ENHANCING COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES FOR ENGINEERING STUDENTS: MANAGING CONVERSATIONAL BREAKDOWNS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION

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To develop engineering students who can effectively contribute in a global context, it is essential to enhance their international communication skills while fostering a proactive mindset for engaging in intercultural environments. In English language education, equipping students with effective communication strategies is particularly crucial. This study aims to develop students' ability to manage communication breakdowns in conversations, whether caused by difficulties in hearing, comprehension, or linguistic limitations. By employing specific communication strategies, students can independently navigate and resolve these challenges. In this study, the participants were first-year engineering students enrolled in a one-year English IA speaking course (30 weeks in total), with elementary-level speaking proficiency in English. The instructor integrated communication strategies, including rejoinders (formulaic responses), follow-up questions, and clarification requests, into regular speaking lessons to facilitate conversational repair when a speaker failed to maintain the flow of discussion. The effectiveness of these strategies was assessed through paired speaking tests, and conversation analysis method was employed to examine speaking test data, highlighting students' ability to utilize these strategies without instructor support. transcriptions of the speaking tests reveal that students effectively used follow-up questions at appropriate moments to expand topics, and demonstrated topic-shifting through various strategies such as using connecting phrases like by the way and rejoinders (e.g., I see, that's great, oh nice, really?) to maintain conversational flow and avoid prolonged silences or conversation breakdowns. The data further indicates a relatively balanced turn-taking pattern, suggesting increased conversational engagement. This study underscores the practical benefits of integrating communication strategy training into English instruction, particularly when tailored to students' experiences. The results indicate that even students with lower English proficiency can engage in meaningful conversations with speakers from diverse linguistic backgrounds. By reinforcing the idea that effective communication is achievable without perfect language skills, this approach fosters students' confidence and willingness to communicate in English across international settings.

Keywords: Communication, Strategies, Paired, Speaking, Test

Introduction

In today's globalized world, engineering students must be equipped not only with technical expertise but also with the ability to communicate effectively in intercultural settings. For students with lower English proficiency, developing confidence and skills to manage real-time conversations is essential. Therefore, English language instruction should go beyond grammar and vocabulary to emphasize interactive speaking skills and communication strategies (CSs) that support meaningful, two-way exchanges.

While many Japanese EFL learners perform well in grammar and reading, they often face difficulties managing spoken interactions, particularly in maintaining topic coherence and responding flexibly during speaking tests. This gap between theoretical knowledge and practical communication skills becomes evident in authentic classroom assessments. The Excerpt 1 below, from the midterm speaking test during the first semester at Kosen, illustrates frequent long pauses and hesitation, reflecting the students' lack of strategies to extend topics, a pattern commonly observed in many pairs during their first speaking test.

Excerpt 1

```
01 A: e:: my (.)my father works for a
02    bus company and my mother works
03    a hospital(.)she is dental
04      hygienist
05 B: oh:(.)that's great (3.0)
06 A: ➡un::: (8.0) (gesturing and
07    indicating to want to say
08      something)
09 A&B: (looking at each other and
10      gesturing)
```

```
11 A:→(3.3) so::(9.2) (puts head down)
12 B:→(6.0) eee you::(2.0) un:: what's
13    un::: your parents' name
```

The extended silences (e.g., 8.0, 9.2, 6.0 seconds) reflect difficulties in managing topic transitions and sustaining conversation without breakdowns, highlighting the need for explicit instruction in communication strategies to support topic extension and interactive competence.

Research in Conversation Analysis (CA) and Second Language Acquisition (SLA) highlights the importance of communication strategies for developing interactional competence. CA emphasizes the structure of "talk-in-interaction" (Waring, 2016), viewing language learning as a socially situated, co-constructed process (Kasper, 2006; Hanafi, 2016). Communication strategies such as rejoinders, follow-up questions, and topic-shifting expressions help learners avoid breakdowns and sustain dialogue, even with limited linguistic resources (Tarone, 1981; Nakatani, 2005; Benson et al., 2013).

Rejoinders ("Really?", "That's great!") signal attentiveness and emotional alignment (Lam, 2006; Sutopo & Mahardhika, 2016), follow-up questions encourage deeper engagement (van Balen et al., 2022), and topic-shifting expressions aid smooth transitions and active topic management (Bai & Hei, 2011; Al-Ghathami, 2018). Empirical studies show that explicit instruction in CSs can improve fluency, confidence, and conversational competence (Nakatani, 2005; Nguyen et al., 2022; Bøhn & Myklevold, 2018).

Despite this, few studies have closely examined how beginner-level learners in Japanese technical colleges apply these strategies during performance-based assessments like speaking tests. This study addresses this gap by investigating how first-year engineering students use explicitly taught communication strategies to manage conversation flow during speaking tests, aiming to reduce breakdowns and enhance interactional competence.

Materials and Methods

This study was conducted with approximately 160 first-year engineering students (average age 15) across four classes at a Japanese technical college (Kosen). At this stage, students had not yet chosen their engineering majors and were enrolled in English IA, which focused on 4 skills. Over half of the students held Eiken certificates, with the majority at Grade 3 (A1) level, reflecting 3–4 years of English learning expereince. However, classroom observations and speaking test performances confirmed that most students demonstrated elementary-level speaking skills.

The English IA course(speaking and listening part) aimed to build foundational speaking confidence and fluency through explicit instruction in communication strategies before transitioning to engineering-related English in subsequent years. The communication strategies explicitly taught included topic-shifting expressions, follow-up questions (especially WH-questions), and formulaic rejoinders. Classroom activities adapted David Kehe's Conversation Strategies into pair-based speaking tasks using topics relevant to students' daily experiences to increase engagement and relevance. Instructional methods included modeling by the instructor, controlled practice with sentence stems, pair speaking practice, and feedback with peer support. Students were encouraged to initiate, sustain, and extend conversations using these strategies during regular lessons.

To assess students' speaking performance as an evaluation, while simultaneously testing their application of communication strategies, speaking tests were conducted to establish a baseline, revealing frequent long pauses and breakdowns in conversation. In each test, each pair of students engaged in a five-minute, face-to-face conversation. Each pair randomly selected a speaking card from five familiar topics that had been practiced during lessons, and no preparation time was provided to simulate authentic conversational conditions. The instructor acted as a rater while seated approximately one meter away during each session, and all interactions were video recorded for subsequent analysis. Student conversations were recorded across the four classes. Transcriptions were created using Transana software, incorporating Jeffersonian notation to capture pauses, overlaps, gestures, and other interactional details in the conversations. To ensure ethical compliance during analysis and reporting, student identities were anonymized. Data were analyzed using Conversation Analysis (CA) to examine turn-taking, topic management, use of communication strategies, and repair sequences and breakdowns during the conversations. Additionally, to capture students' perceived improvement in confidence and willingness to speak English, an end-of-course questionnaire was conducted. This complemented the qualitative analysis with learners' perspectives on their own progress and perceived growth throughout the course.

Results and Discussion

Rejoinder

Rejoinders are short, formulaic expressions that help speakers react naturally to their partner's comments, showing attentiveness, empathy, or agreement. The following two excerpts illustrate how the EFL learners used rejoinders effectively during paired speaking tests to support interaction and keep their conversations smooth and engaging.

Excerpt 2

```
01 Yuma:  How are you today
02 Soshi: I'm happy
03 Yuma:→ Oh that's good
04 Soshi: How are you?
05 Yuma:  Same as always
06 Soshi:→Oh oh that's nice
07 Yuma: By the way, what's your major
08 Soshi: Oh:: My major is Engineering.
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09 Yuma:  ➜Oh::
10 Soshi:   That is so fun
11 Yuma:    Yeah
12 Soshi:   What is your major
13 Yuma:    My major is Engineering too
14 Soshi:➜Oh you too?
15 Yuma:    Yeah
16 Soshi:➜ That's nice
```

In Excerpt 2, several rejoinders are used to maintain the flow and show engagement. In line 3, Yuma says "Oh, that's good" in response to Soshi's "I'm happy" (line 2), which is a positive and supportive rejoinder that acknowledges the partner's feeling. In line 6, Soshi replies with "Oh, oh, that's nice" after Yuma says "Same as always" (line 5). Later, in line 14, Soshi uses "Oh, you too?" after learning that Yuma also majors in Engineering (line 13). This is an effective rejoinder that shows mild surprise and builds a connection. Soshi's "That's nice" (line 16) continue the pattern of polite but basic rejoinders.

Excerpt 3

```
01 Yuito: Hi Takumi how are you
02        today?
03 Takumi: E:: I'm not so good I am
04        sick.
05 Yuito:➜ Oh: I'm sorry to hear that
06        (.) eto::: I will I hope you
07           get well soon.
08 Takumi:➜ Thank you recently
09            lately...
```

In Excerpt 3, in the exchange between Yuito and Takumi, the conversation begins with a natural greeting sequence. In line 3, Takumi expresses that he is "not so good" because he is sick. Yuito responds in line 5 with "Oh, I'm sorry to hear that," which functions as a rejoinder, a formulaic and empathetic response that acknowledges the partner's emotional state and helps maintain conversational flow. This expression shows emotional support and attentiveness, helping to build rapport. In line 8, Takumi replies with "Thank you," which also acts as a rejoinder by reciprocating the empathy and acknowledging Yuito's concern. Together, these lines demonstrate how both speakers use socially appropriate reactions to sustain the interaction and create a cooperative, emotionally responsive exchange.

Topic Shifting

Topic shifting is a crucial communication strategy that enables speakers to move from one subject to another smoothly, helping to sustain and deepen conversations. This section presents three excerpts (Excerpt 3, 4, and 5) that illustrate how EFL students effectively employed topic-shifting strategies during their paired speaking tests. Despite limited proficiency, these learners were

able to manage transitions naturally, demonstrating their growing interactional competence.

Excerpt 4

```
06 Souta:   En::: how are you doing?
07 Takeshi: Ah:: I'm tired because (.)
08     <I did [kendo]> (.) last class
09 Souta:        [Oh:: ]
10 Takeshi: How about you?
11 Souta:   En::: yeah me too. I'm tired
12     becau::se I'm—I'm study—I study
13     English and math, un::other(.)
14     yeah tired [I'm tired]
15 Takeshi: ➜      [Yeah.    ] ah (.) I
16     have a question
17 Souta: Hai((okay)) yeah.
```

In Excerpt 4, Souta opens with a casual greeting: "How are you doing?" (line 6), to which Takeshi responds with a reasoned feeling ("I'm tired because I did kendo"). After a brief exchange about tiredness, Takeshi uses "Ah, I have a question" (line 15-16) to shift the topic deliberately, marking a clear move to a new subject. This expression, "I have a question" is effective communication strategy for managing topic shifts in conversation. It helps maintain structure and signal transitions clearly, especially for language learners building fluency and interactional competence.

Excerpt 5

```
09 Hana:➜ By the way (1.0) where were
10        you born
11 Masa:  (2.0) I born in Yuzawa City
12        And (1.0) how are you (1.0)
13        how about you. Hhh
14 Hana:hhh okay(1.0)I was born in  **
15 Masa:  ***
16 Hana:  But (0.8) I grow up in
17        Kanagawa
18 Masa:➜ Kanagawa okay. (7.0) I'm
19        interested in Kanagawa
20        Please tell me about Kanagawa
21 Hana:  Okay
22 Masa:➜ (2.0) Your recommendation is
23         your recommendation place
24 Hana:  (3.0) I recommendation place
25        is Yokohama Chinatown.
26 Masa:  Oh I see
27 Hana:  There is (1.0) a lot of
           delicious food. (3.0) So
           (2.0) many people go to there
```

In Excerpt 5, the exchange between Hana and Masa shows effective basic conversation skills despite some grammatical errors. Hana shifts the topic with "By the way, where were you born?" (line 09), and both speakers share information about their hometowns. Hana adds that she grew up in Kanagawa, prompting Masa to show interest by saying, "Please tell me about Kanagawa" (line

20). He then asks for a recommendation, and though the phrasing is awkward, Hana understands and responds with "Yokohama Chinatown" (line 25), adding reasons like "a lot of delicious food" and popularity. The conversation demonstrates clear topic development, personal sharing, and follow-up, helping keep the interaction natural and engaging.

Excerpt 6

```
05 Takumi:➜ Thank you. Recently
06  lately (2.0) there have been
07  bears in Akita. (.) Have you ever
08  seen bears?
09 Yuito:  Eto... yes I have (1.0) I
10    have seen them at the zoo but
11    en:: I'm too scared... scared
12    that if I I met them
13 Takumi: That's it.
14       (1.0)
15 Yuito: ➜ Eto... do you know what to
16      do if you encounter a bear?
17 Takumi: Yes I have to leave the
18        place en:: calmly
19 Yuito:  That's that's true
```

In Excerpt 6, Takumi initiates a smooth and natural topic shift in line 05-06, moving from the initial small talk about his health to a new and engaging subject on bear in Akita. He uses the phrase "Recently, lately…" to signal the transition before introducing the unexpected topic. This shift effectively moves the dialogue from routine greetings to a content-rich discussion. Takumi immediately follows up with the question "Have you ever seen bears?"(line 07), which engages Yuito and helps sustain the new topic. While the opening exchange appears somewhat rehearsed, it still demonstrates effective topic development. For elementary-level learners, using such formulaic expressions and structured transitions serves as a valuable foundation for building fluency and confidence in more spontaneous interactions.

Follow-up questions

Follow-up questions are essential for deepening conversations, encouraging elaboration, and sustaining dialogue, particularly among language learners. These questions demonstrate attentiveness and interest, allowing speakers to build on each other's responses and guide the conversation in a natural, engaging way. Excerpts 6 and 7 illustrate how EFL students used follow-up questions to explore personal topics, respond to their partners, and expand conversations without instructor support.

Excerpt 7

```
16 Takumi: En:: what (.) what kind of
17        music do you like?
18 Yuito:  My favorite kind of music
19         is... en:: J-pop
```

```
20 Yuito: J-pop makes me—makes me
21     excited. Eto... how about you?
22 Takumi:  My favorite music is rock
23 ➜   It gives me energi (1.0) What's
24   your favorite musician?
25 Yuito:  I like Yonezu Kenshi. eto::
26     (2.0) how about you?
27 Takumi: (1.0) I'm into Yonezu Kenshi
28       too.
29 Yuito:   Oh::
30 Takumi: I like his lisk and rim
31 ➜    ((lyrics and rhythm)). What's
32       your favorite his song?
33 Yuito:  I like Umi no Yuurei because
34     it e:to made it made me relaxed
35     (2.0)
36 Takumi:en:: (.) My favorite his song
37     is KICK BACK. en:: (.) It is
38     Chainsaw Man's opening.(1.0)
39     I'm excited ah chigau—it
40    makes me excited.((looking at
41 ➜   the speaking card)) Can you
42    play(.) musical instruments?
```

In this conversation, Yuito and Takumi use several follow-up questions to keep the interaction flowing and deepen the topic. Takumi contributes by asking, "What's your favorite musician?" (line 23-24), which shifts the topic from general music preference to specific artists. He follows up with, "What's your favorite his song?" (line 31-32), encouraging Yuito to elaborate further with a personal choice. Finally, Takumi broadens the topic slightly by asking, "Can you play a musical instrument?" (line 41-42), which keeps the theme of music while expanding the conversation. These follow-up questions show active interest, support topic development, and help create a more engaging and natural exchange between the speakers.

Excerpt 8

```
05 Shun: Yes me too I like J-pop
06 ➜    too Have you ever played
07        a musical instrument?
08 Nana: I have played the piano
09 Shun: Oh piano? It's very cool
10 ➜   How long have you played
11        the piano?
12 Nana: Five years
13 Shun: Five years. It's very cool
14 Nana: Thank you
15 Shun: I've never played the piano
16     So I'd like to play a
17 ➜    musical instrument.Have you
18    ever been to a concert?
19 Nana: I have been to  Yes yes
20    I have
21 Shun: Oh.
```

In Excerpt 8, Shun uses follow-up questions effectively to extend the topic and keep the interaction engaging. After agreeing with Nana's music preference, he asks, "Have you ever played a musical instrument?" (line 6-7), which leads naturally to a deeper exchange. When Nana says she has played the piano, Shun responds with interest and follows up with, "How long have you played the piano?" (line 10), encouraging a more detailed answer. He then shares his own experience and shifts the topic slightly but smoothly with another follow-up: "Have you ever been to a concert?" (line 17-18). These questions help move the conversation from general preferences to personal experiences. Shun also builds rapport by responding positively like "It's very cool. " and adding his own opinion. His use of follow-up questions, combined with reactions and shared interests, helps the conversation feel natural and connected.

Besides demonstrating how students applied communication strategies during the speaking test, a questionnaire was also conducted at the end of the one-year course to gather feedback on the course in general. Among the items, Questions 12 to 14 specifically addressed what knowledge students felt they had learned, their perceived overall improvement in speaking, and the confidence they gained in speaking English.
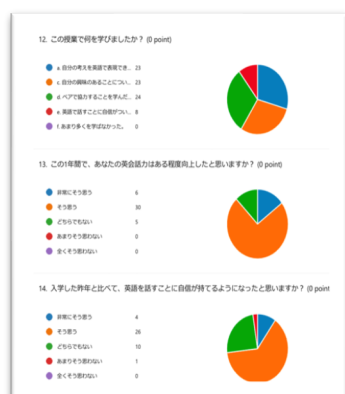

Figure 2

The questionnaire was conducted in Japanese; Figure 1 shows an example of the Japanese version used in the survey. In this section, a summary of the results (figure 2-4) from all four classes is presented using the translated question items and numerical data compiled by the author.
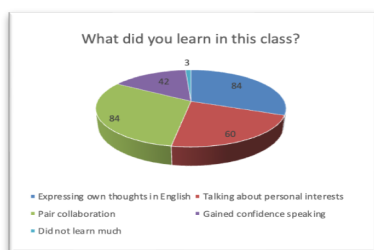

Figure 2

In Figure 2, regarding what students learned, students most frequently reported that they learned to express their own thoughts in English and collaborate with partners

(both 30.8%), indicating that the foundational goals of the course were achieved. Additionally, 22.0% reported discussing personal interests.
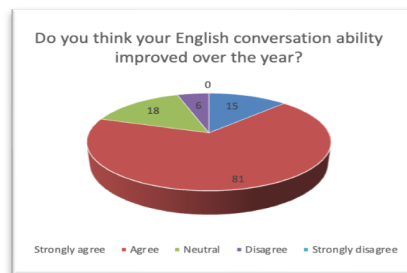

Figure 3

In Figure 3, concerning perceived improvement, a significant majority (80%) of students reported that their English conversation ability improved over the year, reflecting the effectiveness of communication strategy instruction and sustained speaking practice. Only 5% felt they did not improve, while 15% remained neutral, indicating areas for continued focus in supporting hesitant learners.
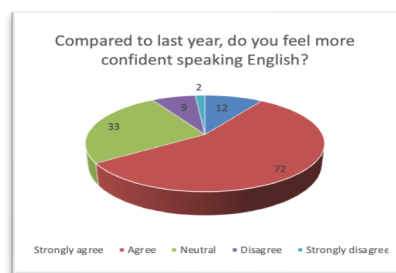

Figure 4

Students' perceived increase in confidence in speaking English compared to the previous year after completing the English IA course. A total of 65.7% (strongly agree + agree) reported feeling more confident, supporting the course objective of building affective confidence alongside fluency. Approximately 26% remained neutral, suggesting that these students may benefit from additional low-pressure speaking opportunities in the second year to further enhance their confidence.

Conclusions

Analysis of seven excerpts from the speaking tests demonstrates that elementary-level engineering students can effectively apply communication strategies: rejoinders, follow-up questions, and topic-shifting expressions, to manage and sustain conversations in English. Despite limited proficiency, many participants were able to initiate, develop, and maintain engaging dialogues during paired speaking tests, indicating emerging interactional competence. Conversation analysis showed these strategies helped prevent breakdowns, deepen engagement, personalize exchanges, and encourage spontaneous, meaning-focused communication. While some segments appeared rehearsed, most exchanges moved beyond memorized

responses, reflecting students' growing ability to use these tools independently. These findings confirm that communication strategies are teachable and transferable when explicitly taught and practiced through relevant tasks.

End-of-course questionnaire results support these findings. Students reported learning to express their thoughts, collaborate with partners, and discuss personal interests in English. Most reported improvement in conversation skills (80%) and increased confidence in speaking English (66%) over the year, demonstrating that explicit instruction in communication strategies contributed to both observable performance improvements and self-perceived growth in confidence.

Pedagogically, integrating communication strategies into EFL instruction offers learners practical tools for navigating conversations naturally, even while grammatical accuracy is still developing. Teachers are encouraged to include scaffolded, strategy-focused speaking tasks and provide opportunities for authentic, peer-based interactions to build interactional competence and confidence. Performance-based assessments such as speaking tests can serve as both evaluation tools and learning opportunities. Paired with conversation analysis, these assessments provide insights into students' conversational strengths and challenges, enabling teachers to adjust instruction and reinforce key strategies. Overall, explicitly teaching communication strategies equips learners with practical tools and confidence to engage meaningfully in intercultural and global contexts.

Acknowledgements

Transcription Conventions

(.)	noticeable pause
(2.0)	2.0-second pause
[ ]	overlapping talk
wo::rd	stretched or elongated sound
(words)	unclear hearing
°word°	quiet talk
>word <	aster speech
<word <	outward slower
?	question intonation
.	falling intonation
→	marks a line of analytic interest
(( ))	transcriber's comment

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