

A STUDY OF ENGLISH COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES OF THAI UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Suttinee Chuanchaisit¹
Kanchana Prapphal²

Abstract

Thai students appear to have problems communicating in English as a second language, especially students of low ability. This may be caused not only by the lack of basic grammar and vocabulary but also by deficiency in the use of appropriate communication strategies. Low-ability students experience difficulties in selecting the most appropriate strategies for many communicative contexts. This study³ aims to obtain empirical data on the types of communication strategies that low-ability students select which may affect their oral communication abilities. Three hundred Thai university students participated in the initial part of this study, 100 of whom were randomly selected to complete the

¹ Ph.D. Candidate, English as an International Language (EIL) Program, Chulalongkorn University, and a Lecturer at Faculty of Humanities, University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce, Thailand

² Ph.D., Professor, Corresponding Author, Chulalongkorn University Language Institute (CULI), Bangkok, Thailand

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Strategies Used in Speaking Task Inventory, which was developed to elicit responses related to their use of communication strategies. In addition, content analysis was employed to confirm the quantitative analysis. It was found that low-ability students tended to employ risk-avoidance techniques, especially time-gaining strategies, and needed assistance in developing risk-taking techniques such as social-affective, fluency-oriented, help-seeking, and circumlocution strategies.

Introduction

Some speakers of English as a second language (English L2) are able to communicate effectively by uttering just a few words, while others find it difficult to achieve the same level of communication. The former group may use certain devices known as communication strategies (CSs), such as hand gestures, imitation of sounds or movements, paraphrasing, and invention of new words. Poor selection of strategies by students to accomplish language tasks can lead to unsuccessful communication (Cohen and Macaro 2007; Rubin 2005; Oxford et al. 2004; Gu 2003). While CSs are appropriately used by able students, lower-ability students have greater difficulties, and a lack of basic grammar and vocabulary in English L2 speakers increases the limits on oral communication for this latter group (Dörnyei 1995).

There are but few studies investigating students with different language abilities and their employment of different types of CS, particularly in the Thai context. Some studies have focused on the relation between CSs employed and other variables, such as interaction with native speakers or frequency of using CSs (see Ton 1989; Khaopet 1996; and Wannaruk 2003). This study examines the types of CS used by students

of lower abilities and the differences from those used by more able students.

Conceptual background of communication strategies

An approach to understanding a ‘strategy’ is to regard it as ‘problem-solving’ but not in the usual way of producing a solution. The act of students uttering expressions in an attempt to communicate in English L2 is not normally referred to as a strategy. However, if these students have problems using a particular word in English L2, the notion of strategy emerges. Then, they might use description or circumlocution instead of the problematic word or use gestures as a device to reach the communication goal. In this way, a strategy is a possible means of problem-solving that the users select because it works effectively and they are most comfortable with it (Swan 2008).

The interest in CSs has grown over the last four decades. In the 1970s, the study of CSs was introduced as a new area of applied linguistic research by four researchers: Selinker (1972), Savignon (1972), Varadi (1973), and Tarone (1977). Selinker (1972) published papers about interlanguage in which the notion of CSs in English L2 arose for the first time. Meanwhile, Savignon (1972) introduced pedagogical research focusing on student training in CSs. Varadi (1973, 1980) expanded on the ideas of Selinker (1972) by initiating a systematic analysis of CSs, and introducing several taxonomies and terms used in CS research.

Generally, CSs can be seen as systematic, communication-enhancing devices used to handle communication difficulties and to avoid communication breakdown (Canale 1983, Long 1983, Dörnyei 1995, Nakatani 2006). CSs should not deal with problem-solving only (as mentioned in the traditional

conceptualization) but may be used to avoid conversational trouble or failure in achieving communicative goals (Long 1983).

Although several definitions have been proposed for second-language CSs (for example, Canale and Swain 1980; Corder 1981; Færch and Kasper 1983; Dörnyei and Scott 1997; Dörnyei and Cohen 2002; Nakatani 2005, 2006), there has not been complete agreement on a single definition of CSs because of the range of strategies involved (Dörnyei 1995). Different definitions have focused on different aspects. Some emphasized the interaction process in communication (Gass and Varonis 1990; Rost and Ross 1991; Williams et al. 1997), but others considered the behaviors of problem-solving arising from gaps in speakers’ linguistic knowledge (Nakatani 2005, Poullisse 1990). In some studies, the CSs were seen as problem-solving devices divided into two levels: consciousness and problem-orientedness. The former was studied by Dörnyei and Scott (1995a, 1995b), Schmidt (1994), Yule and Tarone (1991), and Varadi (1983), while the latter was examined by Varadi (1992), Færch and Kasper (1983), and Bialystok (1984, 1990). As different types of definitions evolved, they led to many different categories of CSs (see Dörnyei and Scott (1997) for a summary of the various definitions).

CSs have recently been categorized into two major types: “achievement or compensatory strategies”, used by “good language learners” (Nakatani 2006), and “reduction or avoidance strategies”, commonly used among “low ability learners” (see Bialystok 1990; Dörnyei and Scott 1997; Dörnyei and Cohen 2002; Nakatani 2005, 2006). Apart from these categories, risk-taking strategies and risk-avoidance strategies were adopted as the

main types of CSs based on the framework of Corder (1983), taking into account tolerance of risk as one of the influences that makes individual students vary (Carton 1966).

In the Thai context, some students are encouraged to avoid 'loss of face' as a result of making mistakes. Thus, they are likely to employ risk-avoidance strategies to maintain the conversation. In contrast, other students might have been raised in an environment where people communicate naturally without worrying seriously about correctness. These students are more likely to take risks to expand their resources in order to solve communication breakdowns.

Considering CSs used by Thai students, Luangsaengthong (2002) has stated that Thai university students use Approximation, Paraphrasing and Circumlocution strategies most frequently. This result is in line with Wannaruk's study of the use of CSs by Thai university students in the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) process, in which it was found, that students used different CSs to varying degrees according to their language levels and that the most frequently CS type used was Modification Devices. Thai researchers have focused on several different aspects of CS use, most of them examining the frequency of CSs used by students at a particular level (Wannaruk 2003; Khaopet 1996). However, few studies have tried to differentiate types of CSs used by speakers with different language ability levels. That is one of the reasons why this study aims to examine this aspect.

The taxonomies of CSs have generally been based on criteria such as whether the target group chooses to achieve or reduce the goal, or whether they consult sources of information in their first language (L1)

or English (L2). Most of the existing taxonomies are quite elaborate in distinguishing several types of CSs (Færch and Kasper 1983; Dörnyei and Scott 1995a, 1995b; Dörnyei and Cohen 2002), and some of them become downright daunting with their multiple levels of subcategorization (Færch and Kasper 1983, Paribakht 1985). In this study, we have adopted a different classification system based on the use of risk-taking strategies vs. risk-avoidance strategies made up of nine subcategories modified from Corder (1983), Dörnyei and Cohen (2002), and Nakatani (2005, 2006), as follows.

One list was made up of risk-taking strategies, referring to strategies speakers used to expand their linguistic resources to achieve communicative goals. These included:

- 1) social-affective strategies for dealing with emotions and attitudes;
- 2) fluency-oriented strategies emphasizing speech clarity and pronunciation;
- 3) accuracy-oriented strategies for paying attention to forms of speech;
- 4) non-verbal strategies such as giving hints by using gestures and facial expression;
- 5) help-seeking strategies such as asking for repetition, clarification or confirmation; and
- 6) circumlocution strategies for paraphrasing or describing the properties of target objects.

The other list was made up of risk-avoidance strategies, referring to strategies speakers use to adjust the message to match their linguistic resources. These included:

- 1) message abandonment strategies for leaving a message unfinished;

- 2) message reduction and alteration strategies to allow the substitution of familiar words;
- 3) time-gaining strategies, consisting of gambits or fillers, to keep the communication channel open and maintain discourse in times of difficulty.

According to the ideal concept of oral communication, CSs are essential in terms of the relationship between the means and the ends of communication (Corder 1983: 17). The ideal assumes that speakers' linguistic resources and the message are in balance, i.e., speakers have enough linguistic knowledge to express the message. However, sometimes L2 speakers wish to convey a message which their linguistic resources may not permit them to express successfully. In this situation, there are two options to choose from: speakers may either attempt to increase their resources to reach the communicative goals, although it is risky to do so—the risk-taking strategies,—or they may tailor the message to the available resources—the risk-avoidance strategies, so called because there is no risk to take as the speakers may simply leave the message unfinished (Corder 1983: 17).

Many studies, dealing with both international and Thai contexts, have reported that, although students with lower language abilities employed CSs (Yoshida-Morise 1998; Purpura 1999; Fulcher 2003; Wannarak 2003), they were not successful in communication. For this reason, this study investigates the types of CSs that less-able students use in their oral communication and the reasons for their lack of success.

This study mainly provides information about how high- and low-language-ability students invoked strategies in speaking

tasks. The results have numerous implications for language educators as they can potentially learn how high-ability students differ from low-ability students in their use of CSs. Moreover, the study provides further insight into the roles of the various types of CS in expanding the language ability of Thai university students. Since the findings reveal which type of CSs are used by high-ability students, this may indicate that this type can help students succeed at a higher language ability level, and this suggests the need to provide the low-language-ability students with specific strategies to improve their language proficiency.

Practically, the teacher can apply the Strategies Used in Speaking Task Inventory (SUSTI) to elicit students' responses relating to their use of CSs. It might be effective if teachers realize which types of CS students tend to use before planning lessons, selecting materials, and designing methods of teaching. In addition, the Oral Communication Test (OCT) can be useful for graduating students as an instrument for self-assessment of their actual oral communication ability. Furthermore, the test and the questionnaire, can act as guidelines for educators to design in-house instruments.

The study

This study forms part of a dissertation entitled *The Effects of English Language Ability and Types of Communication Strategies on Oral Communication Ability of Thai University Students* (see Chaunchaisit, forthcoming). The researchers investigated the employment of risk-taking and risk-avoidance CSs, by students with different language ability levels. The study posed two research questions:

1. What the types of CSs are used by lower-ability students?
2. What are the pedagogical implications of helping lower ability students to improve their oral communication ability through the selection of effective CSs?

Methodology and design

Population and sample

The sample of population for the study consisted of 300 third-year students enrolled in the speaking course in the Faculty of Humanities of a private university in the second term of the academic year 2008. At that stage, the students had studied English for 15 years in school and university. They appeared homogeneous in terms of nationality and background knowledge as they were Thai students studying in the same faculty and university. Most of them were about the same age and it could be assumed that they had similar cultural and educational backgrounds.

These students were categorized into two groups, high- and low-ability, based on their average grades in the English speaking course and the highest and the lowest grades that they had received in their previous English courses. So, the two language-ability groups referred to overall language ability, rather than only speaking ability. The high-ability group consisted of the students who obtained average grades above the +1 S.D. in these courses and the low-ability group comprised students whose grades in the courses were lower than -1 S.D.

From this total of 300 students, 50 students were used in the pilot study to validate the instruments. This left 250 students to participate in the main study. After that, a

sample of 100 students' results were selected randomly for quantitative data analysis purposes (see "Data Collection" below and appendix C for the sample selection procedure). Only 100 were selected because, as a rule of thumb, "in the survey research literature a range of between one percent to ten percent of the population is usually mentioned as the magic sampling fraction, with a minimum of about 100 participants" (Dörnyei 2007: 99). The rough estimates of sample sizes for multivariate procedures are at least 100 participants, as well (2007: 100).

In addition, the sample size in this study could not exceed 100 because of the study's research design, called randomized block design, and the criterion of categorizing student ability level based on boundary lines of +1 and -1 S.D. Two hundred and fifty students of mixed language ability levels were needed to produce the language ability level classifications. Then, 50 students were randomly selected from both the high-ability group and the low-ability group.

The mean of the students' average grades equaled 3.13, with a S.D. of 0.36. Therefore, +1 S.D. was 3.49, and -1 S.D. was 2.77. From this, the high language ability group was defined as students with an average grade greater than 3.49 ($n= 89$), while the low ability group included those students whose average grade was less than 2.77 ($n= 63$). Once students had been assigned to these two groups according to their language ability levels, 50 were randomly selected from each group to investigate whether there was a significant difference between high- and low-ability students in terms of their use of different types of CSs. Additionally, content analysis was employed to confirm the findings obtained from the quantitative approach. Twelve

audio-recorded OCT performances (six speech samples in each cell) were selected randomly, transcribed, and analyzed.

Instrumentation

The main instrument used in this study was a self-report questionnaire, the Strategy Use in Speaking Task Inventory (SUSTI). A 32-item Likert-scale questionnaire was designed to assess the frequency with which students used CSs in their English oral communication. The five-point scale on the SUSTI ranged from one (never true for me) to five (always true for me). The SUSTI was written in Thai to avoid the problem of questions being misunderstood (see appendix A).

Items included in the SUSTI were drawn from systematic lists of two major types of CSs: risk-taking and risk-avoidance strategies. These were derived from Carton's classical notion that tolerance of risk is one of the factors that makes individual language learners vary (Carton 1966: 18). In addition, the framework of CSs from Corder (1983) and the taxonomies proposed by Nakatani (2005, 2006) and Dörnyei and Cohen (2002) suggested the classification of CSs into risk-taking and risk-avoidance strategies.

The SUSTI was developed to be used as an instrument for assessing the CSs students used during their communication in English. The test specification development and needs assessment were based on a review of CS literature (e.g. Tarone 1980; Færch and Kasper 1983; Poulisse 1987; Dörnyei 1995; Dörnyei and Scott 1995a; and Nakatani 2005, 2006). Content and construct validity was checked, using an Item—Objective Congruence (IOC) test validating form; the classificatory agreement among three independent experts in the field of

language teaching who matched each item with the specific behaviour domain to be observed was 77%. There was consensus among the raters that the SUSTI reflected the specific descriptions of the domain being tested. Moreover, the specific language used in the SUSTI occurred in actual conversations which established a high degree of authenticity. The measure of internal consistency for the reliability of the questionnaire using Cronbach's alpha was .80. This promised that the test results would be consistent regardless of how many times the test was repeated.

The study also used the Oral Communication Test (OCT) (see appendix B) as a tool for assessing test-takers' oral communication ability in the area of general English. It focused on authentic oral communication in students' daily lives. The OCT format was made up of a semi-direct speaking test consisting of four tasks: a warm-up task, an interview task, a description task, and a problem-solving task. The students' oral performance was elicited through the use of a tape recorder.

With regard to specifications of the OCT constructs, Anastasi (1990) and Bachman and Palmer (1996) suggest that the specifications for the test tasks should be developed based on a review of related literature illustrating the content areas to be covered by the test to ensure its content validity. All contents of the OCT items are thus based on the speaking proficiency guidelines of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language (ACTFL).

Regarding its content and a priori construct validation, three experts were asked to investigate the contents and constructs (abilities) to be measured and they agreed with the constructs and contents of the OCT using the IOC index.

Data collection

The population of 300 students was classified into two groups, high- and low-ability, based on their average grades in the three English courses mentioned above. Fifty students were used in the pilot study. For the main study, the remaining 250 students were asked to complete the OCT at the university language laboratory. The students responded to a tape recorder, and scores were assigned by three raters for each student based on his/her oral communication ability. Students completed the SUSTI questionnaire directly after the OCT.

Since this paper focuses on types of CSs used by the students with different language ability levels as evidenced by their self-report questionnaire and recorded OCT speech sample performances, the OCT scores are not given in the article. However, the inter-rater reliability coefficients among the three raters ranged from .70 to .85.

Fifty students each were randomly selected from the high- and low-ability groups, and their results were analysed. Additionally, the contents of 12 speech sample performances in OCT (six randomly selected from each group) were transcribed and analyzed to triangulate the results of the SUSTI.

Data analysis

Independent t-test and descriptive statistics were computed to determine whether there was any significant difference between the high- and low-ability students in their use of different types of CS. Content analysis using the data obtained from the audio-recorded OCT was performed to check the findings from the questionnaire analysis.

The transcriptions of student speech samples were analysed for the obvious features elicited from each type of CS in order to differentiate between high- and low-ability students in terms of types of CS used. For example, social-affective strategies have clear features of controlling anxiety and avoiding silence to communicate smoothly. So, number of words produced was compared with periods of silence. Moreover, as speakers use fluency-oriented strategies to increase the clarity of their speech, there was a comparison between the number of words produced and the number of unclearly pronounced words. Another example involves message-abandonment strategies in which speakers give up on their attempts to communicate by leaving messages unfinished. The use of such strategies was detected through a comparison between the number of words produced and the number of unfinished sentences in the response.

Results and discussion

To determine the difference in types of CSs used by the two groups, the means of the self-reported scores in the SUSTI were compared. Table 1 shows the difference in the selection of the types of CSs by the two language ability groups.

An independent t-test was performed on the comparison of the means of CSs used by the two groups. It was found that the uses of three strategies were strongly different, one was different, one was slightly different, and the uses of four strategies were not different in terms of the t-values. As for overall risk-taking strategies, the results indicated that there was a significant difference between the two groups, showing that the high-ability group employed risk-taking strategies significantly more than the low-ability group. An

examination of the subcategories revealed that the high-ability students used social-affective, fluency-oriented, help-seeking, and circumlocution strategies significantly more frequently than the low-ability students, the t-values being 5.17, 4.54, 5.40 ($p \leq .001$), and 2.23 ($p \leq .05$), respectively.

For the overall risk-avoidance strategies, there was no significant difference between the two groups. However, it is interesting to note that the low-ability students used time-gaining strategies more frequently than their high-ability counterparts, the t-value being 3.65 ($p \leq .01$). This probably occurred because time-gaining strategies are surface strategies which do not involve making connections between known and unknown knowledge (Leaver et al. 2005). It is possible that the low-ability students, having more difficulties due to their limited L2 knowledge, had to resort to this type of strategy more frequently to compensate for their limitations (Qingquan et al. 2008). Also, the use of time-gaining strategies does not require much effort or time and contributes less to language learning (Leaver et al. 2005).

Investigation of the differences showed strongly significant differences in the use of social-affective, fluency-oriented, and help-seeking strategies. Regarding the significant difference in employing social-affective strategies, it may be inferred that students with a high ability level often have a positive attitude towards English, while low-ability students likely will not. This may plausibly be taken to indicate that the higher ability group knows how to regulate their emotions better by coping more efficiently with emotional problems that occur. Thus, this group intentionally seeks out opportunities to interact with the target language communicatively in order

to enhance their language proficiency (Qingquan et al. 2008, Stern 1983).

The difference in use of fluency-oriented strategies seems to support the idea that the higher level group may be attempting to keep the conversation flowing by avoiding silence. This may reflect their awareness of the communicative nature of language use and their confidence in their ability to manage any communication breakdown.

As for help-seeking strategies, high-ability students' more frequent use of this kind of CS indicates that they are more active and tend not to be afraid of losing face when turning to others for help. On the other hand, the low-ability students in this study may have been unwilling to look foolish and afraid that others would regard their questions as silly and laugh at them.

In addition, time-gaining strategies were employed quite differently by the two groups. It is interesting to note that the low-ability group evinced more use of this type of CS. This may be because their limited language proficiency causes them to use fillers such as 'um', 'uh', and 'okay' in order to gain time to think what to say.

Furthermore, the study revealed a slight difference between the two groups in terms of their use of circumlocution strategies. The high-ability group's tendency to employ this type of CSs may be due to their greater repertoire of English resources for circumlocution. They seemed to have a larger stock of vocabulary in their word-banks than the lower ability students, so they were more likely to be risk-takers, trying to use their available resources to express what they wanted.

Content analysis was considered along with the results of SUSTI to examine specific types of CSs used by the two groups. The following are the results of the qualitative

approach with explanations relating to each type of CS use.

Table 1: The nine communication strategies (CSs) employed by the two groups

Categories	High Ability		Low Ability		t-Value	Mean Comparison
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
	(N=50)		(N=50)			
Risk-Taking Strategies						
1. Social-affective strategies	3.84	0.38	3.33	0.52	5.17***	H>L
2. Fluency-oriented strategies	3.97	0.63	3.41	0.51	4.54***	H>L
3. Accuracy-oriented strategies	3.64	0.47	3.52	0.37	1.44	NS
4. Nonverbal strategies	3.97	0.40	3.85	0.50	1.34	NS
5. Help-seeking strategies	3.85	0.49	3.41	0.53	5.40***	H>L
6. Circumlocution strategies	4.00	0.78	3.67	0.74	2.23*	H>L
Total	3.88	0.14	3.53	0.19	4.43**	H>L
Risk-Avoidance Strategies						
1. Message-abandonment strategies	3.06	0.59	3.00	0.45	0.61	NS
2. Message-reduction and -alteration strategies	4.07	0.53	3.86	0.93	1.37	NS
3. Time-gaining strategies	2.82	0.56	3.22	0.51	3.65**	L>H
Total	3.32	0.66	3.36	0.45	0.09	NS

H = high language ability students, L = low language ability students, NS = no significant difference
 * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$

The first explanation relates to the use of social-affective strategies. According to Nakatani (2006), students might try to control their own anxiety and encourage themselves to use English. They behave in such a way as to give a good impression and avoid silence during the test. Therefore, the attempt to control their periods of pauses were used as a feature to elicit the strategies used by comparing the number of words produced and periods of silence in responding to the description task, "Please describe a person who is

important to you" (see Table 2). In this study, the word referred to "Number of words produced" refers to "a unit of language which means something" (Oxford dictionary 2003). Thus, incomplete words were not counted.

It was found that the group of low-ability students employed this type of CS more. This finding is in line with the studies of Nakatani (2006) and Nakatani and Goh (2007), which stated that the high-ability group tended to control affective factors to

react smoothly and maintain their interactions. High ability students may cope more efficiently with emotional problems and intentionally seek out opportunities to interact with the target language communicatively, so they spend less time leaving the conversation in silence. (Qingquan et al. 2008). Moreover, these

students may take more risks in actively encouraging themselves to express what they want to say, even though this could cause mistakes. Also, because of their high language ability, they are able to control their use of the target language, thus making them feel at ease with the use of English.

Table 2: Number of words produced and periods of silence when using social-affective strategies

Categories	Number of words produced	Periods of silence	Average no. of words produced/average period of silence	Average percentage between words and pause time
High ability	\bar{X} = 113 words	\bar{X} = 8.84 seconds	113 words/8.84 sec.	7.82% (8.84x 100/113)
Low ability	\bar{X} = 51 words	\bar{X} = 20.25 seconds	51 words/20.25 sec.	39.71% (20.25x100/51)
Low-ability student				
"Please describe a person who is important to you"				
"my: mom, father euh grandmum grandparent euh she's too. when I gave something her (1.0) she (.5) she gave everything that I met she..(4.0) she take care me (.5) in everything (1.0) gave money? (4.0) when I sick she (5.0) she (1.0) she take care me (5.0) she gave (2.0) money (2.0) love (1.0) she love me I love my parent (1.0) very euh the most. (7.0) I am stay... I am stay in J (.5) now because she...[laugh]"				

Note: () refers to periods of silence

The second explanation relates to the use of fluency-oriented strategies, as students pay attention to the pronunciation and clarity of their speech, they try to speak clearly and take their time in order not to send inappropriate messages (Nakatani 2006).

Table 3 shows a comparison between the number of words produced and the number of unclearly pronounced words resulting from slips of the students' tongues in response to the test question about their plans to use English in the future. The results of both the SUSTI and the content

analysis indicate that the high-ability group was markedly more likely to attend to pronunciation than the other group. The average percentages between the number of words produced and the number of unclearly pronounced words of the high-ability and the low-ability groups were 2.39% and 7.32%, respectively, indicating that the high-ability students tended to be more aware of their pronunciation.

Apart from the issue of language ability, extroverted personality types and confidence in the use of language are factors which

might promote the use of this strategy (Takeuchi et al. 2008). In general, higher language ability students tend to be more confident with their ability, so they are able to speak more comfortably and produce smoother conversation. However, many slips of the tongue may arise due the high-pressure environment of the test, leading to words being uttered improperly or pronounced incorrectly.

The use of accuracy-oriented strategies points to students who desire to speak English accurately paying attention to speech forms and seeking to improve grammatical accuracy by self-correcting when they notice mistakes (Nakatani 2006). Table 4 presents a comparison between the number of words the students produced, the number of failures or grammatical mistakes, and the number of attempts at self-correction in students' responses to the problem-solving task.

Table 3: Number of words produced and unclearly pronounced words when using fluency-oriented strategies

Categories	Number of words produced	Number of unclearly pronounced words	Average no. of words/average no. of unclearly pronounced words	Average percentage between no. of words and no. of unclearly pronounced words
High ability	$\bar{X} = 69$ words	$\bar{X} = 1.65$	69 / 1.65	2.39% (1.65x100/69)
Low ability	$\bar{X} = 27.34$ words	$\bar{X} = 2$	27.34 / 2	7.32% (2x100/27.34)
Low-ability student				
"What is your plan to use English in the future?"				
"I think that.. <u>major</u> (1.0) major I study (1.0) can help me good job or high salary (1.0) and maybe (.5) [<u>unidentified phrase</u>] umm I ca::n study in abroad"				

In this study, the high-ability students employed this type of CS more than their low-ability counterparts. For the high-ability group, grammatical mistakes rarely occurred (less than 1 mistake occurred per 100 words produced). Moreover, all mistakes occurring in high-ability students' conversations were corrected as soon as they were noticed. In contrast, the low-ability students tended not to use this type of CS.

The example provided in Table 4 illustrates some of the problems created by many major grammatical mistakes occurring in a

very short response and the respondent not noticing his/her own mistakes. This finding is in line with Yoshida-Morise (1998) and Lee (2004) who discovered that high-ability students self-correct more than those at a low ability level. It seems that the greater English L2 knowledge speakers possess, the more chance they have of noticing and correcting the mistakes while trying to get their message across.

In sum, a high use of accuracy-oriented strategies reflects the ability to notice and correct language mistakes, positive attitudes towards mistakes, and the ability to monitor

the production of language (Qingquan et al. 2008). This explains why accuracy-oriented strategies were employed more frequently by the high-ability students in this study.

When students face communicative problems, they might use nonverbal language to express themselves, using gestures, facial expressions, and eye contact to give hints (Nakatani 2006). As nonverbal strategies are behaviour aids to verbal output (Lazaraton 2002), content analysis could not be used to illustrate the strategies the students used. Therefore, observation was conducted instead. The researchers recorded the frequency of students' gestures as they occurred during the conversation before tallying the frequency of gestures used by the high- and low-ability students, with the result that no significant difference was found between the two groups in their use of nonverbal strategies, although most studies have asserted that less competent groups rely more heavily on paralinguistic knowledge (Paribakht 1985; Fulcher 2003; Nakatani 2006). In the present study, both groups used non-verbal strategies sparingly. Thai students' infrequent use of nonverbal strategies may be explicable in terms of Chamot's idea that cultural values influence choice of CS as Thai culture considers many gestures impolite (Chamot 2004). In the Thai culture, younger people are considered impolite if they wave their hands as a gesture of denial or refusal. Such things are supposed to be expressed verbally, e.g., by saying "no."

Help-seeking strategies are seen in situations where speakers try to solve communicative problems by asking for assistance either directly or indirectly. Not only may they ask for repetition, clarification, and confirmation; they may also use rising intonation or pauses to signal a need for help from their partners (Nakatani 2005). As the semi-direct interview employed in this study did not indicate the students' direct help-seeking, the frequency of pauses may suggest indirect signs of help-seeking. Table 5 presents the number of words produced and the frequency of pauses in response to the test instruction "What do you like most about studying English?"

Table 4: Number of words produced, failures or grammatical mistakes, and attempts at self-correction by students when using accuracy-oriented strategies

Categories	Number of words produced	Number of failures/ grammatical mistakes	Number of attempts at self-correction	Average percentage between no. of words and failures
High ability	\bar{X} = 167 words	\bar{X} = 1	\bar{X} = 1	0.60% (1x 100/ 167)
	Comments: There were some simple mistakes. Students noticed the mistakes and corrected them.			
Low ability	\bar{X} = 64 words	\bar{X} = 2.83	\bar{X} = 0.34	4.42% (2.83x 100/ 64)
	Comments: There were serious mistakes that the students did not notice.			
Low-ability student				
"Your close friend invited you to his or her birthday party, but you will have an examination tomorrow. You don't want to miss the party and also don't want to fail the test. What should you do?"				
"I call (1.0) I call girlfriend <u>is name Daring</u> (2.0) err I will talk with her: err Daring (1.0) I (1.0) <u>can't birthday party?</u> with you: (1.0) because (1.0) tomorrow I will (.5) <u>test</u> and I don't (2.0) <u>I don't know this exam</u> (3.0) <u>is difficult?</u> to (2.0) <u>examination</u> (1.0) and I don't read (4.0) please please please angry me (1.0) next day I will <u>I will do anything</u> for you that you that you want I can I promise. If I go to birthday party err I I will fail exam because: so (5.) umm I regret I sorry (3.0) to tell you (1.0) but hope you understand me? (4.0) um I think I love you(9.0)"				

Table 5: Number of Words Produced and Frequency of Pauses in Using Help-Seeking Strategies

Categories	Number of words produced	Number of pauses	Average no. of words produced/ no. pauses	Average percentage between no. of words and no. of pauses
High ability	\bar{X} = 45.67 words	\bar{X} = 3.17	45.67 words/3.17 pauses	6.94% (3.17x100/45.67)
Low ability	\bar{X} = 23 words	\bar{X} = 3.5	23 words/3.5 pauses	15.22% (3.5x100/23)
Low-ability student				
"What do you like most about studying English?"				
"I(.5) like... I like to most think (.) think (.) think about speaking umm partish for (1.0) foreign language (1.0) I like to learn [unidentified phrase]"				

Regarding the SUSTI results, the high-ability students' more frequent use of this kind of CS indicates that they were more active and tended not to be afraid of losing face when turning to others for help. The

low-ability students, on the other hand, may have been unwilling to look foolish and afraid that others would regard their questions as silly and laugh at them (cf. Qingquan et al 2008).

Although the low-ability group seemed to employ help-seeking strategies more often than the high-ability group (15.22% and 6.94%, respectively) most of the pauses from the low-ability group were micro-pauses. Examples of the pauses are given at the bottom of the table.

One explanation for this finding may be Kirtikara's (2000) suggestion that Thai students with any level of proficiency seem not to have individual thoughts and questioning minds, even tertiary-level students. Generally, they do not appear to be inquisitive, being rather passive and lacking in enthusiasm instead, so they rarely asked for clarification or confirmation. Another explanation may be that language teaching and learning encourages individual competition, so students who are competitive and want to reach their goals may prefer the types of CS that allow them to think and work alone rather than collaborate with others (Chamot 2004).

This part of the present study strikes the researchers as inadequate because using pauses to study help-seeking strategies seems both unusual and superficial and, furthermore, no references support the idea that pauses signify the use of this type of strategy. To check this, a follow-up interview was conducted after the test had been administered. The researchers contacted 10 of the original 12 students to be interviewees and asked them "When you paused at that time, what were you thinking about?" Seven students responded that they had paused because they needed someone to assist them by providing something like clarifying sentences. The

rest of the students needed time to think but were not seeking help. Therefore, one might conclude that pauses do not constitute an appropriate measure of help-seeking strategies in this study.

With the use of circumlocution strategies, students try to approach relevant linguistic items or expressions using paraphrase and approximation (Nakatani 2005). Paraphrasing takes the form of exemplification in describing characteristic properties or functions of the intended term. In using approximation, students use alternative expressions with semantic features similar to those of the intended term. These two techniques may result in indirect and unnecessary utterances. Table 6 compares the number of words produced and the number of indirect and unclear sentences given in response to the test prompt "Please describe a person who is important to you." These types of CS were more popular among the low-ability students. The low-ability students tended to paraphrase and exemplify for the sake of better communication.

Several scholars (Fulcher 2003; Yoshida-Morise 1998; and Poulisse 1990) have agreed that low-ability students use description or alternative expressions instead of specific ones to compensate for their lack of English L2 linguistic knowledge. Their limited English L2 vocabulary makes it difficult for them to cope with problems (see the example in Table 6). In contrast, high-ability students can select the appropriate words to express themselves, so it was not necessary for them to attempt to add clarification.

Table 6: Number of words produced and unnecessary sentences used in circumlocution strategies

Categories	Number of words produced	Number of unnecessary sentences used or repeated sentences	Average no. of words /average no. of unnecessary sentences	Average percentage between no. of words and repeated sentences
High ability	\bar{X} = 113 words	\bar{X} = 1.5 sentence	113 words/1.5 sentence	1.33% (1.5x100/113)
Low ability	\bar{X} = 51 words	\bar{X} = 2.5 sentences	51 words/2.5 sentences	4.9% (2.5x100/51)
Low-ability student				
"Please describe a person who is important to you."				
"my: mom, father euh grandmum grandparent euh she's too. when I gave something her (1.0) she (.5) she gave everything that I met she. . .(4.0) she take care me (.5) in everything (1.0) gave money? (4.0) when I sick she (5.0) she (1.0) she take care me (5.0) she gave (2.0) money (2.0) love (1.0) she love me I love my parent (1.0) very euh the most. (7.0) I am stay. . . I am stay in err(.5) now because she. . .[laugh]"				

Table 7: Number of words produced and unfinished sentences in message-abandonment strategies

Categories	Number of words produced	Number of unfinished sentences	Average no. of words produced/average no. of unfinished sentences	Average percentage between no. of words and unfinished sentences
High ability	\bar{X} = 113 words	\bar{X} = 0.33 sentence	113 words/0.33 sentence	0.29% (0.33x100/113)
Low ability	\bar{X} = 51 words	\bar{X} = 1 sentence	51 words/1 sentence	1.96% (1x100/51)
Low-ability student				
"Please describe a person who is important to you."				
"my (3.0) my puh.. my important (4.0) my important person are my parents (1.0) my father is a soldier (1.0) he's:: (3.0) take care of me all the time and my mom (3.0) she (1.0) she's nice kind (2.0) and best (1.0) of"				

Among the risk-avoidance strategies, there was a dramatic use of message-abandonment strategies by the low-ability students, which did not match the results of the SUSTI. These types of CSs are common among students of low proficiency and low enthusiasm (Nakatani 2006; Khanji

1996). Nakatani (2005) has stated that speakers use these strategies to avoid engaging in communication when they face problems in the target language. When they are not able to find appropriate forms or rules, they stop speaking, or in the worst case, they kept silent without

any response. So, unfinished sentences may indicate the use of this type of CS. Table 7 shows the use of message-abandonment strategies, comparing the number of words produced with the number of unfinished sentences in response to the task "Describe the person who is the most important in your life." There seemed to be a dramatic use of this type of CS by the group of low-ability students. On average, the low-ability students left two sentences unfinished for every 100 words produced. In contrast, the high-ability students rarely left sentences unfinished (less than one sentence per 100 words produced).

The low-ability students appeared to lack strategic competence and had no other choice but to end the interaction. An example of such a breakdown is shown in Table 7, e.g., the utterance "she's nice kind (2.0) and *best (1.0) of*".

Message-reduction and alteration strategies consist of speakers tending to use familiar words and avoiding the risk of using new or unfamiliar words even though they may realize that the utterance is far from their communicative goal (Nakatani 2006).

Table 8 illustrates the use of this type of CS by comparing the number of words produced with the number of familiar words used to replace the correct words in response to the question "When did you begin studying English?" The results showed message-reduction and alteration strategies being employed more by the low-ability students. On average, the low ability group used familiar words to replace the target words approximately three times per 100 words produced, while the high-ability group tended to go straight to the exact words in the context as substitution of

familiar words accounts for only 1% of the total.

The low ability students used familiar expressions confidently to avoid communication breakdown even though they sometimes realized that their utterances were irrelevant to their communication goal. The example in Table 8 shows a representative change from using "grade five" to the simpler "year five."

Time-gaining strategies involve the conscious use of fillers to keep the communication channel open and the conversation going (Nakatani 2005). Table 9 presents a comparison between the number of words produced and the number of fillers or hesitations in response to the problem-solving task "Give some advice to your friend to solve the problem."

Content analysis agreed with the results of the SUSTI that the low-ability students used time-gaining strategies more than those in the high-ability group. This supports the finding of Yoshida-Morise (1998) that use of fillers showed significant differences across student proficiency levels.

This can be seen from the example in Table 9, where the limitations in language proficiency of the low-ability group may have caused them to use fillers to gain more time to think of what to say next. In addition, fillers provide students with a sense of security by allowing them to manage times of difficulty (Dörnyei 1995).

Table 8: Number of words produced and number of familiar words used to replace correct words in message-reduction and -alteration strategies

Categories	Number of words produced	Number of familiar words used to replace correct words	Average no. of words produced/ no. of substituted words	Average percentage between no. of words produced and substituted words
High ability	\bar{X} = 34.17 words	\bar{X} = 0.34	34.17 words/ 0.34 substitutions	1% (0.34x100/34.17)
Low ability	\bar{X} = 18.17 words	\bar{X} = 0.5	18.17 words/ 0.5 substitutions	2.76% (0.5x100/18.17)
Low-ability student				
"When did you begin studying English?"				
"I began studying English in (2.0) <u>grade</u> : <u>er</u> <u>year</u> five (1.0) five primary school (2.0) um eleven year old it's very <u>inter</u> . umm it's very (1.0) <u>exciting</u> "				

Table 9: Number of words and fillers or hesitations produced in time-gaining strategies

Categories	Number of words produced	Number of fillers or hesitations produced	Average no. of words produced/no. of fillers or hesitations	Average percentage between no. of words and no. of hesitations
High ability	\bar{X} = 167 words	\bar{X} = 4.17	167 words/4.17 fillers	2.50% (4.17x100/167)
Low ability	\bar{X} = 64 words	\bar{X} = 4	64 words/4 fillers	6.25% (4x100/64)
Low-ability student				
"Your close friend invited you to his or her birthday party, but you will have an examination tomorrow. You don't want to miss the party and also don't want to fail the test. What should you do?"				
"umm:I will buy the <u>er</u> present for her (1.0) and give it (1.0) <u>hhh</u> to her before party and I don't <u>er</u> I don't come to I don't go to (1.0) her birthday party <u>hhh</u> (4.0) I want to take the time for reading for my examination tomorrow (4.0) <u>yeah</u> I know she will understand me"				

Conclusions and Implications

In this study, the high-ability students preferred risk-taking strategies, such as social-affective, fluency-oriented, help-seeking, and circumlocution strategies, whereas the low-ability students tended to employ more risk-avoidance strategies,

like time-gaining strategies. The reason for this finding may be that high-ability students employ most of the risk-taking strategies because of their proficiency in English. Additionally, with their higher degree of cognitive flexibility, they were likely to apply social-affective strategies to manage their feelings during communication. In contrast, the lower English proficiency

of low-ability students may lead them to utilize risk-avoidance strategies, e.g., time-gaining strategies. This supports Yoshida-Morise's (1998) finding that less competent language learners rely more on their world-knowledge than on linguistic knowledge.

The types of CSs employed by the high-ability students made them more successful in oral communication. Their use of risk-taking strategies was more effective in conveying their meaning or concepts since all necessary and appropriate information was provided in a clear and direct way.

The question of whether CSs should be taught is a contentious one. The results of this study suggest that it might be profitable to teach students not only linguistic knowledge but also communication strategies which they can use to promote more effective language learning. As Rubin (1990: 282) has stated:

Often poor learners don't have a clue as to how good learners arrive at their answers and feel they can never perform as good learners do. By revealing the process, this myth can be exposed.

In addition, there is a belief that, if students do not select strategies in the service of tasks, skills, and goals, they might not easily find the most appropriate strategies and be successful language learners (Gu 2003; Oxford et al. 2004; Rubin 2005; Rubin et al. 2007). Hence, more effectiveness could be obtained if both process and product were integrated in the teaching methods (Rubin et al. 2007). Consequently, strategic competence and language-skills development can be supported by a particular learning system in which students can foster their ability to select appropriate

strategies and be more successful (Rubin et al. 2007).

Due to the scope of this study, the researchers did not perform a fine linguistic analysis of the information units used by the high-ability and low-ability groups. So, there is no evidence of how the two groups perform in terms of their use of intelligible information units in the OCT. Further research should be done to see whether both linguistic competence and communicative competence can be enhanced for better communication or not.

Students should be introduced to CSs and the kinds of strategies that can be used, as suggested by Cohen (1998), Chamot et al. (1999), Macaro (2001), and Cohen and Macaro (2007). One possible way to help low-ability students improve their oral communication may be to introduce them to the use of risk-taking strategies employed by high-ability students. Cohen et al. (1998) and Dörnyei (1995) have claimed that communicative skills can be improved by developing specific CSs and raising low-ability students' awareness of strategies for solving potential communication problems, leading to the development of their oral communication ability. These suggestions are supported by Nakatani (2005), who has stated that trained participants significantly improved their oral proficiency test scores and their success partly due to an increased awareness of CSs. More importantly, a focused and explicit program of CSs teaching and/or training is needed (Dörnyei 1995; Rubin et al. 2007) and should be designed specifically for implementation in Thai context.

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Appendix A

Strategies Used in Speaking Task Inventory (SUSTI)

Part One: Demographic Information

Please put a ✓ in front of the item you choose and write required information.

1. Gender: _____ Male _____ Female

2. Age: _____

3. GPA: _____

4. The grade received in the speaking course:

_____ A _____ B+ _____ B _____ C+ _____ C _____ D+ _____ D _____ F

5. The highest grade received in a previous English course:

_____ A _____ B+ _____ B _____ C+ _____ C _____ D+ _____ D _____ F

6. The lowest grade received in previous English course:

_____ A _____ B+ _____ B _____ C+ _____ C _____ D+ _____ D _____ F

7. Which of the following standardized tests have you taken, please write your scores?

_____ **TOEFL** _____ **CU-TEP**
 _____ **TOEIC** _____ **TU-GET**
 _____ **IELTS**
 _____ **Others**, please specify _____
 _____ **Never taken any standardized test.**

Part 2: Communication strategies use in speaking tasks

Please put a ✓ in front of the item you choose.

5 = Usually ; 4 = Mainly; 3 = Sometimes; 2 = Rarely; 1 = Never

During a communication in English,

No	Questions	5 Usually	4 Main-ly	3 Some-times	2 Rare-ly	1 Ne-ver
1.	I pay attention to the conversation flow, and avoid silence.					
2.	I try to relax when I feel anxious.					
3.	I notice myself using an expression which fits a rule that I have learned.					
4.	When I am talking, I try to make eye-contact.					
5.	I use words which are familiar to me.					

6.	I think of what I want to say in Thai, then construct the English sentence.					
7.	When the message is not clear, I ask my interlocutors for clarification directly.					
8.	If I face some language difficulties, I will leave a message unfinished.					
9.	I pay attention to the intonation and pronunciation.					
10.	I give up expressing a message if I cannot make myself understood.					
11.	I try to elicit help from my interlocutor indirectly; such as using rising intonation.					
12.	I use fillers; such as 'well, you know, okay, um, or uh' when I do not know what to say.					
13.	I try to enjoy the conversation.					
14.	I correct myself when I notice that I have made a mistake.					
15.	I describe the characteristics of the object instead of using the exact word when I am not sure.					
16.	I reduce the message and use simple expressions.					
17.	I encourage myself to use English even though this may cause mistakes.					
18.	I use gestures if I cannot express myself.					
19.	I give a good impression to the listener.					
20.	I pay attention to grammar and word-order.					
21.	I ask for repetition; such as 'Pardon?', or 'Could you say it again?', when a message is not clear to me.					
22.	I actively encourage myself to express what I want to say.					
23.	I replace the original message with another message because of feeling incapable of executing my original intent.					
24.	I use some phrases; like 'It is a good question.' or 'It is rather difficult to explain', in order to gain more time to think what I should say.					
25.	I use facial expressions if I cannot express what I want to say.					

Appendix B

The Oral Communication Test

This test consists of four tasks, comprised of warm-up, interview, description, and problem-solving. The first task begins with a simple question. There is no score given in this task. The second task is an interview about one's personal background. The subject is required to answer three questions. The next task is descriptive in which the subject has to talk in detail about a topic like family or friends. The final task is problem-solving, which requires the subject to give advice on how to solve a problem.

Task One: Warm-up task. Please respond to this question.

Hello, could you tell me your name in full, please?

⊕ Answer (15 seconds)

Now, let's move to the second task. There are three questions. You have 10 seconds to prepare for each question and 30 seconds to answer each question. When you hear this sound (🔊), it means that you have to start answering.

When did you begin studying English?

⊕ Think (10 seconds)

Now, your thinking time is up, please start answering after hearing this sound (🔊)

⊕ Answer (30 seconds)

OK. And, what do you like most about studying English?

⊕ Think (10 seconds)

Now, your thinking time is up, please start answering after hearing this sound (🔊)

⊕ Answer (30 seconds)

What is your plan to use English in the future?

⊕ Think (10 seconds)

Now, your thinking time is up, please start answering after hearing this sound (🔊)

⊕ Answer (30 seconds)

Thank you. Next is the description task. You have 30 seconds for preparation and one and a half minutes for the description after hearing this sound (🔊).

Please describe a person who is important to you.

⊕ Think (30 seconds)

Now, your thinking time is up, please start answering after hearing this sound (🔊)

⊕ Answer (1.5 min)

Thank you. Let's go on to the last task that you have to give some advice to solve the following problem. You have 45 seconds for preparation and two minutes for answering the question after hearing this sound (🔊).

Your close friend just invited you to his or her birthday party tonight. Unfortunately, you will have a final examination tomorrow morning, so you need time to prepare for the exam. You don't want to miss the party and also don't want to fail the test. What should you do?

Thank you very much. This is the end of the speaking test.

Appendix C

The Procedures for Sample Selection

