

The Effects of Communication Strategies Instruction Used in an English as a Lingua Franca Academic Context

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Abstract

This study examines the effects of communication strategies instruction on the ability to use English in an academic context. The participants were 28 students comprising 13 Thai students and 15 Cambodian students who enrolled at a Burapha university that used English as a lingua franca (ELF) in an academic context. The research instruments were pretest and posttest communication strategies tasks, communication strategies instruction, video recorder, observational field notes, and student reflections. Wilcoxon signed-rank test and coding method were used to analyze the data. The findings presented both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data indicated that most of the students had higher scores after receiving communication strategies instruction. The qualitative data revealed that the students perceived better language use in the classroom after receiving communication strategies instruction. Moreover, they had more confidence to speak with their interlocutors. They also attempted to use communication strategies to help them overcome language difficulties. In addition, they had positive effects on this communication strategy instruction. The findings of this study suggest that English teachers play an important role in motivating low-proficiency students to speak English when implementing communication strategies.

Keywords: communication, communication strategies, communication strategies instruction, English as a lingua franca in an academic context, communication strategies test

1. Introduction

Individuals worldwide use English as a communicative tool (Kirkpatrick, 2012). Both native English speakers and non-native English speakers (NNES) use English (McKay, 2002). It is widely accepted that English is used internationally as a global lingua franca across boundaries in intercultural communication among people whose first languages are often not English (Seidlhofer, 2011). Thus, especially in the context of internationalization, individuals need to become fluent multilingual speakers in both accents and skills required for intercultural communication while retaining their national identities (Baker, 2015; Graddol, 2006). Moreover, English has become increasingly essential in academic contexts. Many educational institutions worldwide have attempted to increase English medium instruction (EMI) programs at all educational levels, reflecting the more important role of English in academic contexts. For example, in Thailand, the number of EMI programs has increased dramatically from 78 programs in 2007 to 769 programs in 2018, serving approximately 20,497 international students (Galloway & Sahan, 2021). Many high schools, colleges, and universities in Thailand have recently enrolled foreign students, especially those from China and Cambodia (Nomnian, 2018). This paper's researcher is working as a lecturer at a university adjacent to the border of Cambodia and noticed a steady increase in the number of students from Cambodia. The students have come to study at an undergraduate level or do activities with Thai students in high schools and at the university. Because their first languages are different, they use English as a medium of communication. According to this context, English functions as a lingua franca between Thais and Cambodians. Firth (1996) defined English as a lingua franca that is "a contact language between persons who share neither a common native tongue nor a common (national) culture, and for whom English is the chosen foreign language of communication" (p. 240).

According to the above definition, it is safe to assume that non-native speakers face considerable communication problems when engaged in ELF communication because their interlocutors bring multilingual repertoires to negotiate meanings. Kongsom (2016) stated that non-native speakers may face language difficulties such as

limited vocabulary or lack of message comprehension. Moreover, the obviously empirical study of my previous study conducted the communication needs or problems between Thai students and Cambodian students in the ELF academic context regarding the causes of unsuccessful communication. I found that they had limited linguistic knowledge. They need to develop comprehension skills and adequate vocabulary. However, Faerch and Kasper (1983) suggested that communication strategies are important devices to use to overcome communication problems and assist non-native speakers to reach their communicative achievements.

Most empirical studies on communication strategies have been promoted and conducted with various variables such as proficiency level (e.g., Chen, 1990; Wannaruk, 2002) and teaching pedagogies related to communication (e.g., Dörnyei, 1995; Kongsom, 2009). Because communication strategies are essential nowadays, many researchers advocate for the need to use such strategies in many contexts. Even though many researchers have addressed the importance of communication strategies, they have not focused on ELF in an academic context, which Canagarajah (2005) pointed out is very crucial for ELF learners in overcoming language difficulties. Moreover, communication strategies instruction research in the ELF context is quite limited. Thus, Yoshida (2004), Galloway and Rose (2015), and Vettorel (2017) called for paying attention to the pedagogical implications of communication strategies in an academic context for ELF. They stated that communication strategies instruction is beneficial because it provides learners with ways and opportunities to interact cooperatively in L2 contexts. Additionally, it can assist non-native speakers to scaffold their communication skills. Further, communication strategies should be included or integrated into language teaching materials and classroom practices to equip learners with tools to cope with diversity. These skills may be critical to communicative success. It is a new challenge for ELF researchers to consider the training approaches to raise awareness and promote ELF practice communication strategies. Therefore, this current study aims to investigate the effects of communication strategies instruction on the ability to use English in an academic context. This study can fill the gap of knowledge about communication strategies in an academic situation of ELF and pedagogy.

2. Literature Review

This section presents communication strategies and communication strategies instruction.

2.1 Communication Strategies

Selinker (1972) first introduced communication strategies (CS). He considered communication strategies as one of the five central processes involved in second language acquisition. Later communication strategies were proposed two different theoretical approaches: the interactional approach and the psycholinguistic approach (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997). The interactional approach emphasizes the negotiation of meaning between interlocutors. Tarone (1980) viewed communication strategies as tools that learners use to enhance their negotiation of meaning as well as to convey their messages while interacting with interlocutors. In the psycholinguistic approach, Faerch and Kasper (1983), Bialystok (1990), and the Nijmegen Group (i.e., Bongaerts & Poulishse, 1989; Kellerman, 1991) viewed communication strategies as an individual's mental response to a communication problem instead of a mutual response by two interlocutors. However, Bialystok (1990) pointed out that although communication strategy researchers offer various definitions, the definitions listed above share the following three main features:

- (1) Problematicity refers to the fact that one adopts a strategy when faced with a problem in either learning or production. This problem can disrupt or interrupt communication and cause failure in communication.
- (2) Consciousness refers to learners' awareness of the employment of a particular strategy. Bialystok (1990) stated that consciousness is implicit in all the proposed definitions for communication strategies. She also explained that speakers make a choice when they communicate. For example, they can use "truck" or "lorry" to refer to the same thing. Thus, the learners choose; they make a "conscious consideration" (p. 4).
- (3) Intentionality refers to the learner's control over those strategies, so that particular ones may be selected from the range of options and deliberately applied to achieve specific effects (Bialystok, 1990). In other words, learners have some control over their strategy use. They may select or choose from various strategies to deal with their communication problems.

Bialystok (1990) noted that none of the communication strategies were unique and that the same three features have been found in most communication strategy definitions so far. It can be said that communication strategies are not only problem-solving mechanisms for dealing with communication breakdowns but also tools for discourse functions for the negotiation of meaning. According to the three concepts of communication strategy definitions listed above, scholars have studied communication strategy employment only in terms of native and

non-native speakers. However, it is challenging to investigate communication strategies in terms of the ELF situation. Many scholars (e.g., Canagarajah, 2005; Galloway & Rose, 2015) have recommended that communication strategies be used to assist ELF learners overcome language difficulties because they can promote negotiation of meaning among ELF learners.

2.2 Communication Strategies Instruction

Most previous research in communication strategies has been concerned with pedagogical aspects and language teaching in the EFL context, which emphasized conversations between native and non-native speakers, and researchers focused on solving non-native speakers' communicative problems in the EFL context. Communication strategies and instructions have been discussed in different arguments. Some scholars (e.g., Bialystok, 1990; Kellerman, 1991) have conducted studies of the validity and usefulness of communication strategies instruction. They reported that non-native learners had developed the ability to overcome communication problems as part of their mother tongues. Therefore, there is no need to train them in communication strategies (as cited in Manchon, 2000). Conversely, many scholars (e.g., Faerch & Kasper, 1983; Kongsom, 2009; Lam, 2010; Tarone & Yule, 1989; Willems, 1987) have advocated for communication strategies instruction and have supported the development of learners' strategic competence. Kirkpatrick (2000) pointed out reasons to promote communication strategies instruction. First, it can assist non-native learners in overcoming communication problems. Second, communication strategies instruction enhances learners' sense of security and self-confidence when they try to communicate using interlanguage resources and thus attempt to communicate in the second language (L2). Moreover, Mariani (2010) supported training in using communication strategies because the strategies provide learners with the impression that they can exert more control over language use, take an active part, make some decisions, and become more accountable for what they say and how they say it. Galloway and Rose (2015) also addressed the need to train others to use communication strategies to help learners reach communicative goals. This current study focuses on the ELF situation in an academic context. It is critical to pay attention to negotiation of meaning. Giles and Coupland (1991), Canagarajah (2005), and Cogo (2009) pointed out the significance of communication strategies instruction and stated that it should be taught to non-native learners for adapting an interlocutor's communicative behavior and to help negotiate meaning.

In conclusion, the researchers who support communication strategies instruction have recommended teaching communication strategies explicitly and implicitly because these strategies can help develop students' knowledge. Therefore, this paper provided communication strategies instruction, which explored the communication problems or needs of both Thai students and Cambodian students in my previous study. The findings indicated that they needed to increase their comprehension skills, and they had an inadequate vocabulary. Therefore, my communication strategies were designed and consisted of four communication strategies (circumlocution, approximation, clarification requests, and comprehension checks). The details of communication strategies instruction will be presented in the following section.

3. Method

3.1 Research Design and Context

The researcher applied a mixed-method approach using quantitative and qualitative methods. The participants were 28 students comprising 13 Thai and 15 Cambodian students. Purposive sampling was used to select the enrolled participants at a university that used ELF in an academic context. All participants were in grade 12 and studied in the same class.

3.2 Research Instrument

(1) A standardized test was used to determine a test taker's ability to understand a range of grammatical forms and the meanings they convey in a wide range of contexts. It also measured how learners can use these language resources to communicate in English language situations. This current study aims to test students' communication and identify effective communication strategies to separate students into high- and low-proficiency groups.

(2) Pretest and posttest communication strategies tasks refer to the communication situations provided to determine the communication strategies used by high- and low-proficiency students. Students completed the tasks to compare the effects of communication strategies instruction on the ability to use English in an ELF academic context. Moreover, these tasks can indicate whether communication strategies were used to achieve their communicative goals. Furthermore, the tasks can identify what types of communication strategies are selected to overcome communication problems. Moreover, three experts were asked to validate the tests by using

item objective congruence (IOC).

(3) Observation. In this study, field notes were used to document the effects of communication strategies instruction and video recorders to check the data accuracy and record the students' results. An observational field note is a written form used for recording the students' effects through the training activities. Field notes were used in events related to interesting aspects through the conversations and verified with video transcripts. Moreover, a reflection form was used to collect data on the effects of the training on the students. The students completed a form after finishing each strategy training to record the input of the improvement movement to develop the course and set communication strategies instruction for the other non-native speakers. As mentioned above, reflection forms were related to Thai and Cambodian students. The purpose of these forms was to record students' internal phenomena; therefore, they had to be clear to prevent inaccurate or incomplete responses. To solve this problem and check the trustworthiness of the reflection form in both Thai and Cambodian versions, the reflection form was checked and tried out.

(4) Communication strategies instruction contains four lesson plans regarding communication strategies: circumlocution, approximation, clarification requests, and comprehension checks. It was designed and checked the validity of communication strategies instruction. Three experts rated the IOC. Each lesson plan was designed based on Dörnyei's (1995) instructional design using the following steps (pp. 63-64):

- (1) Raising awareness about the communicative potential of CSs
- (2) Encouraging students to be willing to take risks and use CSs
- (3) Providing L2 models of the use of certain CSs
- (4) Highlighting cross-cultural differences in CS use
- (5) Teaching CSs directly
- (6) Providing opportunities for practice in strategy use

3.3 Data Collection

The researcher aimed to examine the effects of communication strategies instruction. Both Thai and Cambodian students completed standardized tests to separate them into high- and low-proficiency groups. They then did the pretest communication strategies tasks before the training. After that, they trained using communication strategies instruction, which contained four lesson plans: circumlocution, approximation, clarification requests, and confirmation checks. Next, they completed posttest communication strategies tasks to compare the effects of the communication strategies instruction. Moreover, students' reflection forms and observational field notes also supported determination of the students' qualitative effects.

3.4 Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Quantitative data was analyzed and the Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used to investigate the communication strategies used based on the scores of pretest and posttest communication strategies tasks; this revealed the effects of communication strategies instruction on the participant's ability to use English in an ELF academic context.

Before analyzing the qualitative data, video records were transcribed professionally, and the data was rechecked for the accuracy of the transcripts to maximise the quality of the data. The field notes and students' reflections were expanded fully. Subsequently, the data were analyzed using the coding method, which included three stages of analysis: (a) open coding, (b) axial coding, and (c) selective coding (Saldana, 2009). The data from both sources were labeled and named from the data analysis in the first step. The purpose was to grasp each part's core idea and develop a code to describe it. Then, it was read, scanned, and identified the codes from both sources. In the second step, the data were analyzed to identify their relationships and generate categories. The third step involved selective coding. Then, the researcher combined the categories into themes by selectively choosing the ones related to the effects of the communication strategies instruction. Moreover, a member check technique was used to enhance the trustworthiness of the data by bringing the emergent themes to the participants to check whether they reflected the effects of the communication strategies instruction.

4. Results

This section reports the effects of the communication strategies instruction on the participant's ability to use English in an ELF academic context. To answer the research question, quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed. Quantitative data were obtained from the pretest and the posttest communication strategies tasks. Qualitative data were gathered from students' reflections and observational notes. The participants were 28

students comprising 13 Thai students and 15 Cambodian students. To explore the effects in detail, the participants were separated into high-and low-proficiency groups, characterized by using the standardized Oxford Placement Test, to observe how students with different proficiencies responded to communication strategies instruction. There were 6 high-proficiency students (3 Thais and 3 Cambodians) and 22 low-proficiency students (9 Thais and 13 Cambodians). Afterward, the students completed pretest and posttest of communication strategies tasks, in which communication situations were provided to determine the communication strategies used by high- and low-proficiency students.

The quantitative data from the scores of the pretest and posttest communication strategies tasks were analyzed. There were several statistics to compare the scores of pretest and posttest communication strategies tasks, such as the Paired T-test or Wilcoxon signed-rank test. However, the researcher considered the assumptions of the statistics. The Paired T-test checked the premises, but it did not match this statistic because of the small sample size. Therefore, the Wilcoxon signed-rank test was considered because this statistic is nonparametric and should be used if the differences between data pairs are non-normally distributed. A Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used to analyze the communication strategies used and investigate the effects of communication strategies instruction on the ability to use English in an ELF academic context. The results of the score comparison are presented in Table 1 for students with high proficiency levels and in Table 2 for students with low proficiency levels.

Table 1. Comparison between the pretest and the posttest scores of communication strategies tasks of high-proficiency students

Test	Median	Standard Deviation	Wilcoxon (Z) test	P-value
Pretest	33	2.09762	-1.095 ^b	.273
Posttest	34	2.68328		

In the above table, the Wilcoxon signed-rank test indicated that the posttest score was not statistically significantly higher than the pretest score $Z = -1.095$, $P = 0.273$

Table 2. Comparison between the pretest and the posttest scores of communication strategies tasks for low-proficiency students

Test	Median	Standard Deviation	Wilcoxon (Z) test	P-value
Pretest	29.4545	4.59531	-2.335 ^b	.020
Posttest	31.1364	4.38933		

In the above table, the Wilcoxon signed-rank test indicated that the posttest score was statistically significantly higher than the pretest rank $Z = -2.335$, $P = 0.020$

According to the results in the tables, the comparison scores between the pretest and posttest communication strategies tasks for high-proficiency students were not statistically significant. Conversely, the posttest comparison scores for low-proficiency students were statistically significantly higher than those of the pretest. Thus, this communication strategies instruction was more suitable for training low-proficiency students than it was for training high-proficiency students because it served the communication needs of low-proficiency students.

The qualitative data were gathered from reflections and the researcher's observational notes. After the data were analyzed, two main themes of students' attitudes emerged as the effects of communication strategies instruction. The first theme concerns the perceived better language use in the classroom, and the second theme is relevant to positive attitudes toward communication strategies instruction.

4.1 Perceived Better Language Use in the Classroom

The data from observational notes revealed that students attempted to speak English and maintain their conversations. Low-proficiency students initiated talking and using communication strategies in their discussions to improve their listening and responses with interlocutors rather than keeping quiet. Communication strategies instruction can assist students with the language used, which can be separated into two aspects: (a) knowledge gained for communication in the classroom, and (b) satisfaction with communication strategy instruction.

For the first aspect, most Thai and Cambodian students ($n = 28$) reported that they had more understanding of communication strategies and how to solve communication problems in situations similar to those that had previously been difficult. For example, a student from Cambodia reported that before he was in this training class, he did not understand the meaning of the vocabulary that his counterpart used, so he kept quiet. However, after the

training, he asked his counterpart to clarify the meaning by using the sentence “What do you mean?” Before the training, the students did not know the name of the strategies or have any background in communication strategies. Some of them did not know how to overcome language difficulties.

“I never know about the name of the strategy, and I discovered that I had new methods to overcome language difficulties.” (Thai student, reflection)

“I think learning communication strategies in class is fun and helping me to have a good connection with other students, teacher and expanding my knowledge.” (Cambodian student, reflection)

“I have learned something new, which I never know how to reach the communicative goal. I always keep quiet or smiling if I do not know how to make my friend understand my expression.” (Cambodian student, reflection)

“I had a big communication problem that I cannot comprehend or catch interlocutors’ word. After I finish these lessons, I think it can help me.” (Thai student, reflection)

The data from the observations also supported that the students gained more knowledge about communication strategies. They frequently used communication strategies when they did not understand interlocutor’s messages. If the interlocutor still did not understand, the speakers had choices to describe or present their ideas to reach communicative goals.

“He reported that he only used ‘again, please’ to ask for repetition, but he changed to use ‘pardon?’ instead.” (Researcher, observational note)

After the training, it was surprising to find that several students in the low-proficiency group had changed their behaviors. In the early class, they seemed nervous about communicating with foreigners. When asked, they revealed that they feared speaking incorrect words/sentences and may not understand the message from the interlocutor because of low listening competency. They kept quiet and smiled or said “I don’t understand” if they did not understand. After the training, they attempted to use communication strategies from the lesson to ask the interlocutor questions and initiate speaking with partners.

For example,

C7: Have you ever gone to the temple?

T7: Temple? . . . Errr . . . you mean . . . monk live there (Comprehension check)

For the second aspect involving students’ confidence to speak English, most Thai and Cambodian students (n = 24) did not have the confidence to speak English with the interlocutor in the early class. The teacher tried to motivate them to speak up or express their ideas. They said that they were anxious and were not confident to speak English.

“At first, I feared speaking English with friends because I had limited vocabulary. I think I may not understand what my interlocutor said. After the lesson, I had more confidence to speak with my interlocutors; I had just known how to make my friends understand my message.” (Thai student, reflection)

“I like these lessons because it makes me confident to communicate with people.” (Cambodian student, reflection)

The researcher’s observational note data also supported that students had more confidence to speak with the interlocutor. However, almost all high-proficiency students had the confidence to speak English, particularly Cambodian students. Thai students seemed a bit nervous at first, but they were more confident interacting with the interlocutor after finishing the first lesson. Students attempted to use short sentences for communication in the low-proficiency group. If they did not understand, they tried to use communication strategies to solve communicative problems instead of keeping quiet early in class.

4.2 Positive Attitudes toward Communication Strategies Instruction

The data from students’ reflections indicated that all students reported positive attitudes about communication strategies instruction, particularly those in the high-proficiency group. They said they enjoyed learning in the communication strategy lessons. In the practicing part, they revealed that they felt excited as if they were playing a game. Low-proficiency students enjoyed the lessons, but they were nervous about their listening and speaking skills. After finishing the studies, they felt that their communication skills had improved. Moreover, they stated that they now know the ways to overcome language difficulties.

“I think it is great to learn about the communication strategies in this class, and I am excited about it because I haven’t had this kind of program before, and I think this is my opportunity to speak English. I enjoy this class.” (Thai student, reflection)

“After I finished the class, I found that it makes my learning easier, quicker, and more enjoyable.” (Cambodian

student, reflection)

“I’m interested in these communication strategies; I feel that it can help me when I have some communicative problems.” (Thai student, reflection)

“I think I may use these communication strategies for solving my communication problem, and I want to learn more about communication strategies.” (Cambodian student, reflection)

In conclusion, the quantitative data from the Wilcoxon signed-rank test results showed that low-proficiency students improved because the posttest scores were statistically significantly higher than the pretest scores. In contrast, high-proficiency students’ posttest scores were not statistically significantly higher than the pretest scores. Thus, this communication strategy instruction might be suitable for solving communication problems for low-proficiency students. Moreover, qualitative data also revealed that the students perceived better language use in the classroom and had positive attitudes toward instruction in communication strategies. Communication strategies instruction helped them with the language used and their anxiety and communication problems. They also enjoyed the activities involved in the instructions in the classroom.

5. Discussion

According to the findings, communication strategies instruction affected the ability to use English in an ELF academic context. The findings of this study were consistent with previous studies (e.g., Dimoski et al., 2016; Dörnyei, 1995; Kongsom, 2009; Lin, 2007; Nakatani, 2005). These scholars conducted the effects of communication strategies instruction with ELF students. However, they did not separate students into high and low proficiency groups. After the training, it was found that communication strategies instruction affects the learners because it increases their ability to use communication strategies effectively. They had more confidence to communicate with their interlocutors. Moreover, Kongsom (2009), who conducted the effects of teaching communication strategies to Thai English learners, stated that students had a positive attitude toward communication strategy training instruction. According to the previous studies mentioned, it could be assumed that communication strategies training could assist learners in improving and maintaining their communication skills.

In addition, many scholars, such as Chamot et al. (1999), Canagarajah (2005), and Cohen and Macaro (2007), confirmed that communication strategies are a possible approach to assist students, particularly low-proficiency students, to improve their oral communication and maintain their conversation to reach communicative goals. Dörnyei (1995) claimed that communicative skills could be enhanced by developing specific communication strategies and raising low-proficiency students’ awareness of methods for solving potential communication problems, leading to their oral communication ability development. Nakatani (2005) also supported these recommendations that students trained in communication strategies significantly improved their verbal proficiency test scores and their success as a result of an increased awareness of communication strategies. However, the above studies were done in an ELF context. This current study was done in an ELF academic context. Galloway and Rose (2015) and Canagarajah (2005) revealed that an explicit program of communication strategies training was also needed and should be explicitly designed for implementation in an ELF academic context. Moreover, the previous research analyzed the communication strategies for training instruction from texts or literature reviews rather than selecting from learners’ needs.

6. Conclusion

This study provides some evidence for supporting the utilization of communication strategies instruction. It also supports the earlier research on communication strategies instruction and provides more empirical evidence that communication strategies instruction is both practical and beneficial for non-native speakers in the ELF context. Communication strategies instruction might assist in improving students’ strategic awareness and strategic competence to solve their communication problems. However, this current study had limitations. First, the sample size in this current study was quite small. It cannot claim that the scores of the posttest were higher than the scores of the pretest because of the training. The higher scores may have occurred from other factors because there was no control group for comparing or confirming the results. In short, the current study cannot claim a causal relationship. Hence, further studies may employ a more robust research design. Second, to see the qualitative changes in students’ communication strategies use, further studies should be longitudinal. The communication strategies instruction took 6 hours, and a longer period of training is needed. Therefore, future longitudinal studies may examine the change in students’ communication strategies behaviors and their perceptions about the strategies used over time. The last limitation involved the Coronavirus infectious disease (COVID-19) because the classroom situation moved from on-site to online. Online classrooms affected learning and teaching because it was more complex than in on-site classrooms. The implications of this study are both

theoretical and practical. The study's theoretical implication is that it makes an effort to develop communication strategies for academic settings involving ELF. It fills the gap in research on enhancing communication strategies or helping ELF students because this field of research is limited in Thailand. In addition, Bialystok's (1990) study confirmed that there was little empirical research concerning communication strategies pedagogy, so descriptions and evaluations of any procedure are somewhat speculative. Moreover, this study attempted to fulfill the pedagogy and communication strategies employed by ELF students to assist them in reaching their communicative goals and promoting mutual understanding. The study's practical implication is that the findings might be appealing to English teachers who have had similar experiences or are currently teaching non-native speakers in their academic contexts. Rather than focusing on improving grammar skills, a teacher may consider improving communication strategies. Teachers play an important role when implementing communication strategies. They need to motivate low-proficiency students to speak their responses or use communication strategies when the students are faced with language difficulties. Moreover, teachers' feedback can encourage students to have more confidence to speak or express their ideas.

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