

# GROUNDING STRATEGIES IN ESL LEARNER- LEARNER INTERACTION

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## ABSTRACT

*It is considered that insufficient second language vocabulary is one of the challenges facing language learners in daily conversations. Lexical problems occur frequently in ESL face-to-face oral interactions when there is insufficient linguistic competence among second language learners. This paper examines the strategies used by eight dyads of Malaysian ESL learners and interlocutors to collaborate in oral interaction and investigates the existing collaborative behaviours the speaking interlocutors have, the types of grounding strategies they use and the amount of collaborative support they offer to the learners when lexical difficulty arises. The results showed that lexical problems in oral interaction were collaboratively solved. When a lexical difficulty arose and a communication strategy needed to be used, interlocutors resorted to different types of grounding strategies to collaborate with the learner in the successful communication of the message. This paper also highlights the possible implications of this strategic behaviour for the second language learning process.*

**Keywords:** lexical problem; grounding strategies; collaborations; second language learners; interaction

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Lexical problem due to insufficient second language vocabulary is one of the challenges facing language learners. When learners find that the lexical items or structures they want to use in order to convey their messages are not accessible in their interlanguage system, they may need to use communication strategies (CSs hereafter) instead. These are alternative means of expression to convey the content of their messages; they make use of synonyms, descriptions, native language transfers, circumlocution, a word coinage, or even gestures to compensate the unavailable target form (Poulisse, Bongaerts, & Eric, 1990; Dornyei & Kormos, 1998).

Recent research shows that Malaysian ESL learners employ CSs when the target language item is not available (Rushita & Muria, 2006; Fariza, 2008; Ting & Lau, 2008). Below is an example of the use of circumlocution which was found to be the most frequent CS use among these learners whereby the learner's intention is to communicate the meaning 'puddle':

### Example 1

- L1: it doesn't look like: : a hole, what do you call this? ... water... thing and then..have you put the water thing
- L2: no
- L1: what should I say...here?
- L2: a hole or.....
- L1: I think it's a... hole.. fill with.. water
- L2: a puddle lah!
- L1: haa..ya.
- L2: ok..... a puddle of.. water.

In example 1, the learner uses a number of CSs, such as 'water thing', 'what should I say here?', 'I think a hole fill with water', to present the meaning of the word 'puddle'. However, communication is not successfully done until the presentation is grounded. Here CSs are analyzed as elements in the interactional context and are always followed by a grounding strategy from the interlocutor. Example 1 also shows how the learner and the interlocutor collaborate in coordinating their individual actions and beliefs to attain a final agreement on the meaning.

In this study, the segment of interaction between the learner and interlocutor as they collaborate to establish a mutual agreement on the meaning 'puddle' is referred to as a CS segment. This segment is identified when a lexical problem arises and a CS needs to be used to resolve conflicts between the learner and interlocutor in the interaction.

Here the authors intend to analyse learner-learner interaction focusing on CS segments in order to answer the following questions:

- a) What types of grounding strategies do ESL interlocutors use to collaborate with the learner in the solution of the problem when there is a segment of communication strategy use?
- b) Do ESL interlocutors at different proficiency levels use the same types of grounding strategies with the same frequency?
- c) Can this collaborative problem solving activity offer an opportunity for second language vocabulary learning?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Earlier research on CSs has been generally aimed at the underlying cognitive processes in the use of a CS (Poulisse et al., 1990) and the linguistic realization of different types of CSs (Tarone, 1981). Current research has dealt with the influence on the frequency and types of

CSs used by learners who had varying levels of English language proficiency (Rababah, 2001; Rushita & Muria, 2006) and task-related factors (Smith, 2003; Rossiter, 2006) and the teachability of CSs (Maleki, 2007). Researchers from these two approaches have focused on the language produced by the learner. CSs are treated as independent and isolated units of analysis (Tarone, 2005), paying little or no attention at all to the interactional context of possible collaboration of the interlocutor in the strategic meaning process.

Yule and Tarone (1991) suggested that for a comprehensive understanding of strategic communication, attention needs to be paid to “both sides of the page” i.e. actions of both the learners and interlocutors. Roles played by these two parties on cooperative moves are found to be very useful within a communication strategy framework. Since then, scholars such as Suni (1996), Williams, Insoe and Tasker (1997), Wagner and Alan (1997) and Dobao and Martinez (2007) attempted to describe strategic communication as an interactive activity involving the learners’ and interlocutors’ coordinated use of communication and negotiation of meaning strategies.

It is on this premise that the present study was conducted to explore CSs as part of establishing a common ground. It is drawn on the collaborative model of communication, originally designed by Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs (1986) to account for the process by which a common ground is established through communication (Clark, 1992; Wilkes-Gibbs & Clark, 1992). In this model, two people cooperatively engaged in conversation for a common ground building activity. In the grounding process, people may present a proposition or other information for their partner to consider (*presentation phase*) and their partner may either accept or reject their proposition (*acceptance phase*) (Clark & Schaefer, 1987; Clark & Schaefer, 1989). In accepting a proposition, people may contribute by providing evidence of their understanding (Brennan, 1990; Brennan & Clark, 1991). For communication to succeed, the participants need to establish the mutual belief that what has been actually understood “to a criterion sufficient for current purposes” (Clark & Wilkes-Gibbs, 1986). However, in a demonstration of misunderstanding, participants contribute by making adjustments, refashions and repairs as appropriate (Clark & Schaefer, 1989) until the proposition is finally accepted.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

Participants of the study comprised 16 university students majoring in Applied Language Studies at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) in Shah Alam, Malaysia. They were paired in two different groups of four low intermediate - low intermediate dyads and four high intermediate - high intermediate learner dyads based on their national Malaysian University English Test (MUET) scores (High intermediate Band 4; Low intermediate Band 3) This group of students had been learning English for the past 15 years and can be categorized as learners who speak English infrequently in their daily lives or only when the need arose.

For the purposes of this study, a picture-story narration task (Willis & Wright, 2003) was adapted and converted into a spot-the-difference activity. Two versions of the same picture-story narration, specifically designed to elicit samples of interactional discourse were given to each member of the dyad. They were asked to describe and compare their pictures in as much detail as possible in order to identify the differences existing between the two sets of the story without looking at each other’s images.

There are a total of 32 referents in the learner's pictures which were missing from the version of the interlocutor's image. These 32 elements involve objects, actions and moods of the characters. Items of this kind would encourage the authentic use of language and generate meaningful communication (Ellis, 1999). In this study, the authors compare different dyads' behaviour as they communicate the same set of pre-selected referents.

At the end of this task, a stimulated recall interview was carried out. The audio and video recorded data were reviewed in the presence of the participants and they made comments on the linguistic difficulties they encountered and the strategies they had employed earlier in the task. Later the audio and video recorded data were transcribed and analyzed.

#### 4. DATA ANALYSIS

Initially the data had to be examined and studied in the search for lexical difficulties and CS segments. The CS segments identified were then analysed paying attention to grounding strategies. From this data analysis, the five categories of grounding devices that were established are "implicit acceptance, acknowledgement, reformulation, replacement, and avoidance and abandonment". These are the common procedures used by addressees to provide evidence of understanding of the learners' utterance (Clark & Schaefer, 1989).

##### 4.1 *Implicit Acceptance*

In understanding the learner's message, this procedure is sometimes used by the interlocutors in order to presuppose their acceptance of a speaker's previous utterance. They may either display continued actions by initiating the next contribution or allowing the speaker to go on with his turn and present a new piece of information. In example 2, Lyn uses a CS to compensate for the lack of knowledge of the English item, 'dented'. Her interlocutor offers a relevant and appropriate answer. He would not be offering this answer if he did not believe he has correctly understood Lyn's contribution. In the collaborative model of communication, this kind of interactional movement is considered an implicit acceptance.

Example 2:

- 1 LYN: ..the front bonnet.... is like... crushed
- 2 FAMI: in my picture, the car which is ....banging... is hitting something

##### 4.2 *Acknowledgement*

These are affirmative verbal or non verbal signals offered by the addressees in order to assert their acceptance of the speaker's previous presentation. Explicit confirmation of understanding from the interlocutors is always needed by the learner when lexical problems need to be solved in ESL interaction. For agreement on the meaning to be reached, the learner also needs to accept these acknowledgments as enough evidence of the addressee's satisfactory understanding of his or her intended message.

In example 3, Dian is trying to communicate the meaning of the word 'puddle'. Amir is not able to infer the meaning of the CS in turn 1 so he asks for clarification, 'where?' Dian offers two alternative strategic utterances: 'on the road' and 'in front of the bike'. Amir finally

understands and finally in the last turn explicitly asserts his understanding: 'okay'. In a collaborative model, assertive signals such as nods or saying 'uh uh,' 'yeah', 'okay' or the likes are known as acknowledgements and considered to be an explicit acceptance of the previous contribution.

Example 3:

- 1 DIAN: he's riding his bike i think by the road side. And there's a water
- 2 AMIR: where?
- 3 DIAN: on the road
- 4 AMIR: okay it's like a water
- 5 DIAN: in front of the bike, okay..ermm
- 6 AMIR: okay one more

#### **4.3 Reformulation**

Taking a more active role in the collaborative problem solving process, interlocutors occasionally demonstrate their correct understanding of the speaker's communicative intention by offering an alternative CS. In Example 4, Taufik is trying to convey the meaning for the target lexical item, 'fire hydrant' through the use of a CS by using literal translation stating 'water pump' which is not accurate. Badrul is not certain of the correct lexical item but he could only circumlocute the illustration of the object with 'T-shape it's like the letter T'. In this segment, Badrul reformulates the learner's original CS. In this segment, Badrul and Taufik have successfully understood the intended meaning but they could not come up with the accurate and appropriate lexis.

Example 4:

- 1 TAUFIK: water pump?
- 2 BADRUL : oo like the.. fire ..for the.. okay..
- 3 TAUFIK: yes
- 4 BADRUL: what do we call it huh?
- 5 TAUFIK: (laughing) I'm not sure ..but the shape is like a.. T-shape
- 6 BADRUL: what .. what shape?
- 7 TAUFIK: T-shape [it's like the letter T]
- 8 [draws the letter T in the air]
- 9 BADRUL: oo the pump the water pump for the fire fighter. okay.

#### **4.4 Replacement**

The use of CSs in ESL interaction shows that both the interlocutor and the learner have the intent of a successful communication of the message. They may collaborate to build the necessary lexical knowledge to convey this message with accuracy and precision. In this type of collaborative problem solving process, the interlocutor replaces the learner's CS with the originally intended lexical item, which the learner was having trouble with.

In example 5, the interlocutor and the learner are collaborating on solving the problem that the learner has with the word 'speed bump'. Initially, Sheila uses the grammatical coinage CS by referring to the target lexical item as "bumper". Eman requests for clarification in trying to understand Sheila's intended meaning. In the 6th turn, Eman replaces the inaccurate word 'bumper' with the correct one, 'road bump', thereby enabling Sheila to produce the accurate and the intended lexical item.

Example 5:

- 1 SHEILA: next picture ermm he was..he is still cycling but then there is a bumper ahead of him
- 2 EMAN: a bumper ahead of him?
- 3 SHEILA: aa..ya, and there's a dog barking i think
- 4 EMAN: the bumper would be the bump.. rear end of the car [or the]
- 5 *[hand going over an object motion]*
- 6 SHEILA: bumper for the road
- 7 EMAN: oh road bump
- 8 SHEILA: ya
- 9 EMAN: okay road bump
- 10 SHEILA: road bump

#### **4.5 Avoidance and Abandonment**

An unsuccessful communication of an originally intended message when linguistic difficulties arise in ESL interaction is caused by learners' avoidance and abandonment of their message. Instead of attempting an alternate means of expression to communicate the intended message when the desired target lexical item is unavailable, the learner decides to avoid it. Under these circumstances, a stimulated recall interview helps to identify these instances.

In the comments made by Asma in the stimulated recall interview, she is actually trying to communicate the meaning 'dented'. Instead, she decides to abandon her message before a mutual meaning could be established.

Example 6:

1 ASMA : and there is.. and the... car is aa.. in a bad condition.... when the car hit..

## 5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In analyzing the collected data quantitatively, each of the CS segments that was identified is classified into one of the five categories. In this study, these categories are treated as a hierarchy. Agreement on meaning is considered accomplished with an implicit signal of acceptance when there is no explicit signal of acceptance in the CS segment, that it has been accomplished by an acknowledgement when there is no reformulation or replacement, by a reformulation when there is no replacement, and by a replacement when there is no avoidance or signal of abandonment. A replacement CS segment may also include reformulations and acknowledgement signals.

Table 1 below shows the number of CS segments and the number and percentage of each type of solution adapted in high intermediate learner-learner and low intermediate learner-learner speaker dyads:

Table 1: High Intermediate Learner-Learner and Low Intermediate Learner-Learner Interaction

	High intermediate Learner-learner		Low intermediate Learner-learner	
	No.	%	No.	%
Implicit signal	14	17%	28	27%
Acknowledgement	20	25%	32	31%
Reformulation	18	22%	22	21%
Replacement	28	35%	13	12%
Avoidance & abandonment	1	1%	9	9%
Total	81		104	

This table shows that high intermediate and low intermediate speaking interlocutors resort to the same types of grounding strategies but not with the same frequency. High intermediate interlocutors provide a considerably higher number of replacements than low intermediate interlocutors (35% versus 12%). Replacements are preferred grounding strategy for high intermediate speakers, whereas low intermediate speakers seem to prefer the weaker grounding strategy i.e. acknowledgement.

Low intermediate interlocutors do not always have in their interlanguage system the necessary linguistic resources to help other same learners as desired. High intermediate interlocutors have the resources. From this data or at least in this particular context, not only do the high intermediate level interlocutors have the resources, they are also eager to use them to collaborate with the learner and help them enhance their use and knowledge of the language.

However, there is a considerable variation found within each dyad condition. In Table 2, there are differences in collaborative behaviours which could not be explained in relation to the interlocutor's command of the language. Although high intermediate level speakers were in general more collaborative than low intermediate level speakers, Badrul offered only two replacements.

In the retrospective interview, Badrul explained that he was aware that Taufik was experiencing some lexical difficulties. However, he did not attempt to correct Taufik as he did not consider it necessary. According to him, the content of the message was clear enough and there was no need to replace Taufik's words. Badrul, however, assisted Taufik more in reformulating his intended target lexical items.

Table 2: High Intermediate Learner-High Intermediate Learner Interaction

	<b>Amir &amp; Dian</b>		<b>Asma &amp; Lina</b>		<b>Taufik &amp; Badrul</b>		<b>Seha &amp; Eman</b>	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Implicit signal	3	15%	4	17%	5	29%	2	10%
Acknowledgement	7	35%	3	13%	4	24%	6	30%
Reformulation	2	10%	8	33%	6	35%	2	10%
Replacement	8	40%	9	37%	2	12%	9	45%
Avoidance & Abandonment	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	1	5%
Total	20		24		17		20	

Within low intermediate learner-learner interaction, there are individual differences in collaborative behaviours, as shown in Table 3 below. Fami offered 8 replacements as compared to Zul who did not offer any at all. In his comments, Zul explained that he had some difficulties with the vocabulary and he could not replace or reformulate Karim's words.

Table 3. Low intermediate learner-low intermediate learner interaction

CS segments	<b>Wana &amp; Zam</b>		<b>Arif &amp; L atif</b>		<b>Lyn &amp; Fami</b>		<b>Karim &amp; Zul</b>	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Implicit signal	9	38%	5	22%	3	9%	11	44%
Acknowledgement	9	38%	5	22%	11	34%	7	28%
Reformulation	3	2%	7	30%	10	31%	2	8%
Replacement	2	8%	3	13%	8	25%	0	0%
Avoidance & Abandonment	1	4%	3	13%	0	0%	5	20%
Total	24		23		32		25	

All the learners who took part in the study were students in the Applied Language Studies programme of Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam at the moment of the data collection. Their MUET scores were used to group them into the respective levels of proficiency in this study and they were all taking similar language courses and had similar previous experiences and contact with the English language. In sum, it seems that their different patterns of behaviour could not be explained in relation to their proficiency level. To account for these differences, we need to look for other related factors and different social context of interaction. Further research is also needed to analyse learners and interlocutors' interpretation of the task, their definition of the situation and their understanding of the role they have to play in it.



## 6. CONCLUSION

The results of the present study show that the occurrence of lexical problems in ESL oral interaction is collaboratively solved among Malaysian ESL learners. When there is a lexical difficulty and learners need to use a CS, interlocutors resort to different types of grounding strategies to collaborate with the learner in the successful communication of the message. Moreover, interlocutors, depending on their proficiency levels, may take quite an active role in the collaborative problem solving process in offering reformulations and replacements that provide enhanced input to the learner. Earlier studies revealed that interactional exchange of this kind may constitute an opportunity for second language learning input (Tarone, 1980; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991). It has been found that CSs play an important role in the second language acquisition process.

High intermediate and low intermediate speaking interlocutors resort to the same types of grounding strategies but with different frequency. This seems to suggest that the proficiency level of the learners and interlocutors plays an important role in strategy choice. In this particular kind of context established for the purposes of the present study, high intermediate learner-learner speaker interaction offers more opportunities for second language learning lexical input than low intermediate learner-learner interaction.

Based on the findings, it is suggested that the interlocutor's command of the language interaction with other individuals of different language background need to be explored. The results of this study are based on the analyses of a limited amount of data collected in an experimental setting which cannot be generalized to other different types of contexts. However, it sheds light on how learners establish grounding strategies and it serves to point out the need for future research paying more attention to the learner and the interlocutor to facilitate our understanding of the opportunities that collaboration and interaction may offer for second language learning.

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