

EFL learners' perceived use of conversation maintenance strategies during synchronous computer-mediated communication with native English speakers

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Abstract. This study investigated the perceived use of conversation maintenance strategies during synchronous computer-mediated communication with native English speakers. I also correlated the relationships of the strategies used with students' speaking ability and comprehensive proficiency level. The research questions were: (1) how were the learners' perceived use of conversation maintenance strategies related with one another?; and (2) what were the relationships of those strategies with learner's speaking ability and English proficiency? During the semester, the participants participated in five synchronous computer-mediated communication sessions in total. Each of the teachers listened to three presentations during each 50 minutes session. During one period, the teacher interacted with the learners, especially after each presentation, asking questions and giving some comments. Significant correlations were found between keeping eye contact and asking questions to the teacher, between keeping eye contact and taking action/showing attitude to continue conversation, and between keeping eye contact and readiness to help peers. It was also found that asking questions to the teacher and readiness to help peers were strongly correlated. These results seemed to mean that keeping eye-contact was a crucial conversation maintenance strategy in videoconferencing synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC).

Keywords: EFL learners, videoconferencing, SCMC, strategies, speaking ability, English proficiency.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Problem

In the Japanese English as a foreign language (EFL) environment, the learners at university level have few chances of authentic output and interaction in English. Although they have a fair amount of vocabulary and grammatical knowledge gained through competitive entrance examinations to universities, they are weak in applying their linguistic knowledge to performance. Even after they enter university, they still have few opportunities to speak English for authentic communication.

1.2. Solution

Videoconferencing, an oral mode of SCMC, seemed a solution for such a situation. It has been found that it enhances learner's ability of native/non-native speaker interactions, which leads to the promotion of L2 acquisition process as well as motivation to learn an L2, especially for beginner level learners (Jauregi, de Graaff, van den Bergh, & Kriz, 2012).

Therefore, the researcher decided to provide the students the opportunities to have videoconferencing through Skype with native English speakers regularly during a semester. Concretely, in each videoconferencing session, each group of three learners gave a 10 minute presentation to a native English speaking teacher. They then had a discussion with the teacher about the content each student presented. Interactions during the sessions seemed to be a crucial opportunity to have real conversations with native English speakers.

1.3. Conversation maintenance strategies

To see the progress of the learners' speaking performance, what the researcher operationally called 'conversation maintenance strategies' was adopted. Actually, communication strategies could be the term which broadly includes various kinds of strategies to avoid and make up for communication breakdowns (Long, 1983).

Among the typically referred line up of communication strategies (e.g. Smith, 2003), the one called 'conversational continuants' (Lee, 2001) or 'supportive move' (Zuengler, 1989) was regarded as an important strategy for beginner L2 speakers. Since oral SCMC frequently urges the teacher to check the learners' comprehension of exchange, responsive moves taken by the learners seemed important to maintain

conversation between the teacher and the learners, for example, keeping eye contact through the camera and clearly verbalizing listeners' responses such as acknowledgement.

1.4. Research questions

This study investigated perceived use of conversation maintenance strategies during synchronous computer-mediated communication with native English speakers as an indicator of motivation to learn L2. I also examined the relationships of the strategies used with speaking ability and comprehensive proficiency level. Thus, the research questions were: (1) how were the learners' perceived use of conversation maintenance strategies related with one another?, and (2) what were the relationships of those strategies with learner's speaking ability and English proficiency?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants were 21 Japanese university students majoring in Economics. During the semester, the participants participated in five synchronous computer-mediated communication sessions in total. Two Filipino native-like English teachers were in charge of seven groups of two or three Japanese EFL learners. The teachers listened to three presentations during 50-minute-sessions each. During one session, the teacher had interactions with the learners, especially after each presentation, asking questions and giving some comments.

2.2. Data collection procedure

Speaking ability was assessed through an interview test following the format of an *Eiken* (*Eiken* Foundation of Japan) test for Japanese learners of English, which consists of reading aloud, comprehension questions, picture narration with criteria of content and grammatical accuracy and open-ended Q&A (two different topics). In each of the tasks, three raters evaluated the learner performance on a five point scale ($\alpha=.78$). The sum of the evaluation in each task was adopted as the speaking ability score.

To obtain the learners' perception of conversation maintenance strategies, a questionnaire was given after the sessions which asked whether they could actually put the strategies into practice.

To measure English proficiency level, CASEC (Computerized Assessment System for English Communication), a computerized test of English, was used. It is an adaptive test based on Item Response Theory by which it is able to accurately test a student's English ability in a short amount of time. It was developed by The Japan Institute for Educational Measurement (JIEM). It consists of four sections: vocabulary, expressions in conversation situations, listening comprehension, and dictation. Each section has 15 questions with 250 points being a perfect score. This makes the total score 1000 points. The test takers took between 40 and 60 minutes to complete the test.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive statistics

The means of each question were calculated based on the post SCMC reflection questionnaire, which was conducted after the first, third, and fifth sessions. The participants responded with YES (3) / In between (2) / No (1) (see [Table 1](#)).

Table 1. Mean scores in strategy use

Questions	M (/3)	SD
Q1 Could you keep eye contact with your teacher?	2.65	0.46
Q2 Could you speak loud enough?	2.77	0.39
Q3 Could you ask some questions to the teacher?	2.26	0.47
Q4 Could you use expressions showing your comprehension? e.g. Uh-huh. Yes. OK. I see. All right. Me, too. Really? That's great/nice/wonderful/etc.	2.76	0.33
Q5 Did you use "echoing" or "shadowing" techniques to continue the conversation or clarify the part that you could not understand? e.g. A: I like Kyoto very much. →B: Oh, <u>you</u> like Kyoto a lot! A: You bet! →B: <u>You bet?</u> →A: Oh "you bet," means "you're right".	2.02	0.60
Q6 Did you ask some questions to the teacher?	2.49	0.51
Q7 Did you take action/show your attitude to continue the conversation?	2.68	0.45
Q8 Did you ACTIVELY listen to the interaction of your group members?	2.77	0.37
Q9 Were you always ready to help other members and speak at any time?	2.45	0.58

3.2. RQ1: How were the learners' perceived use of conversation maintenance strategies related with one another?

Based on the questionnaire results, the relationships between the strategies were examined with Pearson Correlation Coefficients. Significant correlations were found between keeping eye contact (Q1) and asking questions to the teacher (Q6) ($r=.61, p<.01$), between keeping eye contact (Q1) and taking action/showing attitude to continue conversation (Q7) ($r=.49, p<.05$), and between keeping eye

contact (Q1) and readiness to help peers (Q9) ($r=.47, p<.05$). It was also found that questioning the teacher (Q3) and readiness to help peers (Q9) were strongly correlated ($r=.70, p<.01$).

3.3. RQ (2): What were the relationships of those strategies with the learner's English speaking ability and proficiency level?

Descriptive statistics of the speaking test are displayed in Table 2. The sum of the average total score by the three raters was 55.2 ($SD=18.4$). Mean score of the proficiency test was 614.4 points out of 1000. The correlation coefficient between the mean speaking score and mean proficiency test score was .61 ($p<.05$).

Table 2. Evaluation of each speaking test task by three raters

Rater	Reading aloud			Comprehension Q			Picture Narration			Vocabulary & Grammar		
	A	B	C	A	B	C	A	B	C	A	B	C
M	3.7	3.3	3.6	2.4	1.9	2.6	3.5	2.4	3.7	3.4	2.3	3.4
SD	0.58	0.46	0.59	0.86	0.65	0.81	0.93	0.68	1.06	0.68	0.56	0.81

Rater	Q&A			Q&A			Total			SUM
	A	B	C	A	B	C	A	B	C	
M	3.2	2.7	3.7	3.4	2.5	3.7	19.5	15	20.7	55.2
SD	1.25	0.58	1.19	1.24	0.68	1.06	3.74	1.92	4.3	18.4

Table 3. Correlation coefficients of speaking ability and proficiency with the strategies

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9
Speaking ability	.227	.282	.432**	-.045	.314	.300	.339	.197	.329
CASEC	-.107	.153	-.135	.207	.411**	.353	.263	-.043	.027

Table 4. Results of CASEC test

	Vocabulary	Expressions	Listening	Dictation	Total
M	159.8	149.9	158.1	146.7	614.4
SD	23.5	15.0	22.7	17.4	57.4

Based on this data, it was found that speaking ability was correlated with (Q3) asking questions to the teacher ($r=.43, p<.05$). Other strategies did not show any significant relationship with speaking ability (Table 3). Concerning the relationship with the proficiency score (CASEC, see Table 4), (Q5) using echoing/shadowing had a significant relationship ($r=.41, p<.05$).

4. Discussion

A significant correlation between maintaining eye contact and asking questions to the teacher seemed natural because it is common to look at the interlocutor when asking questions. This result indicates that videoconferencing was quite close to face to face conversation. Other strategies which related to eye contact, such as taking action/showing attitudes to continue the conversation and readiness to help peers, were also an indication of the extent to which the learners focused on the teacher's utterances through the camera to maintain conversation.

Another interesting finding was the fact that questioning the teacher and readiness to help peers were strongly correlated. This phenomenon was also close to face to face conversation because the learners who were eager to ask questions to the teacher were eager to help peers, or the learners who were eager to help peers were eager to ask questions to the teacher.

This result could be related to another finding that speaking ability was correlated to asking questions to the teacher. This means the good speakers were more likely to ask questions, possibly because of the less cognitive burden to do so. Thus, they could help peers.

The last finding was that the learner's English proficiency level had a significant relationship with using echoing or shadowing of the teacher's expressions to continue the conversation. This strategy use implicated that repeating the teacher's utterances in conversation was used often by highly proficient learners. This strategy was used the least among the learners, as seen in the descriptive statistics (Table 1). However, this fact indicated that only high proficiency learners with a strong listening ability and articulation automaticity could use the strategy.

5. Conclusions

In this study, videoconferencing mode of synchronous computer-mediated communication was investigated, shedding light on how the learners maintain conversation with native speaker teachers. The perceived use of eye contact was implied to be a crucial conversation maintenance strategy, especially in videoconferencing SCMC, exactly like face to face communication. Also, high speaking ability extended the strategy use not only between the learner and the teacher but also to peers, which indicated that the social aspect of conversation maintenance was also of concern for the learners. In terms of variety of strategies used, the least used strategy, echoing or shadowing the teacher's expressions to

continue conversation, was mostly used by highly proficient learners. These findings indicated the improvement of speaking ability and overall English proficiency level help expand the repertoires of conversation maintenance strategies.

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