

## Japanese Middle School Students in Speaking Tests: Use of The L1 and Communication Strategies

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### Abstract

L2 learners, especially beginners, should be taught to use communication strategies (CSs) to keep conversations going. This study looks at the use of CSs by Japanese middle school students in speaking tests. Previous studies on Japanese middle school students's use of CSs were limited to ones that focused on interactions between a Japanese middle school student and a native English teaching assistant who supposedly did not speak Japanese. This study tries to reveal how Japanese middle school students use CSs in interactions in English with a Japanese native speaker (a Japanese teacher of English or another Japanese middle school student). Analysis of their CS use in three speaking tests suggests that the Japanese middle school students are most concerned with accuracy of grammar. This implies that more focus on meaning should be taken into consideration in order to improve classroom instruction.

### Introduction

For many decades in Japan, grammar and vocabulary drills have been the main activities in English classrooms. However, studies and anecdotes have repeatedly shown that the knowledge of syntax is not enough to use English for communication. To be proficient English users, learners need to develop communicative competence. In recent years, communicative language teaching (CLT) has gained popularity in Japan. In this approach, learning to communicate through communication is the idea. Even when L2 learners' language is still limited, they should be encouraged to communicate with each other, since that is how they develop their L2. In the process, they need some means to overcome the limitation of their current language skills so that they can keep communicating in L2. These means are called communication strategies (CSs). This paper aims to look at how CSs are used by Japanese junior high school students in talking to each other and with their Japanese teacher of English. First, some definitions of communicative competence and CSs will be reviewed. Then, I will describe the design of a classroom-level research project and report some findings through examples. Finally, some implications

for teaching as well as the limitations of the study and further research questions will be discussed.

### Communicative Competence

Different scholars have given different definitions of communicative competence. Canale and Swain (1980) suggested three types of competence: grammatical competence, strategic competence, and sociolinguistic competence. Savignon (1983) developed a diagram of communicative competence including grammatical competence, strategic competence, sociolinguistic competence, and discourse competence. According to her diagram, strategic competence plays a bigger role when learner's language is limited. This paper focuses on beginning learners' use of communication strategies.

### *Communication Strategies*

Strategic competence includes two types of strategies: *language learning strategies* and *strategies of language use* (Trane, 1980). The latter refers to what Selinker named communication strategies in 1972 (as cited in Hirano, 1987). To this day, various definitions of CSs have been presented by different researchers.



Tarone (1980) defined CSs as “a mutual attempt of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in situations where requisite meaning structures do not seem to be shared” (p. 419). Færch and Kasper’s referred to CSs as “potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal” (as cited in Hirano, 1987). Later, Celce-Murcia, Dornyei, and Thurrell (1995) redefined CSs. They saw CSs as “means of keeping the communication channel open in the face of communication difficulties, and playing for time to think and make (alternative) speech

plans” (p. 26). In the next section, I will describe the components of CSs.

#### *Components of Strategies Competence*

There has not been a single agreed list of communicative strategies in the field. Celce-Murcia, Dornyei, and Thurrell (1995) provided an exhaustive collection of communication strategies with many examples (Table 1). Since their list is the most detailed, I will base my analysis on their classification of CSs.

Table 1

#### *Suggested Components of Strategic Competence*

##### AVOIDANCE OR REDUCTION STRATEGIES

- Message replacement
- Topic avoidance
- Message abandonment

##### ACHIEVEMENT OR COMPENSATORY STRATEGIES

- Circumlocution (e.g., The thing you open bottles with for corkscrew)
- Approximation (e.g., *fish for carp*)
- All-purpose words (e.g., thingy, thingamajig)
- Non-linguistic means (mime, pointing, gestures, drawing pictures)
- Restructuring (e.g., the bus was very... there were a lot of people on it)
- Word-coinage (e.g., vegetariannist)
- Literal translation from L1
- Foreignizing (e.g., L1 word with L2 pronunciation)
- Code switching to L1 or L3
- Retrieval (e.g., bro... bron... bronze)

##### STALLING OR TIME-GAINING STRATEGIES

- Fillers, hesitation devices and gambits (e.g., *well, actually..., while was i...?*)
- Self and other-repetition

##### SELF-MONITORING STRATEGIES

- Self-initiated repair (e.g., *I mean...*)
- Self-rephrasing (over-elaboration) (e.g., This is for students... pupils... when you're at school...)

##### INTERACTIONAL STRATEGIES

- Appeals for help
  - direct (e.g., What do you call...?)
  - indirect (e.g., I don't know the word in English... or puzzled expression)
- Meaning negotiation strategies
- Indicators of non/mis-understanding
  - requests
    - repetition requests (e.g., *Pardon? or Could you say that again please?*)

- clarification requests (*e.g., What do you mean by...?*)
  - confirmation requests (*e.g., Did you say...?*)
  - expressions of non-understanding
    - verbal (*e.g., Sorry, I'm not sure I understand...*)
    - non-verbal (raised eyebrows, blank look)
  - interpretive summary (*e.g., You mean...?/So what you're saying is...?*)
  - Responses
    - repetition, rephrasing, expansion, reduction, confirmation, rejection, repair
  - Comprehension checks
    - whether the interlocutor can follow you (*e.g., Am I making sense?*)
    - whether what you said was correct or grammatical (*e.g., Can I/you say that?*)
    - whether the interlocutor is listening (*e.g., on the phone: Are you still there?*)
    - whether the interlocutor can hear you
- (Celce-Murcia, Dornyei, and Thurrell, 1995, p. 28)

## Research Questions

Although there have been some studies (Takahara, 2000; Inuzuka, 2001) that investigated the communication strategies use by Japanese junior high school students, these were usually limited to interactions between a student and a native English assistant teacher. This paper aims to reveal how a group of Japanese junior high school students used communication strategies in interaction with their Japanese classmates and a Japanese teacher of English during speaking tests.

## Methodology

### *Participants*

The participants were nineteen students in Aichi, Japan. Five of them were male and fourteen of them were female. All of them were Japanese native speakers. They were twelve or thirteen years old. They were all classmates in the same junior high school. Although they were all beginners, their levels were slightly different depending on their former English education.

### *Data*

The data include 39 video clips from three speaking tests. Each clip is about two minutes. In total, eighty minutes of clips were reviewed and transcribed for detailed analysis. In the transcription, three dots are used for a pause, a hyphen is used for a cut-off, and a question

mark is used for a rising tone. Japanese words are translated into English in the line beneath the original, in italics. The participants' pronunciation of English words is transcribed closely to capture their unique language production.

### *Data Collection*

The data were collected over a period of four months through three speaking tests in October, 2010, December, 2010, and February, 2011. In the first speaking test, the participants introduced their families to their Japanese teacher of English. Prior to the test, they prepared a photo or drawing of their real or imaginary families and practiced with their classmates a few times. During the test, they also answered questions from the teacher. The second test was done in student-student pairs. The pairs were randomly assigned right before the test began. Then, each participant picked up three cards that showed different activities. Their task was to ask each other if they could perform the given activities. If they finished asking all the questions, they were encouraged to talk about anything up to two minutes. The third test was also done in student-student pairs, and the pairs were formed in the same manner as the second test. The participants introduced their real or imaginary friends to each other, showing a photo or drawing.

Their task included asking a few questions about each other's friend.

## Findings

Here I would like to describe the CSs used by the participants in accordance with the classification of CSs in Table 1.

### *Avoidance Or Reduction Strategies*

No examples of avoidance or reduction strategies were recorded in my data. According to Bialystok (as cited in Takehara, 2000), message abandonment happens when learners run into a topic that is so difficult that they cannot go on. Since the participants had had chances to talk about the same topics prior to the test dates, many of them did not have such a difficulty in dealing with the topics. However, some of them could do nothing but remain silent for a while when they were asked some questions provided the teacher in the first speaking test. In the testing situation with the teacher, it was almost impossible for

the students to abandon topics suggested from her. The fact that the teacher is the authority, especially in test situations, rules out this strategy. Student-student interactions would be more relevant for the development of this particular strategy.

### *Achievement or Compensatory Strategies*

Table 2 shows how many of the participants used these strategies in each speaking test. First of all, there was no case of all-purpose words such as *thingy* since they had not been taught any of those words. Second, restructuring seems to have been difficult for their level. Third, word-coinage, literal translation from L1, foreignizing, and retrieval were not used, either. The students generally stayed in their comfortable vocabulary zones and did not take a risk to go beyond it. They may have avoided some words or topics, but it cannot be verified in the data. Finally, I did not count retrieval since it was unclear how it is different from repair.

Table 2

### *Achievement Or Compensatory Strategies*

ACHIEVEMENT OR COMPENSATORY STRATEGIES	Speaking Test 1		Speaking Test 2		Speaking Test 3	
	participants <sup>1</sup>	total <sup>2</sup>	participants	total	participants	total
Circumlocution	1	1	0	0	0	0
Approximation	1	1	0	0	0	0
All-purpose words	0	0	0	0	0	0
Non-linguistic means	3	4	1	2	4	4
Restructuring	0	0	0	0	0	0
Word-coinage	0	0	0	0	0	0
Literal translation from L1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Foreignizing	0	0	0	0	0	0
Code switching to L1						
in hesitation devices	13	65	13	24	13	56
in private speech	2	5	4	5	3	3
in words	2	3	0	0	0	0
in phrases/sentences	1	1	4	7	3	10
Retrieval	0	0	0	0	0	0

<sup>1</sup> Number of participants who used the strategy

<sup>2</sup> Total use of the strategy by the participants

Next, I will present an example from my data to illustrate the use of the highlighted strategies in Table 2 above. All the names that

appear in the following excerpts are pseudonyms.

### Circumlocution

There was only one case of circumlocution in my data. In the following excerpt, M wants to say “all of my family members like Arashi” or “everyone in my family likes Arashi,” but she cannot come up with “all” or “everyone” (her

comment to the teacher after the speaking test). After a pause (lines 4 and 6), she ends up listing all members of her family (line 8).

#### Excerpt 1: Mika’s speaking Test 1

- 1 T: So, tell me about your sister. What does she like?
- 2 M: She likes Arashi.
- 3 T: Arashi? I see. How about your mother? Does she like Arashi, too?
- 4 M: My family...
- 5 T: Hm?
- 6 M: ...
- 7 T: Your family?
- 8 M: ... Sister and father and mother and me... is... likes... Arashi.

### Approximation

There was only one case of approximation in my data. In the following excerpt, it turns out that Hana wants to say “mountain climbing” but instead says “mountain challenge (line 1),” an approximation. Her use of the L1 in line 3

and her receipt of the teacher’s turn in line 5 is evidence that indeed “mountain challenge” is only an approximation of what she originally intends to say.

#### Excerpt 2: Hana’s Speaking Test 1

- 1 H: My Grandmother like mountain challenge?
- 2 T: Mountain challenge?
- 3 H: Yamanobori.  
[mountain climbing]
- 4 T: Ah::, mountain climbing.
- 5 H: Climbing!

### Non-linguistic Means

For this analysis, I only counted non-linguistic means when they were used in place of verbal communication. Gestures accompanied with verbal languages were not counted. Only a few students employed this strategy in each speaking test. In the following excerpt, Mika is talking about her friend, Michiko. Mika asks Anri if she has any questions about Michiko (line 4). A forms a question using “Can

you...?” instead of “Can she...? ” (line 5). Mika wonders if Anri is asking about Michiko and points to her in the picture (line 6). Anri nods, showing agreement (line 7). Then, Mika understands that the question was actually about Michiko. This negotiation was done through pointing and head movement (lines 6 and 7).

#### Excerpt 3: Anri and Mika’s Speaking Test 3

- 1 M: This is my friend, Michiko. She is thirteen years old.
- 2 Her birthday is May twelfth. She likes ice-creamz.
- 3 She can- she can... she can draw... and she: plays soccer.
- 4 Any questions?
- 5 A: Can you play the piano?
- 6 M: ((points to Michiko in the picture))
- 7 A: ((nods))
- 8 M: Yes, she can.

### Code Switching

Many of the participants used their L1 (Japanese) during the speaking tests. Although they all shared the same L1 with each other and the teacher, they did not randomly use L1 whenever they had communication problems. Rather, the L1 was used for certain functions.

#### Excerpt 4: Kentaro's Speaking Test 1

1 T: I see. So, what is your favorite subject?  
2 K: Etto...etto... my favorite subject is math.

"Etto" was most commonly used by the participants. Some other variations include "eeto" "e" "ntto" "unto" and many more. In

#### Excerpt 5: Ayako and Rika's speaking test 3

R: Eeto... This is eeto Josephine. She live... n:... Australia.

### L1 Private Speech

In the following excerpt, Kentaro seems unsure if his sentence is grammatically correct. As he says an L1 word (line 2), he is not looking at his partner, Yukiko. Thus, this is not a question targeted at Yukiko, but Kentaro is asking it himself. This type of utterance is

#### Excerpt 6: Yukiko and Kentaro's Speaking Test 3

1 K: Etto... this is... Etto.. he is... he lives in Okazaki.  
2 He run fast. Ah... he is run fast, kana?  
3 Eetoo... He wear glassu every day. Question, please question.

### L1 Vocabulary

In the next excerpt, Haruko does not remember how to say "shakai" (social studies) in English. Instead, she uses L1 with a question intonation (line 8). The teacher gives the L2 words in response (line 9). There was

#### Excerpt 7: Haruko's Speaking Test 1

1 T: Uh-hun. So, what do you study? English, math, a:nd?  
2 H: Japanese.  
3 T: Japanese.  
4 H: Science.  
5 T: Science.  
6 H: National...  
7 T: Uh-huh.  
8 H: Nandakke... Nandakke... Shakai?  
9 T: Social studies?  
10 H: Social studies.

### L1 Time-Gaining/Hesitation Device

The most commonly observed L1 use was to gain time. In the following excerpt, Kentaro is using L1 hesitation devices to gain time before he answers T's question (line 2).

the next excerpt, Rika is using "etto" and "n:" in the middle of the sentences to gain some time while she searches for a next word.

called private speech (Vygotsky, as cited in Ortega, 2009). Private speech may appear when people are attempting to carry out a challenging task. His L1 use here shows his inclination for accuracy. After this, he goes back to his agenda.

only one more participant who used the L1 in place of an unknown L2 word. Other than that, the participants usually stayed in their vocabulary zones.



repetition since it is commonly observed phenomena in repair although the repeated part may not have any perceived problems

(Wong and Waring, 2010). There was no case of self-rephrase observed in my data.

Table 4  
*Self-Monitoring Strategies Or Self-Initiated Repair*

SELF-MONITORING STRATEGIES	Speaking Test 1		Speaking Test 2		Speaking Test 3	
	participants	total	participants	total	participants	total
Self-initiated repair:						
insertion	3	3	1	1	3	3
deletion	1	1	1	1	0	0
replacement	10	13	4	5	8	11
abandonment	3	3	2	2	2	2
repetition	8	13	14	25	11	23
Self-rephrasing	0	0	0	0	0	0

#### Insertion

In the following utterance, after producing the beginning sound of “she,” Kanae inserts

“does” before he produces “she” in full form to make a correct question.

**Excerpt 10: Ayako and Kanae’s Speaking Test 3**

K: Uh... sh- does she... liku chocolate?

#### Deletion

In the following sentence, Kanae produced the article “the” before “tennis,” and self-repairs to delete it.

**Excerpt 11: Kaon’s Speaking Test 1**

S: This is my father. He play the... play tennis.

#### Replacement

In the following excerpt, Rina first says “cook.” However, she seems to then realize that “bake”

would be a better word, and replaces “cook” with “bake.”

**Excerpt 12: Rina and Haruko’s Speaking Test 2**

R: I can cook a- bake bread. It’s very interesting.

Replacement was observed 29 times in the three speaking tests when participants tried to come up with the correct auxiliary verbs, for example. Replacement was not used much in

Speaking Test 2, in which they mainly used only “can.” Thus, tasks seem to influence the CSs used by the participants.

#### Abandonment

In the following excerpt, Shuji seems to attempt to recycle the teacher’s turn “Nice

talking to you,” but cuts himself off and restarts with “you, too” (line 2).

**Excerpt 13: Shuji’s Speaking Test 1**

1 T: So, nice talking with you, Shuji.

2 S: Nice- you, too, Ms. Tsukimi.



### Repetition

The most commonly observed type of repair was repetition. Many participants repeated parts that were not problematic by themselves before proceeding with sentences. In the following excerpt, Anri says “she” three times

before she can go on to the next part (line 2). This repetition may be helping her remember a word that should come next as well as gaining time while she searches for the word.

**Excerpt 14: Anri and Mika’s Speaking Test 3**

**A:** She has boyfriend, Mickey Mouse. She lives in Toon Town.

She... she... she- a- her high to isu one hundred nine centimeteru.

### *Interactional Strategies*

There were no explicit appeals for help in L2. Some appeals for help in L1 are included in code switching. The strategy of interpretive

summary was not used since it was perhaps too difficult for any of the participants (Table 5).

Table 5

### *Interactional Strategies*

INTERACTIONAL STRATEGIES	Speaking Test 1		Speaking Test 2		Speaking Test 3	
	participants	total	participants	total	participants	total
Appeals for help	0	0	0	0	0	0
Indicators of non/mis-understanding	2	2	0	0	0	0
Interpretive summary	0	0	0	0	0	0
Response (conversation continuants)	3(2)	4(2)	14(14)	26(26)	8(7)	12(11)
Comprehension checks	1	1	0	0	2	2

### *Indicators of Non-/Misunderstanding*

#### Repetition Requests

In the following excerpt, Yukiko does not understand what the teacher says. First, she pauses, then, she asks the teacher to repeat again (line 2). After the teacher reissues the request in simpler terms (line 3), Yukiko confirms her understanding with a one-word

answer (line 4). When the teacher reissues the request a third time with a specific question (line 5), Yukiko is able to produce an answer to the teacher’s question (line 6). Thus, Yukiko’s strategy in line 2 helps her to continue with the conversation.

**Excerpt 15: Yukiko’s Speaking Test 1**

1 T: Yes? Okay. How about... them? Tell me about your pets.

2 Y: ...one more time.

3 T: Okay. so are they your pets? Pets dogs?

4 Y: Yes.

5 T: Yes? Okay. What’s their names?

6 Y: This is Moka.

#### Response

Under this category, I included what Varonis and Gass (1985) called conversational continuants. Conversational continuants, such as “Oh, really?,” keep the conversation going.

A total of 26 conversational continuants were used by 14 participants in Speaking Test 2, in which they asked some questions to each other.

**Excerpt 16: Yukari and Asuna's Speaking Test 2**

- 1 Y: Can you use a computer?  
2 A: Yes, I can. How about you?  
3 Y: Yes, I can It's very easy.  
4 A: Really?  
5 Y: .....  
6 A: ..... Do you like... ballet?

Although "Really?" is used by Asuna, it is followed by a pause. Then, Asuna comes up with a new topic. Here, "Really?" is not working as a conversation continuant. This illustrates that for these beginning students, being able to produce the expression is not the same as knowing how the expression functions in discourse, in this case, topic continuation.

**Comprehension Checks**

In the following conversation, Shuji and Kaon are talking about a female dog. Shuji first uses "he" to refer to the dog (line 4), but after Kaon's pause (line 5), Shuji checks with Kaon if Shuji should say "he" or "she" (line 6). It is a comprehension check to see "whether what you said was correct or grammatical" in the list proposed by Celce-Murcia, Dornyei, and Thurrell (1995).

**Excerpt 17: Shuji and Kaon's Speaking Test 3**

- 1 K: She don't like angry master.  
2 S: Uh-huh.  
3 K: Any question?  
4 S: When is he birthday?  
5 K: ...  
6 S: He? Her?  
7 K: She.  
8 S: When is she birthday?

Other types of comprehension checks were not found in my data.

**Discussion And Conclusion**

In the analysis above, I have observed that the Japanese junior high school students used some CSs in talking with others who share the same L1 in speaking tests. Their use of CSs seemed to orient to negotiation of form rather than meaning (Excerpts 6, 10, 11, 12, 13 and 17). In real-life communication, however, language users tend to attend to meaning rather than form, because usually it is the content of the talk that matter, not the form itself. Although it was good that the students were aware of the grammar that they had learned, they need to go beyond that to really use language for communication. More meaningful communicative practice should be introduced to their classroom.

At the same time, junior high school students should be introduced to more CSs. Teachers should encourage and enable the students to take more risks, and thus enhance learning. Kehe and Kehe (1994) offered lists of useful CSs in the form of handouts that could be used in lessons. For example, among many CSs, L2 hesitation devices could be one of the first to be taught to Japanese junior high school students. The main L1 use in the speaking tests was to gain time for the students to produce L2 utterances. Teaching them a few L2 hesitation devices could possibly help them reduce their L1 use in this area. Instead of "etto," they can learn to use "ah" or "uh," which are quite similar to their



L1 sounds. Above all, as the data show (Excerpt 16), teachers should keep in mind that just introducing the useful phrases is not enough. Students need to practice using CSs in plenty of communicative activities.

I am aware that this study is not without its limitations. First, CS coding is never a straightforward business. Sometimes it was unclear if something could be considered a CS or not, and classifying CSs was not an easy job, either. It is also still unclear how different variants (proficiency levels, interlocutors, and

tasks) influence the CSs use. Further research is needed to explore questions such as which CSs are used more or less by Japanese junior high school students with different English proficiency, how Japanese junior high school students improve CSs over, say, a school year, what kinds of speaking tasks promote CSs use and learning by Japanese junior high school students, and whether Japanese junior high school students use as many CSs with other Japanese (classmates or Japanese teacher of English) as with native English teacher.

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