

Employers' Viewpoints on Strategic Competence for Workplace Communication

Maisarah Ahmad Kamil¹ & Nadia Anuar^{1,*}

¹Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

*Corresponding author: Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

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Abstract

Strategic competence refers to the use of both verbal and nonverbal communication to (1) compensate for breakdowns in communication, (2) manage insufficient competence in communication, or (3) enhance the effectiveness of communication (Canale, 1983). In the teaching and learning of English as a second or foreign language, such strategies are useful to ensure that messages are communicated accurately despite limitations in vocabulary or grammatical competence. In the context of higher education, these strategies are especially useful for fresh graduates who wish to seek employment in an English-medium workplace. However, very little research has examined the acceptable strategies that can be used by fresh graduates to minimize breakdowns in communication that result from existing language barriers. Hence, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 12 employers in Malaysia to uncover different strategies that are used in the workplace to avoid breakdowns in communication. The findings show that metacognitive strategies through observing others to improve communication as well as cognitive strategies such as obtaining direct feedback on specific terminologies, formats or wordings are among the strategies that fresh graduates could utilize to improve their competence in communicating at the workplace. Thus, the findings of this research are especially valuable for educators and fresh graduates to develop communicative competence to communicate effectively in the workplace.

Keywords: strategic competence, professional communication, workplace communication, employability, English language

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Despite receiving formal education to learn the English language from primary school to tertiary education, many employers in Malaysia still lament that local fresh graduates continue to demonstrate low proficiency in communicating in the language (Karim, 2016; Sani, 2019). As a result, different policies were released by the Malaysian government to address this issue, such as the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 and the National Graduate Employability Blueprint 2012-2017. Yet, the problem persisted, and has also been highlighted by recent research to affect other countries where English is learned as a second or tertiary language, such as in China (Yao & Du-Babcock, 2020), Iran (Alibakhshi & Labbafi, 2021), Saudi Arabia (Kumar, 2020), and more.

In the workplace, employees are generally expected to communicate effectively by demonstrating not only accurate grammatical knowledge, but also knowledge on appropriateness of utterances based on specific contexts and audiences. In the study of language and communication, this is known as communicative competence, where competence is demonstrated through a language user's linguistic knowledge, appropriateness of communication within different sociolinguistic contexts, knowledge of how certain discourses are produced, and finally, knowledge of how to overcome and avoid miscommunication, otherwise known as strategic competence. Canale (1983) defines strategic competence as the verbal and non-verbal ability of learners to overcome breakdowns in communication that result from insufficient competence in the language.

In contexts where English is learned and used as a second language, strategic competence is a crucial area of research, as it provides a way for language users to maintain communication despite shortcomings in grammatical, sociolinguistic, and discourse competences. As a result, extensive studies have been conducted to identify and measure strategic competence among users of English as a second language (ESL), which involve studying the communicative strategies used to overcome breakdowns in communication, misunderstanding, and insufficient competence in communicating with others.

The teaching of strategies to overcome possible breakdowns in communication has been stressed by researchers (Ne'matillayevna & Bokijonovna, 2022) to help students develop confidence, and later competence, in learning a new or additional language. Santos and Alarcon (2016), for instance, proposed that fillers that are uttered in the target language (such as 'well', 'you see', 'I mean' etc.) can be taught especially for students who use fillers in L1. This may help the process of beginning to think in the target language as they speak and is also a strategy to buy time. However, the researchers also stressed the importance of warning the students on the overuse of fillers as they develop their competence and confidence in using the language. The general expectation is that as they develop their competence, fewer fillers would appear when they speak.

In another study, Octaviana (2021) used a survey to measure the language strategies that students use against their overall speaking performance. The study found that the students

mainly used borrowing strategies (involving literal translation and mixing languages) as well as paraphrasing (involving approximation and circumlocution), and that there is a positive relationship between strategic competence and overall speaking performance.

Related to the workplace, Kwan and Dunworth (2016) conducted a study in Hong Kong that examined the use of English as a lingua franca between Filipino employees and Hong Kongese employers. The study found that asking for clarification, repeating words, and direct questioning were among the effective active strategies that were undertaken by the participants to minimize misunderstanding in communication. They also found that passive strategies such as ignoring unknown language were counter-productive and would more likely lead to ambiguity and misunderstanding.

A review of the studies done on strategic competence underlines that there is a clear paucity on the common and generally acceptable strategies used by ESL learners in the existing literature. Studies done in the context of Malaysia, and especially in the workplace for fresh graduates, are particularly lacking. An examination of past literature found that while many studies have focused on identifying the tasks fresh graduates are required to perform at the workplace (Manjet Kaur, 2021; Rahman et al., 2019), minimal research has been conducted on identifying the strategies that these fresh graduates can employ when they are unable to perform such communicative tasks effectively. With the existing complaints and issues in employability due to low proficiency and insufficient competence in the English language, a study on strategic competence in the workplace context for fresh graduates who are new to the workplace is highly crucial, which warrants this study.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

Communicative competence has been a subject of research interest for the past few decades, the term of which was originally introduced by Hymes (1972). Later, the concept was expanded by Canale (1983), where communicative competence was said to comprise of four competences: grammatical or linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. Strategic competence, as defined by Canale (1983), refers to the verbal and non-verbal ability of learners to overcome breakdowns in communication that result from insufficient competence in the language. Thus, when learners lack adequate knowledge in grammatical, sociolinguistic and discourse competences, strategic competence can help minimize misunderstanding and overcome the barriers in communicating.

Strategic competence has also been understood to include both learning strategies and communication strategies (Celce-Murcia, 2008). Generally, it is seen as a metacognitive function that serves as a management function in language use (Bachman & Palmer, 2010). This involves three metacognitive strategies, which are goal setting (to determine the user's decision of what to do for a particular language task), appraisal (to assess the feasibility of performing the language task), and planning (deciding how to use language knowledge to complete the language task). Strategic competence has also been elaborated by Celce-Murcia et al. (1995) to play a role in three main perspectives:

- 1) Psycholinguistic perspective: Strategies are verbal plans that are used to avoid breakdowns in communication by avoiding or compensating for not knowing the vocabulary.
- 2) Interactional perspective: Strategies are cooperative attempts to repair breakdowns during communication by clarifying confusion or negotiating meaning.
- 3) Communication continuity or maintenance perspective: Strategies are attempts to keep communication going, including by playing for time to think.

Much research has been conducted to uncover the strategies to minimize breakdowns in communication. Tarone (1980), for instance, mentioned three common communication strategies when a user is unable to identify a word. The first is the paraphrasing strategy, which consists of approximation (using words that share semantic meanings to the word they cannot remember), word coinage (making up a new word), and circumlocution (describing characteristics of the object in action). The second is transfer, which uses either literal translation (translating a word from the native language), language switch (using the term without translating), appeal for assistance (actually asking for help to identify the word), and miming (using nonverbal strategies to describe the word). The last is avoidance, which includes topic avoidance (simply avoiding the topic where the word needs to be used) and message abandonment (cease continuing the communication).

There exist challenges, however, in researching strategic competence, as it normally requires researchers to observe and take note of certain strategies in real time (Soekarno & Hie, 2020). Some studies have attempted to provide metacognitive surveys or interviews to identify the strategies used, but this comes with the limitation that the L2 user needs to be aware of and remember what strategies have been used as they overcome limitations in communication; additionally, not all existing instruments are able to elicit strategic competence that is relevant to the tertiary domain (Zhang et al., 2021). This study, therefore, makes use of the operational definition of Canale (1983) to design specific interview questions that may potentially elicit strategies from employers that can later be mapped against the communication strategies given by Tarone (1980) and Celce-Murcia et al. (1995). To the knowledge of the researchers, this is an empirical approach to identify new (if any) strategies that fresh graduates and users of ESL can adopt to avoid breakdowns in communication or overcome instances where there is insufficient competence in communicating at the workplace.

2. Method

This study adopts the qualitative research design to explore the strategies that are expected to be used by fresh graduates in the workplace to overcome breakdowns in communication. To achieve the aims of this study, semi-structured in-depth interviews were deemed as the most suitable method to obtain the relevant data. The semi-structured method of conducting the interviews was chosen to allow flexibility and a degree of freedom to explore the topic with the interviewees, as it enabled the researchers to explore certain topics in greater depth based on the initial answers given by the interviewees for the questions asked (Merriam & Tisdell,

2016).

2.1 Sampling Procedures

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), purposive sampling, a type of non-probabilistic sampling, is the most common sampling method that is utilized in qualitative studies as the study does not require a generalizable sample that reflects the population as is commonly practiced in quantitative studies. Purposive sampling is often utilized when a researcher seeks to discover, gain insight, and understand a situation which requires the viewpoints of samples who can best provide that insight (Patton, 2015). However, within purposive sampling, there exist other sampling methods to define the sampling procedure and criteria that will be used (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In the context of this study, two sampling methods were adopted, which are the typical case sampling and maximum variation sampling to guide the purposive sampling.

According to Patton (2015), typical case sampling identifies cases that illustrate the typical, normal, or average case of the situation being studied. While using typical cases does not mean that the sample is representative of the population, the findings are often considered more relevant to cases with other samples. To identify the typical case in a situation, past studies were examined, and it was found that managers and senior managers who often supervise fresh graduates are among those who are able to provide quality responses and insights into the needs of fresh graduates in the workplace (Ting et al., 2017; Zainuddin et al., 2019). Thus, this study identified managers or senior managers with more than eight years of working experience who work closely with fresh graduates and use English as its main medium of communication as the sample of the study.

Table 1. List of Interviewees

Respondent Code	Designation	Role
IN01	Manager	Human Resource
IN02	Manager	Finance Network
IN03	Manager	Sales
IN04	Manager	Audit
IN05	Senior Executive	Quality & Technology
IN06	Department Head	Pharmacy
IN07	Deputy General Manager	Strategy & Corporate
IN08	Manager	Internal Audit
IN09	Division Head	Project Management
IN10	Department Head	Legal, Compliance & Risk Management
IN11	State Director	State Governance
IN12	Deputy Director	Medicine

The second sampling method that was chosen was the maximum variation sampling, where a researcher widens the selection of the participants to see whether the same patterns or findings still hold across a wider variation (Miles et al., 1994). Past research has often examined the perspectives of employers within specific fields such as engineering (Adnan, 2019; Baklazhenko, 2018), information technology (Fareen, 2018) and maritime (Ahmmed et al., 2020; Alibakhshi & Labbafi, 2021) among others. This research, however, sought to explore the most common strategies used across all fields, thus, no limitation was put on sector where the employers were working. The researchers also decided to vary the departments and functions of the employers to identify the most common strategies that could be used in all departments within the industries. From the two methods above, therefore, the following Table 1 details the list of interviewees who participated in the study.

2.2 Data Collection Procedures

Prior to collecting the data, an interview protocol was developed based on interview questions that were adapted from past studies. The questions were also designed based on the professional communication skills that are often employed in the workplace based on Ahmad Tajuddin (2015) which include speaking (interpersonal), presentation skills, listening, reading, writing, and verbal communication to elicit the strategies required to overcome limitations in performing the skills above. Among the questions in the interview protocol were, “What have you observed to be the most challenging for the fresh graduates in performing this skill?”, “Have you observed issues with how they practice this skill?” and “How would you address these issues in communication?”

Once the interview protocol was finalized, each interviewee was identified and contacted formally via email with an information sheet containing the details of the research and a consent form to participate in the interviews. As the interviews were conducted in early 2021 amidst movement restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviewees were also given the option to choose between having the interviews face-to-face or online to prioritize their comfort during the session. Three out of the 12 interviewees chose face-to-face interviews.

At the beginning of each interview, the researchers introduced themselves and asked for their consent to have the session recorded. The online interviews were conducted via Google Meet. The interviewees were assured of the confidentiality of their identities, and after completing each interview, the interview was transcribed and initially coded. A copy of this transcription and the codes was sent to each interviewee for member checking. They were also given the opportunity to ask questions or add to what they had previously shared. Subsequent interviews were then conducted until data saturation was reached where no new codes could be generated. This happened during the 11th interview, and data saturation was confirmed with the 12th interview. Thus, 12 employers participated in the study.

2.3 Data Analysis Procedures

The transcriptions of the interviews were analyzed using the ATLAS.ti software, which was chosen due to its extensive coding and analysis capabilities. The software was also chosen for

its ability to run intercoder agreement analyses and compute Krippendorff's (2004) alpha for reliability. The deductive method of coding the data was used in the analysis of the data, where the definition of strategic competence as given by Canale (1983) was used to generate the main categories for strategic competence. A code and recode process was also conducted; after the initial coding was performed, the documents were left for two months before recoding to ensure consistency in the codes. As emerging themes were refined and finalized, the themes were then classified under the most relevant category following the definition of Canale (1983).

Following this process, a codebook was then developed, and relevant quotations were extracted for the reliability test. Four raters including the researchers were required to code the document containing the extracted quotations using the codebook that contained the list of codes and definitions. The raters coded the document individually, and comparison and analysis were conducted in ATLAS.ti to measure Krippendorff's (2004) alpha for reliability. According to Krippendorff (2004), a value of 0.8 and above indicates good reliability, 0.667 to 0.8 indicates acceptable reliability, and 0.666 and below indicates low reliability. From the analysis conducted, the items gained a value of 0.935 which indicates good reliability, indicating that the transcriptions had been reliably coded. The themes and results are thus explained in the next section.

3. Results

Based on the interviews conducted with the employers, the feedback given were categorized into themes under the three main functions of strategic competence as given by Canale (1983). To compensate for breakdowns that happen in communicating with others, double-checking, obtaining feedback and using mixed languages were among the strategies that could be adopted. Next, to manage insufficient competence in communicating, fresh graduates were encouraged to cross-check their understanding, work with their peers and supervisors, and learn from observing others on how to conduct the tasks given. Finally, to enhance and improve effectiveness in communication, fresh graduates were encouraged to conduct research and rehearse. The classification of themes into its respective categories is depicted in Figure 1 below.

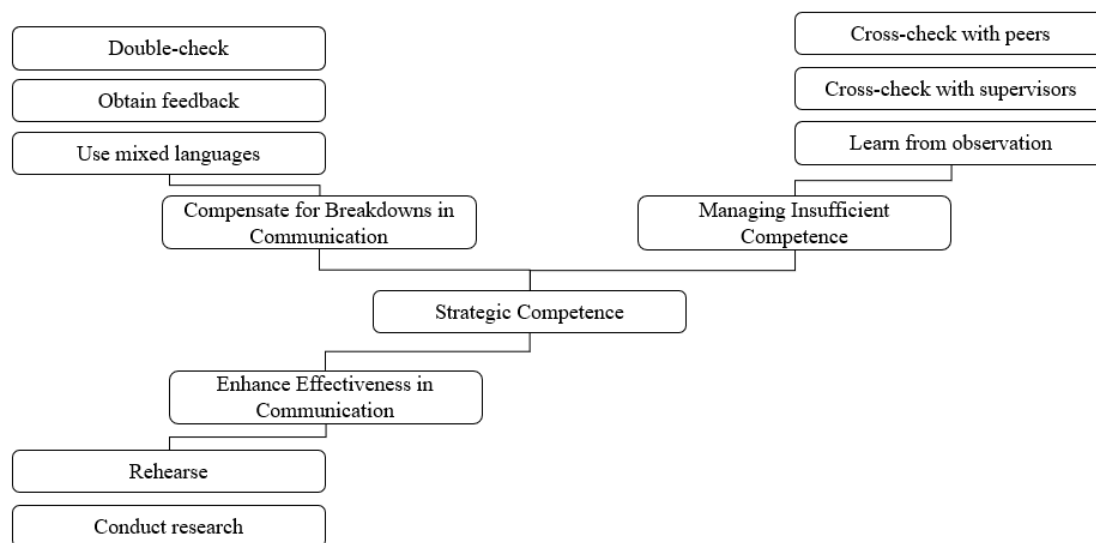


Figure 1. Strategies for Fresh Graduates

3.1 Strategies to Compensate for Breakdowns in Communication

Firstly, a few strategies can be adopted by fresh graduates to compensate for breakdowns in communication. To avoid it from happening in the first place, double-checking is extremely important, particularly for written communication. For instance, IN07 below mentioned that a common etiquette mistake she saw is in email writing, as below:

“In terms of etiquette, sometimes I see... Sometimes you have ‘Please find attached the information requested’ but you did not attach anything.”

(IN07)

One important consideration is that the employers also believe that it is essential for the fresh graduates to learn how to troubleshoot issues in communication themselves, as articulated by IN05 and IN02 below. However, if the fresh graduates are unable to figure out how to solve a particular issue, they are also expected to be brave to ask and obtain feedback. From the feedback received, they can then find areas to improve on and improve the communication further, as given below.

“When there’s an issue, I ask them to go themselves for them to know how to do the troubleshooting.”

(IN05)

“If they’re brave enough to ask, I’m willing to help. [...] What I notice, when you first start work, you need a mentor. If you don’t have a mentor, it’s difficult. [...] Because this one guy that worked with me, I noticed first that he did not know much. But he did a lot of reports, and I notice he polished his skills as he learned from me.”

(IN02)

Some companies even adopt a more severe approach of not allowing fresh graduates to conduct certain tasks without the help of others, or until they are able to demonstrate their capabilities. In the case of IN06 and IN01 below, for instance, potential breakdowns in communication or overcoming errors happen by pairing fresh graduates with a senior, or by making sure they have enough experience, as given below.

“We always have two working together. The new one does not work alone. We do not allow. I mean, even for us, we don’t work alone because it’s a way to reduce error. Usually we have steps of counter-checking, so you cannot work alone. What more the new ones, they don’t work with another new one. They have to be attached to a senior. So that’s the way. It’s like on-the-job training.”

(IN06)

“Writing is like, for a newbie, or a manager, of course everyone has issues with that. Regardless which position you are at. But those are the things that also like I said come with experience. Because... you know when you get a new person to send an email, usually for me, I would never get another person to send out an email. That to me is a big no no. Because instead of telling A, this person might be sending B, C, D without A. So writing was never... like in our policy, the execs, they do not send out with less than a year experience. They are not allowed to send anything.”

(IN01)

It should be noted here, however, that some employers did not agree with the method above. Rather, despite the lack of experience they may have, they are required to still deliver but with the understanding that they will learn and improve with more exposure, as stated by IN03 below.

“In my department, a fresh graduate is required to deliver presentations or pitches because we are dealing with enterprise customers. However, we don’t expect that when they first come, they will do the pitching. In our team, they’ll usually be matched with a senior. They learn from the senior. The senior may be a senior executive, senior manager... and along the way, they will tag along with the seniors. So when we describe, when we do a presentation as a senior, we ask the junior to observe the presentation or the pitch to the customer.”

(IN03)

Finally, in avoiding breakdowns in communication, it is interesting to observe that some employers were not averse to fresh graduates mixing English and Bahasa Melayu to ensure that they are able to communicate with others, as given by IN06 and IN07 below.

“If you want to write the records, say you interviewed the patient and then you want to write the history. You interview in BM, you then need to translate and write, so if you don’t know the word, then it’s hard. So now, there will be plenty of like, inverted

comma, Bahasa Melayu, and close comma.”

(IN06)

“A lot of our references, a lot of our communications is in English. In fact, if we write emails and so on and so forth, it’s in English. Only when you really, desperately need to write in BM, then you write in BM. But 90% is English.”

(IN07)

This is an interesting finding, considering Malaysia is a country whose citizens learn and use English as a second or foreign language. It is also a common strategy within language learning, yet it should also be noted that not all employers share this perception that mixing languages is an acceptable strategy. In the case of IN07, for instance, it is strongly alluded that fresh graduates are required to maintain using English to the best of their ability (“90% in English”) and that only when the need is “desperate” are they allowed to substitute with their first language to get the message across.

3.2 Strategies to Manage Insufficient Competence

For the findings on strategic competence in communicating for fresh graduates, a lot of the feedback gained from the employers centered on ways to manage insufficient competence. The most common strategies are to cross-check with peers and superiors, as well to learn from observing how others in the same company perform the tasks.

“Let’s say, in the report, in terms of scoping also, they will write their part. If let’s say there is a finding or observation, I ask them to write it themselves. But I will review. I will review and check in terms of the accuracy in terms of the content, in terms of the language, grammar. So that’s how I train. So that they will grow.”

(IN08)

“There are some in my team that is really lacking in English. Even in emails it’s terrible. The way they respond, I feel like they need to polish that. [...] So when I help, they will polish up their skills, that’s what I notice.”

(IN02)

“When they email, they would cc to me. Sometimes I will call them and say, ‘You should rephrase this word, etc.’ There are some people, they will quickly implement the feedback, they see it and then in the next email, it will be better. But some become afraid when I correct them. Sigh. It is so difficult to give them work.”

(IN05)

From the above, there is an expectation for fresh graduates to obtain feedback and learn from their peers and superiors to manage insufficient competence in communicating with others. This is evident especially in written communication such as in email writing. As given above, IN08 and IN05, for instance, would conduct checks and give immediate and specific feedback to the fresh graduates on how to improve aspects of communication, which they

also expect will be improved in the next task. Apart from that, fresh graduates are expected to be able to learn from observing others, as given below.

“What I do is that I always encourage my people to just... if they just join, of course they just follow me, to shadow how I do the interview and all that, so for them to observe. But, after like few times, I will give them a chance to initiate or drive the discussion, then I will add on certain points after that.”

(IN08)

“Let’s say I recruit someone new, so during the first one or three months, that person will stick directly with me, so they’ll stick very close to me in every meeting, in every discussion. Whenever I see that the potential is there, the promising essence is already there, so I will allow independence.”

(IN10)

Based on the comments shared by IN08 and IN10 above, to manage insufficient competence in communicating, fresh graduates are expected to learn from observing others. Observing others provides the fresh graduates the opportunity to understand the format of the communication and the way the communication is conducted, which may help build their competence in using the language in the workplace. As shared by IN08 above, as their competence develops, with enough exposure, they will also be expected to begin initiating and driving the communication as part of the learning process.

3.3 Strategies to Enhance Effectiveness in Communication

Some strategies were also given to enhance effectiveness in communication. Conducting research to prepare for the task and rehearsing are especially important and are relevant mostly in spoken communication such as for presentations or for meeting external clients and stakeholders, as given below.

“My colleagues will be the respective stakeholders, and they will ask questions that are a bit controversial. Then the presenter will try to present. And that is very, very helpful because it helps the presenter to rehearse what are the answers. Sometimes we already know the answers, but because we don’t rehearse, we stutter, and then you know we are also presenting in English, sometimes the brain thinks in Bahasa Melayu, the mouth speaks in English. That’s where you lose grammar and all. So a lot of preparation needs to be done, especially if you are doing a big presentation.”

(IN07)

“Even for me, what I’m always encouraged to do by my boss, or even like I ask my team to do, is to prepare questions beforehand. [...] Sometimes, the boss will not give you the opportunity. He will not say, ‘So what do you think?’ But some bosses do ask you back. So sometimes... It’s awkward when we like, don’t know, it doesn’t look good on you.”

(IN08)

Based on the comments by IN07 and IN08 above, rehearsing and preparing well are practices that are used by employers at all levels of the organization and are not specified to fresh graduates alone. Before giving a presentation, for instance, research conducted on the audience and current events may allow fresh graduates to anticipate potential questions that may be asked. By anticipating these questions and rehearsing potential answers, the fresh graduates can then enhance the effectiveness of the communication before it is conducted. According to IN07, rehearsing answers that are anticipated also reduces the likelihood of stuttering and losing one's words during the actual presentation session later, which enhances the communication overall.

4. Discussion

To reiterate, the purpose of this study was to uncover the strategies that fresh graduates can use in workplaces to minimize breakdowns in communication and overcome insufficient competence in the English language when communicating with others. This was to overcome the one of the main issues highlighted among employers in Malaysia, where local fresh graduates are largely unable to communicate fluently and effectively in the English language, which is generally used as the medium of communication for many companies in the country.

From the feedback given by the employers above, the strategies shared hint at a metacognitive approach as given by Celce-Murcia (2008), where such strategies may allow fresh graduates to take note of their own mistakes or inadequacies, or recognize opportunities to enhance their communication with others. For instance, when asking for feedback and cross-checking with others, fresh graduates may take note of areas of improvement and mistakes that should not be repeated in future communication.

However, some strategies are also directly cognitive in nature (Celce-Murcia, 2008). For instance, when asking for feedback or when cross-checking how certain communicative tasks are done, direct feedback may include actual directives in terms of how phrases should be worded or how certain formats should be followed. This gives the learners something concrete and immediate to improve on, which they can quickly implement to develop competence in workplace communication.

To encourage fresh graduates to learn from others, whether directly or indirectly at the metacognitive level, some companies appoint mentors to provide fresh graduates the opportunity to obtain continuous feedback for improved performance. Other companies pair fresh graduates with a senior executive or partner so that the process of cross-checking to avoid mistakes and learn from observation is greater. In the context of tertiary education, this is often emulated in the classroom when students are asked to work in groups to produce an assignment; however, a more effective approach that could be considered is to pair younger students with older students in cross-functional courses so that learning and transfer of knowledge are guided and more widely practiced to increase the metacognitive awareness of the indirect learning that occurs. Once the students graduate from university and enter the workplace, this metacognitive awareness may be higher for them to understand what to learn

and observe when working with others.

Apart from that, one of the most direct strategies mentioned by the employers to overcome issues in communicating was in language mixing, as given by Tarone (1980) and which was also noted by past researchers such as Octaviana (2021). While this may be an acceptable strategy in some workplaces, it should be noted that fresh graduates should have adequate sociolinguistic competence to firstly determine whether the strategy is acceptable in the context of their own workplace. Not all employers interviewed in this study mentioned language mixing as a strategy that is often used (and therefore accepted) in their workplace, and with English being the general language of business in Malaysia, other strategies such as paraphrasing may be more suitable to be used.

In the context of tertiary education, therefore, it should be emphasized that the design and development of competence-based curriculum should not center around strategic competence alone. Rather, focus should also be given to the other three competences (linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse) as they relate to the need to develop strategic competence when the three are insufficient. The choice of which strategy to use, for instance, also depends on whether it is linguistically appropriate or suitable for the particular discourse of the communication, which can only be determined from a sound knowledge of the sociolinguistic context of the communication. Ideally, fresh graduates should develop themselves in all four competences to communicate well in the workplace.

Another observation was that none of the employers mentioned avoiding strategies as a strategy that is practiced in workplace communication. Rather, the employers strongly spoke of the need to try, learn from feedback, and improve with time and exposure to develop competence and build one's confidence in communicating at the workplace. Thus, it could be inferred that avoiding strategies such as topic avoidance and message abandonment as given by Tarone (1980) should be avoided in workplace communication, which is similar to the findings of Kwan and Dunworth (2016).

Overall, this study has achieved its objective to uncover the strategies that fresh graduates can use to minimize breakdowns and overcome insufficient competence in communicating in English at the workplace. The findings of this study are firstly significant to fresh graduates themselves who wish to know the generally accepted strategies that they can use to develop their communication competence in the workplace. This is especially true in the context of this study, which employed maximum variation sampling to extract the most common strategies that are acceptable in the workplace context. Through maximum variation sampling, the perspectives of employers from various fields and departments were explored until the data reached saturation point; while this does not mean that the findings can be generalized, the data does serve as a sound basis of strategic competence in the workplace that can be developed further for specific fields and functions in future research.

Additionally, the findings are significant to tertiary educators as they can use these findings as a guide to develop case study questions or roleplay situations that may warrant the teaching and learning of such strategies to prepare fresh graduates for the workplace. In line with the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025) which sought to drive education

through close collaboration with the industry, the findings of this study can help drive a competence-based curriculum that is guided by actual practices within the industry that can be brought into the classroom. Common issues related to the way fresh graduates communicate can be elicited from employers as done in this study, which can then guide the lessons and activities held in the classroom.

While the objectives of this study have been met, it should be noted that this study is not without its limitations. Firstly, the employers were themselves unfamiliar with strategic competence as a communicative concept. Therefore, questions were asked to elicit the strategies and inferences were made as to the strategies that are accepted in the workplace. This means that a lot more strategies could have gone unnoticed, thus, it is recommended for observations to be made in an ethnographic study to truly determine the strategies that are most used and accepted. Secondly, maximum variation sampling led to responses that may not be shared by consensus between all employers. Mixing languages, for instance, is accepted only by a certain group of employers (and seemingly only in the healthcare field in the context of this study), thus, such distinctions should also be made when examining the results. Future studies, as previously mentioned, could examine the communicative practices of specific industries or work functions to develop a more focused understanding of the competences required.

Next, due to the qualitative nature of the study, the findings also cannot be generalized to the entire population. Thus, a quantitative study that aims to better represent the population is recommended to discover the preferred strategies that fresh graduates can practice in the workplace to develop competence in workplace communication.

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