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Perceptions Towards and Use of Conversation Strategies in an English Communication Course

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This paper consists of the rationale, methodology, results, and discussion of an exploratory study with the purpose of focusing the potential scope of research possibilities regarding the use of conversation strategies in first-year English Communication (EC) courses at Sojo University. The inclusion of conversation strategies within these curricula is based on the theory that strategic competence is an integral part of communicative competence. It is believed that communication strategies perform an important function in the development of strategic competence, and therefore the development of a learner's overall communicative competence (Canale and Swain, 1980). A survey was used to gather data pertaining to students' knowledge and opinion of conversation strategies that were taught in their EC courses. Test transcripts were analyzed for the presence of conversation strategies in use by the students. Data analysis showed a generally positive opinion on the inclusion of strategies in the course, as well as their usefulness in spoken conversation. The results of this study will inform the design of a more in-depth, larger scale project in the future.

本論文は、崇城大学の１年次英語コミュニケーション（EC）コースにおける会話ストラテジーの使用に関する研究の可能性に焦点を当てることを目的とした探索的研究の根拠、方法論、結果、考察から構成されている。このようなカリキュラムに会話ストラテジーを含めることは、戦略的能力がコミュニケーション能力の不可欠な一部であるという理論に基づいている。コミュニケーション・ストラテジーは、戦略的能力の発達、ひいては学習者の全体的なコミュニケーション能力の発達において重要な機能を果たすと考えられている（Canale and Swain, 1980。EC コースで教えている会話ストラテジーに関する学生の知識と意見に関するデータを収集するためにアンケートを使用した。また、テスト記録を分析し、学生が会話ストラテジーを使用しているかどうかを調べた。データ分析の結果、会話ストラテジーの授業への導入や、会話におけるストラテジーの有用性については、概して肯定的な意見が多かった。本研究の結果は、将来のより詳細で大規模なプロジェクトの設計に役立つであろう。

Introduction

Communicative language teaching is aimed at improving the students' communicative competence, and according to the theory presented by Canale and Swain (1980), strategic competence is an important component of communicative competence. It has been argued that communication strategies play an important role in the development of strategic competence (e.g., Faucette, 2001). The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in Japan has been emphasizing communicative competence in a foreign language since 1980 (Okuno, 2007), and the latest version of the *Course of Study* issued by MEXT in relation to School Education Law highlights communicative competence as a primary goal in the subject area of Foreign Languages for high school (MEXT, 2018). At Sojo University, all first and second-year students are required to take English Communication for four semesters. The focus of the first-year curriculum is spoken communication with an emphasis on engaging in simple conversations on familiar topics, sustaining those conversations, and utilizing a variety of skills such as eliciting details, asking for clarification, and changing topics. Starting experimentally, conversation strategies were

incorporated as a part of the curriculum in order to support students achieving the aforementioned goals. The incorporation of conversation strategies in the curriculum has had several iterations since 2019. After the return from remote learning to face-to-face classes in 2023, it became prudent to employ a more in-depth study into the functionality of these strategies in the curriculum. Thus, the purpose of this study was to investigate:

1. The extent to which Sojo first-year students perceive conversation strategies as useful as well as interesting.
2. The extent to which students actually use the conversation strategies in their speaking assessments.
3. Which conversation strategies students use most often.

The intention of this study is to answer the research questions and apply any results to future applications of conversation strategies in the English Communication curriculum, as well as contribute to the body of literature regarding practical instances of communicative competency teaching in English education in Japan.

Background

First-year English Communication courses at Sojo University contain two speaking assessments which consist of 10-minute recorded conversations that are then transcribed and assessed both qualitatively and quantitatively. In such circumstances, perspectives on standards when we teach in our classes when it comes to a speaking-focused syllabus can vary greatly. Students in these EC courses focus on three main goals: 1) I can engage in simple conversations on topics that are familiar, of personal interest or pertinent to everyday life, 2) I can both understand and use words and phrases that pertain to areas of immediate personal relevance, and 3) I can initiate, maintain and close simple face-to-face conversations. The generality of these goals lends itself towards flexibility on standards of assessment and what constitutes a successful conversation. Preconceptions about the spoken form can influence how we as teachers think about speech at the interaction level, language choice level, and what it means to be a 'fluent' speaker of a language (Hughes, 2011).

As grammar and vocabulary are reduced to a minimum in spoken language (Yungzhong, 1985), an approach that supports the development of knowledge about and practice of a variety of subtle language choices for language learners should be vital to the consideration of what vocabulary and grammar structures a learner is introduced to in a speaking-focused language curriculum (Hughes, 2011).

In regard to using recording and transcription as items for assessments, having students record and transcribe their own conversations is useful for students to recognize what they need to improve, or correct and compare to other transcripts (Murphey & Kenny, 1998; Murphey & Woo, 1998). This could also apply when students correct and compare to their own past transcripts. Some communication strategies may be easier to understand when students can actually hear themselves using them (Murphey & Arao, 2001). The proposition for the use of conversation strategies as a part of the curriculum in the first place was inspired by the theory of discourse competence. In Riggenbach's (1998) breakdown of discourse competence there is listed a set of 'micro skills' needed for both discourse competence (comprehensible, smooth turn-taking) and strategic competence (avoiding communication breakdown). These include:

- the ability to claim turns of talk
- the ability to maintain turns of talk
- the ability to yield turns of talk
- the ability to backchannel

- the ability to self-repair
- the ability to ensure comprehension of a listener
- the ability to initiate repair (e.g., clarification)
- the ability to employ compensatory strategies (e.g., avoiding structures or vocabulary beyond one's proficiency; word coinage; shifting topics or asking questions that encourage the other speaker to aid in maintaining the flow of the conversation)

These micro skills can be broken down even further into specific skills or strategies that students can focus on as will be further elaborated upon. The practicality of these strategies is well documented by researchers such as O'Malley (1987), Tarone (1984), Dornyei and Thurrell (1991), Dornyei (1995), Oxford (2001), Littlemore (2001), and Gorjian & Habibi (2015). This is where the development of the conversation strategies chosen for and taught in the courses originated.

This applies especially in terms of a language learner understanding the potential intercultural expectations and their impact on communication. In the context of Japanese language learners of English, differences in communication style can be affected by the native culture of the speaker, and it is sometimes important to learn how various 'communication codes' in one language can differ from codes in another. Learning to overcome these differences contributes to the success of the communication (Azra et al., 2015). The inclusion of conversation strategies in a communicative language classroom then provides an opportunity for students to develop this language awareness and apply it to their own spoken interactions.

Methods

The research project at hand takes an empirically-based approach (Hughes, 2011). Both qualitative and quantitative data were derived from open-ended and closed-ended questions (Creswell, 2014). Findings and inferences were drawn from both of these approaches. The aim for adopting a mixed method approach in this study was to achieve both completeness, a holistic view of the data, and development, to utilize this initial study to develop the research questions, data sources, or analysis decisions in later intended studies (Tashakkori & Newman, 2010).

This study focused on students in three first-year English Communication courses at Sojo University. This group consisted of students from five different majors, though this variable was not included as a factor of study. Students were streamed into classes based on proficiency level prior to the beginning of the course. This was done via an exam that tested their listening comprehension and grammar skills. The participating classes ranged widely from approximately A1 to B2 on the Common Reference Levels Global Scale (CEFR 3.3). Students in these classes were asked to complete a survey, as well as provide optional permission for use of their speaking assessment recording and transcript data. Students who did not want to participate in the study did not have their data included. To answer the first research question, a survey was given to students in all participating EC1 classes with 73 out of 77 students responding, including: 8 Mechanical Engineering, 13 Nanoscience, 16 Architecture, 17 Aerospace (including engineers, systems engineers, and pilots), and 19 Pharmacy students. The classes were all taught by the researcher.

The focus was to survey students as to whether they thought learning different conversation strategies for English had helped them improve their English conversation ability, if they found it interesting to learn different conversation strategies for other languages, and whether or not they thought learning conversation strategies is useful. They were also asked to give individual ratings for each strategy covered during their course. Ratings were given on a Likert scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very) for how useful a particular

strategy was found to be. Also, ratings were given from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very) for how interesting or enjoyable the strategy was to learn.

To answer the second research question, student transcripts were analyzed to determine if strategies were used in students' speaking assessments. For these data, 24 students participated and two transcripts per student were analyzed. Transcripts from an initial conversation assessment given at the beginning of the course were compared to transcripts of a final assessment to determine if and what conversation strategies were present in the assessments, and if the use of strategies had increased from the beginning of the semester. The transcripts were analyzed for only those strategies taught specifically in those courses. These included:

Table 1
Conversation Strategies Taught in Participating Courses

Strategy	Description
Reacting	Responding to an utterance with an appropriate word or phrase. (e.g., "Oh, really?")
Follow-up questions	Using *Wh-* questions to further a conversation or ask for more information
Echo questions	Showing you are listening to an interlocutor by repeating what they said
Starting and stopping a conversation	Words and phrases for opening a conversation and closing a conversation
Giving yourself time to think	Using filler words such as 'Um', 'Let me see...', etc. To give yourself time to think of a response during a conversation
Discussing preference	Using words and phrases for discussing one's preferences
Discussing indifference	Using words and phrases for discussing one's indifference

It should be acknowledged that the conversations were not transcribed at the acoustic or visual level relating to the stream of speech (instances of overlapping talk, gestures, or facial expressions), but at the structural level (Hughes, 2011: 39). Transcripts initially created by learners themselves were taken and corrected by the instructor for accuracy. This was due to the intention of only looking for particular types of interaction. It is important to acknowledge that there are factors that may have influenced these transcriptions. These can be broken down into factors relating to the assessment itself (test conditions, pairing of test takers, test-taking anxiety (Butler et. al, 2000; Fulcher, 2003), and factors related to transcription (quality of audio, interpretation of transcriber).

During the analysis of the transcript data, only strategies covered during the semester were located and coded in transcripts from the first assessment of the semester and the final assessment of the semester. It is possible that other conversation strategies were present in these conversations, but they were not identified at this time.

At the beginning of the semester, all participating students recorded and transcribed a 10-minute conversation in groups of three. They did not have any practice or preparation before this recording. The purpose of this was to mark a starting point for each student from which their individual progress could be measured. This task was not assessed and was referred to as the Conversation Task.

Results

Survey Data

The first section of the survey consisted of 7-point Likert scale items asking students to choose from strongly disagree to strongly agree regarding a prompt. The first prompt asked students to react to "learning different conversation strategies for English has helped improve my English conversation ability". To this prompt, 4.1% of respondents disagreed a little,

4.1% neither agreed nor disagreed, 17.8% agreed a little bit, 46.6% agreed, and 27.4% strongly agreed.

The second prompt asked students to react to "I think it's interesting to learn different conversation strategies for other languages." To this prompt, 2.7% disagreed a little, 16.4% neither agreed nor disagreed, 21.9% agreed a little bit, 34.2% agreed, and 24.7% strongly agreed. The last prompt in this section of the survey asked students to react to "I think learning conversation strategies is useful." To this prompt, 1.4% disagreed a little, 43.8% agreed, and 43.8% strongly agreed. There were no neutral responses to this item.

Additional survey data consisted of rated items. Each item represented a conversation strategy covered during the semester. There were seven strategies taught in the course. Each strategy was rated from 1 to 5 in the categories of usefulness and enjoyability. In addition to the rating, students were prompted to reply freely with any additional comments they might have.
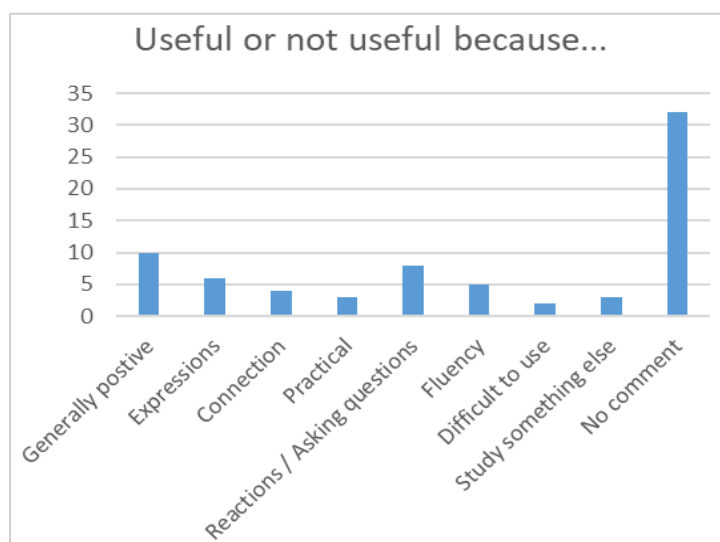
Figure 1.1
Average rating out of five given for the usefulness of each strategy
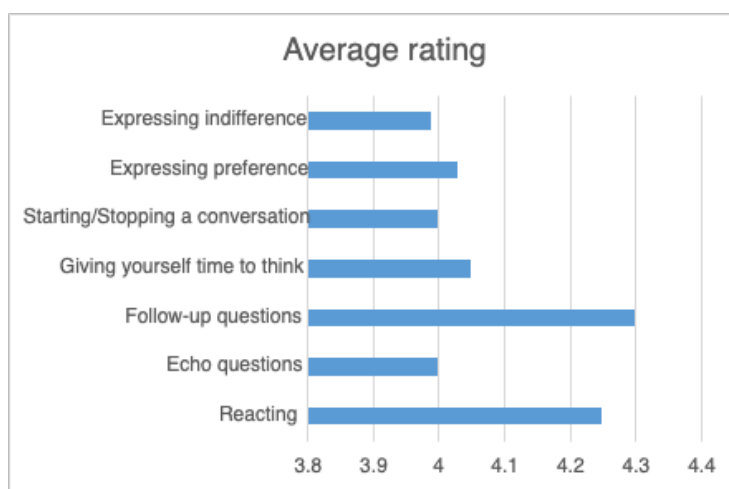
As shown in Figure 1.1, expressing indifference had an average rating of 3.9. Expressing preference's average rating was 4.03. Starting and stopping a conversation was 4. Giving yourself time to think was 4.05. Follow-up questions was 4.30. Echo questions was 4, and reacting was 4.25.

Figure 1.2
Reasons given for why a strategy was useful or not

Of the additional comments on the usefulness of the conversation strategies represented in Figure 1.2, 26 students replied with "no comment" or "nothing to add." Further comments were divided into nine categories. Ten students gave generally positive comments that the content useful without mentioning any specific reasoning. Six students commented on the usefulness of the expressions they learned for specific situations. Four students felt that they were able to connect better with their classmates in conversation because of the strategies. Three students mentioned how they found the content practical because it will be useful in the future or at their current part-time job. Eight students mentioned the reactions and follow-up questions specifically as being particularly useful. Five students commented on how strategies were helpful in improving their fluency and their conversations flowed easier. There were two somewhat negative comments that said they found the strategies difficult to use in practice. And finally, three students mentioned that they would prefer to focus on another area of language learning, like vocabulary or listening. Figure 2.1 shows the average rating given for how interesting or enjoyable the strategies were to learn.
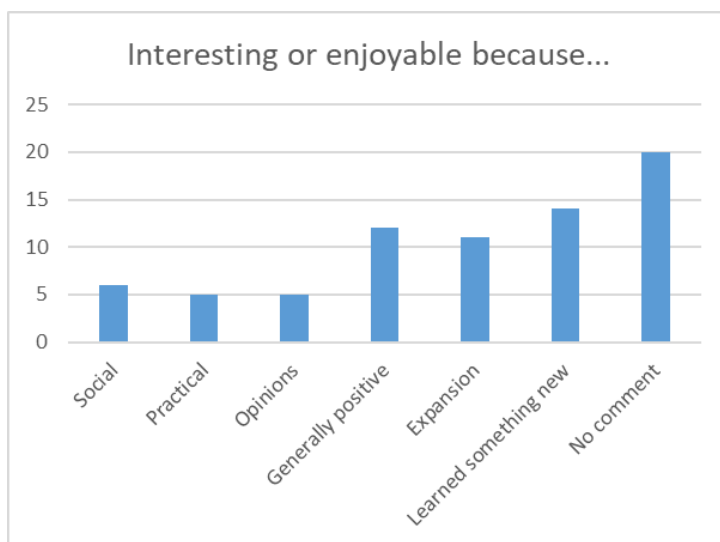
Figure 2.1

Average rating out of five given for how interesting a strategy was thought to be
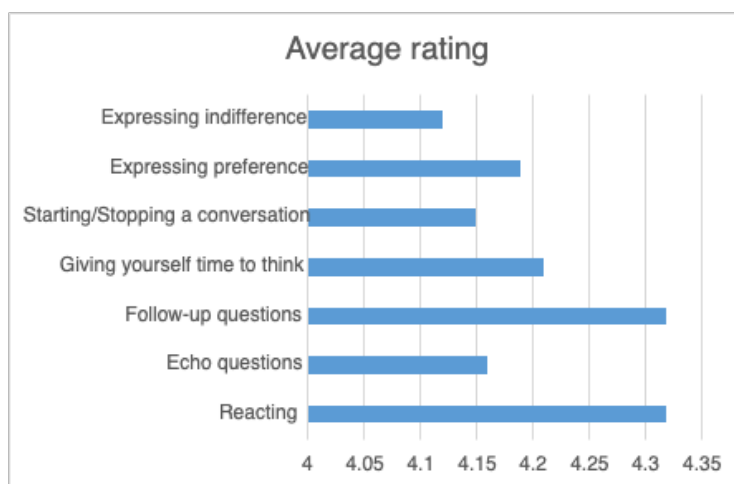
Expressing indifference had an average rating of 4.12. Expressing preference's average rating was 4.19. Starting and stopping a conversation was 4.15. Giving yourself time to think was 4.21. Follow-up questions was 4.32. Echo questions was 4.16, and reacting was 4.32.

Figure 2.2

*Reasons given for why a strategy was considered interesting or not*

Additional comments on how enjoyable or interesting these strategies were to learn this semester as represented in Figure 2.2. 17 students replied with no comment or nothing to add. Further comments could be divided into six categories. Six students commented that the strategies were fun to learn because they enjoyed using them to talk to their classmates. They made the class more enjoyable overall. Five students commented that the strategies were interesting to learn because of how practical they are to use. Also, five students commented that strategies were interesting because they could more easily share their opinions and hear the opinions of others on casual matters. 12 students gave generally positive feedback that the items were fun to learn with no specific reasons. Six students commented that the strategies were interesting because they allowed them to expand their conversations. They were able to speak more and as a result, gained more confidence. Finally, 14 students commented that it was fun to learn something new, mentioning that they liked learning new expressions, vocabulary, techniques, and/or knowledge.

Transcript Data

Conversation strategies were found to be present in the Conversation Task. Overall, there were 178 instances of conversation strategies being employed in the 24 transcripts that were analyzed. 14 instances of students using reactions including echo questions, 87 instances of follow-up questions being asked, 73 filler words were found, four instances of expressing indifference, and zero instances of starting/stopping a conversation and expressing preferences. The final assessment was given at the end of the semester. By which point, all six of the strategies had been taught and practiced in class. There were a higher number of conversation strategies present in this assessment, though not every strategy was used. Overall, in the 24 transcripts analyzed, 621 conversation strategies were found to be employed. There were 44 usages of reactions including echo questions, 184 follow-up questions asked, 393 filler words used, and zero instances of starting/stopping a conversation, expressing preference, or expressing difference.

Figure 3

Comparison of strategy usage from beginning to end of the course
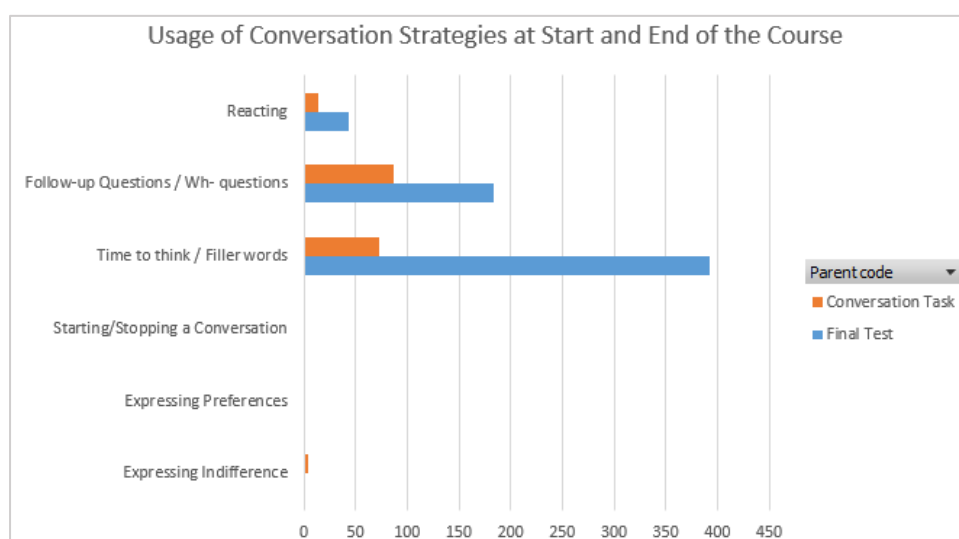
Comparing assessments showed progress over the course of the semester at a 248.9% increase in overall usage of the six conversation strategies. Usage of each strategy in the initial assessment and the final assessment is visualized in Figure 3.

Summary

Student perspectives
The survey data discussed above suggest an overall positive outlook on the inclusion of conversation strategies in the course. The first prompt, which asked students to react to "Learning different conversation strategies for English has helped improve my English conversation ability", indicates a strong inclination towards agreement with 91.8% of respondents agreeing a little bit to agreeing strongly. This, coupled with the results of the transcript analysis data, suggest that students' perspectives are accurate to their performance, if their performance is measured in use of the conversation strategies taught. Students were able to make use of the strategies more at the end of the term than the beginning, increasing their overall contributions to their conversations. From the students' perspective, learning these strategies was helpful for improving their own English conversation abilities.

The second Likert scale item, which asked students to react to "I think it's interesting to learn different conversation strategies for other languages", also showed a prevalently positive response with 80.8% of respondents agreeing a little bit to agreeing strongly. 16.4% neither agreed nor disagreed, but only 2.7% disagreed with his statement. The comments added further elaboration that those with negative or indifferent comments perhaps would have preferred a different focus in the classroom. Whether or not this is due to students not seeing conversation strategies as practical or if perhaps they are simply not interested in speaking and conversation to begin with was not clarified by the comments.

The third Likert scale item, which asked students to react to "I think learning conversation strategies is useful", showed a largely positive response with 98.6% of respondents in agreement to some degree. While 1.4% of respondents disagreed a little, there were no neutral responses to this item. Comparing this item to the second item, it would seem that while there are some students who do not find conversation strategies fun or interesting to learn, the majority of students acknowledge that they are useful to some degree.

When students were asked to rate the strategies they learned in the course, they were asked to do so by giving each strategy its own individual rating. The results of which may suggest that the strategies with less specific usages were preferred by the students. Phrases and expressions for starting and stopping a conversation, expressing one's preferences, and expressing indifference on a subject were shown to be the least used in their conversations and were also rated the lowest in both usefulness and how interesting the students found them to learn. It could be because these phrases were quite specific to their function and could therefore only be used in specific situations. If these situations did not happen to come up in their conversations, they would not have the opportunity to use them. However, strategies such as reacting appropriately to another speaker, and following up that reaction with another question, are almost always functional strategies to use regardless of the topic of conversation. Their usability may have influenced the students' perspective on their usefulness and enjoyability. With that being said, it is important to point out that while the survey prompted students for commentary and further explanation on their perspectives and ratings, these comments were not followed up with supplementary interviews or more in-depth surveys. The takeaways from this survey can only be supposed and further exploration into the reasoning behind students' perspectives is a point for future study.

Regarding the results of the transcript analyses, it is interesting to note the presence of the strategies at the start of the semester. It might be wondered why the strategies were present at all. Students were not asked if they had ever been explicitly taught these skills in the past as strategies for English conversation, so it is not clear if they had been exposed to them as a concept before. It could be that their usage was instinctual. Students have very likely heard many example conversations in the past in previous English classes where models used reactions and asked follow-up questions without actually identifying them as such. Therefore,

students may have had a notion to use them without knowing what they are called. Again, this is a point to be explored in future research as it was not addressed in this study.

It is interesting to compare this with the use of strategies at the end of the semester. Students continued to use mainly three strategies: reactions, follow-up questions, and filler words. But they did so at a much higher rate at the end of the term than the beginning. This might suggest that students did indeed find these particular strategies useful and managed to utilize them more successfully after learning what they are and practicing them expressly. Though as pointed out when discussing the ratings, without further investigation by means of more detailed surveys or interviews with students, it is difficult to make any definitive conclusions about why some strategies were consistently not used in both assessments and why some were used so frequently.

Conclusion

The main focus of this study was student perceptions and usage of the conversation strategies they learned in the first semester of their first-year English Communication course at Sojo University. Four questions were addressed: To what extent do Sojo first-year students perceive the conversation strategies they learned in their course to be useful? What were students' perceptions regarding how interesting and enjoyable conversation strategies were to learn? Which strategies in particular were found useful or interesting by students? Finally, to what extent do students use conversation strategies in their speaking assessments? The intention in answering these questions was to inform both curriculum development in these courses as well as future studies into conversation strategy usage by students. It was discovered that students came into their English Communication courses already using certain strategies to a limited degree, and that after dedicated focus on learning and practicing these strategies, they were able to increase their usage in their assessments. It was also revealed that students' perceptions towards if their English conversation abilities improving as a result of learning these strategies was overwhelmingly positive. Perceptions towards usefulness in conversation as well as how enjoyable it was as part of the classroom content were also largely positive. The results of this study seem to suggest that including conversation strategies as part of an English language communication curriculum results in both a positive experience for students and improvement in students' communication skills. This study opened up more questions, and opportunities for future areas of research in this topic. Further exploration into students' feedback, for instance, would be vital for examining students' reasoning behind ratings and opinions on strategy knowledge and usage. It would also be interesting to delve into students' educational backgrounds to find evidence of explicit conversation strategy instruction or practice in their previous language courses. Finally, further exploration into the perceptions of and usage of more strategies beyond the ones covered in this study. Avenues of research that would certainly prove to be beneficial to this particular area of language learning.

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