

# English Communication Strategies Used by Thai EFL Teachers

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## Abstract

The present investigation aims at exploring English communication strategies (CSs) employed by Thai EFL teachers teaching in high schools in Nakhon Ratchasima Province. Four specific research questions were answered. The CSs questionnaire adopted from Toomnan (2014) was employed to collect the data. The research samples were 151 Thai EFL teachers teaching in high schools under Nakhon Ratchasima Provincial Administrative Organization (PAO). Descriptive statistics were employed to analyze the data in terms of frequency distribution. The findings reveal that Thai EFL teachers reported employing CSs at a medium frequency level of use when they had to deal with English oral communication breakdowns. They used them most frequently for maintaining the conversation. Self-reliance strategies were reported at a high level of use by the participants. The results of the present study indicate different problems faced by EFL teachers and students when they had to deal with communication breakdowns, which shed a light on CSs while teaching in normal classroom.

**Keywords:** communication strategies, Thai EFL teachers

## บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อสำรวจกลยุทธ์การสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษของครูไทยที่สอนภาษาอังกฤษในโรงเรียนมัธยมในจังหวัดนครราชสีมา โดยใช้แบบสอบถามกลยุทธ์การสื่อสารที่ปรับปรุงจาก ทูมนัน (2014) ในการรวบรวมข้อมูลเพื่อตอบคำถามวิจัยจำนวน 4 ข้อ กลุ่มตัวอย่างเป็นครูไทยที่สอนภาษาอังกฤษในโรงเรียนมัธยมศึกษาตอนปลายสังกัดองค์การบริหารส่วนจังหวัดนครราชสีมาจำนวน 151 คน ใช้สถิติเชิงพรรณนาในการวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลในรูปแบบของการแจกแจงความถี่ และค่าเฉลี่ย ผลการวิจัยพบว่าครูใช้กลยุทธ์การสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษ ในระดับความถี่ปานกลาง เพื่อแก้ปัญหาในสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษ กลยุทธ์การสื่อสารที่พบบ่อยคือกลยุทธ์การสื่อสารเพื่อให้การสนทนาต่อเนื่อง นอกจากนี้กลยุทธ์การสื่อสารโดยพึ่งตนเองพบการใช้ในระดับสูง ผลการศึกษาสะท้อนให้เห็นปัญหาที่ครูสอนภาษาอังกฤษและนักเรียนที่เรียนภาษาอังกฤษต้องเผชิญเมื่อต้องสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษ

## 1. Introduction

Communication strategies (CSs) have been known since the early 1970s after noticing the mismatch between L2 learners' linguistic knowledge and communicative intentions which induces a great number of language phenomena aimed to handle the difficulties or breakdowns in oral communication (Corder, 1983). According to Hughes (2002, p. 91) CSs refer to 'the ability of language user to actively manipulate a conversation and negotiate interactions effectively. Such strategies are particularly beneficial when there is some difficulty of expression or communication. Language learners can take CSs as processes to improve the effectiveness of their communication (Littlemore, 2003). Dornyei and Thurrel (1991) point out that CSs can help control the conversation when an unexpected event occurs and these CSs lead to improved self-confidence of the learners. This is consistent with Zheng (2004, p. 72) who indicates that 'there are stronger voices stating that strategic competence as a means to make students confident, flexible and effective in communication' is feasible and to some extent evitable'. Native speakers and non-native speakers may use different CSs to help overcome a communication breakdown like paraphrase, approximation, literal translation, language switch, appeal for assistance, fillers or hesitation devices. Swain (1984 cited in Mariani, 2010, p. 39) defines strategic competence as "the mastery of communication strategies that may be called into action either to enhance the effectiveness of communication or to compensate for the breakdowns in communication." If learners' strategic competence has been underdeveloped, they may lack fluency and conversation skills (Dornyei & Thurrel, 1991). Communicative language teaching (CLT) has been introduced in Thailand since the mid 1980s (Kustati, 2013; Kwangsawad & Yawongsa, 2009; Saengboon, 2002). With an attempt to improve English language teaching in Thailand, the Thai government instituted a policy to replace traditional teaching methods as found in the grammar translation approach. Therefore, communicative teaching approach has been implemented, resulting in a paradigm shift from teacher- to student-centered approaches (Darasawang, 2007). CLT is currently widely adopted in Thai ELT. Despite the implementation of CLT as the dominant teaching pedagogy, Thai teachers are still struggling with executing CLT and Thai students' English fluency outcomes are still unsatisfactory. One of the many reasons is a lack of sustained professional development and teacher fluency (Teng & Sinwongsawat, 2015). Teachers who teach English in Thailand are mostly Thai native speakers and too often are low proficient in oral English (Bruner, Sinwongsawat & Shimray 2014; Khamkhien, 2010). It is undeniable that EFL teachers play a critical role in language acquisition as EFL teachers' language is an important part of the learners' input. They are expected to be a language role model who can communicate in the target language fluently with a variety of CSs used. In the Thai contexts, studies related to CSs have been mainly focused on learner's CSs used in relation to different variables such as learners' characteristics, language proficiency, gender, year of language studies, and major of studies. The studies related to CSs conducted focusing on the EFL teacher seem scarce. This preliminary study seeks to fill the gap by investigating the CSs employed by Thai EFL teachers. Four specific research questions were answered: 1) How frequently are overall CSs reported being employed by Thai EFL teachers? 2) What is the frequency of each teachers' individual use of CSs? 3) How frequently are CSs that are reported used by Thai EFL teachers employed when grouped under 3 main categories? And

4) What is the frequency of each teacher's use of CSs according to the 3 main categories?

## 2. Research Method

This section presents the research method used in this study. It begins with operational definitions, followed by research samples, instrument and data analysis.

### 2.1 Operational Definition

#### - Communication Strategies

The working definition of CSs was adopted from Toomnan (2014). It refers to attempts that teachers make to cope with communication breakdowns in English in order to convey an intended message to the interlocutor, to understand messages, and to maintain the conversation. There were 43 items (21 strategies for conveying an intended message to the interlocutor or 'SCM'; 12 strategies for understanding the message or 'SUM'; and 10 strategies for maintaining the conversation or SMC)

### 2.2 Research Samples

Two sampling techniques were used. A sample of EFL teachers teaching in high schools under the jurisdiction of the Nakhon Ratchasima Provincial Administrative Organization (PAO) were purposively selected to participate in the present study. Then a simple random sampling technique was employed to select the 151 participants from 58 schools who were teaching in the Academic Year 2016. Nearly half of the participants (41%) have been teaching for more than fifteen years. Fifteen percent of them have been teaching less than 5 years. Forty-four percent of them have been teaching for 5 to 15 years. In relation to their major of graduation, more than 95 percent obtained a degree in English language and 5 percent obtained a Bachelor's Degree in other fields of study. More than half (53%) have been trained in an extra English speaking course.

### 2.3 Instrument

The CS questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part of the CSs questionnaire asked for the demographic information of the participants in relation to majors upon graduation, degree obtained, years of teaching experience, and opportunities of taking any extra English speaking courses. The second part was a 4-point rating scale questionnaire adopted from Toomnan (2014). It was valued as 1, 2, 3 and 4. 'Never or almost never' was valued as 1, 'sometimes' was valued as 2, 'often' was valued as 3 and 'always or almost always' was valued as 4. Cornbach's Alpha was employed as a means to check the reliability of the questionnaire. The pilot study was carried out to ensure the quality of the CS questionnaire. Thirty EFL teachers participated in piloting. They were taken from the research population but would not participate in the actual state. The results showed .90 indicating that

the instrument was reliable.

#### 2.4 Data Analysis

The obtained data were analyzed in four steps. The first step analyzed teachers' overall reported CSs used. In the second step, teachers' individual CSs were shown in ascending order. In the third step, the overall CSs were grouped into 3 main categories, and the ones used were reported based on these 3: SCM, SUM and SMC. In the last step, teachers' individual CSs grouped under the 3 main categories were shown in ascending order. As a four-point rating scale was employed to collect the data, the values of the frequency can be from 1 to 4. The mid-point of the minimum and the maximum values is 2. Therefore, the teachers' use of CSs of any items valued lower than 2 was classified as 'low use'. The teachers' use of CSs of any items valued as 2 or higher, but lower than 3 was classified as 'moderate use', and any items valued as 3 or higher was classified as 'high use'.

### 3. Results

Results are presented in four parts based on the research questions. The overall frequency of CSs employed by sampled Thai EFL teachers is presented first, followed by the frequency of teachers' individual CSs use, next the frequency of overall CSs used under the 3 main categories is reported and the frequency of teachers' individual CSs used under the 3 main categories is mentioned.

#### 3.1. Overall use of Communication Strategies by Sampled Thai EFL Teachers

The results of holistic mean frequency score across the responses to CSs questionnaire given by 151 Thai EFL teachers teaching in Nakhon Ratchasima public high schools are illustrated in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Overall Use of Communication Strategies by Sampled Thai EFL Teachers

Strategy Use	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	Frequency of Use
Overall Use	2.71	.317	Moderate Use

As presented in Table 1, the mean frequency score of sampled Thai EFL teachers' reported overall CSs use was 2.71. This indicates that as a whole, the research participants reported employing CSs at the medium frequency level of use when they had to deal with English oral communication breakdowns.

Table 2. Frequency of Top 10 Individual CSs Reportedly Used by Sampled Thai EFL Teachers (n =151)

Individual Strategy Use	Mean ( $\bar{x}$ )	S.D.	Frequency Category
1) Paying attention to the speaker's eye contact, facial expression and gestures	3.35	.57	High Use
2) Making use of expressions which have been previously learnt	3.26	.60	High Use
3) Trying to catch the speaker's main point	3.19	.66	High Use
4) Actively encouraging oneself to express what one wants to say	3.17	.64	High Use
5) Trying to relax and enjoy the conversation	3.15	.63	High Use
6) Especially paying attention to the interrogative when listening to WH-questions	3.00	.65	High Use
7) Reducing the message and using simple expressions	2.98	.63	Moderate Use
8) Making use of expressions found in some sources of media	2.97	.65	Moderate Use
9) Guessing the meaning of what the interlocutor has said	2.97	.72	Moderate Use
10) Speaking more slowly to gain time to think and keep the conversation going smoothly	2.92	.71	Moderate Use

Table 2 reveals that among the top ten strategies, six strategies were reported at a high frequency of use. 'Paying attention to the speaker's eye contact, facial expression and gestures' was reported at the highest frequency of use, followed by, 'Making use of expressions which have been previously learnt', 'Trying to catch the speaker's main point', 'Actively encouraging oneself to express what one wants to say', 'Trying to relax and enjoy the conversation', and 'Especially paying attention to the interrogative when listening to WH-questions'. Four strategies were reported at a moderate frequency of use, i.e 'Reducing the message and using simple expressions', 'Making use of expressions found in some sources of media', 'Guessing the meaning of what the interlocutor has said', and 'speaking more slowly to gain time to think and keep the conversation going smoothly'

Table 3. Frequency of Bottom 10 Individual CSs Reportedly Used by Sampled Thai EFL Teachers (n =151)

Individual Strategy Use	Mean ( $\bar{x}$ )	S.D.	Frequency Category
1) Making up a new word in order to communicate a desired concept	2.44	.70	Moderate Use
2) Preparing the message by trying to anticipate what the interlocutor is going to say based on the context	2.41	.73	Moderate Use
3) Using circumlocution (paraphrase)	2.40	.67	Moderate Use
4) Appealing for assistance from other people around to clarify the interlocutor's message	2.36	.73	Moderate Use
5) Switching some unknown words or phrases into Thai	2.32	.79	Moderate Use
6) Appealing for assistance from the interlocutor	2.28	.72	Moderate Use
7) Pretending to understand in order to make attempt to carry on the conversation	2.11	.74	Moderate Use
8) Drawing a picture	1.82	.74	Low Use
9) Making a phone call to another person for assistance	1.62	.77	Low Use
10) Giving up when one can't make oneself understood	1.61	.71	Low Use

Table 3 reveals that among the bottom 10 Individual CSs, three strategies were reported at a low frequency of use, ie 'Drawing a picture', followed by 'Making a phone call to another person for assistance', and 'Giving up when one can't make oneself understood'.

### 3.2. Use of Communication Strategies under Three Main Categories

Table 4. Overall Use of Communication Strategies under 3 Main Categories

Overall Strategy Use	Mean ( $\bar{x}$ )	S.D.	Frequency Category
Strategies for conveying an intended message to the interlocutor or 'SCM'	2.57	.37	Moderate Use
Strategies for understanding the message or 'SUM'	2.70	.41	Moderate Use
Strategies for maintaining the conversation or 'SMC'	2.87	.43	Moderate Use

Table 4 reveals that Thai EFL teachers in our sample reported employing CSs at a medium frequency level to all three main categories. Considering the mean frequency scores of the three categories, we found that the most frequently used of the participants' reported CSs are in the SMC categories, followed by the SUM and SCM categories, respectively. The frequency of individual CS use in each category will be explored in the following tables.

Table 5. Frequency of Top 3 Individual CSs within the SCM Category Reported by Sampled Thai EFL Teachers

<b>Individual Strategy Use</b>	<b>Mean (<math>\bar{x}</math>)</b>	<b>S.D.</b>	<b>Frequency Category</b>
1) Making use of expressions which have been previously learnt	3.26	.60	High Use
2) Reducing the message and using simple expressions	2.98	.63	Moderate Use
3) Making use of expressions found in some sources of media	2.97	.65	Moderate Use

Table 6. Frequency of Bottom 3 Individual CSs within the SCM Category Reported by Sampled Thai EFL Teachers

<b>Individual Strategy Use</b>	<b>Mean (<math>\bar{x}</math>)</b>	<b>S.D.</b>	<b>Frequency Category</b>
1) Appealing for assistance from the interlocutor	2.28	.72	Moderate Use
2) Drawing a picture	1.82	.74	Low Use
3) Making a phone call to another person for assistance	1.61	.77	Low Use

Tables 5 and 6 are the top and bottom three CSs under the SCM category employed by Thai EFL teachers in order to deal with communication breakdowns. "Making use of expressions which have been previously learnt" was the most frequently employed CS, while "Making a phone call to another person for assistance" was the least frequently employed CS.

Table 7. Frequency of Top 3 Individual CSs within the SUM Category Reported by Sampled Thai EFL Teachers

<b>Individual Strategy Use</b>	<b>Mean (<math>\bar{x}</math>)</b>	<b>S.D.</b>	<b>Frequency Category</b>
1) Trying to catch the speaker's main point	3.19	.66	<b>High Use</b>
2) Especially paying attention to the interrogative when listening to WH-questions	3.00	.65	<b>High Use</b>
3) Guessing the meaning of what the interlocutor has said	2.97	.72	<b>Moderate Use</b>

Table 8. Frequency of Bottom 3 Individual CSs within the SUM Category Reported by Sampled Thai EFL Teachers

<b>Individual Strategy Use</b>	<b>Mean (<math>\bar{x}</math>)</b>	<b>S.D.</b>	<b>Frequency Category</b>
1) Trying to translate into native language little by little to understand what the speaker has said	2.61	.74	Moderate Use
2) Asking the speaker to give an example and use easy words when one is not sure what he/she said	2.52	.62	Moderate Use
3) Giving up when one can't make oneself understood	1.61	.71	Low Use

Tables 7 and 8 provide the top and bottom three CSs under the SUM category as employed by sampled Thai EFL teachers in order to deal with communication breakdowns. "Trying to catch the speaker's main point" was the most frequently employed CS under this category, while "Giving up when one can't make oneself understood" was employed the least.

Table 9. Frequency of Top 3 Individual CSs within the SMC Category Reported by Sampled Thai EFL Teachers

<b>Individual Strategy Use</b>	<b>Mean (<math>\bar{x}</math>)</b>	<b>S.D.</b>	<b>Frequency Category</b>
1) Paying attention to the speaker's eye contact, facial expression and gestures	3.35	.57	High Use
2) Actively encouraging oneself to express what one wants to say	3.17	.64	High Use
3) Trying to relax and enjoy the conversation	3.15	.63	High Use



Table 10. Frequency of Bottom 3 Individual CSs within the SMC Category Reported by Sampled Thai EFL Teachers

Individual Strategy Use	Mean ( $\bar{x}$ )	S.D.	Frequency Category
1) Changing the way of saying things according to the context in order to continue conversations	2.87	.71	Moderate Use
2) Talking about something else to gain time to think	2.49	.82	Moderate Use
3) Pretending to understand in order to make attempt to carry on the conversation	2.11	.73	Moderate Use

Tables 9 and 10 present the top and bottom three CSs under the SMC category reportedly employed by sampled Thai EFL teachers in order to deal with communication breakdowns. “Paying attention to the speaker’s eye contact, facial expression and gestures” was the most frequently employed CS under this category, while “Pretending to understand in order to make attempt to carry on the conversation” was employed the least.

#### 4. Discussions

The present study was intended to explore and describe communication strategies (CSs) employed by EFL teachers teaching in high schools in Nakhon Ratchasima Province, Thailand. The findings previously revealed that the mean frequency score of Thai EFL teachers’ reported overall CS use was 2.71. This indicates that as a whole, the research participants reported employing CSs at the medium frequency level of use when they had to deal with English oral communication breakdowns. To the best of the researcher’s knowledge the previous research conducted with Thai EFL teacher’s CSs usage seems scarce. In Thailand, only studies conducted with Thai EFL students majoring in English were found. In Somsai & Intaraprasert’s studies (2011), students majoring in English at Rajamangala University of Technology (RMUT) reported employing CSs, as a whole, with a medium frequency. This was consistent with Toomnan (2014) whose findings also reveal that university students, majoring in English in the Northeast of Thailand reported a medium frequency of CSs used when they had to deal with English oral communication breakdowns. This indicates that both EFL teachers and students in Thailand reported that they encounter more or less the same problems and solutions when they have to deal with English communication. According to Bialystok (1990), problematicity is one of the basic features of CSs as the CSs are employed when oral communication problems arise. “Researchers generally agree that the main purpose of CS use is to manage oral communication problems” (Dornyei & Scott, 1997, p.186). Problems might happen when both linguistics and sociolinguistic rule structures of the two interlocutors do not seem to be shared in order to agree on a meaning in situations. CSs are used to join such structures

in attempts to reach a communicative goal.

As far as the purpose of CSs used is concerned, the EFL teachers in the present study tended to use CSs mostly in order to maintain their conversation, while Thai EFL students in the previous research works tended to use CSs mostly in order to understand the message. Some examples of strategies for maintaining the conversation (SMC) 1) are 'Paying attention to the speaker's eye contact, facial expression and gestures' 2) 'Actively encouraging oneself to express what one wants to say' and 3) 'Trying to relax and enjoy the conversation'. Some examples of strategies for understanding the message (SUM) are 1) 'Trying to catch the speaker's main point', 2) 'Especially paying attention to the interrogative when listening to WH-questions', and 3) 'Guessing the meaning of what the interlocutor has said'. The different purposes of CSs used between Thai EFL teachers and students reveal different problems they encounter when dealing with English communication breakdowns. Those EFL teachers whose English proficiency is higher than those of EFL students seem to use their oral communication strategies in order to keep the conversation going. On the other hand, students whose English proficiency and language learning experience are lower seem to use their oral communication strategies in order to understand the message.

Keeping the free flow of the conversation by paying attention to the speaker's eye contact, facial expression and gestures seems to be used most frequently by our sample of teachers whereas "Giving up when one can't make oneself understood" was reportedly used least frequently. It is apparent that language proficiency and language learning experience seem to be crucial factors related to the purpose of the strategies used. Language proficiency creates the professional confidence of non-native English teachers (NNES). Language competence has been rated as the most essential characteristic of a good language teacher (Lange, 1990). According to Doff (1987), a teacher's confidence in the classroom may be undermined by a poor command of the English language. Poor command of the language can affect the self-esteem and professional status of the teacher and interfere with simple teaching procedures. "Drawing a picture" and "Making a phone call to another person for assistance" were the other two least frequently used strategies. It is important to note that Thai EFL teachers and students seem to use CSs for different purposes. The teachers should be aware of differences when teaching communication strategies to their students so that they can train them appropriately when dealing with communication breakdown. For the students, CSs for understanding the message should be the focus to minimize communication problems. This may contribute to the students' security, self-confidence, and motivation to communicate in English. Similarly, when promoting CSs to be used by EFL teachers, strategies for maintaining the conversation should be emphasized.

The least frequently used strategies under the 3 main categories (SCM, SUM, SMC) are 'Making a phone call to another person for assistance', 'Giving up when one can't make oneself understood', and 'Pretending to understand in order to make attempt to carry on the conversation, respectively. It reveals that Thai EFL Teachers are not inclined to rely on other people when coping with oral communication breakdown. In addition, they do

have the ability to select an effective means of performing a communicative act. When teaching the CSs to students with low English proficiency and less language learning experience, both self-reliant strategies and non-self-reliant strategies should be addressed. Since CSs are useful to language learners, particularly for those with low language proficiency and less language learning experience, it may be required to incorporate CS-based instruction into the normal curriculum. Teachers and students should have opportunities to observe and discuss what strategies should be utilized for certain situations because not all CSs work well in all situations (Wannaruk, 2003)

## **5. The Implications for ELT Pedagogy**

1. CSs can be used for many purposes such as to convey an intended message to the interlocutor, to understand messages, and to maintain the conversation. It may be desirable to incorporate strategy-based training into English teacher training courses. In the course, teachers should have opportunities to observe and discuss what strategies might be utilized for them for certain circumstances because not all strategies work well in all situations.

2. Based on the findings, the EFL teachers in the present study tended to use CSs mostly in order to maintain their conversation, while Thai EFL students in the previous research works tended to use CSs mostly in order to understand the message. Therefore, the teachers should be aware the differences of strategy employment between those for themselves and those for their students. CS training for students might intend to increase the students' self-confidence and motivation to communicate, while CS training for teachers might intend to develop their language fluency.

3. CSs training should be help particularly for pre-service English teachers as to raise the awareness of the importance of Cs use. In addition, English teachers are considered role -models of language learners. Learning occurs through observing and imitating the behavior of teachers. If the teachers can use CSs naturally, language learners can imitate them.

## **6. Conclusion**

The present study aimed at investigating CSs to deal with oral communication breakdowns by EFL teachers teaching in high schools under the jurisdiction of the Nakhon Ratchasima Provincial Administrative Organization (PAO). One hundred-fifty one EFL teachers teaching in public high schools were the participants. In order to investigate CSs used, a questionnaire adopted from Toomnan (2014) was employed to collect the data. Descriptive statistics were employed to analyze the data in terms of frequency distribution. The findings revealed that the sampled Thai EFL teachers reported employing CSs at the medium frequency level of use when they had to deal with English oral communication breakdowns. The main purpose for employing those strategies is to keep the conversation going. The teachers in the present study are considered highly proficient in English and gained lots of language learning experience (around 53% have been trained

in an extra English speaking course). Therefore, self-reliant strategies were found to be used frequently by this group. The choice of strategies used in the present study seems to be different from those used by Thai EFL students found in previous studies. This may shed the light on teaching CSs to students in that both self-reliant strategies and dependent strategies should be concerned. On the other hand, when promoting CSs used by EFL teachers, strategies for maintaining the conversation should be emphasized.

## 7. Limitations of the Study

In conducting the present study, certain limitations need to be acknowledged and taken into account in any further research work.

1. A CSs questionnaire was employed as the main research instrument to elicit the data concerning CSs use. However, no research instrument has been accepted to be the best research method to elicit such data; therefore, the potential limitations related to the use of questionnaire should be acknowledged: 1) the respondents might not be able to exactly recall what they had done when they were dealing with communication breakdown so, they might not exactly report their real CS use. It would be better if further research studies could employ other methods, such as classroom observations, think-aloud and interview to supplement the use of a questionnaire.

2. In the present study, the CSs have been explored without any variables taken into consideration. It might yield insights into a new picture of Thai' EFL teacher 'CSs use, if some variables like gender, years of teaching experience and age were investigated.

3. The present study has limited the scope of its study to describe the use of CSs employed by the sampled EFL teachers teaching in high schools under the jurisdiction of the Nakhon Ratchasima Provincial Administrative Organization (PAO). There is a need to examine CSs employed by Thai EFL teachers in other parts of the country. This would help provide a complete picture of CSs employed by Thai EFL teachers in the whole country of Thailand.

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