese. However, they were proficient in Malay, which is the medium of education in school. All had studied English formally for about 13 years and some used English at home. To minimise possible cultural influence, the selection criteria for the study were a composite band score in the criterion-referenced Malaysian University English Test (MUET) and homogeneity in the L1 background.

The proficient speakers were selected at MUET Band 5, as there were very few students at Band 6 in the university population. According to the MUET descriptors, Band 5 users are fluent users of English who can communicate appropriately with minor inaccuracies. They have a good understanding of the language and can function well in the language. The proficient participants in this study used English for a variety of communicative purposes in their daily lives.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abandon message *</td>
<td>Interactional</td>
<td>The speaker begins to talk about a concept but is unable to continue due to lack of meaning structure, stops in mid-utterance and moves on to another idea.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic avoidance</td>
<td>Interactional</td>
<td>The speaker does not talk about a concept because he/she does not have the target language item or structure for it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literal translation</td>
<td>Interactional</td>
<td>The speaker translates word for word from another language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language switch</td>
<td>Interactional</td>
<td>The speaker uses a term from another language without bothering to translate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restructuring</td>
<td>Psycholinguistic</td>
<td>The speaker reformulates the syntax of the utterance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circumlocution</td>
<td>Interactional</td>
<td>The speaker describes characteristics or elements of the object or action instead of using the appropriate target language structure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word coinage</td>
<td>Interactional</td>
<td>The speaker makes up a new word in order to communicate a desired concept.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approximation*</td>
<td>Interactional</td>
<td>The speaker uses a single target language vocabulary item that he/she knows is not correct but shares enough semantic features in common with the desired item to satisfy the speaker. Structure is excluded.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appeal for assistance</td>
<td>Interactional</td>
<td>The speaker asks for the correct item or structure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offer help</td>
<td>Interactional</td>
<td>The speaker offers the target item to the interlocutor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lexical repetition</td>
<td>Discourse</td>
<td>The speaker repeats words or phrases with a system of tones (eg rise, fall, rise–fall) for discourse and topic maintenance, topic salience marker, appeal for assistance, request for clarification and to indicate comprehension.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tonicity</td>
<td>Discourse</td>
<td>The speaker uses stress and pitch to mark key information or to differentiate given from new information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic fronting</td>
<td>Discourse</td>
<td>The speaker makes use of subject plus predicate syntactic structure to parcel up information to emphasise the topic.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The strategies marked with an asterisk * have been redefined.
The less-proficient speakers were assessed at MUET Band 3. This describes fairly fluent users of English who are usually able to communicate appropriately with noticeable inaccuracies. Their understanding is compromised because they tend to misinterpret messages. The less-proficient participants in this study spoke their first language and Malay most of the time, and English was used occasionally when the need arose. Students with MUET scores at Bands 1 and 2 were not included, as it was difficult to find volunteers. This is unfortunate, as they would have provided greater contrast in communication strategy use.

**Method**

The participants were asked to discuss, in a simulated oral interaction task, a social issue relevant to undergraduates – *Do you think that university students should date during their university days?* This topic often surfaces in the informal talk of undergraduates in this sociocultural setting. To include real-life elements in the interaction, participants were paired with people they knew so that they could draw upon shared knowledge in their discussion. Analysis of the transcripts reveals the naturalness of their interactions in the form of the language-switch strategy, characteristic of informal interactions among friends.

Pairing for the simulated oral interaction task was in three combinations:

- four proficient pairs
- four less-proficient pairs
- two mixed-proficiency pairs.

Although the initial intention was to have all mixed pairs, this was reviewed when the pilot study revealed that the proficient speakers dominated the conversations. The less-proficient speakers merely nodded their heads and said a few words when prompted, and natural conversation did not emerge. The decision was then made to establish more homogeneous pairs than mixed pairs.

The discussion took place at a time convenient to the participants in a quiet room to minimise noise interference during the audio recording. Before the interaction, participants were given one to two minutes to read the prompt individually. They were told that English was to be the main medium but they were free to use other languages as they did in real life. When they were ready to begin the conversation on the given topic, the MP3 player was switched on for the audio taping and sometimes the participants made jokes about the awkward recording situation before they began the discussion. One researcher stayed in the room with the participants to take notes in case the miming strategy was used, but, as it turned out, this was not necessary. The recording was stopped when the discussion ended.

The conversations were transcribed with detail appropriate to the identification of communication strategies. As language-switch is a communication strategy for the participants, the use of other languages was clearly indicated in the transcripts: Malay in italics (*eg jodoh* for *match*) and Chinese using an approximation of the pronunciation (*eg am pai ta men de shi jian for manage their time*).

Repetitions were transcribed but if they were merely a feature of oral speech, not followed by restructuring of utterances, they were not identified as restructuring in the analysis. During the transcription, the researchers looked for the use of tonicity and marked words said with a rising tone (/) and ones said with a falling tone (\). On the transcripts, pauses and hesitations were marked as ellipses (…) but the duration was not recorded because this was deemed unnecessary in identifying communication strategies.

**Data analysis**

The printed transcripts were read several times and the communication strategies were coded using a typology of 13 strategies (see Table 1). The two evaluators agreed on most of the communication strategy classifications for the data but some topic-fronting instances (*eg My friend, the other time, housemate, they … they got together*) were missed because one researcher was not sensitised to the form. Different interpretations of what constituted message abandonment were discussed and a consensus reached. The researchers agreed to code reformulations of the intended message as restructuring until the participants finally gave up in the meaning-making attempts and this was coded as message abandonment, as shown in this excerpt from one less-proficient speaker (LP3):

> I don’t think we have the time to go dating and I don’t think we … can take out the time or spend time to the … uh … (restructuring) our boyfriend or girlfriend. So I don’t agree with
the … (restructuring) we want … we want to dating [date, sic] in the university. And … (message abandonment) How about you? You agree?

Following this, a tally of the communication strategies was computed for both partners in the ten-pair interactions. In hindsight, computing the percentage of matches between the two evaluators would have served to indicate the reliability of the coding, but this was not done because of the recursive manner in which the coding and cross-checking was carried out.

**Language proficiency and preferred communication strategies**

In the 6000-word transcript of the ten paired oral interactions, a total of 274 instances of communication strategy use were identified. The proficient group and less-proficient group did not differ very much in the total number of strategies used. The proficient group used 132 and the less-proficient group used 142. This contradicts the finding of Labarca and Khanji (1986), Poulisse and Schils (1989) and Liskin-Gasparro (1996) that there is a decrease in the number of strategies with increasing proficiency.

The proficient and less-proficient participants in this study also did not differ very much in their reliance on restructuring and lexical repetition. Restructuring was the most frequently used strategy, with the proficient group using this 44 times (or 33.3 per cent of the total number of strategies used) and the less-proficient group 41 times (or 28.9 per cent of the total number of strategies used) (see Table 2). Restructuring is employed when speakers realise that their lexical or syntactic deficiencies prevent them from completing an initial plan to reach their original goal (Faerch and Kasper 1984). Research on other learners of English in this sociocultural context has shown that restructuring is a commonly used strategy to solve communication problems and can make up half the number of strategies used (see Ting 2005; Ting and Lau 2007). This finding is supported by Laford's (2004) study investigating the effect of context of learning on the use of communication strategies by learners of Spanish as a second language, where restructuring, together with self-repairs (considered as restructuring in the present study), constituted at least half of the strategies used. Table 2 outlines the strategies used by the three groups of pairs.

The data showed that lexical repetition was used by the proficient group 28 times and by the less-proficient group 33 times, with versatility for communicative functions such as discourse and topic maintenance, topic salience marker, appeal for assistance and request for clarification (see Clennell 1994). The repetitions in this excerpt from proficient Pair 3 are **highlighted**.

P5: But I would prefer to … relax during my dating. Like after I study, then I can at least date to relax\ myself.

P6: To relax\ yourself. How about other things, like exercise? Or other ways to relax\ yourself?

P5: Well, you can see my body size. You know that I don’t exercise.

P6: [Laughs] OK. So you think that dating is like a hobby already?

P5: Um … It’s beneficial for me. Uh … Not hobby actually but then for me, dating becomes a habit already.

P6: Hmm … Just now you said that dating relax\ yourself. I wonder if … whether uni students should be encouraged to date so that they can relax\ themselves.

The point about dating being a relaxing activity, similar to hobbies and exercise, was made through lexical repetition. First P5 repeated relax to indicate prominence in the discourse and P6 echoed with the same falling tone to indicate comprehension – To relax\ yourself – and then to seek clarification – Or other ways to relax\ yourself? After a few turns, P6 repeated the word to refer to the point made earlier – Just now you said that dating relax\ yourself – before putting forward a motion for discussion – I wonder if … whether uni students should be encouraged to date so that they can relax\ themselves. This excerpt is taken from the discussion of a proficient pair but the less-proficient pairs were also able to use lexical repetition for clarification, emphasis and topic maintenance.

The results showed that proficiency influenced the use of tonicity and language switch. The proficient participants demonstrated greater ability to use tonicity as a message-enhancing...
communication strategy, with 30 instances as compared with 10 for the less-proficient group.
The following excerpt is from P10, the participant who used tonicity the most.

P10: I don’t know but I think it depends on people, whether … you should date or not, because this is really … a very controversial issue.
Sometimes it is good, and sometimes it can be bad, and at the same time, there are pros and cons to it. Do you agree?

Note the way this speaker uses stress to assert the controversial issue of whether one should or should not date at university and then uses stress to mark the two positions that could be taken on the issue – Sometimes it is good, and sometimes it can be bad – before stating it in full – there are pros and cons to it. By using a rising tone to mark significant
information, this proficient speaker engaged a less-proficient speaker (LP10) in the conversation. However, the less-proficient speaker had to restructure the message frequently when expressing her views on the issue. At times she appealed for help, at other times she abandoned the message but she did not use tonicity to draw attention to key information, as did the proficient participants. The native speakers in Clennell’s (1995) study, on the other hand, used tonicity to mark given from new information. Although tonicity is paralinguistic, the ability to use this message-enhancing strategy is linked to proficiency in the target language.

Table 2 shows that the less-proficient group switched to another language 25 times but the proficient group did so only twice. One speaker (P4) used it for rhetorical effect – *Bring your boyfriend home, then your mother say[s], Good, ‘Boleh’* – and another speaker (P9) used it for ease of expression. The Malay word *boleh*, literally translated as *can*, indicates that the mother is agreeing to the choice of boyfriend. The less-proficient group used language switches for ease of expression twice as often as switches prompted by the need to capture the connotative cultural meanings associated with particular words. For example, in this excerpt two language switches occur, with the Malay word *jodoh* (which means *fate in relationships*) and the Mandarin Chinese expression *am pai ta men de shi jian* (which means *manage their time*).

**LP7:** But if that then their *jodoh* already come, how leh?

**LP8:** They can, uh, use their time … *am pai ta men de shi jian*

Both these speakers were of Chinese descent but they used the Malay word *jodoh* instead of the Chinese *yuen fen* to convey the meaning of divine determination of marital partners in order to capture the connotative cultural meanings associated with a Malay Muslim belief. Other language switches carrying particular meanings included *hiam qi* (Hokkien Chinese for *philandering girls*) and *guru sandaran* (Malay for temporary teaching positions in Malaysian government schools for those without an education degree). The shared language and cultural backgrounds of the participants made language switch and, to a lesser extent, literal translation convenient strategies. This could explain why the participants did not use word coinage, approximation or mime in the interactions.

Overall, the participants persisted with the task in English, as indicated by L2 strategies (92) accounting for one-third of the total identified communication strategies in the data set (274). The most frequent communication strategies were discourse-based, with the proficient group using these more for message enhancement. The less-proficient speakers relied more heavily on L1-based strategies.

**Adjustment of communication strategy use to proficiency of interlocutor**

The qualitative analysis of the interactional data of the eight homogeneous and two mixed pairs indicated conversational adjustments in communication strategy use and exchange of meanings in response to interlocutor language proficiency. The transcripts of the proficient pairs showed that the discussion usually covered new ground with each turn, but discussion was slow moving for the less-proficient pairs. The following excerpt shows how LP5 and LP6 in the less-proficient Pair 3 laboriously construct the meaning that dating would not adversely affect the studies of mature university students who know how to manage their time. They build on each other’s ideas with small increments in meaning in each turn and the turns are short, with frequent restructuring of the message.

**LP6:** How about your opinion?

**LP5:** Oh, this one ah? Mm. Ah … I think the university student already matured enough to spend their time, divide their time, mm … and will not affect their studies.

**LP6:** Mm … I also think like that lah because ah … they now will become more … *(restructuring)* know how to manage themselves lah.

**LP5:** *How they manage themselves? (lexical repetition – seeking clarification)*

**LP6:** Because they are now … *(restructuring)* Their, their thinking is now more matured lah, so they know how to decide their time, then ah, this will not affect their study lah.

**LP5:** But I think if they, if they too, too, *tou lu...*
(engrossed in – language switch) their, their dating ah, they will not, not good also lah.

LP6: Mm … But sometimes if they’re … they’re really ah, how to say (appeal for assistance), um mm … if they can, like (restructuring), they can, um (restructuring), same, like same um, mission, like, they can, ah, study together, like that lah. It’s also good for them. Not just only go to dating, but can … (restructuring) they can go to uh dating, like go to CAIS [library] ah.

In the mixed pairs the proficient participants carried the burden for maintaining the conversation. In the following excerpt, the proficient speaker (P9) is leading the discussion about the characteristics of an ideal boyfriend, and the less-proficient speaker (LP9) offers characteristics such as handsome, hardworking and san qin xin (Mandarin Chinese for outstanding).

From personal characteristics, the participants move on to the issue of whether dating affects academic achievement and parental reaction.

P9: Sometimes?/ What kind of guy do you want to date? (repetition – maintaining topic)


P9: I ah?

LP9: Handsome.

P9: Handsome\ (repetition – maintaining topic) Got career, dog, home, like Ming Dao ah. [Laughs] What about you?

LP9: He must handsome lah, hoh?

P9: He must handsome ah/ (repetition – clarification)? Oh …

LP9: Eh … hardworking.

P9: Hardworking\ (repetition – maintaining topic)

LP9: Eh … How to say … uh … uh … san qin xin (language switch).

P9: Oh … san qin xin\ … And? (repetition – maintaining topic)

LP9: And others lah\ (repetition – maintaining topic) If you (restructuring), if someone ask you, will you be my girlfriend, what will you do? Will you reject or will you think about it or what?

LP9: Think about it. [Laughs]

All through this discussion, the proficient speaker asks questions to prompt the other speaker for her views, uses lexical repetition with a falling tone to maintain the topic through indication of comprehension and acknowledgment of viewpoint, and uses lexical repetition with a rising tone to seek clarification. In the other mixed pair, the proficient speaker (P10) used tonicity instead of lexical repetition to sustain the interaction and, although the less-proficient speaker (LP10) was slightly more responsive, the turns were also short.

A comparison of the interactional patterns showed that the homogenous less-proficient and mixed pairs were compromised in their ability to discuss the given topic in depth, while the homogeneous proficient pairs were able to negotiate more complex meanings. The results would have been more conclusive if the participants had also been paired with other interlocutors to eliminate individual differences. However, as it is, the study has uncovered some initial patterns for further investigation.

Conclusion

This study on the use of communication strategies by proficient and less-proficient speakers of English and adjustment to interlocutor proficiency showed that proficiency does not influence the number of strategies used or the reliance on restructuring and lexical repetition. However, the effect of proficiency was seen in the ability of the proficient participants to use tonicity to enhance the message and the need of the less-proficient participants to resort to language switches to bridge communication gaps. The language switching took place in a task where they were expected to use English.

In language classrooms with learners from various language backgrounds, sometimes sharing one or two languages, more frequent language switching occurs during group discussion activities when the teacher is not within earshot. However, the findings suggest that grouping proficient with less-proficient learners may have two benefits. The
first is encouraging learners, with better knowledge and control of the language, to scaffold the less-proficient learners in constructing meanings in the target language. The other is enabling less-proficient learners to develop their own strategic competence in discourse-related aspects. However, further investigation in natural classroom contexts is needed to verify these implications for the language classroom.

References


