

## **Unravelling the perceptions of English teacher educators on oral communication strategies instructions**

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### **Abstract**

Studies on oral communication strategies (OCS) in the English language teaching arena have been extensively done (e.g. Abid & Sambouw, 2018; Dornyei, 1995; Jamshidnejad, 2011), with key findings suggesting OCS instruction in the classroom. However, to what extent English teacher educators (TEs), especially in the context of Indonesia, are aware of the instruction and its efficacy remain underexplored. Using a case study approach, the study reported in this paper, therefore, sought to examine the perceptions of several TEs working in an English Education Program on OCS instruction. A semi structured interview technique was chosen to gather data from all TEs teaching speaking and listening classes in a university located in the Province of Gorontalo. Drawing on a thematic analysis method, the results show that although the majority of TEs lacked responses pertaining to OCS instruction on the whole, they recognized the use of certain OCS. The study suggests that some pedagogical implications seeking to facilitate a sustained improvement in the program is of necessity.

**Keywords:** oral communication strategies, English education program, English teacher educators

### **Introduction**

In the context of English language learning across classrooms in Indonesia, there is also a widely accepted belief among teachers and teacher educators that assisting learners in making the most of their English learning experience is of necessity. One of the perceived reasons on the presence of the belief is the fact that demonstrating good command of English, a language that has been largely spoken around the world to serve different purposes, supports access to many worldwide opportunities (Crystal, 2003; Fatiha, Sliman, Mustapha, & Yahia, 2014). Successful English language learners are seen as potential candidates to reach out the opportunities, such as working and studying in renowned institutions. As such, there is no doubt that a strong emphasis has been placed into the Indonesian school curricula on teaching the language (Sahiruddin, 2013), seeking to allow Indonesian learners of English to respond to the unpredictably rapid change of the world, particularly in today's era of 4.0 industrial revolution.

Among the ensuing impacts of such revolution on English uses by the Indonesians is the demand of preparing qualified English school teachers who will eventually be at the forefront of English tuition at the school level. To this end, the English Education Program subsumed under the Teacher Education Institution or LPTK plays a vital role in ensuring that the graduates exhibit adequate understanding of teaching and using the language. The latter expectation remains pivotal in many discussions on English language teaching in numerous studies, with a major emphasis on equipping English pre-service teachers with sufficient knowledge and skills pertaining to developing their English oral proficiency level (Abid, 2018; Zein, 2014), as well as positive attitude towards second

language learning (Abrar, Mukminin, Habibi, Asyraf, Makmur, & Marzulina, 2018). As they are the role model of the language they will teach, it is relevant why the expectation persists.

The English Education Program of a university in Gorontalo, where the present study was conducted, is among several Teacher Education Institutions in Indonesia that caters to high school graduates who aims to pursue career as English language teachers at the school level. Through this program, pre-service teachers are trained to develop their pedagogical knowledge as well as language skills, such as listening, reading, writing and speaking. In addition, they are also taught other courses, such as English Literature, Translation, and English for Business, which support them in performing jobs other than English teachers in the future. The majority of the PSTs are from high schools in Gorontalo and the surrounding regions. As they are from different educational backgrounds, their English language proficiency level vary to some extent. While many of them who graduated from schools in the urban areas often show better performance in using English orally in their university study, others who finished high schools in rural areas continue to find English uses rather demanding. This difference often appears particularly in the domain of oral communication.

Apparently, there remains a gap between what the curricula suggest learners to develop and the actual picture of the English pedagogy across classrooms in Indonesia. Many university graduates, unfortunately, fail to demonstrate satisfactorily uses of spoken English (Fareh, 2010; Suryanto, 2015; Zein, 2014), and this is partly attributed to English speaking anxiety, which is often triggered by the lack of English vocabulary and the low confidence level. Anxious language learners, for instance, in many studies are described as potentially experiencing difficulties in developing their second language (L2) oral proficiency level, owing to the limited opportunities they can establish to interact using the language. Yet, this does not always mean that alleviating the issue is unviable. There are different ways of overhauling the issue in order to help English learners achieve better performance in English uses regardless of the linguistic deficiency they have. One of these approaches is teaching oral communication strategies (OCS).

In many studies (e.g. Abid & Sambouw, 2018; Dörnyei, 1995; Jamshidnejad, 2011; Tarone, 1977), OCS is defined as strategies that language learners can use to handle breakdowns when communicating orally and to improve the quality of the communication. Among the most common employed strategies that these studies highlight are paraphrasing, asking for clarification and using gestures. Other strategies include topic avoidance, where speakers avoid communicating about unfamiliar topics that potentially prompts delays or misunderstanding when speakers exchange messages. Using particular OCS helps L2 speakers to negotiate meaning, aiming to establish successful L2 communication, which are often indicated by, for example, smoothness in delivering messages (Ghout-Khneoune, 2012; Jamshidnejad, 2011; Nakatani, 2012).

Dörnyei (1995) stated that the term OCS can also include ways of coping with processing time pressure in the target language interaction. That is why the strategies like the use of fillers, hesitation devices, and self-repetition, should be considered as part of OCS. However, despite such diverse definitions, Brett (2001) contends that these classifications of OCS refer to the same or similar entities. The use of OCS should be considered as a means by which language learners find ways to convey meaning, to negotiate, and to reach a communicative goal by managing their linguistic gaps (Jamshidnejad, 2011). Table 1 below represents one sample of OCS classification that is based on several OCS scholars, such as Tarone (1977), Faerch and Kasper (1983a), and Bialystok (1990). The table is adapted from Dörnyei (1995, p. 58).

Owing to the many benefits it has, studies on OCS have been done extensively, and much focus were paid to how its uses help language learners improve their L2 oral communication skills. Yet, very little is known about whether or not OCS formal tuition for English pre-service teachers is of necessity. Therefore, the study reported in this article, which is part of a larger study conducted in the Province of Gorontalo, aimed to identify what teacher educators (TEs) perceive about teaching OCS on an English Education Program of a university in Gorontalo. Unravelling their perceptions on OCS may help the program to design a better approach to deal with English oral communication issues that pre-service English teacher have so far experienced. This is important as expectation towards

qualified and professional candidates of English school teachers is increasingly high, and meeting such expectation is by and large the primary responsibility of the program. Although the present study is mainly situated in the context of Gorontalo, its findings may shed some lights toward the improvement of English Education Programs located in other provinces in Indonesia.

Table 1 OCS classification

| Avoidance or Reduction Strategies | Achievement or Compensatory Strategies | Stalling or Time-gaining Strategies |
|-----------------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|
| Message abandonment               | Circumlocution                         | Use of fillers/hesitation devices   |
| Topic avoidance                   | Approximation                          |                                     |
|                                   | Use of all-purpose words               |                                     |
|                                   | Word-coinage                           |                                     |
|                                   | Use of non-linguistic means            |                                     |
|                                   | Literal translation                    |                                     |
|                                   | Foreignizing                           |                                     |
|                                   | Code switching                         |                                     |
|                                   | Appeal for help                        |                                     |

(Dörnyei, 1995, p. 58)

## Method

A case study approach was chosen as the research design of the present study. Seeking to unravel the perception of English TEs on the teaching of OCS, the study asked all TEs teaching speaking and listening skills unit (eleven TEs) in an English Department of a university in Gorontalo to participate voluntarily. This participant selection technique corresponded with the nature of the research objective of the study. Hence, following a pilot study, data in the form of interview transcripts were collected using a recording device and transcribed verbatim. The interviews were done in a language most preferred by the participants, either English or Indonesian, and lasted between 25-40 minutes. All TEs were asked to respond to a key research question: what do English teacher educators perceive about teaching OCS in the context of English Education Program?

To analyze data, a thematic analysis approach was used. All similar codes arising from the unit of data were put together to allow the emergence of themes that address the research question. To do this, all the interview transcripts were initially read several times to meticulously understand the participants' responses, followed by the coding process which was manually done. Where necessary, English translation was provided to help better understanding of the given data. To minimize biases growing out of the research analysis process when presenting the research report, a description of the context to the study is presented. In addition, all participants were shown interview transcripts to check for accuracy of transcription prior to data analysis.

## Results and Discussion

Results revealed one major theme, that is, TE's awareness on OCS. It was found that although the TEs lacked responses about OCS instruction on the whole when they were not prompted, some TEs reported that they recognized certain OCS uses, such as using gestures, referring to first language (L1) and asking for clarification, as resources for PSTs to aid their English oral communication when in classroom, in some instances. TE7, for example, mentioned that displaying specific gestures enabled her PSTs to continue speaking English, despite of their shortage of English vocabulary:

*Ya keep talking. Kadang mereka tidak bisa ucapkan kata yang mereka tidak ingat mereka apa? gesture. Artinya mereka pakai bahasa tubuh. Bahasa tubuh. (TE7: 49)*

Yes, keep talking. Sometimes when they cannot say the words that they do not remember they use gesture. It means they use gesture. Gesture. (Researcher's translation, TE7: 49)

Likewise, with regard to using L1, another TE (TE3) described that she allowed her PSTs to speak Indonesian to compensate for expressions they could not say in English. In her interview, TE3 narrated that because the PSTs "are not born with the language [English]", TE3 should "let them speak". TE3 perceived that allowing her PSTs to continue speaking English despite the use of Indonesian could be helpful for the PSTs' English learning experience. For TE3, satisfaction is the key to her teaching practices. She thought that whatever kind of activities she delivered in the classroom, she had to make sure that the activities would please her PSTs, as shown in the quote below. Teaching OCS, therefore, was obviously not a main objective because she did not elaborate on specific details about the why and when her PSTs should use OCS.

Because to me teaching is satisfaction. The result should be satisfaction. ... So that's why everytime if I'm going to the class I have to think very carefully what I'm gonna do to my students so that they will enjoy the class. They are not just learning but they also enjoy the class. (TE3: 41)

Among those who were able to elaborate on OCS in any detail was TE6, who reported that she had used some OCS and they helped her in some ways although she was not confident in her understanding of OCS. As an L2 speaker of English, TE6 said that she employed certain strategies, such as asking for clarification, encouraging the use of L1, and paraphrasing, when in the classroom, without fully realising them. TE6 described that she considered the teaching of OCS to be important:

Well such a hard thing to answer because I guess it's because it works for me I will say yes. Because it works for me I will say yes. (TE6: 48)

These results revealed that there was very little that could be elicited from all TEs about OCS instruction. This could mean that the TEs considered teaching other strategies, other than OCS, were more important as ways to assist their PSTs in, for example, dealing with various English oral communication challenges. In fact, it appeared that the term 'OCS' was relatively new for the majority of the TEs because very few of them referred to the use of any of the strategies when asked about how they helped to improve their PSTs' English oral communication skills. Even if they did, the strategy that the TEs said they used was similar and nothing further could be inferred about how the use of the strategies, which varied greatly, could be taught to the PSTs. For the majority of these TEs, as the results indicated, they might not think of meaning negotiation, which characterises OCS, as a part of the strategies that they can teach their PSTs to help them to find ways of dealing with communication breakdowns in their L2 communication.

What can be further inferred from the results discussion above is the fact that there remains a huge responsibility for the English Education Program to help the PSTs maintain positive attitude about learning English as a foreign language (Abid, 2018; Abrar, et. al., 2018). It is necessary for the English Education Program to continuously develop a specific "conceptual framework of reference" to provide PSTs with skills and knowledge relevant to their future teaching practises (Zein, 2014, p. 12). This can be done by introducing the notion of OCS to English oral communication classes and possibly other relevant courses, such as English for Specific Purposes, English for Young Learners, Teaching English as a Foreign Language, and Sociolinguistics. These courses may also equip the PSTs with a belief that successful language learning is an achievable task, and that having a positive attitude towards such a task is crucial. In fact, providing the PSTs with tools that can accelerate their learning by continuously practicing communicating in English, such as OCS, could be useful for their English language acquisition.

Despite the research that dismiss OCS instruction, Dörnyei (1995) suggests that if a language teacher considers that OCS instruction is necessary, TEs may find it useful to raise PSTs' awareness about OCS, to provide some samples of OCS use, and to encourage them to apply certain OCS in their English oral communication. Although OCS instruction does not always improve oral communication skills, PSTs may become aware of specific strategies that they can use to improve the quality of their English oral communication (Nakatani, 2012). The key to such instruction is to make them aware of 'their own mental process' beforehand, and when it is accomplished, TEs can provide them with different tasks to practice the use of CSs (Mariani, 2010). Where necessary, TEs can also delete hints to the uses of the strategies in order to enable their PSTs to become 'autonomous strategy users' (Maleki, 2007). Autonomous learning help equip learners with tools that 'will best serve them once they are on their own and to facilitate their self-directed learning outside the classroom' (Ghout-Khenoune, 2012).

## Conclusions

The findings of the present study showed that teaching OCS is not a major part of the TEs teaching practices in the context of the English Education Program of a university in the Province of Gorontalo. This is not to say that the TEs consider the strategies instruction less useful than some of the strategies aforementioned, or irrelevant to the context of English language teaching. The TEs may have their own understandings of what causes the currently occurring oral communication challenges among the PSTs and how they handle them. In other words, they hold a slightly different understanding of the concept of OCS instruction as compared to the literature identified in this present study. What is crucial is the need to ensure that the PSTs, upon the completion of their studies, are able to not only demonstrate sufficient understanding of English knowledge, but also to show that they are competent users of the language, indicated by, for instance, comfortably using English for oral communication purposes in any given situation. Future research which focus on examining PSTs' perception on OCS uses may shed lights on the existing literature about OCS.

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