Student Peer-monitored Use of Compensatory Strategies During General Education English Classes

共通教育英語授業における学生の相互にモニターされた状態での補償方略の使用

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1. Introduction and Historical Background

Increasing students' motivation and performance has always been a primary concern of language teachers. However, when trying to communicate in a second language (L2) students are often faced with linguistic problems due to their limited command of an L2. This can lead to a complete breakdown of communication, resulting in the students' reduced confidence in their ability to communicate and use an L2.

The techniques described below aimed at encouraging students to try to overcome these problems by using what are known as communication strategies (CSs). CSs have been defined as "mutual attempts of two interlocutors to agree on meaning in situations where requisite meaning structures do not seen to be shared" (Bialystok, E. and Frohlich, M., 1980:420). When faced with a breakdown in communication, students can either dispense with their original communicative goal or reach their original communicative goal via a different route by making use of the limited linguistic means they have at their disposal.

Broadly speaking, CSs can be divided into two groups: reduction strategies and compensatory strategies. When students either fail or abandon their original communicative goal, they make use of reduction strategies. However, when students employ an alternative method to reach this goal they are using compensatory strategies. This class encouraged students to make use of compensatory strategies to bridge the communication gap.

Since the mid-seventies, CSs have been the focus of increasing interest (Tarone, Cohen & Dumas, 1976; Tarone, 1977; Faerch & Kasper, 1983). Most of these early studies focused on defining CSs and developing methods of classifying them. Other studies (Bialystok & Frohlich, 1980) tried to examine the relationship between CSs use and learner characteristics such as L2 proficiency level, L1 background, and personality. Some later studies tried to establish the comprehensibility and effectiveness of students' ability to use compensatory strategies (Bialystok, 1981; Corder, 1983).

Research into the use of CSs has been further stimulated with the increase in more communicative approaches to language learning and teaching. One of the effects of this more communicative focus was that grammatical correctness was no longer considered the primary aim of most language classrooms. Another effect was the idea that sometimes grammatical accuracy had to be sacrificed in order to reach a common communicative goal. The aim of reaching a communicative goal encouraged teachers and students to realize the value of compensatory strategies. Once it was understood that it is impossible to teach students all the language they will need in any possible situation, teachers became more open to encouraging students to use compensatory strategies both inside

and outside the foreign language classroom.

Over the years, two general approaches to compensatory strategies can be seen (Yule & Tarone, 1997). A common approach to compensatory strategies focuses on the cognitive processes involved in the selection of one strategy over a different strategy. Researchers taking this approach believe that students' cognitive processes are not affected by teaching and therefore believe that it is impossible to teach communication strategies in an L2 (Bialystok, 1990; Kellerman, 1991).

However, these days many researchers and teachers take the position that training in compensatory strategies is a practical and effective pedagogical tool, one that can provide authentic communicative practice, as well as the opportunities to learn and practice a core set of English linguistic expressions (Konishi & Tarone, 2004). This is the position taken when designing and implementing training in compensatory strategies in the General Education English classes.

One of the aims of this study was to examine the relationship between students' TOEIC score and their ability to use compensatory strategies ? which compensatory strategies did they most frequently employ, which did they avoid and how successful were they in re-establishing communication in the exercises designed to include a communication gap.

2. Class Description and Class Methodology

The general education second year English classes are a required class although students are free to choose which of these classes to attend from those listed in the syllabus. Each class of 25 to 30 students met once a week for ninety minutes and CSs were taught in the second part of the course for approximately eight weeks.

Pair work and small group work played an important role in the classroom. Each week one student from each group on a rotating schedule was asked (as homework) to find a short news or magazine article that they would then read to their group members. The students reading the articles also planned how to explain difficult words or expressions and prepared explanations of them. When he/she had finished reading, he/she then read ten comprehension questions, five of which were general comprehension questions and 5 of which tested students understanding of vocabulary items (Batten, 2002). During the reading of these articles, students were encouraged to ask any questions they needed to reach a satisfactory level of comprehension and both the student reading and those listening could use any compensatory strategies (or any other techniques in their repertoire) to reach an mutual understanding. As the weeks progressed, this section of the class took up more and more time as students gained in confidence asking and answering questions.

3. Research Design

In order to examine the relationship between TOEIC scores and use of compensatory strategies data was collected from students in the general education English classes at the Faculty of Medicine and at the Faculty of

Economics. The average and range of TOEIC scores is shown in the table below.

Table 1   Information on the TOEIC Scores of Students in the Study

	No. of Students	Mean TOEIC Score	Lowest Score	Highest Score	Standard Deviation
Economics Class	24	400	260	520	66.23
Medical Class	30	570	420	850	105.01

To make sure that the compensatory strategies produced by students in both classes could be compared, both sets of students performed the same tasks. The tasks had an information gap that could be overcome with the use of compensatory strategies (See Appendices for the tasks).

Students had practiced using compensatory strategies for approximately six weeks and during this time had been exposed to and actively practiced approximations (antonyms and synonyms), inventing (word coinage), using descriptions to describe the unknown word or phase, and rephrasing.

Table 2   Skills Practiced and Examples

skill	target	example
Approximations	Do you have a **light**?	Do you have a **match**?
Inventing	I broke my **toe**.	I broke my **foot finger**.
Describing	**Banana**	A **soft, yellow fruit**.
Rephrasing	Please **don't stop**.	Please **keep going**.

During the class, students were divided into groups of three. Two students participated in the task while the third student monitored and recorded their use of compensatory strategies on a tally sheet (see Appendix 2, for Student Tally sheet). Students took turns being the monitor so that all three students had the chance to monitor, be the main speaker and listener. At the end of the class all students were asked to fill in a short questionnaire on their use of compensatory strategies and their confidence using them.

4. Results and Discussion

Students were asked to do this pair-work/monitoring activity in the final week of the course. The data was then collected from each group and to date, approximately half the tally sheets have been analyzed from both classes. Overall, medical students were more successful in using compensatory strategies. They used a wider variety of strategies, including non-verbal strategies, i.e. gestures, and sometimes used more than one strategy.

The students in the economics class used a smaller variety of strategies and overall found it more difficult to explain the missing words successfully. However, it should be noted that the majority of students did manage to reach a mutual level of comprehension with their partner. Students were asked to try to explain the missing word at least three times before giving up and moving on to the next point. The data analyzed has been divided by

activity, A, B, or C. The results for each set (A, B, and C) for each class were then analyzed.

4.1 Pair A

   Pair A needed to explain the following words: *enormous, humans, chilly, clear, powerful, tides, flag and golf ball*. The results from the medical class are tabulated below.

<div align="center">

Table 3   Medical Class (Pair A)

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	approximation	inventing	description	rephrasing
enormous	*5 (Y)			
humans	5 (Y)			
chilly +		1 (Y)	3 (Y)	1 (Y)
clear	1 (N)			4 (Y)
powerful	5 (Y)			
tides			***5 (4Y)	
flag +		**1 (N)	4 (Y)	
golf ball			5 (Y)	

   Key: * 5(Y) indicates that five (5) pairs used approximation to explain the word *enormous* and all five were successful (Y); **1(N) indicates that one pair tried inventing, but were unsuccessful (N); *** 5(4Y) indicates that five pairs attempted this strategy but only four were successful in conveying the meaning. (Y = successful, N = not successful). + Indicates that gestures were used in this task.

For the word 'chilly' the observers noted that all pairs used a gesture when explaining this word and also two pairs drew a rectangle in the air when describing the word 'flag'.

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Table 4   Economics Class (Pair A)

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	approximation	inventing	description	rephrasing
enormous	5 (2Y)			
humans	5 (Y)			
Cchilly+		1 (Y)	4 (1Y)	
clear				5 (3Y)
powerful	5 (Y)			
tides			5 (1Y)	
flag +			5 (3Y)	
golf ball			5 (Y)	

In the medical class of the 40 times these 8 words were explained, only two attempts ended in failure (95% of attempts were successful). Economics students were also largely successful with 36 of their attempts to use compensatory strategies being successful. Students in Pair A in both classes used all four skills but descriptions were used in almost half the cases 17 times or 42% by the medical students and 19 times by economics students (47%). The second most frequently used skill was approximations which was used 16 times (40%) by medical students and 15 times (37%) by economics students. Inventing a new word or phrase was the least frequently

used skill by students in both classes. The word 'tides' proved to be the most difficult word for both groups to explain － perhaps this word unfamiliar to most students in both classes.

4.2 Pair B

Pair B needed to explain the following words: desert, tall, rain, walk, sharp needles, plants, and dry. The results from both classes are tabulated below

Table 5   Medical Class (Pair B)

	approximation	inventing	description	rephrase
desert			5 (Y)	
tall	5 (Y)			
rain		2 (Y)	3 (Y)	
walk	5 (Y)			
sharp needles			5 (4Y)	
plants	3 (Y)		2 (Y)	
dry			2 (Y)	3 (Y)

Table 6   Economics Class (Pair B)

	approximation	inventing	description	rephrase
desert			5 (2Y)	
tall	2Y			3 (2Y)
rain			5(3Y)	
walk	5Y			
sharp needles			5 (0Y)	
plants	5 (3Y)			
dry				5 (3Y)

As with the first passage, approximations and describing were the two most popular skills with students in the medical class. They were successful in all but one case using both of these skills. Rephrasing was used (always successfully) by only 3 pairs and only to explain the word 'dry'. A similar situation is seen with 'inventing'. This skill was only used by 2 pairs to describe the word 'rain'.

With the economics students, none attempted to use 'inventing'. Describing and approximations were the most commonly used compensatory strategies but rephrasing was also used by all 5 pairs to describe 'dry' and by 2 pairs to describe 'tall'.

Overall the medical students were successful in 97% of their attempts to use compensatory strategies, but the economics students were only successful in 50% of their efforts to use compensatory strategies. No pair in the economics class successfully managed to explain 'sharp needles' to their partner. They may not have known the word 'needles' which may have made it difficult for them to guess and explain the word.

4.3 Pair C

Pair C needed to explain the following words: *beneath, man-made, whale, scientists, explore, oceans, war, and ships*.

This passage proved to be the most challenging for students in both classes. In particular, the words, 'beneath', 'man-made', and 'explore' caused them the greatest problems with very few students successfully explaining these two words to their partners. However, unlike some of the vocabulary items in the previous two passages, none of the words in this passage were unfamiliar to the students. The data from both classes is tabulated below.

Table 7   Medical Class (Pair C)

	approximation	inventing	description	rephrase
beneath	5 (2Y)			2Y*
man-made	2 (1Y)		3 (2Y)	1Y
whale			5Y	
scientists			5Y	
explore	4 (2Y)		1N	
oceans	5Y			
war			5Y	
ships	5Y			

*Of those who were unsuccessful in the approximation for *beneath*, two pairs were successful using rephrasing in communicating the word.

Two pairs used both approximations and rephrasing to elicit the word 'beneath'. Both were successful with rephrasing but not approximations.

Table 8   Economics Class (Pair C)

	approximation	inventing	description	rephrase
beneath	5 (0Y)			
man-made			5 (1Y)	
whale			3 (Y)	
scientists			3 (Y)	
explore	5 (1Y)		1N	
oceans	4Y*			
war			4Y*	
ships	5Y			

* Not all the groups attempted to elicit this word.

Medical students were successful in 85% of their attempts to use compensatory strategies while economics students were successful in only 52% of their efforts to use compensatory strategies.

Table 9 Successful Use of Compensatory Strategies per Pair

	Economics	Medical
Pair A	90%	98%
Pair B	50%	97%
Pair C	52%	90%

The success rate of medical students remained constant in the first two exercises. Students were familiar with all the vocabulary in all exercises so the drop to 90% in Pair C is not explained by unfamiliar vocabulary.

However, Pair A from the economics class was also very successful, but Pairs B and C only achieved an approximate 50% success rate. There could be a number of reasons for this. First, since both the medical students were also less successful with Pair C, fatigue could have been an issue. This style of exercise requires intense concentration whether students are reading/explaining, listening or monitoring. In addition, the first time the students did the exercise, it was new and interesting for them. The economics students took a long time to complete this exercise ― approximately 50 minutes. The exercise may have become less interesting and stimulating as the class progressed. This, combined with the intense concentration, may have contributed to the lower scores in Pairs B and C. The medical students finished the exercise within 30 minutes so fatigue and boredom may not have been such an issue for them.

Students also said that it was difficult to explain 'beneath'. Many students tried to describe it by using the synonyms 'under' and 'below'. While students all knew the word 'beneath', it may not be as frequently seen in their texts as 'under' and 'below' and may therefore not really be part of their active vocabulary.

Table 10 Most Commonly Used Compensatory Strategies

	approximation	inventing	description	rephrase
Medical	50	4	53	11
Economics	46	1	31	14
Totals	96	5	84	23

From the three exercises we can see that approximations, and descriptions were the most commonly used compensatory strategies. What was interesting is that medical students used 'description' considerably more often than the economics students. This may be a refection of their better command of English and/or a willingness to make sentences needed in describing. Economics students depended considerably more on rephrasing, usually changing to the negative/positive with synonym/antonym. For example, 'enormous' was explained by some students as 'not small', and 'tall' was explained as 'not short'. However, although economics students used rephrasing more frequently than medical students, they failed to use any rephrasing strategies in the Pair C task. This may have been because the vocabulary items in Pair C did not lend themselves so easily to rephrasing. Finally, as this data was collected by students monitoring their peers in a noisy class environment, there may be errors in their tally scores due to their unfamiliarity with the task, the noise and distractions of the classroom, and finally an unwillingness to report that their peers failed to successfully negotiate for meaning.

In the mini-survey given to all students at the end of the class, students were asked to evaluate their own

confidence in the skills practiced in class. Students from both faculties were most confident asking questions about meaning and spelling. They were also very confident asking the speaker to speak more slowly or more loudly, and using approximations. A majority of the students from both faculties (Medical 85%, Economics 73%) reported that they felt 'very confident' asking these kinds of questions or using approximations. The results of the questionnaire showed similar results as collected from the previous class (McCrohan & Batten, 2010).

Students were least confident when 'checking that they had understood" or 'inventing'. Only 5% of medical students felt very confident in these areas, and only about 1% of economics students. Most students rated their abilities in these skills as 'a little more confident' than at the start of the course. One of the medical students commented that he felt 'silly' inventing a new word or phrase, but realized that this was a skill that could help if he could not describe or find a synonym. This would suggest that students need more training in this technique, especially when they are unable to find a synonym.

5. Conclusion

Overall it can be shown from this data that communication strategy training was an effective tool for helping students bridge communication gaps. The majority of students were able to complete the pair-work exercise successfully using the skills and techniques that they had learned in class. By learning different techniques and a set of core expressions, students became more confident in their ability to communicate, even in situations where they did not fully understand all the language, or when the person they were communicating with did not understand them.

The medical students with their significantly higher TOEIC scores were more successful, used a wider variety of compensatory strategies, and felt more confident using them. They also were willing to use non-verbal clues. This has also been observed in other studies. Nakano (1996) noted that the proficiency of the language learner determines the number and variety of strategies used, how the strategies were applied to the communication problem and the actual appropriateness of the strategies themselves.

However, this is not to say that the economics group were unsuccessful, rather, just less successful. However, judging from their success rates and confidence levels in using these techniques, it appears that they could benefit from a longer, more intensive course. For the medical students, it seems that the current course length meets their needs adequately.

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Appendix 1

Instructions: Read the paragraph to your partner. Do not use the words in **bold**. Use the strategies studied in class instead to help your partner understand. Your partner will try to guess the word or if necessary, ask for more information.

Paragraph A (Student Reading)

There is an enormous place that only few **humans** have visited and nobody has been there for a long time. The place is very **chilly** and no living things grow there. You can look at it almost every night if the weather is **clear**. Although this place is far away, it is very **powerful**. It controls the **tides** in the oceans and the behavior of many animals. If you visit this place, you will be able to find the following things: an American **flag**, a **golf ball** and rocks. What is it?

Paragraph A (Student Listening)

There is an ………. place that only few ………. have visited and nobody has been there for a long time. The place is very ………. and no living things grow there. You can look at it almost every night if the weather is………. . Although this place is far away, it is very………. . It controls the ………. in the oceans and the behavior of many animals. If you visit this place, you will be able to find the following things: an American………., a ………. and rocks.

Paragraph B (Student Reading)

This is something that you can find in the desert. It can be very **tall** or quite short. It can live for many months without rain or water, but it cannot **walk**. You will find very **sharp needles** converting this thing. It is one of the only **plants** that can live in such a **dry** place. What is it?

Paragraph B (Student Listening)

This is something that you can find in the ……. It can be very ….. or quite short. It can live for many months without ….. or water, but it cannot….. . You will find very ….. converting this thing. It is one of the only ….. that can live in such a ….. place.

Paragraph C (Student Reading)

This is something that travels **beneath** the sea. It is man-made and usually much larger than any or even a **whale**. It is used by **scientists** to **explore** deep under the **oceans** or sometimes for **war**. If you do not like extremely small spaces or living very close to other people, you should not travel on one of these. Many Hollywood films have been made about these underwater **ships**. What is it?

Paragraph C (Student Listening)

This is something that travels ….. the sea. It is ….. And usually much larger than any or even a ….. . It is used by ….. to ….. Deep under the ….. or sometimes for ….. . If you do not like ….. small spaces or living very close to other people, you should not travel on one of these. Many Hollywood films have been made about these underwater ….. .

Appendix 2.

Tally sheet used to observe students' use of Compensatory Strategies.

Group……..   Pair A, B, C   Student monitoring…………….

Instructions

a. Please circle pair A, B, or C, above. Fill in your name and the group number.

b. Listen to the students doing the pairwork exercise. Every time you hear one of them approximate, invent a word, rephrase or describe a word, put a tick in the column. Also write y (yes) or n (no) to show whether the students were successful in reaching an understanding.

	rephrase	approximations	invent	describe
Successful	y/n	y/n	y/n	y/n
Word 1				
Word 2				
Word 3				
Word 4				
Word 5				
Word 6				
Word 7				
Word 8				