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Use of Fillers as a Communication Strategy in Oral Interactions

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Abstract

Being competent in English is an advantage to ESL speakers, particularly in the context of job interviews. While many learners of English as a second language (ESL) are struggling when using the language, Communication Strategies (CS) appear as helpful tools to overcome ESL speakers' difficulties in conveying their intended messages. CS generally refers to efforts made by ESL speakers to tackle various communication problems in the course of their oral interactions. Among the various types of CS, fillers are widely used due to its function as a floor-holding strategy in oral interactions. This study aims to investigate the use of fillers as CS by candidates of real academic staff recruitment interviews and explore their functions in oral communication. The data of this qualitative study were obtained from observations made on interview sessions involving interview panelists and the candidates, consisting of 19 Malay ESL speakers. The interview sessions were conducted in the English language at UiTM Machang campus in Kelantan, Malaysia. With the help of NVivo software (version 12), the researchers identified the types of fillers that occurred in the oral interactions and classified them according to Dörnyei and Scott's (1997) taxonomy of CS; lexicalised fillers and hesitation gambits. The results revealed that fillers were extensively used by ESL speakers in the interviews as a processing time pressure-related strategy. They occurred when the speakers were trying to fill in the gaps in communication. Undeniably, the strategy helps to maintain conversations and prevent communication breakdown, hence providing a significant contribution to speech and signal relationships between the speaker, the listener, and the discourse. Hence, the use of fillers should not be viewed negatively and totally avoided. As the speakers gradually increase their L2 competency, it is hoped that they would have more control over their use of fillers and hence, resulting in smoother oral communication.

Keywords: Academic Staff Recruitment Interviews, Communication Strategies, ESL Speakers, Oral Communication, Use of Fillers.

Introduction

Communication is defined as the mechanism by which concepts, information, thoughts, and emotions are transmitted to understand and be understood (Akilandeswari et al., 2015). It is an essential skill needed by an individual. When a message is clearly transmitted and interpreted by the recipient in the same way as the sender intends, then effective communication is said to occur. Obviously, effective communication is not solely determined by what is said by a speaker, but also how it is spoken and the attitude with which the speaker delivers the message (Kelvin-Iloafu, 2016). This makes an individual a competent speaker.

In high-stake interaction contexts such as job interviews, the English language is preferable by many. While being able to speak competently in English is desired by many, one should expect to encounter various difficulties during his or her interactions. A review on past literature shows that such difficulties are handled by speakers of English as a second language (ESL) through the use of communication strategies (CS). CS generally refers to efforts made by ESL speakers to tackle various communication problems in the course of their oral interactions. Examples of them include translating into the first language (termed as "code switching") and word coinage. Ahmed and Pawar (2018) highlighted the significance of CS by stating that CS plays an integral role in language acquisition.

Among the various types of CS employed by ESL speakers, fillers have been identified as one of the most common types of CS. They are used to fill in the gaps in communication when the speakers search for the right words in the target language. While a review on past studies indicates that fillers are widely employed by L2 speakers, the current study is interested to examine the use of such strategy by interview candidates and explore their functions in the context of academic staff recruitment interviews.

Literature Review

The term "communication strategy" (CS) which was firstly proposed by Selinker (1972) originally concerned with the linguistic aspects of the psychology of second language (L2) learning. An early definition of CS, therefore, revolved around the use of various strategies in L2 interactions to communicate ideas when facing a communication gap caused by performance variables or insufficient competence (Canale & Swain, 1980). This traditional conceptualisation of CS which refers to strategies used to tackle insufficient language resources in the speakers, however, is seen by some scholars as being insufficient to capture its meaning since there could be other reasons for the use of such strategies. Yet, this notion gained its popularity in the 1970s, resulting in the emergence of many CS scholars who proposed their perspectives on CS.

In general, there are two perspectives of CS namely psychological and interactional perspectives. Faerch and Kasper (1983) who advocated the psychological perspective of CS defined the term as potentially conscious plans for solving speakers' perceived problems in reaching their communicative goals. Meanwhile, Tarone (1981: 288) saw CS to occur when there is "a mutual attempt of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in situations where requisite meaning structures (include both linguistic structures and sociolinguistic rule structures) do not seem to be shared", hence giving the interactional perspective of CS. Other CS scholars are (Bialsystok, 1983; Corder, 1983; Poulisse, 1990).

Among many scholars of CS, Dörnyei and Scott (1997) offered the most "holistic" and comprehensive concept of CS which integrates both psychological and interactional perspectives of CS. Hence, the taxonomy is found suitable in the context of the current study which involves interactions between interview candidates and the panelists. According to Dörnyei and Scott (1997, p. 179), CS refers to "every potentially intentional attempt to cope with any language-related problem of which the speaker is aware during the course of communication". Table 1 shows Dörnyei and Scott's (1997) taxonomy of CS.

Table 1
Dornyei and Scott's (1997) taxonomy of CS

Categories of Dornyei and Scott's (1997) taxonomy	**Communication Strategies**
Direct Strategies	
Resource deficit-related strategies	Message abandonment Message reduction Message replacement Circumlocution Approximation Use of all-purpose words Word-coinage Restructuring Literal translation Foreignising Code switching Use of similar sounding words Mumbling Omission Retrieval Mime
Own-performance problem-related strategies	Self-rephrasing Self-repair
Other-performance problem-related strategies	Other-repair

Interactional Strategies Resource deficit related strategies	Appeals for help
Own-performance problem-related strategies	Comprehension check Own accuracy check
Other-performance problem-related strategies	Asking for repetition Asking for clarification Asking for confirmation Guessing Expressing non-understanding Interpretive summary Responses Repeat Repair Rephrase Expand Confirm Reject
Indirect Strategies Processing time-pressure related strategies	Use of fillers Repetition Self-repetition Other-repetition
Own-performance problem-related strategies	Verbal strategy marker
Other-performance problem-related strategies	Feigning understanding

Dörnyei & Scott (1997, p. 197)

In this taxonomy, Dörnyei and Scott (1997) separate the main categories of CS into three, which are direct, interactional, and indirect. These categories are then separated into sub-categories based on the types of communication problems, namely Resource deficit-related (gaps in speakers' knowledge that prohibit them successfully from verbalising their messages), Own performance problem-related (the realisation that what has been said by the speakers is incorrect or partly correct), Other performance problem-related (refer to something inthe interlocutors' speech that is deemed problematic), and Processing time pressure-related (relate to the situation in which a speaker needs additional time to process and prepare L2 speech). Hence, fillers are placed under the sub-category of Processing time-pressure related strategies under the main category of Indirect strategy.

Some research has been conducted on oral communication strategies in the Malaysian context. These include a study by Kuen et al (2017), who investigated the effects of oral CS instruction on ESL learners' oral communicative performance and their strategic competence. The respondents consisted of 88 Malay ESL speakers from two polytechnics

in the central and southern zones of Malaysia. The treatment involved 12 weeks of training using oral communication strategies such as circumlocution, appeal for help, clarification request, fillers, comprehension check, confirmation checks, self-repair, and topic avoidance among two groups, namely the control group and the experimental group. The instruments such as oral proficiency test, oral communication test, transcripts of oral communication test, unstructured interview, and self-report were used to collect the data. The findings revealed that after the training, the experimental group outperformed the control group significantly, and the learners' self-reports also indicated positive results. The literal translation was the most used CS in their conversation.

Aside from Kuen et al (2017), other studies on CS include Kaizhu (2016) who investigated the most frequently used oral CS and the relationship between oral English language proficiency by pre-university Malaysian Chinese students in a matriculation college in Selangor, Malaysia. The data analysis was based on the Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI) developed by (Nakatani, 2006). The findings revealed that message reduction and alteration strategies were the most frequently used CS, followed by non-verbal strategies, social affective strategies, fluency-oriented strategies, and negotiation for meaning strategies. In addition, Spearman's correlation coefficients used to examine the relationship between two variables revealed that there was a statistically significant relationship between oral CS used with the participants' oral proficiency. The findings above were consistent with the study by Idrus (2016) who also employed Nakatani's OCSI in the data analysis in identifying the CS used by undergraduate students when delivering oral presentations. The results showed that good presenters used more oral CS compared to average presenters. They used more social affective, fluency-oriented, and non-verbal strategies, whereas average students used social effective and non-verbal strategies to a considerably smaller extent.

The above studies which were conducted in non-real communication contexts, provide support that CS is significant and widely used in conversations. The current study however, departs from these studies by examining the use of CS among ESL learners in a real communication context, specifically academic staff recruitment interviews. Among the various types of CS that might be used by the interview candidates, this study is interested to examine the use of fillers, mainly because they are reported to occur in a vast amount in conversations as stated by (Richards and Schmidt, 2013).

Fillers as Communication Strategies

As illustrated in Table 1, Dörnyei and Scott (1997) propose 40 strategies, and the use of fillers is part of them. Following Dörnyei and Scott's (1997) perspective of CS, fillers, being part of Processing time-pressure related strategies are used to fill pauses, to stall, and to gain time to keep the communication channel open and maintain discourse at times of difficulty. Bavelas, Coates, & Johnson (2002); Clark & Wasow (1998); Dornyei (1995) highlighted the use of fillers as strategies to gain more time to think and find appropriate words and structures. Dornyei and Scott (1997) categorized fillers into two types namely lexicalised pause fillers and hesitation gambits. Lexicalised pause fillers refer to the short structures such as "well", "actually", and "okay" while hesitation gambits come in the form

of sounds such as “aaa”, “erm”, and “emm”. The latter, from Faerch and Kasper’s (1983, p. 215) perspective, are known as non-lexicalised fillers.

On the function of fillers, lexicalised fillers and hesitation gambits have no significant meaning in the sentence although the former is usually uttered consciously while the latter might occur without speakers’ consciousness (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997). Nevertheless, they both fill in the gaps that suddenly occur in the conversation when the speaker has to take a little pause to think about what to say next before continuing with the speech. Simply put, they are indicators that “there’s more to come” (Lomotey, 2021).

On the use of fillers, Kharismawan (2017) states that L2 speakers should be made aware that it works in holding the conversation while the speaker thinks of what to say next. Unlike other types of CS which help L2 speakers to convey and clarify their messages, fillers are used to retain interlocutors’ attention on the subject matter being talked about. Additionally, Erten (2014) states that in daily talks by native or non-native speakers, fillers always exist and it is nearly impossible to discover a speaker who does not use any fillers at all while speaking (Khojastehrad, 2012), hence is considered normal in speaking (Stevani, Sudarsono, & Supardi, 2018) and that they appear regularly in most conversations (Richards & Schmidt, 2013).

Considering the above, the use of fillers is defined in the current study as a strategy to fill in the gaps in communication when the speakers search for the right words in the target language. Apparently, their occurrence is not due to insufficient resources of the target language but to indicate the need for a word or simply to plan utterances. This study in particular, is interested to look into more detail of the use of fillers by ESL speakers as candidates in real job interviews.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach to examine the interview candidates’ use of fillers in academic staff recruitment interviews. Merriam (1998, p. 6) stated that the purpose of qualitative research is to identify, describe, and explain the “meaning inherent in people’s experiences”. Therefore, the researchers used the qualitative method in this study to investigate, comprehend, and describe the use of fillers among candidates of real job interviews.

Location and Participants

The respondents of this study were 19 Malay ESL speakers who attended academic staff recruitment interviews to select permanent and part-time lecturers at UiTM Machang campus in Kelantan, Malaysia. Being Malaysia’s largest public institution, UiTM represents the majority of Malays who speak English as a second language. The candidates were selected at two interview phases; mock teaching and final interview. Since the mock interview did not involve much interactions between candidates and the interview panelists, the data were gathered only from the final interview. The selections were made for three faculties namely the Faculty of Art and Design (FSSR), the Faculty of Information Management (IM), and the Academy of Contemporary Islamic Studies (ACIS). Due to the current COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews were conducted physically and online;

whichever was convenient to the candidates as well as the campus. One FSSR candidate attended a face-to-face interview, while the other five joined online interviews via Cisco Webex. As for IM, all five candidates were called in for online interviews using Cisco Webex. Meanwhile, five candidates from ACIS attended face-to-face interviews and another three joined online interviews also through Cisco Webex. In the current study, Malay candidates were chosen as the respondents since they are believed to be the least receptive to the use of English (Abdullah & Eng, 2017). Hence, their ability to communicate in English has become a real concern of many studies, including the current study.

During the interview sessions, the panelists comprised the Rector of the Machang campus, the Deputy Rector of Academic Affairs, and the Heads of the three faculties mentioned earlier. They were all physically placed in a meeting room to evaluate the candidates. Meanwhile, three Deans from the respective faculties joined the interview sessions virtually from the UiTM Shah Alam campus, giving a total of eight panelists.

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection procedure began by getting written approvals from the Research Ethics Committee and the Rector of UiTM Kelantan, Malaysia. Following these approvals, the researchers made arrangements with the Assistant Registrar of UiTM Machang campus to allow the former to observe all interview sessions on the dates determined by the campus. Prior to the interview sessions, consent to participate in the research were obtained from the interview candidates and the panelists. During the interview sessions, the researchers were helped by the media technician in-charge to record the sessions. The recordings would help them in analysing the data later on. In total, there were eight video recordings capturing all 19 candidates with a different number of candidates in each video. Following this, the oral data were then transcribed verbatim so as to ensure complete understanding of the context of interactions. Data analysis was then conducted to investigate the use of fillers as CS by the interview candidates.

Data Analysis

The main focus of data analysis was the use of fillers by ESL speakers attending academic staff recruitment interviews conducted in English. Following the data collection process, the video recordings were analysed using NVivo software (version 12) which greatly helped the researchers to manage the data more systematically. This software enabled the researchers to systematically identify and classify the types of fillers used by candidates based on Dörnyei and Scott's (1997) perspective of CS.

Data analysis started with the coding process. Prior to that, the video data were imported into the NVivo software. The researchers then viewed the video recordings and identified any occurrences of fillers among the candidates. Once fillers were identified, the oral data were transcribed for further data analysis and descriptions. To enhance the accuracy of the transcription, the digital recording was played back and forth in small segments to ensure that no pertinent data would be missed out. Apparently, the use of Nvivo software allowed the researchers to digitally identify the point of interactions that involved the candidates' use fillers and make references to them later as and when necessary.

By adopting thematic analysis based on Dörnyei and Scott's (1997) taxonomy of CS, fillers were placed under the theme of processing time pressure-related strategy. From the different types of fillers identified from the data, the researchers constructed three different codes namely lexicalised pause fillers, hesitation gambits, and a combination of both. For data confidentiality, all 19 candidates examined were given pseudonyms. Respondent 1 was labelled as "(R1)" followed by other candidates up until the last candidate who was labelled as "(R19)". Similarly, the first interview panelist was labelled as "IP1" and the number continued until "IP8" for the eighth panelist.

Data Reliability and Validity

The use of NVivo software (version 12) helped to address the issue of reliability of the research findings. This is because the software allowed the researchers to manage the classifications of fillers more systematically. Meanwhile, the validity of the research findings on the classifications of fillers was enhanced by verifications made by two inter-raters. According to Liao et al (2010), two inter-raters would be sufficient for 19 candidates examined in this study.

Discussion of Results Findings

The results of this study showed extensive use of fillers among the candidates with 388 occurrences. They can either be lexicalised pause fillers, hesitation gambits, or a combination of both. While the former referred to the form of short structures such as "well", "actually", and "okay", the latter referred to non-word sounds such as "aaa", "erm", and "emm".

Table 2
Frequency of the types of fillers used by the candidates in real job interviews

Types of fillers	Frequency
Lexicalised pause fillers	23
Hesitation gambits	299
Lexicalised pause fillers and hesitation gambits	66
Total	388

Table 2 shows the occurrence of fillers according to their types. Out of 388 occurrences, 23 are lexicalised pause fillers, while 299 occurrences are hesitation gambits. The remaining 66 occurrences are a combination of both. The following are the examples of excerpts from the transcribed data in their verbatim form which show the use of different types of fillers by the interview candidates.

Lexicalised Pause Fillers

<Files\\Video 1>

IP1: So, to start with, introduce to us...introduce yourself

R1: Okay, bismillahirrahmanirrahim, assalamualaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh

<Files\\Video 2>

IP4: What is your specialised…specialised area?

R2: I do specialise in advertising, from illustrating the design, or making a video in a television commercial show okay…that's it.

<Files\\Video 3>
IP3: Can you tell us about your teaching background?
R6: I have lots more education experience which is more than 10 years with the other education.. okay**…**but I want to go to another established university which is the UiTM. That is number one.

As seen in video 1, video 2, and video 3, the candidates used lexicalised pause fillers (the word "okay"). This type of fillers kept the communication channel open regardless of the position the strategy was used in the sentence. In video 1 for instance, the candidate started responding to the interviewer's request to introduce himself by reciting "bismillahirrahmanirrahim". Prior to this however, she uttered the lexicalised pause filler "okay" to start her response. Meanwhile, in video 2, the candidate uttered "okay" before she ended her explanation about her area of expertise while in video 3, the word "okay" was uttered in the midst of R6's explanation about her teaching background.

Hesitation Gambits

Hesitation gambits are non-word sounds that have no significant meaning in a sentence. With 299 occurrences, these fillers were rampant among the interview candidates. Hesitation gambits occurred in almost every sentence uttered by the speaker as seen below:

<Files\\Video 2>
R4: for planning design aaa...during my time at emm...at try apps which is during my intern

<Files\\Video 2>
R4: This one of the project that I am most emm...that I most like

<Files\\Video 3
R5: I collaborate with the faculty business, and then aaa...with hotspot reg aaa...with faculty engineering so emm...

<Files\\Video 4
R7: Okay, assalamualaikum warahmatullah. My name (he stated his name). Currently I am a Master holder aaa...of IM77 plus which is aaa...Information Kolej (inaudible) and currently I'm working as aaa...ptft for UiTM Machang. This month aaa...my first semester and currently I've been teach aaa...working aaa...for system development under PPIM45 aaa...

The above excerpts show that hesitation gambits occurred in almost all utterances, resulting in much greater number than the lexicalised fillers. Notice that in all utterances, hesitation gambits serve to fill the gap at the point when the speakers were taking time while thinking of what to say next. At the same time, this strategy helped the speakers sustain their interactions by keeping the panelists' attention on them.

Lexicalised Pause Fillers and Hesitation Gambits

<Files\\Video 5>
IP3: If you are selected for this position, can you share with us, what you like and dislike about teaching?

R11: Okay…aaa…what I dislike err…sorry what I like and dislike about teaching. Okay…I like to aaa…share my knowledge to my students and aaa…I believe I can give more value and advantage to UiTM Kelantan especially to my faculty. And aaa…I also can share experience and get err…information with other lecturers also.

As seen in the above excerpt, the candidate used a combination of lexicalised pause fillers and hesitation gambits in delivering the intended messages. The number of hesitation gambits however, appeared to be much greater than lexicalised fillers with six occurrences as opposed to only two occurrences of the latter. Other excerpts involving both types of fillers are given below:

<Files\\Video 2>
R3: Okay, aaa...thank you emm...from my...I can use my previous works experience

<Files\\Video 2>
R4: Actually emm...just one of my...I actually very disappointed with myself because I do not actively join in any competition

<Files\\Video 3>
R6: Okay, aaa...thank you. Okay so, I don't have aaa...lots of art...artworks actually but my artworks all of them is I got file

<Files\\Video 3>
R6: Okay, actually emm...my (inaudible) aaa...account is containing all the emm...artwork which is err...containing my all artwork aaa...series okay emm...but emm...I want to share the screen okay

Based on the excerpts given above, notice that the candidates started their responses with lexicalised fillers ("okay" and "actually") followed by hesitation gambits. Apparently, this provided them extra time to respond while at the same time, holding the panelists' attention on them until they started giving their responses. Known as "time-gaining" strategies, fillers differ from other types of CS as they are not used to compensate linguistic deficiency, but to acquire time and to preserve the communication channel open at times of difficulty (Dörnyei (1995). In addition, Santos et al. (2016, p. 199) asserted that the use of fillers is not about the common use in the oral strategy, but the use of it serves as a signal for the interlocutor not to "steal" the floor when the speaker has not finished her/his turn. Finally, notice also that from the total number of 18 instances involving lexicalised fillers and hesitation gambits, there were only six occurrences of the former while the rest were the latter, hence indicating the widespread use of hesitation gambits in L2 oral interactions.

Conclusion

Although early definition of CS relates them to various strategies in L2 interactions to communicate ideas when facing a communication gap caused by performance variables or insufficient competence (Canale & Swain, 1980), fillers, being one type of CS, help speakers to think of what to say next or even rearrange their thoughts before they speak. This prevents struggling L2 speakers from abandoning their messages, or even giving up their

endeavor to communicate in L2. In short, fillers help to sustain conversations and prevent communication breakdown.

As shown in this study, fillers, particularly hesitation gambits, are extensively used by L2 speakers in delivering their intended messages particularly in the context of real job interviews. They are a useful strategy for the speakers to hold the floor when they think or hesitate during their speech.

Implications of the Study

Unlike other types of CS which are teachable, teaching fillers to learners seems not possible or purposeful. After all, it does not help learners to improve their L2 proficiency. As, Lomotey (2021) puts it, there are times when overuse of fillers attracts negativity since it tends to reduce fluency. Despite this however, the use of fillers offers ways for struggling L2 speakers to maintain their conversations until their messages are delivered to the interlocutors. Fillers therefore, provide a significant contribution to speech and signal relationships between the speaker, the listener, and the discourse (Biber, Conrad, & Cortes, 2004). Hence, the use of fillers should not be viewed negatively and totally avoided. As speakers gradually increase their L2 competency, it is hoped that they would have more control over their use of fillers and hence, resulting in smoother L2 communication.

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