

## “I Don’t Know How to Explain ‘Osechi’”: Communication Problems and Strategies of Japanese University Students in Speaking English

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*NS: Can you tell me about usual New Year in Japan?*

*L10: Ehh!?(l)*

*Learner comment: [R: Why did you say “Ehh?!” here?] I thought she (the NS) was asking a very difficult question (l). [R: In terms of content or English?] In terms of English. [R: In what way?] I once had a problem explaining “omisoka” (New Year’s Eve) in English when I was talking to an exchange student from England, and ... I thought I’d need words like that, I mean words I hadn’t learnt at school, in order to talk about New Year. “Osechi,” for example. And I thought “Oh gosh!”*

### Introduction

Despite the history of a strong emphasis on English education in Japan, only recently has oral communication received serious attention and begun to be taught as a self-standing course at secondary and tertiary institutions. Oral communication is considered to be one of the most problematic areas for Japanese university students, and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology has acknowledged the need for improvement in this regard (2003). Due, however, to the lack of previous attention in this area, there are few descriptive studies which have investigated the English speaking problems and related behaviour of Japanese university students from a communicative perspective. Past studies have typically focused on three areas: the analysis of linguistic errors (e.g. Taura, 1998), pragmatic deviations from NS norms/models (e.g. Beebe, Takahashi, & Uliss-Weltz, 1990; Narita & Young, 1994; Rossiter, 1989), comprehension problems or irritation felt by observers (e.g. Matsunaga & Caprio, 1989). However, problems actually “experienced” by the communicators themselves have not been the focus and as a result, only the views of researchers or observers have been presented. In particular, the investigation of speaking problems experienced by L2 learners themselves has been one of the most neglected areas in the entire L2 speaking research, and apart from some small-scale individual studies such as Robinson (1991) and Dornyei and Kormos (1998), it has only marginally been addressed in communication strategy (CS) research, which focuses more on problem-solving behaviour rather than on the problems themselves. The investigation of the views of both parties in communication carries extremely important implications for English speaking instruction to Japanese students, in that communication problems may be the result of a gap in their perceptions as to what constitutes good oral communication.

Thus, the purpose of the present study is to explore this still inadequately researched area and to provide as in-depth and accurate a description as possible of communication problems and problem-related behaviour (i.e. CSs) of Japanese university EFL students within the limited scope

of a small-scale study. It is hoped that some implications for areas of priority for EFL oral communication instruction will emerge from this.

### **Research Questions**

The following four research questions are addressed in the study, of which the first two are the main focus of this paper:

- 1) What problems do Japanese EFL learners experience in communicating with the native speaker (NS) interlocutor?

In this question, “problems” refers to anything that causes the learners problems/difficulties in expressing their propositional and/or illocutionary messages in English, and includes not only the lack of linguistic knowledge, but also discursal, or socio-pragmatic knowledge, as well as problems related to content knowledge and psychological factors, such as nervousness.

- 2) What problems does the NS interlocutor experience in communicating with Japanese EFL learners?

Likewise, problems perceived by the NS refer to any features of the learners’ performance that cause the NS difficulty in understanding their propositional and/or illocutionary meaning, or those which engender negative sensations, such as irritation or frustration.

- 3) What communication strategies (CSs) do these learners use to cope with these problems or to facilitate communication?

A CS is defined in the study, drawing on Canale (1983: 11-12), Swain (1984: 189) and Faerch and Kasper (1983: 36), as any potentially conscious attempt by the learners to enhance the effectiveness of communication or to cope with problems due to limiting factors in actual communication or to insufficient competence in one or more of the other components of communicative competence (the terms “potentially conscious” and “communicative competence” are not discussed in this paper due to the space limitations).

- 4) How effective are these CSs?

Effectiveness of a CS is defined as its successfulness in achieving 1) the intended effect, 2) the global communicative goal of the utterance (e.g. conveyance of the original message) and 3) a positive/neutral affective impact on the NS interlocutor.

### **Method**

#### ***Performance Data Elicitation Task***

Short, one-to-one oral proficiency interviews (OPI), each between a NS and a learner, were chosen for the performance data elicitation tasks, as this seemed to strike a balance among the competing criteria of authenticity, interactiveness, feasibility, elicibility, controllability and assessability, factors which are considered important in obtaining the data sought in the study.

Among validated OPI formats, the speaking test of the Cambridge First Certificate in English (University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations, 2001) was used with its assessment battery as a basis in designing the task and scales<sup>1</sup> as it best met the above-mentioned criteria. It should be mentioned that some major modifications were made to the formats to suit the study<sup>2</sup>, and, as a result, the same degrees of reliability and validity are not claimed in the study.

The OPI lasted approximately fifteen minutes and consisted of three phases: 1) warm-up, 2) interaction (to elicit and evaluate interactive features such as turn-taking and negotiation of meaning), and 3) long turn and challenge (to elicit extended speech to see if the learner could sustain and organise extended and coherent utterances, and also how fluently or intelligibly the learners could speak when the topic was cognitively more demanding). In the OPI, a Japanese university student interacted orally with a British NS on relatively simple and familiar topics such as family, English study and Japanese culture. The topics and sample questions were provided in the interviewer guidelines so that parallel data would be elicited from all learners. However, if the learner could not understand the NS, or if it was felt that the learner gave a prepared answer<sup>3</sup>, the NS was allowed to reformulate the question or ask for elaboration as appropriate. Interviewer behaviour, such as the amount and type of support, was also controlled by the use of an interviewer frame. This frame also instructed the NS to pretend she did not understand any Japanese and was unfamiliar with Japanese accent and culture.

The OPI was video-recorded and used in the subsequent retrospective verbal report (RVR) sessions (see below). It was also observed by the researcher who took notes as to salient features (e.g. observed problems and CSs) to be covered in the RVR sessions. In order to minimise observer effects, the researcher was sitting behind the learner at some distance so that she was invisible to him/her. The OPI data, both audio and visual, were later transcribed for analysis.

### ***Retrospective Verbal Reports (RVRs)***

The retrospective verbal report (RVR) technique was used to obtain detailed, and often unobservable, information as to:

- 1) the individual communication problems the interactants experienced,
- 2) each instance of CS used by the learners (including intention and purpose) or noticed by the NS, and
- 3) the perceived effectiveness of the CS.

The RVR session was conducted by the researcher on a one-to-one basis immediately after the OPI, first with the NS in English and then with the learner in Japanese. The participants were asked to recall and verbalise what they were thinking during the OPI, with a special focus on communication problems and CSs. The NS was also asked to comment on the learner's strengths.

In order to help the participants' recall, the video recording of the OPI was used as a prompt. The researcher played the video and the participants were instructed to request that the video be stopped when they wanted to make any comments. In addition, when it was felt the participants were not verbalising enough, the researcher stopped the video and prompted for verbalisation by asking indirect questions such as "You seem to be thinking about something here. What were you

thinking about?” Special care was taken not to ask leading questions such as “Were you looking for an English word here?” (following Hosenfeld, 1977: 112) The RVR sessions, which lasted 42 minutes for the NS and 55 minutes for the learners on average, were audio recorded. The RVR data thus collected were later transcribed and comprise the main data of the study.

**Learners:**

Due to the time- and energy-consuming data collection and analysis procedures, the sample size is limited. A total of thirty-two first and second year Japanese university students of approximately intermediate level written English ability<sup>4</sup> participated in the study. An equal number of male and female students between eighteen to twenty years of age were selected from three major disciplines (engineering, social science, humanities) according to the representative profile developed through the pre-study questionnaire survey (which will be discussed elsewhere). All participants’ English speaking experience was limited to approximately seven to ten years of formal instruction in Japan except for eight students (one student for each category: see Table 1 below) who had short (between 2 weeks and 1 month) experience of attending language courses in an English speaking country. They were selected to see if such short experience in an English speaking country which is becoming increasingly common makes any difference.<sup>5</sup> (See Table 1 below for the breakdown of the participants.)

Table 1: Learner Participants (n = 32)

Sex \ Field of Study	Engineering	Social Science	Humanities		Total
			Non-English	English	
M	4	4	4	4	16
F	4	4	4	4	16
Total	8	8	8	8	32

**NS:**

In order to minimise interlocutor variables, only one NS who was unknown to all the learners was selected. The role of the interlocutor is extremely important in the study in that he/she needs to elicit parallel data from all learners which are adequate in both amount and content, evaluate the learners’ performance in a reliable manner, and provide detailed RVRs. Therefore, although the researcher was fully aware that the perception by such an expert interviewer might be different from that of a “naïve” NS, the advantages of using an expert NS seemed to outweigh the disadvantages. Thus, a qualified oral examiner who was familiar with the Cambridge ESOL examinations, as well as the rating schemes, and who had substantial interviewing experience, was selected.

In addition, although a NS who is totally unfamiliar with the Japanese language and culture was considered ideal in order to enhance the generalisability of the findings of the study, such a person who also met the above-mentioned criteria was not available, since the data collection was conducted in Japan. However, the NS selected did not speak/understand much Japanese, despite

living in Japan, and was trained to evaluate learner performance as a non-EFL specialist (as instructed in the FCE assessment criteria: University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations, 2001). Therefore it was judged that she could give detailed comments on learner performance based on both her own perception and the likely reaction of a non-expert NS in a fairly reliable manner.

### **Preliminary Results: Difficulty in Explaining Japanese Culture**

Below I present some preliminary findings regarding communication problems and related CSs based on an exploratory analysis of the RVR data. More specifically, I focus on those related to the topic of Japanese culture (the New Year festival) since it was this topic that caused learners the most serious difficulties. It should be noted that, in order to ensure a purely descriptive analysis, the communication problem and strategy categories will be developed *post hoc* as emerging from the data, while using existing taxonomies (e.g. Faerch & Kasper, 1983; Dornyei & Kormos, 1998) as frameworks.

#### ***Learner Perception: Lexical Problems***

Interestingly, most learners found the topic of Japanese culture to be the most problematic in the OPI. As expected, they commented that lack of vocabulary (including difficulty in on-line retrieval) was the main reason for this. Their retrospective comments revealed that they created their messages first in Japanese and then converted them into English before speaking, typically using word-for-word translations. This created a particular problem with this topic since the learners tended to look for the exact English equivalents, and descriptions of Japanese culture and customs typically require the use of less frequent vocabulary items which the learners had not yet learnt, or their equivalents sometimes do not exist in English. The learner comment quoted at the beginning of this paper represents a typical reaction of many learners.

Faced with lexical problems, many learners strategically used Japanese words even when they were not sure about their comprehensibility, hoping that the NS would have some idea of what they meant<sup>6</sup> so that they would not have to explain. A few even made a conscious decision not to provide any explanation unless requested by the NS:

*L32: mm, New Year. (...) We, we eat, (.) osechi, and, (.) ozoni? (.) and, m at, new year.*

*Learner comment: [R: Did you think she (the NS) knew osechi and ozoni?] I thought she may probably know osechi. ...I didn't think she knows ozoni but I didn't want to explain what it is unless asked. [R: Why?] Because I don't know how to say osechi in English. ...I thought, "Let's just say osechi and if she asks me what it is, I'll explain."*

A few learners, unable to think of any English words to use, abandoned their attempt to provide an English explanation and resorted to Japanese, even though they knew the NS would not understand:

*NS: Ok, is there anything else that you enjoy doing on that festival?*

L2: Ahm, (.) mm. ahm (.) ah (..) I eat ozoni and osechi. Ozoni and osechi is food. m, we eat, in, (.) oshogatsu.

Learner comment: [R: Why did you say all those in Japanese?] I couldn't do anything but telling her that it is called ozoni. It was just too difficult to explain in English. (l)

Interestingly, there were a few cases where learners used Japanese words in the belief that they were internationally known<sup>7</sup>:

NS: Ok (l). Is there anything special that you do, with your family at New Year?

L32: Mm, (..) mm, New Year (..) we:, we eat soba.

Learner comment: [R: You said "soba". Did you think she'd understand "soba"?] Yes... I thought it had the same level of recognition as "sushi".

L7: Mm, (..) family eat, (.) m, (.) (ehto, kimatta) ah, (..) (l) food. (l)

NS: M. (l)

L7: Ehto, omochi? mochi? Do you know mochi?

NS: No.

Learner comment: I thought omochi was internationally known like "karate". But because she didn't know, I thought, "Oh, doesn't she know that? Gosh, I won't be able to explain." (l)

When realising the NS did not understand the Japanese words they had used, several learners fell silent, as they were unable to think of how to explain them in English:

NS: And how about food? Is there any special food?

L24: Ah (.) osechi ryori.

NS: [?]

L24: (.) mm (...)

Learner comment: I wanted to use the Japanese word because I thought it'd be too difficult to explain traditional Japanese New Year food in English, and didn't know what to do. [R: Why did you think it'd be difficult?] Because I thought they don't have (the equivalents of) "ozoni" and so on in English and therefore I wouldn't be able to translate it into English. Before I said it I thought she might know this word, but when I realised she doesn't, I didn't know how to explain.

NS: Can you tell me what you do or what your family does, at New Year?

L30: Ah (.) my family (.) watch TV.

NS: uh-huh,

L30: And (.) go to (.) hatsumode.

NS: Sorry?

L30: Ehto, hatsumode is (.) go to (.) go to (.) tera, tera wa, jinja.

NS: (l)

L30: (l) (*jinja wa nanikana jinja wa.*)(..) (*jinja wa*) (..) (*jinja nanteiundarou?*)

Learner comment: [R: Did you think she would understand *hatsumode*?] Yes. ... I thought it was like "*samurai*". But she didn't know the word and I didn't know how to explain it. I wanted to say "It means to go to *jinja* (= shrine)", but I didn't know how to say the word in English, so I decided to say "*otera*" (= temple) instead, then I thought "*otera*" was "temple", but I was not sure because there's a temple in the head as well, isn't there? And I thought she may understand "*tera*", but because she didn't, I was wondering how to explain it.

### **NS Perception: Negative Effects of the Use of Japanese**

From the NS interlocutor's viewpoint, the use of Japanese words unaccompanied by English explanations had a very negative communicative impact, not only because it led to communication breakdowns but also because it suggested a lack of effort on the part of the learners to communicate with the NS interlocutor who is unfamiliar with the Japanese language and customs:

NS comment on Learner 30 above: *I thought, "What is he gonna do? Is he gonna carry on saying every Japanese word until he finds one that I know?" ... Lack of communication. ... You know we're speaking English, why are you using Japanese? ... Or, if he'd said "Oh, I don't know what it's called in English but we say 'jinja'", it'd have been fine, but there was NO attempt on his part to communicate it to me. He just threw these Japanese words at me, so it was a bit off-putting. I didn't feel like he was really trying to explain it to you. ... That was like him rejecting me in a way, I felt.*

The above comment provides a useful insight, namely that verbalising the problem the learner was experiencing could have at least helped him to avoid giving the impression that he was not making any effort to communicate. Similarly, the following NS comment indicates the importance of checking the NS' knowledge/understanding of Japanese words in order to show consideration for the interlocutor from a different language and cultural background:

L9: *Uhm, h, (.) mm. helping, shrine, is, (....) m (..) selling omamori.*

NS: [?]

L9: *Omamori. (..)Ah, (....)*

NS comment: *Why did he repeat it? Very odd that he would think I can understand that. He didn't even attempt to ask, "Do you know what it is?" or, there was very little consideration actually for the interlocutor. He's very much a one-way communicator. ... You just don't feel like carry on talking with him.*

There were some learners who were aware that Japanese words needed to be accompanied by

English explanations. Most of them provided the explanation after they had uttered the Japanese words, believing this to be what was expected of them. A few of them commented that they took this approach in order to teach the NS the Japanese words:

L16: *a for example mmmmm ss (.) nantsundarona (l) datemaki? i:s (.) made by made by? made fro:m eggs.*

Learner comment: [R: Why did you say “datemaki”? Did you think she (the NS) knew the word?] No, not at all. But I decided to give the Japanese name “datemaki” first and then explain it in English. [R: Why?] Because she asked me to tell her about New Year in Japan, I wanted to teach her some Japanese as well - although I couldn't manage after all. (l)

The NS commented that, in order for this approach to be communicatively effective, the English explanation needs to follow the Japanese immediately. However, since the learners often paused struggling to construct the explanation, this led to communication problems:

NS: *What do Japanese people usually do?*

L14: *(.) (ehto) (..) I s (.) I saw ha, tsu, hi, no, dE, the fir(st) (.) the first sunrise (.) I saw it (.) I saw it (.) I saw IT(.) riding bicycle. (l)*

NS comment: *...he gave the Japanese, and then the explanation. He should have said, “I cycled and saw first sunrise”, then “we call it”, but he did the opposite, so you were lost, and then you worked out what he said. Very bad. Explanation first. He said, “I saw hatsuhinode,” which means nothing to me.*

The above comment suggests that it would be advisable for learners to provide the English explanations prior to Japanese words.

### ***Importance of effective problem-solving behaviour***

In order to illustrate the importance of effective problem-solving behaviour in L2 oral communication, I present below two sample cases where learners successfully communicated the gist of their messages despite lexical problems.

#### **Successful Case 1**

NS: *Ah, can you tell me about the festival?*

L3: *m, (l) m. this festival. Hah. Very long line, very long line, do you know mikoshi?*

*Mikoshi? Mikoshi. Um. Little house, little house, shrine, shrine. Little shrine, o, un, un.  
[gesture: carrying mikoshi]*

NS: *Ah, ok, yeah.*

This learner commented that he had some difficulty organising the explanation (as indicated by the number of self-repetitions) since he had never described this festival in any language.



However, he managed to convey the gist of his message using various CSs without falling silent or being helped by the NS. Firstly, he checked the NS' knowledge of the word "mikoshi", showing consideration for the interlocutor from a different linguistic and cultural background. On realising that the NS does not know the word, the learner quickly used CSs such as circumlocution<sup>8</sup> ("*little shrine*") and gesture (carrying mikoshi), and thus successfully communicated the meaning. The NS commented that the gesture was particularly effective since it was used to compensate for the lack of an action verb. As a result of his effective use of CSs, he gave the NS the positive impression that he was a good communicator despite his linguistic weaknesses:

NS comment: *He brought me in there, asking if I knew 'mikoshi', and then when he knew I don't understand, he explained it's like a little shrine. So he was not just answering the questions but communicating with me. ... That's his main strength. He's independent, he checked my understanding ...and brought the interlocutor in, very good. ...I felt his English was better than it actually is because he communicates so well.*

Similarly, the learner below succeeded in communicating a general idea of what "ozoni" and "osechi" are with her limited English:

#### Successful Case 2

L13: ... Japanese, mm, (.) only new year (.) foods,

NS: uh-huh,

L13: Ah, (.) osechi. Japanese name is ose, osechi.

NS: uh-huh,

L13: And, ozoni

NS: uh-huh,

L13: Ah (,) ozoni, is (.) Japanese (,) soup.

NS: Ah, ok.

L13: And, sokoni, vegetables and (...) white mm (.) ah (.) to, /la/, rice rice no (.) into [gesture: putting in rice], and osechi is (.) mm (.) osechi is (.) m, (.....) m, (.) osechi is (.) black bean.

NS: m

L13: and (.) mm (.) fish (.) and (.) mm (.) marron, marron sweets.

This learner started with a general English explanation prior to the Japanese words ("*Japanese ...only new year foods, ...Japanese name is osechi ...and ozoni*"). This was followed by more detailed explanation, for which she used such CSs as circumlocution (e.g. "*white rice*" for mochi) and gesture (for "putting in") very effectively. The NS made a positive comment on this learner's strategic approach of focusing on the conveyance of the main message:

NS comment: *She was very good there. "White rice". I think the reason why she's quite good at communicating is because she realises that she's got to give this main meaning. And then when she realises, "Oh god, I don't know the word for that", she makes decisions, she is quick to make decisions on, "Oh, that's not actually that important." So she just said white rice and a soup, that's enough. And she left it at that, whereas some other students, "ahhh, ahhh, mochi mochi moch." She was like, "Vegetable, rice soup. There you go, you can understand that." So I think she's got quite a good idea of, good sense of communication.*

In dyadic interaction in the real world, maintaining the conversation without communication breakdowns is of paramount importance. While vocabulary development is crucial, the number of lexical items learners may need in order to express themselves is limitless, and a vocabulary deficit is an unavoidable problem. The analysis of the examples above suggests that the keys to successful L2 English oral communication are: 1) an awareness of the expected L2 communication behaviour, such as a) checking the NS interlocutor's comprehension and providing an English explanation (preferably preceding the Japanese) when talking about topics which are possibly unfamiliar to the interlocutor, and b) focusing on the conveyance of the main message, and 2) an effective use of lexical compensatory CSs<sup>9</sup>. Since Japanese culture would be one of the topics that our learners are most likely to encounter in a context where they need to communicate in English, it seems extremely important for us, the teachers, to prepare them for this topic. The following learner's comment indicates the importance of practice opportunities:

Learner 7 comment: *The most difficult thing was to explain things about Japan, things uniquely Japanese which the interlocutor doesn't know about, like mochi and osechi. [R: Why was it?] Because I'd never thought about them because I'd never been asked about them. [R: What was the easiest?] Things I'd been asked about or practised in English, like hobbies or what I want to be in the future, because I thought about them in Japanese as well in order to talk about them in English.*

### **Conclusion and implications**

This paper has reported on some preliminary findings of an ongoing study of Japanese university learners' communication problems and strategies in speaking English, with a particular focus on those related to the explanation of Japanese culture. Due to the time- and energy-consuming data collection and analysis procedures, the sample size is relatively small. In addition, in order to control the interlocutor variables and due to the focus of the study (i.e. an investigation of the interlocutor's, as opposed to the observer's, perception), only one NS was used. While it could be said that these could impinge on the generalisability of the findings, every effort was made to minimise the drawbacks through the careful selection of participants (learners and the NS interlocutor).

It was found that most learners in the study felt that explaining Japanese culture posed the most serious problems, mainly due to the lack of vocabulary items needed to describe uniquely

Japanese customs or objects. On encountering this lexical deficit, learners typically resorted to Japanese words, which led to communication breakdowns. This seems to suggest that the development of vocabulary especially related to Japanese culture should be one of our instructional priorities. On the other hand, a few learners overcame this problem and successfully communicated their message with their limited English by using various CSs. Those CSs which the NS found to be particularly effective are: comprehension checks, circumlocution and gesture.

Thus, if one of our aims as English teachers is to develop our learners' oral communication abilities in English, one possible instructional approach would be to train the learners to use these CSs so that communication breakdowns could at least be partly avoided, and the gist of their message could be conveyed. More importantly, we should firstly raise the learners' awareness of the basics of L2 oral communication, namely, the importance of showing consideration for the interlocutor from a different language and cultural background.

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## Notes

RVR data transcription symbols:

.	falling intonation
,	level, continuing intonation
?	rising intonation
(.)	short pause of approximately 0.5 second
(.)	pause of approximately 1 second
:	prolonged sound (e.g. a:nd)
(l)	laugh
[xxxxx]	body language (including eye gaze and facial expressions)
CAPITAL	stress/emphasis
<u>underline</u>	Japanese (including fillers)
(xxxxx)	whisper
[R: xxxx]	researcher prompt

<sup>1</sup> I would like to express my gratitude to Cambridge ESOL for their support. The rating scales and relevant results are not discussed in this paper due to space limitations.

<sup>2</sup> For example, the OPI format was converted from a pair to one-to-one interview in order to eliminate any confounding variables of group dynamics, and the phase of uninterrupted long turn was excluded as it is beyond the focus of the present study.

<sup>3</sup> Prepared answers were observed extremely rarely probably because the learners were not informed about the details of the interview and also because they were instructed not to prepare anything so that spontaneous behaviour could be observed.

<sup>4</sup> None of the participants had taken any forms of test in spoken English.

<sup>5</sup> It has been observed that the NS typically responded positively to learners with experience in English speaking countries. (The NS were not informed of the learners' background.) There were, however, considerable individual differences and a further analysis is needed before any conclusions can be drawn.

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<sup>6</sup> Despite the oral and written instructions given prior to the interview which clearly states that the NS does not speak/understand any Japanese and is completely unfamiliar with Japanese culture.

<sup>7</sup> The RVR technique was found to be extremely useful in revealing the different mental operations underlying identical performance features, which in turn would have different pedagogical implications.

<sup>8</sup> “[E]xemplifying, illustrating, or describing the properties of the target object or action.” (Dornyei & Kormos, 1998: 361)

<sup>9</sup> A sub-type of achievement strategies used to compensate for lexical resource deficit (e.g. Faerch & Kasper, 1983).

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