วารสารมหาวิทยาลัยนครพนม ; ปีที่ 2 ฉบับที่ 2 : พฤษภาคม - สิงหาคม 2555
Nakhon Phanom University Journal ; Vol.2 No.2 : May - August 2012

13

The Strategic Competence in Communication: A Case Study of The Thai Wives of Foreigners in Nong Bua Lam Phu Province

Paleerath Kongsuriya,[1] Assoc. Prof. Dr. Prayong Klanrit,[2]
Assoc. Prof. Dr. Napasup Lerdpreedakorn[3] and Asst. Prof. Dr. Naengnoi Yanwaree[4]

[1] M.A. (TESOL) Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Udon Thani Rajabhat University
[2] D.Ed. (TESOL) Assoc. Prof. Dr. Office of Graduate Studies Udon Thani Rajabhat University
[3] D.Ed. (TESOL) Assoc. Prof. Dr. Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Udon Thani Rajabhat University
[4] Ph.D. (Nursing) Asst. Prof. Dr. Office of Graduate Studies Udon Thani Rajabhat University

บทคัดย่อ

วัตถุประสงค์ของการวิจัย เพื่อศึกษาความสามารถในการใช้กลยุทธ์การสื่อสารของภรรยาชาวต่างชาติในจังหวัดหนองบัวลำภู กลุ่มตัวอย่างผู้ให้ข้อมูลเป็นหญิงไทยที่เป็นภรรยาชาวต่างชาติในจังหวัดหนองบัวลำภู จำนวน 8 คน ใช้วิธีสุ่มตัวอย่างแบบสโนว์บอล เก็บรวบรวมข้อมูลโดยการสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึกแบบไม่มีโครงสร้าง การสังเกต และการบันทึกภาคสนาม ผู้วิจัยสัมภาษณ์เป็นภาษาไทยและภาษาอังกฤษ และวิเคราะห์ตามวิธีวิทยาของการสร้างทฤษฎีฐานราก ผู้วิจัยได้นำเสนอกระบวนการของการใช้กลยุทธ์การสื่อสารของผู้ให้ข้อมูล และกรอบทฤษฎีของกลยุทธ์การสื่อสาร

ผลการวิจัยพบว่า กลยุทธ์การสื่อสารที่ผู้ให้ข้อมูลใช้เพื่อบรรลุเป้าหมายในการสื่อสาร ประกอบด้วย 1) การเปิดพจนานุกรม 2) การเรียนในชั้นเรียน 3) การพูดคุยโทรศัพท์ 4) การเรียนด้วยตนเอง 5) การถามคำถามและการจดจำ 6) การพูดตามและการเลียนแบบ 7) การใช้ภาษาท่าทาง 8) การจดบันทึก 9) ความกล้า 10) การฟังโดยใช้จิตใต้สำนึก 11) การพูดคุยออนไลน์ 12) การเขียน และ 13) การวาดภาพ ซึ่งนำมาวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลโดยการจัดหมวดหมู่ได้ 5 ลักษณะหลัก ได้แก่ 1) แรงจูงใจ 2) ความเต็มใจที่จะสื่อสาร 3) การได้สัมผัสกับภาษาเป้าหมาย 4) การถามคำถามและการจดจำ และ 5) การใช้กลวิธีการสื่อสาร ผู้วิจัยได้ค้นพบว่าแรงจูงใจเป็นองค์ประกอบหลักที่ร้อยรวมทั้งห้าลักษณะเข้าด้วยกัน

คำสำคัญ : กลยุทธ์การสื่อสาร / กลวิธีการสื่อสาร / การวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพ / ทฤษฎีฐานราก / กรณีศึกษา

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this case study was to investigate the strategic competence in communication of the Thai wives of foreigners in Nong Bua Lam Phu province. The informants were eight Thai wives of foreigners in Nong Bua Lam Phu province chosen by snowball technique. Data were collected through in-depth unstructured interviews, observations and field notes. The interviews were conducted in Thai and English and analyzed according to grounded theory methodology. The process of the strategies utilized by the informants and theoretical framework of strategic competence in communication were proposed.

The findings revealed the strategic competence in communication employed by the informants to achieve their communicative goals, ranging from: 1) using dictionary, 2) attending classes, 3) telephoning, 4) self-directed learning, 5) asking questions and memorization, 6) repetition and imitation, 7) mime and gestures, 8) note-taking, 9) risk-taking, 10) subconscious listening, 11) chatting online, 12) writing and 13) drawing. These categories were analyzed and related into 5 main aspects, namely: 1) motivation, 2) willingness to communicate, 3) exposure to the target language, 4) asking questions and memorization, and 5) employing communication strategies. It was discovered that motivation was the core component that tied the entire five aspects together.

Keywords : Strategic competence / Communication strategies / Qualitative research / Grounded theory / Case study

14

วารสารมหาวิทยาลัยนครพนม ; ปีที่ 2 ฉบับที่ 2 : พฤษภาคม - สิงหาคม 2555
Nakhon Phanom University Journal ; Vol.2 No.2 : May - August 2012

Rationale and Statement of the Problems

Pensioners' movement across international borders is obviously rising in both Asia and Europe (Toyota, Bocker & Guild. 2006 : 30). In addition, the number of foreigners desiring to stay longer in Thailand is rapidly increasing in recent years. Some visitors are married to the local Thai women in Nong Bua Lam Phu province. It is interesting that foreign husbands are willing to learn the Thai language. Moreover, they also encourage their Thai wives to learn and speak English in order to bridge their communication gap. The major problems of Thai learners of English are lacking an opportunity to utilize the target language outside the classroom (Klanrit. 2005 : 22), including anxiety and fear of making mistakes when communicating with foreigners. However, it is interesting that the Thai wives of foreigners in Nong Bua Lam Phu province are able to communicate in English with less difficulty and low anxiety. Therefore, the researcher finds it challenging to investigate the strategic competence in communication of the Thai wives of foreigners in Nong Bua Lam Phu province.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the strategic competence in communication of the Thai wives of foreigners in Nong Bua Lam Phu province.

Methodology

This qualitative study was analyzed through grounded theory (GT) approach as developed by Strauss & Corbin (1990). The coding procedures are explained respectively in data analysis.

The Informants

Eight Thai wives of foreigners in Nong Bua Lam Phu province were chosen by purposive selection. Theoretical sampling, a method of data collection based on concepts derived from data (Corbin & Strauss. 2008 : 144) was conducted. A snowball technique was administered in order to get some general knowledge about the population of interest and identify its members (Robson. 1993 : 142). In this study, the researcher left numbers of the informants open; that was, data collection was continued until theoretical saturation was achieved.

Research Instruments

Research instruments used to collect data for this study were: firstly, the researcher as the research instrument and secondly, in-depth unstructured interviews, observations and field notes.

Protection of Human Subjects

Oral consent was obtained before conducting an interview. Rapport was established in order to gain solid data and access to conduct subsequent interviews. Pseudonyms were used to protect the informants' confidentiality (Yanwaree. 2002 : 57).

Trustworthiness

This study utilized multiple methods of triangulation and member checks (Merriam. 2009 : 229) to ensure the trustworthiness of qualitative data; that was, interview transcripts were returned to the informants to verify accuracy of data interpretation.

Data Collection

Data were collected from March to August, 2010 through in-depth unstructured interviews in natural settings. All interviews were observed through video-recordings while field notes were also taken. The first set of data was collected and analyzed simultaneously. Subsequent interviews were continued until no new categories emerged from the data. Consequently, there were altogether eight informants in this study.

Data Analysis

During open coding, there were 13 categories emerged from data, ranging from: 1) using dictionary, 2) attending classes, 3) telephoning, 4) self-directed learning, 5) asking questions and memorization, 6) repetition and imitation, 7) mime and gestures, 8) note-taking, 9) risk-taking, 10) subconscious listening, 11) chatting online, 12) writing and 13) drawing.

In axial coding process, these categories were analyzed and related into 5 main aspects, namely :

1) motivation, 2) willingness to communicate, 3) exposure to the target language, 4) asking questions and memorization, and 5) employing communication strategies. The new aspects can be proposed in a process as follows:

1. Motivation

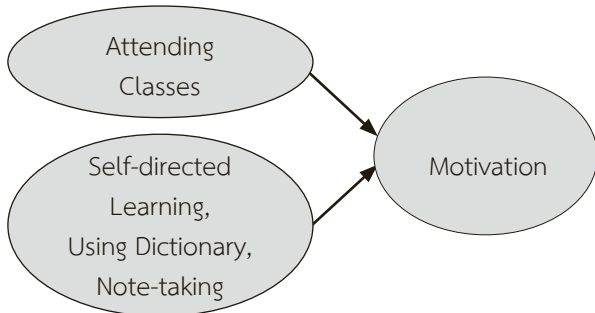The first connections can be found in **Figure 1.**

Figure 1: Motivation

Figure 1 illustrates how the categories from open coding were combined to form the new motivation aspect.

2. Willingness to Communicate (WTC)

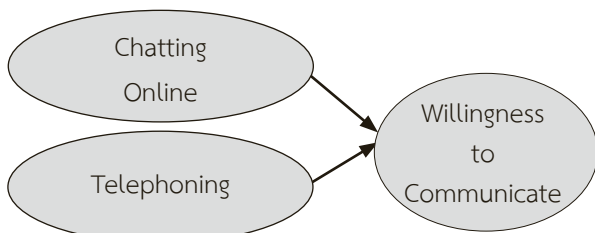Two other open coding categories were merged to form willingness to communicate aspect as seen in **Figure 2.**

Figure 2 Willingness to Communicate

3. Exposure to the Target Language

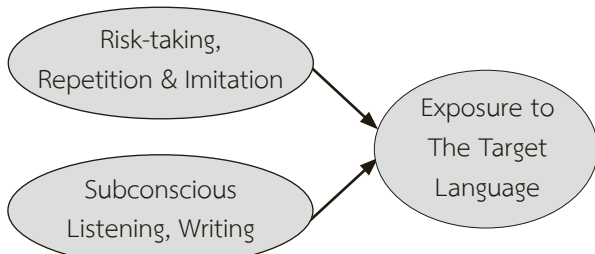Four categories were also combined to form exposure to the target language aspect as illustrated in **Figure 3.**

Figure 3 Exposure to the Target Language

4. Asking Question & Memorization

The asking questions and memorization category emerged in open coding and was carried over into axial coding phase with no change.
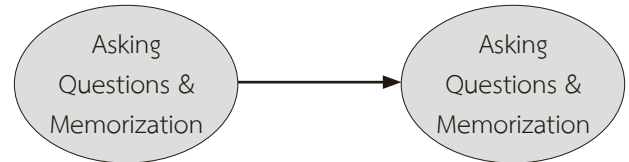

Figure 4 Asking Questions and Memorization

5. Employing Communication Strategies

All informants employed a broad range of communication strategies (CSs) to maintain their conversations. They deployed not only verbal communication but also non-verbal strategies such as mime and gestures, and drawing strategy which were frequently utilized by the informants.
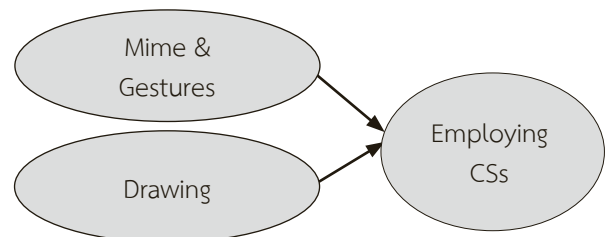

Figure 5 Employing Communication Strategies

The resulting new aspects were used to create a theoretical framework as reflected in **Figure 6.**
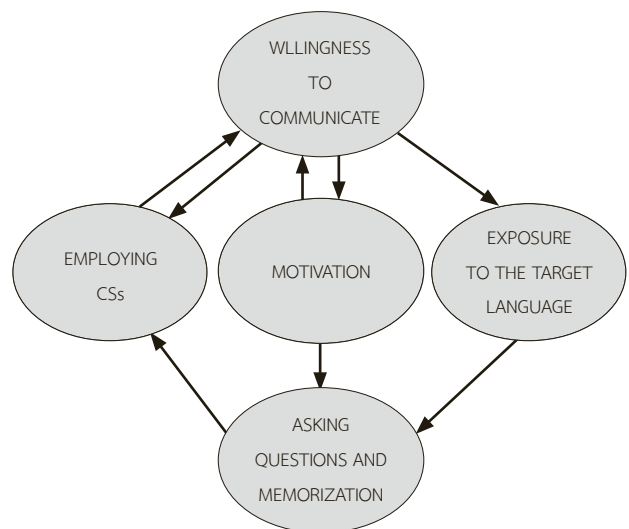

Figure 6 Theoretical Framework of Strategic Competence in Communication

16

วารสารมหาวิทยาลัยนครพนม ; ปีที่ 2 ฉบับที่ 2 : พฤษภาคม - สิงหาคม 2555
Nakhon Phanom University Journal ; Vol.2 No.2 : May - August 2012

Selective coding was the final analysis step which the core component was chosen and relating all other aspects to it which explained the phenomenon being study. The explanation of the theoretical framework is included in discussions section.

Findings

The research involved a qualitative case study that attempted to investigate the strategic competence in communication of the Thai wives of foreigners in Nong Bua Lam Phu province. The informants were eight Thai wives of foreigners in Nong Bua Lam Phu province chosen by purposive selection, theoretical sampling and a snowball technique. Data were collected through in-depth unstructured interviews, observations and field notes and they were analyzed according to GT methodology. The findings revealed the strategic competence in communication employed by the informants to accomplish their communicative goals, ranging from: 1) using dictionary, 2) attending classes, 3) telephoning, 4) self-directed learning, 5) asking questions and memorization, 6) repetition and imitation, 7) mime and gestures, 8) note-taking, 9) risk-taking, 10) subconscious listening, 11) chatting online, 12) writing and 13) drawing. These categories were analyzed and related into 5 main aspects, namely: 1) motivation, 2) willingness to communicate, 3) exposure to the target language, 4) asking questions and memorization, and 5) employing communication strategies. It was discovered that motivation was the core component that tied the entire five aspects together.

The interactions between each component are explained in the next section.

Discussions

Details of the theoretical framework of strategic competence in communication are described as follows:

1. Motivation

In this study, the informants went through a period of difficulties in using English for communication, namely : shyness and a lack of self-confidence, anxiety and fear. They managed to overcome these feelings of frustration by employing a number of strategies to maintain conversations. It was clearly shown that high motivation of the informants has successfully led them through all difficulties they encountered at the very beginning phase of their second language (L2) interaction experiences. This results is consistent with Ehrman (1994 : 138) that people recognize the value of language learning for a number of reasons. Some of them are interested in the language and culture, some find it challenging, and others might need to seek their ways to increase interactions with interesting people. This kind of motivation is called intrinsic. On the other hand, if they have to do it for external benefit, for instance; job enhancement, passing a test or meeting academic requirements, it is called extrinsic motivation. In this study it was clearly intrinsic motivation. In addition, "the important element of motivation is that it is sensitive to success and failure" (Ehrman. 1994 : 141); that is, if a person succeeds at a task he/she is aroused to perform repetitions as a very true statement of Dörnyei (2001 : 89); 'Success breeds successes'. Repeatedly fighting through the time of difficulties, the informants also gained their self-confidence in L2 communication.

Therefore, it is crucial that language teachers sustain learners' motivation by engaging them in such meaningful interactions. It was found in this study that with high motivation and self-confidence of the informants, willingness to communicate in the target language has gradually been constructed alongside.

2. Willingness to Communicate

A number of language learners with high grammatical abilities are unwilling to utilize their second language to communicate while others with lesser linguistic knowledge attempt their best to communicate in all possible opportunities (Clément, Dörnyei, Macintyre, & Noels. 1998 : 545). It seems to be consistent with the results of this study that after the informants were informed that part of the interview would be conducted in English apparently

none of them hesitated in participating in the interview conversation. According to Peng (2006 : 37), motivation was considered to be the strongest predictor of L2 WTC. It was also apparent in this study that with high motivation together with WTC, the informants were quite confident in communicating in the target language regardless of the grammatical accuracy. It was obvious that they all possess WTC. Therefore, one of the most crucial factors of language learning is to increase learners' L2 WTC (Peng. 2006: 33). In a Thai English as a foreign language (EFL) context, it is important that educators build this personality trait for Thai learners of English as a fundamental in language learning.

An interesting example supports WTC was the case of informant Nida. Despite the fact that she has never been abroad she is very fluent in English. She claimed that she spent most of her time practicing English by talking on the phone with her foreign husband. It took her approximately four months to become fluent in English. Apparently, she did not depend much on non-verbal communication as she needed to convey her intended meaning through voice interactions. This findings supports Krashen's Input hypothesis (2009 : 22) that "speaking fluency cannot be taught directly. Rather, it 'emerges' over time, on its own this state of readiness arrives at somewhat different times for different people, however. Early speech, moreover, is typically not grammatically accurate. Accuracy develops over time as the acquirer hears and understands more input". It was proved from this real-time speech situation that informant Nida has fully acquired the target language and in turn formulated her speaking fluency.

Without WTC, even individuals with the most outstanding competency could not succeed their long-term goals as clearly shown in the case of Narak, the informant of this study, who spent her first 3 months in Australia. However, she hardly communicated in English with anyone which resulting in her poor spoken ability in English as she admitted. In this study, data showed that living abroad did not guarantee the target language speaking competency of individuals, provided that they possess L2 WTC.

3. Exposure to the Target Language

The informants showed their WTC by keeping themselves exposed to the target language through means of listening, speaking and also writing. (Rababah. 2002 : 11) claims that the more learners are exposed to the target language; the faster they can assimilate the language. In this study, the informants consistently employed risk-taking until they reached the point where they felt familiar with the target language and that their confidence increased. They learned from trial and errors. Repetition and imitation strategy also emerged from data which played a significant role in language speaking competence of the informants.

It is necessary that Thai teachers of English use the target language in their classes and employ an interpretive summary to ensure mutual understanding like the way foreign husbands patiently talked to their Thai wives in this study.

4. Asking Questions and Memorization

The informants encountered a number of communication problems. They described fighting through this time of difficulties by asking questions, seeking advice from their foreign husbands and native speaker friends. Asking questions and memorization strategy emerged in open coding process and was carried over through the process of axial coding. The category was named by the informants themselves. However, many a time without context, words convey no meaning when the speaker could not get his or her intended meaning across to the hearer. Therefore, non-verbal communication often gets involved with the messages being conveyed to add clarification or to make the meaning clearer (Sroinam. 2005 : 4-5). Moreover, it was frequently deployed by all informants of this present study.

5. Employing Communication Strategies

Employing CSs was another aspect found during axial coding process. The interactions between WTC and CSs; the arrows pointing both ways from the two aspects, indicates that whenever the informants fully equipped with WTC, it was a high time they reached the state of readiness and prompted to use

CSs they have learned to help solving their communication problems. On the other hand, if the informants primed with CSs to facilitate in their real-time interactions they would be more confident to communicate in the target language and that their WTC increased. In other words, CSs were one of the most crucial factors that helped building informants' self-confidence which results in the formation of WTC.

In summary, it was apparent in this study that the informants did not use a broad range of linguistic knowledge. However, they were able to express themselves confidently with limited vocabulary. It was proved that they did not depend much on how large the vocabulary they knew, but rather depended on their strategic competence to convey their intended meaning and repair breakdowns in communication. Therefore, teaching strategic competence to learners is a significant task for language teachers. It might be difficult to implement strategic competence teaching in typical Thai classroom contexts due to class size constraints. However, as facilitators, there are some possibilities worth taking into consideration and commencing our journeys.

One of the informants in this study declared that she relied entirely on non-verbal communication, the language of the world, and that she successfully conveyed her intended meaning without saying a word. For example, Thirak padded on her stomach when she could not express that she was hungry. In this sense, communication has taken place when the intended message precisely received by the hearer. It is necessary to realize that the most important function of language is communication. Therefore, in order to elicit risk-taking performance from the part of learners in the first place, non-verbal communication should be taught to engage all abilities of learners' participation. More importantly, the willingness to participate in all language activities provided by teachers is subconsciously constructed which may take a crucial role in further teaching language speaking.

Incorporating non-verbal communication into language teaching classroom is an interesting notion to maintain the conversations. This strategy can be employed until learners arrive at the point where they feel comfortable engaging themselves in the target language interactions and that they are ready to initiate their own meaningful languages. The follow up strategy can be asking questions related to the topic or the initial sentence being conveyed. Learners need to be taught a wide range of phrases, expressions and communication strategies to maintain the flow of the conversations. It is vital that teachers create a 'having fun while learning' approach which considers being the most colorful ingredient of communicative language learning. The researcher hopes that learning by heart may possibly lead to a long-term retention.

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Nakhon Phanom University Journal ; Vol.2 No.2 : May - August 2012

19

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