

# **CULTURE-SPECIFIC NOTIONS IN L2 COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Communication strategies (CS) used by L2 speakers have been investigated using various tasks, and it has been demonstrated that there exist task effects that cause differences in CS choice. Previously missing in CS research has been the use of culture-specific notions as referents. This study aimed at exploring CS use for culture-specific notions in L2 by answering two questions: “What kinds of CS will Thai ESL speakers employ to convey these referential concepts in English?” and “Will there be any patterns that can be observed as different from CS used in other kinds of tasks?” The participants, 30 Thai native speakers with intermediate English proficiency, were asked to perform two tasks that contain culture-specific notions. The analysis focuses on 14 concepts that were expected to be problematic. The results showed that circumlocution and approximation were the most preferred strategies. Patterns of approximation, all-purpose words, and L1 words followed by circumlocution were also seen and found to be similar to the hierarchy of CS found elsewhere in the referential CS research. Finally, the study suggests that the familiarity of the L2 speaker with a concept does not always help them in dealing with communicative problems; rather it is their knowledge of *how* to talk about it in the L2 that matters more.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Communication strategies (CS), widely-studied in the fields of linguistics and second language acquisition, have been defined in various ways, but most definitions are based on the concept of “problematicity” (Kasper & Kellerman, 1997, p. 2). For example, according to Tarone (1977), CS are “...used by an individual to overcome the crisis which occurs when language structures are inadequate to convey the individual’s thought” (p. 195). Færch and Kasper (1983) defined CS as “...potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal” (p. 36). This concept of problematicity leads to problem-solving strategies that a speaker uses when lacking morphological, lexical, or syntactic knowledge. However, CS research has primarily focused on lexical deficiencies within the speaker’s knowledge, since lexical CS are easy to identify (Kasper & Kellerman, 1997). Closely related to lexical problem solving are studies concerned with referential strategies. Referential communication is described as any information exchange between two speakers that is “typically dependent on successful acts of reference, whereby entities (human and nonhuman) are identified (by naming or describing), are located or moved

relative to other entities (by giving instructions or directions), or are followed through sequences of locations and events (by recounting an incident or a narrative)” (Yule, 1997, p. 1). Different perspectives taken towards CS have led to several methodologies in CS studies in terms of the various referents used.

In order to elicit CS from speech production, many kinds of reference tasks have been used in CS studies. First described here are tasks used in studies deriving from psycholinguistic perspectives where the focus is placed on a speaker’s utterances without an interlocutor’s interactions.

Concrete picture description tasks have been widely used in both first and second language acquisition research. In L2 studies, pictures of real-world objects are shown to a language learner who has to describe them for a native speaker to either identify the objects or reconstruct the picture. One example of a study using such tasks is Poulisse (1990), in which the English learner participants were asked to describe what objects they saw so that an English native speaker would be able to identify the object later when listening to recordings of the description. Bialystock (1983) made use of the same kind of tasks to elicit CS used by learners of French in describing a color illustration to a French speaker to reconstruct the picture. Tarone and Yule (1987) also used a set of visual stimuli presented on a video screen for the speakers to describe, give instructions for, or narrate what is shown. Then the listeners had to choose the objects or pictures being described. What all these studies have in common is the use of real-world objects for which the vocabulary was unknown to the participants, thus creating lexical gaps in their communication processes and prompting the use of CS.

In addition to the above instruments, novel abstract figure reference tasks, which were first employed in first language acquisition research (Krauss & Weinheimer, 1964) have standing in second language studies as well. For this task, abstract pictures that are unconventional, i.e., have no specific terms or names that can be used to refer to them, are shown to the participants. Using abstract figure description as one of four tasks in her study, Poulisse (1990) justified the inclusion of such task items as they “...allow comparisons of strategic behavior in L1 and L2” (p. 85; see also Bongaerts & Poulisse, 1989). The figures used in this study were adopted from Krauss and Weinheimer (1964). In Kellerman, Ammerlan, Bongaerts, and Poulisse (1990), abstract figures were also used for the same purposes. Kellerman et al. proposed cognitive strategies that were classified as holistic, partitive, and linear with a hierarchy of preference which would be operational both across and within languages. A replication study was performed by Russel (1997) with culturally different groups of participants in order to establish the cross-linguistic operational function of the proposed claim. Using the same figures as in Krauss and Weinheimer (1964), but for a different research purpose, Dickson, Miyake,

and Muto (1977) aimed at the effect of language and culture upon referential meaning and the culture-boundedness of communication. This type of task has a certain level of face validity since it causes problems that are similar to those that the participants face in both their L1 and L2 production when they do not have a name for something.

In order to stimulate a wider range of CS use, concept-identification tasks have been used. Not only are concrete lexical items used as referents, but abstract concepts are included as well. To study how the participants' target language proficiency levels influence the type of CS used and the relative frequency with which they use different types of CS, Paribakht (1985) used this task and justified the inclusion of abstract concepts "...to obtain a global picture of the participants' communication of nouns," commenting that "... abstract concepts, lacking visual clues, were expected to place heavier linguistic and cultural burdens on the speakers than concrete concepts" (p. 133). Another study employing the same kind of task for the same purposes was done by Chen (1990). In these two studies, the concepts were carefully selected to make sure that they were universal concepts or culturally appropriate, i.e., had the same semantic meanings for both native speakers and language learners, and had the same level of difficulty as well.

Story-telling tasks were used with varying procedures by Dechert (1983) and Poulisse (1990). In the former study, an advanced English learner was asked to tell a story from cartoon pictures with no verbal information, whereas in the latter, the participants were asked to retell in English a story read to them once in their first language. In both studies, the content of the stories was manipulated and controlled by the researchers to provide enough problematicity so that CS could be elicited.

Moving towards more socio-linguistic perspectives, different kinds of reference tasks have been explored in more authentic situations where the research is designed to be less experimental and interlocutors play somewhat important roles. In other words, the interactional aspect of communication or collaborative model of communication (Wilkes-Gibbs, 1997) is also taken into consideration. First, direction-giving tasks are favored by many researchers such as Lloyd (1990, 1991, 1992, 1997). In his studies, the participants were given a map task in which they had to give delivery directions to their listener. Similar to this task is the information-transfer task employed by Yule and Macdonald (1990), Yule (1991) and Yule, Powers, and Macdonald (1992). Like the map tasks in Lloyd's studies, Yule's studies employed map tasks in which the sender had to describe the route so that the receiver could draw it, but these tasks included specific referential conflicts (differences in some parts of the maps), resulting in more cooperativeness required from the interlocutors. As reviewed in Yule (1997), these tasks provide new information about both sides of the interlocutors, but at the same time, they "contain

fixed reference points that increase the shared knowledge, or common ground, for speaker and listener” and therefore “make the communication of further referential information less demanding” (p. 51).

The most naturalistic CS elicitation methods are oral interviews and conversations. Poulisse (1990) used oral interviews between participants, non-native speakers of English and a native speaker. The topics of the interviews were partly determined beforehand to assure that unfamiliar concepts were included, forcing the participants to use CS. Haastrup and Phillipson (1983) analyzed interaction between Danish learners of English and British native speakers. The problem with this kind of elicitation is that CS use is less likely to be found due to the fact that what the participants might say is less controlled by the experimenters (Kasper & Kellerman, 1997).

From all of the different kinds of referents discussed thus far in this paper, it is claimed that CS use varies according to the type of reference tasks and seems to be highly item specific. The first variable influencing the choice of CS is the familiarity of the referents to participants. Yule (1997) suggests that “The more familiar the entities to be identified, the more likely that the speakers will produce single-word labels or short phrases,” hence “reducing the familiarity of the objects typically increases the difficulty of being able to identify that object with a simple word or two” (p. 42). This, of course, results in an increase in communication stress for the speaker. CS research to date has placed its focuses on familiarity-reduced notions, especially with real-world object description tasks. Other examples of CS tasks where the concept of familiarity comes into play are those using abstract unconventional figures with which both the speaker and the listener have no familiarity at all. This often results in the use of holistic, partitive, and linear strategies and their hierarchy mentioned earlier. Yule and Tarone (1997) also support this idea by saying that “The more abstract the prompt, the more likely that conceptually related analogies will be used. The more concrete and familiar the prompt, the more likely the simple names and everyday functions will be mentioned” (p. 26).

Poulisse (1990) also provides more information on task-related effects in her study, in which she found that participants preferred long and informative analytic strategies in a picture description task. Short, less informative, holistic, and transfer strategies were found more in a story-retell task and oral interviews. In addition, some communication factors play important roles in affecting CS use. Most important is the role of “mutual knowledge,” i.e., shared knowledge by both interlocutors (Poulisse, 1990, p. 68). This mutual knowledge enables the speakers to reduce their references to figures they had referred to before, since a common ground of understanding has already been established between both parties. A speaker should always take the listener’s knowledge into account in order to make the communication effective. Effective reference use will be more likely

achieved if the speaker uses referents based on conceptual or linguistic knowledge that is also shared by the interlocutor. Therefore, mutual knowledge also has effects on the selection of CS.

More or less related to mutual knowledge is the role of both the speaker's and listener's cultural backgrounds. Most CS literature has focused on CS use according to the speaker's level of proficiency. Only one study (Dickson et al., 1977) has addressed culture as an essential variable affecting the use of CS. The concept of culture seen in CS research is usually *accidentally* derived from data analysis. For instance, Tarone and Yule (1987), focusing on specific CS used between Asian and South American non-native speakers of English, not sociocultural factors involved in the communication, noted the use of culturally bound information in the participants' CS. Here, the participants attempted to avoid the use of *culturally loaded* references (p. 63). In other words, they tried not to make use of references to their native cultures. This supports the idea that the speaker takes the identity of the listener into consideration. In Paribakht (1985), Persian-speaking participants made use of translated L1 idioms and proverbs for some notions, supporting the idea that the CS choices of some specific concepts appear to be context or culture bound although this was not the main focus of the study. Lastly, Chen (1990) identified one CS used by Chinese EFL learners as addressing cultural knowledge when the learners provided cultural characteristics of the concepts. It should be noted here that both of the above studies used the same kind of *universal* referents as discussed earlier; however, culturally-bound CS were still identified, emphasizing the fact that speaker's and listener's cultural backgrounds play a role in CS use.

### ***Purpose***

From the discussion above of the different types of referents used in CS research, it can be clearly seen that abstract notions have not been investigated much. Only two studies, Paribakht (1985) and Chen (1990) made use of them. Another category of referent that is entirely lacking in the literature is that related to culture-specific notions. While interlocutors' mutual knowledge and cultural backgrounds have been demonstrated and found to influence the choice of CS (as shown in the discussion above), no studies have been conducted to address this issue directly. The importance of these notions can be seen in intercultural communication dealing with cultural issues, when culture-specific issues would tend to be topics. It would be interesting to see how such notions would be explained and described by what kind of CS since for such notions to be explained, the burden falls totally on the speaker, due to the absence of mutual knowledge and cultural background shared by the speaker and the listener. Also, different from other kinds of tasks that provide new information to both the speaker and the

listener, here the speaker's familiarity with the referents is extremely high and the listener's is null.

A few examples of Thai culture-specific notions that would be interesting to study will be illustrated as follows. First, abstract notions like *bun* or *merit* and *good deeds* should yield some interesting CS use. Some concrete culture specific notions are, for instance, *cha-da*, a crown-like head ornament worn by traditional Thai dancers and *joong-kra-ben*, a traditional costume which is worn in a special way to look like pants. Buddhist-related concepts and rituals relating to notions and objects endemically related to Thai culture would be of use as well. The specific questions of interest in the research are thus:

1. What kinds of CS will Thai ESL speakers employ to convey these referential concepts in English?
2. Will there be any patterns that can be observed as different from CS used in other kind of tasks?

## METHOD

### *Participants*

Thirty participants, 29 females and one male, participated in the study. All were Thai students in their 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year in the Faculty of Arts of a university in Thailand. They were all enrolled in the same conversation class offered by the Department of English. Their ages ranged from 18 to 21, with an average of 19.77 years. Their English proficiency was between low and high intermediate.

### *Tasks*

The participants were asked to do two tasks. Each task presented a situation where the participants had to use English in explaining some Thai cultural specific notions. In Task 1, the participants were required to explain to an American friend who had arrived in Thailand for the first time about a ceremony in which Thai students pay respect to their teachers. They had to explain to him what the ceremony was, why it was important, what students in general did in the ceremony, and what he had to do in the ceremony as the representative of the class. It was expected that four concepts would be problematic for them to express in English.

Task 2 consisted of two parts. The first part was a story-retelling task. The participants were given a situation that they were in a Halloween party in the United States with all American friends. They had to tell their friends a ghost story. The story was about their experience of seeing Thai ghosts dressed in Thai traditional costume. It

was expected that they would have difficulties talking about the four words concerning the traditional costume. The second part of this task asked the participants to explain to their American friends how to *make merit* and what Thai Buddhists usually do when they see or dream about people who have passed away. Four more notions were expected to be difficult for them to talk about.

The following 14 problematic notions are in the order that will be used in the rest of the paper:

#### *Task 1*

1. *phi-thii-way-khruu*: a ceremony in which students pay respect to teachers
2. *phaan*: a pedestal dish with a special flower arrangement needed in the ceremony
3. *kraap*: to prostrate as oneself a way to pay respect to the Buddha image
4. *khlaan-khaw*: to walk on knees

#### *Task 2: Part 1*

5. *thuup*: an incense stick
6. *phaa-thung*: a long piece of cloth worn as a skirt by wrapping it around the hips and tucking the end of it into the waist
7. *sa-bay*: a long piece of cloth like shawl worn as a top by wrapping around the chest
8. *phom-chuk*: a topknot
9. *choong-kra-ben*: a piece pf cloth worn as pants
10. *tham-bun*: to make merit

#### *Task 2: Part 2*

11. *tak-baat*: to offer food to monks
12. *kruat-nam*: a ritual involving pouring water onto the ground after offering food to monks in order that the merit earned will go to the dead
13. *suat-mon-uthit-suan-bun-suan-kuson*: to pray in order to dedicate the merit to whoever we want
14. *chaw-kam-naay-ween*: a person to whom we did something wrong in the last life

### **Procedures**

Both tasks were carried out in one session of a conversation class in a language laboratory. The researcher and the teacher had prepared the laboratory by putting cassette tapes in the recorders and placing an instructional document in each booth prior to the students' coming into the laboratory. The document consisted of seven pages, the first of which was a consent form. The second page was the first task. English instructions were given at the beginning of the page followed by the situation of the task and the prompt

questions to which the participants were supposed to respond. The situation and prompt questions were written in English, but the Thai concepts were written in Thai. The reason for having the prompt questions was to provide the participants a starting point for talking since there was no interlocutor presented for them. The third page was a retrospective questionnaire asking if the participants had problems with vocabulary when doing the task. It also asked the participants to identify words or concepts that they had problems saying in English and to think back about what went on in their mind when they encountered such problems and what they actually did to solve those problems. Finally, it also asked what made those words difficult for them and what alternative ways of communication they might want to use to express their problematic concepts. Task 2 was separated into two parts as mentioned earlier and written on pages 4 and 5. Again, page 4 started with the instructions followed by the situation of the task, the ghost story, which was written in Thai, and the prompt dialog. Page 5 was part 2 of Task 2 with only the situation and prompt questions. Page 6 was another retrospective questionnaire in the same format as Task 1. The last page was the participant profile to be filled out by the participants. (See **APPENDIX A** for the instructions document.)

Once the participants came into the lab and sat down in their booths, the researcher explained the instructions in Thai. They were asked to turn the document one page at a time, finish whatever the task on the page was, and then turn to the next page. This was done to prevent them from jumping back and forth between tasks and to make the retrospective questionnaire more effective, since they had to do it right after they finished each task. In addition, they were asked to start talking as soon as they finished reading the instructions to encourage the naturalistic quality of their speech. The questions in the questionnaire were also explained in Thai. After all the instructions were given, the researcher explained the concept of *phi-thii-way-khruu* in Thai to ensure that there would be no lack of basic knowledge and that all the participants had the same understanding of what it was and what they had to talk about. For Task 2, the researcher asked if the participants all understood all the Thai concepts that were presented. Since these concepts were about typical Buddhist rituals that everyone was familiar with, no further description was given of them. However, one student did say that she was a Christian and did not know about all these rituals, so she was asked to leave and let her friend take her place.

After all the instructions were given, the participants started doing the tasks on their own. The process took about 50 minutes. All speech was audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis. The length of the recordings for the two tasks ranged from 10 to 20 minutes.

### **Data Analysis**

CS in the data were identified with care. The researcher and her co-coder, a native speaker of English, separately coded the data transcription according to the CS taxonomies summarized in Dörnyei (1995). CS were mainly indicated by the use of filled and unfilled pauses, repeats, self-correction, rising intonation, and explicit signals of uncertainty like “I don’t know what it’s called in English” or “something like that” (Færch & Kasper, 1983). Initially, the percentage of agreement between the two coders was only 66.56%. This was because for four concepts, the co-coder missed many CS due to his lack of familiarity with the cultural-specific concepts himself. When he was given a lengthy description of the four concepts, he did not recognize the CS. When these four concepts were taken out, the percentage of agreement was 86.85%. The researcher and the co-rater discussed the differences in their coding and the missed CS until they came to the same understanding and identified the same CS.

After this coding, the retrospective questionnaires were used to help identify additional CS, especially topic avoidance, which might be missing or could not be identified from the analysis of the transcription only. Unfortunately, the retrospective questionnaires did not prove to be a good way to identify the topic avoidance strategy. Clearly, there were two words, *suat-mon-uthit-suan-bun-suan-kuson* and *chaw-kam-naay-ween*, that a large number of participants did not talk about in their speech, and these words were not mentioned in the questionnaires as problematic lexical items either. Nonetheless, the participants who used CS for these two words identified them as problematic lexical items in their questionnaires. This indicates that the questionnaires could reveal some problematic items, but such items were only the ones that the participants paid attention to while doing the task. The reason some participants did not talk about these particular concepts might be that the task did not require them to talk about every concept, but rather only to give the main points needed to understand general Buddhist ceremonies.

## **RESULTS**

The CS found in this study were limited to nine categories: message abandonment, topic avoidance, circumlocution, approximation, use of all-purpose word, restructuring, code-switching, and mime. The following will explain and illustrate each strategy that was used:

1. *Message abandonment*: “...just like you pay respect to Buddha um I’m not so sure what it’s called in English again just like kraap you will um sit down uh huh sit and well...I think in the ceremony you will see the people in the ceremony

- how to *kraap* how to pay respect to the teachers.” Here, the participant left her explanation of the verb *kraap* unfinished.
2. *Topic avoidance*: participant 18 did not talk about *kraut-nam* in her speech, but this word was written in her questionnaire as one of the words that she had problems explaining and she just “skipped that” as a solution.
  3. *Circumlocution*: “*phi-thii-way-khruu* is the ceremony that Thai students show their respect for their teacher...” The description of the ceremony is given here. It should be noted that there was variability in terms of the use of circumlocution. For other lexical items where circumlocution was used, the description of appearance was given, for example, “...phaan is ummmm...umm...it’s a thing I don’t know how to explain this thing *that carry...uh...many flowers with candles it’s it’s very beautiful.*” To talk about this same item, another participant chose to give its function or importance as explanation instead as seen in “phaan *is represents the respect for the teacher.*” In many cases, both kinds of explanation were given together.
  4. *Approximation*: “when you go up the stage you must um you must you must *perform your respect to uh Buddha.*” To explain *kraap* (to prostrate), one participant used a broad explanation without giving further explanation of *how* to perform this action. Another example of approximation is the use of a term that shares semantic features with the target item. For instance, in “what we have to do is ...prepare the *tray* of flowers to to give them,” the participant used the word *tray* to refer to *phaan* (a pedestal dish with flower arrangement).
  5. *Use of all-purpose words*: “and at the same time I I smell the...*something* that’s very very terrible” Here, the *empty* lexical item is used to refer to *thuup* (incense stick).
  6. *Word coinage*: “I the smell you know kind of from...*inscent stick* you know” the participant created a non-existent L2 word to explain the word *thuup*.
  7. *Restructuring*: “and then they advise me to go to temple to the temple and then um...use...use duh (2.0) and go to the temple and show respect to the Buddhism” When talking about *tham-bun* (to make merit), here, the participant abandoned her original verbal plan, but continued communicating the intended message with an alternative plan.
  8. *Code-switching*: “they will choose their representative to *carry phaan* you know” The participant used the L1 word *phaan* with L1 pronunciation and within L2 syntax.
  9. *Mime*: “*kraap* is a way of showing respect highly respect to uh someone or sacred place in Thailand and their (xxx) *I’ll show you yea*” The use of this non-linguistic

strategy was shown by the participant's preference to use visual illustration to explain the action *kraap*.

Since culture-specific notions are complicated concepts to explain and there is variation between the use of approximation and circumlocution, more examples will be provided regarding the distinction between the two. Basically, approximation occurs when the utterance gives a broad explanation of the target concept without going into details, whereas circumlocution of the same target lexical item involves a detailed description of it. It should be noted here that approximation is not only the use of a single alternative lexical item which shares the same semantic as the target item (Bialystok, 1983, Tarone, 1977, and Willems, 1987), but is also the use of a broader explanation relative to the circumlocution used.

<b>Words</b>	<b>Circumlocution</b>	<b>Approximation</b>
<i>Kraap</i>	to put your hand together...and like um a lotus	show respect to the Buddha image
<i>Phaan</i>	in the phaan it um consists of a lot of flowers	the utensil
<i>Khlaan-khaw</i>	walk on your knees	crawl
<i>Thuup</i>	we lit it when we want to show respect to Buddha	stick
<i>Phaa-thung</i>	an old one is ah piece of cloth you put it around you're your body as a skirt	Thai style Thai cloth
<i>Sa-bay</i>	for the top you use another piece of cloth a very long narrow piece of cloth and you wrap it around your chest	traditional Thai wear
<i>Phom-chuk</i>	you put your hair um you put t upward to be to:: together it on top of your head	Thai ancient hairstyle
<i>Choong-kra-ben</i>	It's made of a cloth and they wrap around your legs	Thai traditional wear
<i>Tham-bun</i>	to go to the temple and like um give food and other things to the monks	make a charity
<i>Tak-baat</i>	to offer food to the monk every morning	do the merit
<i>Kruat-nam</i>	pouring water to the soil to show that you willingly give merit to those people	pray for the dead
<i>Chaw-kam-naay-ween</i>	people you have offend before	the angel

All the utterances were counted as CS when they were used to talk about the target items the first time those items were introduced in speech. Use of L1 words was counted as code-switching only when it was used in L2 syntax, but it was not counted when it was used to introduce the target item. For example, “phaan is a kind of tray” is not counted, but “we have to prepare phaan which is a half foam or vase” was counted. The total number of CS elicited is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1  
*Number of Strategies Used*

Word #	Strategies					Found					Total CS	%	
	Mess. Aban.	Topic Av.	Circum.	Approx.	APW	Word Coin.	Restruc.	Code-Sw.	Mime				
<i>Task 1</i>													
1			31		1						32	6.24	
2			31	9	10		1	11			62	12.09	
3	2		7	29				9	4		51	9.94	
4			19	4		1					24	4.68	
<i>Task 2</i>													
5	1		20	10	11	4		4			50	9.75	
6			11	29				6			46	8.97	
7			13	21				6			40	7.80	
8		3	15	14				1			33	6.43	
9		2	10	24				4			40	7.80	
10			14	7	2		2				25	4.87	
11		1	25	4				4			34	6.63	
12		1	32	1	1			11			46	8.97	
13			13								13	2.53	
14		1	13	2	1						17	3.31	
Total CS	3	8	254	154	26	5	3	56	4		513		
%	0.58	1.56	49.51	30.02	5.07	0.97	0.58	10.94	0.78				

Table 1 clearly shows that circumlocution is the most frequently used CS (49.51%), and approximation is second (30.02%). Besides code-switching (10.94%), other types of CS made up only 9.53% of all the strategies used in total. Table 1 also shows that circumlocution was used more frequently than other strategies in most items, but not for items 3, 5, 6, and 8. More explanation will be given below about this. When looking at the relationship between numbers of CS and the lexical items, it can be seen that all 14 items generated 13-62 occurrences of overall CS. There were some words that had distinctively low numbers of CS, especially items 13 and 14. The reason for this is that these words were totally omitted by participants in their speech, i.e., they did not talk about them at all, and they did not mention them in their retrospective questionnaires, either. For Item 13 (*suat-mon-uthit-suan-bun-suan-kuson*), 17 participants did not talk

about this concept at all, and item 14 (*chaw-kam-naay-ween*) was not mentioned by 17 participants. Moreover, item 10 (*tham-bun*) was not problematic for 12 participants, and therefore, fewer CS were elicited. Lastly, seven participants did not talk about item 4 (*khlaan-khaw*). The reason that these missing words were not counted as topic avoidance was mentioned earlier in the discussions of the data analysis and the ineffectiveness of retrospective questionnaires.

In addition, rare CS like mime and word coinage appeared with some specific items. Mime occurred only in item 3 (*kraap*), which is a verb that is hard to explain. It would be much easier for the participants to demonstrate the action than give a verbal explanation of it, but since the task required them to speak, they had no other choice. This fact is also supported by the questionnaires. All the participants said they would rather act out or demonstrate the action as a better solution to the communicative problem. Word coinage occurred with item 5 (*thuup*). Two participants did not have any problems with this word at all, whereas it seemed that the participants who used word coinage for this lexical item had some idea of what the target word is in English, but their knowledge was not exact. As the example illustrated earlier, three participants used *inscent* to refer to incense sticks, and the one used *conscent*. These two words are really close to *incense* and their roots might be the word *scent* in English which corresponds to the quality of incense stick that needed to be mentioned in the story retelling.

Besides CS elicited from the 14 lexical items that were the focus of the study, there were also other CS that occurred with other words. Lexical items that were not expected to be problematic were words that Task 1 did not require the participants to talk about (i.e., they were not written in the task instructions), but rather they were words that came up in some participants' speeches as a necessary part of their explanation of the ceremony that they had to talk about. These words were *to-muu-buu-chaa* (a set of tables where Buddha images are placed) and *phra-phut-tha-ruup* (a Buddha image). It should be noted that not all the participants had problems with these words. For the first word, only 10 participants talked about it by using circumlocution, for example, "it is a table that located that locate um a Buddhist figure." The second word was problematic for eight participants. They all used approximation like "the Buddhist," "the Buddha," and "the statue of the monk" to refer to this lexical item.

Next, there were embedded CS or CS that occurred within other CS. These embedded (Bialystok, 1983) or subordinate CS (Poulisse, 1990) strategies existed only within circumlocution in this study. This corresponds with the finding of Poulisse (1990) who claims that other kinds of CS do not activate other lexical items. When using circumlocution, the participants have a chance of running into another lexical problem. In this study, there were not many embedded strategies. Embedded CS are seen in item 10

*tham-bun*. Four participants used circumlocution to explain what *tham-bun* (to make merit) was and three of them used all-purpose words like *something* and *anything* to generalize what they do at a temple, for instance, “I should go to ah give something to the temple.” Another participant restructured her speech and finally abandoned the message altogether as seen in the following utterance: “they advise me to go to the temple to uh (2.0) so to the temple to give them the um...to tell that so to the temple to the monk so...because you saw that and you will not see it again.” The other item that caused the use of embedded strategies is item 2 *phaan*. By explaining that *phaan* has many kinds of flowers in it, seven participants had to employ CS like code-switching, approximation and circumlocution to talk about those flowers. We can see this use of embedded CS in the following utterance: “in the phaan we the flowers that consist of a dok-khem um yaa-phraek some kind of a grass and um what is that dok-makhua and khaaw-tok all those are the symbols of good things...”

In addition to understanding which CS were generally preferred, another interesting point that came up when looking at the data more closely is the relationship between approximation, all-purpose words, code-switching, and circumlocution. There is a noticeable pattern: approximation, all-purpose words, and code switching (L1 words) were followed by circumlocution except for items 3, 6, 7, 8 and 9. The distribution of these CS with regard to lexical items is shown in Table 2. The + sign indicates that the strategy is followed by circumlocution and the – sign indicates that it is not.

It is clear that for items 1, 2, 4, 5, 10, 11, 12, and 14, approximation, all-purpose words, and L1 words were followed by circumlocution, whereas for items 3, 6, 7, 8, and 9, approximation was used more often without circumlocution. Also, for this latter group of items, the use of L1 words with circumlocution is not as distinctly great as for the former group, and all-purpose words were not used at all.

In the first group of lexical items, it is not surprising that all-purpose words were used with circumlocution because when using semantically empty words like *thing* or *something*, more explanation is needed to clarify what the speaker means. In the latter group, no all-purpose words were used because the participants opted for approximation instead as seen in the much higher number of approximations used. This can be explained by the fact that, in the latter group, the approximation terms are presumably much easier to retrieve for the participants. Item 3 is the verb *kraap*, which is not explainable by using all-purpose words, and items 6-9 all of which concern Thai traditional costume. Thus, it was a lot easier for the participants to come up with approximation words like *clothes*, *wear*, and *costume* modified by adjectives like *traditional* and *ancient* since these are words that were more available to them. On the other hand, words like *container* or *stick* that a few participants used for items 2 and 5, respectively, might not be as available for

most participants. Therefore, they had to fill in the gaps in their speech with all-purpose words instead.

Table 2  
*Distribution of Approximation, All-Purpose Words, and L1 Words with Circumlocution*

Lexical Items	Approximation		All-purpose words		L1 words	
	+	-	+	-	+	-
1	-	-	1	-	-	-
2	6	3	10	-	9	2
4	4	-	-	-	-	-
5	7	3	8	3	3	1
10	4	3	2	-	-	-
11	3	1	-	-	3	1
12	1	-	1	-	11	-
14	2	-	1	-	-	-
Subtotal	27	10	23	3	26	4
3**	7	22	-	-	5	4
6**	10	19	-	-	3	3
7**	6	15	-	-	4	2
8**	3	11	-	-	1	-
9**	7	17	-	-	2	2
Subtotal	33	84	-	-	15	11
Total#	60	94	23	3	41	15

\*\* indicates lexical items that have more approximation that was not followed by circumlocution.

For the use of L1 words, the first group of items shows a preference for circumlocution, whereas for the other group this preference is not as distinctive. L1 words in the context and situation of the tasks (talking to a foreigner who has no background in Thai culture) were more or less *empty* as all-purpose words. Hence, an explanation for what the words were was needed to create mutual understanding between the speaker and the listener. The fact that L1 words in the latter group of items were not as often followed by circumlocution as the ones in the first group is because the

participants preferred to use approximation in their explanation of the terms since it is easier to give only short and broad explanation using L2 words that were available for them. The nature of the tasks themselves might have had some effect on this preference between approximation and circumlocution since the tasks did not require that the participants give as clear an explanation as possible. In addition, because items 6-9 are in the story-retelling task, participants might not see the importance of giving a clear picture of what the ghosts were wearing.

Lastly for this observation, the numbers of approximations with circumlocutions in the two groups are obviously different. In the first group, more approximations (27 out of 37) were followed by circumlocutions while in the second group, most approximations were used with circumlocutions (60 out of 94). This can be explained by looking at the how much the approximations needed to be clarified. For the first group, the approximations used, for example *tray*, *utensil*, and *ritual*, need clarification to specify what kinds of trays, dishes, or rituals were being talked about, while in the other group, the target items were sufficiently referred to by using phrases that are meaningful in themselves like “pay respect to the Buddha image” and “Thai traditional wear.”

Finally, it is observed that after explaining the target items the first time they were introduced in the speech, the participants always used the same words subsequently that they used initially, whether this was an approximation, all-purpose words, or L1 words to refer to the same concepts when they reappear in their speech. For instance, “ what we have to do is...prepare the tray of flowers to to give them and ...start with...the there will be a represent to give the teacher this tray of flowers.” Moreover, L1 words that were not counted as code-switching but were explained by approximation and/or circumlocution were usually used again, for example, “phaan is the symbol of respect um...you must take the take phaan and go up the stage.”

## DISCUSSION

This study has demonstrated that the use of culture-specific notions as referents is a good way to elicit CS use, since quite a large number of CS were detected. In addition, the use of these notions makes it possible to anticipate and control problematic lexical items. This is useful for designing tasks that are to be more naturalistic than experimental by putting target items in context like story retelling.

Like other studies, this one found that the most frequently used CS were circumlocution and approximation. Lack of other kinds of CS, especially ones that involve interlingual transfer (Færch & Kasper, 1983) like foreignizing and literal translation may be due to the distance between the L1, Thai, and the target language,

English. Thai belongs to the Tai language family whereas English belongs to the Indo-European one. They are distant from each other not only grammatically but also phonetically. This results in a lack of CS that rely on L1 and L2 combination. A similar result was also found by Chen (1990) who studied CS used by Chinese speakers. Moreover, other kinds of CS, nonlinguistic ones like mime and interactive ones like appeal for help, were used very limitedly or not used at all. Mime was used only in one item, *kraap*, a verb that is easier to demonstrate than talk about. The nature of the task being conducted in a lab and the participants not having an interlocutor explains the absence of this strategy. In the questionnaires, all the participants said that they would prefer to demonstrate this action by acting out instead of explaining verbally. In the same way, appeals for help were not found, due to the fact that participants did not have interlocutors who could provide them with help.

The pattern of approximation, all-purpose words, and L1 words followed by circumlocution can be explained as follows. Poullisse (1990) defines approximation and circumlocution as holistic and analytic approaches, respectively. She also states that the distinction between the two CS is very similar to the one between *holistic* and *segmental* perspectives and encoding styles proposed by Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs (1986). By using the same perspectives in coding CS, Kellerman, Bongaerts, and Poullisse (1987) and Kellerman, Ammerlaan, Bongaerts, and Poullisse (1990) also propose that there is a hierarchy of the use of referential strategies used in describing abstract novel figures. Kellerman et al. (1987 & 1990) classify referential strategies into holistic, partitive, and linear, and claim that there exists a hierarchy of holistic over partitive over linear. They also claim that the holistic approach is preferred as a first attempt because the least effort is required. This hierarchy or pattern of strategies can shed light on the pattern found in this present study. The use of approximation followed by circumlocution functions in the same way as the holistic, partitive, and linear hierarchy. When an L2 learner does not have an appropriate L2 word for a concept, he can choose to use either the holistic approach, relating the concept to one which is close to it, or the analytic approach, analyzing it into components of properties, to describe the concept (Poullisse, 1990). The novel abstract figures in referential strategies have not been lexicalized in the speaker's L1 or L2 in the same way that culture-specific notions are not in the participants' L2 in this study. When encountering this gap in their L2 lexical knowledge, the participants chose to employ approximation, the strategy that requires the least effort, a general problem-solving principle. If this strategy does not yield a satisfactory result, however, then another attempt is tried by using circumlocution or analytic approach, which are similar to the partitive and linear approaches in referential strategies. This hierarchy is undoubtedly shown in this study. When approximation is adequate for clarifying the

problematic notions as seen in items 3 and 6-9, not many participants chose to use circumlocution, but when the approximation is vague, they chose to give more explanation by using circumlocution. The use of all-purpose words and L1 words can be explained by the same principle. To fill in the gap in his lexical knowledge at the time of speaking, the speaker uses the word that is most available, thus demanding the least amount of effort. The use of all-purpose words and L1 words suit their needs well. It should be noted that no violation of this hierarchy is found in the present study, that is, circumlocutions were never followed by approximations, all-purpose words or L1 words.

Furthermore, culture-specific notions, as mentioned in the introduction, are different from other kinds of referents in terms of the participants' familiarity with the notions. The reason these notions are difficult to express in English is not only that they have no equivalent translation in English, but also because, even though the participants were all familiar with all the items, their knowledge about them is so implicit. In other words, the simple fact that these words do not exist in English made it difficult for the participants to talk about them as they stated in the questionnaires. In contrast to other kinds of CS referents, familiarity with referents did not prove to be of any help to the speakers in this study. This proposition can be further explained by the concept of declarative and procedural knowledge (Færch & Kasper, 1983, 1984; Robinson, 1989, 1993). Declarative knowledge, i.e., *knowledge that* is the participants' full understanding of the culture-specific notions presented in this study. What they lack is, on the other hand, procedural knowledge, i.e., *knowledge how*. This procedural knowledge is important for linguistic production since it is an ability to encode declarative knowledge that one has in a language. The participants in this study had never been required to talk about these culture-specific notions in their L2 before; therefore, their knowledge of *how* to talk about them was totally missing in their L2. With regard to this concept, a pedagogical implication can be drawn here. This study suggests that in order for an L2 learner to be competent, not only is declarative knowledge necessary, but procedural knowledge should be highly promoted as well.

Finally, there are some methodological concerns in this study. First, to elicit some CS like topic avoidance, more effective retrospective protocols should be collected. Not only will they yield a more exact count of topic avoidance, but they can also give a better understanding of why some words were not talked about at all, whether it was attributable to the task or not. Second, this study was conducted in a somewhat experimental environment. Even though the tasks were designed to be naturalistic compared to other CS studies, the participants did not have any interlocutors, and this, as a result, affected their choice of CS as mentioned before. Further CS research should take these points into account.

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**APPENDIX A****Task instructions**

**Instructions:** Please read the following situation carefully and answer the prompt dialogue question at the end. Feel free to talk as long as you want, and you can stop when you think you have already given enough information that is needed in the task. After you are done talking, please pause the tape recording and turn to the next page.

**Task 1**

**Situation:** You are studying in a university in Thailand and are part of a foreign exchange student program. Your job is to take care of an American friend, Eric, who just arrived in Bangkok for the first time a few weeks ago. He has to participate in พิธีไหว้ครู, and your teacher asks you to explain to him what it is, how it is important and what he has to do as a representative of all foreign students.

(อธิบายว่านักเรียนทุกคนต้องทำอะไรบ้างในพิธี พานไหว้ครูคืออะไร มีความหมายอย่างไร ในฐานะคนถือพานต้องทำอะไรบ้าง เช่น การคลานขึ้นเวที หมอบกราบพระ คลานเข้า และไหว้ครู)

**Prompt question:**

Eric: Can you tell me what phi-thee-wai-khru is, what is phaan that I have to prepare, and what I have to do? I know that I'll have to go up the stage, what do I do up there?

**Instructions:** Please read the following situation carefully and answer the prompt dialogue questions at the end. Press the PAUSE button again before you start speaking to continue the recording. Feel free to talk as long as you want, and you can stop when you think you have already given enough information that is needed in the task. After you are done talking, please turn to the next page and do the rest of the task.

**Task 2**

**Situation:** You are in the United States. It is Halloween night, and you are in a party with your American friends. Each person at the party takes turns telling a ghost story that they have experienced. Now it is your turn, tell them the following story:

คุณไปตั้งแคมป์ต่างจังหวัดกับเพื่อน ตกตึกคืนหนึ่งคุณตื่นไปเข้าห้องน้ำ ระหว่างทางก็ได้ยินเสียงผู้หญิงกับเด็กร้องไห้ พร้อกันนั้นก็ได้กลิ่นธูปจวนจัดเข้ามุกพอคุณเหลือวไปข้างหลังก็เห็นผู้หญิงผมยาวนั่งผ้าถุงห่มผ้าสไบกับเด็กมัดผมจุกนั่งโจงกระเบนยื่นร้องไห้อยู่ใต้ต้นไม้ คุณตกใจมากพอได้สติก็สวดมนต์แล้วก็วิ่งกลับไปที่เต้นท์แบบไม่คิดชีวิต พอรุ่งขึ้นคุณกับเพื่อนก็ลองสอบถามชาวบ้านแถวนั้นดูได้ความว่าต้นไม้ต้นนั้นเก่าแก่มาก และเคยมีคนเจอเหตุการณ์แบบเดียวกันมาแล้วหลายคน ชาวบ้านแนะนำให้คุณไปทำบุญเสียจะได้ไม่เจอเหตุการณ์อย่างเดียวกันอีก

**Prompt question:**

Your friend: Now it's your turn to tell us a ghost story.

You: Well, here is my story. Last year, .....

Now your American friends who have never been to Thailand before are interested in what Buddhists do when they see or dream about people who passed away. You have to tell them about: การทำบุญตักบาตร กรวดน้ำและการสวดมนต์อุทิศส่วนบุญส่วนกุศลให้คนตายและเจ้ากรรมนายเวร

**Prompt question:**

Your friend: What do Thai Buddhists do for the dead that they see or dream about? Are there any ceremonies?

---

*Retrospective questionnaire after each task*

Please think about what you just said in the task and answer the following questions in Thai and/or English.

1. Do you think you had problems with vocabulary when doing the task?

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes    \_\_\_\_\_ No

2. If yes, please specify what words or concepts that you found difficult to express in English:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

3. What made those words or concepts difficult to say in English?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

4. Please think back carefully and write down what went on in your mind when you encountered the above problematic words or concepts and what you did to solve these communicative problems you had:

Words	What went on in your mind?	What you did?
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

5. Are there any other ways of communication that you might want to use instead of what you did earlier? Please specify:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## **APPENDIX B**

### ***Transcript Notation***

The audio-recorded data are transcribed using the following conventions:

- ... indicates a very short gap in the speech.
- indicates a cut-off in the flow of speech.
- (1.0) indicates pause in seconds.
- o::ld colons indicate lengthened sounds.
- stAble capitalization indicates emphatic stress.
- (xxx) indicates inaudible segments.
- ? indicates rising intonation.

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