

## The Use of Communication Strategies to Compensate for Gaps in Classroom Communication: The Case of the University of Cape Coast, Ghana

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### ABSTRACT

Classroom interaction is very critical to the teaching and learning process in the second language classroom and speakers may encounter difficulties in expressing their communication intentions as a result of gaps in their linguistic repertoire. Necessarily, this study was conducted to ascertain the strategies students and lecturers of the University of Cape Coast use to compensate for gaps in their classroom interactions. The convergent mixed method approach was used to study 128 students and 2 lecturers of the Department of Arts Education of the University of Cape Coast. Questionnaire and an observational schedule were used to collect data from students and lecturers. It was found that students prefer to use non-linguistic means (indirect strategies) to convey their meaning while lecturers prefer to use strategies that engage students in the conversation (interactional strategies). Fillers, self-rephrasing, and self-repetition were found to be the most frequently used strategies by students and lecturers. The study concluded that interactional strategies are often used by lecturers as a teaching methodology even though excessive use of communication strategies sometimes disrupts instructional hours and impedes the proper acquisition of the English language. The study also recommends the use of more learner-centred teaching methodologies which will give students the opportunity to self-learn the second language by practicing it.

**Keywords:** *Communication strategies, Classroom communication, Communication gaps, Students, Lecturers*

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Communication allows humans to share their emotions, thoughts, and other information among themselves (Anyidoho, 2018), thereby becoming one of the essential needs of humans. In situations where the language of communication is not the first language of the speakers, they may encounter difficulties in expressing their communication intentions (Kern, 2000) as a result of gaps in their linguistic repertoire. Such a situation then requires them to adopt some communication strategies to help express their intentions (Adegbile & Alabi, 2009). The English language has gained very significant status in the lives of Ghanaians with varying levels ranging from the broken English spoken by uneducated Ghanaians, the anglicized mother tongues (Fanglish) mostly spoken by Fante market women and youngsters, to the official standard spoken by educated Ghanaians. During the 2010 population census, 63% of Ghanaians were reported as people aged fifteen years and above (15+) who speak English in Ghana (Afrifa et al, 2019). There is this unofficial premium put on the acquisition of the language by Ghanaians because of the educational, material, and status advantages that knowledge of it confers.

Contrary to the expectation that students from high schools, colleges, and universities should be proficient in the English language, students seem to fumble in their oral communications in the English language inside and outside the classroom. This may be resulting from lags in their linguistic repertoire or, the result of other social and environmental factors like nervousness, speakers' physical or psychological condition, etc. To compensate for these lags, students may resort to the use of other linguistic and non-linguistic means to communicate. Junior High School students are found to use transliteration, omissions, wrong word use, L1-induced spelling errors, etc. in their English

language essay writings (Owu-Ewie & Lomotey, 2016). These strategies that L2 users employ to translate linguistic structures from their mother tongue into the target language are defined by linguists as the strategies that learners adopt to deal with the gaps in their communicative repertoire when they are faced with difficulties in expressing their communicative intentions (Adegbile & Alabi, 2009). Some of the communication strategies that L2 learners use include: circumlocution, word coinages, prefabricated patterns, appeal for help, time-gaining strategies, message abandonment, topic avoidance, approximation, use of non-linguistic means, literal translation, use of fillers, code-switching, wrong term use, repetition, self-correction, etc. (Tarone 1977,1981; Dornyei, 1995, 1997).

The imperfection in a language is not limited to only second languages but also all languages since no individual can have a perfect linguistic repertoire (Maleki, 2007). The general assumption is that every individual, in their communications, makes mistakes, if not errors because of social or psychological factors. To avoid interruption in communication, speakers use communication strategies to make do with the immediately available linguistic resources to communicate their intentions. While others may see the language of the L2 learner as mere interference of learners' first language or errors they make in the process of perfecting their learning, from another lens, these features can be seen as conscious attempts by speakers to communicate in the target language with the limited linguistic repertoire at their level of education and level of competence.

### 1.1 Problem Statement

Although access to and dissemination of information has become easier in recent years, the teacher is still the primary source of knowledge and information in the classroom (Simpllico, 2002 as cited by Nazish, 2014). In the delivery of knowledge to students, teachers' communication skills are very essential in the classroom (McCarthy & Carter, 2001) and so are the student's communication skills since communication goes both ways. Therefore, comprehension of communication intentions between and among lecturer(s) and students during the teaching process is of great importance.

However, it has been suggested by scholars that second language users encounter communication breakdowns during communications in the L2 as a result of gaps in their linguistics repertoire (Adegbile & Alabi, 2009; Lehmann, 2007; Owusu, Agor, & Amuzu 2015; Rydell, 2018). Hence, researchers have looked into the types of communication strategies (CS) that second language learners use, the factors that influence the choice of a CS, the awareness of CS usage by second language users, etc. (Houston, 2006; Hua, Nor, & Jaradat, 2012; Spromberg, 2011; Tiono & Sylvia, 2004). These studies, though share similarities in terms of theories and purpose, the linguacultural background in which the studies are conducted make them different, thereby creating a gap in this area of study.

In Ghana, a study conducted by Nti (2019) to ascertain the use of CS by college tutors and students in the Bono and Ahafo region revealed the use of CS by college students and tutors helps to reduce their communication apprehension level and improve their state of communicative self-confidence. Lomotey and Debrah-Amofah (2021), investigating lecturers and students in two public universities in Ghana also found out that code-switching, literal translation, and appeal for help were employed by lecturers and students to solve communication problems, to reach communicative goals, for clarification and to reach language accuracy.

There are obvious gaps in the geographical setting, educational level, and linguacultural background of the reviewed studies on communication strategies conducted in Ghana. These necessitate an in-depth exploration of the use of CS in a different setting, UCC, to find out if there are geographical or culture-related differences as compared to the other studies. This study, therefore, looks at the use of communication strategies among lecturers and students.

### 1.2 Research Questions

The following research questions directed the study;

- (i) What types of communication strategies do lecturers and students adopt during instructional hours?
- (ii) What is the frequency of occurrence of communication strategies lecturers and students use during instructional hours?
- (iii) What factors influence the choice to use a communication strategy by lecturers and students during instructional hours?

## II. METHODOLOGY

Data were collected from students and teachers of the Department of Arts Education of the University of Cape Coast to ascertain the use of communication strategies by students and lecturers. A convergent parallel mixed method design was adopted for this; therefore both quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently during lecture sessions of the sampled classes throughout six (6) weeks.

## 2.1 Sample

The population of the study was all level 300 undergraduate students of the Department of Arts Education of the University of Cape Coast in the Central Region of Ghana. Ideally, the study was interested in level 400 students as they are presumed to be at a level where they have acquired a higher language competence level. However, since level 400s are required to do a compulsory teaching internship, they were not available at the time of the study so level 300 undergraduates were studied. There are 275 level 300 undergraduates in the Department of Arts education. Using the purposive sampling technique, two areas of specialisation, English language, and Religion studies were randomly chosen for the study out of the five areas of specialisation, English, French, History, Religion, and Ghanaian languages. In total, the sample size of the English and Religion level 300 students was 128 together with one lecturer each from the specialisation area making a total of 130 respondents.

## 2.2 Instrument

The research instruments used in this study were a questionnaire and an observational schedule. The nature of the research questions and the research approach adopted in this study requires the use of a variety of research instruments to obtain the needed data for the study. A structured observation schedule was used to collect both quantitative and qualitative data on students and lecturers. The observational guide was put together using Dornyei and Scott's (1995) taxonomy of communication strategies adapted from Dornyei and Scott (1995). Questionnaires were used to collect quantitative data from students. The questionnaire was pilot tested on level 300 Mathematics education students from the department of Maths and ICT of the university of Cape Coast. A reliable Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.794 was obtained.

## 2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected on the University of Cape Coast campus during lecture sessions of students of the two areas of specialisation for six (6) weeks. Consent was sorted from all participants before data was collected. The quantitative data was edited, coded, keyed, classified, and analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and presented on tables using frequencies, means, and percentages. The qualitative data was transcribed manually by the researcher. The results were presented in narratives and themes to support the analyses of the results from the quantitative data.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### 3.1 What types of communication strategies do lecturers and students adopt during instructional hours?

This research question sought to find out all the types of CS used during lesson delivery. An observation schedule was used to collect such data from students and lecturers using Dornyei and Scott's (1995) typology of CS. The result indicated that students and lecturers used direct strategies such as circumlocution, restructuring, use of all-purpose words, word-coinage, literal translation, foreignizing, code-switching, mime, and self-rephrasing, indirect strategies like fillers, repetitions and hesitation devices and interactional strategies such as appeal for help, clarification check, confirmation check, comprehension check and interpretive summary during classroom interactions.

**Table 1**

*Cumulative Percentage of CS Usage*

Category/ Respondents	Direct strategies	Interactional strategies	Indirect strategies
Students	50%	42.85%	100%
Lecturers	50%	71.43%	66.7%
Sum	50%	57.14%	88.35%
Difference	-	28.58%	33.3%

It can also be seen that students use more indirect strategies (33.3%) than lecturers. On the other hand, lecturers use more interactional strategies (28.58%) than students. This is an indication of the lecturers' level of competency in communicating in the English language. At their level, they are believed to have a good command of their subject matter and the English language, implying that their use of communication strategies is mostly for interactional purposes (to make sure they are understood well by their students).

The results established that some strategies were common only among students while other strategies are common only among lecturers. Though respondents from this study used a variety of CS during the observation, some CS such as message abandonment, message retrieval, and message replacement were not used at all during the 4 weeks of

observation, slightly contradicting previous findings (Spromberg, 2011; Abunawas, 2012; Nazish, 2014; Nti, 2019; etc.). Students also repeated their utterances as a means to gain time to think and check the accuracy of their utterances. Again, students appeal for help from their friends when they are faced with communication gaps. Most students continually used the phrase “how do we say it? How do I put it?” when speaking. The observation was that students did not need help in conveying their intentions. Rather, those were fillers and mannerisms they use to organize their thoughts. This affirms Nti’s (2019) findings that students and lecturers use CS just to avoid communication discontinuity and not because speakers need help from other interlocutors.

### 3.2 What is the frequency of occurrence of communication strategies lecturers and students use during instructional hours?

The purpose of research question two was to find out how often students and lecturers use CS, and which particular CS is frequently used by respondents. This information was gathered using two different instruments: an observation schedule and questionnaires. The result from the analysis of the observational schedule demonstrates that fillers are the most frequently used CS with 61 occurrences out of the total 262 strategies used by students and lecturers. This is followed by self-rephrasing (26 occurrences) and self-repetition (25 occurrences). Confirmation check and word coinage are found to be the least frequently used CS (2 occurrences each) followed by appeal for help and message retrieval (3 occurrences each). Accuracy check, mumbling, message replacement, message abandonment, message reduction, and message replacement were not used at all.

Comparing the CS usage between students and lecturers, from Table 1, it can be seen that students used more CS (57%) than lecturers (43%). This is in contrast with Nti (2019) who found that lectures used more CS than students. Also, from Table1, while Religion students used more CS (30%) than English students (27%), English lecturers used more CS (23%) than Religion lecturers (20%).

To get data from students’ perspectives, students responded to a questionnaire on how frequently they use communication strategies. Responses to items on the questionnaire were on a scale; All the time=5, Usually= 4, Sometimes= 3, Occasionally=2, Rarely=1. The results, as seen in Table 2, indicates that out of the 25 communication strategies, expressing non-understanding, the use of all-purpose-words, code-switch, message reduction, literal translation, fillers, appeal for help, word coinage, clarification check, self-rephrasing, accuracy check, mime, message replacement, restructuring, message abandonment, and interpretive summary is used averagely by students with a mean between 2.6-3.5.

From Table 2, restructuring, comprehension check, confirmation heck, hesitation devices, asking for repetition, mumbling, and foreignization are the most frequently used CS by students with means scores ranging from 3.60 to 3.98, with foreignization having the highest mean ( $M=3.98$ ,  $SD=0.972$ ). The least frequently used CS out of the 25 communication strategies was message retrieval ( $M=2.52$ ,  $SD=1.094$ ). Out of the 25 communication strategies, expressing non-understanding, the use of all-purpose-words, code-switch, message reduction, literal translation, fillers, appeal for help, word coinage, clarification check, self-rephrasing, accuracy check, mime, message replacement, restructuring, message abandonment, and interpretive summary is used averagely by students with a mean between 2.6-3.5.

The results from both the observation schedule and questionnaires confirm the purpose of communication studies as devices used when speakers are faced with communication problems.

**Table 2**

*Frequency of use of CS by Students*

CS	Mean	Std. Deviation
Message abandonment	3.52	1.346
Message reduction	3.05	1.121
Message replacement	3.41	1.220
Circumlocution	3.60	1.152
Restructuring	3.45	1.196
Use of all-purpose words	2.75	1.210
Word coinage	3.17	1.073
Literal translation	3.06	1.338
Foreignization	3.98	.972
Code switching	2.88	1.367
Mumbling	3.76	1.169

Retrieval	2.52	1.094
Mime	3.24	1.297
Self-rephrasing	3.19	1.189
Appeal for help	3.12	1.355
Asking for repetition	3.70	1.045
Expressing non- understanding	2.65	1.201
Comprehension check	3.60	1.199
Clarification check	3.17	1.274
Confirmation check	3.60	1.232
Accuracy check	3.23	1.192
Interpretive summary	3.55	1.202
The use of fillers	3.11	1.287
Self-repetition	3.57	1.259
Hesitation devices	3.61	1.172

### 3.3 What factors influence the choice to use communication strategies during instructional hours?

This research question also sought to find the factors that influence students and lecturers to use communication strategies. This data was collected using questionnaires and was subjected to factor analysis to find out the extent to which items were measuring the same concept. That is, factor analysis was used in this section to deduce which factors gave a better understanding of the data of students. The KMO and Bartlett's Test and the pattern matrix were reported. Pallant (2016) posits that before a researcher goes on to use factor analysis in a study, they must check to see if the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (KMO) value is  $\geq .6$ , Bartlett's Test of Sphericity value has a significant figure  $\leq .05$  before they proceed to use factor analysis. The factor analysis reported a KMO of .889, which is greater than .6, and Bartlett's test with a sig. figure of ( $p = .000$ ), which is less than .05, appropriating the use of factor analysis in this study.

**Table 3**

*Pattern Matrix*

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.889
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	2909.378
	Df	231
	Sig.	.000

The factor analysis put all 22 factors under 4-factor groups, namely the context and situation of communication (component 1), personal beliefs and attitude (component 2), competence (component 3), and communicative environment (component 4), as indicated in Table 4.

The transcripts from the interview with the lecturers also indicated two (2) factors that influence the use of CS; interlocutors involved and competence (language and pedagogical). On competence, lecturers believe that one must be competent in both pedagogy and the English language to be able to appropriately use most communication strategies without diverting from the lesson objectives or losing the interest of students. Again, the respondents posited that depending on the level of a group of students, be it knowledge or educational, they use a language that will help them understand the topic.

*“My experiences as a university lecturer help me identify with my students well and to know how to speak to them for them to understand...Also, depending on the reaction from my students, their facial expressions, I switch between languages and use other types of strategies”.*

*“Sometimes, though students may be in the same class, you can see that some are very fluent and confident in using the language but others are not. In a situation like this, you have to try and get them involved by using all necessary means.”*

Teachers may use some communication strategies to simplify their message so that less advanced learners may understand their lesson, an L2 practice Cullen (1998) terms as teacher talk. CS is used as a scaffolding device in the classroom to ensure the involvement of all students in the lesson.



**Table 4**  
*Pattern Matrix*

	Component			
	1	2	3	4
I use CS based on the context and situation of the interaction	.928			
I use CS to avoid communication breakdowns	.917			
I use CS based on the type of problem or task involved	.877			
I use CS to probe for further explanations	.875			
I use CS to avoid errors when communicating in the classroom	.846			
I use CS when my lecturer also uses them in class	.778			
I use CS based on my belief that a target proficiency is not attainable		.892		
I use CS because it helps me express myself better		.884		
I use CS because it makes my communications sound more natural		.884		
I use CS because of my indifferent attitude toward the L2		.844		
I use CS because it deepens my understanding in the classroom		.838		
I use CS because I am not motivated to speak target English		.826		
I use CS because it helps me express myself better			.865	
I use CS because of my weak linguistic background in the L2			.860	
I use CS based on the competence level of other interlocutors involved			.755	
I use CS because of my low-level competence in the L2			.719	
I use CS when I do not understand what other interlocutors are saying			.632	
I use CS because it enhances fluency when I speak			.625	
I use CS based on the personality of other interlocutors involved				.948
I use CS because I have a high communication apprehension level in the classroom				.854
I use CS in a semi-formal classroom context				.845
I use CS because it reduces the tension that comes with the communication environment				.738

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

##### 4.1 Conclusions

It can be concluded from the findings of this study that the role an interlocutor plays in a communicative situation determines the kinds of communication strategies they use. Students used direct strategies or non-linguistic strategies in an attempt to communicate their intentions whereas lecturers used a lot of interactional strategies to help students participate in the lesson. With communication strategies, students keep self-learning, practicing, and testing their linguistic knowledge as they try to communicate their intentions and make meaning of the communication situation. As speakers repeat, rephrase, show doubts and affirm or rephrase their utterances, they build up their linguistic competence and language self-efficacy. Lecturers and instructors aid this by using more interactional strategies to help students understand, and to understand students in the classroom.

It can also be concluded that the language and cultural backgrounds of speakers influence the use of communication strategies. In most cases, when a word is foreignized, the base form is in the L1 while the affixes are in the L2. However, from this study, almost all the foreignized words had English base words and Akan affixes (Akan words added to base words) making the words localized instead of foreignized. Thus, the language backgrounds of speakers influence the type of CS they use-instead of foreignization of L1, they localised the L2.

##### 4.2 Recommendations

The context and situation of communication were found to be one of the major factors that influence the use of communication strategies in second language classrooms. Mostly, strict classrooms make students nervous which makes them use CS in excess. Hence, it is recommended that all teachers, instructors, and lecturers adopt more friendly approaches to teaching or more student-centred approaches which will make students more relaxed during instructional hours and give students opportunities to express themselves better and self-learn to improve their vocabulary.

The study again recommends the adaptation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in language classrooms to help students practice their knowledge of the target language in the target language instead of giving priority to grammatical competence. Thus, communication strategies have become a part of the interlingual systems of the

Ghanaian, and thus, recognising the Ghanaian variety of English as a formal language will aid second language communications and acquisition both inside and outside the classroom.

Ghana Education Service should consider organising in-service training and professional development for all senior high school and junior high school teachers, regardless of the subject they teach to enhance their knowledge of communication strategies so they may incorporate them into their professional practices.

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