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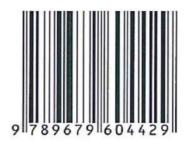Universiti Putra Malaysia

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"IS THE STRATEGY TEACHABLE?" A TEXTBOOK ANALYSIS ON THE REPRESENTATION OF ORAL COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT

In the English Department of a university in Indonesia, the Intensive Course (IC) textbook plays a very important role in preparing pre-service teachers (PSTs) in their first year of undergraduate study. The textbook is the main learning resource for them because it compiles learning materials on all aspects of the English language, such as listening, reading, speaking, writing, grammar, and vocabulary. Although the textbook design aims to help PSTs and lecturers to access learning and teaching materials from the same resource, the textbook seems to pose challenges for both parties, especially for the PSTs. We have noticed from the textbook uses that the presentation of English oral communication was problematic. Many dialogs, for example, in the speaking sections, were written in a straight-forward way, with particular features of everyday English oral communication were underrepresented. The study presented in this paper, therefore, aims to examine how the textbook represents oral communication strategies, viz. strategies that help learners find ways to overcome particular communication breakdowns. Driven by a qualitative approach, data were collected mainly from the textbook, and analysed using a content analysis method. The findings of the study suggest that including oral communication strategies instruction into the textbook can provide PSTs with much opportunities to engage effectively in everyday use of English in particular given context in Indonesia.

KEYWORDS: Oral Communication Strategies, Textbook Analysis, English Department, Intensive Course

1.0   INTRODUCTION

Efforts to develop learners' oral proficiency in the English language across English classrooms in Indonesia is an essential part of the Indonesian school curricula for teaching foreign language subjects. To complement this effort, researchers suggest a need to continuously examine the language teaching materials, such as textbooks, that helps teachers to create stimulating classroom atmosphere for their students to learn and practice using English. Unfortunately, limited number of studies investigate how English language learners maintain involvement and handle potential breakdowns in English communication, especially in the context of Indonesia. Looking into English Teacher Education Programs, such as English Department at a university located in the Province of Gorontalo, Indonesia, where textbooks remains as ubiquitous sources throughout many classrooms in the department and where options to select and use textbooks published by myriad of domestic/international publishers are available, it is a crucial contribution to examine the extent to which some of these textbooks meet the current need of promoting oral proficiency through highlighting the notion of oral communication strategies (OCS) in the ELT textbooks.

Studies seeking to examine English language textbooks have been done extensively. However, in the context of English Teacher Education programs as in Indonesia, studies investigating how communications strategies are included in the ELT textbook used widely in the country and whether or not lecturers are concerned about the strategies instruction in the classroom remain underexplored. This issue is also present within the English Department at a university located in the north part of Indonesia. Studies which specifically look at how IC textbooks promote communication strategies, such as paraphrasing, topic avoidance and gesture use, that help language learners operate independently using the language they learn are relatively limited. To address this issue, the study reported in this paper sets out the following research questions.

1. What types of communication strategies that are introduced in the IC textbook?
2. How are the strategies introduced in the IC textbooks?

In the following section, context to the study is presented, followed by the introduction of OCS. A review of relevant previous studies then follows. Findings and discussion are presented afterward. This article ends with some suggestions presented in the conclusion section.

2.0   LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1   Context to the study

IC is a course offered to students in their first year of study at the English Department, in a university located in Indonesia. The course is a 12 credit program that caters to first semester students at the department, seeking to provide the students with opportunities to improve their language skills before they embark on semester 2. In this program, students learn a wide range of integrated language skills and contents, such listening, speaking, reading, and writing, as well as pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. This program runs from Monday to Thursday, and is delivered on the basis of 3 credits per day.

The textbook used to teach IC is designed by the lecturers appointed by the head of the department. This textbook covers a wide range of topics, following the six basic language skills, namely, listening, reading, speaking, writing, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. The first four skills are the sub-course of IC, weighing 12 credits in total. Students enrolling into this course are required to have a full 16 meeting attendance, as well as to take the mid and final tests for a complete pass of the course. Failure to pass this course will result in re-enrolling into the course in semester 3. As this course features many important aspects, efforts to continuously improve its efficacy have been undertaken by lecturers at the department. To complement this effort, this study took part by contributing to the analysis of the textbook being used by the lecturers and students (henceforth refers to PST/pre-service teachers), which so far has been underexplored.

2.2   Oral communication strategies (OCS)

OCS can be defined as strategies to help language learners anticipate speaking problems (Smith, 2003). It also concerns how these learners use certain types of the strategies to carry out successful communication in the language they learn (Ghout-Khenoune, 2012; Jamshidnejad, 2011). Learners use a series of OCS to overcome certain communication problems (e.g. 'a-let-it-pass-strategy') because the normal flow of L2 interaction can be interrupted due to the occurrence of the problems (e.g. not knowing how to say a particular L2 word). OCS also refers to 'learners' verbal and non-verbal means to resolve interactional problems, to negotiate meaning, to stay in the conversation and keep the channel of communication open'. According to Tarone (1981), OCS includes at least the following categories, including time stalling strategies (Dörnyei, 1995).

1. Paraphrasing
    1.1 Approximation
    1.2 Word coinage
    1.3 Circumlocution
2. Borrowing
    2.1 Literal translation
    2.2 Language switch
3. Appeal for assistance
4. Mime
5. Avoidance
    5.1 Topic avoidance
    5.2 Message abandonment

There are a number of functions of OCS uses. For example, OCS helps speakers negotiate meaning (Tarone, 1981). In addition, OCS uses do not only help language learners to overcome communication

difficulties, but also to remain involved in a L2 conversation. Language learners may need to use particular OCS to anticipate difficulties when communicating using the language they learn, without necessarily engaging the interlocutor to negotiate meaning.

2.3   Previous studies

There are a number of previous studies which investigates ELT textbooks for various purposes. For instance, Abid (2011) examined how selected online English textbooks used widely by students in Indonesian schools consider features of authentic oral communication. Abid found that the representation of certain types of the features is limited, and suggested that ensuring adequate representation of such features may help learners be familiar with how real life English conversation takes place. This is in line with Ahmed (2018) who believes that task in English language teaching textbooks should facilitate learners in learning social communicative functions, not only linguistic features. Ahmed claims that "creative tasks in the language textbooks lead to genuine communication and co-operation", which further promotes learners' independent use of the language they learn outside language classroom situations.

Another study is from Gilmore (2004), who analysed the representation of 8 discourse features of 7 dialogues in course books and compared them to the authentic interactions in ESL context. Gilmore found that there were only 4% of backchannel occurrence, whereas in the authentic interactions (recordings of the dialogues) the occurrence reached 30,2% level. He reported that sufficient coverage of certain features of authentic interaction in English textbooks could help learners find ways to improve the way they interact orally using English. One study that examines the representation of CS in ELT textbook is by Faucette (2001). Faucette examined seventeen textbooks used in the target language community, i.e. an English speaking country. She concluded that there were limited numbers of effective practice activities to foster OCS. She suggested that it would be useful if textbooks writers could design more high quality materials to teach OCS, which then provided learners with useful ways for overcoming particular communication breakdowns.

The studies presented above indicate that analysing the representation of OCS in ELT textbooks, particularly the IC textbook as the main source of language learning for the IC course program is a potential research area to investigate. This signals that the need to compensate for the gap is crucial, and analysing the IC textbook for the purpose of this present study is beneficial, particularly, for a sustained pedagogical improvement in the English Department where the study was carried out.

3.0   METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was chosen for collecting and analysing data of this present study. The data was collected from the Intensive Course textbook used by lecturers and PSTs in the English Department of a university located in the Province of Gorontalo. The textbook was written by a team of lecturers, and designed for teaching the basic skills of the English language, such as listening, reading, writing, speaking, vocabulary and pronunciation, to new students majoring in the department. The collection of data was preceded by a pilot study, in which the researchers collected data from the first two lessons of the textbook, and combined the results to see whether the data collected showed similar results. When both researchers agreed upon the results, collecting data from the texbook was begun. A checklist system as presented in the study by Faucette (2001) was used, and modified to fit the purpose of the present study. The checklist entails a series of OCS. The data collection was first done by looking at Unit 1 Lesson 1, all the way to Unit 6 Lesson 4. In each unit and lesson, when OCS was present, the corresponded OCS in the checklist was ticked. For analysing data, this present study notes details of the representation of OCS in aspects of presentation of contextual information, presentation of meta-pragmatic information, and forms of presentation. A rich description of the IC textbooks was provided which helped ensure the transferability criteria, though this study wass not originally intended to be generalized.

4.0   FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study found that, as seen in the table below, oral communication strategies were underexplored in the IC textbook. First, definition of OCS was not explicitly addressed in all lessons of the textbooks, and

so were the classification of the strategies. Second, the use of other terms relating to how language learners handle oral communication breakdowns, such as communication tactics, was not identified. Third, only particular kinds of OCS were introduced in the textbooks, and such introduction, for the purpose of developing the quality of the PSTs' oral communication skills, needs improvement in some ways. These OCS are circumlocution and time-stalling strategies. In the table below, the numbers under the OCS column represent the types of OCS defined by Tarone (1978), which are: (1) Approximation; (2) Word coinage; (3) Circumlocution; (4) Literal translation; (5) Language switch; (6) Appeal for assistance; (7) Mime; (8) Avoidance; and by Dörnyei (1995), which is (9) Time stalling.

Table 1. Representation of OCS in the IC textbook

Unit	Oral communication strategies (Tarone, 1978)									Sections
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
1	x	x	√	x	x	x	x	x	√	Listening and Reading
2	x	x	√	x	x	x	x	x	√	Listening, Vocabulary and Speaking
3	x	x	√	x	x	x	x	x	√	Listening and Speaking
4	x	x	√	x	x	x	x	x	√	Listening, Vocabulary and Speaking
5	x	x	√	x	x	x	x	x	√	Listening, Vocabulary and Speaking
6	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	Not available in all sections

The data showed that only two types of OCS were introduced in the textbooks, namely circumlocution and time stalling (including back channelling) strategies. These strategies were introduced in Lesson 1 to Lesson 5. No explicit introduction of the strategies was detected in Lesson 6, however. In each of the lessons, the strategy representation was identified in certain aspects of language skills or sections. These were listening, vocabulary, reading and speaking sections. First, this study found that circumlocution strategies were introduced in two ways. First, learners were given particular words related to specific topics, followed by their definitions. For example, when learning about majors in university, PSTs were given names of major and their description, such as "English Education" (major) and "learn about English knowledge" (description). Second, PSTs worked on exercises where they had to find out the meaning of certain words/phrases from the given answers or they defined the words/phrases on their own.

Those two ways provide PSTs with skills to define unknown/unfamiliar concepts/terms/names when having conversations in English at times of difficulties. However, PSTs do not have much opportunities to elaborate on the skills because follow up activities that help them build on the skills were limited. They might have learnt that they could define things when they could not express the right words, but they might not be able to apply these regularly in conversation. Not all speaking sections, for instance, would allow PSTs to use circumlocution when they talk in English. If it would, however, PSTs might not be aware of using it or that the circumlocution they use could help them maintain conversation in English.

With regard to time-stalling strategy, this present study found that the textbook introduced several expressions, namely, "well", "uhm", "wow", and "yeah". These expressions were found in the dialogs within the listening and speaking sections, reminding PSTs about the nature of real-life conversation, where pauses or false starts often appear and, thus, driving the speakers to use particular expressions to anticipate such communication breakdown. Yet, further analysis of the textbook indicated that there was inadequate amount of instruction for both PSTs and lecturers about whether or not using some of these expressions could help PSTs manoeuvre when speaking English with, for example, their peers in the classroom. There was only one section in the textbook where the use of "well" was explicitly taught to PSTs. This section was listening, and PSTs were asked to match questions with the right responses (sentences), which entailed "well" in the beginning of the sentences. Not all samples of dialogs were followed by speaking practices where PSTs might be encouraged to apply certain features of the expression.

5.0   CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study has found that the representation of oral communication strategies was inadequate in the IC textbook used by lecturers and PSTs in the English Department. Although examples of particular uses of OCS were found in some sections in the textbook, there was not enough instructions for lecturers and PSTs about how to effectively apply certain OCS for communicative purposes. Despite the fact that two OCS strategies were identified in the textbook (circumlocution and time-stalling strategies), relevant follow-up activities are urgently needed to promote their uses in conversation. Not all studies support teaching certain OCS in the classroom, though, because learners can simply pass on their developed strategies in their first language to a second language they learn (e.g. see Kellerman, 1991), but some other studies do (e.g. Willems, 1987; Faucette, 2001; Jamshidnejad, 2011). Being familiar with using particular OCS can help PSTs comfortably negotiate meaning in English conversation at times of difficulties. They will have learnt how to fix misunderstanding with peers, for example, that can potentially disrupt the flow of conversation done in English, as well as to improve the quality of their involvement in the conversation. Lecturers, as suggested by Maleki (2007), play a very important role here in order to raise learners' awareness about OCS and its uses, and textbook promoting OCS uses can best complement lecturers' efforts to do so.

In conclusion, promoting OCS in the IC textbook help lecturers realise the goal of the English Department in educating candidates of English language teachers in Gorontalo. Dörnyei (1995) suggests several ways to promote OCS in the classroom. First, lecturers continuously encourage PSTs to use certain OCS and not to be afraid of making mistakes when communicating orally in English. Second, relevant samples of OCS use are introduced in all learning resources for PSTs to learn, including the IC textbook. PST should not only learn from textbook dialogs that they read and role play with peers, but also see from videos how particular OCS are used in conversation. This reminds PST that English conversation in different settings does not always run smooth, and delays can often occur.

The study presented in this paper, however, did not investigate the perspectives of lecturers teaching the intensive course subject, the PSTs, as well as the textbook writers. A further investigation in this area may be useful in the analysis of OCS representation in the IC textbook as well as in the future design of teaching and learning materials in the department.

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