IDENTIFICATION OF GAPS AND ADOPTION OF COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES BY SECOND LANGUAGE MODEST SPEAKER IN GROUP DISCUSSIONS

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how the second language (L2) modest speakers at pre-university level used English in group discussions despite constraints such as limited linguistic knowledge and poor communication strategies (CSs). Thus, the purpose of this study was to identify gaps affecting L2 modest speakers' task fulfilment in group discussions and CSs adopted to compensate for inadequacies in group discussions. In addition, the study also produced a comprehensive classification of CSs to facilitate the L2 modest speakers' oral performance in discussions. This case study used a mixed method research design which integrated qualitative and quantitative approaches. In Stage 1, the quantitative data from the questionnaire was analysed descriptively using SPSS software and presented in frequency and percentage. For Stage 2, the qualitative data were collected from nine recordings of pre-university students' group discussions, nine observations and 24 students' written notes (Band 3). In Stage 3, the qualitative data were collected from 24 interviews of the Band 3 students. Verbatim discussions and interviews data supported by observation data and students' written notes were then analysed qualitatively using *Atlas.ti 6.0* software. The findings identified two types of gaps namely content gap and language gap, and 15 CSs namely approximation, message abandonment, literal translation, non-lexicalised filled pauses, prefabricated expressions, repetition, restructuring, self-repair, unfilled pauses, circumlocution, topic avoidance, code-switching, fillers, all-purpose words and appeal for assistance to compensate for inadequacies in group discussions. The comprehensive classification of these CSs would facilitate the English as a second language teachers in enhancing pre-university students' oral performance in group discussions and provide substantial implications particularly in the theoretical and practical aspect of speaking skills.

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini mengkaji bagaimana penutur bahasa kedua (L2) tahap sederhana pada peringkat prauniversiti menggunakan Bahasa Inggeris dalam perbincangan kumpulan dengan kekangan seperti pengetahuan linguistik yang terhad dan strategi komunikasi (CSs) yang lemah. Oleh itu, tujuan kajian ini adalah untuk mengenal pasti pemasalahan yang menjejaskan penyelesaian tugas dalam perbincangan kumpulan bagi penutur L2 tahap sederhana dan CSs yang digunakan untuk mengimbangi kekurangan dalam perbincangan kumpulan. Di samping itu, kajian ini juga menghasilkan satu pengelasan CSs yang komprehensif bagi membantu prestasi lisan penutur L2 tahap sederhana dalam perbincangan. Kajian kes ini menggunakan reka bentuk kajian kaedah campuran yang menyepadukan pendekatan kualitatif dan kuantitatif. Pada Peringkat 1, data kuantitatif daripada soal selidik dianalisis secara deskriptif menggunakan perisian SPSS dan dinyatakan dalam bentuk kekerapan dan peratusan. Pada Peringkat 2, data kualitatif dikumpulkan daripada sembilan rakaman perbincangan kumpulan pelajar prauniversiti, sembilan pemerhatian dan 24 nota bertulis pelajar (Band 3). Pada Peringkat 3, data kualitatif dikumpulkan daripada 24 temu bual dalam kalangan pelajar Band 3. Transkrip perbincangan dan temu bual yang disokong oleh data pemerhatian serta nota bertulis pelajar kemudiannya dianalisis secara kualitatif menggunakan perisian *Atlas.ti 6.0*. Dapatan kajian mengenal pasti dua jenis permasalahan iaitu permasalahan berkaitan isi kandungan dan bahasa, dan 15 CSs iaitu penganggaran, pengabaian mesej, terjemahan literal, berhenti seketika dengan pengisian bukan leksikal, ungkapan sedia ada, pengulangan, penyusunan semula, pembetulan sendiri, berhenti seketika tanpa pengisian, deskripsi objek, pengelakan topik, penukaran kod, pengisian, penggunaan istilah umum dan meminta bantuan untuk mengimbangi kekurangan dalam perbincangan kumpulan. Pengelasan CSs yang komprehensif dapat membantu guru-guru yang mengajar Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua meningkatkan prestasi lisan pelajar prauniversiti dalam perbincangan kumpulan dan memberikan implikasi yang besar terutamanya dalam aspek teori dan praktikal kemahiran bertutur.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1   Introduction

Language learning is all about learning to communicate and countless research have confirmed that students learn to communicate best by interacting (Finochiarro and Brumfit, 1983). Similarly, Rubin and Thompson (1994) claim that for most people, language learning is learning to negotiate meaning and to communicate effectively. In the ESL context, to be proficient in English is a necessity and oral ability is of utmost importance in L2 learning. Thus, speaking has always been the benchmark for language proficiency whereby the ability to interact confidently and efficiently is often seen as an assurance of success in L2 (Chan and Bee, 2004; Sharifah Zakiah et. al., 2009). However, speaking is also known to be a difficult skill to acquire as it involves more than just producing grammatically correct sentences. Often, the utterances are produced spontaneously and speakers have no time to pause and think. Thus, besides the problems in accuracy and fluency, L2 speakers have to deal with the complexity of the speaking tasks which requires the use of certain communication strategies (CSs) to solve communication problems.

In Malaysia, the need to be communicatively proficient in English has been further geared with proficiency test such as the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) at the pre-tertiary level. This test has also sparked the urgency to increase English language proficiency among pre-university students and develop speaking skill which is known to be one of the weakest skills for students to acquire. However,

as claimed by Asma Singh and Gill (2001), the real L2 challenge is whether the L2 speakers are able to communicate effectively and to use language appropriately. This is true since the ability to communicate requires various communicative skills on how to express what to say, how to convey the messages and how to achieve communicative purposes (Nor Fariza, 2009). In view of all these, this study is an investigation of gaps and adoption of communication strategies in group discussions of L2 modest speakers.

This chapter addresses the statement of the problem, the purpose of conducting the study, the research objectives, the significance, the scope, the theoretical framework and the conceptual framework of the study as well as the operationalized definition of terms related to the study. To understand the research problem, this chapter reviews the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) specifically the Speaking component to provide the setting to the background and the rationale of the study.

1.2   Research Background

In order to meet the expected university level English literacy, the government has introduced the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) to further encourage the learning of English among pre-university students. It measures and demonstrates the prospective university students' English Language proficiency. The examination is administered by the Malaysian Examinations Council thrice a year and designed to measure the students' English language proficiency especially those planning to pursue tertiary education in Malaysian universities. In fact, the test has become a compulsory university entrance English test for all candidates seeking to enter local universities to pursue first degree studies (MUET Test Specifications, 2006). Although there is no pass or fail grade in MUET examination, the candidates need to obtain the minimal prerequisite MUET band set by the universities for admission.

The test intends to prepare students for various academic challenges which focusses on developing critical thinking and competent use of Listening, Speaking,

Reading Comprehension and Writing skills. These language components are tested individually and the marks are accumulated to the overall score which are rated according to the banding system. Thus, the examination is customised to fill the gap of the training and learning of English Language. It is meant to enhance the English language ability of pre-university students to perform academically effective at tertiary level, in line with the aspirations of the National Education Philosophy (Malaysian Examination Council, 1999). Zuraidah (2003) states that being a proficiency test, it demonstrates the ability to perform in the areas of Listening, Speaking, Reading Comprehension and Writing independently. It incorporates the linguistic and communicative aspects of the language which are authentic, and contains performance-based tests that require the students to use the language to perform a task. Thus, the test assesses the integration of the four skills to check on the students' ability in using more than one skill by taking into account the grammatical, discourse and pragmatics features of the English language. The four competency carry different weight and accumulated as the final score to determine the candidates' overall proficiency level. The candidates are placed in bands, ranging from Band 1 to Band 6 based on the aggregated score of 0-300 points as specified by the Malaysian Examinations Council (Refer to Appendix A).

Although there are other reliable proficiency tests such as Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the International English Language Testing System (IELTS,) the researcher has decided to focus on MUET which is relevant for local L2 setting since it measures the English Language proficiency of students who wish to pursue tertiary studies in Malaysian universities. Besides, as claimed by Malaysian Examination Council (2006), MUET has slowly established its acceptance and recognition as a respectable, credible and reliable instrument to measure English language proficiency thus, it does not compromise on standard and quality. However, for the purpose of the study, the researcher has decided to focus only on MUET Speaking component as it enables assessment of the language and communicative aspects of the L2 in a more authentic and spontaneous manner. In addition, this study offers validation on gaps in group discussions as highlighted in the MUET speaking descriptors, investigation on the adoption of communication strategies (CSs) to compensate for inadequacies in group discussions and the contribution of CSs to the oral performance of L2 modest speaker in group discussions.

The next sections provide a comprehensive explanation on the aspects of MUET Speaking test which involved the test format, specification and assessment which are needed to be considered for this study.

1.2.1 MUET Speaking

The MUET Speaking Test Specifications (1999) seek to enable students to participate in social and academic contexts such as in conversations, discussions and presentations. It is to develop students' sensitivity towards the practice of the linguistic functions and the ability to use these forms is highlighted for assessment in the MUET Speaking test. In 2006, changes have been made to the test specifications which aim to assess the candidates' ability in making individual presentations and in taking part in group discussions based on current issues such as socio-cultural, economics, science and technology, sports, environment, education and health (Malaysian Examinations Council, 2006).

In a MUET speaking test, Band 1 students show very limited understanding in terms of language and context, and hardly able to use the language. Band 2 students are rated as limited users of the language who are not fluent and have limited ability to function in the language. Band 3 students are moderately fluent and display modest understanding in language and context. Band 4 students are satisfactory users who display satisfactory understanding of language and context, generally fluent and able to function satisfactorily in the language. Band 5 students are proficient users of the language who are fluent and have high ability to function in the language. Thus, Band 6 students have very good understanding of language and context, and are very proficient in the language (Refer to Appendix A) (Malaysian Examinations Council, 2006).

1.2.1.1 Test Format and Assessment

Since this study follows closely the MUET-like discussions and assessment, it is important to review the MUET Speaking test format and assessment for clearer understanding of the study. The main aim of the MUET Speaking is to test the ability of the students in speaking the English Language through the individual presentation (Task A) and the group interaction (Task B). The students are assessed based on the ability to present relevant and logical ideas that are well-elaborated, well-linked and justified. In addition, the use of a variety of structures, vocabulary and correct grammar would determine the language control of the candidates as they display the ability of managing a discussion and speaking fluently and confidently without hesitation or unnecessary pauses (Kaur and Jonas, 2009).

During the individual presentation, the students are expected to present their ideas in a logical and systematic manner to enable the listeners to understand the ideas and argument easily. This requires the students to use some of the linguistic functions such as expressing opinion, reasoning and persuading. For Task A, the students are assessed individually and each student is given the same situation but different task to discuss. The students are given two minutes to prepare their responses and as soon as the two minutes preparation time is up, Candidate A is required to present his or her responses followed by Candidate B, Candidate C and Candidate D. While listening to the other students' presentation, the students are allowed to jot down relevant notes to be used for Task B (group interaction).

In the group discussion (Task B), the students are required to apply the interactive skills and engage themselves effectively in a discussion (Richards et. al., 2004). For Task B, the students are given two minutes to prepare for their responses either to support or oppose the other students' views based on the previous individual presentation in Task A. The group is given ten minutes for the discussion. Any student in the group can initiate the discussion and each student is expected to contribute ideas for the discussion. Thus, at the end of the discussion, the students are required to conclude the discussion and come to a consensus. Figure 1.1 shows the physical layout of the MUET Speaking Test.
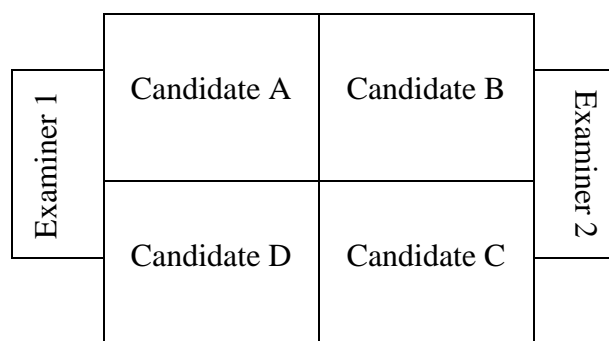
Figure 1.1: Physical Layout of MUET Speaking Test

The test specifications cover the aspects of accuracy, fluency, appropriacy, coherence and cohesion, the use of language functions, the management of the discussion and the fulfilment of task (Refer to Appendix B). The students' overall performance is assessed based on three categories; task fulfilment, language and communicative ability (MUET Test Specifications, 2006). Such test specifications and areas of assessment are relevant for this study since it describes the actual L2 modest speaker's oral performance in group discussions and highlight the gaps as well as communication strategies (CSs) adopted by the modest speaker to compensate for inadequacies in group discussions. Thus, although there are two tasks to be fulfilled in the MUET Speaking Test, only the task involving the group discussions (Task B) is taken into consideration since the primary study is the oral performance of L2 modest speakers in group discussions.

1.3   Statement of the Problem

In the earlier studies, Nakamura (1993) states that with the emergence of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), speaking skill has a prominent role in L2 learning and has also given rise to important issues such as the testing of oral proficiency which measures students' ability to produce words and phrases, and evaluates students' fulfilment of a variety of tasks such as in conversation, presentations and discussions. In fact, the skills of communicating effectively have paved the way of learning a second language and the teaching approach has been shifted from behaviourist approach which involves repetition of drills and

memorisation of dialogues to CLT approach which emphasizes on interaction (Kayi, 2006). Activities such as individual presentations, pair work and small group discussions are frequently used in ESL classroom to generate the use of English language and to develop students' communicative skills (Nor Fariza, 2009).

However, it is still argued that even with the recent communicative approaches, ESL teachers still face problems in developing students' communicative skills. In the context of the Malaysian University English Test (MUET), the pressing need to prepare and to ensure that the pre-university students are able to communicate effectively and to use the language appropriately is more serious especially in the speaking test. This is due to the fact that the pre-university students' oral performance is determined by the fulfilment of task through the confident and competent interaction with regards to good command of language and communication strategies. Besides, the students are expected to provide responses that are relevant, adequate, coherent, maturely developed and justified (MUET Test Specifications, 2006). Thus, with such expectation but with constraints such as low proficiency, limited linguistic knowledge and poor communication strategies, speaking has become a deficiency to most pre-university students. Despite the higher demand for fluency in English, the undergraduate students in Malaysia still have not achieved the intended level of English proficiency even after eleven years of learning English at the primary and secondary level (Zuraidah, 2003 ; Richards et. al., 2004). It seems that although most of the students could grasp the social functions of the language and establish understanding of the rules and patterns of interaction, the weak ones still face difficulties in discussions (S Hasimah Wati, 2005).

In addition, Kaur and Jonas (2009) reported that the weak speaking skills, the lack of confidence, the lack of knowledge on the topic of discussion and the lack of experience in delivering a presentation are some of the possible causes of difficulty in speaking English among the pre-university students. In a more recent study, it was reported that for MUET Speaking, the less proficient students lacked planning and organisation, lacked command of basic structures as well as lacked confidence and participation during speaking assessment. Most importantly, the students were hesitant in their speech, lacked vocabulary in expressing ideas and failed to elaborate on the ideas (Malaysian Examination Council, 2014). All these findings imply that knowing

the patterns of interaction and interaction strategies alone do not necessarily ensure the success of a discussion and task performance. Yet, task fulfilment, good command of language and communicative ability are crucial areas of assessment which determine the oral performance of the L2 speakers.

Eventually, this triggers the interest to investigate how the L2 modest speakers at pre-tertiary level use English in discussions despite having low proficiency, limited linguistic knowledge and poor communication strategies. A few MUET-like discussions (Task B) are used as the platform for investigating the oral performance of L2 modest speakers in discussions. The selected subjects for this study are pre-university students (lower six) who have not yet taken the MUET examination. This study thus, intends to look closely at the types of gaps affecting L2 modest speakers' task fulfilment (TF) in group discussions, seek communication strategies (CSs) adopted by the L2 modest speakers to cope for inadequacies in group discussions and determine the contribution of these CSs to L2 modest speakers' oral performance in group discussions.

1.4   Objectives of the Study

The aim of the study is to examine the oral performance of L2 modest speakers in group discussions. The researcher is primarily interested in investigating the types of gaps affecting L2 modest speakers' task fulfilment (TF) in group discussions as well as identifying communication strategies (CSs) adopted by the L2 modest speakers to compensate for inadequacies in group discussions and determining the contribution of communication strategies in enhancing oral performance of L2 modest speakers in group discussions . This is done in the context of pre-university students' MUET-like discussions focussing on the modest speakers (Band 3).

The study sought to assist teachers in investigating the L2 modest speakers' discussion skills and CSs used to bridge the various communicative problems in discussions. Thus, the study aims to produce a more comprehensive and appropriate classification of communication strategies (CSs) to enhance the L2 modest speakers'

oral performance in group discussions. The study is carried out to meet the following objectives:-

1. To investigate the types of gaps affecting L2 modest speakers' task fulfilment in group discussions
2. To identify communication strategies adopted by L2 modest speakers to compensate for inadequacies in group discussions
3. To determine the contribution of communication strategies in enhancing the oral performance of L2 modest speakers in group discussions

In order to meet the objectives, the following research questions are formulated to help guide the study.

1.5 Research Questions

The research questions aim to investigate the gaps affecting L2 modest speakers' task fulfilment (TF) in discussions in relation to communication strategies (CSs) adopted when facing problems and how the CSs are used to compensate for various communicative problems in discussions This research attempts to seek answers to the following research questions:-

1. What are the types of gaps affecting the L2 modest speakers' task fulfilment in group discussions?
2. What are the communication strategies adopted by L2 modest speakers to compensate for inadequacies in group discussions?
3. How do the communication strategies contribute to the oral performance of L2 modest speakers in group discussions?

The three research questions are used to aid the structure of data analysis. The first research question (RQ1) investigates the types of gaps affecting the L2 modest speakers' task fulfilment (TF) in group discussions. The analysis was done by analysing the interactional routine sequences and language functions used in group

discussions as suggested in the MUET Speaking Test Specifications (2006). The types of gaps were also reflected from the adoption of certain CSs proposed by Tarone (1981), Faerch & Kasper (1983), Bialystok (1990), Dörnyei (1995) and Dörnyei & Scott (1997) during the group discussions. To answer research question 2 (RQ2), a frequency count of communication strategies (CSs) adopted by the L2 modest speakers in group discussions was carried out referring to the same taxonomies of communication strategies used in this study. Finally for the third research question (RQ3), the identified CSs adopted by the L2 modest speakers were further categorised into task fulfilment strategies based on the same taxonomies.

1.6   Significance of the Study

The L2 modest speakers needed to be equipped with a repertoire of communication skills in order to enable them to speak effectively in their daily encounters and speaking test. Such ability requires mastery of speaking skills and CSs to ensure messages are conveyed and task is fulfilled. Any setback in communication should be investigated in the quest to find explanation as to why the students failed to discuss and fulfil the task assigned effectively. Thus, it is significant to research in this area since the study confirms the types of gaps affecting the L2 modest speakers' task fulfilment (TF) in group discussions as suggested by Malaysian Examination Council (2006) and classifies the communication strategies (CSs) adopted by the L2 modest speakers in group discussions. Besides, the findings provide some insights on how the CSs contribute to the oral performance of L2 modest speakers in group discussions.

This study offers deeper understanding of the L2 modest speakers' actual speech production difficulty and gaps that affect TF in discussions. In addition, it reveals the CSs adopted by the L2 modest speakers in overcoming problems in discussions. In addition, it provides some understanding on the strategic competence needed by the L2 modest speakers to improve oral performance particularly in group discussions. The findings have important pedagogical implications and would establish valuable insights for language teachers especially in assisting the students to

become more proficient in speaking as well as enhancing oral performance of L2 modest speakers in group discussions.

1.7   Scope of the Study

Being a public diagnostic test of proficiency, MUET adopts the fourfold concept of proficiency; listening, speaking, reading comprehension and writing. However, this study concentrates only on speaking particularly discussions which were similar to those tested in the MUET Speaking component. The study examines the oral performance of the modest speaker (Band 3) in discussions looking at the types of gaps affecting task fulfilment (TF) in group discussions and communication strategies (CSs) adopted by the modest speakers to compensate for inadequacies in group discussions. It is be a critical exploration on gaps in group discussions pertaining to the relevancy and adequacy of ideas in discussions as well as the ability to discuss effectively. Additionally, it investigates the types of CSs adopted by the modest speakers to overcome difficulties in group discussions and the contribution of the CSs to the Band 3 students' oral performance in group discussions. Most importantly, the study emphasizes on task fulfilment, language and communicative aspect of a group discussion as required in the actual MUET Speaking Test and does not consider other variables affecting speaking.

1.8   Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The ability to speak in a target language is always associated with one's communicative competence, a notion proposed by Hymes (1974) which includes linguistic competence as well as sociolinguistic and conversational skills. Similarly, Richards, Platt and Weber (1985) state that the characteristics of communicative competence such as knowing the rules of speaking includes the knowledge of grammar and vocabulary as well as knowledge of using the language in appropriate context (Nunan, 1999). In addition, speaking is often seen to be spontaneous, open-ended and

evolving which enables language patterns to recur, to be identified and charted (Burns & Joyce, 1977). It requires the learners to not only know the 'linguistic competence' namely grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary, but also the 'sociolinguistic competence' which deals with the questions of when to produce the language, why such language is produced and how to produce the language (Florez, 1999).

In the context of this study, the L2 modest speakers' oral performance in group discussions is analysed in relation to theory on Cooperative Principle (Grice, 1975) and theories on spoken language by Bygate (1987) and Thornbury (2005). The analysis enables the L2 teachers to identify problems in speaking and offer some answers to cope with the communicative problems. This is so as speaking involves different social contexts and speakers need to fulfil certain tasks. It also takes into account the cognitive, affective and performance factors that make speaking easy or difficult at different stages of speaking such as conceptualization, formulation, articulation and self-monitoring as noted by Thornbury (2005).

A good speaker requires more than just knowledge of the language systems and strategies to maintain involvement in discussions. As for this study, the discussions are observed from the aspects of task fulfilment, language and communicative ability. In addition, since this study emphasizes on oral performance in discussions, the focus is drawn to the theory underlying communicative competence by Canale and Swain (1980) which incorporates linguistic, strategic and sociolinguistic competence. However, for the purpose of this study, the focus is on strategic competence which highlights the L2 modest speakers' ability to solve communication problems as they arise in group discussions. In addition to that, typology on communication strategies integrating Tarone's (1981) interactional views, Faerch and Kasper's (1983) psycholinguistics perspectives, Bialystok's (1990), Dörnyei's (1995) and Dörnyei & Scott's (1997) taxonomies of CSs also serve as the basis for the analysis. Figure 1.2 depicts the theoretical framework of the study which integrates the related theories to assist in the identification of gaps affecting L2 modest speakers' task fulfilment (TF) in discussions and CSs adopted to compensate for inadequacies in group discussions as well as the contribution of the CSs to L2 modest speakers' oral performance in group discussions.
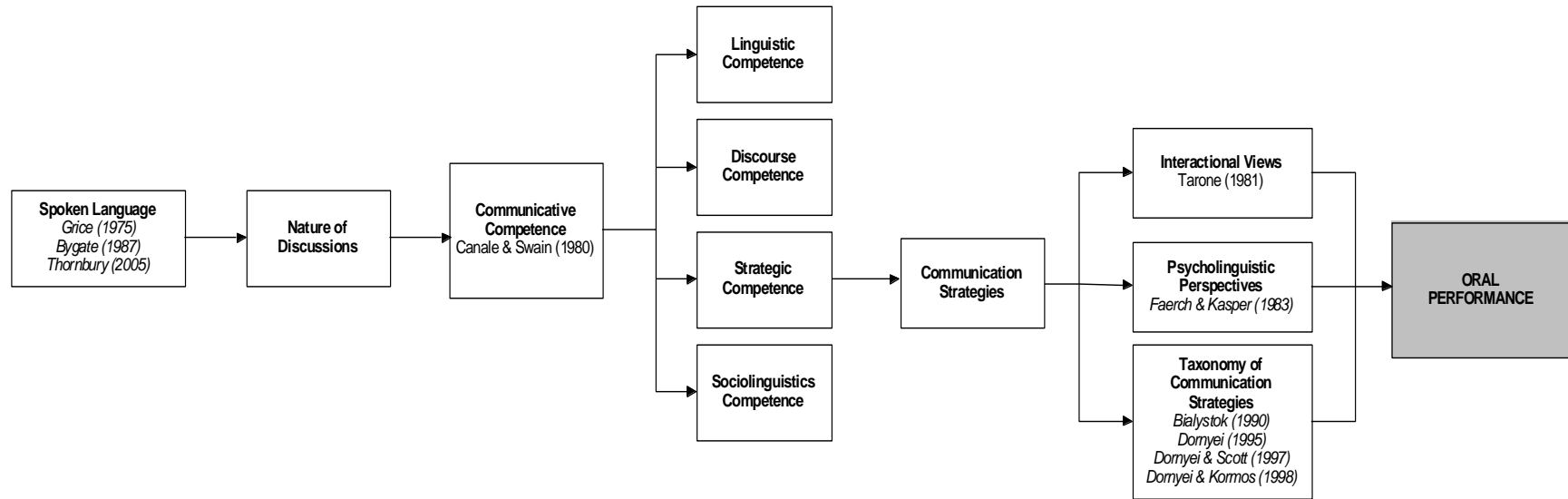
Figure 1.2: Theoretical Framework

In this study, the data was gathered from various instruments; questionnaire, recordings of discussions, observations checklist and students' written notes and interviews. The questionnaire was distributed to 138 students in a school to obtain preliminary data on general perceptions of the students' task fulfilment (TF) problems and communication strategies (CSs) adopted in discussions regardless of the band level. However, for this study, the researcher decided to employ the purposive sampling method in which the selection of the small-sized sampling was based on the same characteristics (Patton, 1990). Thus, for this study only the modest speakers (Band 3) who volunteered to participate in the group discussions were considered for detailed analysis.

The recordings of the discussions and interviews were the primary instruments of the study which were then transcribed adapting the Jefferson Notation System (2004). The transcripts were used to capture everything that was said and provided a detailed version of a complex nature of discussions (Refer to Appendix C). Observation was carried out simultaneously with the discussions whereas the students' notes were collected after the group discussions. The interviews were conducted to the modest speakers (Band 3) to seek answers to the research objectives. Since most L2 learners relied on the strategies and expectations of their L1 development which could be inappropriate for the L2 setting, it would indirectly result in communication difficulties and misunderstandings. In the context of this study, the findings of each instrument were triangulated to shed light on the communication difficulties or gaps in interaction and at the same time to identify different CSs adopted in the discussions to enhance L2 modest speakers' oral performance in group discussions.

Since the study deals with strategic competence, which is the ability of using language to achieve communicative goals, (Canale & Swain, 1980), more attention is given to CSs used by the modest speaker when dealing with difficulties in communicating. Besides the CSs, the study attempts to highlight any occurrence of gaps indicated by the CSs used and CSs adopted to cope with communication difficulties in group discussions. The gaps were identified by analysing the types of CSs used by the modest speakers in group discussions and by analysing the modest speakers' interactional routine sequences based on MUET Speaking Test Specification (2006). Several taxonomies of CSs namely Tarone's (1981) interactional views,

Faerch and Kasper's (1983) psycholinguistics perspectives as well as taxonomy of CSs by Bialystok (1990), Dörnyei (1995) and Dörnyei & Scott's (1997) were adapted and modified as deemed necessary to categorise the CSs to a more appropriate classification of CSs which reflected the L2 modest speakers' oral performance in group discussions (Refer to Figure 1.3).
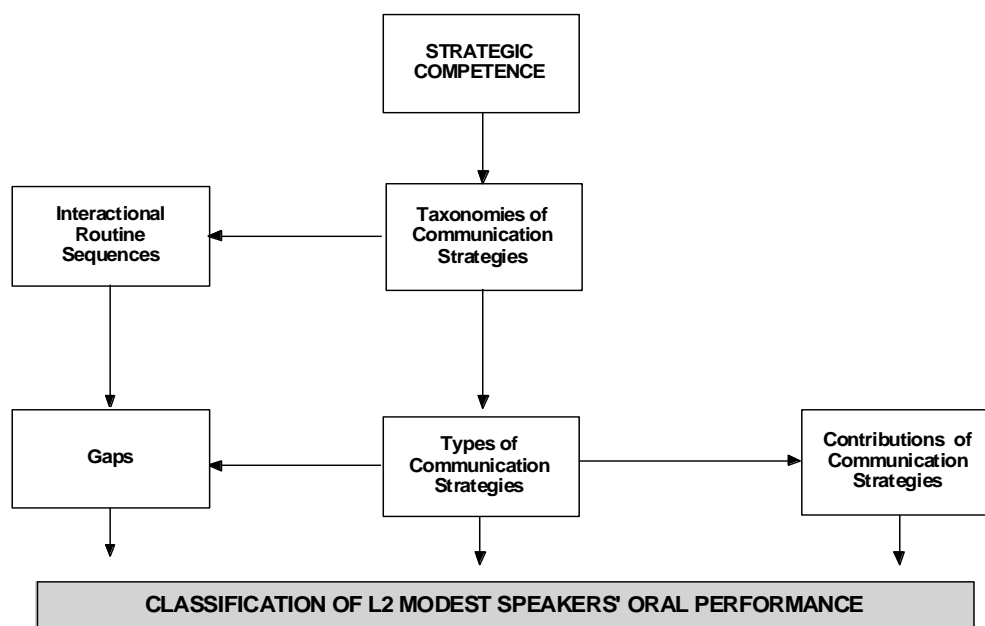
Figure 1.3: Conceptual Framework

1.9   Operational Definition of Terms

1.9.1   Gaps

According to Bialystok (1990) gaps in the second language can be in a form of a word, a structure or even a phrase and the attempts made to overcome these gaps is known as communication strategies (CSs). Thus, since CSs are used when there is breakdown in communication, the occurrence of CSs can be considered as an indication of gaps in communication. In addition, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) support the claim and affirm that gaps are in a form of linguistic structures or even

sociolinguistics rules. According to Herman (1998), the presence of gaps in an interaction is usually signified by pauses which may signal uncertainty or lack of confidence. At times, pauses can signify gaps between speaking and thinking to express movement of thoughts or even to enact the 'think before you speak' maxim thus making the response more deliberate (Herman, 1998:21). Any gap that is not filled in any way can bring the interaction to a close in which will demonstrate limits or impossibilities of communication.

Thus, in the context of this study, gaps are seen as elements that affect the fulfilment of task which resulted to modest oral performance (Band 3) in group discussions. As stated in the MUET Test Specifications (1999), any gap in the content of the discussions would display responses that are irrelevant, inadequate and immature which indirectly affects the students' performance in the speaking test. Therefore, to identify the gaps in group discussions, focal issues such as relevancy of ideas, adequacy of content and other elements which might interrupt continuity or limit an interaction are considered for further analysis of the gaps.

1.9.2 Communication Strategies

The studies on communication strategies (CSs) gain its importance in the early 1970s and started to focus on conversation especially in negotiating meaning when facing communication breakdowns. Language learners often have difficulties maintaining a conversation due to the lack of linguistic resources to understand and to be understood (Ellis, 2003). The notion of communication strategy was initially termed by Selinker (1972) based on his work on 'interlanguage'. The idea was then highlighted by Savignon (1983) and referred as 'coping strategies'. Selinker (1972) defines communication strategies as "an identifiable approach" used by the learner when communicating with native speakers. The definition was refined by 1980s as tools used in negotiating meaning (Tarone, 1980), strategies that learners employ to express and decode meanings in the target language, thus serve to compensate gaps in the L2 proficiency (Tarone,1981), devices that help L2 learners overcome linguistic inadequacies in communication (Corder, 1983).

CSs are used in an attempt to compensate gaps in communication using the learners' available linguistic resources (Yang and Gai, 2010). It is used to counterbalance limitations in language reception and production particularly inadequacies in grammar and vocabulary. These strategies allow learners to participate in conversations and maintain involvement in conversations which indirectly improves the quality of communication (David, 1999). Some of the earlier studies, define CSs as a systematic technique used to express meaning when facing difficulty (Corder, 1977), the attempts made by two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in a situation (Tarone, 1980), and plans done consciously to solve a communicative problem and to achieve a particular communicative goal (Faerch and Kasper, 1983a). All the above definitions perceive CSs as the L2 learners' ability to communicate ideas when facing communication gap due to the inability in expressing ideas and achieving understanding among interlocutors (Lafford, 2004; Faerch and Kasper, 1983a and Stern, 1983).

In the context of this study, the communication strategies (CSs) are strategies adopted by the modest speaker (Band 3) to communicate ideas in group discussions and communication strategies (CSs) used to compensate for inadequacies in the L2 during discussions. Thus, the CSs adopted by Band 3 students would reflect on problems or gaps in communication and the students' linguistic resources. Thus, this study draws upon several taxonomies of CSs by Tarone (1981), Faerch and Kasper (1983a), Dörnyei (1995) and Dörnyei & Scott (1997) to suit the objectives of the study.

Tarone (1980) categorises the CSs into three strategies namely paraphrase (approximation, word coinage, circumlocution), borrowing (literal translation, language switch, appeal for assistance, mime) and avoidance (topic avoidance, message abandonment). In another taxonomy of CSs, Faerch and Kasper (1983a) divide the strategies into formal reduction strategies (formal and functional reduction) and achievement strategies (code-switching, interlingual/intralingual transfer, IL based strategies, cooperative strategies and non-linguistic strategies). Although similar to Tarone's (1983) and Faerch and Kasper's (1983a) classification of CSs, Bialystok's (1990) taxonomy identifies the sources in overcoming the communication problems and categorises the strategies into L1-based strategies (switching, foreignizing, transliteration), L2-based strategies (semantic contiguity, description, word coinage)

and paralinguistics strategies (mime, gestures). Dörnyei (1995) classifies the strategies into avoidance strategies (message abandonment, topic avoidance) and compensatory strategies (circumlocution, approximation, all-purpose words, word coinage, prefabricated patterns, non-linguistics signal, literal translation, foreignizing, code-switching, appeal for help and stalling). For a more comprehensive classification of CSs, Dörnyei & Scott (1997) separated the strategies into direct, indirect and interactional strategies. The direct strategies refer to most of the avoidance and compensatory strategy as suggested by Dörnyei (1995) while the indirect strategies involve the use of fillers, repetition, verbal strategy markers and feigning. The interactional strategies include strategies such as appeals for help, asking for repetition, asking for clarification, asking for confirmation and guessing. As for Dörnyei & Kormos (1998), problem-solving mechanisms are used to overcome difficulties due to the lack of lexical, grammatical and phonological knowledge of a word or connected speech.

1.9.3 Modest Speakers

Based on the Holistic Rating Scale of speaking assessment by Carroll (1980), a modest speaker is known to be able to produce responses that are relevant and can be understood with some noticeable deficiencies in mastery of language patterns and style. At times modest speaker needs to ask for clarification and be asked to repeat. Although lacks flexibility and interest, a modest speaker is able to cope in the speaking task. On the other hand, based on the Analytic Rating Scale, in a scale of 6, a modest speaker in an L2 context shares the Band 3 and Band 4 speakers' characteristics which display some inaccuracies in the choice of words but able to participate in interaction with adequate vocabulary. However, the speech is hesitant and at times the speakers were seen groping for words and sentences were abandoned (O'Sullivan, 2012).

In the context of this study, modest speakers refer to pre-university students who scored a Band 3 in the MUET Speaking test administered at the school level. The assessment follows closely the MUET Speaking descriptors and Band 3 students who are modestly expressive, fairly fluent and able to use appropriate language with many

noticeable inaccuracies in terms of the grammar (Malaysian Examinations Council, 2006).

1.9.4   Group Discussions

A group discussion is the verbal interchange of ideas and is the most natural and effective way for students to practise talking freely in English as it allows the students to think out the problems collectively. However, as compared to the other skills, only a limited number of students can actually participate in a speaking class, therefore it is liable to be practised less. Thus, although the main aim of group discussion is efficient and fluent practise of the L2, very often English is used in the classroom for the sake of achieving an objective to perform a function such as to persuade, inform, inquire etc.

Evidently, a group discussion offers much to be learnt especially from the content of the discussion in which information may be acquired and new points of views are considered. In addition, through discussion, the students can speak relevantly and clearly, and learn how to participate constructively and cooperatively (Ur, 1981). Brown (2001) believes a group discussion is interactive as it involves collaboration among speakers where thoughts, ideas and feelings are exchanged and shared. The interaction is very much directed to meanings and messages and not the linguistic forms. Therefore, it requires strategic competence for the students to make decision on how to say or to interpret and to repair the language when communication is blocked.

In the MUET Speaking context, a group discussion refers to a group of students sitting together for a face-to-face interaction to explore orally a certain topic of interest. The aim is to discuss and to work towards achieving a consensus on a task assigned. The effectiveness of the group discussion is measured by the ability of the students to be effectively competent in presenting relevant ideas and providing adequate content maturely, in using the language appropriately and in interacting confidently during the discussion using appropriate communication strategies (Malaysian Examinations Council, 2006). Thus, Band 3 students' group discussions are the primary instrument

for this study. The discussions are transcribed and analysed to identify gaps that affect the L2 modest speakers' oral performance in discussions and communication strategies adopted to compensate for inadequacies in the language that seems to be the hindrance to satisfactory group discussions.

1.9.5   Task Fulfilment

In the context of MUET Speaking, the tasks are divided into Task A (individual presentation) and Task B (group discussion). However, for the purpose of the study, only the group discussions in Task B is considered for the analysis. For task fulfilment (TF), the student is assessed by the ability to provide various types of content that is appropriate to the task. The topics addressed range from issues in fields such as socio-cultural, economic, science and technology, sports, environment, health and education.

The fulfilment of task is determined by the ability of the student to show the level of understanding of the topic assigned and development of ideas related to the topic during discussions. The students are required to present relevant ideas, provide adequate content and show mature treatment of the given topic. The inability to provide logical ideas that are well-elaborated, well-linked and justified would display responses that are irrelevant, inadequate or immature which indirectly affect the students' fulfilment of task and overall performance in the speaking test (MUET Test Specifications, 1999).

1.9.6   Oral Performance

Communication or interaction is a skill that requires the speaker to generate speech that is acceptable in both content and form (Coughlin, 2006). To generate such speech, speakers need to engage in tasks which require speakers to comprehend, produce and interact in the L2, thus focussing more on meaning than the

language form (Nunan, 1993). Bachman and Palmer (1996) define speaking tasks as activities that involve speakers in using language for the purpose of achieving a particular goal in a speaking event. Similarly, Ellis (2003) agrees that the tasks are activities that require the speakers to use the language as in the real-world setting, emphasize on meaning and require language learners to use the language to accomplish an objective (Bygate, Skehan and Swain, 2001).

In the context of this study, oral ability refers to the ability of the students in speaking the English Language during group discussions (Task B). The performance is assessed in terms of task fulfilment, language and communicative ability. The oral performance is determined by the ability of the student to show understanding of the topic assigned and development of ideas related to the topic during discussions. The student is required to present relevant ideas, provide adequate content and show mature treatment of the given topic. Besides that, the students' oral performance is also indicated by the students' control of the language such as vocabulary use and grammatical accuracy especially in conveying meaning and linking the ideas. Thus, in MUET Speaking, the ability to communicate is determined by fluency in delivery, the ability to maintain interaction and the ability to display initiative as well as interest in group discussions (MUET Test Specifications, 1999).

1.10   Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the background of the research, the statement of problem, the purpose of the study, the research objectives, the research questions, the significance and the scope of the study. Overview of all these aspects have provided foundation to the research problem to be investigated and researched upon. The next chapter reviews related theories and literature to the research problem.

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