

Exploring the effects of communication strategy instruction in practice conversations of young EFL learners**1. Introduction**

A study by Tahira (2012) suggests that in Japan, English language teaching is not taught following a communicative approach, particularly one such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). This study began one year before I started the MA TESOL program at NUFS, and although unaware of Tahira's conclusion, I realized I had to learn more about communicative approaches after teaching at a JHS in Nagoya in 2011. After three years in the program I decided to explore the effects of Communication Strategies (CSs) in order to see the development in practice conversations.

2. Theoretical Background**i. Communicative Language Teaching**

The CLT approach to teaching highlights the communication of meaning in interaction, rather than the practice and manipulation of grammatical forms in isolation (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Moreover, the CLT approach aims to improve a learner's communicative competence (CC) (Savignon, 2002). The notion of CC refers to "the ability to use language in a variety of settings, taking into account relationships between speakers and differences in situations" (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p. 214). Brown (2007) offers his definition of CLT as "an approach to language teaching methodology that emphasizes authenticity, interaction, student-centered learning, task-based activities, and communication for the real world, meaningful purposes" (p. 378). Perhaps CLT would be useful in environments where interaction is limited, or if authentic conversations are not taking place. Brown (2007) offers four interconnected characteristics of CLT, which could show that CLT can help students who need to improve conversational skills:

- (1) Classroom goals are focused on all of the components of CC (communicative competence) and not restricted to grammatical or linguistic competence.
- (2) Language techniques are designed to engage learners in the pragmatic, authentic, functional use of language for meaningful purposes. Organizational language forms are not the central focus but rather aspects of language that enable the learner to accomplish those purposes.
- (3) Fluency and accuracy are seen as complimentary principles underlying communicative techniques. At times fluency may have to take on more

importance than accuracy in order to keep learners meaningfully engaged in language use.

- (4) In the communicative classroom, students ultimately have to use the language, productively and receptively, in unrehearsed contexts. (p. 241)

ii. Communication Strategies

One area of CLT that could benefit young learners are CSs. These are strategies one can use in conversation such as clarifying something one does not understand. that can help continue conversations, and can accompany a program or course design to improve CC (Canale & Swain, 1980). Furthermore, CC is associated with the interlocuters' ability in using CSs (Faerch & Kasper, 1983). Canale and Swain (1980) believe appropriate use of CSs are an indicator of development of CC.

iii. Scaffolding

Scaffolding is the support given to the learning process tailored to the needs of the student. Scaffolding intends to help the student reach his or her learning goals (Sawyer, 2006). Arguably, CSs cannot be taught without the use of scaffolding. The scaffolded approach itself cannot be explained without the concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). The ZPD is a metaphor that represents the construction zone to show what students are capable of learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Scaffolding is a metaphor of a support structure to assist with the learning in the construction zone.

iv. Focus-on-form instruction

An explanation of FFI is that it is instruction that draws attention to the forms and structures of the language within the context of communicative interaction (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). This may be done by giving metalinguistic information, simply highlighting the form in question, or by providing corrective feedback (p. 218). Ellis (1996) refers to FFI as “any planned or incidental instructional activity that is intended to induce language learners to pay attention to linguistic forms” (p. 218).

v. Performance tests for CSs assessment

Anderson and Wall (1993) argue that if a test reflects the aims of the syllabus, and its content and methods, then it will produce positive washback. In a speaking test, which encourages the use of CSs, perhaps CSs should be practiced using the same tasks that will be tested, then the assessment will better reflect the learning. Kawauchi (1998) conducted studies on performance tests to investigate whether they should be planned or unplanned. She clarifies that planned tests mean that students have to use a certain type of grammar or have

been told what grammar point to use (p. 7), whereas unplanned is free conversation. Kawauchi gave one group of students planned tests and another group unplanned tests. The group that received unplanned test results, were averaged higher for fluency and accuracy. This does not mean that unplanned is best, but it may suggest that students perhaps do not need a framework when being tested. It may also be a more authentic test meaning it is closer to real life conversations that are unrehearsed (Kleinsasser, 2012).

v. Conversation analysis, transcription, fluency and data collection

Transcription in this report refers to the systematic representation of utterances in written form (Davidson, 2007). According to Ellis (2012), “transcription can be broad or narrow depending on the goals of a study” (p. 207). Segalowitz (2007) defined fluency as “those aspects of productive and receptive language ability characterized by fluidity (smoothness) of performance” (p. 181).

vi. Research Issues

Students were receiving memory exercises whilst just working through the textbook in a traditional manner. There was little student to student interaction or communication including speaking activities.

vii. Research Questions

How does using communication strategies in practice conversations affect fluency?

3. Methods

i. Research context, participants and Applied Processes

I conducted this Action Research at a kindergarten with four 11 year olds, three male and one female. These students were clearly capable, attentive students from the first instance I met them in April. However, when attempting a basic conversation with the students it came apparent that communicative activities were new to them. I saw the students once a week in a 50 minute lesson where I could control how to progress through an allocated textbook: Let's Go 5. I was free to teach communicatively and conduct speaking tests which I did. The only request by the kindergarten was to conduct mini EIKEN tests to continue with the students EIKEN vocabulary intake. Therefore, with the students lack of conversational experience in mind the following activities and processes were undertaken:

Created Scripts for the students to see where communications strategies are being implemented.

Gave students speaking opportunities frequently (with rubrics).

Showed them five communication strategies (demonstrated and shown in Conversation Brinks as shown in Appendix B) in the following order:

- 1) Openers and Closers
- 2) Shadowing
- 3) Interjections
- 4) Fillers
- 5) Follow-up Questions

- Students created conversation cards on request to assist with final conversation tests.
- Created multiple speaking tests, many free conversations and many that had rubrics which - focused on either certain communication strategies or specific grammar points.
- Speaking opportunities would use the same grammar as the textbook so it could be worked through.
- Mini EIKEN tests (as requested by the kindergarten)
- Created focus on form instructional activities to teach grammar points.
- Conducted interviews in Japanese aided by an assistant to gauge the students' feelings on communication strategies and conversations.

ii. Research changes

After an observation as part of the AR process, it became apparent that the scripts shown to students were not going to improve CC or create any communication. The scripts did help the students memorize openers and closers but they only encouraged memorization and not spontaneous speech. The scripts were then replaced in favor of a scaffolding program explained below.

Post observation, I continued to teach five communication strategies. I would only teach a new communication strategy once the students had become comfortable with the previous one. A CS would be deemed 'comfortable' if the students used the strategy in a test successfully, after successfully using the CS in repeated practice. In this repeated practice, the students would keep switching partners and have spontaneous conversations with no topic. After a second observation, it became apparent that fluency was an area that could be focused on. Therefore, the final goal of speaking for longer than two minutes was set in a conversation where communication strategies had to be used.

4. Speaking test analysis and Results

To explain the journey the students undertook, the conversations are presented here in chronological order using excerpts to highlight key points of each conversation. Below is an excerpt from the first free topic conversation test. This transcription is a basic CA informed

version which has been chosen to assist in analysis because (1) CSs are identified, (2) pauses are signaled, and (3) the amount of turns taken by the pairs are recorded:

Excerpt A: Speaking Test 1, 24th May 2016, Keisuke and Yuma

1. [0:28] Keisuke: (3)How was your weekend?
2. [0:35] Yuma: (2)It was (3)great.
3. [0:40] Keisuke: That is great.
4. [0:42] Yuma: And you?
5. [0:44] Keisuke: (2)It was (1)it was (1)was ok (3)
6. [0:52] Yuma: (2)That's (2)that's (2)ok

Excerpt A is from a test conducted on the 24th of May, 2016. The two names after the date in the title refer to the students participating in the test. Excerpt A is from a test participated by Keisuke and Yuma. The numbers listed on the left indicate the order the conversation progressed and are used so I can indicate specific lines in the analysis. The time that each turn started is shown inside the square brackets. Right to the times are the students' names followed by their utterances transcribed. Below is an example of a given rubric where students would receive two points for using an interjection:

Rubric used for Speaking test 1 (Excerpt A)

Used one CS appropriately.	1 point.	Used an Interjection	2 points.
Used two CSs appropriately	2 points.	Eye Contact.	1 point.
Used 3 CSs appropriately	3 points.	Big Voice.	1 point.

The students were made aware of the rubric for following tests during the practice before each test and explained that appropriately referred to using each CS in context. Pauses are indicated using parenthesis. Following this system, (2) would indicate a two-second pause, although indicated that a one-second pause is considered a long pause in conversation analysis (Sidnell & Stivers, 2013), they are often measured to one decimal point. However, being that they are young learners who are experiencing recordings for the first time, I have rounded them off to the approximate whole number, therefore (2.4) would be (2) in my transcription system.

In line two, Yuma refers to his weekend as “great” and Keisuke interjects with “that is great.” Keisuke received two points for the use of this interjection and there are no pauses in his speech which indicated to me that he was comfortable at this particular time. His pace was fast and he spoke in a loud voice when he interjected, further suggesting that he was relaxed, in contrast to his reply in line five and Yuma’s interjection in line six. In line five, Keisuke uses four pauses for a duration of seven seconds. He sounded nervous and his voice was lower in volume. Keisuke also refers to his weekend as “ok” which I believe confuses Yuma. I taught the interjections “that’s great” and “that’s too bad” before this test. I also explained that interjections could vary further and in demonstrations with my assistant, I showed the students “that’s good” and “that’s fantastic.” I did not show “that’s ok.” I believe that Yuma is trying hard to use an interjection that he has not practiced and that is why there are three pauses in line six for a duration of six seconds. The interjection shows that students are making original CSs and using spontaneous language. In line five Keisuke used ‘ok’ so an alternative reading could be that the students are learning from each other. According to Swain, Kinnear and Steinman (2015) student-student scaffolding can be powerful, even more so than teacher-student. This CS program is designed to give students tools to continue speaking during practice conversations but engaging in spontaneous speech is a positive outcome in their development. It shows that the students are not only using the CS examples they were given or shown. Spontaneous speech may suggest an improvement in fluency as it continues the conversation and the students are not restricted to what the teacher has taught them. They are attempting new language that they have accessed because of the CSs.

Excerpt B shows both Akira and Yuma using follow-up questions. There are five pauses that are 11 seconds long. Before this conversation students were encouraged to talk about interests so they could ask follow-up questions but the test did not require them to. Akira uses a follow-up question in line two and Yuma uses a follow-up question in line five. Below the excerpt is my analysis on the use of these follow-up questions.

Excerpt B: Speaking test 3, September 20th 2016, Akira and Yuma

1. [0:36] Yuma: Hmmmm, I like dog.
2. [0:40] Akira: Why do you like dog?
3. [0:44] Yuma: Im living together (2)and you?(2)ja be(1)cause I’m living together and you?
4. [0:58] Akira: Uhh, I like bird.
5. [1:05] Yuma: (3)What kind of bird?
6. [1:08] Akira: (3)I like tiny bird.

In line five, Yuma takes a three second pause and uses a follow-up question. The follow-up question consists of the “what kind of” form. We practiced this repeatedly in class beforehand and Yuma used the CS to extend his conversation with Akira. Akira takes a three-second pause to think of an answer in line six. It appears that these follow-up questions extend the conversations in terms of turn taking but also create pauses in replies. In line three, there are five seconds of pauses. I believe this is an example of follow-up questions that are difficult to answer. In this next excerpt, there is one pause for a duration of two seconds and two follow-up questions. The students are talking about things they like in a spontaneous speech tested conversation:

Excerpt C: Speaking test 3, September 27th 2016, Yuka and Keisuke

1. [0:07] Keisuke: I like swimming.
2. [0:09] Yuka: Do you swim every day?
3. [0:11] Keisuke: No I don't, and you?
4. [0:13] Yuka: I like golf.
5. [0:15] Keisuke: Golf that's cool(2). What food do you like?
6. [0:18] Yuka: Food? I like strawberry, and you?
7. [0:23] Keisuke: Mmmm, I like takoyaki.
8. [0:26] Yuka: Do you eat takoyaki every day?
9. [0:29] Keisuke: No, I don't.

I like the creativity shown here by the student as she uses follow-up questions with two different verbs in two questions that are otherwise the same, in line three she uses “swim” and in line nine she uses “eat.” Yuka has found a pattern of a follow-up question she is comfortable with, but can adapt this pattern to suit different details. This could indicate that she understands this CS and is using it in this manner as to extend her role in the conversation. This CS helps her on two occasions in a short excerpt could indicate an improvement in her fluency. In October and November, the students practiced the CSs in many small talk interchanges. Small talk topics such as “What did you do last weekend?” and “What will you do tomorrow?” were used, and I also increased the minimum time, which the students had to go beyond to two minutes. Yuka and Keisuke participated in the recorded test where an excerpt below shows a new follow-up question pattern, one of two follow-up questions used. In this excerpt, there are 13 pauses and they total 37 seconds in duration:

Excerpt D: Speaking test 4, from November 1st 2016, Yuka and Keisuke

1. [0:24] Keisuke: I like dog.
2. [0:27] Yuka: Et(1)uh(3)what kind of dog do you like?

3. [0:32] Keisuke: I like labrador.
4. [0:35] Yuka: Cute.
5. [0:47] Keisuke: (12)what(2)did you do last weekend?
6. [0:52] Yuka: I(2)played(2)golf.
7. [1:01] Keisuke: Oh that's great.
8. [1:02] Yuka: And you?
9. [1:05] Keisuke: I(2)went(2)to karaoke.
10. [1:11] Yuka: (5)What(3)did(2)you(1)sing?
11. [1:22] Keisuke: I like Evangelion.

The test required the students to use as many CSs as they could. This excerpt indicates that one student used different kinds of follow-up questions within the same conversation. Perhaps this suggests that the student is comfortable with this CS. In line 10, Yuka asks a follow-up question that had not been taught to her. In the conversation bricks there are examples of follow-up questions but in line 10 of this excerpt Yuka creates her own. This could suggest that Yuka understands the goals and aims of a follow-up question. I consider this to be a positive development even if there are 11 seconds of pauses in her question, as it shows that she is trying to improve her CC and conversation skills.

In line four of Excerpt D, Yuka uses the interjection “cute.” This is another example of spontaneous speech, this instance in the form of an interjection. Listening to the recording I believe that Yuka used this interjection in a natural manner. Furthermore, the interjection was used immediately after Keisuke finished speaking. I believe Yuka used this CS, naturally as if this was a real conversation in her first language. This could indicate her confidence in her use of language, as she is relaxed. In May and June, Yuka did not invent any new interjections. Excerpt D is from a test in November where she has made an original interjection. This could be an indication of fluency development for Yuka.

Below is an excerpt from Akira’s and Yuma’s conversation test in which they had to speak for two minutes and use at least three different CSs appropriately to get a high score. If they spoke in a loud voice, and made eye contact, they would receive a higher score. This was the final test, so although the aforementioned two minutes is challenging as it is an increase from the previous test of 30 seconds, it was important to push the students to speak longer, but still consider their inexperience in speaking activities. However, an increase in speaking duration is important as it may increase turn taking and this could lead to an improved fluency. Excerpt E showcases two follow-up questions and consists of two pauses with a total duration of four seconds’

Excerpt E: Speaking test 5, November 8th, Akari and Yuma

1. [0:18] Akira: I like baseball. I like dragons.
2. [0:26] Yuma: Why?
3. [0:30] Akira: Because I like Jeter.
4. [0:32] Yuma: I don't know.
5. [0:35] Akira: What sports do you like?
6. [0:37] Yuma: I like soccer. I like Gamba soccer.
7. [0:42] Akira: Why?
8. [0:44] Yuma: Because I like Sammy.
9. [0:46] Akira: I don't know.

Yuma asks a question after 12 seconds, Akira replies with an answer with extra detail. There are no pauses in this answer and there is a follow up question, "why" immediately. Only being four students, as discussed previously, they became familiar with each other's interests and language, thereby naturally creating and remembering their own repeated patterns of speech. This could indicate a positive influence on fluency as there are no pauses in these patterns and a CS is used twice, once in line three and once in line eight. In line five and 10, both students say "I don't know" in response to detail from their partner. They created naturally a genuine interjection. Students creating their own output could suggest an improvement in fluency. Below is Excerpt F is the final conversation for Yuka and Keisuke in which they discuss where they want to go in an extract that includes seven pauses, with one pause up to six seconds whilst the student is trying to answer a question. In this excerpt, there is one follow-up question used. This extract has dialogue spoken past two minutes so the students are working hard to keep going as this is the longest they have ever spoken. Perhaps this why there is some inaccurate English used which is analyzed below the excerpt:

Excerpt F: Speaking test 5, from November 8th, Yuka and Keisuke

1. [1:49] Yuka: I (2)want (2)to America.
2. [1:56] Keisuke: Me too (2).What kind of America do you like?
3. [2:10] Yuka: Eh(2)The stadium of liberty.
4. [2:16] Keisuke: That's great.
5. [2:19] Yuka: And you?
6. [2:27] Keisuke: Mmmm(5)New York, Washington(6)New York
7. [2:52] Yuka: That's great, (3)see you.

In line two, Keisuke wanted to use a pattern we had practiced in class. However, he was not aware he asked a very difficult question, which was difficult for his partner to answer. Nevertheless, Yuka, who although she was a little confused in line three, still attempted an answer. This is not the only incident with the language ‘what kind of.’ In Excerpt D, line two there was the similar worded question: ‘what kind of dog do you like?’ The students have developed their own interlanguage. Selinker (1972) noted that the utterances produced by a learner are different from those native speakers would produce had they attempted to convey the same meaning. This comparison is the existence of a separate linguistic system. This system is observed when studying the utterances of the learner who attempts to produce meaning in their L2 speech; it is not seen when that same learner performs form-focused tasks, such as oral drills in a classroom. This example of interlanguage is a positive development as they are trying to move from drills to create original speech.

Looking at the table in Appendix A, the turn taking does increase steadily and eventually both pairs have conversations with over 30 turns. Perhaps the CSs have helped them maintain the conversation and speak for longer. Underneath the durations are percentages of what proportion the pauses take up the conversations. The number of pauses decreased to one in September. The pauses then increased in November. I am not sure why this is, but I believe it is because the length of conversation increases. As students spoke for longer, they had to concentrate harder. Perhaps trying new follow-up questions, means that partners have to think carefully about answers, such as line six in Excerpt F. In this excerpt, Keisuke is responding to a difficult new follow-up question, one that was not previously practiced in class, and pauses three times in his answer. As shown in Excerpt F, the conversation between Yuka and Keisuke includes an original follow-up question that was not practiced in the classroom. There is a pause in the answer, in line 26 and in the extra detail that follows in line 29. This could be due the students’ motivation to try to extend the conversation further.

Interview responses

Here are highlights from student interviews after final conversations on November 8th. The students’ comments are discussed in turn, starting with Yuka below’

Yuka: I am happy I made a follow-up question. I enjoyed talking but I want to speak to more people. The hardest strategy to use is shadowing because I keep forgetting to use it. I am happy I spoke for a long time.

Keisuke: I had a long conversation. I want to make more long conversations in the future. I made follow-up questions but they are the hardest strategy to use. Follow-up questions are hard as I don't know what to ask and I don't know what they are going to say.

Akira: I got nervous and did not make many follow-up questions. They are hard to make. I want to carry on with the textbook. I am happy I had a conversation longer than two minutes.

Yuma: It was nice to talk about anything. I did not like it when we had to talk about the weekend. I spoke a lot in English [conversation practice] so I am happy.

5. Discussion: How does using communication strategies in practice conversations affect fluency?

The speaking tests are significantly longer in duration from when students had one-minute conversations to nearly three-minute conversations. The speaking test shows more CSs are used as the students progressed. The table data shows the time increasing and the students show they were aware of this in their interview answers. With regards to fluency, students increased the amount of turns they took in the conversations. The speaking test analysis shows students added more detail to their conversations by asking follow-up questions they had learned, and in some cases original spontaneous questions. This could be evidence of fluency development.

In the interviews, they clarify that they found the follow-up questions more challenging to create and respond to in conversations. This is interesting as the transcriptions indicate improved follow-up question usage, but the students are less persuaded. This could be because as a teacher I have not convinced the students of their progress, or it could be because follow-up questions need more time than a CS program limited to two semesters can provide. Without both sets of data I would not have realized this interesting juxtaposition. Perhaps when I conduct a CS program again in the future I will research effective methods for giving feedback, other than comments and rubric test scores.

6. Conclusion

For CS programs to be effective, they have to include spontaneous speech tests to allow natural CS use. They also have to include transcribed conversations to see how CSs were used, numerical data collection to measure time, turn taking and pauses, and student feedback to gauge motivation. It is this combination that benefited the four students and perhaps led to a positive development of their fluency.

7. References

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Appendix A

Speaking test data table

Date Participants	Total duration of Pauses (as a percentage of the conversation)	Number of Pauses	Number of Turns	Duration of Conversation
24 th May (2016) Yuma and Keisuke	63 (seconds) 64.9%	25	15	1:37
28 th June Akira and Keisuke	27 33.3%	11	16	1:21
20 th September Akira and Yuma	34 34.7%	15	18	1:38
27 th September Yuka and Keisuke	2 5.3%	1	17	0:38
1 st November Yuka and Keisuke	67 51.9%	19	26	2:09
8 th November Akira and Yuma	37 28.7%	13	30	2:09
8 th November Yuka and Keisuke	47 26.2%	20	31	2:59

Appendix B: Sample Lesson Plan

Lesson plan October 20th

0-5 Students review Conversation bricks

5-10 T.A and I demonstrate easy conversation including various follow-up questions.

The topic is interests in the vein of ‘What do you like?’

15-20 Students practice and are told to pay particular attention to follow up questions.

20-25 Students are introduced to “What will you do next weekend?” in the textbook.

25-30 Students think of 3 weekend activities they can do..

30-35 Students practice conversation with the grammar point (question above).

35-40 Students record conversations with the grammar point and are handed the rubric.

40-45 Students record conversations without the grammar point.

45-50 EIKEN mini vocabulary test.

Sample Handouts:

Conversation Bricks 2: Shadowing

Please catch information and check.

I play soccer.....ahhhh soccer/ ahhhh you play soccer.

I like chocolate.....oh chocolate/ you like chocolate.

I study English.....oh English/ you study English.

I-----You

Conversation Bricks 3: Good listening

Please catch information, check and show you are interested.

I play soccer.....ahhhh soccer/ ahhhh you play soccer. That’s great.

I like chocolate.....oh chocolate/ you like chocolate. That’s cool.

I study English.....oh English/ you study English. That’s interesting.