

Short Report

## Factors Relating to the Willingness of Japanese Learners to Employ Communication Strategies

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This study reports the findings of a 12-month intervention study into the use of communication strategies by Japanese learners, highlighting several factors that are prevalent in Japan and influence the selection and employment of communication strategies.

キーワード : speaking proficiency, speaking ability, communication barriers

### Introduction

Although strategic competence exists in all languages and cultures, Tarone (2009) highlights how particular strategies preferred for use in certain situations may be culture- or language-specific. Likewise, Oxford (2003) highlights that varieties of strategic reliance reflect personal approaches in managing communicative tasks and the entwining of learning styles and CS employment. Littlemore (2001) similarly relates strategic choice to learner characteristics by demonstrating how differences in patterns of CS reliance are attributable to individual cognitive style. Holistic learners (i.e., those able to view situations in their overall context) were found to be predominantly dependent on holistic CSs (mostly comparison-based strategies) compared to analytic learners (i.e., those who analyse information into its composite parts). Manifestations of this dichotomy resulted in subjects either describing target items in terms of a componential comparison or analogically

relating items to a concept that shares a number of its critical features. The present research attempts to measure the impacts of these learner factors, which are most likely to influence the successfulness of strategy instruction conducted in Japan. Furthermore, studies conducted with Japanese learners highlight the influence of sociocultural factors (Iwai, 1997), L1-L2 distance (Chiswick, 2004), personality characteristics (Sato, 2008), conversational style (Tannen, 2005), learning style and instructional background (Skehan, 1989), and cognitive maturity (Iwai, 2006) as additionally determinative in CS selection in the Japanese context. In a collectivist country such as Japan, the learning and cognitive style preferences of Japanese learners (Oxford, 1990) add a further dimension to strategic language selection. The present research attempts to explore performance variables in uncovering underlying sociocultural influence in CS selection and reliance. Manifesting in the recognized variables mentioned above, these variables are likely equally influential in CS selection and employment.

1. Existential competence
2. L2 language proficiency
3. Sociolinguistic factors
4. Language distance

The above factors will be related to the findings from Chapter 4 to offer an insight into CS selection processes in managing CPs. Although every effort has been taken to validate accurate representation based on VSR, the author acknowledges that a level of interpretation and inference in accurately representing subjects' recollections.

### **Existential competences**

Selfhood factors linked to the personal traits of identity (e.g., attitudes, values, beliefs) affect communicative interaction (CEFR, 2001) and represent constituents of the user's emotional, affective, cognitive and social attitudes. Rules and norms governing L2 interactional patterns will take on new dimensions depending as much on the pedagogic orientation as on learner disposition and effort to surmount communicative difficulty (Troudi, 2005). Specifically, interactions are governed by conversational principles such as the cooperative principle (Grice, 1975) and the face-saving principle (Brown & Levinson, 1978); Færch and Kasper identify these principles (1984) as evidence that intra-personal strategies are often affected by discursal and interactional features. According to Lin and Li (2009), cooperative and imitation strategies are used more by extroverted learners, while reduction strategies are employed more by introverted learners who are more reluctant to ask for assistance or select expressions that they are unsure or unfamiliar with. The fear of making mistakes (Hofstede, 1986) or the shyness factor can determine the level of risk a learner is prepared to undertake in order to transcend a CP. During

communicative lessons, this feature manifests as Japanese students' strong tendency to write out prepared answers (even for English communication classes) rather than mentally constructing ideas as the conversation progresses. A common justification for this practice is that it allows learners to form ideas and opinions without the constraints of construction while interacting. Due to this exacting attention to detail, which Hofstede (1986, 2001) terms ambiguity avoidance, extended non-lexicalized pauses combined with Japanese culture's greater tolerance of silence can result in lengthy interruptions while planning takes place. In Japan's high-context communication environment, most information is either conveyed through physical context or internalized in the person, and therefore, not all information needs to be explicitly expressed verbally. When communicating in this environment, the high-context individual will expect his interlocutor to know details so that the need for specifics becomes redundant (Hall, 1976). Additionally, the use of silence by Japanese EFL learners in conversations within the classroom is often the result of rule-conflict between English and Japanese conversation style; when confronted with questions that they cannot answer, a common recourse is to resort to silence as a face-saving measure and/or convey unfamiliarity by remaining silent. The dynamics of this conflict mean that uncomfortable silences can be a common feature in EFL classrooms in Japan and one of the most challenging aspects of classroom management for non-Japanese language teachers. Explicitly stating lack of familiarity does not carry the same connotation to a Japanese person as it does to a non-Japanese, as such an admission of ignorance or unfamiliarity often presupposes insufficient subject matter knowledge due to lack of intelligence or interest and pertains to the dimension of face and credibility.

### **Second language proficiency**

Determinative variables influencing CS employment primarily relate to learner proficiency (Iwai, 2005) as, predictably, frequencies of encountering linguistic problems for which CSs have to be employed are higher for less proficient learners. Research conducted among learners of all ages and nationalities, regardless of disparity in elicitation settings, (Chen, 1990) have highlighted a disparity in CS employment between learners of varying proficiency levels. Intuitively, learners of higher proficiency should need to resort to less linguistically demanding but also communicatively less effective strategies (e.g., varying degrees of omission or L1 reliance) more infrequently than lower proficient learners. A more advanced repertoire of L2 linguistic knowledge allows learners to exploit alternative varieties that require more elaborate manipulation of their linguistic resources and recourse to more L2-based CSs dependency. Wang (2005) shows how effective L2-based strategies were employed more by higher proficiency learners, whereas L1-based strategies and reduction strategies were used more by introverts with a lower proficiency level. Kitajima (1997) and Yoshida-Morise (1998) support similar findings that proportionally more L1-based CSs are used by less proficient Japanese EFL learners. In addition to the types of CS, Poulisse and Schils (1989) have also observed an inverse relationship between proficiency level and frequency of CS reliance. Among Japanese learners, Iwai (2005) examined proficiency effects and concluded that proficiency does affect L2 learners' strategy use even from a process-oriented perspective since less proficient learners are often forced, as mentioned above, to choose less favorable strategies. Watanbe and Gapp (2004, also conducted in Japan) claim that the use of effective discourse-level strategies is closely related to learners' communication experience in L1 rather than L2 proficiency. Additionally, proficient

subjects rely on lexical strategies (e.g., circumlocution, approximation) less often than their less proficient counterparts do. Also, effective problem-solvers were not necessarily proficient learners. As such a claim contradicts the findings of the present research, clarification is required into precise levels of proficiency (both L1 and L2) and their influence on CS employment.

### **Sociocultural influences**

Even within the interview setting, the situation is not only determined by cognitive, affective, and language proficiency factors, but also social influences (Prabhu, 1987). The context of the learning situation and the cultural values of the learners' society can be expected to have a strong influence on choice and acceptability of CS employment (Burrows, 2008). The characteristics highlighted in the existential competences section are products of "centralized curricula, didactic and expository teaching styles, concentration on knowledge acquisition, [and] examinations emphasizing reproductive knowledge over genuine thinking" (Pierson, 1996, cited in Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p.55). While some researchers have attempted to negate the significance of these sociocultural influences (Tsui, 1996), factors that are presented as mitigating these influences are themselves culturally bound phenomenon (e.g., student reticence, low confidence levels, and fear of making mistakes).

Chamot (2004) highlights how a culture that prizes individual competition organizes its educational system around competitive tasks; resultantly, successful language learners prefer strategies that allow them to work alone rather than social strategies that call for collaboration with others. In the same way, discourse strategies (Gumperz, 1982) are vary across cultures and are a potential source of intercultural miscommunication. Likewise, appropriate CS

employment is also culturally constrained. In a similar discursive vein, Abdesslem (1996) shows that Tunisian EFL learners tend to control their oral production strategically according to specific sociocultural factors (termed “cultural interference”) and relevant psychological factors of the speaker. Iwai (2004) also discussed the influence of discursive factors on CS use and showed that their reliance can also vary between individual learners coming from different cultural and educational backgrounds. These can be attributed to their mother tongue, learning style interference, and educational and cultural background (Corrales & Emily 1989; Paribaht, 1985). To illustrate their potential influence, as touched upon above, inhibitions regarding making mistakes are likely to impact a learner’s reliance on risk-taking strategies. The Japanese school system, consistent with the values ingrained in Japanese society, places a great emphasis on the evaluation paradigm. As a result, Japanese learners’ concern regarding evaluation of their performance by others further adds to language anxiety (Cutrone, 2009). This is one reason put forward for the predominance of convergent thinking (Guilford, 1967) and the focus on the production of a single “right” answer in second language production. Several subjects cited the fear of making mistakes and appearing incompetent as the greatest cause of their anxiety during interactions. This may help explain the reluctance to interact freely and uninhibited and the tendency for defensive reactions to error correction (Doyon 2000). Such risks, however, are an inherently unavoidable part of language learning for learners, and therefore they must be made aware that such risks can never be completely avoided, merely reduced. Furthermore, as CS reliance is the result of communication breakdown, employment could be viewed as a demotivating endeavor because learners are admitting an element of failure in producing accurate language (Foster & Ohta, 2005).

## Language distance

In addition to learners’ native language background, distance from the L2 and knowledge of the target culture have additionally been shown to affect CS selection. Perception of typological distance and shared knowledge between the L1 and L2 are factors that can influence CS employment (Davies, 1998; Tarone & Yule, 1990; Yule & Tarone, 1997). Non-cognateness between the Japanese and English languages (especially in terms of particles, verbal morphology, honorifics, etymology) ensures that language distance reduces the tendency to depend on them both grammatically and phonetically due to the assumption they will not be effective (Paribaht 1985).] As Al-Siyabi (2014) points out, the presence of L1-based strategies may form an indicator of learners’ commitment and willingness to employ strategic language constructs. Frequency of CS reliance may vary according to the native language, with Rabab’ah and Bulut (2007) highlighting how subjects from eight countries displayed contrasting frequencies of usage according to the subject’s native language and task. In the interview task, for instance, compensation strategies were used most frequently by Russian native learners and least frequently by French learners. The differences can be explained by the effect of different mother tongue interferences in addition to educational backgrounds. Yule and Tarone (1997) point out that the performance of learners from a single L1 background is remarkably geographically, historically and socioculturally close to English as the L2 and will not generalize to the larger, extremely diverse population of L2 learners around the world.

## Summary

The present study aimed to investigate the efficacy of CS instruction in equipping Japanese EFL learners

with the strategic tools to be able to strategically and effectively manage communication barriers. Although the three-month training program failed to yield a statistically significant effect on overall participation (in terms of staying actively involved in the interaction), changes in CS employment recorded for the experimental group (most significantly relating to sharp increases of interaction and reduction-based CSs) were greater for those CSs more associated with a more active approach and willingness to achieve their communicative intention. This indicated a change in the quality of participation in the experimental group. Even though their overall amount of language was not significantly greater after the experiment, it was significantly more interactive as a result of CS employment. A possible explanation for the increase in the reliance of these CSs may be attributed to an alignment between the proficiency level and the corresponding linguistic and cognitive demands of the strategy. This is consistent with the notion that CSs that enable speakers to formulate and express ideas in a relatively effortless way and only demand surface processing and therefore tend to be favored by elementary learners (Green & Oxford, 1995) may serve as “bedrock strategies” (Green & Oxford, 1995, p. 282) in oral communication.

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〔 令和 2 年 6 月 30 日 受付 〕  
〔 令和 2 年 7 月 16 日 受理 〕