# A Model of Transactional Negotiation of Meaning

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**Abstract**

Transactional competence as related to strategic competence, and ultimately communicative competence, is a rarely studied phenomenon regarding linguistics. Most literature on transactions focuses on the mechanics of business transactions and tends to gloss over what happens linguistically in such transactions. Therefore, as original research, this study posits *A Model of Transactional Negotiation of Meaning* that demonstrates the relevance of Strategic Competence within transactional communication. By analyzing the directive function of language within the context of Referential Communication, the model herein lays out the basis of discovery where miscommunication, as the result of Language Related Episodes (LREs), is addressed by Communication Strategies (CSs). Ten international university students demonstrated their Transactional Competence by navigating the completion of a closed task. The results demonstrated procedural breakdowns of the transactional process where achievement strategies such as asking for clarification or confirmation, interactional strategies, and maintenance strategies were needed to remediate problematic communication. It is believed that the transactional model herein is an excellent resource for discovering Language Related Episodes and the use of communication strategies

found in common miscommunications. The model demonstrates that LREs are primarily referential and that establishing common reference points is crucial to competent transactional communication.

**Keywords:** Strategic competence, Transactional competence, Language related episodes, Communication strategies, Directives

## Introduction

One result of the prevalence of English as the world's leading lingua franca is that more students are studying through English as a medium of instruction at international universities. In such academic environments, students face the many challenges of situations where the difference between understanding and misunderstanding is vital to passing a course or performing the many other duties required in their scholastic lives. To be successful, these students who speak English as an additional language need to demonstrate their functional language aptitude by constantly and consistently negotiating the meaning of interactions while expressing nonunderstanding when necessary. How do our students deal with these forced transactions? What process are they going through, and what happens when difficulties arise?

On the surface, it seems evident that the risk of miscommunication primarily depends on the language skills of the interlocutors involved. However, functional language, such as giving and receiving directives, only compounds the difficulties experienced by students using an L2 as the immediate processing of meaning and understanding are required; alas, demanding situations for more LREs to occur. Additionally, each person is unique, and in L2 dialogues, they lack the shared linguistic resources common to communicating in their L1. The linguistic resources may diminish even further if speakers of different L1s share an L2 (Schepens, Slik, & Hout, 2015). Such hindrances to communication could be physical

regarding phonetics and phonology or cognitive regarding the processing of spoken information—these problems require the implementation of a variety of communication strategies to keep the doors of communication open. Therefore, a model that reflects the complexities of such transactions is needed.

## Literature Review

Researchers of CSs tend to fall into two groups. First is the Psycholinguistic Perspective, where CSs are used in two phases for speech production. The first step is planning, which requires the speaker to determine what to say regarding the achievement of their communicative goals. Then, once a plan has been contrived, correct execution needs to take place. The second group is of the Interactional paradigm, where "CSs are seen as tools used in the joint negotiation of meaning where both interlocutors are attempting to agree as to a communicative goal" (Tarone, 1980, p.420). Like Ellis (2008, pp. 503-504), the author of this paper believes that the distinction between these two concepts is not as black and white as some may consider. For example, Dornyei and Scott (1997, p. 183) concluded that there are three types of problems that result in the need for CSs:

1. *Own-performance problems:* the realization that something one has said is incorrect or only partly correct.
2. *Other-performance problems:* something perceived as problematic in the interlocutor's speech, either because it is thought to be incorrect (or highly unexpected), or because of a lack (or uncertainty) of understanding something fully.
3. *Processing time pressure:* the L2 speaker's frequent need for time to process and plan L2 speech that would be naturally available in fluent communication.

These problems concerning performance, time, and the conceptualized views of solving them have led researchers to develop taxonomies of communication strategies over

the years. Dornyei and Scott (1997) have an exhaustive review that summarizes the existing taxonomies. The strategies are divided into three categories: direct strategies, interactional strategies, and indirect strategies. "Direct strategies provide an alternative, manageable, and self-contained means of getting the (sometimes modified meaning) across." These direct strategies are further subcategorized as to whether they are "Resource Deficit," i.e., the speaker is unsure what specific words to say to convey their idea; "Own Performance," i.e., they have already spoken but realize that it is not clear or does not make sense; "Other Performance," i.e. one interlocutor corrects the other to make sense. Interactional strategies also use the same subcategories but rely on both interlocutors for the achievement of mutual understanding through "asking for help" or "confirmation" while also expressing "nonunderstanding," for example. Whereas these types of strategies are "problem-solving devices," indirect strategies are not, "but rather facilitate the conveyance of meaning indirectly by creating conditions for achieving mutual understanding: preventing breakdowns and keeping the communication channel open" (ibid, p.198). The following strategies are the focus of this paper because of their transactional function in referential closed tasks.

***Direct Strategies:***

- **Circumlocution (Paraphrasing) {CIRC}** is used by "illustrating of describing the properties of the target object or action."
- **All-purpose Words {APW}**like "thing and stuff" are used instead of specific words.
- **Mime {MIME}** is "describing whole concepts nonverbally, or accompanying a verbal strategy with a visual illustration."
- **Self-repair {SR}** is "making self-initiated corrections in one's own speech."
- **Other-repair {OR}** is correcting something the other speaker has said.

***Interactional Strategies:***

- **Comprehension Check {CC}** is "Asking questions to check that the interlocutor can follow you."
- **Asking for Repetition {REP}** is "requesting repetition when not hearing or understanding something properly."
- **Asking for Clarification {CLAR}** is "requesting an explanation of an unfamiliar meaning structure."
- **Asking for Confirmation {CON}** is "requesting confirmation that one heard or understood something correctly."
- **Expressing misunderstanding {EXM}** is "expressing that one did not understand something properly either verbally or nonverbally."

***Indirect Strategies:***

- **Verbal Strategy Markers {VSM}** are phrases used "before or after a strategy to signal that the word or structure does not carry the intended meaning perfectly in the L2 code." Phrases like "I do not know what it is called," "some kind of," or "we call them."

(Dornyei and Scott, 1997, pp. 188-192)

***Maintenance Strategies:***

- **Expressing Confirmation {EXC}** is the term coined by the author, which represents what Nakatani (2005, p. 81) describes as "providing an active response and shadowing."

***Language Related Episodes***

Language Related Episodes act as triggers in that they initiate the usage of Communication Strategies. Swain and Lapkin (1998, p. 326), as quoted in Mackey (2012, p.

133), define LREs as "instances of feedback, negotiating for meaning, questioning the meaning of a word or the correctness of a structure, as well as a request for assistance."

***Referential: (REF)***

Referential communication relies on locative deictic expressions. For successful transactions to occur, interlocutors must establish a "common ground" through "Spatial Dialogue" (Tenbrink, Andonova, Schole, & Coventry, 2017, p. 318). This spatial dialogue needs to be consistent with what Yule (1997, p. 10) describes as "a basic intention to identify" with "a recognition of this intention" by the interlocutors. Referential LREs involve the following triggers:

- Participants are not identifying the same referential object.
- Participants are not establishing a common referential orientation.
- Participants are not able to discern the directives within the referential location. (paying attention to details within the location)

***Pronunciation: (PRO)***

LREs referring to pronunciation affect the intelligibility between the interlocutors. Discerning and mitigating accent as a source of phonological interference depends on the perception of "phonetic similarity in inter-lingual identifications" in which the phonemes of the L1 and L2 are categorized (Odlin 1989, p. 113). There may be no difference in perception to some speakers due to a lack of, or misunderstanding of, the articulator distinction between phonemes in their first language and the language they are trying to learn. Such phonological interference "refer(s) to the ways in which a person's knowledge of the sound system of one language can affect that person's perception and production of speech sounds in another language" (Jarvis & Pavlenko 2007, p. 62). Thus, the role of *Strategic Competence* in effective communicative performance is indispensable when creating an environment conducive to mutual intelligibility, and as a result, understanding.

***Grammatical Knowledge / Code Complexity: (GRAM)***

Bachman and Palmer (2010, p. 44) defined grammatical knowledge as the syntax for "producing and comprehending formally accurate utterances or sentences." When a dyad of second language speakers communicate, "Interlanguage Talk" (ILT) may occur, which "describes the simplified code" used to "speak to one another" (Jenkins 2000, p. 19).

***Cognitive Complexity of Processing: (COG)***

Ahmadian, as cited in (Wen, Mota, & McNeill, 2015, p. 160) describes cognitive complexity as "a flexible and capacity-limited cognitive system with domain-specific stores for the storage processing and manipulation of information." Such "domain-specific" issues may not just be an illocutionary factor in the act of processing directives but also affect the decoder's perlocutionary actions. Therefore, when both the encoder and decoder are experiencing LREs, the cognitive complexity increases. Task performance is also affected by the familiarity of the task, which determines how much information needs processing. As such, "cognitive familiarity" is directly correlated with the "cognitive processing" required for the task. A lack of "Clarity and Sufficiency" also contributes to LREs where because of poor pronunciation or syntax, inferences cannot be made, thus becoming confusing (Skehan 1998, p. 101).

***Communicative Stress: (STRESS)***

"Performance conditions" such as time pressure as perceived by the interlocutors may affect the "rate of speech, or opportunities to control the interaction." As a result of such communicative stress, the "type of response" may not meet the communicative needs of the interlocutors (ibid, p. 101).

***Combined LREs:***

LREs are not isolated and can be a combination of factors. For example, Referential/Cognitive (REF/COG) LREs occur when there is insufficient referential

information where the interlocutors do not share the exact location or object of reference. Referential/Cognitive/Grammatical (REF/COG/GRAM) LREs regard the clarity of the referential information where vocabulary and syntax cause interlocutors not to share the exact location or object of reference.

## Methodology

### *Student Sample*

Ten undergraduate students from Assumption University's second-level English course volunteered for this study. Assumption University is the first international university in Thailand, and all its courses are conducted through English as a medium of instruction. Based on the university's standards, these students would score in the 5.5 to 6 range on IELTS or 525 to 550 in TOEFL. Of the ten students, five were Thai, two were Chinese, two Burmese, and one was Vietnamese. The students were divided into five dyads where no two students shared the same L1 to ensure the use of English to conduct the testing.

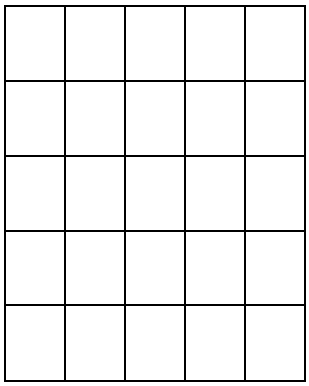
### *Testing and Data Collection*

**Figure 1**

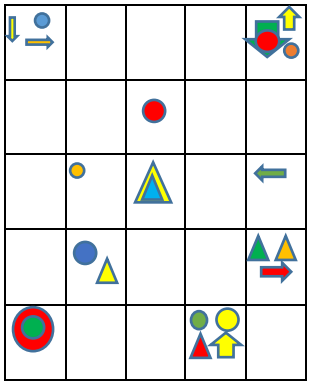
*Test Materials (Seely 2019a)*

Answer Sheet

Reference



TEST 1, 2, 3, etc.



Objects of

Each test consisted of 54 objects consisting of 6 colours, three different shapes, and three different sizes. Of these reference objects, 23 needed to be placed in a blank 25 square grid as directed by the encoder. Thus, each participant had access to the same objects and a clear understanding of what the task entailed. Furthermore, the tests combined Yule's (1997) referential model and Shortreed's (1993) research model, and each dyad had a similar test to ensure validity by relying on the same referential vocabulary and scheme throughout.

How each dyad performed the task was up to the participants. Some dyads preferred to alternate between speakers, with each student taking turns giving directives. Other dyads tried to perform the tasks where one student would give all their directives first before the second student would act as the encoder. Each dyad had its interactions recorded with a camera and was allocated 20 minutes to complete the tasks. Time management was crucial because it created a necessity to perform the tasks promptly and correctly on the first attempt.

The specifications of the instruments and the technique used for obtaining the qualitative and quantitative data representing the value or the characteristics of the variable being studied were evaluated by the three doctorate-level experts in ELT. The instruments tested were the ten referential tests used for giving directives and marking the completed tests, the transcription method used, and the record of assessment. The Index of Item Objective Congruence (IOC) was then applied to assess the content validity of the tests, transcriptions, and the record of assessment. IOC means the congruence between the items and the objectives or content, whereas it represents the sum of scores checked by the three experts.

***Assessment***

The study utilized interdependent methods of assessment where transcriptions of the referential tasks were evaluated for qualitative and quantitative data. The tasks were assessed according to the same dependent variables: the LREs and the CSs used. The construct of the

study focused on making abductive inferences, as described by Krippendorf (2013, p. 42), as ones that "proceed across logically distinct domains from particulars of a kind to particulars of another kind." In this study, the LREs/CSs, as such research, are often used to observe causal relationships where causes precede effects, consistency in causal relationships, and correlation. To develop the Model of Transactional Negotiation of Meaning, the author transcribed over 200 minutes of videos depicting the dyads' performance of the tests. Transcriptions were made from the video recordings to collect qualitative data through discourse analysis and quantitative data through content analysis that was used to determine the CSs and LREs. The transcriptions allowed the author to pinpoint precisely where the directives and their reception induced LREs and the consequential repair sequences requiring CSs.

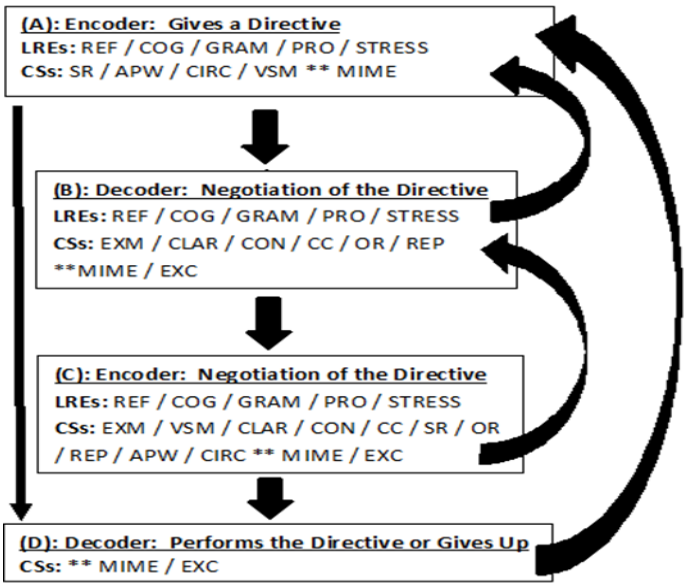
**Data Analysis**

Two prevalent features of dialogue discovered through the model were the two styles of directives used by the students. The first is the Compound Directive, where each task component is addressed singly in consecutive stanzas until all the directives compound into a whole set of instructions to complete the task. This approach to performing tasks is methodical, and the syntax is generally easier to understand for both the encoder and decoder. The second is the Conditional Directive, which tends to have a more complex syntax as they require fulfilling many conditions within one directive. Such directives may be rife with LREs if they are insufficient to clarify the referential object or location and meet the conditions in the correct order. Each type of directive in the three examples of the data analysis represents the dyadic dialogues throughout the research and informs the *Model of Transactional Negotiation of Meaning*.

Initially, each test starts in **Stage (A),** with the encoder giving a directive. Depending on the complexity of the directive, the encoder might encounter an LRE based on their ability to formulate the directive regarding referential aspects that are the object, its location, and establishing common orientation with the decoder. If the encoder does have an LRE, they may attempt CSs through verbal strategy markers, self-repair, all-purpose words, and physical communication such as miming. Once the encoder has finished their directive, the decoder may respond with **Stage (B)** or **Stage (D).**

**Figure 2**

*A Model Of Transactional Negotiation of Meaning (Seely 2019b)*




***(A) => (B)***

**Stage (B)** is the result of an LRE that affects the decoder. Poorly expressed or formulated directives and the decoder's misunderstanding of the directive are suspect due to the transaction's referential, cognitive, and grammatical aspects. CSs such as expressing misunderstanding or asking for confirmation, clarification, or repetition might be used to negotiate the directive and most likely involve a degree of miming and expressing

confirmation. Depending on the negotiation of the directive, either **Stage (A)** will need to be performed again with a new directive, or the negotiation will continue with **Stage (C).**

***(A) => (D)***

**Stage (D)** results in a successful performance of the directive by the decoder where the decoder confirms their success via a CS such as a physical confirmation, or verbal, or some combination of both. Or **(A) => (D)** occurs, and the decoder gives up on the directive and requests a new one or quits the task altogether. Insight into the difficulty of the directive can also be determined by how much planning takes place before the given directive. Sometimes, if the directive is just too difficult to understand, the encoder may decide to move on to a more straightforward task or ask their partner to go first. These avoidance strategies do not bode well when the goal is to complete all the tasks as quickly as possible.

***(B) => (C)***

**Stage (C)**. Alternatively, the CSs are used to lead to further negotiation of meaning by the encoder. Further negotiation may result from the decoder using a Comprehension Check or asking for Clarification or Confirmation. Therefore, the cycle of negotiation of meaning from stages **(C) => (B) => (C)** will continue until confirmation of understanding is expressed, and finally, **Stage (D)** is achieved.

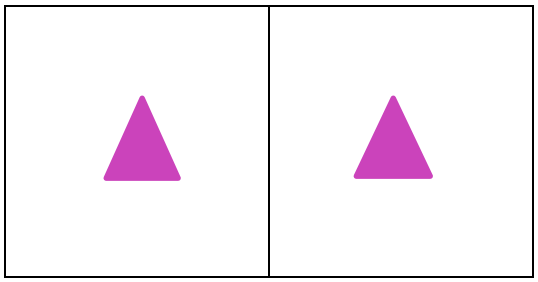
## Findings and Discussion

Using the *Model of Transactional Negotiation of Meaning*, the transcribed communicative performance of the dyads was analyzed. The following examples focus on the formulation and implementation of directives that initiate and set up the rest of the communication that will take place in the stanza. The correct and actual answers are provided as a visual reference for interpreting directives and the ensuing dialogue.

**Figure 3**

*Compound Directives*

**Correct Answer** **Actual Answer (Correct Location)**



1. S1: line four box three
2. S2: box three ok **{EXC}**
3. S1: the middle the smallest=
4. S2: =the smallest = **{EXC}**
5. S1: =triangle
6. S2: smallest triangle**{EXC}**
7. S1: purple one
8. S2: purple ↗ **{CON}(REF)**
9. S1: yeah **{EXC}**
10. S2: ok **{EXC}**

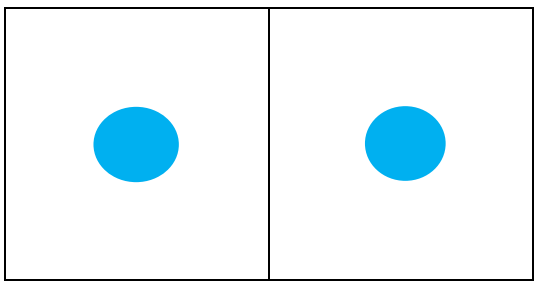
The example in Figure 3 is typical of how students formulated many of the directives in that the stanza does not start with one complete directive but is instead broken down into consecutive directives until the task is complete. The author refers to these as *Compound Directives*. The advantage of using compound directives is that it is easier for both the encoder and decoder to intercede with a CS if the need arises. The linguistic and cognitive burden is less as the simpler syntax compounds create the more complex directive. In effect, the final complex directive is a sum of its parts.

Using Figure 2, *A Model of Transactional Negotiation of Meaning*, the sequence of Figure 3 is **1(A) => 2(D) => 3(A) => 4(D) => 5(A) => 6(D) => 7(A) => 8(B) => 9(C) => 10(D)** where the CS of EXC is utilized to maintain the flow and clarity of the directive. The whole directive could have been given in one turn of dialogue, but instead, a more systematic approach was used. In line 1, **(A)**, the locational coordinates in reference to the grid are given first. In line 2, **(D)**, confirmation of the coordinates is expressed. Then in line 3, **(A)**, the encoder moves their attention to the object of reference in its position in the location and the size of the object. At this point, lines 4 and 5 happen in quick succession, as depicted by the = sign. It is not until line 8, **(B)** that S2 asks for confirmation **{CON}** based on a referential **(REF)** LRE with regards to the colour of the referent. It is important to note the syntax used in which confirmation was asked as this is crucial to understanding Transactional Competence. Syntactically, no question was formed, but rather it was asked in regards to context and the use of rising tone depicted by ↗. This course of action leads to completing the directive and the task in lines 9, **(C),** to 10, **(D)**.

**Figure 4**

*Conditional Directives*

**Correct Answer** **Actual Answer (Correct Location)**



1. S2: next… in the last line in the first box… ok have <ipa> əm <ipa> the small blue circle
2. S1: ok (nods) **{EXC}**

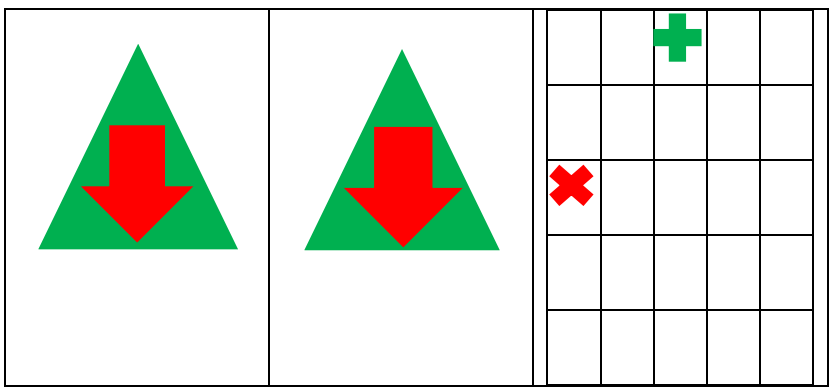
The example in Figure 4 demonstrates what the author refers to as a *Conditional Directive* without the occurrence of an LRE. The stanza follows the sequence of **(A) => (D)**. Student 2 (S2) starts by first signaling that they are moving on to a new directive with "next." Then there is a pause as depicted by (…), and then the directive begins. In the first condition of the directive, the coordinates on the grid are established, which is similar to the example in Figure 3. Then another pause occurs, and then the second condition of the directive explaining the object of reference. These pauses are typical of students who are taking a moment to plan and contemplate what to say. Before speaking, the other indication of this planning is the vocal filler <ipa> əm <ipa>. It is interesting to note that the directive ended at "the small blue circle" without any indication of the position within the location. It could be that the decoder guessed the position or assumed that the middle was inferred because no prepositions were indicating the place.

Whereas the examples in Figures 3 and 4 provide stanzas that demonstrate students giving directives that were performed with relative ease, the example in Figure 5 reflects on the complexities faced by students when the concept of referential location is challenging to grasp due to the complexity of the objects of reference and their position.

**Figure 5**

*Conditional => Compound Directives*

**Correct Answer Actual Answer (Incorrect Location)**



1. S1: ok <ipa> ə <ipa> first column and that line <ipa> ə <ipa> green one the big one= **(REF/COG/GRAM)**
2. S2: =what one= **{CLAR}(REF)**
3. S1: =triangle
4. S2: triangle which size **{CLAR}(REF)**
5. S1: the big size
6. S2: big size which color **{EXC/CLAR}(REF)**
7. S1: <ipa> ə <ipa> green
8. S2: green= **{EXC}**
9. S1: =green and in the inside have the arrow <ipa> ə <ipa> the second=
10. S2: =no no no the first column which colour which shape **{EXM/CLAR}(REF/COG/STRESS)**
11. S1: first column third third line a triangle the big one and green size and the inside one have arrow it's the=
12. S2: =which **{CLAR}( REF/COG/GRAM/STRESS)**
13. S1: the same column
14. S2: side side ↗ **{CLAR}(REF/COG/STRESS)**
15. S1: side the right no middle and red one … **{SR}(REF/COG)**
16. S2: how to put this **{CLAR}(REF/COG)**
17. S1: put inside the green down
18. S2: ok **{EXC}**

In this example, the first row and third column are the correct referential coordinates for the location in this stanza, as represented by the green cross on the grid. The red X is the incorrect location used on the grid.

This stanza starts with a Conditional Directive that refers to the referential location of the object. The progression of this task according to Figure 1 is line **1(A) => 2(B) => 3(C) => 4(B) => 5(C) => 6(B) => 7(C) => 8(D) => 9(A) => 10(B) => 11(C) => 12(B) => 13(C) => 14(B) => 15(C) => 16(B) => 17(C) => 18(D)** which required a lot of negotiation. The directive in line 1 causes misunderstanding in two different ways. The first difficulty is with regards to the reference of location with the use of "first column and that line" as "first column" is incorrect and "that line" is an ambiguous reference, hence the LRE of **(REF/COG/GRAM)**. S2 seems to ignore the reference of location and instead focuses on the object of reference **(REF)** by asking for clarification 2**(B)**, **{CLAR},** "what one." This cycle of negotiation for the object of reference continues until line 8, **(D)**. In line 9, **(A)**, S1 begins with a new directive for the second object of reference: the red arrow. In line 10, S2 seems lost, and there is a breakdown in communication which starts with the expression of misunderstanding "no no no" **{EXM}**, and then the asking for clarification **{CLAR}** "which colour which shape." At this point, the frustration S2 is having with S1 is physically expressed by their demeanour and body language as represented with the LRE **(REF/COG/STRESS)**. From turns 11 to 18, the communication breakdown continues, and the **(STRESS)** of the task becomes even more apparent in S2, and by line 14, it seems they have given up.

## Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research

One limitation of this study is that it focuses on only ten participants from one university. These participants also represent a narrow level of achievement where course requirements and an IELTS score between 5.5 and 6 determined which university students participated. The small sample size was necessary due to the amount of time required to gather data and to transcribe and assess the results. Ideally, more than one researcher at

multiple universities with students ranging in academic achievement would have made for more encompassing research.

The methodology also had limitations. This study approached the gathering, assessing, and interpreting of data through tasks that were purposely devoid of any sociolinguistic connotations. As a result, the tasks used for testing were contrived to create LREs that were explicitly referential to elicit the use of achievement strategies, all of which was done to focus exclusively on the complexities of transactional competence to develop the model. As a result, the most apparent limitation is the lack of "real world" context. In following up the research, some participants even mentioned that they felt encouraged to use more communication strategies in their daily transactions. These limitations provide an incentive for further research where the model is used to examine LREs and CSs in daily transactions. The query now becomes a question of whether Transactional Competence and the resulting communicative performance can be improved, and if so, how can it be done? Future research could address this question that focuses on the teaching of specific CSs for use in task-based communication where such skills would be invaluable to international university students.

## Conclusion

This research demonstrates that the symbiotic relationship between competence and performance constantly evolves based on continuous feedback loops starting with directives. *A Model of Transactional Negotiation of Meaning* is a needed framework that simulates the psycholinguistic process of strategic competence. It demonstrates that communicative achievement requires agreement among interlocutors concerning referential objects, spatial awareness, and comprehension of perspective. The model also exposes how directives routinely are formed in one of two ways. As demonstrated in Figure 3, the directives are sometimes given in pieces of the syntax of specific information that compounds as the

directive proceeds until it is complete. Alternatively, like in Figure 4, the directive is given using a more complex syntax which requires meeting certain conditions before the other conditions are performed.

Given that this research uses referential communication to pinpoint simple to complex transactions and their outcomes from start to finish, this manner of testing, paired with the *Model of Transactional Competence,* can target various communicative deficiencies. As a result, the model is also a valuable pedagogical tool for exploring LREs and what factors trigger the necessity for CSs in task-oriented contexts. Through the model, educators can examine and understand the transactional use of language and how it is essential for students to function in their courses and eventually the workplace. The findings indicate that students can somewhat successfully use CSs within unfamiliar situations even though their choice of strategies may be limited to what they are accustomed to using in their daily English communications. As such, the findings indicate that specific metacognitive skills regarding the processing of information, giving and receiving directives would be most beneficial to students learning through English as a medium of instruction. Because real-world tasks are spontaneous interactions where negotiation of meaning takes place all the time, the value of transactional and strategic competence should not be overlooked in the instruction of English where communicative outcomes are concerned, and the gained skills translate directly into use in our students' daily lives.

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