

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Communicative Strategies Used by Undergraduates in Spoken English

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Abstract:

This case study investigated the difficulties when speaking in English among undergraduates at UiTM Sarawak. It identified the kinds of difficulties they faced when speaking English and strategies they employed to cope with these difficulties. A set of questionnaires was used to elicit information on their speaking skills, investigating the socio-cultural aspects of using English and speaking strategies used. The survey which involved 110 respondents from various faculties at UiTM Sarawak adopted Rebecca Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). The findings revealed that there were a number of similar speaking problems faced by the respondents and there were some common strategies employed to ease communication. The reasons for such choice of strategies would also be discussed.

Keywords: *communicative strategies, spoken English*

1. Introduction

The Malaysian government has, since 1957, acknowledged that English is the second most important language learned in schools in Malaysia after Bahasa Malaysia (Mohd Faisal Hanapiah, 2002). English is taught as a second language in Malaysian government schools for 11 years from Year One until Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia. With this tutored exposure to English, it is believed that the learners should have mastered the language fairly well (Suliana Wan Chik, 2009). Apart from grammar, students in schools are taught grammar, listening, speaking and writing skills. In 2003, the teaching Mathematics and Science were reversed to English when Tun Mahathir Mohammad, then the Prime Minister saw it as one of the important means to achieve a developed nation status through Vision 2020. However, in 2010, the teachings of both subjects were reversed to Bahasa Malaysia due to strong resistance from Malay nationalist groups who believed that these subjects should be taught in the pupil's mother tongue. After many debates, in 2015, the government again decided that certain selected schools were allowed to teach Mathematics and Science in English. This flip flop policy is due to the fact that the government is aware that objectives of the English language curriculum in schools to teach Mathematics and Science in English so as to equip Malaysian children with appropriate communication skills and ample knowledge of the language that will enable them to expand their general knowledge, as well as for work-related and leisure based purposes after they finish their studies (English Language Syllabus, Ministry of Education, 1998).

Nevertheless, after 11 years of continuously learning English language, it is observed that students who enrolled to study at MARA University of Technology, (UiTM) have not been able to speak English fluently. UiTM offers compulsory English language courses at pre-diploma, diploma and degree programmes. Although the students have improved in their reading, writing and listening skills as proven by assessment scores taken during their diploma courses at UiTM, much can be said about their speaking skills. At UiTM Sarawak, the lingua franca in the campus is *Sarawak Malay* dialect being conversed in unofficial domains while English and *Bahasa Melayu* are commonly spoken in official domains. English is hardly spoken outside the classrooms. Thus, even at degree level, speaking impromptu English during oral presentation is a major challenge to most students.

In UiTM Sarawak, the aim of learners' proficiency is achieved through the integration of the four skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening, with appropriate consideration given to building an appropriate working knowledge on intermediate-level grammar. At the degree level, the aim of the English courses is to consolidate the level of proficiency at the advanced level. The speaking component enhances other components in the language that require students to present ideas orally, presenting ideas individually and in groups argumentatively and critically. Degree students are also required to participate and contribute to group discussions during oral presentations.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

This study investigated the problems related to the difficulties in presenting in English by students at UiTM Sarawak, particularly the 5th semester students who are studying their final English course, English for Report Writing 661. It also investigated their challenges

delivering oral presentation in English by identifying the suitable speaking strategies in coping with their personal dilemma towards mastering the communication skills.

1.2. Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are to investigate the problems faced by the 5th semester degree students at UiTM Sarawak when conducting oral presentation in English and to determine the suitable speaking strategies to deal with the difficulties.

1.3. Research Questions

To investigate the problems related to oral presentation in English among the 5th semester degree students at UiTM Sarawak, this study was carried out with the aim to answer the following research questions:

1.3.1 What are the problems faced by the 5th semester degree students during oral presentation in English?

1.3.2 What are the learning strategies they employ to overcome difficulties in English oral presentation?

1.4. Scope of the Study

The scope of the study was narrowed down to the 5th semester degree students at UiTM Sarawak from 2 different faculties by investigating their problems in English oral presentation and speaking strategies as outcomes of the investigation.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework is built mainly on Krashen's acquisition theory (Krashen, 1982 & 1985). This theory states that a language is normally acquired through participation or experience in using it. In fact, it encourages language acquisition extensively by providing the maximum amounts of comprehensible input. Comprehensible input emphasizes that students learning English language have to use the language in order to understand, particularly about topics or issues which have meanings to them, or something which they can relate with their surroundings.

It is expected that learners can use ample variety of strategies in the learning process. Apparently, each learner chooses and employs different strategies depending upon individual differences, field of studies, teaching methods, amount of time, learning technologies, kinds of feedback, required level of mastery, ways of measurement etc. In short, these variables are also important from the point of designing effective, engaging, and efficient instruction (Milano & Ullius, 1998).

Bright and McGregor (1970) also emphasizes that language learning will not take place unless the language is put to usage. The researchers continue to believe that its usage should not be limited to classroom situations only, as the outside environment is equally important for language acquisition to take place. The two major components of usage are the usage and the environment. The curriculum is seen as the formal usage and the environment as the informal usage. Both are equally needed.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

In this study, the English language speaking problems and remedies are adapted from Brown and Palinscar (1984), based on a number of possible variables as follows: Linguistic problems, Barriers to intercultural communication, Socio-cultural aspects on second language learning, and Learning Strategies.

2.2.1. Linguistic Problems

Thongsonsee (1998) discovered that a good understanding of western cultural practices, the ability to adjust oneself to a different style of learning, and personal problems played important roles in the general achievement of the students. This is echoed by Songsangkaew (2003) stated that formal language for language function was the most difficulty in comparison with informal language. The researcher also revealed that there are many students who experience problems with culture, the different learning styles and linguistics.

Caroll (1967) insisted that more usage means more proficiency, and more instructions indeed, means more proficiency, affirming that years of formal instruction is a better predictor of English than is time spent in an English-speaking environment. Davis (2004) had identified social associations as one of the factors influencing L2 attainments. The assumption that the more the learners interact in the language, the more competent they are in the target language has also been confirmed by Seliger (1977). Therefore, additional interaction outside class is very important in acquiring L2 competency.

2.2.2. Barriers to Intercultural Communication

Daly (1991) stated that communication anxiety is a significant affectivity role in second language learning. Anxiety concerns with feelings of uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, apprehension, or worry. In oral communication in L2 learning, there is a connection between communication apprehension and problems faced by learners. Daly also explained that fear or anxiety is the obstacle of communication. McCroskey (1992) stated that communication apprehension is the fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons. Some people want to communicate with others and see the importance of doing so; but they may be hindered by their fear or anxiety. Similarly, those who do not have appropriate communication skills or whose communication is ethnically or culturally contrary may also result in communication apprehension. According to Horwitz and Cope (1991), the anxiety can arise because of the difficulty in engaging in genuine or authentic communication, i.e. when one's

linguistic skills are limited. The willingness to communicate can be a main force in a person's behaviour as any communication situation may cause discomfort. As a result, the person is likely to stay away from the situation if he or she cannot avoid it. Thus, the willingness to talk is significant to the results of communication.

2.2.3. Socio- cultural on Second Language Learning

Ochs and Scheffelin (1995) stressed the relevance of language socialization even to grammatical development. Firstly, this method responds to the assumption that, in every community, grammatical form is closely connected, culturally organised situations of use and the guided meanings of grammatical forms influence children's production and understanding. Secondly, they point out that a language socialisation perspective expects that there will be structured strategic relationships between language development and culturally organised situations of use. Vygotsky (1986) acknowledges that the development of a child should investigate into the external social which the individual has developed. Learning is concerned with social events and occurs as a child interacts with people, objects and environment. The important theory lies in the understanding of human cognition and learning as social and cultural phenomena rather than an individual one.

2.2.4. Learning Strategies

Oxford (1990) provided four strategies which may help language learners in their learning process, and these are:

Memory strategies: help language learners to deal with difficulty remembering the newly learned words to attain fluency. Learners are able to keep verbal materials and remember them when needed for communication. Memory strategies may contribute to language learning, but L2 learners seldom use them, especially beyond the basic levels of language learning.

Compensatory strategies. Refers to the way language learners assume the context in listening and reading; using synonyms and inferring the missing words in speaking and writing components; and only for speaking, using gestures or pause words. Good language learners make 'smart' guesses when they come across unfamiliar expressions. While guessing, learners are actually interpreting information by using the instant context and their personal life experience. In addition, compensatory strategies permit learners to produce spoken or written expression in the new language without complete knowledge. In many situations, compensatory strategies are applied if students lack appropriate vocabulary and grammatical knowledge. For example, if learners do not know how to express one form of a verb, they may use a different form to get the message across. They are able to rephrase the meaning in other forms of the language in order to make others comprehend their actual meaning. Cohen (1998) indicated that compensatory strategies are intended for language use and must not be considered as language learning.

Social strategies involve as the process of asking questions to get confirmation, asking for clarification, asking for help in doing a language task, talking with a native speaking conversation partner, and exploring cultural and social norms. Social strategies help the learner work with others and understand the western culture as well as the language.

Speaking / Presenting. In relation to this study, L2 learners normally have communicative goals when involving themselves in language learning activities that are geared towards improving speaking skills. They find it difficult in expressing themselves when presenting in front of the class. It is because of the variance in their linguistic background. Based on a study by Songsangkaew (2003), if the problem occurs while learners are involved in speaking, they should try to find means and ways to have the meaning sent across. In doing so, consider the following:

2.3. Adjust the Message

As learners come across a problem exchanging of messages takes place, it is usually too late to escape, and they will just their message half-way through. However, they may decide to change the meanings in their planned communication. For example, they may leave out some information, make the ideas simpler or more straightforward, or say something a little different than usual.

2.4. Paraphrase

A language learner can use paraphrasing in his or her conversation- such as using a description- in order to express the meaning that he wants to communicate. For instance, a learner who did not recall the word 'humongous' avoided the need for it by saying 'I visited a real huge house'. Similarly, a learner who could not recall the word 'chopper' spoke of the thing that you use to cut large pieces of meat.

2.5. Use Approximation

A L2 learner may decide to use words which express the meaning as closely as possible. It may also mean using words which really refer to something else but may be interpreted appropriately in the context of the learner's utterance. For example, a Malay learner who could not recall the word for a 'grocer' spoke instead of 'supermarket' which means 'a large shop that sells food, drinks and things regularly used at home'.

2.6. Create New Words or Vocabulary

In learning a language, learner may construct a new word or phrase which expresses the meaning of words. For example, a Chinese learner of English who does not know the word for a 'table lamp' may have formed the word as 'night table'. There is a possibility that the word actually exists in L2 when using this particular strategy.

2.7. Use non-linguistic Resources

In many situations, learners often use non- linguistic resources such as mime, gesture or imitation in order to make word meanings understandable.

2.8. Seek Help

In speaking activities, some learners may look for help from a bilingual dictionary. On the other hand, they may use signals if they have difficulty in expressing themselves while communicating. Thus, they would mime or describe so as to express their ideas and views.

3. Methodology

The study was conducted at MARA University of Technology (UiTM) in Samarahan Campus 1. The respondents of this study were 5th Semester degree students who enrolled in English Writing Course 661. The selected groups of students were in the February -July 2016 academic year. The total number of Semester 5 students' population was 212 and questionnaires were distributed to a sample of 110 students. The samples involved were those studying for English Writing Course 661 from the Faculty of Business Management such as Marketing, Finance, International Business, and students from Faculty of Accounting.

The data collection was carried out by distributing a survey questionnaire of rating scales adapted from Rebecca Oxford (1990). There are four sections in the questionnaire that consists of; Part One concerns with the respondents' personal details; Part 2 was constructed to gather the problems that the students faced and to encourage them to reveal their English learning problems; Part 3 comprises of 6 questions which cover the socio- cultural aspect of L2 learning; and Part 4 was aimed at investigating the learning strategies used by the students to solve any difficulties in speaking English. To determine the strategy use, Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for language Learning (SILL) was adapted in this study. Descriptive statistics analyses were carried out in which tables were used for data tabulation. Likert Scale was used and it was classified into 5 levels: always =5, usually =4, occasionally = 3, rarely =2, and never =1.

4. Findings

- Research Question 1: What are the problems faced by the 5th semester degree students in English oral presentation?

The objective of this research question is to identify the problems faced by the respondents when they do their oral presentations in English.

PROBLEMS	Always	Usually	Occasionally	Seldom	Never	Total
Not easy to express myself during presentation	2 (1.8%)	23 (20.9%)	55 (50%)	26 (23.6%)	4 (3.6%)	110 100%
Not comfortable presenting in English in front of the class	3 (2.7%)	25 (22.7%)	57 (51.8%)	23 (20.9%)	2 (1.8%)	110 100%
My vocabulary is limited	2 (1.8%)	22 (20%)	64 (58.2%)	19 (8.2%)	3 (2.7%)	110 100%
Uncomfortable when taking questions from the audience	4 (3.6%)	26 (23.6%)	46 (41.8%)	27 (24.6%)	7 (6.4%)	110 100%
It's very difficult doing impromptu speech compared to prepared speech.	2 (1.8%)	20 (18.2%)	61 (55.5%)	23 (20.9%)	4 (3.6%)	110 100%
I find speaking within a time limit very stressful.	6 (5.5%)	22 (20%)	44 (40%)	36 (32.7%)	2 (1.8%)	110 100%
I have grammatical problems when speaking English.	23 (20.9%)	25 (22.7%)	31 (28.2%)	30 (27.2%)	1 (0.9%)	110 100%
I find myself translating from <i>Bahasa Melayu</i> into English while speaking	14 (12.7%)	34 (31%)	31 (28.2%)	21 (19%)	10 (9.1%)	110 100%
I have many problems with pronunciation in English	15 (13.7%)	29 (26.4%)	30 (27.2%)	32 (29.1%)	4 (3.6%)	110 100%

Table 1: Problems when presenting in English

The third part of the questionnaire analysis is based on the socio-cultural aspects of second language learning. The objective is to perceive how the surroundings had affected the participants and the opportunities they had in the process of improving their spoken English.

Actions /activities	Always	Usually	Occasionally	Seldom	Never	Total
Joining English related activities	4 (3.6%)	34 (30.9%)	47 (42.7%)	20 (18.2%)	5 (4.5%)	110 100%
Making friends with those who can speak English	7 (6.4%)	40 (36.4%)	39 (35.5%)	17 (15.5%)	7 (6.4%)	110 100%
Spending free time speaking English with friends who are good in English	10 (9.1%)	25 (22.8%)	42 (38.2%)	27 (24.6%)	6 (5.5%)	110 100%
Paying attention to the speaker's usage of English during communication	5 (4.5%)	30 (27.2%)	43 (39.1%)	29 (26.4%)	3 (2.7%)	110 100%
Rehearsing to boost confidence before presentation	3 (2.7%)	33 (30%)	57 (51.8%)	12 (11%)	5 (4.5%)	110 100%
When communicating with someone who is good in English, I am not ashamed of my pronunciation.	7 (6.4%)	36 (32.8%)	55 (50%)	8 (7.3%)	4 (3.6%)	110 100%
Memorising the speech text before presentation makes me less nervous	3 (2.7%)	32 (29.1%)	59 (53.6%)	7 (6.4%)	9 (8.2%)	110 100%

Table 2: The effects of surrounding on the speaker

➤ Research Question 2: What are the learning strategies they employ to overcome their difficulties?

Actions /activities	Always	Usually	Occasionally	Seldom	Never	Total
Taking every opportunity to speak English daily	15 (13.7%)	35 (31.8%)	30 (27.2%)	21 (19%)	9 (8.3%)	110 100%
Self -correct or let others correct my English when speaking	20 (18.2%)	28 (25.5%)	30 (27.2%)	30 (27.2%)	2 (1.8%)	110 100%
Practice speaking correct grammar structures	18 (16.4%)	37 (33.6%)	30 (27.2%)	20 (18.2%)	5 (4.5%)	110 100%
Remembering new English words by making a mental image	2 (1.8%)	23 (20.9%)	63 (57.3%)	18 (16.2%)	4 (3.6%)	110 100%
Keep speaking even though the grammar and pronunciation might not be all correct	4 (3.6%)	27 (24.6%)	49 (44.5%)	24 (21.8%)	6 (5.5%)	110 100%
Code- switch at word level to <i>Bahasa Melayu</i> when unable to get the exact word in English when speaking	3 (2.7%)	26 (23.6%)	58 (52.7%)	24 (21.8%)	1 (0.9%)	110 100%
Using gestures while speaking when cannot express in English	14 (12.7%)	28 (25.5%)	32 (29.1%)	32 (29.1%)	4 (3.6%)	110 100%
Just guess the words while speaking and hopefully the listener understands	4 (3.6%)	24 (21.8%)	56 (50.1%)	25 (22.7%)	1 (0.9%)	110 100%
Using new English words when speaking to add to vocabulary	6 (5.5%)	23 (20.9%)	43 (39.1%)	36 (32.7%)	2 (1.8%)	110 100%

Table 3: Learning strategies to overcome their difficulties?

5. Discussion of Findings

Table 1 lists a number of problems faced by the respondents when presenting in English. Generally, 50(55%) of the respondents agreed that they have problems when they expressed themselves; this occurs due lack of vocabulary, lack of confidence and low proficiency in the language. A total of 57 (51.8%) of the respondents stated that they were occasionally uncomfortable presenting in English in front of the class. This was due to the fact that they did not do many oral presentations in English and individual presentation was even more nerve-wrecking for those who were less proficient in English. It was found that 64 (58.2%) of the respondents realised that their vocabulary was limited and is an obstacle to them when presenting in English. Their limited vocabulary is due to their medium of instruction that was mostly spoken in Malay language in school before joining UiTM. This has caused 46 (41.8%) to feel uncomfortable when taking questions from the audience. They would rather not answer any questions or read from their prepared texts when answering questions. Besides that, a total of 61(55.5%) of the respondents stated that it was very difficult for them to do impromptu speech compared to prepared speech. However, when presenting their prepared speech, the respondents used cue words and phrases to enable them to present smoothly. Thus, it was not surprising to note that 44(40%) of the respondents said that they found speaking within a time limit was very stressful. A total of 31(28.2%) of the respondents stated that they occasionally have grammatical problems when speaking English. Thus, this explained the need to rehearse their speech before presentation. To overcome their difficulty when presenting in English a total of 31(28.2%) of the respondents found themselves translating from *Bahasa Melayu* into English while speaking. Again, the Malay medium of instruction in school for at least 11 years made it easier for them to think in Malay compared to English. Out of the total of 110 respondents, the majority or 32(29.1%) of the respondents stated that they have many problems with pronunciation in English and this had contributed to their difficulty to present effectively.

Table 2 provides feedback on the effects of surrounding on the speaker. A total of 47(42.7%) of the respondents stated that they

would join English related activities to improve their proficiency in speaking English. They believed that such exposure would be useful when they have to do oral presentations in English. Besides that, a total of 39(35.5%) of the respondents also said that they made friends with those who could speak English well. By speaking English with them, the respondents believed that their spoken English would improve as well. In addition, a total of 42(38.2%) of the respondents also said that they would occasionally spend their free time speaking English with friends who are good in the language. In order to improve their spoken English, 43(39.1%) of the respondents paid attention to the speaker's usage of English during communication. Since doing presentations in English is a difficult task for many respondents, it was not surprising that 57(51.3%) of them rehearsed their speeches to boost confidence before presentation. To overcome their lack of confidence, a total of 55(50%) of the respondents stated that when communicating with those who were good in English, they were not ashamed of their pronunciation. To ease their presentation, a total of 59(53.6%) of the respondents stated that they memorised their speech texts before presentation in order to make them less nervous.

Table 3 shows the learning strategies employed to overcome their difficulties in oral presentations. A total of 35(31.5%) of the respondents stated that they used every opportunity to speak English daily in campus so as to improve their presentations. Besides that, a total of 30(27.2%) of the respondents would self -correct or let others to correct their English when speaking. However, they were quick to note that these were done by close friends and lecturers only. A total of 37(33.6%) of the respondents also stated that they usually practice speaking correct grammar structures in order to improve their spoken English. A large number or 63(57.3%) of the respondents also said that they recalled new English words by making a mental image. By doing so, the respondents believed that it could improve their language proficiency. Additionally, a total of 49(44.5%) of the respondents stated that they occasionally kept speaking even though the grammar and pronunciation might not be all correct. This was to boost their confidence and motivated them as they have set their own targets. In addition, a total of 58(52.7%) of the respondents also stated that they would practice code-switching at word level to *Bahasa Melayu* in some instances they unable to get the exact word in English when speaking. Another strategy employed by the respondents was using gestures while speaking when they could not totally express themselves in English. This comprised of 32(29.1%) who stated that they did it occasionally. To add on to that, a total of 56(50.1%) of the respondents stated that they would guessed the words while speaking and hopefully the listener would understand. Finally, a total of 43(39.1%) of the respondents stated that they would try using new English words when speaking to add to their vocabulary.

6. Conclusion

The data obtained from the questionnaires reflected the difficulties and strategies used by the respondents when presenting orally in English. A few areas of speaking strategies and difficulties were identified. Effective ways to cope with these difficulties when making presentations were noted according to students' preferences and ones that suited their difficulties. As a whole, in order to be competent in speaking skills, the learners must have enough vocabulary to overcome the barriers when presenting using English. It is recommended that further studies incorporate multiple measures, such as direct observations and interviews to be conducted in order to get more accurate picture of the problems encounter by students in tertiary education when presenting orally in English. For UiTM English language lecturers and curriculum developers, it is equally important to identify learning experiences which are surrounded with cultural, ethnic and religious beliefs as these elements may have great influence on the speaking pattern during interaction and its difficulties along with the strategies used when teaching Speaking Skills at UiTM.

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