The Use of Gambits in the English Language Classroom

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Learners and users of a second language have to resort to a variety of conversational strategies or structures to enable them to communicate effectively and competently. Factors affecting effective communication among English as a second or English as foreign language (ESL/EFL) learners are diverse in nature because of different socio-cultural backgrounds. Gambits as a conversational strategy are used to a large extent and teachers must be made aware of such conversational strategies used by English as second or foreign language learners. Thus, studies focusing on conversational strategies among ESL/EFL learners in the English language classroom are important in order to identify the types of conversational strategies used and to help teachers to understand the appropriate conversational strategies and structures. Such understanding can be used to guide learners to use correct conversational strategies when communicating in English. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the use of gambits as a communication strategy in conversation among non-native speakers of English in an English as a second language(ESL) context based on Kellers conversational strategy signals. (175 words)

I. INTRODUCTION

Conversation is an essential feature of communication and thus plays an extremely important role in communication. Research has shown that language competency aids effective communication. Thus, in the English language-teaching

context, teachers need to help students to acquire effective communication strategies in order to equip them with the knowledge and skills of effective communication.

Communication strategy is an important aspect in studying conversation. It can enhance our understanding of how people of different cultures and background construct their speech pattern and choice of words in their daily interactions. It appears that non-native speakers (NNS) of English often struggle to converse or express themselves clearly. Very often low proficiency NNS of English will use repetition, message abandonment and code switching strategies, which are sometimes viewed as forms of communication, which impairs understanding in communicative speech. According to Faerch and Kasper (1983), these strategies suggest that speakers appear to distance themselves from the task and objectify language in order to gain control of it. Frawley and Lantolf (1985, p. 20) explain that this phenomenon is the result of insufficient mastery of the language. However, one needs to understand that a speaker can have access to different types of strategies as there are no fixed types of communication strategies characterizing the language proficiency of that speaker.

The purpose of this study is to explore and single out particular verbal signals (gambits) used in conversation and to describe their form, distribution and function with reference to their usage in everyday conversation. It focuses on Kellers (1979) conversational strategy signals. The study sought to answer the following questions.
(1) What are the roles of gambits within conversational discourse?
(2) Do gambits serve specific functions?
(3) Are gambits structured to maintain the flow of discourse?
(4) Is the use of gambits influenced by culture?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Conversational Strategies and Conversational Structure

Conversational strategies also known as conversational styles are used to achieve certain communicational goals. Examples of these can be found in everyday conversation where speakers employ certain expressions to create the impression that the speaker is showing consideration, politeness, respect and agreeableness or

to express their feelings and emotions. In other words, the speaker tries to maintain harmonious and unproblematic relationships that are free from conflict. Two approaches can be used to analyze conversational strategies. The first is the interactional approach where conversational strategies are characterized by the negotiation of an agreement on meaning between interlocutors (Tarone, 1990; Corder, 1985). The second is the psycholinguistics approach that deals with use of conversational strategies with a concern to analyze the ability to control oneself in a communication task. In other words, this approach is concerned with the strategies used by the interlocutors to structure their content and conversational procedure (Keller, 1979, Tarone, 1981; Tarone et al, 1983; Faerch and Kasper, 1983, Frawley and Lantolf, 1985 and Stenstrom, 1994).

The differences between these two approaches are that the psycholinguistics approach states that all forms of discourse are viewed as markers of how speakers relate to the task of conversation. In other words, it refers to how a speakers performance is related to his/her ability to maintain control of speaking tasks. The interactional approach on the other hand, is used to analyze discourse such as contextualization cues relating to contextual knowledge. Speakers resort to conversational strategies to either help them simplify target language or to create a smooth flow of conversation. To achieve this, they could resort to either the interactional approach or the psycholinguistic approach or perhaps a combination of both.

Thus, one can deduce that conversation is the primary basis of direct social relations between people, and this can be achieved through the use of appropriate conversational strategies. The use of conversation strategies is important because it is these strategies that speakers use to convey their message or opinion to the listener. Studies on conversational strategies (Keller, 1979; Coulmas, 1981; Levinson, 1983, Tarone et al., 1983; Bublitz, 1988; Bialystock, 1990, Poulisse, 1990; Tarone, 1990; Stenstrom, 1994) show that speakers use conversational/ communication strategies as potential tools for learning and improving their interactions.

Furthermore when speakers interact, their conversation consists of some form of a conversational structure. A conversational structure consists of organizational units such as openings, closing, pre-sequences, repair mechanism and the turn taking system (Levinson, 1983). Similarly, Stenstrom (1994) introduces a conversational structure, which consists of three levels: opening, message and closing. The different conversational structures suggest that each structure has different functions and thus requires different conversational strategies to

communicate meaning.

Teachers need to understand conversational structure because different sequences of the conversational structure seek different types of conversational strategies. It is important for language teachers to understand conversation structures so that they will be able to incorporate such understanding in the teaching of oral communication to NNS of English within the English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) context. In addition, in the English language a common strategy used is that of conversational gambits to achieve better understanding of the message and or conversation, and these should be taught to English language learners.

2. 'Gambits' in Conversation

Gambits are common English expressions used to begin, continue or end a conversation. Basically gambits are used to help speakers get a conversation going on some specific level of context and or understanding. As such they can be considered conversational strategies, which lend themselves to conversational analysis incorporating both the interactional and psychological approaches. According to Keller (1979, p. 94), gambits are 'semi-fixed expressions' used by speakers to structure their content and their conversational procedure. He further elaborates that gambits can be used to (a) start a conversation (opening gambits), (b) link own ideas to what someone has just said (linking gambits) and (c) respond to what other people has said. These verbal signals are semi-fixed expressions used by speakers to structure their content and their conversational procedures. Gambits enable the speaker to involve the listeners in the interactions in general by showing concern for the listener's feelings and opinions, which makes it easier for the listener to react.

3. Classification of Gambits

According to Keller (1979, p. 96), gambits are expressions consisting of a single or several habitually co-occurring lexemes. They should meet the following criteria:
(1) They should work to introduce a semantic frame, signal social context or a persons state of consciousness, serve an explicit communication control function. In this case then, idioms cannot be accepted as gambits.
Example: 'I think......' (semantic framing)

'To begin with......'

(2) They could occur in initial position within a sentence or form a complete utterance. Hence, they function as a move initiating a turn in the conversation either as a set of phrases or sentences.

   Example: 'First of all....' (initial position)

            'You must be joking.' (complete utterance)

(3) They must be in common use by a wide range of speakers.

(4) They function as to introduce a subject. Thus, phrases that serve as conversational initiation and leave-taking like 'Hello', and 'Thank you', are excluded.

The literature suggests that there are various types of gambits. For example, Edmondson and House (1981, p. 61) suggest that there are four types of gambits as shown below.

- Cajolers   – *I mean, You know, You see*
- Under scorers   – *Look, listen, the point is*
- Appealers   – *Question tags-right? Okay.*
- Starters   – *Well*

Keller (1979, p. 94-95) on the other hand maintains that there are four types of gambits-all of which have different functions and are discussed below.

1) Semantic Framing

This is a verbal signal, which indicates what topic is about to be introduced in the conversation. They also signal the string of utterance that is about to take place in a particular manner. For example, the utterance could mean as giving an opinion such as:

      Example: 'I think......';   'In my opinion...'

The utterance could also be an unpleasant realism such as:

      Example: 'To be realistic...'

2) Signaling Social Context

This is a particular verbal signal, which indicates a speaker's wish to place him and his/her listeners into a certain social structural formation. It also signals intention and wishes concerning the participant's turn in the conversation.

Example: 'May I interrupt for a moment...'
On the other hand, it could also signal the speaker's social status or his/her claim to such a status.

Example: 'Here's what we do...'

3) State-of-consciousness signals

State-of-consciousness signals are gambits that signals speaker's state of consciousness and a person's state of mind concerning information, opinion or emotions. In other words it indicates what the listener is ready to listen, to say, or to emphasize with. Basically this verbal signal suggests that some knowledge or concern is being shared.

Example: 'I know what you mean'
'I dont think so'

4) Communication Control Signals

Communication control signals deal with words or phrases that function to fill in time or holding the line to look for words or adequate syntactic structure (Keller, 1979). This in effect ensures that the listener has perceived the expressed meaning. Thus, communication signals helps to check if the recipients understood the information correctly or not.

Example: 'Is that clear?'
'Do you understand?'

According to Keller (1979) gambits are structured to express politeness. The functions of gambits are as follows: (a) to present topics/subjects, (b) turn taking, and (c) indicating state of consciousness such as information, knowledge, emotion and planned action and finally (d) to check whether communication is being passed on to the listener successfully or otherwise. Therefore, gambits also consist of linguistic features such as appropriateness, degree and structure of politeness and size of audience.

Keller's conversational strategies bear similarities to both Stenstrom and Bublitz conversational strategies as illustrated in figure 1. Listing the types of gambits used in relation to the conversational structure has further expanded this, thus the

meaning of each gambit is also gauged.

FIGURE 1
Stenstrom, Keller and Bublitz's Conversational Strategies

Stenstrom	Keller	Bublitz
Taking a turn.	Semantic framing	Introduce a topic
Holding a turn.	Signaling a social context	Changing a topic.
Yielding a turn	State-of-consciousness signals	Digressing a topic
	Communication control signals	Shifting a topic
		Closing a topic

III. METHODOLOGY

1. Subjects

The subjects were 12 male and female fifth formers of a secondary school in Kuala Lumpur. All were members of the schools' English language society. They were between 17 to 18 years old and spoke a range of three different mother tongues.

2. Data

All the subjects were asked to have a causal conversation based on a specific topic entitled '*What they would like to do when they completed their upper secondary education*'. The subjects' conversations were recorded in a special recording booth. Recording sessions were 30 minutes long for each group of speakers consisting of 4 students. Recordings were held for a week. The subjects knew each other well and this was considered to be important so that the flow of the conversation could be achieved in order to create a casual speech style. Each group was recorded separately and the transcribed conversations were analyzed qualitatively using Keller, Tarone, Bublitz's and Stenstrom's taxonomies. Subjects

were also required to fill in a demographic questionnaire.

3. Analysis

The analysis of the conversation was divided into three parts: text (the conversation), the topic under discussion and types of gambits used. The following is a list of abbreviations used to identify types of gambits and the subjects ethnicity that appear in the conversation.

　SCS – State of Consciousness signals; SSC – Signal of Social Context.
　CCS – Communication Control Signals; SF   – Semantic Framing

Subjects Ethnicity:
A and D – Malay　　　　　B – Indian　　　　C – Chinese

IV. DISCUSSION AND PRESENTATION OF DATA

The purpose of this study was to identify the conversational strategies used by non-native teenagers in Malaysia. The conversational styles called gambits are identified from the transcribed conversation. In addition, the study sought to identify whether the subjects cultural background influences the speakers use of conversational strategies. The analysis of the conversations revealed interesting patterns and differences in the use of gambits and is discussed below.

1. Types of Conversational Strategies Used

Table 1 shows that the respondents used several types of gambits. The overall conversational strategies used by respondents are listed according to frequency counts of the types of gambits.

TABLE 1
Frequency of Types of Gambits Used

	Types of Gambits	Frequency	Percentage
1	Semantic Framing (SF)	25	31
2	State of Consciousness Signals (SCS)	32	40
3	The Signaling of Social Context (SSC)	11	15
4	Communication Control Signal (CCS)	12	14

Table 1 shows that the most favorable strategies used are the State of Consciousness Signals, followed by Semantic Framing Signals, the Signaling of Social Context and Communication Control Signals. Students appear to employ State of Consciousness signals and Semantic framing signals more frequently compared to the other two signals. The reasons for these are illustrated below.

1) State of Consciousness Signals

The result shows that the highest use of gambits is State of consciousness signals, which was 40%.
Example (1): 'Oh iya.' (pronounced as 'ear') 'Right?' 'Yaplah' 'I think'

It is obvious that 'iya' 'yaplah' instead of 'yes' is used most frequently in expressing knowledge, approval and opinion. This feature is referred to as 'interference' by Corder (1985) where the speaker in his /her attempt to communicate borrow features of his/her mother tongue which is accepted by the interlocutor. Tarone et al (1980) describe this phenomenon as language switch where a learner transports a native word or expression into interlanguage utterance. In this case, the switch is socially based (a desire to get in with one's peer).

But most of the time, respondents seem to use short phrases to denote that some knowledge or concern is being shared. This is shown in the following example.
Example (2): A: For guys it must be sportinglah because he can marry 28
                       women.
                   B: Wah.
                   A: You know, many rich guys come here·.
                   B: Ah yo.
This act is considered as simultaneously saying something as the speakers come to an end of his sentence. This is to denote level of agreement and comprehension revealing the listener's emotional involvement. It also denotes that the listener is in 'receive mode' and the speaker in 'transmit mode' so that the message can pass

from one person to the other (Keller: 1979: 103). '*Right*' is frequently used at the end of a sentence to denote 'State of consciousness signal'. Although it is normally considered as 'Communication control signal,' '*right*' in most utterances denote more of an opinion .

Example (3): 'Lucky, we didn't do bio, right.'

The speaker is not asking a question but merely stating an opinion, expecting an agreement from the other speakers. *You see, you know,* and *well* are also used to soften the potential harshness of stark statements and to bring the listener to the conversation or talk. The second most frequently used gambit was Semantic framing.

2) Semantic Framing

Semantic framing was also used in the conversation that covers 31% of the gambits. It appears that the widely used gambits are those that function as a link. Most of the respondents used gambits such as 'first', 'then' and 'after that' to introduce or expand the topic. This is illustrated below.

Example (4): 'The country that I never wanted to visit but Im planning to visit India. *After that*, I'm planning to live with my auntie in Italy.'
(expanding the topic being discussed)

Interestingly however, respondents never introduced topics with phrases like '*Let's talk about...*' instead they discussed topics without any approximating words as shown below.

Example (5): D: I think music better.
B: Musiclah.

When a topic is to be introduced, the Wh-question is used and is normally direct.

Example (6): 'What do you want to talk about?'
'What sort of music , music you all like?'
'Who do you like from the Corrs?'

The speakers are not able to express their opinion successfully with the use of phrases like; '*I think,*' '*You see,*' '*I feel,*' '*You know.*' These gambits are also known as 'cajolers' (Edmonson and House, 1981), where it functions to persuade by flattery. One of the reasons for this occurrence could be because the Malay culture disfavours people from verbally expressing how they feel. On the other hand, when respondents want to empathize with other speakers, or to express their opinion on the subject matter, they tend to use fillers such as '*Ah yo,*' '*Ah ye,*' '*Wah.*' These

expressions range in meanings in a conversation and are called 'ejaculators' and are frequently used by the ethnic Chinese in Malaysia and can have different meanings attached to them. (Tongue, 1974). For example:

'ah ye'   – often suggests exasperation on the part of the speaker.
'Ah yo' 'ah ye' –   suggest pain, amazement or indicating the speaker is
                          reacting to something unpleasant/unexpected.
'wah'   – is used as surprising aspect

Almost all the respondents used these expressions irrespective of their ethnic group. This is not necessarily due to lack of language competence but rather these expressions are part of Malaysian English and therefore used very naturally by the speakers

3) Signaling of Social Context

Only 14% of this type of gambit was used. The findings seem to suggest that the subjects failed to use verbal signals to signal their intention to take a turn. The subjects seemed to use simple pronouns to signal to others that they would like to have a turn.

Example (7): B: 'Not yet. Studying alone. You?'

Proper noun is also widely used as a cue to take a turn.

Example (8): B: 'College. Kok Wei?'
               B: 'Okay, okay. Haiza?'

This example clearly shows directly expressed turn taking signals, which could be considered as rude in formal situations. The use of this type of gambit also signals the speakers social status. Speaker B who controls the conversation by asking most of the questions and encouraging others to take a turn shows this.

Example (9): B: Who do you like from the Corrs?
               B: You don't watch the movie, Ana and the King?

4) Communication Control Signal

Most of the time the Communication control signals used was in the form of Wh-questions when the respondents did not understand or hear what had been said.

Example (10): 'What?'
                 'So. What?'

'Who?'

Hence, respondents failed to use phrases such as '*I beg your pardon?*' to clarify what had been said. It is interesting to note that '*Okay*' is used quite often to denote agreement on what has been said. This appears to be a reinforcement strategy and it suggests that those who know each other tended to do more reinforcing than strangers. Mc Laughlin (1984:59) on the other hand states that use of '*okay*' and '*right*' can be encountered in situations in which one of the speakers has the exclusive control of the floor. This can clearly be seen in the example given below where throughout the conversation speaker 'B' has the control of the conversation.

    Example (11): A: 'I think music better.'

                  B: 'Okay.'

                  B: 'Okay, What sort of music...'

From the example given, speaker B has the control of the conversation where she initiated the opening conversation and encourages other respondents to take a turn.

It was observed that the speakers' also repeated the subject/topic under discussion when they could not understand what had been said or when they wanted to clarify what was said. This is referred to as redundancy. However this phenomenon is also called 'restatement' where the speaker's intention is to check and make sure that the other party has understood what is being said.

    Example (12): A: 'I hate Accounting, Maths.'

                  B: 'Accounts?'

                  A: 'What subject do you like?'

                  B: 'Me? Subjects?'

                  A: 'Ya.'

                  B: 'I like?'

Besides gambits, respondents also used other strategy types to create a smooth flow of utterances.

2. Other Strategy Types

1) Reduplication

Reduplication occurs in several utterances of the respondents' to show emphasis.

Example (13): 'Sad storylah, very, very sad.'

'Ya, exactly, exactly...'

Example 13 is the result of direct influence of the mother tongue, where in the Malay language emphasis is normally expressed in plural form. Reduplication is 'a class of words that is partially or wholly reduplicated but which does not exist in a non-reduplicated form' (Asmah: 1975). From the example given, '*exactly, exactly*' refers to 'very true' (benar-benar) in Malay. The meaning 'intensifier' is conveyed by reduplication, which can be applied to any root word in the Malay language. Repetition on the other hand, occurs to gain time for the selection of the next lexical/syntactic items.

Example (14): 'The movie he acted with was... was...What was the movie called?'

2) Semantic Contiguity

Due to lack of language competence, speaker C tended to use the wrong lexical items as shown below.

Example (15): C: 'Ah good. That's a very good ambition. Very highlah.'

'Ah, I think first chapter is easy but I think after that it was very uphill.' (instead of ***difficult/hard***)

A: 'Singer? I used to like to be a singer oncelah.'

B: '***Same.***' (instead of '***me to/I too.***')

This strategy is used where speakers replace a lexical item with another that shared certain semantic features with it (Bialystok, 1990).

3) Message Abandonment

The speakers in the study were unable to complete their utterances due to lack of knowledge that resulted in communication breakdown. Thus, numerous topic shifts occurred and were directed in a form of a question.

Example (16): A: 'Hey, you like the Corrs. Sing, sing. Ah.. sing, sing a bit from the Corrs.' (request to sing)

B: 'I dont know how to sing but I...' (no verbal response)

A: 'Who do you like from the Corrs?' (asks about the artist)

This strategy is known as 'topic avoidance' by Tarone (1990), where the respondent shifts the topic under discussion to that of another topic. Clue words were also used in marking the shift of a topic. These gambits are seen in these examples.

Example (17): B: Ya, exactly, exactly. Lucky we drop bio.

C: So... (*suggest a topic is being closed*)

D: So, what?

3. Discourse Structure

1) Conversational Phases

The speakers generally failed to link opening, core and closing phases. For example, speaker B introduces a topic for discussion but other speakers failed to link the opening to the core phase.

Example (18): B: You don't watch the movie, Anna and the king?

C: Anna and the King.

B: It's so nice. It's about the picture...

2) Topics

The findings revealed that the speakers displayed a preference for short topics.

Example (19): D: *I don't think so, you see...* (topic: designer)

C: *Are you taking arts?* (topic: school subject)

Speakers may deliberately change to a new topic because they are uncertain about the latter's topic acceptability. On the other hand, they may also need to give up a topic when they realize that their partner is unable to cope with a topic due to language problems.

Example (20): D: Which country do you like? To do business management?

C: Business management?

D: Which country?

C: Not yet because I don't have the time to check up.

D: I see the Chinese drama and I see the ICSA is good...

Speaker 'D' abandons the topic under discussion which is 'Business Management' and switches to Chinese drama when the speaker realizes that speaker 'C' is unable

to respond to the question.

The findings revealed that gambits do play an important role as a conversational strategy used by speakers to structure their content and conversational procedure. This can clearly be seen when the speakers are trying to create, sustain a topic, take a turn, shifting or closing a topic. Hence speakers do use gambits in their conversation, though, they lack variety. Further, it could be discerned that speakers were unable to use verbal signals to sign their intention to take a turn and hence, pauses existed and utterances tended to end abruptly. The study further showed that gambits do have specific functions in that they help to create a smooth flow of the utterances, create polite utterances and allow speakers to express their emotions and feelings.

The analysis showed that some speakers failed to utilize gambits in their utterances, hence, they failed to either complete or answer questions addressed to them. These speakers tend to pause when they wanted to or when they repeat words to either buy time to restructure their thoughts or are unable to respond completely. As a result, there is no flow in the conversation as compared to those who dominated the conversation and directed others to take a turn. The findings also clearly suggest that communication breakdown appear to be caused by a lack of overall English language skills.

Speakers seem to like to use direct utterances and were unable to use phrases that denote politeness. For example, for turn taking, speaker B tends to use pronouns to encourage other respondents to take a turn, which are seen, as rude. Speakers respond/express their feelings and emotion by using fillers like '*oh, ah yo.*' They fail however, to display gambits such as '*Is that so?*' '*or really?*'.

The findings suggests that gambits are influenced by culture and in this study the influence of mother tongue was prominent especially in the case of choice of words and sentence structure.

VI. CONCLUSION

The findings from this study strongly suggests that speakers do use specific gambits in their utterances (although there was a lack of variation) for a smooth flow of conversation and that whenever gambits are not used, the speakers found difficulties in continuing their utterances. However, there is evidence that certain

features of the utterances are influenced by their mother tongue. The speakers to introduce topics or change the turns, to indicate their state of consciousness and also to find out if the decoder has understood what has been said, evidently use gambits. The study has also shown that in informal conversation, speakers tend to use direct and abrupt phrases in introducing a topic or turn taking which is considered as rude.

Finally the analysis suggests that there is a clear relationship between conversational structure and conversation strategy. It is essential that ESL teachers are able to understand this interrelationship in order to develop pragmatic competence among non-native speakers of English in the ESL /EFL context.

Second language learners often attempt to use communication strategies to get the message across to others. However, the types of strategies used vary according to the language competency of the speakers. Poor language competency among English as a second or foreign language learners can cause communication breakdown and hence the use of mother tongue or colloquial expressions. Thus, it is also crucial that teachers teach cultural and linguistic differences in the use of gambits. It is therefore pertinent that communication strategies be taught and emphasized in the English language classroom so that students will learn to acquire effective communication strategies and thereby become communicatively competent as a non-native speaker of the language.

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