A Study on Japanese High School Teachers’ Use and Instruction of Communication Strategies in English

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Abstract

The purpose of the study is to survey Japanese senior high school English teachers’ perceptions of their own communication strategy (hereafter CS) use in English, their views in relation to the necessity of providing CS training to their students, and their perceptions of the actual instruction they provide in class. The questionnaire items used a five-point Likert scale and were based on the CS list of Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei and Thurrell (1995). Each item involved three components: (1) How often does the participant use a particular CS as a language user? (2) How necessary does the participant feel it is to teach the CS as a language teacher? (3) Does the participant believe he/she actually teaches the strategy explicitly in class? The survey involved the participation of 120 high school teachers. There are two major findings: (1) The above three components are closely related to one another; (2) CS training is not practiced in class as much as expected. In addition to the statistical analysis, qualitative data in the form of comments on CS use and instruction made by 39 teachers were also summarized.

1. Introduction

Since the emergence and increased recognition of communicative language teaching (CLT) in the 1970s, a number of active discussions and empirical studies have been conducted in relation to CS definitions, categorizations, and study methods. Major research themes include the following: the comparison of CS use between learners and native speakers (Varonis & Gass, 1985), the relationships between learners’ CS use and their foreign language proficiency (Paribakht, 1985), the relationships between CS use in the L1 and that in the L2 (Iwai, 2000), and CS teachability (Lam, 2005). However, almost all studies have focused on language learners, or language users in general, while very few have been conducted from the viewpoint of language teachers. Furthermore, if we try to develop learners’ communicative competence and to nurture more autonomous language users in an EFL context such as Japan, teachers’ roles are very important and their ideas on language teaching are highly influential in their effect on students. In this respect, it is very
important to investigate how Japanese high school teachers feel about the use of CSs and classroom instruction relating to them in English.

2. Theoretical Background (Necessity of CS training in L2 learning)

2.1 Arguments against the teaching of CSs

Bialystok (1991) argues that there is a common recognition process for CSs in language use, and this is not unique to L2 learning at all. She believes “the more language the learner knows, the more possibilities exist for the learner’s system of language to be flexible and adjust itself to meet the demands of the learner. What one must teach students of a language is not strategy, but language” (p.147). Also, Kellerman (1991) thinks that if learners are given CS training, they only make use of what they already have, and so the training will not help them to expand their linguistic range: “The answer seems simple enough: Teach the learners more language and let the strategies look after themselves” (p.157). However, it is important to note that while both writers assert that CS training is unnecessary because it does not contribute to developing the learners’ language ability, it is important to discuss whether CS training actually helps to develop their strategic competence (Iwai, 2000).

2.2 Arguments for the teaching of CSs

Tarone and Yule (1989) think that learners can improve their use of CSs if they are put into a task-based L2 learning context, and that task-based activities are helpful in developing learners’ language abilities. Lam (2005) believes that CS training is necessary but argues that the degree of teachability varies from one CS to another. Furthermore, a number of researchers are afraid that Japanese learners of English do not know how to use CSs in the target language even though they have some potential strategic competence (Nakatani, 2005; Takatsuka, 1996).

The author would like to argue for explicit CS teaching due to the following reasons:
(1) We are discussing Japanese teachers’ awareness of CS use and instruction in English as a foreign (not second) language;
(2) Many high school students have not yet acquired sufficient strategic competence in their L1;
(3) CS training involves a lot of different interactive activities, which encourage learners to be more active in class, and should help them to improve their communicative language abilities.

In this paper, the term ‘Strategic Competence’ is defined as the knowledge and the ability to use the target language so as (1) to maintain communication and repair communication breakdown when it occurs and (2) to reduce the possibility of communication breakdown.
3. The Study

3.1 Purpose (Research Questions)

The survey was conducted in order to evaluate Japanese senior high school teachers’ awareness of CS use and instruction in English. Based on the results, some pedagogical implications for better CS training will be discussed. In this study there are three main research questions:
(1) If teachers often use a particular CS as language users, do they also think that they should teach it to their students?
(2) If teachers think that they should teach a particular CS, do they think they actually teach it in class?
(3) What views do teachers have in relation to the use of and instruction in CSs?

3.2 Participants

The questionnaire was sent by post to about 180 senior high school teachers in one of the 47 prefectures in Japan, and 126 teachers sent their replies to the survey. Due to statistical inappropriateness, six teachers were excluded from the data. As a result, the responses of 120 teachers (64 males and 56 females) were accepted for analysis. The average length of English language teaching experience is 15.9 years, and the average length of time spent staying in English-speaking areas abroad is 9.7 months.

3.3 Method

The CS items of the questionnaire (Tatsukawa, 2008) were developed based on the comprehensive CS list of Celce-Murcia et al. (1995). Participants were required to respond to three statements, using a five-point Likert scale. One statement related to their views as language users, one related to their ideas as teachers, and one related to their classroom practices:

Question: Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

(1) I often use this strategy when speaking English. (hereafter USE for short)
(2) I think that I should teach this strategy to students explicitly. (NEED)
(3) I teach this strategy to my students in class explicitly. (TEACH)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Undecided</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>USE</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEED</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEACH</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Choose one of the five responses and put a circle for each statement.)
Example (1): Achievement or Compensatory Strategies

(6) Restructuring (restarting with a new sentence when an original one is hard to complete) (e.g., The bus was very ... there were a lot of people on it.)

[Situation: between two friends; one of them came late for an appointment that morning]
M: Why were you late this morning?
W: It took me 20 minutes longer than usual. The road was very ... There were so many cars on the road.

Example (2): Self-monitoring Strategies

(11) Self-initiated repair (rephrasing voluntarily for better communication) (e.g., I mean ...)

[Situation: between two friends; the woman is afraid that the man does not understand the meaning of the phrase ‘expire this week’]
W: Would you like to go to the movies this weekend? I have two free tickets.
M: Thanks, but I have a part-time job. How about next weekend?
W: These tickets expire this week. I mean we can’t use them next week.

Example (3): Meaning negotiation strategies (CS category: RESPONSE)

(24) Confirmation (making sure of what has been said)

[Situation: between two friends; the man confirms what the woman wants him to get her]
W: Kenji, can you do some shopping for me? I’m sick and cannot go out.
M: Sure. What do you want?
W: Well, I need milk, bread, and two apples.
M: No problem.
W: And one more thing. Can you get me some eggs as well?
M: So, to sum up, you want four things: milk, bread, apples, and eggs. Right?

Also, the participants were asked to write free comments on CS use and instruction in class. Their comments were used to gain further insight into their perceptions of CSs.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Overall Results and Discussion

The average and standard deviation (SD) for all 30 strategies are shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>USE</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>0.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEED</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>0.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEACH</td>
<td>2.70</td>
<td>0.69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The correlations between the three components across the whole 30 strategies are shown in Table 2 and those for each CS are shown in Figure 1.

Table 2 The Correlations of USE, Need, and TEACH of the Whole 30 Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>USE</th>
<th>NEED</th>
<th>TEACH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>USE</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.896*</td>
<td>0.823*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEED</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.915*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEACH</td>
<td>0.823*</td>
<td>0.915*</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[N = 120 \quad **p < .01\]

Figure 1 The Relationships of USE, NEED, and TEACH for each CS

The 30 strategies were divided into eight categories according to their features. Table 3 shows the averages of the three components for the eight categories. An analysis of variance was conducted on the two overall factors of AWARENESS and CS CATEGORIES to test the figures statistically. As a result, main effects were seen with these two factors: AWARENESS \([F(2, 238) = 231.465, p < .01]\), CATEGORIES \([F(7, 833) = 72.152, p < .01]\). Also, since an interaction was seen between AWARENESS and CATEGORIES \([F(14, 1666) = 6.205, p < .01]\), a simple main effect test was conducted, and significant differences were found between all the factors. Furthermore, a multiple choice comparison was made: There are some significant differences, except for those between USE and NEED for AVOID, COMPENSATION, MONITOR, REQUEST, RESPONSE, and CHECK \((p < .01)\).

From the data analysis above, the correlations between USE, NEED, and TEACH are very strong concerning the CSs (see Table 2), indicating that the more often Japanese high school teachers use CSs, the more they feel that it is necessary to teach them explicitly, and the more they do actually teach them explicitly in class. Unfortunately, explicit CS training
Table 3 The Average of Eight Categories of
Three Awareness factors (Figures below=SD)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATEGORIES</th>
<th>USE</th>
<th>NEED</th>
<th>TEACH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AVOID</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td>1.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COMPENSATION</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>2.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TIME</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>2.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MONITOR</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>2.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPEAL</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td>2.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REQUEST</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>3.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RESPONSE</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>2.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHECK</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>2.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>2.70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

is not practiced as much as expected (see Figure 1). When we consider the eight categories in relation to the three components of AWARENESS (USE, NEED, and TEACH) and pay attention to AVOID, it is clear that the high school teachers participating in this survey use avoidance strategies least, feel that they need to teach them to students least, and explicitly teach them least. In accordance with Dörnyei & Scott 1997, Færch & Kasper 1983, and Nakatani 2005, they think that avoidance strategies do not promote much communication or language acquisition. In contrast, REQUEST was ranked most highly in relation to the three awareness factors. When the participants do not understand fully what is said, they often ask for clarification as language users and also feel that they need to teach REQUEST strategies to their students explicitly. Long (1981) describes three important components in the negotiation of meaning, one of which is ‘clarification requests.’ His comment is supported by the results of this survey. As for TIME and APPEAL, the relationships between USE and NEED, and between NEED and TEACH are high \((r=0.60, r=0.65)\). Also, participants use time-gaining strategies quite often (the average=4.13). However, there is a significant difference between USE and NEED for these two categories. One possible reason for this result may be that there are not many different English expressions for TIME in authorized textbooks, but a couple of set phrases such as “Let me see ...” or “Well ...” to gain time before the main message or for thinking what to say next, or “Pardon?” and “Can you say it again, please?” when asking for repetition. Many senior high school students might have learned them at junior high school already.

4.2 Research Question (1) and Discussion

(1) If teachers often use a particular CS as language users, do they also think that they should teach it to their students?

The relationship between USE and NEED for all 30 strategies is 0.896, which is extremely strong. The difference between their means is 0.14. For all categories, the means for USE are bigger than those for NEED, except for MONITOR (see Figure 2), but no
statistical significance was found using a t-test ($p < .05$). As a result, we can state that the more often teachers use some particular CSs as language users, the more strongly they feel they need to teach them to their students. It is important for English teachers to communicate in the target language as much as they can in everyday life, and to notice what CSs they often use. This should help teachers raise their awareness of and need for teaching those useful CSs.

![Figure 2](image1.png)

**Figure 2** The relationship of three awareness factors for eight CS categories

4.3 Research Question (2) and Discussion

(2) If teachers think that they should teach a particular CS, do they actually teach it in class?

The correlation between NEED and TEACH for all 30 strategies is 0.915, which is also extremely strong. A two-tailed t-test was also conducted and shows statistical significance between NEED and TEACH for all eight categories ($p < .01$). These results indicate that the participants do not teach CSs as much as they feel they should. The author thinks that there are some possible reasons for the insufficient instruction in CSs:

(1) For some categories, they do not think they need to teach some CSs to their students, and so they do not do so. (e.g., NEED and TEACH for AVOID are 2.91 and 1.32 respectively.)

(2) Since there are a number of set phrases for some CSs that are already taught at junior high school, senior high school teachers do not teach those CSs in their classes. The SD of TEACH for TIME and APPEAL are the largest two of the eight categories (1.04 and 1.00 respectively).

(3) The difference between NEED and TEACH for RESPONSE and MONITOR are the two biggest ones: 1.08 and 0.99 respectively (see Table 3). This may be due to the linguistic distance between English and Japanese. Also, although teachers feel they need to teach these strategies, it may be difficult to teach a certain number of set phrases to realize them. In other words, there are not clear goals for students to reach in terms of
expressions to master. Furthermore, students are expected to make use of their knowledge of the world to meet different situations in addition to their linguistic knowledge, but they may not have sufficient knowledge of the world to be effective.

In summary, it is important to teach students some set phrases to realize TIME and APPEAL strategies and to have them practice and use them as early as possible. Also, it is recommended that teachers demonstrate in class as many situations involving the use of RESPONSE (e.g., repair, expansion) and MONITOR strategies as they can. Consequently, students should have some idea of when to use these CSs even if they cannot use them by themselves properly. Such teaching can at least raise their awareness of those CSs.

4. 4 Research Question (3) and Discussion
(3) What views do teachers have in relation to the use and instruction of CSs?

In addition to responding to the items involving the five-point scale for the 30 strategies, teachers were asked to write free comments in relation to CS use and instruction in class. Thirty-nine teachers out of 120 noted their views and ideas on CSs. Their comments can be divided into the following six categories:

(A) How to teach CSs
(B) When to teach CSs / Who should teach CSs
(C) What materials to use for CS training
(D) Comments on particular CSs
(E) Comments on the relationships between CSs and strategic competence or whole communicative competence
(F) Others

[Discussion]

A lot of teachers commented on how and when to teach CSs as well as who should teach them. Six people said they do not know how to teach CSs systematically: I think that teachers should teach CSs to students, but I do not know how to do it systematically. They seem to be struggling either with students of different proficiencies (2 teachers) or with those who have such a limited linguistic knowledge that it impedes CS teaching: If linguistic knowledge such as vocabulary is poor, I think it is hard to teach CSs. / It can be very difficult to give CS training if there are both good and poor students of English in one class together. Also, they need more time to give CS training (2 teachers): I want to give CS training to my students, but I do not have enough time to do that. On the other hand, some teachers work hard to give good and creative activities to practice CSs (2 teachers): I try to have my students maintain communication and summarize what is said by using such
phrases as “You said ....” or “You mean ...” / I usually speak in English most of the time in class. Therefore, I think I teach how to use CSs in many situations. They also want to get good materials in order to give CS training. We need to improve both the circumstances and the content of teaching to give proper CS instruction.

Two teachers pointed out that achievement and compensatory strategies are important because they help promote more message production: I think it is important to teach achievement and compensatory strategies. Another teacher noted that students need a certain level of linguistic knowledge to use CSs well: If students try to use CSs, they should have a certain level of language proficiency. These comments are based on the actual language proficiency of their own students in class. On the other hand, some teachers have rather negative ideas about CS training in general: If students have good common sense (in social life), they can use CSs in most cases. They should learn as many useful phrases as they can (rather than having CS training). Also, very strong negative views towards avoidance strategies were made: We do not have to teach avoidance strategies. These comments dovetail with results of the statistical analysis in this study.

Three teachers noted that the questionnaire had raised their awareness of various CSs (as language users) and made them aware that they need to give CS training more often in order to raise students’ awareness of CSs: While working on the questionnaire, I noticed a variety of CSs. / I found that there are some CSs which I do not teach in class explicitly.

**5. Conclusion (Pedagogical Implications)**

This study gives us several findings and pedagogical implications for better CS instruction based on the results of the questionnaire.

First of all, the survey revealed extremely strong correlations between USE, NEED, and TEACH: The more often teachers use some particular CSs, the more they feel they need to teach them to their students and the more explicitly they actually teach them in class. Therefore, they should communicate in English as language users as much as possible, and notice and consider what CSs they use most often. Also, if teachers show students some appropriate situations for CS use, the learners can have a clearer image and idea about how to use CSs. There is general agreement that foreign language teachers should use the target language as much as possible, and this assertion is supported by this study from the viewpoint of CS training.

Secondly, the results show that teachers do not give CS training as much as they think they should. AS for TIME and APPEAL strategies, since there are some set phrases to teach and most of them are already taught at junior high school, it is crucial to have students practice and use them as early as possible. Also it is valuable for teachers to show students as many situations involving RESPONSE and MONITOR strategies as they can. Then, it is
expected that students will at least have some idea when to use these CSs and raise their awareness of those CSs. As far as AVOID strategies are concerned, they are not considered to promote much communication or language acquisition.

Lastly, although some teachers work hard to improve strategic competence by speaking as much English in class as they can or by providing creative activities for CS training, in general the participants’ comments indicate that teachers may not have clear idea of how to teach CSs systematically. It may be true that teachers do not have enough time for CS training in the limited number of English classes they have, and that there are few appropriate teaching materials available. However it is crucial that teachers should raise their own awareness of various CSs first, so that they can give better CS instruction in class.

References


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