Oral Communication Strategies and Enhancers in Content-Based Academic English Discussion
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ABSTRACT

Nakatani (2010) identified a variety of oral communication strategies and enhancers (OCS) for improved communicative performance in English language learning, and found that OCS usage affords several benefits in interaction. Following suit, the Rikkyo University Center for English Discussion Class incorporated a new set of "communication skills" in an effort to enhance the quality of communicative interaction in group discussion. Thus, this study looked at transcriptions of interaction in regular lessons and described communication skill usage in relation to OCS principles. Findings offer insight into future classroom approaches to facilitating OCS use in group-based academic English discussion.

INTRODUCTION

Guided by the question on how to improve the quality of communicative interaction in a second language, Nakatani (2010) looked to communication strategies, traditionally defined as "any attempt by learners to overcome their difficulties and generate the TL [target language] to achieve communication goals in actual interaction" (p. 118). Included are achievement strategies, reaching a goal through alternative means, and reduction strategies, when learners avoid solving communication breakdowns (Nakatani, 2010). Also included are the "Three Cs" of negotiated interaction: confirmation checks ("Do you mean it's not good?"), clarification checks ("Could you repeat that?"), and comprehension checks ("Do you understand?"). The term oral communication strategies and enhancers (OCS) is coined in order to be distinguished from a psycholinguistic view of communication strategies, and to emphasize the goal of focusing on how learners use these strategies to resolve communication breakdown. In addition to negotiation, OCS also includes enhancers, defined as "strategies for developing and maintaining interaction" (Nakatani 2010, p. 119). These include time gaining strategies ("Let me see…"), active response ("I see. Good idea."), and shadowing (repeating a speaker's utterance).

Thus, Nakatani (2010) looked at low and high proficiency learners, observed OCS frequency in tasks, and measured performance in tests. It was concluded that high-proficiency learners use OCS more frequently, and that higher frequency may correlate to better performance, while low-frequency learners used OCS less frequently and scored lower on tests. Subsequent study on the matter reflect the higher OCS usage with high-proficiency learners (Metcalfe & Noom-Ura, 2013; Pawlak, 2015; Kongsom, 2015; Nurdini, 2017; Almaktary, 2018). Concerning interactional dynamics, Burch (2014) observed through conversational analysis that learners use multiple strategies at the same time. Most relevant to the context of the present study, Benson, Fischer, Geluso, and Von Joo (2013) looked at the context of small-group discussion and observed that an experimental group that was taught OCS strategies used them more frequently than the control group. Influenced by such findings, Rikkyo University's Center for English Discussion Class introduced a new set of "communication skills" to the curriculum to better reflect strategic competence (Schaefer, 2018). These communication skills reflect the Three Cs and enhancers, but are divided into speaker/listener roles (Appendix A). The communication skills differ from traditional target language in the sense that the aim is to afford the production of ideas in discussion rather than the learning of the items themselves (Hurling, 2012). Therefore, of most interest to this study is the correlation between proficiency level and OCS frequency, and how learners use OCS strategies in small-group discussion. In order to observe this effect in the EDC context, two

questions guide data analysis:
1. In light of OCS principles, how do high-proficiency and low-proficiency learners use the new communication skills in content-based English discussion?
2. What insights might this give to future pedagogical approaches with respect to improving the quality of negotiation and enhancing communicative interaction?

DISCUSSION

Participants included 15 Japanese university first-year students in two separate classes, one Level III (low proficiency) and one Level II (high proficiency), engaged in group discussion (typically two groups of three or four). In 10 lessons, I audio-recorded interaction in group discussion tasks. During the task, I noted instances of OCS use and later transcribed pertinent episodes. Communication skills were introduced in the first lesson and periodic feedback on usage was offered in subsequent lessons. I facilitated skill usage in these classes in the same way as I did in classes not participating in the study.

To answer the first question ("How do high-proficiency and low-proficiency learners use the new communication skills in content-based English discussion?"), I first look at OCS type and respective frequencies in high and low proficiency classes, and I look at relevant episodes of strategy usage and attempt to describe it in terms of OCS principles. In all, there were a total of 223 OCS episodes in 255 minutes of discussion (Low 122 minutes, High 130 minutes). In Table 1 below, each OCS type is listed with total frequency, measured in instances per minute, and total count in parentheses. The high proficiency is represented as "High," and the low proficiency class as "Low." As for the strategies for negotiated interaction, the most striking feature is the use of comprehension checks, a total of 143 instances at .56 frequency. Low relied on this strategy the most at a .89 frequency. Clarification requests were second most common with a total of 27 instances at .10 frequency. In this case, High relied on it the most at .18 frequency, while Low was at a minimal .11 frequency. Both appeals for help and asking for repetition occurred relatively infrequently in both groups. Restructuring and modified output also occurred at low frequency in both groups. Concerning reduction strategies, L1 reliance occurred 30 times, with Low holding the highest frequency at .33. However, it is important to note that I allowed the L1 during requests for lexical items ("How do you say [L1 item] in English?"). Interlanguage reduction strategies were not tallied due to time constraint, and message abandonment did not occur. Communication enhancers (active responses, echoes, time-gaining strategies) were not tallied due to very high frequency and time constraints.

Table 1. OCS Frequencies in English Discussion Class

OCS Types	Total	High	Low
Negotiation Strategies			
Comprehensions Checks	.56 (143)	.26 (34)	.89 (109)
Clarification Requests	.10 (27)	.18 (22)	.03 (5)
Appeals for Help	.02 (5)	.01 (2)	.02 (3)
Asking for Repetition	.03 (9)	.03 (4)	.03 (5)
Restructuring	.01 (3)	.02 (3)	0
Modified Output	.02 (6)	.02 (3)	.02 (3)

Reduction Strategies

L1 Reliance	.11 (30)	.05 (7)	.18 (23)
Message Abandonment	-	-	-

As for the second question ("What insights might this give to my approach to future lessons with respect to improving the quality of negotiation and enhancing communicative interaction?"), I look at select transcripts for elucidation, and which assist explanation of the Table 1 results. Interlocutors appear as Speakers and Listeners, numbered by the order they appear in the transcript (e.g. Listener 1, Listener 2).

Extract 1 below includes a typical comprehension check episode, the skills which learners relied on far more than any other. Here, the comprehension check in Line 1 is followed by three confirmations and a reaffirmation by the speaker in Line 5:

Extract 1. *Comprehension Checks, Confirmations, and Reaffirmations*
Line 1: Speaker: …so I think companies should more support
        to working mothers. Do you understand?   *comprehension check*
Line 2: Listener: Yes.   *confirmation*
Line 3: Lister 2: Yes. I understand.   *confirmation*
Line 4: Lister 3: Yes.   *confirmation*
Line 5: Speaker: Ok. What does everyone think of my idea?   *reaffirmation*

One explanation for high frequency is the clear context in which the skill can be used – at the end of a speaking turn where it functions not only as a negotiation signal but also as a turn-taking request, and at times to indicate that an idea was complete. This often made for robotic usage of the strategy far removed from its intended function, seen below when all three listeners respond using roughly the same phrases. These classes may have benefited from more awareness of the difference between comprehension checks and organizational turn-taking skills, and how a variety of confirmations can enhance the quality of interaction. Also, what is unique to group discussion context, as opposed to dyads, is that the speaker may have to wait for more than one member to confirm understanding before reaffirming and continuing the flow. This puts more importance on the use of confirmations in group discussions, where learners may benefit from increased awareness of the function of confirming understanding for the purpose of enhancing interaction.

Another common strategy, confirmation checks, were sometimes followed by modified output, as demonstrated in Extract 2. Active responses from multiple listeners further aided the process of modification, and confirmation is used to indicate an end to negotiation:

Extract 2. *Confirmation Checks, Modified Output, and Active Responses*
Line 1: Speaker: …so what do you think of my idea?
Line 2: Listener 1: uh…so do you mean the number of men who have   *confirmation check*
        a good idea is more big?
Line 3: Speaker: Well, I mean, exactly we should choose
        politicians by their ideas so if female…   *modified output*
Line 4: Listener 1: [yes]   *active response*
Line 5: Speaker: …[the person] who is entering the elections suggest
        a good idea…
Line 6: Listener 2: [yes]   *active response*

Line 7: Speaker: …[should be] the one chosen.
Line 8: Listener 1: Ah. Ok, thank you.   *confirmation*

While not all confirmation check episodes afforded modified output (often the speakers simply confirmed the confirmation check with "yes"), the episode above exemplifies the usefulness of these strategies in group contexts. It appears that the listeners obtain a greater understanding of the speaker's utterance thanks to modified output via a well-marked "paraphrasing yourself" phrase, and especially given two active responses and a clear confirmation. Additionally, modified output need not be the phrases offered in course resources. Students were observed to use a variety of markers, such as "for example" and "well," and instances with no clear markers were frequent. Group discussion contexts can benefit from the awareness that different OCS types can (and perhaps should) be used together for more successful negotiation, and that a variety of markers can fulfill their functions. This is in alignment with the Burch (2014) findings.

　　　Similar to modified output, restructuring was sometimes observed in the data, and often occurred alongside time-gaining strategies and active responses. In Extract 3 below, the speaker indicates difficulty with "uh… yea so" in Line 1, which in this context functions as a time gaining strategy. Listener 1 offers active response in Line 2, and the speaker continues with modified output in Line 3. Listener 2 offers an active response in Line 4, and the speaker completes modified output in Line 5. This is finally confirmed by Listener 2 in Line 6:

Extract 3. *Restructuring and Time Gaining Strategy*
Line 1: Speaker: …criminals should be judged by their crime.
　　　　　　　 uh… yea so, what I'm trying to say is…   *time gaining*
Line 2: Listener 1: [yes   *active response*
Line 3: Speaker: if some]…someone killed someone, they should
　　　　　　　 get the death penalty, but if someone just, like, steal
　　　　　　　 something…   *modified output*
Line 4: Listener 2: [ok   *active response*
Line 5: Speaker: …they] should go to jail.
Line 6: Listener 2: Ah yeah. That's right.   *confirmation*

As demonstrated, speakers in group discussion, with the helpful nudge of active responses, may use restructuring and time gaining strategies to self-assist. As restructuring occurred rather infrequently, future approaches can raise awareness of the benefits restructuring can have, especially if a speaker interacts with listeners who do not offer assistance. Another observation of time gaining strategies is that learners often used L1 (Japanese) items, such as *edo* (エード) or ano (あの). Raising awareness on common time-gaining expressions in English and their functions is well worth the effort in future approaches to teaching academic discussion.

　　　While infrequent, clarification requests also afforded modified output. Below, Extract 4 showcases the unmarked clarification request of the lexical item "elderly" in Line 2, to which the speaker modifies the lexical item with an explanation in Line 3. Lister 2 confirms the accuracy of the explanation in Line 4, and Listener 1 confirms understanding in Line 5:

Extract 4. *Clarification Requests and Modified Output*
Line 1: Speaker: In my opinion it is important to help the elderly,
　　　　　　　 For example [we can..
Line 2: Listener: elderly?]   *clarification request*
Line 3: Speaker: Ah… so old people. My grandma grandpa   *modified output*

Line 4: Listener 2: yea.   *confirmation*
Line 5: Listener 1: Ah ok.   *confirmation*

      Appeals for help and asking for repetition function similarly to clarification requests, as they both afford modified output. In Extract 5, although Listener 1 confirms understanding in Line 2, Listener 2 indicates misunderstanding with both an appeal for help ("sorry") and asking for repetition ("one more") in Line 3. The speaker then modifies output in Line 4 and Listener 2 provides a confirmation in Line 5:

Extract 5. *Appeal for help, asking for repetition and modified output*
Line 1: Speaker: Is that clear?   *comprehension check*
Line 2: Listener 1: Yes.   *confirmation*
Line 3: Listener 2: Sorry. Ah… One more.   *appeal for help*,
                                                                            asking for repetition

Line 4: Speaker: Ok. Ah… If women has the same job as men,
                    and the same skill, and things, I think they
                    should have the same salary.   *modified output*
Line 5: Listener 2: Ah, yeah yeah yeah. Ok.   *confirmation*

Again, interlocutors use a variety of skills to resolve communication breakdown, and ultimately avoid message abandonment. Two reasons can explain why abandonment was not observed in the study. First, a small sample size decreases the chance of such an episode to occur. Second and most importantly, learners had already finished 14 weeks of discussion class in their first semester, while this study's data collection commenced late in the second semester. It is likely that ample practice time and formal feedback on the course's communication skills helped to reduce the likelihood of abandonment.
      Another vital finding in alignment with OCS literature was the high frequency of Line 1 reliance, especially with the low proficiency class. In Extract 6 below, the speaker requests the English equivalent of a Japanese item in Line 1, to which Listener 2 provides assistance in Line 2. The speaker checks confirmation in Line 3, followed by confirmation in L4, and the speaker modifies output with the new item in Line 5:

Extract 6: *L1 Reliance in Request for Lexical Item*
Line 1: Speaker: …so elderly people…how do you say
                    okane-sukunai (お金少ない: insufficient money)   *L1 reliance*
Line 2: Listener 1: ah… don't have enough money   *response (assistance)*
Lien 3: Speaker: don't have enough?
                                                                            confirmation check
Line 4: Listener 1: yea.

                                                                            confirmation
Line 5: Speaker 1: ok. Elderly people…don't have enough money.   *confirmation,*
                                                                            modified output

Requests for lexical items using the L1 make up the majority of L1 reliance episodes. This can be explained by how I allowed this to occur as long as the speaker attempted to use the new English item, a practice common in the program. While most OCS literature might regard this as a reduction strategy, it is important for future approaches to distinguish effective and ineffective use of L1 for L2 development for Japanese learners in the academic English discussion context.

CONCLUSION

With reference to Nakatani's (2010) OCS principles, Japanese learners were taught "communication skills" and were observed in group academic discussion with the goal of describing usage in terms of OCS and making inferences on possible adjustment to future classroom approaches to group academic English discussion. Quantitative findings reveal possible overreliance on comprehension checks for both High and Low groups, and clarification requests occurred more frequently in the High group. For all other strategies tallied, no major difference in frequency was observed. Other items may need further assistance from instructors to increase frequency in both groups, such as appeals for help and asking for repetition. Qualitative analysis indicates that several strategies such as clarification requests and active responses seem to support negotiation in group discussion. As for communication enhancers, active responses and time-gaining mechanisms seem to enhance the quality of group discussion in ways similarly observed in OCS literature. L1 reliance occurred most in the low proficiency class, also in agreement with the literature, suggesting more assistance is needed for this learner profile. Last, a close look at the transcripts reveals that learners use multiple strategies together to enhance both negotiation and the quality of interaction. Raising awareness of this effect benefits the quality of group discussion, especially in negotiation, such as encouraging modified output following a confirmation check.

This study did not tally active responses, echoes, and time-gaining strategies, so future study in the group discussion context can benefit from a quantitative analysis of these types. Also not included was a post-test feature, which if used could more accurately reflect results found in studies similar to OCS literature. Likewise, an observation of usage over a longer period of time, such as over one academic year, could elucidate why abandonment was not observed in this study, and add further credence to the value of OCS in reducing abandonment and enhancing the quality of communicative interaction.

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APPENDIX – Communication Skills in English Discussion Class

Nakatani (2010) terminology in parenthesis

Active Listening (active response**)**	**Checking Understanding (**negotiation signals)	
I see. Okay.	(appeal for help)	(comprehension checks)
Right. Sure. Uh-huh. Really?	Sorry, I don't understand.	Do you understand?
	Sorry, I don't follow you.	Do you follow me?
		Do you see what I mean?

Paraphrasing Others (confirmation checks)	**Paraphrasing Yourself** (modified output/restructuring)
Do you mean…?	I mean…
So, are you saying…?	What I'm saying is…
So, in other words,…?	In other words,…

Asking for Explanation (clarification requests)	**Asking for Repetition** (same)
Can you explain?	Could you repeat that, please?
What does {X} mean?	Could you say that again, please?