CeLTA Fellowship Project Summary

Project Title: *Relationship between L2 Oral Communication Strategies and Abilities*

Project Leader: Debra M. Hardison

This was a multi-phase project focused on exploring a) the communication strategies used by L2 English speakers, b) the relationship between these strategies and their oral skills, and c) their implications for instruction in a conversation course.

I. OUTCOMES: The outcomes of the project are described for each phase.

Phase 1 (SS2014): Phase 1 involved assessment of the generalizability of a slightly revised version of the Oral Communication Strategy Inventory developed by Nakatani (2006) in Japan for L1 Japanese university-level learners of English as a foreign language. At MSU, the survey was administered to 75 L2 speakers of English (L1 Chinese), and results revealed relatively low reliability for the strategy factors (Cronbach's alpha values ranged from .12 to .67) that Nakatani had derived from his factor analysis. There were several issues that might have contributed to this result. The original survey was administered in Japanese; consequently, the English translations (in the article's appendix), which contained a considerable amount of jargon, may not have represented the constructs well. The rewording of some of the items prior to the administration of the survey at MSU might have altered the intended construct and prompted a different response. I also noted that the original factor analysis indicated that several items loaded similarly on more than one factor, but the one to which they were assigned and retained in the current study may not have been appropriate for the MSU population. In addition, Nakatani reported reliability only for the entire set of speaking strategies (vs. for each scale). There were also numerous population differences between the two studies in terms of age, education level, discipline majors, and history of English instruction, as well as the marked difference in the presence of English in the setting for each study.

Phase 2 (FS2014): Students in the LLT 872 Research Methods course worked in groups to review the existing survey items and recommend revisions, omissions, and additions. Based on other research pointing to differences in communication affect for L2 speakers between speaking to an interlocutor who is a native speaker of the target language versus another nonnative speaker (Hardison, 2014, 2015; Hardison & Okuno, 2015), the substantially revised survey had two sections: Strategies When Communicating in English with Native Speakers (NSs) of English (Section 1), and Strategies When Communicating in English with Other Nonnative Speakers (NNSs) of English (Section 2). This revised survey was administered to 91 L2 English speakers (L1Chinese) at MSU who were mostly graduate students or visiting scholars. Data analysis revealed five scales or strategy factors with good reliability for each section of the survey (Cronbach's alpha ranged from .70 to .91; most were above .77) as follows: Socioaffective Strategies, Strategies Involving Reference to a NS Model (most items were related to pronunciation), Compensatory or Listener Accommodation Strategies, Strategies Focused on Fluency, and Strategies Focused on Grammar. There were a few differences in the strategies that constituted a scale according to the section of the survey (i.e., the speaker status of the interlocutor); for example, respondents reported trying to use fillers (e.g., well, um, ah) instead of being silent when they had trouble expressing their ideas, but this item only belonged to a scale in section 1 referring to communication with a NS. There was also an apparent influence of the setting of the survey in the US versus Japan, such that the ESL respondents reported low usage of the following strategies: thinking in the first language and translating to English, taking the time to plan what they wanted to say before speaking, and abandoning communication if they could not think of the right word or phrase.

Phase 3 (SS2015): A subset (48) of the survey respondents from Phase 2 participated in an oral interview with me. Native-speaking raters evaluated the recordings using a 0-8 point scale and a detailed rubric for pronunciation, fluency, grammar, vocabulary, and general communication skills. The median ratings were as follows: pronunciation 3.00, fluency 3.00, grammar 3.50, vocabulary 3.50, and communication skills 4.00. A Spearman correlation revealed that the scale involving Socioaffective Strategies was the only one showing a significant relationship with each of the oral skills when participants were communicating with a NS (survey section 1). A similar situation was found when participants were communicating with another NNS (survey section 2). In that case, four components (fluency, grammar, vocabulary, communication skills) showed a significant relationship with the scale Socioaffective Strategies; however, pronunciation showed a significant correlation with the scale Strategies Involving Reference to a NS Model.

Phase 4 (SS2015): The final phase of the project involved implementing the knowledge gained from the survey and interviews in the English Conversation Course (LLT 896, TESOL Practicum). Many of the registrants in this course reported not getting enough speaking practice and having difficulty initiating and maintaining conversations in English. As such, a particular focus of the course in SS15 was on strategies to facilitate interactions with both native- and nonnative-speaking interlocutors by building the confidence that, according to the aforementioned research, plays an important role in oral skill development. There was a total of 91 registrants in the course, with a range of L1s although the largest group were L1 Chinese speakers.

Laurel Waller, a second-year TESOL student at the time, worked with me to review the literature on teaching communication strategies and developed materials which were placed on the D2L Community that we use for the course. The teachers in each of the five levels/classes chose strategies from that site and adapted them to fit their learners' proficiency level and the theme of their class. The learners were asked to keep strategy logs each week to indicate how helpful the instruction was and the opportunities they were having to use the strategies outside of class. Below are examples of some of the strategies that were incorporated into the different levels of the course. I observed each of the sessions outlined below.

Beginning Level: Topic – *Small Talk*

- The teachers showed a short YouTube video of Ellen DeGeneres recounting an attempt at small talk with another person in show business at a social gathering.

- The students discussed why the exchange was awkward. The topics of conversation were appropriate, but there was no expansion and there were long pauses which Ellen described as uncomfortable.

- The class discussed possible conversation starters for a similar situation, appropriate topics (including some cross-cultural comparisons), and how to keep the conversation going.

Low-intermediate Level: Topic – *Offering Opinions and Disagreeing*

- The teacher used the website ImprovforEveryone.com to demonstrate some effective speaking techniques.

- The students discussed how to offer their opinions and disagree with someone politely.

- The students then practiced with assigned topics on which they were to express an opinion.

Intermediate Level: Topic – *Keeping the Conversation Going*

- The teacher presented rejoinders and follow-up questions to keep a conversation going.

- The class discussed how to recount an event.

- They talked about ways to ask for clarification and negotiate meaning.

- At the end of class, they talked about how to close a conversation.

Advanced Level: Topic – *Speech Acts in Group Discussion*

- The class considered ways to offer suggestions or alternatives if they were involved in group discussions. A number of the students in the class reported having been in this type of situation in their regular academic classes; for example, one student described having been involved in a group discussion in a lab, and by the time she felt confident enough to try to offer a suggestion, the lab meeting was over!

- The teachers went over the use of fillers in a conversation.

- They reviewed levels of formality in making requests.

- They also looked at ways of expressing regret, and declining requests politely.

From the Strategy Logs

The weekly strategy logs were reviewed for the six-week period of the course. In these logs, learners reported having used what they had learned in their classes to facilitate participation in debates in their regular academic classes, make suggestions and offer alternative ideas to group members in class/lab discussions, talk to advisors, talk to neighbors, make requests in various campus offices, and deal with customer service representatives on the phone and in stores.

II. IMPACT

I presented some of the early findings of this project at a conference *Pronunciation in Second Language Learning and Teaching (PSLLT)* at the University of California at Santa Barbara in September, 2014. The remaining findings will be presented at *PSLLT* in Dallas (hosted by Texas A&M University) in October, 2015.

The project also involved participation from several students. Laurel Waller (M.A. TESOL 2015) was instrumental in developing materials and assisting teachers in the practicum with lesson plans. This gave her some additional experience in research and teacher education. Dustin Crowther (SLS student) assisted with development of the survey. Graduate students, both native and nonnative speakers of English, in LLT 872 Research Methods (FS14) played a crucial role in revising survey items and suggesting new ones. This was a beneficial experience for them and was related to course content. I presented some of the research findings in that class and in LLT 841 (Special Topics: L2 Speech) in SS15. In addition, some of the students in LLT 841 served as raters for the speech samples.

This project also had a positive impact on the TESOL graduate students who taught in the practicum and the registrants in the course, who are from the MSU and Greater Lansing Area communities. Because of the scope of the registrant population, the course also constitutes an outreach project. Based on the weekly logs, I would say that the instructional materials were appreciated and should be continued as a part of the course.

References

Hardison, D. M. (2014). Changes in second-language learners' oral skills and socio-affective profile following study abroad: A mixed-methods approach. *The Canadian Modern Language Review* [Special issue on Second language speech perception and production: Implications for language teaching], *70*, 415-444. (Project supported by CLEAR)

Hardison, D. M. (2015). *The socioaffective component in L2 oral interactions: Role of interlocutor type*. Manuscript in preparation.

Hardison, D. M., & Okuno, T. (2015). *Changes in second-language learners' oral skills and socioaffective profile following short-term study abroad to Japan. Macro- and microlevel analyses*. Manuscript in preparation. (Project supported by CLEAR)

Nakatani, Y. (2006). Developing an oral communication strategy inventory. *The Modern Language Journal, 90, 151-168.*