
Compensation Strategies by Korean Students

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Abstract

This study aims to provide an empirical foundation of student strategies to compensate for missing knowledge or deficiencies in speaking and listening ability while undertaking an oral exam interview. Observable compensation strategies that were employed and not employed by students are reported. In addition, strategies are ranked in order of most utilized to least utilized by study participants. Further, correlation results of strategies to test scores and strategies to gender and age variables were examined. Relationships were observed between guessing strategies and female students, as well as guessing strategies and older students. Also, students who engaged in reduction strategies—such as giving-up and tuning out—were most likely to have lower test scores, suggesting the importance of teaching them alternatives to these strategies.

Korean Students' Compensation Strategies Observed During Interview Exams

Margolis & Kim (in press) reported that Korean students have fossilized study habits and learning expectations that may be obstacles to language learning. They concluded that language instructors must concentrate their attention to the eradication of such habits and the development of learning strategies conducive to second language acquisition. Brown (1994) considers “strategic investment”—the learner’s own personal commitment of time, effort, and attention—critical for the success of language learning and urges teachers to seize every opportunity to help learners develop and use strategies that will transform them into independent learners, capable of taking responsibility for their own learning. This study was inspired by a student from a Tourism English conversation course, who, during a discussion of learning strategies, asked this author which compensation strategies he should use. Oxford (1990) defines compensation strategies as those that:

enable learners to use the new language for either comprehension or production despite limitations in knowledge. Compensation strategies are intended to make up for an inadequate repertoire of grammar and, especially, of vocabulary

(p. 47).

Oxford offers 10 compensation strategies: guessing by linguistic clues, guessing by other clues, switching to the mother tongue, getting help, using mime or gesture, avoiding communication partially or totally, selecting the topic, adjusting or approximating the message, coining words, and using circumlocution or synonym.

The present author has often observed students avoiding communication altogether or panicking and giving up—two “strategies,” or “reactions,” that are not very effective for learning or maintaining communications. Windle (2000) writes that such a strategy may arise because of cultural reasons and serve to help the student “save face” for both student and teacher. Nevertheless, whether culturally motivated or not, giving up or tuning out often creates an uncomfortable atmosphere that can obstruct further conversation practice, and, during exams, negatively impact the student’s score. Teaching students positive strategies to communicate ideas with limited vocabulary and grammar will likely improve test scores, increase conversation practice, and help students become more communicatively confident and competent.

Moreover, Gardner (1985) suggests that maintaining or increasing student motivation is one of the challenges that teachers face that can improve language learning. Abdesslem (1996) argues that highly motivated students become wary of classrooms that tend to focus too much on form instead of enabling them to interact in the target language. In addition, students without high motivation can become motivated through successful experiences interacting in the target language. Thus, teaching students compensation strategies can increase motivation and improve student potential for success in learning the second language. Further, effective deployment of compensation strategies can enrich student experience of meaningful communication, thereby boosting self-confidence and increasing student self-efficacy. (See Kim & Margolis, in press, for a discussion of the importance of self-efficacy in language learning, or Bandura, 1997, for a more detailed discussion of self-efficacy and its importance for learning in general.) For these reasons—motivation, self-confidence, and self-efficacy—compensation strategies are important skills to teach, as well as for effective communication ability in the target language.

Study Objectives

This study has three aims: 1) to identify compensation strategies used by students, 2) to identify strategies typically not utilized by students, and 3) to explore possible relationships between the use of compensation strategies, test scores, and student gender and age.

Literature Review

Oxford (1990) developed her view of compensation strategies within the framework of language learning strategies that aim to teach skills to help students become

autonomous learners. She conceptualized learning strategies into two categories: direct and indirect. The direct strategies include memory strategies, cognitive strategies, and compensation strategies. The indirect strategies include metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies. Margolis & Kim (in press) reported that English classrooms in Korea tend to overemphasize memory strategies and neglect the other 5 types. It seems a safe assumption that by diversifying student awareness and ability in all the learning strategies, their learning efficiency may increase.

This study focuses on compensation strategies. Oxford's term "compensation strategies" and its definition are by no means agreed upon or accepted in the literature. In fact, few writers use the term. The most commonly found terminology is "communication strategies." Khanji (1996) reported that the seminal work on this topic was based on error analysis research, focusing on identifying mistakes students made in communications. As functional approaches came to replace structural studies, discourse analysis became the focus (Khanji, 1996). From this approach, communication strategies became defined as "problematicity, which arises from the disparity between the learner's ends and means" (Abdesslem, 1996). Khanji (1996) identified three components of communication strategies: 1) a communication difficulty owing to target language inadequacy, 2) student awareness of the problem, and 3) a solution to overcome it. Faerch and Kasper (1983) considered the communication strategy as an attempt to solve a problem while trying to achieve a language goal, but regarded student consciousness of the strategy as only potential. In other words, students are not always conscious of their strategy utilization. Brown (1994) expanded the definition further by including verbal and non-verbal mechanisms for solving the communication problem. Abdesslem (1996), however, in pursuing a similar view to Brown, regarded the term "communication strategies" problematical because many of the instances of their use in the literature could be attributed to insufficient awareness of discourse strategies—such as opening and closing topics, language gambits, and the like. He therefore argued that "communication strategies" become a suspect label and that routines and patterns that form the mechanics of discourse should be taught in the classroom. His criticisms of the term "communication strategies," in part, arise from Faerch & Kasper's (1983) taxonomy and limits to their conceptualizations. Faerch & Kasper (1983), for example, theorized that the speaker in a communicative event begins with a goal. This goal can be related to the speech act, the relationship between speakers, or the content of the event. With the goal in mind, the speaker then enters a planning phase and eventually an execution stage. In the planning stage, if an obstacle occurs, the speaker chooses either to reduce one's goals—"reduction strategies"—or to seek alternative means for achieving the initial goal—"achievement strategies." If the problem occurs in the execution phase, the speaker could resort to "retrieval strategies" to achieve the goal (Faerch & Kasper, 1983). Abdesslem (1996) argued, however, that the distinction between phases and strategies is blurred. He questioned whether speakers actually change their goals or not.

Khanji (1996) offered an alternative taxonomy of strategies based on a psycholinguistic view. This approach divides communication strategies into “object-regulation strategies,” such as message abandonment or code switching, which result from the learners lack of linguistic knowledge in the L2; “other-regulation strategies,” such as appeals for assistance; and “self-regulation strategies,” such as topic shifting and transliteration (Khanji, 1996).

Therefore, to distinguish from these taxonomies that mingle psycholinguistic, discourse, and communication goals, this study utilizes Oxford’s (1990) terminology, “compensation strategies,” to emphasize that they are active, conscious techniques that students can adopt and teachers can teach, to compensate for gaps in linguistic and lexical knowledge in the target language. Moreover, “compensation strategies” are used for reading, writing, speaking, and listening, not limited to productive speaking skills, although this study only focused on oral compensation strategies. In addition, this study utilizes the term “reduction strategy” to describe student withdrawal from the communication event, without assuming that a goal was reduced.

Method

To ascertain what compensation strategies Korean students most utilized, least utilized, and relationships between strategies, test scores, gender, and age, a checklist of anticipated strategies was developed based on Oxford’s list of compensation strategies and the author’s personal experiences with students. This checklist was included on an oral exam grading form. The checklist included the following:

- 1) Tunes out, gives up
- 2) Abandons communication mid-utterance
- 3) Limits responses
- 4) Wrong guesses
- 5) Requests more information
- 6) Seeks confirmation of understanding
- 7) Checks possibilities
- 8) “What did you say?” or equivalent
- 9) Uses mime or gestures
- 10) Switches to Korean
- 11) Selects topics
- 12) Coins words
- 13) Uses circumlocution
- 14) Uses synonyms or antonyms
- 15) Uses metaphors, stories, experiences

The checklist was designed to facilitate fast recording of observable compensation strategies to coincide with the oral exam interview. Students were not graded

on their use of compensation strategies. The test was merely seen as an opportunity to observe student compensation strategies when they might be most motivated to resort to them. Resource limitations and time constraints made it unfeasible to address the issue of unobservable compensation strategies in this study. In addition, audio and video were not utilized, but would have been useful additions. Strategies were detected and identified in a manner similar to what Khanji (1996) reported for observing compensation strategies used by Jordanian EFL learners. That is,

1) noticeable deviance from native speaker norm in the interlanguage syntax, word choice or discourse pattern; 2) apparent, obvious desire on the part of the speaker to communicate ‘meaning’ to listeners as indicated by overt and covert discourse clues; 3) evident and sometimes repetitive attempts to seek alternative ways, including repairs and appeals, to communicate and negotiate meaning; 4) overt pausological, hesitational and other temporal features in the speaker’s communicative behavior, 5) presence of paralinguistic and kinesic features both in lieu of and in support of linguistic inadequacy

(sic., Khanji, 1996).

Procedure

1. As participants engaged in conversation for the exam interview, the researcher checked observed compensations where appropriate on the checklist.
2. When compensation strategies were observed that had not been anticipated, they were written in a space reserved for other strategies and check marks indicated how many times they were utilized by students.
3. Information about student age and gender was also recorded.
4. The data from the checklist was then inputted and subjected to statistical analyses. The statistical package SPSS, version 5.0.1 for Windows, was used to produce the results for usage: frequencies, percentages (%), and correlations (*r*).

Results

Participant Composition

Participants included 72 1st year Tourism Information Management students in a Seoul area college required English Conversation course. Their levels ranged from beginner to pre-intermediate. There were 56 females and 16 males. Ages ranged from 18 to 40, with 75% of the participants aged 18 to 26. The mean age was 24.17 with a standard deviation of 3.93.

Total Uses of Each Strategy Observed

Some strategies were not observed at all. Others were only observed once or twice. Table 1 lists strategies observed, the total number of times the strategy was employed by students, and the number of students who utilized the strategy.

Table 1
List of Anticipated Strategies and Frequency of Usage

<u>Anticipated Students Compensation Strategy</u>	<u>Occurrences</u>	<u>Number of Employing Strategy</u>
Tunes out, gives up	91	42
Abandons communication mid-utterance	27	20
Wrong guesses	105	54
Requests more information	101	43
“What did you say?” or equivalent	121	57
Uses Mime or Gestures	20	12
Switches to Korean	87	40
Selects Topics	3	2
Coins Words	2	2
Uses circumlocution	5	4
Uses synonyms or antonyms	1	1

This list demonstrates that asking for a repetition of the question was the most common strategy that participants utilized. Guessing and asking for more information were the next two strategies employed. Giving up was the next most used strategy, followed by switching to Korean. A small number of students used other strategies, but these were much less frequently observed.

Table 2
Unanticipated Strategies and Frequency of Usage

<u>Unanticipated Compensation Strategies</u>	<u>Occurrences</u>	<u>Number of Student Employing Strategy</u>
Repeats words not known	3	2
Repeats questions	19	14
Silently indicates need for assistance	6	2
Says, “I don’t understand.”	4	3
Pre-practices response	8	4
Delay tactics	15	8
Writing—spelling words	2	1

Unanticipated Strategies

Several strategies were observed that had not been anticipated. Amongst these, the repetition of questions prior to responding was the most common, with 19 occurrences. Various types of delay tactics were also employed in 15 instances. Four students were observed on 8 occasions pre-practicing their responses, usually

in a low voice but nevertheless audible. On six occasions students made an obvious plea for assistance, but silently, without words. Three instances of students repeating a single word that was unknown were also observed. Finally, one student wrote out responses twice before speaking. Table 2 lists the unanticipated strategies, number of observations of their use, and the number of students who employed the strategy.

Aggregated Categories

To facilitate better results using the SPSS statistical package because of many occurrences of 0 observations, some strategies were combined. For example, “Tunes out, gives up” and “Abandons communication mid-utterance” were combined into a variable called “Reduction Strategies.” “Requests more information,” and “What did you say?” were combined into “Seeks Help.” “Wrong guesses,” which indicates the strategy of guessing, and “Switches to Korean,” were not combined with any other strategy. All the remaining strategies were combined into a category called, “Combined Other.”

Most and Least Frequent Compensation Strategies

To answer the question, what strategy is most often employed by students in this study, frequencies of use of the strategy, at least once and once or more times, were compared. Table 3 (the last two columns) presents the results. 13 Students (18.1%) used the strategy of seeking help one time. 61 students (84.7%) employed the strategy one or more times, making this strategy the most utilized. 23 Students (31.9%) utilized the strategy of guessing at least one time (see note 1), while 54 students (75%) were observed guessing one or more times. 18 Students (25%)

Table 3
Rank Order of Compensation Strategies
Utilized by Study Participants, Most to Least

Strategy	Zero observations	Once or Less	One observation	Once or More
Seek Help	11 (15.3%)	24 (33.3%)	13 (18.1%)	61 (84.7%)
Guesses	18 (25.0%)	41 (56.9%)	23 (31.9%)	54 (75.0%)
Reduction	22 (30.6%)	40 (55.6%)	18 (25.0%)	50 (69.4%)
Switch to Korean	32 (44.4%)	50 (69.4%)	18 (25.0%)	40 (55.6%)
Combined Other	47 (65.3%)	63 (87.5%)	16 (22.2%)	25 (34.7%)

Value = number of participants observed not using or using the strategy.

Percentages = the percent within each category compared to other frequencies for the same strategy.

utilized the reduction strategies of giving up or tuning out at least one time, while 50 students (69.4%) were observed using reduction strategies at least one or more times. 18 Students (25%) were also observed switching to Korean once, while 40 students (55.6%) switched to Korean one or more times. Finally, 16 Students (22.2%) were observed using other strategies one time, while 25 students (34.7%) were observed utilizing other strategies one or more times.

These results indicate that students most often utilize the strategy of seeking help—asking for confirmation or more information—compared to the other strategies listed. Making guesses was the second most often observed strategy. A range of other strategies, such as using gestures and mime, synonyms and antonyms, coining words, circumlocutions, etc., as a combined category were the least observed strategy utilized.

Table 3, second and third columns, present the number of cases where the strategy was not utilized by any students and where it was only utilized once or less. The order of the strategies remains the same, but now less ambiguously. 11 Students (15.3%) did not utilize the strategy of seeking help, while 24 students (33.3%) used this strategy one time or less. 18 Students (25%) made no observable guesses, while 41 students (56.9%) made one or less. 22 Students (30.6%) did not utilize any reduction strategies, while 40 students (55.6%) utilized them one time or less. 32 Students (44.4%) did not switch to Korean during the test, while 50 students (69.4%) switched to Korean once or less. The combined other strategies were not utilized at all by 47 students (65.3%), while 63 students (87.5%) utilized them once or less.

These results demonstrate that the combined strategies—such as using synonyms, coining words, gesturing and using circumlocutions—are the least utilized. Switching to Korean is the next least utilized strategy, then employing reduction Strategies, then Guessing, and finally, Seeking Help.

Correlation Results

To answer the question of whether there were any relationships between the uses of strategies and student success, the data was analyzed for Pearson Correlation Coefficients. Table 4 presents the results of correlations between strategies and test score.

No relationships reached a significance greater than .05, except for a negative relationship between test score and use of reduction strategies (Correlation Coefficient is $-.5608^{**}$). That is, the more students used reduction strategies, the lower their test score. This relationship, however, is not very surprising, because one would expect that a student who gives up and tunes out would likely not perform well on the test.

Table 4
Aggregated Strategies Correlated With Exam Score

	Combined	Seeks Help	Reduction	Guesses	Switches to Korean	Exam Score
Combined	1.0000					
Seeks Help	.1354	1.0000				
Reduction	-.0153	-.1335	1.0000			
Guesses	.1317	.0835	.1270	1.0000		
Switches To Korean	.2193	.1190	-.1243	.0888	1.0000	
Exam Score	.1307	.1756	-.5608**	-.0732	.1284	1.0000

** *Significance < .01 (2-tailed)*

To answer the question of whether gender or age has a relationship with compensation strategy use, these items were also analyzed for Pearson Correlation Coefficients. Table 5 presents the results.

Table 5
Correlations of Strategies with Gender & Age

	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Age</u>
Combined Other	.2025	.0708
Seeks Help	-.0016	-.1050
Reduction	-.0449	-.1136
Guesses	.2927*	.2729*
Switches To Korean	-.0084	-.0287
Exam Score	-.0053	.0482

* *Significance < .05 (2-tailed)*

This table shows that only two correlations reach a significance below the .05 level, guessing and gender, as well as guessing and age. The correlation between gender and age shows that female students had a tendency to guess incorrectly more than males, which may mean that they have a tendency to guess more than males. The correlation between age and guessing shows that the older a person is, the more likely they were to employ the guessing strategy (again, incorrectly). No other relationships reached a level of significance.

Discussion

In the process of conducting this study, several limitations emerged. The first and most problematical stems from the fact that not all compensation strategies are

observable. For example, guessing correctly would be difficult to detect unless students somehow indicated each time they were guessing. To circumvent this difficulty, wrong guesses were used to indicate the strategy of guessing. However, when a student states an inappropriate response, it is difficult to ascertain whether the student guessed incorrectly or misunderstood a question. In this study, such responses were always recorded as guesses. Future studies that hope to assess guessing strategies more precisely must elaborate a better method for dealing with this issue. Further, the absence of audio or video recordings limits the potential for observing compensation strategies and the dynamics related to their employment.

Nevertheless, this study adds empirical data to the literature on this topic. Khanji (1996), in his study of 36 Jordanian EFL students found that students at a low level were most likely to adopt repetition strategies, as a form of delay tactic. Such a strategy was not observed to be very common among Korean students in this study. Khanji (1996) also found message abandonment strategies—herein called reduction strategies—to be the second most commonly utilized by low level students. In this study, the most utilized and second most utilized strategies were found to be seeking help and guessing, respectively, then followed by reduction strategies. Interestingly, Khanji (1996) found Jordanian EFL learners to be least inclined to employ the strategy of appealing for assistance, whereas Korean students were found to employ this strategy the most. This gap is not related to terminology differences. Khanji (1996) recorded appeal for assistance when students asked for help in English from their interlocutors or from the teacher. In the current study, the same standard was used. One explanation for the difference might be Korean student exposure during class sessions to encouragement to use appeals for assistance to help maintain the conversation flow.

The high tendency of students to resort to reduction strategies, however, greatly inhibits the conversation flow, but these strategies have a positive function as well. Oxford (1990), for example, reported that they serve to “emotionally protect the learner” and make the interlocutor slow down, stop, or change gears, giving the learner a chance to catch up. Teachers can also utilize these breakdowns for identifying areas that require more instruction and practice. Students can also be taught to use these breakdowns as an opportunity to identify what they need to learn. Embarrassment over the breakdown can be transformed to empowerment that directs students to focus on the language areas most relevant to what they want to communicate.

One cause for Korean student utilization of reduction strategies might be anxiety about accuracy. Many low level students mistakenly believe that there is always a one-to-one correspondence between first and second language. This mistaken idea causes panic when the exact correct word is unavailable. In addition, preoccupation with accuracy of grammar or pronunciation might lead to frustration and breakdown. Due to the fact that reduction strategies are likely to negatively impact

student oral exam scores and conversational experiences, understanding the causes for students resorting to these strategies can help teachers build student skills for alternative strategy utilization.

Guiding students to use alternative strategies is an important task for teachers. This study demonstrates that students utilize relatively few compensation strategies. Introducing new strategies to students can help expand their repertoire and improve their communicative competence, creating greater satisfaction, higher motivation, and other positive consequences cited above.

Conclusion

This study set out to identify compensation strategies that Korean students most utilized and least utilized, as well as to look at the relationships between strategies and test scores, gender, and age. Participants in this study were found to most employ help seeking compensation strategies and to least employ a combination of strategies that included using circumlocutions, coining words, and gesturing. This information can help teachers identify potential new strategies to explore and utilize. Further, a high number of study participants employed reduction strategies—giving up, tuning out or abandoning the message in mid-utterance. Such strategies may be culturally motivated or beneficial for emotional reasons, but they often inhibit communication, reduce practice opportunities, promote a sense of inability, and negatively impact test scores. Therefore, teachers should seek to help students resort less to reduction strategies less and more often to alternative compensation approaches.

The Author

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