

USING ORAL STORY-TELLING FOR ASSESSING COMMUNICATIVE PERFORMANCE IN ESL CONTEXTS¹

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INTRODUCTION

This paper reports a pilot study which investigated the feasibility of using information about a learner's communication strategies for evaluating second language (L₂) communicative performance. The research used bilingual adults as subjects and focused on the relation between different aspects of language proficiency and the use of communication strategies. The study was undertaken in the hope that the methodological details and pedagogical implications of assessing communicative performance in a second language via communication strategies would become better understood by teachers and students.

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES AND ASSESSMENT OF COMMUNICATIVE PERFORMANCE

The notion of communicative strategies as the means by which learners solve their communication problems was first discussed in the early 1970s (Selinker, 1972; Tarone, 1977), and since then has undergone progressive stages in definition and classification (Corder, 1981; Varadi, 1982; Bialystok, 1983, 1990; Faerch & Kasper, 1983; Paribakht, 1985; Poulisse, 1987). In particular, research has focused attention on the relationship between communication strategies and other language proficiency indicators (Tarone, 1977; Paribakht, 1985; Bialystok, 1983; Spolsky, 1989). In terms of pedagogy and evaluation, applied linguists have argued the case for teaching communication strategies and incorporating the measurement of them into the assessment of a learner's communicative performance (Canale & Swain, 1980; Ellis, 1984).

The application of communication strategy research to assessment is of practical significance to language teachers but, to date, only one study (Ellis, 1984) has attempted to validate the procedure. The study, however, did not include a number of important variables, namely topic change, native speaker-nonnative speaker contrasts and baseline data for the way a subject uses their first language in on-line text production tasks.

METHOD

Research questions

The present research was designed to answer the following questions:

- 1 What are the major differences in communication behaviour between native and non-native speakers engaged in oral story-telling from stimulus pictures?
- 2 Does a change in topic affect the use of communication strategies by advanced learners of English?

- 3 Are there any transferable features in the learners' L₁ and L₂ speech production at the discourse level?
- 4 Does language proficiency relate to the use of communication strategies at the advanced level?

Participants

The participants in the study were five second language learners of English and one native speaker of English (ages 25-41) at Victoria University of Wellington. The bilingual students were teachers of English in China and speakers of Mandarin Chinese and their own dialects. Two of them were secondary school teachers and the rest were university teachers. Four of them have been studying English for at least 20 years and have been teaching English as a second language for 13-15 years. One has been studying English for 11 years and has been teaching for five years. The native speaker (NS) was also a teacher of English.

Materials

Two series of pictures were used in the study. One set was taken from 'A Race Scene' in Heaton's Composition Through Pictures (1966: Appendix A). The other is from Hill's Picture Composition Book (1960), a practical joke in a domestic scene. The *Race* pictures were parsed into 12 information units, each representing a single state or event (see Appendix B-1). Twelve items were designated as preferred forms for realizing the information units (Appendix B-1). A list of 15 key words and phrases identified from Heaton's original text was used as the basis for studying the communication strategies used by the subjects (Appendix B-2). For the second set of stimulus pictures, the *Joke*, a sample composition was constructed, composed of 28 information units, 28 preferred forms, and 35 key words and phrases.

Procedure

The subjects were asked to look at the pictures carefully and to tell each story in as great a detail as possible. Each subject was given enough time to look at the pictures until he or she had formed a framework for retelling the story. All descriptions of the pictures were audio-taped and then transcribed for later analysis.

In order to investigate the possibility that communicative strategies represent transferable features of L₁ speech production, the bilingual subjects were asked to tell the stories both in English and Chinese. Sequence effects were counterbalanced by assigning subjects at random to the possible orders for telling two stories in two languages. The information units, the preferred forms expected in a notionally adequate Chinese language account of the picture sets, and the key words and phrases were established by translating the English language reference lists into Chinese.

Analysis

The analysis of the oral stories was based on a method used by Ellis (1984). Initially, each story was parsed into information units which were then compared with the target list in order to identify which of the target units a person chose to include in the story and to what extent preferred forms were used. Secondly, the way each subject handled the list of key words and phrases was studied. Each instance was classified according to whether the person had used a preferred form, or a paraphrase. A further

distinction was made as to which language - Chinese or English - seemed to be underlying the forms used in a paraphrase. On the basis of this analysis, scores were accredited to each individual using the following weights: three points were given for a preferred form, two points for a paraphrase based on the language in which the story was told, and one point for a paraphrase using a different language.

RESULTS

Native speaker-nonnative speaker differences

The first phase of the study examined the communicative performance of subjects during the oral text production process. Table 1 compares group data obtained from the five bilingual subjects with the communicative performance of the native speaker in terms of the total number of information units included in the different language accounts, the number of target information units present in the oral texts, as well as the number of preferred forms used.

Several observations can be made from the group data in Table 1:

- 1 Working through the medium of English did not, on average, reduce the total number of propositions generated by the bilingual subjects. Both language versions contained a similar number of propositions. Compared to the NS of English, however, the bilingual subjects produced texts that were two-thirds shorter than the NS.
- 2 There was a topic difference in the number of target information units included in the various texts. For the *Race*, the bilingual subjects included on average over 80% of the target units (vis-à-vis 100% for the NS), but only 60% of the propositions for the *Joke*, a percentage similar to the NS.

Table 1 Number, type and form of information units included in the oral stories of five bilingual subjects and one native speaker of English: mean, standard deviations and relative coverage of target information

Version	Information Units				Target Information				Preferred Forms			
	Chinese L ₁	English L ₂	English L ₁		Chinese L ₁	English L ₂	English L ₁		Chinese L ₁	English L ₂	English L ₁	
<i>Race</i> Mean	16	16	46		10	10	12		8	6	10	
(%)					(83%)	(83%)	(100%)		(67%)	(50%)	(83%)	
SD	2.4	3.6	-		1.3	1.1	-		1.9	0.8	-	
<i>Joke</i> Mean	20	2.2	69		18	17	18		17	15	18	
(%)					(64%)	(61%)	(64%)		(61%)	(54%)	(64%)	
SD	5.2	6.6	-		2.6	2.0	-		1.8	2.2	-	

- 3 When the bilingual subjects worked in Chinese, about two out of every three target information units were realized in a preferred form. This ratio dropped to one out of two when they worked in English. The native speaker of English, however, not only included more target information units but also used preferred forms more often.

Table 2 shows the way in which the bilingual students realized 15 key words and phrases in the English version of the *Race* scenario. The figures for each subject refer to the number of times that key words were used in their preferred forms in contrast to L₁-based paraphrase and L₂-based paraphrase. The last column records the number of items that did not appear in the texts of the subjects concerned.

The information in Table 2 shows that for the English language versions of the *Race* there were differences in the use of communication strategies among bilingual subjects themselves, and a marked difference between the bilingual subjects as a whole and the native speaker. The NS either used a preferred form or omitted the item from the text. Of the 15 items, the Chinese subjects used on average four preferred forms, one or two Chinese-based paraphrases, four English-based paraphrases, and omitted reference to a third of the ideas.

Language proficiency and communicative performance

A primary purpose of the project was to evaluate the extent to which communication performance indicators correlated with language proficiency, as measured by a composite of listening, reading and writing tests. Using Spearman rank order correlations and alpha set at .05, the following observations can be made:

- 1 English language proficiency correlated with the vocabulary scores for the English language version of the *Race* ($\rho = .80$). The vocabulary score was a weighted sum of the way 15 key vocabulary items were realized linguistically in the oral stories. The correlation represented

Table 2 The communication strategies used to realize 15 words and phrases in the English language version of the *Race* scenario

Subject (NNS)	Preferred Forms	L ₁ -based Paraphrases	L ₂ -based Paraphrases	Omitted Propositions	Total
1	4	2	3	6	15
2	3	1	5	6	15
3	3	2	5	5	15
4	6	0	5	4	15
5	4	1	2	8	15
Mean	4.0	1.2	4.0	5.8	15
SD	1.22	0.84	1.14	1.48	0
NS	13	0	0	2	15

the overlap between English language proficiency and the ability to use preferred forms in oral story-telling, and, to a lesser extent, to use L_2 -based paraphrase.

- 2 There was a strong correlation between the discourse quality (the number of target information units contained in a subject's recount) of the Chinese and English versions of the *Race* and the *Joke* ($\rho = .98$ and $.95$ respectively). What a person included in one account he or she tended to include in the second, irrespective of language orders.

Effect of topic differences

The rank order correlations were high between communicative performance measures of the same topic in both L_1 and L_2 . On the other hand, when communicative performance variables were correlated across different topics, inverse relationships were recorded. Compare, for example, the high correlation between the number of recorded propositions in the L_1 and L_2 accounts of the *Race* ($\rho = +0.98$), with the negative correlation between information units realized in the L_2 account of the *Race* and the L_2 version of the *Joke* ($\rho = -0.28$). It would appear that the ability to recount the information constituents of one topic does not necessarily generalize to another. This is an important caveat in the use of on-line speech production tasks for assessing language proficiency.

DISCUSSION

The study used three types of standards to assess the communicative performance of bilinguals: (1) a native speaker's performance, (2) a standard that had been constructed from an analysis of the stimulus pictures, and (3) the standard set by the bilingual person him or herself in L_1 . A limitation of the present study was that only a single NS was surveyed. Additional NS samples would be needed to establish a standard using native speaker performance.

There was a difference between the information units represented in the oral stories and the list of constituents provided by the authors of the picture sets. The published version was in some respects arbitrary: Ellis (1984) provided 12 propositions for the *Race*, and Hill (1960) 28 for the *Joke*. The NS in the study communicated 46 and 69 information units respectively. When student performance in the mother tongue was taken as the standard, there was little difference between the L_1 and L_2 accounts.

On the basis of experience with the task, an analysis of a sample of expert NS texts is needed to establish the most prominent propositions from a text grammar perspective. The key vocabulary items would then be drawn from the NS texts so as to represent the major notions in each element of the story grammar. An additional step could include a parallel analysis of NS texts in the mother tongue of the test takers in order to check that what is prominent from an English text perspective is also prominent from an L_1 perspective. This last step is important for making the task as culture free as possible.

The difference in communicative performance between the NS and the bilingual subjects was most clearly seen in the number of propositions generated for the pictures, as well as in the supply of preferred forms. This suggests the NNSs, even at an advanced level, have a long way to go to reach native speaker fluency in text production.

The high correlation coefficients between L_1 and L_2 performance and the divergence of the scores for different topics indicate that a learner's strategic competence is closely related to his or her linguistic competence and cognitive experience. As one could expect, if an adult has the ability to form conceptual meaning (the relevant information units) for a picture sequence, then he or she is likely to represent the story in L_1 and L_2 in similar ways, especially advanced learners who have already mastered the basic elements of vocabulary and syntax. On the other hand, the divergence between the results for each individual on different topics signifies a difference in the scope of cognitive knowledge. This is in accordance with the notion of discourse domain (Selinker & Douglas, 1989: 94): "... IL (Interlanguage) forms are relatable to particular knowledge or discourse or genre areas." In other words, "IL forms and human experience are not easily separable" (*ibid.*: 95).

From the point of view of the assessment of communicative performance, there was a positive correlation between a learner's English proficiency level and the choice of key words and phrases during story-telling, but these two variables did not converge with the scores associated with discourse completeness. This seems to indicate that a learner's command of L_2 vocabulary is independent of an ability to construct well-formed discourse.

In essence, communication strategies used by L_2 learners in story-telling tasks could be viewed as "ways of filling vocabulary gaps in L_1 or L_2 " (Kellerman, cited in Cook, 1991: 67). This may provide advanced learners with a metacognitive tactic for noticing where their interlanguages need adjustment. Advanced learners still have a need to expand their productive L_2 vocabulary repertoire. The need to resort to communication strategies is a cue that the learner could use to ensure autonomous vocabulary development. Pedagogically, learners' communicative strategies may signpost the stage of their interlanguage development and the need to increase their linguistic knowledge. From the way story-telling tasks are done, language teachers may get information about what input learners need at a particular time.

CONCLUSION

The present study was planned in order to gather information that could be used for assessing the feasibility of employing story-telling tasks as a direct measure of communicative performance as suggested by Ellis (1984). In particular, information was gathered from five Chinese-English bilinguals and one native speaker of English on: (1) native speaker performance on the tasks in both English and Chinese, (2) second language performance in English, (3) the effect of changing the topic on the production task, and (4) the relationship of communicative performance variables with language proficiency. The results of analysing the texts produced in two languages from two sets of pictures can be summarized as follows. Firstly, text structure appeared to be a transferable factor in story-telling from the pictures. The number of information constituents appearing in the texts seemed to be determined by the perception of story parts in the stimulus materials, and subjects found a way to represent the propositions regardless of the language used in the recount. Secondly, the fact that a person had the appropriate words in their mother tongue did not guarantee that the person, even at an advanced level, would use the specific vocabulary in the L_2 production of the story. Thirdly, domain knowledge appeared to determine the use of preferred forms. If a person had language related experiences of the topic, he or she was likely to have the necessary vocabulary to express key propositions, and hence less need to use communication strategies. Fourthly, apparent avoidance behaviour may be the result of an inability to perceive a story element, or it may result from a decision

not to express a proposition for any of a number of reasons - face saving, lack of perceived relevance, or a gap in language knowledge.

Communicative performance is a composite of many aspects of language use, and tasks such as the on-line production of text from stimulus pictures gives one window on the way in which a person can use language knowledge effectively. The procedure, however, should be used with caution with advanced learners of English. Results may not generalize to different topic occasions; the use of preferred forms does not necessarily predict an ability to make decisions about the structure of a story; and the absence of story elements does not necessarily predict low language proficiency.

NOTE

- ¹ This article is based on a research project completed as part of an MA in Applied Linguistics at Victoria University of Wellington.

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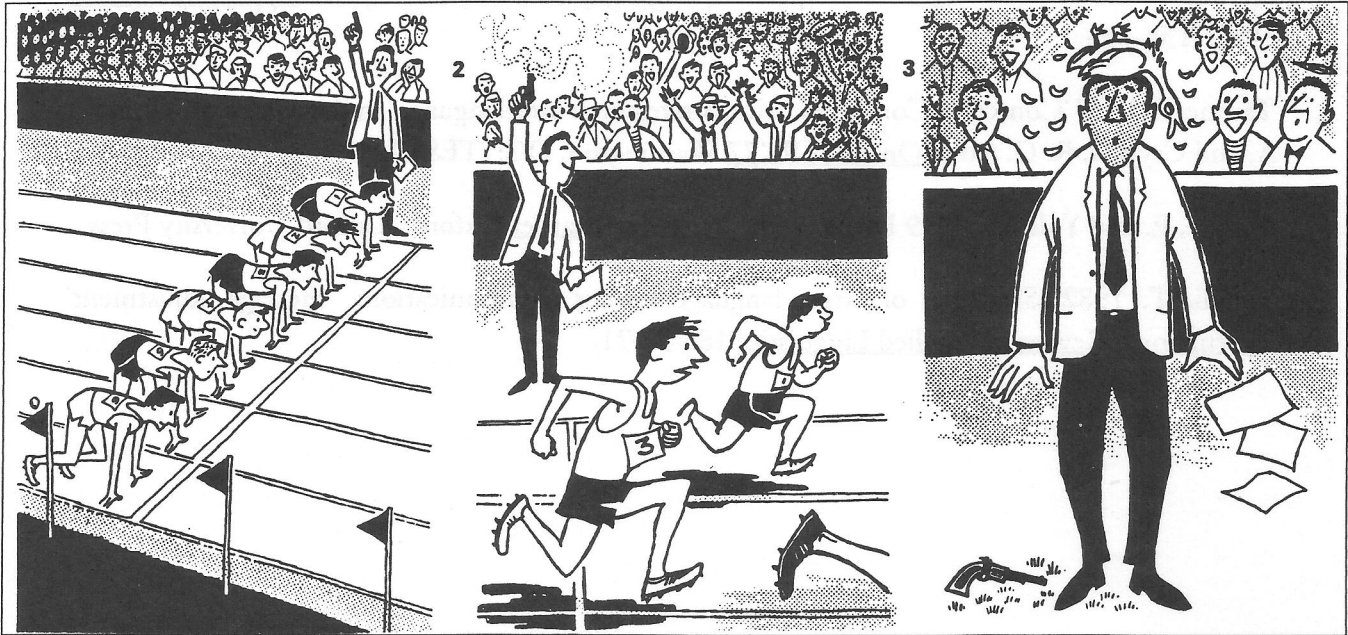
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APPENDIX

Appendix A Stimulus pictures used in the text production task: The Race



Appendix B Criterion features of the Race

B-1 Information units and 'preferred' forms in a notionally 'good' account of the story (after Ellis, 1984)

	Information Units	'Preferred' language
A	People watching race 1 who they are 2 what they do	crowd/spectators laugh
B	People participating in the event 3 what the event is 4 who they are	race runners/athletes
C	Man starting the race 5 who he is 6 what he is holding 7 what he does with it 8 what happens when he fires 9 how it happens 10 what happens to the bird 11 what happens to the things he is holding 12 how he feels	starter starting pistol fire shoot/hit/kill accidentally/without meaning to fall/drop/hit fall/drop/let go surprised/amazed/astonished

B-2	Key words and phrases (Heaton, 1966: 11)						
1	starter	2	starting-line	3	running-track	4	running-shoes
5	shorts	6	competitor	7	runner	8	stadium
9	spectator	10	startled	11	get ready	12	run a race
13	fire a gun	14	start a race	15	cheer a person on		