

# Keeping the Conversation Going: Students' Use of Conversation Strategies

Daniel Leigh Paller

## **Introduction**

A conversation is “a talk, especially an informal one, between two or more people, in which news and ideas are exchanged” (Oxford Dictionary). Having a conversation can be a daunting task for language users regardless of their proficiency. With that said, conversation is one foundation of language learning (Wong & Waring, 2010). This is clearly stated by Clark (1996), “face-to-face conversation is the cradle of language use” (p. 9). In a conversation, two or more people must interact with one another in order for ideas and information to exchange. It is not a one-way process.

Some learners are quite successful language users in conversation and others are not. There are many possible reasons for this, including a strong command of the language, confidence in their language use, and the use of conversation strategies (CSs). Learners who lack grammar and vocabulary can thrive during a conversation because they use various strategies to express themselves. Dörnyei (1995) states there is some disagreement on having one definition of CSs but most follow the definition from Corder (1981), which states CSs are “a systematic technique employed by a speaker to express his or her meaning when faced with some difficulty” (as cited in Dörnyei, 1995, p. 56). Using CSs allow speakers to stay in the conversation without losing face.

The purpose of this study was to investigate students' use of conversation strategies during a fluency building task in an EFL classroom and to examine which conversation strategies students might need more explicit practice with.

## **Literature Review**

Learning strategies are used by students in order to gain a better grasp of the target language (Nakatani, 2010). According to Dörnyei (1995), studies previously were only concerned with identifying and distinguishing the conversation strategies. Dörnyei & Scott (1997) summarize that “researchers have generally agreed with Bialystok's (1990) statement that ‘communication strategies are an undeniable event of language use, their existence is a reliable documented aspect of communication, and their role in second-language communication seems particularly salient’ (p.116)” (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997, p. 181). Nonetheless, Bialystok (1990) opposes the actual teaching of conversation strategies and encourages teaching the actual language (as cited in Maleki, 2007). Based on Tarone (1977), Færch & Kasper (1983), and Bialystok (1990), Dörnyei (1995) finds the following strategies (see Table 1) the most common and useful in language learning and teaching.

**Table 1: CSs Following Traditional Conceptualizations (Dörnyei, 1995)**

<p><b>Avoidance or Reduction Strategies</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Message abandonment</li> <li>2. Topic avoidance</li> </ol>
<p><b>Achievement or Compensatory Strategies</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. Circumlocution</li> <li>4. Approximation</li> <li>5. Use of al-purpose words</li> <li>6. Word-coinage</li> <li>7. Use of nonlinguistic means</li> <li>8. Literal translation</li> <li>9. Foreignizing</li> <li>10. Code-switching</li> <li>11. Appeal for help</li> </ol>
<p><b>Stalling or Time-gaining Strategies</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>12. Use of fillers/hesitation devices</li> </ol>

Dörnyei (1995) investigated whether or not there are any benefits of teaching CSs in the language classroom. He found that including CSs in curriculum would benefit the students' L2 development. Furthermore, Maleki (2007) concluded that CSs should be taught and included in the syllabus. Including CSs would allow for more effective use of the language. In addition, Maleki (2007) found that "teaching materials with communication strategies are more effective than those without them" (p. 593).

Previous studies (Tarone, Cohen, & Dumas, 1976) also looked at how learners compensated their lack of language by using conversation strategies. Nevertheless, Nakatani (2010) examined the use of CSs in the classroom context. Nakatani (2010) concluded that high-proficiency students understood and were aware of using conversation strategies. However, "low-proficiency students lacked sufficient strategic knowledge to maintain their interaction or linguistic knowledge for spontaneous communication" (Nakatani, 2010, pp. 127–128). Thus, Nakatani (2010) concludes more strategic training is needed for lower proficiency students.

## **Methods**

### *Context and Participants*

The participants in this study were second year business management students at a co-educational university in Nagoya. The course was entitled *Advanced Business English*. This class runs over two years and starts the second semester of the students' first year. The purpose of the course is for the students to become communicative in English in the global business world and obtain a minimum TOEIC score of 700. There are between 24 and 26 students and then divided into four sections based on their TOEIC scores. The level of students in this study ranged between low-intermediate to high-intermediate.

Classes met twice a week for 90 minutes over 15 weeks – one day with a native teacher to focus on English conversation and one day with a Japanese teacher to focus on TOEIC preparation. In the

conversation portion of the course, students focused primarily on improving speaking fluency. A textbook was used in addition to other materials and activities designed by the instructor. One fluency exercise was the Five-minute Conversation. In pairs, students have a conversation about any topic they want but are not to stop speaking until the five minutes expires, and to use English.

### *Data Collection*

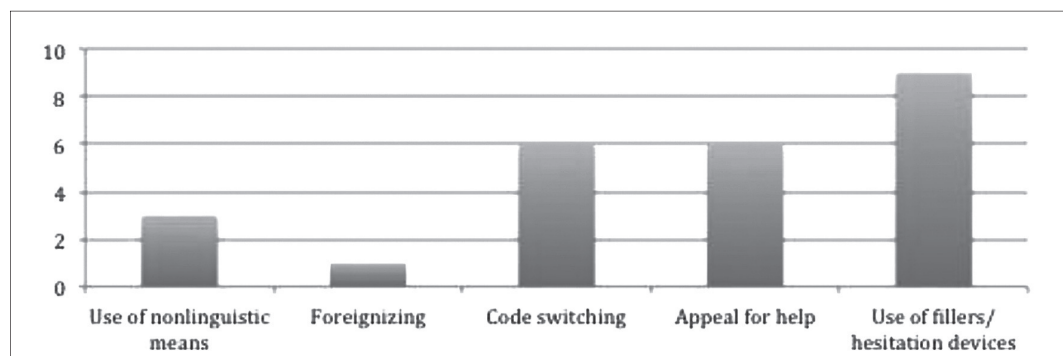
The data was audio recorded during a 5-minute Conversation fluency exercise, using a voice recorder placed between the pair. This process was done multiple times and the two clearest recordings were used to find examples of conversation strategy usage. Each conversation contains only two students and by chance one of the students is the same in both sets of data. Next, Conversation Analysis transcription methods (Appendix 1) were used to transcribe the two sets of data (Appendix 2).

The transcriptions were then analyzed for students' use of conversation strategies and compared to the Dörnyei (1995) Conversation Strategies following Traditional Concepts (Table 1). The conversation strategies were defined as follows: Using nonlinguistic means refers to the use of gestures, hand motions, facial expressions and sound imitation. ; The Foreignizing strategy is using a word from the L1 and using the L2 pronunciation; Code switching is defined as using the L1 as well as well as the L2 where the L2 is the target language; Appealing for help is “turning to the conversation partner for help either directly (e.g. *What do you call...?*) or indirectly (e.g. raising intonation, pause, eye contact, puzzled expression)” (Nakatani, 2006, p. 161); and finally, the use of fillers and hesitation devices were described as “filling words or gambits to fill pauses and to gain time to think (e.g., *well, let me see, as a matter of fact*)” (Dörnyei, 1995, p. 58). Out of the twelve these five strategies were the only ones analyzed.

### **Results and Discussion**

The transcribed data contained twenty-five instances of conversation strategy use. There were twelve utterances using fillers and hesitation devices. Code switching and appealing for help each had six cases, use of nonlinguistic means had three and foreignizing only had one utterance. These results can be seen in Figure 1:

**Figure1: Student Use of CSs**



**Data Set 1: Ex. 1 [Appealing for help, Code Switching, Nonlinguistic means & Use of fillers/hesitation devices]**

- 01 Y: what do: you: what did you: do: last week.  
 02 K: last weekend I had a seminar fo:r flower arrangement.  
 03 Y: heeh?  
 04 K: flower arrangement.  
 05 → Y: what's flower arrangement.  
 06 → K: *Nanto ieba ii?*  
 07 ((they both laugh))  
 08 → K: *eeto* ((possible gestures for flower arrangement))  
 09 Y: gardening?  
 10 K: ((shakes head for "no"))  
 11 Y: no gardening?  
 12 → K: It's *kado*.  
 13 Y: oh, *kado*.  
 14 ((laughter))

In the very beginning of these students' conversation, there are multiple instances of conversation strategy use by both Student Y and Student K. In line 5, Student Y appeals for help by asking the meaning of "flower arrangement" since he did not understand the word. In the following line (line 6), Student K code switches into Japanese saying "what should I say/ Let me see," as a filler/hesitation device. This is interesting since she is using two conversation strategies for one occasion. Following this, in line 8, Student K makes some possible gestures for flower arrangement. Student K makes a guess about the gestures but it was incorrect. Finally in line 12, Student K tells Student Y that flower arrangement is *kado*. This is a clear example of code switching. At this point in the conversation, there were at least four instances of conversation strategies. Without them, this portion of the conversation would have been over. In addition, continuing the conversation could also have been more difficult if this was abandoned.

**Data Set 1: Ex. 2 [Code switching & Use of fillers/hesitation devices]**

- 22 K: How about you? What did you do last weekend.  
 23 → Y: I:: (1.0) *senshu nani yattake*. (2.0) I:: ah:: I:: studied  
 24 financial planners on <<Thurs::day>>  
 25 and Tues::day and Satur::day.

In this example Student Y has some trouble producing an answer (seen in lines 23-25) to Student K's question. He starts by saying "I" and then pauses to think. Next he code switches into Japanese speaking "what DID I do?" to himself. It seems that he understands the question but cannot quite produce what he wants to say. He continues using fillers such as "ah" and extends some of the vowel sounds (e.g., I:: and Thurs::day) as a hesitation device to give him more time to think of what he wants to say.

**Data Set 1: Ex. 3 [Appealing for help & Code Switching]**

- 32 K: so long time. . °um° (1.0) when will you have exam (.) examination?  
 33 → Y: ((possible confused look)) examination?  
 34 → K: *shaken wa itsu?*  
 35 Y: ah:: (.) September. (1.0) what did you study seminar.

Example 3 shows two conversation strategies, one used by Student Y and another by Student K. In line 33, Student Y is struggling with a word so he repeats it and raises his intonation to show he needs help. Student K code switches into Japanese and asks the question again in the following turn (line 34). Since Student K code switched, Student Y understood the question and answered in English. If Student K tried a different conversation strategy such as circumlocution, the conversation may have broken down and Student Y may not have understood the contents. Code switching here was a clear strategy to keeping the conversation on track.

**Data Set 2: Ex. 4 [Appealing for help & Use of fillers/hesitation devices]**

- 01 M: do you have any event eh this month?  
 02 → K: this month (1.5) ahh: this month ahh:  
 03 M: ah. i have ah: live concert of bump of chicken  
 04 this month (1.0) twenty sixth.  
 05 K: twenty sixth? ah:

Example 4 shows two conversation strategies: appealing for help and the use of hesitation devices. In line 2, Student K uses hesitation devices to gain some thinking time. However, Student M sees this as appealing for help and gives her an example. In Student M utterances (line 3), she uses hesitation devices as well saying “ah.” This could be interpreted as either thinking time for Student M in her example or an opportunity for Student K to provide an answer to the original question (line 1).

**Data Set 2: Ex. 5 [Code switching, Appealing for help, & Nonlinguistic means]**

- 38 M: I want to go with. yeah. by the way,  
 39 what did you do last Sunday and Saturday.  
 40 → K: last Sunday ( . ) Ah: I have had a seminar of *kado*.  
 41 → M: *kado? kado?*  
 42 → K: flower arrangement ((gestures))  
 43 → M: *kado?*  
 44 → K: *ocha toka*.  
 45 M: OH. *KADO*.  
 46 K: Yes.

This example shows multiple conversation strategies being used by both students. In line 40, Student K uses a Japanese word, which Student M does not understand and repeats the word twice with a raising intonation to appeal for help. Student K then uses an English equivalent and nonlinguistic means to describe the activity. Student M is still confused and again appeals for help, so Student K code switches and gives a short explanation (line 44).

This is an interesting example since Student K said the activity first in Japanese and then switched to English instead of what she did in Example 1 where she first said the English and then the Japanese. Not knowing what either Student K or Student M was thinking at this time, one possibility is that since Student Y (in Data Set 1: Example 1) did not understand the English, Student K said the Japanese word first. Another possibility is that Student M thought “*kado*” was an English word or expected English and not Japanese, which confused her.

After analyzing the students' conversation, there is clear evidence of student use of conversation strategies. “Given that EFL learners frequently face language difficulties during their communication in English, they have no choice but to use strategies to compensate for their lack of proficiency in order to facilitate their interaction” (Nakatani, 2006, p. 161). However, some conversation strategies in Dörnyei (1995) CSs Following Traditional Conceptions the students did not use. For example circumlocution, which is describing the situation when not knowing the vocabulary, and the use of all-purpose words, which is “extending a general, empty lexical item to contexts where the specific words are lacking (e.g., *thing, stuff, make, do, thingie, what-do-you-call-it*)” (Dörnyei, 1995, p. 58). During the term very little time was spent on the teaching of conversation strategies other than the first day of class. Additionally, appealing for help was the only strategy covered. The results from these intermediate learners show the need to do more explicit CS training especially for circumlocution. According to Dörnyei (1995) teaching CSs directly may include the following aspects:

- Raising learner awareness about the nature and communicative potential of CSs.
- Encouraging students to be willing to take risks and use CSs.
- Providing L2 models of the use of certain CSs.
- Highlighting cross-cultural differences in CS use.
- Teaching CSs directly by presenting linguistic devices to verbalize them.
- Providing opportunities for practice in strategy use. (p. 80)

By doing the above aspects, especially when teaching circumlocution, students will get a better understanding of the CS and its importance. A possible activity is “Guess the Word.” This is how the activity would work - A student is given a word or a picture of a word and then has to explain it without using the word or a word in its family. The other students then have to guess the word. Nonlinguistic means to explain would not be allowed during this activity to focus only on one strategy. This activity would raise students' awareness of the potential benefits of using circumlocution as well as giving them an opportunity to use the strategy.

## **Conclusion**

One purpose of this paper was to reflect on my own teaching and to better understand what is happening in my classroom, especially concerning the use of conversation strategies. During the five-minute conversations, students employed various conversation strategies without explicitly teaching them myself. By using conversation strategies, the students were able to achieve the goal of maintaining a conversation for the entire time (5 minutes). However, there is still a need to teach other communication strategies to increase students' strategic language competency.

This study was very limited to just two conversations of three students. There would be a benefit to record and analyze all the students in the class. Although, this would require a lot of work, it would be beneficial in determining which strategies students lacked and therefore teach. In conclusion, this study has shown the need to teach explicitly conversation strategies in the language classroom.

## **References**

- Bialystok, E. (1990). *Communication strategies*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Clark, H. H. (1996). *Using language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dörnyei, Z. (1995). On the teachability of communication strategies. *TESOL Quarterly*, 29(1), 55–85.
- Dörnyei, Z., & Scott, M. L. (1997). Communication strategies in a second language: Definitions and taxonomies. *Language Learning*, 47(1), 173–210.
- Færch, C. & Kasper, G. (1983). Plans and strategies in foreign language communication. In C. Færch & G. Kasper (Eds.), *Strategies in interlanguage communication* (pp. 20-60). Harlow, England: Longman.
- Maleki, A. (2007). Teachability of communication strategies: An Iranian experience. *System*, 35(4), 583–594.
- Nakatani, Y. (2006). Developing an oral communication strategy inventory. *The Modern Language Journal*, 90(2), 151–168.
- Nakatani, Y. (2010). Identifying strategies that facilitate EFL learners' oral communication: A classroom study using multiple data collection procedures. *The Modern Language Journal*, 94(1), 116–136.
- Tarone, E. (1977). Conscious communication strategies in interlanguage: A progress report. In H.D. Brown, C.A. Yorio, & R.C. Crymes (Eds.), *On TESOL '77* (pp. 194-203). Washington, DC: TESOL.
- Tarone, E., Cohen, A. D., & Dumas, G. (1976). A closer look at some interlanguage terminology: A framework for communication strategies. *Working Papers on Bilingualism*, 9, 76-90.
- Wong, J., & Waring, H. Z. (2010). *Conversation Analysis and Second Language Pedagogy: A Guide for ESL/ EFL Teachers* (1st ed.). Routledge.

## Appendix 1

### *CA transcription symbols*

.	(period) Falling intonation.
?	(question mark) Rising intonation.
,	(comma) Continuing intonation.
-	(hyphen) Marks an abrupt cut-off.
::	(colon(s)) Prolonging of sound.
w <sub>o</sub> :rd	(colon after underlined letter) Falling intonation on word.
w <sub>o</sub> :rd	(underlined colon) Rising intonation on word.
<u>word</u>	(underlining)
<u>word</u>	The more underlying, the greater the stress.
WORD	(all caps) Loud speech.
°word°	(degree symbols) Quiet speech.
↑ word	(upward arrow) raised pitch.
↓ word	(downward arrow) lowered pitch
>>word<<	(more than and less than) Quicker speech.
<<word>>	(less than & more than) Slowed speech.
<	(less than) Talk is jump-started—starting with a rush.
hh	(series of h's) Aspiration or laughter.
.hh	(h's preceded by dot) Inhalation.
[ ]	(brackets) simultaneous or overlapping speech.
=	(equal sign) Latch or contiguous utterances of the same speaker.
(2.4)	(number in parentheses) Length of a silence in 10ths of a second
(.)	(period in parentheses) Micro-pause, 0.2 second or less.
( )	(empty parentheses) Non-transcribable segment of talk.
((gazing toward the ceiling))	(double parentheses) Description of non-speech activity.
(try 1)/(try 2)	(two parentheses separated by a slash) Alternative hearings.
\$word\$	(dollar signs) Smiley voice.
#word#	(number signs) Squeaky voice.
<i>italics</i>	L1 utterances
{L1}	L1 utterances but can't decipher



**Appendix 2**

## Data Set #1

- 01 Y: what do: you: what did you: do: last week.  
 02 K: last weekend I had a seminar fo:r flower arrangement.  
 03 Y: heeh?  
 04 K: flower arrangement.  
 05 → Y: what's flower arrangement.  
 06 → K: *Nanto ieba ii?*  
 07 ((they both laugh))  
 08 → K: *eeto* ((possible gestures for flower arrangement))  
 09 Y: gardening?  
 10 K: ((shakes head for “no”))  
 11 Y: no gardening?  
 12 → K: It's *kado*.  
 13 Y: oh, *kado*.  
 14 ((laughter))  
 15 Y: *kado*. where did you (1.0) do *kado*?  
 16 K: in (.) the city hall.  
 17 Y: oh, city hall. who did you do *kado* with?  
 18 K: um. (1) no one.  
 19 Y: [NO ONE.]  
 20 K: [I] started it by (1.0) myself.  
 21 Y: ahh:: ((laughter))  
 22 K: How about you? What did you do last weekend.  
 23 → Y: I:: (1.0) *senshu nani yattake*. (2.0) I:: I:: studied  
 24 financial planners on <<Thurs::day>>  
 25 and Tues::day and Satur::day.  
 26 K: [very] hard.  
 27 Y: [very] hard very hard.  
 28 I: studied it (.) Saturday: from twelve to six. very hard.  
 29 K: Ah, six hours.  
 30 Y: six hours.  
 31 very hard.  
 32 K: so long time. . °um° (1.0) when will you have exam (.) examination?  
 33 → Y: ((possible confused look)) examination?  
 34 → K: *shaken wa itsu?*  
 35 Y: ah:: (.) September. (1.0) what did you study seminar.  
 36 K: Now, I have customer seminar.  
 37 Y: {Japanese utterance}  
 38 K: NO CUSTOMS SEMINAR.  
 39 Y: CUSTOMS seminar. customs?  
 40 K: Trading  
 41 Y: trading?

42 K: Yes↓  
 43 Y: Ahh::  
 44 K: {Japanese utterance}  
 45 Y: Ah, do you:: do you:: get trading?  
 46 K: I want to be -  
 47 Y: Ok. What do you:: summer vacation? what are you:: going to do  
 48 summer vacation.  
 49 K: Ah, (.) I will go to camp with zemi  
 50 Y: [camp zami] where?  
 51 K: not yet decided.  
 52 ((laughter))  
 53 not yet decided.  
 54 ((more laughter))

Data Set #2

01 M: do you have any event eh this month?  
 02 → K: this month (1.5) ahh: this month ahh:  
 03 → M: ah. i have ah: live concert of bump of chicken  
 04 this month (1.0) twenty sixth.  
 05 K: twenty sixth? ah:  
 06 M: YES.  
 07 K: I had (1.0) the plans to go to their band (.) live but  
 08 I had (.) have another schedule  
 09 M: huh ((surprised))  
 10 K: so I cancelled it.  
 11 M: really? did you have plans (.) *eeto* (.) with Megu?  
 12 K: no  
 13 M: oh no?  
 14 K: YES, YES  
 15 M: she will go to the=  
 16 K: = twenty seventh  
 17 M: uh huh (.) twenty seventh.  
 18 what schedule, zemi?  
 19 K: zeminar, yes.  
 20 M: oh:  
 21 K: I have many conference.  
 22 M: your zemi is so busy.  
 23 K: oh. yes.  
 24 M: ahh: (1.0) do you have any plan for summer vacation?  
 25 K: summer vacation? (.) I will be go to the camp  
 26 M: camp?  
 27 K: with zeminar.

- 28 M: where will you go.  
 29 K: I have not known.  
 30 M: (sounds showing surprised)  
 31 K: I don't know  
 32 M: I don't know. some group decide?  
 33 K: no, third grade students will (.)  
 34 M: will take you?  
 35 K: yes, take us so I don't know.  
 36 M: oh it's so funny.  
 37 K: yes.  
 38 M: I want to go with. yeah. by the way,  
 39 what did you do last Sunday and Saturday.  
 40 → K: last Sunday ( . ) Ah: I have had a seminar of *kado*.  
 41 → M: *kado? kado?*  
 42 → K: flower arrangement ((gestures))  
 43 → M: *kado?*  
 44 → K: *ocha toka*.  
 45 M: OH. *KADO*.  
 46 K: Yes.  
 47 M: Is it your hobby?  
 48 K: YES.  
 49 M: REALLY? WONDERFUL. You can do?  
 50 K: YES. YES. I like it.  
 51 M: YOU are really Japanese.  
 52 ((they both laugh))  
 53 K: It's important of Japanese culture.  
 54 M: WOW. I don't have any Japanese culture.  
 55 I only like *natto*.  
 56 K: *natto?*  
 57 M: Yes. Japanese culture.  
 58 K: ah:: How about you? what did you do?  
 59 M: I went to Osaka.  
 60 K: ah::  
 61 M: Yes you know. I went to Osaka to (.) my friends house.  
 62 ah:: I was going to do sightseeing but just stayed  
 63 with my friend (1.0) talk and sleep.