

Short Report

# Analysis of sociocultural influences on the selection and employment of communication strategies in second language instruction

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本研究の狙いは、コミュニケーション戦略を駆使することで、日本人学習者の会話力をいかに向上・改善させることが可能かを図るものである。コミュニケーション戦略とは、コミュニケーションをはかる時に遭遇する障害（例えば、語彙不足など）に有効な話術の習得である。学習者がその種の話術を身につけることができれば、コミュニケーション時における障害の悪影響を最小限に抑え、会話力の改善・向上する可能性が研究により明らかになっている。

**キーワード:** communication strategies, speaking proficiency, communication barriers

## Problem statement

The Second Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education (The Ministry of Education<sup>1</sup>, 2013) since 2017 has anticipated that at least half of all 16-year-olds will achieve a level of English proficiency equivalent to Grade 3 on the Eiken Test in Practical English Proficiency<sup>2</sup> upon completion of secondary education. Likewise, it is anticipated that half of college students will have an English proficiency equivalent to Grade 2 or Grade Pre-2<sup>3</sup> on the same scale when they matriculate<sup>4</sup>. However, only 40.7% of students in their final year of secondary school actually achieved the target in 2017 (this figure was 39.3% for college leavers). By skill, only 33% of secondary graduates (12% of college leavers) were proficient enough to pass the speaking section of the test to the

indicated level (Aoki, 2018). This seemingly continual failure to achieve government language targets has resulted in a focus on current standards of language instruction and the traditional grammar–translation methodology that is widely used (Aoki, 2017). This perception of ineffectiveness is reinforced by the results of test takers in other countries (Table 1.1). Furthermore, the failure to develop the requisite communicative language ability is well known (Ishiwata, 2012) and a source of continual national chagrin, compounded by the perception that insufficient proficiency in English speaking is damaging Japan’s international competitiveness, to the advantage its Northeast Asian rivals. The upcoming Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games has provided political impetus to the attention given to second language education and reinvigorated the debate over the

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efficacy of current language education in Japan's schools<sup>5</sup>.

The government of South Korea, a roughly comparable country in this regard, has similarly focused its attention on the perceived ineffectiveness of second language instruction in its schools. The implementation of that country's English Education Roadmap (2008) has fueled intense competitive feelings in Japan to develop its own English proficiency, which is associated with employment success, social mobility, and international competitiveness (Koo, 2007; Yim, 2007). The improvement in overall English proficiency resulting from this initiative (South Korea outperforms Japan in the Test of English for International Communication, TOEIC)<sup>7</sup> has been accompanied with gradual improvements in practical speaking proficiency. What accounts for these divergent results for language proficiency?

Table 1.1 *Average TOEIC scores by country (2017)*

Rank	Country	Listening	Reading	Average score
1	Canada	444	402	845
2	Germany	429	371	800
3	Belgium	402	370	772
4	Lebanon	410	359	769
5	Italy	386	368	754
6	Czech Republic	395	347	743
7	Philippines	393	334	727
8	France	378	344	722
9	Morocco	387	333	720
10	Jordan	395	322	717
17	South Korea	369	307	676
≠39	<b>Japan</b>	<b>287</b>	<b>230</b>	<b>517</b>
47	Indonesia	253	193	447

*(Report on Test Takers Worldwide 2017)*

For Japanese educators, addressing this perceived pedagogical weaknesses has taken the form of pronounced amendments to language policy, curricula,

and approaches to teaching in primary and secondary education. Before the most recent revisions, compulsory English language education commenced in the fifth year of primary school and ceased in the third year of sixth-form college<sup>8</sup>. Beginning in 2017, with the stated aim of cultivating Japanese with English abilities (The Ministry of Education, 2013), the government has mandated that all children be taught communicative English (in addition English reading and writing) from the age of eight, by native English speaking teachers. This policy expects the average sixth-form college leaver to be able to participate in “normal communication with regard to topics, for example, relating to daily life” and ultimately for university graduates to be sufficiently competent to be able to use English “at a professional level in their work”<sup>9</sup> (The Ministry of Education). The incorporation of a more communicative or functional pedagogical orientation<sup>10</sup> by means of employing of foreign teaching assistants is an acknowledgment that the structural and methodological approach in use (focusing predominantly on English grammar and the advanced translation skills required by university entrance exams) has had limited pedagogical ability to adequately develop communicative language proficiency (Hosoki, 2011). However, despite the implementation of a curriculum to achieve these goals, few would argue that Japanese college leavers emerge with sufficient language competence to engage in spoken communication at anything other than a rudimentary level. The stereotype of Japanese learners who have extensive knowledge of the language but are poor with the language in communicative settings persists (Haneishi, 2012).

To further compound the issue, as a result of extraneous factors, equipping Japanese learners with only the required language constructs is recognized as an insufficient measure for adequate development of communicative competence (Cutrone, 2014; Burrows,

2010). For example, the grammatical dissimilarity of Japanese to English leads to additional difficulties because language distance<sup>11</sup> leads to impediments, involving both linguistic typology (in structures and phonology, among other things) and lexical dissimilarity (Hughes, 1999). The nature of discourse in Japan further exacerbates matters, as Japanese interaction favors fewer interjections and more indirect or apparently vague types of expression (in the perception of non-Japanese). Additional competences are considered necessary to enable Japanese EFL learners to use language effectively and determine the most efficient means of reaching a communicative goal. For these reasons, educators (Nakatani, 2005) have indicated the need for additional skills to enable effective strategic competence and assist with the demands of L2 production generally and management of communication problems (CPs) specifically. Similarly, the author is fostering strategic language competence in students taking English conversation classes at the author's university. For these competencies to remain an achievable ambition, instruction must recognize the complex, competing expectations, and beliefs present in the Japanese EFL classroom. In addition to the constructs themselves, the sociocultural and existential factors (CEF, 2001) that shape the character and content of classroom discourse must also be acknowledged. If the findings of similarly studies of instruction in communication strategies (CSs) are applicable to the Japanese setting, then fluency and speech production are likely to be impacted by the use of CSs. It is hoped that learners equipped with strategic competence will be less under the influence of the sociocultural factors that can inhibit participation in the language learning process. Notwithstanding instructional goals, the strength of sociocultural influences that are so prominent in collectivist countries such as Japan could influence student participation and contribution in second

language learning (SLL).

### Research and pedagogical background

The tip-of-the-tongue phenomenon refers to the difficulty of retrieval or partial recall due to the temporary inaccessibility of a stored item (Nelson, 2000). When it occurs in the first language (L1) the target word or phrase is often a known lexical item (i.e., present in either the passive or active vocabularies), but in second language use, however, it often indicates a gap (Vàradi, 1983) between communicative intention and available linguistic resources. Both scenarios demonstrate a degree of problematicity (Bialystok, 1990), but for foreign language learners, a linguistic, retrieval, or proficiency shortfall represents a perceptible indicator of an impediment to a communicative goal. The means by which speakers (native and non-native) negotiate their communicate intention using immediately available linguistic resources are known as (CSs). For foreign language learners, these are attempts to incorporate a strategic competence into their *interlanguage* (Selinker, 1972) that would allow communication barriers to be minimized or transcended. Representing a subset of communicative competences (Canale & Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983; Bachman, 1990), CSs help manage language production problems primarily due to insufficient linguistic competence (Poullisse, 1987). The pedagogical rationale for direct strategic language instruction<sup>12</sup> within EFL (Dörnyei & Thurrell, 1991; Dörnyei, 1995; Tarone, 1997; Iwai, 2006) affirms the effectiveness of CSs by relating language competence (i.e., declarative language knowledge) to knowledge of the structures and features of the context in which communication occurs (i.e.,, procedural knowledge; Bachman, 1990). This practical application (Iwai, 2006) can greatly

influence the choice of effective means of minimizing or overcoming potential or emergent CPs.

### Research objectives

It has been over 40 years since research began to examine transitional linguistic competences employed as compensatory tools during SLL (Corder, 1967; Selinker, 1972). The initial identification of strategic language techniques was confirmed by subsequent empirical studies (Tarone, 1977; Våradi, 1980; Tarone et al., 1983; Færch & Kasper, 1983b) and led to the classification and description of skills employed to assist with the cognitive, behavioral, and linguistic demands of second language acquisition (SLA). The focus of strategic language research specifically addressed learners' selective ability to manage and overcome emergent CPs. The overarching purpose remains the clarification of the application of strategic language reliance to produce more efficacious pedagogy. However, much of the interventionist research acknowledging the constructive influence of strategic language has been conducted with learners whose L1s (in their typologies, mutual intelligibility, and lexical and syntactic similarities) and learning experience share common features with those of the L2 country (see Poulisse, 1990). Confounding factors may account for the success learners display in adjusting to the communicative teaching methodologies in which CSs are taught and ultimately the acquisition of the strategies themselves. Japanese EFL learners, more versed in teacher-centered learning approaches and with an L1 that (in the case of learning English) is quite at variance with L2 are more likely to have difficulty with CS acquisition and the autonomous learning environment in which they are taught.

This study investigates the contributions that CSs make to equipping Japanese EFL learners with the strategic tools to manage emergent or surfaced CPs.

The 3-month intervention study proposed here will raise awareness of the potential for CS use in SLA, in addition to teaching and practicing how and when individual strategic linguistic items can be employed. Subjects who have undergone the intervention will then be observed to assess the extent of their selection of and employment (or rejection) of CSs in relation to speaking fluency, with particular focus on the relationship between CS selection and the type of CPs they are used in response to. In addition to CS employment, the rationale for learners' selection of CSs will also be examined. The degree of effectiveness of particular CSs for language proficiency is not within the scope of the research. This study specifically addresses the following three research questions:

Question 1. How does the direct teaching of CSs alter participants' selection and employment of strategic language following a three-month intervention study?

Question 2. Which specific CSs are selected and employed in students' management of potential or emergent CPs?

Question 3. What latent factors are influential among learners in the selection and employment of strategic language?

Although the teachability and effectiveness of CSs for improving communicative performance have been demonstrated among Japanese EFL learners (Nakatani, 2000; Iwai & Konishi, 2003), the order of their application and how they are systematized remains underexplored. The inferencing process (Bialystok, 1979) and justification that differentiates CSs according to cognitive demand or sociocultural or linguistic complexity is examined in relation to Japanese EFL learners' existential competence (CEFR, 2011). Instead this paper concentrates on the extent to which Japanese EFL learners select, employ, and

acquire CSs and the rationale for their employment.

### **Rationale for the research**

The positive influence that strategic language use exerts on communicative performance has primarily been investigated with tasks whose specificity unduly biases both the nature and quantity of strategic language use in L2 (Sato, 2009). Research conducted among Japanese EFL learners (Sato, 1987; Iwai, 1992) has similarly employed restrictive tasks (e.g., picture description, recitation, and storytelling) eliciting task-dependent, referent-determined CS selection. Nakano (1996) shows how the restrictions imposed by the features of the task influence the prepotency of differing types of CSs over others. For easier quantitative assessment, the reduction of tasks to inauthentic interactions exposes researchers to the criticism that despite awareness of the interference, the data expediency of the test construct takes precedence. Principally addressing gaps in learner lexis, few studies have assessed strategic language influence in dyadic, referential interaction, where interlocutors are linguistically and strategically unrestricted in their CP management.

The motivation for the author's study of strategic language usage has developed from personal classroom observation of insufficient strategic awareness in surmounting even moderate CPs during interaction. Only minimal hindrance can cause responses to be abruptly abandoned, causing students to immediately resort to the safety of L1 in the face of any CP. Is overcoming CPs a retrieval problem or does it relate to a lack of CS awareness, and what explains the lack of negotiation or failure to seek assistance in overcoming communication barriers? Is this due to the influence of L1 or could it simply represent a lack of communicative competence? More realistically, could a lack of effort be ascribed as the cause? Topic

abandonment and prominent use of L1 can account for a lack of communicative improvement and serves to reinforce learning habits that avoids problematic constructs and linguistic difficulty through L1 reliance. Fostering student awareness of means of managing or overcoming potential and emergent CPs through strategic language use could have important pedagogical implications for maximizing L2 interaction and, ultimately, the development of strategic competence.

### **Pedagogical significance of the research thesis**

Teachers' beliefs, assumptions, and background knowledge play a crucial role in their pedagogical decision making (Woods, 1996; Johnson & Golombek, 2002). Any variance in teacher/student beliefs is rightly considered potentially significant in explaining the apparent randomness of communicative language teaching. Only by acknowledging the lived experiences and sociocultural particulars of learners can teachers create the conditions for complete, willing, classroom participation. This illustrates the value-laden nature of teaching and learning, and pedagogies that fail to acknowledge these factors may be received poorly. A sense of disillusionment is said to have accompanied the spread of communicative language teaching (Chick, 1996), stemming from the naive ethnocentrism with which it was presented elsewhere, stemming from its impact in the country where it was developed against where it was introduced. Similar concerns exist with any approach that shows a disregard for local linguistic and sociocultural practices and the perception of an ethnocentrism on the part of those exporting a homemade methodology without consideration for the importing locality (Canagarajah, 1999). This wholesale methodological introduction has led to further difficulties, not only with implementation, but also

through increasing the potential for the creation of psychological barriers to learning and the consequential effects derived from it (Shamin, 1996, p. 109). A critical awareness of local exigencies is therefore essential in fostering the exploration and achievement of a pedagogy of particularity. Without a deliberate and purposeful transition and lacking careful observation or evaluation of successful outcomes, the potential for resistance and alienation will only increase. A continual recycling of observation, reflection, and action is required to develop a context-sensitive pedagogical approach.

For the majority of foreign assistant language instructors teaching in Japan, active student participation is viewed as essential to conducting productive, meaningful lessons, which equates to the best-equipped language learners being those who are best able to codify and orally transmit messages in the target language. Learning is an observable act, and a teacher can quantify and draw conclusions about its effectiveness. This represents student-centered principles, in which students are encouraged to find maximum opportunity to practice by taking a maximum share of participation (Long & Porter, 1989). This implies that the most successful lessons are those with the greatest share of contribution from students.

The expectation is clearly that the learner will conform to this new environment or classroom regime, which has been termed modern cultural imperialism because of how it ignores the factors noted above. Environments of autonomous learning, student independence, and student autonomy are learning ideals that are at variance with Japan's pedagogical traditions (Willis & Willis, 1996). Western cultural traditions (Jones, 1995) are unrealistic in their reliance on student input, independence, and cognitive processing, as they fail to acknowledge the cognitive processing patterns of Japanese students. This difference in cognitive style, which has been described

as a "lack of predominant learning style" (Reid, 1996) means that the pedagogical goals of communicative teaching approaches may not be fully understood. Thus, any transition must be explained, and the students must be sensitized to both the attitudinal and behavioral expectations of the adaptation from a teacher-centered system to one where students participate in decisions about their learning. Reducing the classroom to a self-contained entity separate from the society in which it was created and where it remains reduces it to a sterilized entity, devoid of the social, interpersonal, gender, and other forms of interaction and domination that exist in society.

This means that the EFL classroom will not always be the meeting place between student expectations, curricular content, and pedagogical appropriateness (Matsuda, 2003). The teacher-centered nature of the Japanese education system shapes and maintains student beliefs and concepts of the learning process. Consequently, rather than being a motivator for the communicative use of language, interactive activities may result in a more prominent use of L1, indicating a conflict in the rationale for their adoption. The common frustration among English teachers that Japanese students "don't talk enough" (Nakatani, 2010) may relate to the Japanese listener talk approach to conversation, which values reticence and orderly turn taking instead of any inclination to dominate a conversation. By contrast, Western countries generally exhibit a speaker talk approach, which includes all the strategies that EFL teachers wish to bring Japanese students to assist them to negotiate language learning. This shows how rules governing classroom interaction are dependent not only on the pedagogical doctrine guiding the lesson concept but equally the norms and conventions of learner interaction in their first language. The sociocultural influences set out are prominent in collectivist countries and exert a significant influence on language learning.

Stereotypically, Japanese EFL learners have the “handicap” (Doyon, 2000) of being shy, reticent, and quiet. The interference of this feature with the language learning process as envisioned by English teachers is most relevant to them because teaching in a foreign culture can lead to problems of communication and even conflict due to cultural misunderstandings. The cultural basis of the teacher–student relationship therefore tends to make cross-cultural learning fundamentally problematic for both parties.

Teaching to a student or student body with a cognitive profile different from what the teacher is accustomed to is evidently problematic. (Hofstede, 1986, p. 305)

Despite the grammatical and lexical declarative knowledge possessed by Japanese learners, the existential variables mentioned above are influential on their L2 performance within the classroom. The aim of this study is to equip university students with the strategic language skills to negate these prominent Japanese sociocultural factors. Although the goal of communicative language teaching is to develop pragmatic competence, Japanese EFL learners are ill-equipped with strategic competence to help them codify and transmit messages in English. Studies in CS instruction conducted in Japan (Iwai, 2000) have shown how response speeds (signifying improved efficiency of working memory), fluency, and pause times can be improved through strategic language instruction. In speech production terms, shortened planning and execution improve linguistic competence in terms of processing speed. The study results may be significant both theoretically and pedagogically, providing insight into a hierarchical order of the development of strategic competences in L2 among Japanese learners in their management of communication barriers. Ultimately, this knowledge

may help clarify how strategic competence operates and have implications for instructed SLA within the Japanese EFL context.

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<sup>1</sup> Official name: The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology.

<sup>2</sup> Eiken Grade 3 equates to CEFR A1+ level.

<sup>3</sup> Eiken Grade 2 or Grade Pre-2 equates to CEFR B1 and A2 level respectively.

<sup>4</sup> After leaving college, 98% of students continue on to university.

<sup>5</sup> The English Education Reform Plan (2013) is intended to enhance English education through earlier and more extensive language instruction. It also argues that making fundamental changes to the style and content of English teaching in college, which would be almost impossible without commensurate changes to university entrance exams.

<sup>7</sup> The TOEIC test is a commonly used English proficiency test that is designed to assess a non-native English-speaker's ability to use English successfully in the workplace. In 2017, over 7 million TOEIC tests were administered in approximately 150 countries by more than 14,000 organizations. Total numbers for 2017 show that the overwhelming majority of test takers (70%) were in Japan and Korea.

<sup>8</sup> 94% of secondary school students proceed on to sixth form college, with 75% continuing into higher education (The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Cited from the homepage of the Japanese Ministry of Education: <http://www.mext.go.jp/english/shotou/030301.htm>: emphasis added

<sup>10</sup> Although the Ministry of Education stresses the importance of communicative ability, no clear definition of this appears in policy documents.

<sup>11</sup> Hart-Gonzalez and Lindemann (1993) calculate linguistic dissimilarity to be 1.00 (1.00 represents harder to learn, and 3.00 represents easier to learn.) between English and Japanese. Japanese is classified as being the most distant major language (from English), followed by Mandarin (p. 7).

<sup>12</sup> *Strategic language* is an overarching term incorporates all individual communication strategies.

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