

## Strategic competence of bilingual learners at the Primary and Secondary levels

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### Abstract

This paper reports English strategic competence used by bilingual learners at the levels of Primary 6 and Secondary 3 at Satit Bilingual School of Rangsit University. The purposes were (1) to find out the extent to which learners at these levels were able to use strategic competence to communicate their ideas about themselves and their school life, and (2) to identify cultural appropriateness or inappropriateness in the learners' use of verbal and nonverbal strategies in oral discourse. The subjects were 34 primary 6 students and 18 secondary 3 students. All subjects were individually interviewed by two bilingual researchers of Thai and English—one Thai and one American. A set of ten questions was used in a 15-minute interview in English to secure strategic competence data from each subject. Strategic competence was evaluated via communication skills at five levels in the use of verbal and nonverbal strategies: (1) Fully competent, (2) Functionally competent, (3) Moderately competent, (4) Sufficiently competent, and (5) Marginally competent. All interviews were recorded with consent of the subjects. The results on verbal strategies used by the primary 6 and secondary 3 subjects at Communication Skill Level 1 showed their competence on (1) linguistic devices to keep the conversation going, (2) full control of tenses (3) natural expressions, (4) negation strategy and (5) avoidance strategy. Those at levels other than Level 1 resorted to code switching from English to Thai or mixed code, and the use of Thai structures in English expressions. As for nonverbal strategies, the primary 6 and secondary 3 subjects at Levels 1 and 2 revealed competence on (1) eye contact, (2) hand gestures, (3) leaning forward when asking for clarification, (4) nodding in agreement, (5) appropriate proximity, (6) good voice control, and (7) good or native-like prosodic features. Those less competent at Levels 3-5 showed lack of proper eye contact, shy facial expression and reserved body language, soft voice and mumbling, moving hands nervously, scratching head and forehead, and swirling the chair to and fro while talking. As for the subjects' cultural appropriateness, it was found that more competent subjects showed a higher degree of cultural appropriateness than those less competent.

**Keywords:** *strategic competence, bilingual learners, Primary 6, Secondary 3, Satit Bilingual School of Rangsit University*

### บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้รายงานความสามารถในการใช้ยุทธวิธีการสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษที่ใช้โดยผู้เรียนทวิภาษาในระดับประถมศึกษาปีที่ 6 และมัธยมศึกษาปีที่ 3 ที่โรงเรียนสาธิตแห่งมหาวิทยาลัยรังสิต จุดประสงค์เพื่อ (1) ต้องการทราบว่าผู้เรียนสามารถใช้ยุทธวิธีการสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อพูดถึงตนเองและชีวิตในโรงเรียนได้มากน้อยเพียงใด และ (2) เพื่อทราบว่าผู้เรียนสามารถใช้ความรู้ด้านวัฒนธรรมในการสื่อสารที่มีลักษณะเป็นวัจนภาษาและอวัจนภาษาในการสนทนา ผู้ให้ข้อมูลเป็นนักเรียนชั้นประถมศึกษาปีที่ 6 จำนวน 34 คน และนักเรียนชั้นมัธยมศึกษาปีที่ 3 จำนวน 18 คน ผู้ให้ข้อมูลทั้งหมดถูกสัมภาษณ์โดยนักวิจัยทวิภาษา ไทย-อังกฤษ 2 คน เป็นคนไทย 1 คน และเป็นอเมริกัน 1 คน เครื่องมือที่ใช้ในการวิจัยคือ คำถาม 10 คำถามสำหรับการสนทนา 15 นาที ผู้ให้ข้อมูลถูกประเมินความสามารถในการใช้ยุทธวิธีการสื่อสารที่เป็นวัจนภาษาและอวัจนภาษาที่ 5 ระดับ คือ (1) สามารถสื่อสารในระดับสูงสมบูรณ์ (2) สามารถสื่อสารในระดับที่เข้าใจได้ (3) สามารถสื่อสารได้ในระดับปานกลาง (4) สามารถสื่อสารในระดับพอได้บ้าง และ (5) สื่อสารเกือบจะไม่ได้ การสนทนาได้รับการบันทึกเสียงโดยความยินยอมของผู้ให้ข้อมูล ผลของการใช้ยุทธวิธีที่เป็นวัจนภาษาที่ใช้โดยผู้ให้ข้อมูลระดับประถมศึกษาปีที่ 6 และมัธยมศึกษาปีที่ 3 ที่ระดับสูงสมบูรณ์แสดงให้เห็นว่าผู้ให้ข้อมูล (1) สามารถใช้วิธีการที่ทำให้การสนทนาเป็นไปได้อย่างต่อเนื่อง (2) ใช้กาลเวลาได้ถูกต้อง (3) ใช้สำนวนที่เป็นธรรมชาติ (4) มีวิธีการปฏิเสธ และ (5) มีวิธีการเลี่ยงตอบคำถาม ผู้ให้ข้อมูลที่ระดับรองลงไปมีแนวโน้มที่ใช้ภาษาไทยหรือใช้ภาษาอังกฤษปนกับภาษาไทย มีการใช้โครงสร้างภาษาไทยในภาษาอังกฤษ สำหรับผลของข้อมูลที่ เป็นอวัจนภาษา ผู้ให้ข้อมูลชั้นประถมศึกษาปีที่ 6 และมัธยมศึกษาปีที่ 3 ที่ระดับสูงสมบูรณ์ และระดับที่สื่อสารสามารถเข้าใจได้ ได้แสดงความสามารถในการใช้ (1) การสบสายตา (2) การใช้มือแสดงท่าทางสื่อความหมาย (3) การโน้มกายน้ำตาลเพื่อขอความกระจ่าง (4) การพยักหน้า ที่แสดงว่าเห็นด้วย (5) การรักษาระยะห่างที่เหมาะสม (6) การควบคุมน้ำเสียงได้ดี และ (7) การออกเสียงที่เหมือนเจ้าของภาษา ส่วนผู้ให้ข้อมูลที่ระดับรองลงไป ได้แสดงว่าไม่สามารถใช้การสบสายตา มีลักษณะสีหน้าที่อขาย มีภาษากายที่ดูระวัง ใช้เสียงเบาพิมพ์ ใช้มือในลักษณะตืดตืดกั้วล เกาหัวและหน้าตา และหมุนเก้าอี้ที่นั่งไปมา สำหรับการแสดงลักษณะทางวัฒนธรรมนั้น ผู้ให้ข้อมูลที่สื่อสารได้ดีสามารถแสดงออกทางวัฒนธรรมได้ดีกว่าผู้ให้ข้อมูลที่สื่อสารได้ปานกลางหรือสื่อสารไม่ค่อยจะได้

**คำสำคัญ:** *ความสามารถในการใช้ยุทธวิธีการสื่อสาร, ผู้เรียนทวิภาษา, ประถมศึกษาปีที่ 6, มัธยมศึกษาปีที่ 3, โรงเรียนสาธิตแห่งมหาวิทยาลัยรังสิต*

## 1. Introduction

The study has its rationale in the prime importance of language education that enables learners to communicate in the mother tongue and the second language or in this study, English. Such importance is prescribed in the language curriculum in Basic Education of the Ministry of Education, Thailand. Language education that aims at effective communication skills of learners has prompted quite a large number of Thai schools at the primary and secondary level to attempt at their English Program in major subject strands: Mathematics, Science, Social Studies and English. Some other schools with highly qualified teachers who are native speakers of English have opted for a bilingual program that requires partial or full immersion.

It should be noted that a full immersion, though difficult in staffing qualified teachers for its operations, yields good results in language performance via natural language acquisition (Pholsward, 2006b). This is because a target second language is naturally acquired by learners through interactions rather than by direct instruction. Bilingual learners have ample opportunities to acquire lexis (words), syntax (sentence structures) and discourse (conversational turns) in their interactions with native English-speaking teachers. On performing on an oral discourse, bilingual learners show their conversational turns that reflect the degree of interactions between the speaker and the hearer. It should be noted that proficient speakers can communicate well by not simply use lexis (words) or syntax (sentence structure) but also their strategic competence as shown in the use of both verbal and nonverbal strategies.

In this paper, the researcher examined oral discourse with conversational turns and interactions to detect strategic competence--verbal and nonverbal strategies (Canale and Swain, 1980) used by bilingual learners at different communication skill levels. Strategic competence can be explained in terms of communicative competence which enables the speaker--also taking turn as a hearer or respondent-- to interact with the conversational partner in keeping the conversation continued in a naturally extended flow typical of English pattern of development in speaking. The speaker may use either verbal or non-verbal strategies to support their communication to achieve the intended meaning.

It is important to study strategic competence as a tool for bilingual learners in developing their proficiency at a higher level. Once both verbal and

nonverbal strategies are identified, it is possible to remedy them in less proficient speakers as well as further develop them in those more proficient with cultural appropriateness of their strategies being used (Wenden 1986; Mariani, 1994; Alibakhshi and Padiz 2011; Tian, 2011; Semaan and Yamazaki, 2015). As reported in this paper, this was the case of research into strategic competence of Primary 6 and Secondary 3 bilingual students at Satit Bilingual School of Rangsit University (SBS).

## 2. Background of the study

The background of this study deals with a general perspective of Thailand language education, a brief profile of Satit Bilingual School of Rangsit University (SBS) and literature review on earlier research as pertinent to the study.

### 2.1 General perspective of Thailand language education

Bilingual Education has been well recognized as a major part of Thailand Education Reform in rendering learners competent in the mother tongue as well as English which is a language of wider communication in business, science and technology (Office of National Education Commission, 2009, 2011). Its significance lies in its support for academic and intellectual development of learners. As a result, a number of English Programs known as EPs, as part of the Ministry of Education Curriculum on a medium scale, and bilingual schools on a relatively small scale have been on the rise in the last decade in the country. The main purpose is to support Thai students to become competent in English communication skills in response to the far-from-satisfactory scores in English on the National Test. It should be noted that in 2011, the English National Test scores of Primary 6 and Secondary 3 at the national level were 38.37 (SD 17.77) and 30.09 (SD 10.79), respectively. Two years later in 2013, the English national scores still did not improve: Primary 6 at 33.82 (SD 15.20), and Secondary 3 at 30.05 (SD 10.59) (Office of National Assessment, 2011-2013).

It is obvious that evidence of relevancy and success of bilingual school operations definitely relies on English language performance of students who have gone through the language acquisition process for a number of years (Pholsward, 2006a, 2006b). Urgency for language assessment at specific levels was apparent in quite a few local studies

(Sukket, 2007; Panti 2007; Kittitharawat, 2008). It is important for language practitioners to assess language mastery of students after a period of three years' language exposure, especially at specific levels: Primary 3/ 6 and Secondary 3/ 6. This is to ensure that students' language performance be at the target level of functional competency and to enable the school to remedy language limitations of those learners identified as in need of a remedial language program.

In this perspective, the researcher considered an acute need to evaluate student language performance in terms of strategic competence in the use of verbal and nonverbal strategies being acquired after a period of three years, i.e., Primary 3-6 and Secondary 1-3. This was to secure information on the linguistic and nonlinguistic features that mark bilingual students' proficiency in communicating about themselves and their school life.

## 2.2 A profile of Satit Bilingual School of Rangsit University

Satit Bilingual School of Rangsit University is a co-ed school for Kindergarten 1- Grade 12, with an enrolment of over 900 students. One of its academic policies is to conduct research in bilingual education. This type of research serves as a tool to investigate whether students can attain target English language skills, academic achievements in mathematics, and bilingual-bicultural mastery. The School has been assisted by the Faculty of Education Rangsit University in conducting research in bilingual education in the following areas: (1) Language acquisition of Kindergarten students in 2006, (2) English Language Proficiency of Secondary 3 students in 2006, (3) Assessment of Analytical Thinking Skills via problem-solving tasks in mathematics in 2006-2007, (4) A Study of Thai Writing Skills of Primary 1- Secondary 3 Students in 2008-2010, followed by (5) Teaching Methods Used by Social Studies Teachers in 2011 (Pholsward, 2006a, 2006b, 2008, 2009; Pholsward et al., 2010, 2011). In 2012-2013, a planned research had its focus on a study on English Communication skills of Primary 6 and Secondary 3 Students to assess their level of language mastery after the period of language immersion for three years. This was to identify strengths and limitations in students' language performance at the levels of Primary 6 and Secondary 3.

## 2.3 Literature review

The study reviewed selected literature as background of the study in four areas in support of the rationale of the study: (1) Significance of bilingual education, (2) Language acquisition, (3) Language performance assessment, and (4) Strategic competence.

### 2.3.1 Significance of bilingual education

Documents from the Ministry of Education Thailand and Office of National Education Commission underlined the significance of communication skills in English as a tool to acquire new knowledge via information search and transfer to support continuous and lifelong learning (Ministry of Education, 2008; Office of National Education Commission, 2009, 2011). All Thai schools at the primary and secondary level were directed to follow Ministry guidelines with respect to the English curriculum with emphasis on communication skills.

Bilingual education has undoubtedly responded to the English Program policy of the Ministry of Education as an option for communication-based education in Thailand. There has been an increasing number of bilingual schools in various parts of the country. The number has come with some concern for the quality of educational practices in these schools which are now monitored by the Office of Educational Quality Assurance. Most bilingual schools tend to identify language proportion of Thai and English as a matter of preference; some schools repeat instruction in Thai for the subjects taught in English while others like Satit Bilingual School of Rangsit University or SBS advocate to full immersion. Satit Bilingual School of Rangsit University is a good example of bilingual education practices in Thailand; the school has adopted the curriculum of the Thai Ministry of Education and modified it with major components of international curricula (Ourairat, 2011). Besides concern for curriculum development and implementation, quite a few earlier researchers paid attention to the importance of culture in the language for natural performance of learners (Levine and Adelman, 1993; Ziesing, 2001; Tan, 2006).

### 2.3.2 Language acquisition

There have been many studies in second language acquisition especially in the theoretical aspects and practices of second language acquisition (Babrakzai, 2006; Ellis ,2008; Schwartz 2013; Booth,

2014), and the use of language activities and model instruction to support development of speaking skills (Sangamuang, 2002; Boonsue, 2003; Boonsompan, 2008). Other research issues in second language acquisition deal with the age factor (Fougere, 2011), students' achievements and second language acquisition proficiency (Huda, 1998; Dean 2006), vocabulary acquisition (Sukket, 2007; Asbeck, 2008; Ellis, 2008; Gross et al., 2014), to name but a few. As seen in these studies, language acquisition has been considered a current issue of attention for quite a few researchers in language education.

### 2.3.3 Language performance assessment

Bilingual Schools need to identify effective ways to assess students' language performance for the reason that a higher degree of language mastery can occur after a specific period of language exposure or immersion. There have been some studies dealing with the use of language activities to develop and assess vocabulary knowledge and speaking ability (Sukket, 2007; Panti, 2007; Kittithirawat, 2008). As for international literature, researchers worked on assessment of knowledge and skills (Roberts, 2008), students' language achievements (Evans, 2009), language performance with the approach of second language acquisition (Yanyan, 2009), to name but the recent ones. Language performance assessment has always been a challenge for many researchers to find ways to assess learners' language performance effectively and authentically.

### 2.3.4 Strategic competence

Strategic competence has its long history dated back to 1980 with the work of Canale and Swain on theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing. Both explained strategic competence as "mastery of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that can be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient competence" (Canale and Swain, 1980:30). Strategic competence is viewed as part of 'communicative competence' in addition to 'linguistic competence' put forward by Chomsky in the 1960s; these two types make a complete picture of competence required of language learners for proficiency or mastery.

Other researchers after Canale and Swain have elaborated communicative competence into a commonly known term 'communication strategies'.

Tarone (1980) asserted that 'communication strategies' include all attempts at meaning-negotiation. Faerch & Kasper (1984) further exemplified 'communication strategies' as cases in which a speaker attempts to overcome difficulties due to a lack of linguistic resources. In a year earlier, both researchers classified communication strategies as anticipation, directed attention, clarification, cooperation, management of emotions, code-switching, mime, imitation, and asking for assistance. Of these nine strategy-categories, anticipation, directed attention, and clarification are treated as part of the monitoring process; cooperation, and management of emotions as socio-affective strategies; code-switching as interlingual strategies; and mime, imitation, asking for assistance as non-linguistic strategies (Faerch & Kasper, 1983).

'Communication strategies' or 'communicative competence' have received a good deal of attention from applied linguistics researchers and language practitioners, as seen in the work a decade later by Cook (1993) who focused on communication strategies used by a speaker when encountered language limitations in a communication context. It is interesting to note that in 2006, Littlemore and Low extended the domain of 'communicative competence' to include 'metaphoric competence'. Metaphoric competence refers to a speaker's knowledge and ability to use metaphors; for example, *mouth* of a river, the *eye* of a needle, the *head* of the company. Both researchers signified metaphoric competence as determining other dimensions of the competence domain—be it grammatical, contextual, illocutionary, sociolinguistic, or strategic. In particular, metaphoric thinking plays an important role in two types of approaches to strategic competence: the psycholinguistic approach in which a speaker is able to use strategies to keep conversation going, and the interactional approach in which two speakers or interlocutors are able to negotiate for their intended meaning.

The latest development in 'communicative strategies' or 'communicative competence' has revealed itself as 'global competence' in the work by Hunter, White, and Godbey in 2006. They asserted that 'global competence' includes knowledge of cultural differences and ability of a speaker to use both linguistic and cultural skills to communicate effectively. In 2015, Semaan and Yamazaki were interested in 'global competence' initiated by

Hunter, White, and Godbey (2006) and conducted an empirical study on relationship between 'global competence' and language learning motivation in critical language classrooms. The results of their research point to a positive relationship between the two variables under study.

One issue dealing with 'communication strategies' in terms of their 'teachability' has called a lot of attention from language practitioners. Some applied linguists and researchers, for example Bialystok (1990) and Lam (2005), argued that 'communication strategies' are part of *cognitive processes* in selecting strategies, thus unlikely to be teachable. However, later researcher-practitioners conducted their research on training or teaching specific communication strategies. Four studies are good examples of such attempts. Wenden (1986) studied how to help language learners think about their learning or communication strategies. Mariani (1994) investigated how learners can be taught to develop strategic competence toward learner autonomy. Alibakhshi and Padiz (2011) investigated the effect of explicit teaching of some of communicative strategies on language performance of Iranian language learners of English, and claimed the stable effect of teaching CSs even after a long interval. Tian (2011) studied and reported communication strategy training in support of interactions of second language learners at the university level.

As for research on communication strategies, researchers from 2004-2015 have still dealt with other variables like proficiency, gender, interlingual and intralingual aspects, influence of context, and specific language skills. Liu (2004) and Nisbet et al. (2005) found in their research that more proficient language learners used a wider range of language learning strategies. Chanawong (2010) studied communication strategies used by 38 university students as interlingual (literal translation, and code-switching) and intralingual (self-repair, circumlocution, approximation, appeal for assistance). They reported the most-used as 'circumlocution', and the least-used as 'all-purpose word with word coinage'. Le Pichon et al (2010) studied influence of the context of learning a language on the strategic competence of 101 children (mean age = 6.7 years with SD = 1.9; females 47%). They found language learning experience children being able to access more strategies and diversify their strategies more often than those without language learning experience. Talebi (2015)

examined linguistics and/ or strategic competence used by university students and concluded that proficiency and reading strategies determine successful reading performance.

As for local literature, a few researchers also paid attention to 'communicative strategies' or 'strategic competence'. Three examples can reflect such attention. Kongsuriya et al. (2012) examined strategic competence in communication used by eight wives of foreigners by in-depth unstructured interviews, observations, and field notes. They identified 13 *strategic competence categories*: using dictionary, attending classes, telephoning, self-directed learning, using questions and memorization, repetition and imitation, mime and gestures, note-taking, risk-taking, subconscious listening, chatting online, writing, and drawing. Athonthurasuk (2014) studied six learning strategies used by 135 Japanese-major university students: memory strategies, cognitive strategies, communication strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies. 'Communication strategies' were found as the most frequently used, followed by 'metacognitive strategies'. Kaikaew and Lornklang (2015) studied younger learners in grade ten performing on their task-based writing. The researchers signified the cultural aspect of the language. They asserted that Thai cultural contents could help students built schema and understand the process of writing. From their findings, Thai cultural contents helped motivate students to be involved in writing tasks on what they are culturally familiar with.

### 2.3.5 Standpoint of present research

As seen in the development from 'communicative competence' to 'communication strategies'/'strategic competence', then extended to 'metaphoric competence' and currently 'global competence'. It is evident that language learners need all of these dimensions of communicative competence to attain their language mastery. As focused in this study, the researcher has resorted to the root of 'communicative competence' in the domain of *strategic competence* that requires *verbal and non-verbal communication strategies* (after Canale and Swain, 1980) to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to language limitations. In particular, the study looked at younger bilingual learners whose language competence in both *verbal and non-verbal strategies* need to be assessed at a specific interval of three years after

language exposure. Both linguistic or verbal, as well as cultural skills which are verbal and non-verbal, were particularly examined in their spontaneous speech data. Assessment as such is required as part of bilingual education at the operational level to ensure language mastery via natural language acquisition.

### 3. Objectives

The study used Satit Bilingual School of Rangsit University as a case study to investigate strategic competence regarding verbal and nonverbal strategies performed by bilingual students at the levels of Primary 6 and Secondary 3.

The study had two objectives:

3.1. To examine strategic competence in the use of verbal and nonverbal strategies in oral discourse by means of assessing English communication skills of Thai bilingual students at the levels of Primary 6 and Secondary 3.

3.2. To identify cultural appropriateness or inappropriateness in the students' use of verbal and nonverbal strategies in oral discourse as shown in the assessment of their language communication skills.

It was expected that the obtained data on strategic competence via communication skills assessment of students at the levels of Primary 6 and Secondary 3 would shed light on specific language performance levels that carry culturally appropriate or inappropriate verbal and nonverbal strategies. These identified features could in turn reflect both strengths and limitations of language communication skills shown in the strategic competence domain. Such information can be applied in support of an appropriate remedial program for strategic competence, as seen appropriate. It can also be used in an enhancement program to generate culturally appropriate verbal and nonverbal strategies in stronger or higher proficient students. In addition, the instrument and procedure used to secure strategic competence data in the study can potentially serve as guidelines for bilingual schools to examine or assess their students' strategic competence as required after a target period of language exposure.

### 4. Research methodology

This section describes the subjects and the research instrument used in the study.

#### 4.1 Subjects

The subjects were students from Satit Bilingual School of Rangsit University, who, participated on a voluntary basis (with consent from their parents or guardians). The number of Primary 6 subjects was 34 (of 45 or 74.56 %). There were 18 (of 30 or 60.00%) Secondary 3 subjects. All subjects were assumed to have had at least three years' immersion or exposure to the English language in SBS. However, it was found in the data collection stage that five students [P6=4; S3=1] had less than three years at SBS. Given such a circumstance, it was expected that the number of years of language exposure could have an impact on the subjects' language performance. It should be noted that the subjects at the Primary 6 and Secondary 3 levels in the study are not to be compared in terms of communication skills in a literal sense; they are in fact examined in terms of their use of verbal and non-verbal strategies at specific communication skill levels as evaluated by valid bilingual researchers.

#### 4.2 Research instrument

One communication skills instrument was constructed by the researcher and validated for content validity/ relevancy in terms of language forms and functions by four socio-linguistics specialists. The instrument contained a list of ten questions and a set of evaluation criteria; both were tried out in interview simulations and discussed in a group discussion among four researchers for clear-cut understanding before the actual data collection.

##### 4.2.1 Communication skills evaluation instrument

A List of Guiding Questions for a 15-minute oral interview:

- Would you like to introduce yourself briefly?
- How did you or your parents find about the school?
- What is the best part of the school you enjoy most?
- What is the part of the school you would like to suggest improvement?
- What are your favorite subjects?
- What are some interesting school activities?
- What do you think about your teachers?
- What do you think about your friends/ your good friends?
- What is your plan for the future?
- Is there any question you would like to ask us?

#### 4.2.2 Criteria for English communication skills evaluation

Each subject was assigned to a fifteen-minute timeslot for an English oral interview with two interviewers--one bilingual Thai speaker and one native speaker of English. Each interviewee's language performance at the lexical, syntactic, and discursal, together with interactions, strategic competence were holistically evaluated by two interviewers on a five-point scale from 1 (high) to 5 (low) with the following meanings: 1 = Proficient, 2 = Highly functional, 3 = Functional, 4 = Sufficient, and 5 = Marginal. In addition, two observer-researchers--two bilingual Thai speakers--were present at the interviews to observe interactions and collect spontaneous speech data in five areas: (1) lexis, (2) syntax, (3) discourse, (4) interactions, and (5) strategic competence or detectable communicative strategies.

It should be noted that the subjects' communication skill levels were holistically evaluated in the first place to make a strategic competence analysis at specific communication skills levels possible. Linguistic data in all five domains were obtained but this paper is to report only *the analyzed strategic competence data* to reveal the extent to which individual subjects have acquired culturally appropriate verbal and nonverbal strategies in communicating about themselves and their school life.

#### 4.2.3 Specifications of criteria

##### Lexical Use

Level 1 Full control of the use of vocabulary for intended meaning

Level 2 Functional control of the use of vocabulary for intended meaning

Level 3 Moderate control of the use of vocabulary for intended meaning

Level 4 Sufficient control of the use of vocabulary for intended meaning

Level 5 Marginal control of the use of vocabulary for intended meaning

##### Syntactical Use

Level 1 Full control of the use of structures

Level 2 Functional control of the use of structures

Level 3 Moderate control of the use of structures

Level 4 Sufficient control of the use of structures

Level 5 Marginal control of the use of structures

#### 4.2.4 Discoursal use

Level 1 Full control of the use of oral discourse (relevance and appropriateness of conversational turns)

Level 2 Functional control of the use of oral discourse (relevance and appropriateness of conversational turns)

Level 3 Moderate control of the use of oral discourse (relevance and appropriateness of conversational turns)

Level 4 Sufficient control of the use of oral discourse (relevance and appropriateness of conversational turns)

Level 5 Marginal control of the use of oral discourse (relevance and appropriateness of conversational turns)

#### 4.2.5 Interactions

Level 1 Fully appropriate verbal and nonverbal interactions

Level 2 Functionally appropriate verbal and nonverbal interactions

Level 3 Moderately appropriate verbal and nonverbal interactions

Level 4 Sufficiently appropriate verbal and nonverbal interactions

Level 5 Marginally appropriate verbal and nonverbal interactions

#### 4.2.6 Strategic competence

Level 1 Fully competent in the use of verbal and nonverbal strategies

Level 2 Functionally competent in the use of verbal and nonverbal strategies

Level 3 Moderately competent in the use of verbal and nonverbal strategies

Level 4 Sufficiently competent in the use of verbal and nonverbal strategies

Level 5 Marginally competent in the use of verbal and nonverbal strategies

All these criteria were designed to guide bilingual interviewers to evaluate holistically English communication skills of the subjects by taking into consideration classified language features (lexis, syntax and discourse) as well as verbal/ non-verbal interactions/ strategies.

## 5. Data collection

Data Collection by oral interview of 34 Primary 6 subjects was completed in March 2013 whereas that of the Secondary 3 subjects in August of the same year. It was noted that access to Secondary 3 subjects was somewhat difficult because almost all were engaged in seeking admission in a new secondary school or taking extra study programs after the second semester--typically in the period of March to May. With assistance of one staff member at SBS in making contacts with parents of the subjects for their cooperation, the researcher was able to have access to 18 students at the secondary 3 level. It was noted that the delay resulted in one research assistant being absent from Secondary 3 data collection due to unexpected illness.

The data collection procedure required a fifteen-minute timeslot for an oral interview for each subject. Two interviewers--one bilingual Thai speaker and one native speaker of English--assessed each interviewee's language performance at the lexical, syntactic, and discoursal, together with interactions and strategic competence. These features were holistically evaluated by two interviewers on a five-point scale from 1 (high) to 5 (low) with the following meanings: 1 = Proficient, 2 = Highly functional, 3 = Functional, 4 = Sufficient, and 5 = Marginal. Also present at each interview were two observer-researchers--two bilingual Thai speakers, who also evaluated the subjects' communication skills, observed their interactions with two interviewers, and collected spontaneous speech data in five domains: (1) lexis, (2) syntax, (3) discourse, (4) interactions, and (5) strategic competence or detectable verbal and nonverbal strategies.

All interviews were recorded with consent of the subjects and transcribed later by a research assistant. Transcribed data were meant to countercheck accuracy of spontaneous speech products collected by two observer-researchers.

## 6. Data analysis

The obtained data were language performance or communication skill levels as evaluated by two interviewers and supplemented by the two bilingual observer-researchers. These data were analyzed in frequency to establish communication skills at five levels: 1 = Proficient, 2 = Highly functional, 3 = Functional, 4 = Sufficient, and 5 = Marginal.

All language features in the lexical domain were analyzed in frequency and listed alphabetically. Those in the domains of syntax and discourse were analyzed in occurrence at specific communication skills with typical examples for illustration. The other two domains--interactions and strategic competence--were analyzed in terms of patterns of occurrence and their typical examples.

In this paper, the results on communication skill levels and strategic competence in terms of verbal and nonverbal strategies derived from the oral discoursal data are reported in the section on Results of the Study.

## 7. Results of the study

This section reports the researcher's remarks on the students' years of language exposure, their communication skill levels and strategic competence features by level.

### 7.1 Years of language exposure

It was found that communication skill levels were related to the years of language exposure as follows:

- The subjects with 3 or more years at SBS performed at the highly functional level (level 2) to Proficient level (level 1) in their communication skills. There were no limitations in listening skills or speech production.
- The subjects with 1-2 years at SBS performed at the functional level (level 3) to the sufficient/marginal level (level 4/ 5). The subjects appeared to possess functional listening skills though with some limitations in speech production. It should be noted that one P 6 subject at the marginal level showed great difficulty in communicating with the interviewers.

### 7.2 Communication skill levels

Communication skill levels of Primary 6 and Secondary 3 students are reported in tables 1-4 as given below.

**Table 1** Communication skill levels of P 6 students (N=34)

Level 1: Proficient = 4 of 34 (11.77%)
Level 2: Highly functional = 16 of 34 (47.06%)
Level 3: Functional = 11 of 34 (29.41%)
Level 4: Sufficient = 3 of 34 (8.82%)
Level 5: Marginal = 1 of 34 (2.94%)



**Table 2** Levels of communication skills of primary 6 students (N=34) established after evaluation

Name	Evaluator 1	Evaluator 2	Evaluator 3	Evaluator 4	SUM	Averaged	Established level
P 6 Level 1: 4 of 34 = 11.77%							
Student 21	1	1	1	1	4	1	1
Student 9	1	2	1	1	5	1.25	1
Student 25	1	2	1	1	5	1.25	1
Student 31	1	3	1	2	7	1.75	1
P 6 Level 2: 16 of 34 = 47.06%							
Student 11	2	2	2	2	8	2	2
Student 34	2	3	1	2	8	2	2
Student 20	2	-	2	2	6	2	2
Student 3	2	2	2	2	8	2	2
Student 24	2	3	2	2	9	2.25	2
Student 29	2	3	1	3	9	2.25	2
Student 35	2	3	1	3	9	2.25	2
Student 23	2	3	2	2	9	2.25	2
Student 26	2	-	2	3	7	2.33	2
Student 15	2	3	3	2	10	2.5	2
Student 33	2	4	2	2	10	2.5	2
Student 22	2	4	2	2	10	2.5	2
Student 19	2	4	3	2	11	2.75	2
Student 7	3	3	2	2	11	2.75	2
Student 30	2	3	3	3	11	2.75	2
Student 13	2	3	3	3	11	2.75	2
P 6 Level 3: 10 of 34 = 29.41%							
Student 1	3	4	3	2	12	3	3
Student 32	2	4	3	3	12	3	3
Student 4	3	3	3	3	9	3	3
Student 8	3	3	3	3	12	3	3
Student 10	3	3	3	3	12	3	3
Student 2	3	4	3	3	13	3.25	3
Student 18	3	4	3	3	13	3.25	3
Student 12	4	4	3	3	14	3.5	3
Student 27	2	5	3	4	14	3.5	3
Student 17	4	5	3	3	15	3.75	3
P 6 Level 4: 3 of 34 = 8.82%							
Student 6	5	4	4	4	17	4.25	4
Student 14	4	5	4	4	17	4.25	4
Student 16	4	5	4	4	17	4.25	4
P 6 Level 5: 1 of 34 = 2.94%							
Student 5	5	5	5	5	20	5	5
Evaluator 1: R-Principal Researcher Evaluator 2: S-Assistant Researcher 1 Evaluator 3: D-Assistant Researcher 2 Evaluator 4: J-Assistant Researcher 3							

As seen in Tables 1 and 2, the primary 6 subjects were dominant at level 2 of communication skills. It should be noted that communication skill

level evaluation among the four evaluators appeared dominantly consistent.

**Table 3** Communication skill levels of M 3 students (N=18)

Level 1: Proficient = 9 of 18 (50.00%)
Level 2: Highly functional = 8 of 18 (44.44%)
Level 3: Functional = 1 of 18 (5.56%)
Level 4: Sufficient = NIL
Level 5: Marginal = NIL

**Table 4** Levels of communication skills of secondary 3 students (N=18) established after evaluation

Name	Evaluator 1	Evaluator 2	Evaluator 3	Evaluator 4	SUM	Averaged	Established level
Level 1: 9 of 18 = 50%							
Student 11	1	-	1	1	3	1	1
Student 12	1	-	1	1	3	1	1
Student 2	1	-	1	1	3	1	1
Student 5	1	-	1	1	3	1	1
Student 14	1	-	1	1	3	1	1
Student 4	2	-	1	1	4	1.33	1
Student 1	1	-	2	2	5	1.67	1
Student 6	1	-	1	3	5	1.67	1
Student 16	2	-	1	2	5	1.67	1
Level 2: 8 of 18 = 44.44%							
Student 8	1	-	2	3	6	2	2
Student 9	1	-	2	3	6	2	2
Student 7	2	-	2	3	7	2.33	2
Student 3	2	-	2	3	7	2.33	2
Student 13	2	-	3	2	7	2.33	2
Student 18	2	-	2	3	7	2.33	2
Student 15	2	-	3	3	8	2.67	2
Student 10	3	-	2	3	8	2.67	2
Level 3: 1 of 18 = 5.56%							
Student 17	2	-	4	3	9	3	3
Evaluator 1: R-Principal Researcher							
Evaluator 2: S-Research Assistant 1							
Evaluator 3: D-Research Assistant 2							
Evaluator 4: J-Research Assistant 3							

As seen in Tables 3 and 4, all Secondary 3 subjects but one were at levels 1 and 2. It should be noted that Evaluator 2 was absent from data collection; however, communication skill level evaluation among the three evaluators appeared dominantly consistent, except for students 8 and 9.

### 7.3 Strategic Competence Features

Data on both interactions and strategic competence can be detected from oral discourse that reveals conversational turns between the speaker and the hearer. As mentioned earlier, strategic competence reflects competence of the speaker, also taking turn as a hearer or respondent, in interacting with the conversational partner in keeping the conversation continued in a naturally extended flow typical of English pattern of development in

speaking. The speaker may use either verbal or non-verbal strategies to support his or her communication to achieve the intended meaning.

The primary 6 and secondary 3 subjects at Level 1 [Fully competent in the use of verbal and non-verbal strategies] showed their communication skills with their competency in the use of verbal strategies in (1) Linguistic devices to keep the conversation going like “Again, please,” “Can you say that again?”; (2) Full control of tenses like “He’s been my homeroom teacher . . . .,” “[we] have been to the States before,” “I think my mum saw postcard of the school”; (3) Natural expressions like “Nothing special,” “hang out”; (4) Negation strategy like “No idea, ” “Not sure”; and (5) Avoidance

strategy like “It’s quite difficult ... I have to check,  
 ” “It’s a lot .. I don’t know how to explain.”

As for verbal strategies at the less competent levels other than Level 1, it was found that some subjects resorted to code switching from English to Thai. Quite a few subjects pronounced the word “science” as /sai-an/ without ending sound “s” or mixed some Thai words like “สวย” /suay/ [beautiful], “Maak Horse..” [a chess-like game], “I like Kru [Teacher] Name ....” A few turned to a Thai structure in expressing ideas in English like “Football I like Barcelona,” “She help me English.”

Non-verbal data obtained from the primary 6 and secondary 3 subjects reveal competency in communication at Level 1 [Fully competent in the use of verbal and non-verbal strategies] and Level 2 [Functionally competent in the use of verbal and non-verbal strategies] in the form of (1) eye contact, (2) hand gestures, (3) leaning forward when asking for clarification, (4) nodding in agreement, (5)

appropriate proximity, (6) good voice control, and (7) good or native-like prosodic features.

As for non-verbal strategies of those subjects who were less competent in the use of non-verbal strategic competence at Level 3 [Moderately competent in the use of verbal and non-verbal strategies], level 4 [Sufficiently competent in the use of verbal and non-verbal strategies], and Level 5 [Marginally competent in the use of verbal and non-verbal strategies], the obtained data point to the use of (1) lack of proper eye contact, (2) shy facial expression and body language, (3) soft voice and mumbling, (4) moving hands [nervously], (4) scratching head and forehead [not knowing how to respond to the interviewer], and (5) swirling chair to and fro [while talking].

Selected examples of verbal and non-verbal strategies of the primary 6 and secondary 3 subjects are presented in Tables 5 and 6 as shown below.

**Table 5** Strategic competence of primary 6 students at five levels of communication skills established after evaluation

---

P 6 Strategic Competence Level 1

VERBAL:

No idea

1. Would you like to introduce yourself briefly? I’m fine today/ My nickname... This year in June ... K 1 to P 2.. my teachers.. Teacher ...name.... I have many friends... / all P 6 [good articulation and pronunciation... can tell ID number clearly/ I cannot remember all .../ [GOOD EXAMPLE OF well-articulated speech]

Mor-Rangsit [Mor meaning university] [CODE SWITCHING]

NON-VERBAL: No data

---

P 6 Strategic Competence Level 2

VERBAL:

I study at Satit Rangsit/ Now I’m twelve years old/ [clear and good pronunciation]/ I move from .../ this school near my house/

Not sure ... [AVOIDANCE]

Again please.../

I like Kru ...name .... [Kru meaning teacher] [CODE SWITCHING]

[lacking elaboration strategies like asking back or explaining her answers further] [CULTURAL INAPPROPRIATENESS]

NON-VERBAL:

...[I can] piano a little bit .../ learn piano with English teacher, [prosodic features and curve of pronunciation quite flat --- saying with drawing voice kind of word by word -lacking liveliness].

Go to England for one month [study] ... study in April and return in May ... [leaning forward asking “hah” to the interviewer for clarification]... [return to SBS] [CULTURAL APPROPRIATENESS]

---

P 6 Strategic Competence Level 3

VERBAL:

Can you say that again? [CULTURAL APPROPRIATENESS]

Again... [when hearing a question from the interviewer]/

English.../ Social and Career.../ house clean.../ Science [sai-an] with Thai pronunciation, e.g., paper] finish [no ending sound]/ three forty five.../

Maak Horse... / the same as Maak Rook in Thailand [chess-like game] [CODE SWITCHING]

What thing you would like to do? [asked the interviewer]

10.Is there any question would you like to ask us? I want to know what you do....

NON-VERBAL:

[with hand gestures on the table]/

[leaning forward saying ‘hah’ [for clarification]...]

My friend [rising voice] .../ [QUESTIONING] [CULTURAL INAPPROPRIATENESS]

---

P 6 Strategic Competence Level 4

VERBAL:

Not sure [weaker students tend to use “not sure” as a typical response, like “I don’t know”]

... [mumbling] [try to use Thai] [CODE SWITCHING]

Football I like Barcelona [Thai structure]

NON-VERBAL: No data

---

P 6 Strategic Competence Level 5

VERBAL: No data

NON-VERBAL: No data

---

**Table 6** Strategic Competence of Secondary 3 Students at Five Levels of Communication Skills Established after Evaluation

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S 3 Strategic Competence Level 1

VERBAL:

Nothing special ... I like to draw ... [by himself] .... [EXPRESSION] [CULTURAL APPROPRIATENESS]

He’s been my homeroom teacher ....

... have been to the States before ....

Pretty fun .... He usually give us time .... To watch movies ....

4. What is the part of the school you would like to suggest improvement? It’s a lot .. I don’t know how to explain [AVOIDANCE]

... the stuff we used in science class ....[rather old ... same old thing]

I go out watch movies ... hang out with friends ....

... my mum thought the school should be good ... good for my future .... At first in my first year was a bit hard.

... right now I don’t like ICT.

I don’t like science /sai-an/ very much. [CODE SWITCHING]

I’m not sure whether it is good or bad .... [mature EXPRESSION]

It’s quite difficult ... I have to check ..... [response when asked with Question 10: Is there any question would you like to ask us?]

[AVOIDANCE STRATEGY]

NON-VERBAL: No data

---

S 3 Strategic Competence Level 2

VERBAL:

Again please ... like Halloween Day ... have costumes .... Some [students] do... some don’t .... [EXPRESSION] [CULTURAL APPROPRIATENESS]

I don’t know how to say ....

Now I’m not good for Kemea [Chemistry—code switching to Thai] [CODE SWITCHING]

8.What about your friends/ your good friends?

Some friends have problem with other friend; history or biology ... cannot understand well...; I ask other English teacher ... I have to ask

Thai teacher about biology .... They come to class, play computer, walk around [one or two teachers] ...; new teachers every year [those

who do not teach well] ...; we have the lab... but we can’t do the lab...; [change topic]... we cannot have court to play ...; [my English

pretty good now] I learn English at SBS ...[not outside class] [HIGHLY ARTICULATED]

I think I do in math very well other subjects so so; [COLLOQUIAL/ NATURAL]

I think my mum saw postcard of the school. [TENSE CONTROL]

... most of the time stayed in mathayom building .... [TENSE CONTROL]

... when I returned I went to a bilingual school [SBS]; my father speaks English to me ....[TENSE CONTROL]

NON-VERBAL: No data

---

S 3 Strategic Competence Level 3

VERBAL:

I know English little. [THAI STRUCTURE] [EXCUSE STRATEGY]

Teacher Nyo (นางนโย), Teacher Em. Teacher Nyo is my favorite teacher. She help me English. [CODE SWITCHING to THAI]

World Champion. I like good job. สวย/suay/ (Working with beautiful things) [CODE SWITCHING to THAI]

Football I like... [Thai STRUCTURE]

NON-VERBAL:

Continuous moving hands and nodding [CULTURAL INAPPROPRIATENESS]

---

## 8. Discussion of results

Strategic competence is the final and perhaps an ultimate domain in assessing a speaker's language performance. Learners at a high proficiency level can also use language as a tool to support their academic achievements (Dean, 2006; Booth, 2014; Gross et al., 2014). It should be noted that strategic competence generally refers to one's ability to communicate the intended meanings or ideas to one's conversational partner. Even though the speaker may be handicapped with verbal expressions, the speaker can communicate meanings or ideas non-verbally (Canale and Swain, 1980; Tarone, 1980; Faerch and Kasper, 1984; Cook, 1993; Littlemore and Low, 2006; Tian, 2015). Those who are limited in lexis (words) or syntax (sentence structure) can also turn to (1) indirect verbal expressions as alternatives to show their avoidance in answering the question or (2) diversion of the conversation topic into a newly nominated topic the speaker wishes to communicate with the conversational partner. Strategic competence can be refined through practices in speaking skills as emphasized in the work of quite a few researchers like Huda (1998), Boonsue (2003), Wrenhall (2005), Pholsward (2006b), Panti (2007), Kittitharawat (2008), Alibakhshi and Padiz (2011), Schwartz (2013), and Talebi (2015).

It was found that those proficient subjects showed their communication skills reflecting competence in the use of strategic competence both verbally and non-verbally with cultural appropriateness. Cultural appropriateness in the use of verbal and nonverbal strategies [mainly appropriate conversational turns, expressions in keeping conversation continued, and gestures acknowledging attention] indicates proficiency of speakers as studied in the work of Levine and Adelman (1993), Ziesing (2001), Hunter et al (2006), Tan (2006), and Semaan and Yamazaki (2015). Those less proficient and severely limited in lexis (word) tended to resort to code switching—turning to Thai words to make their communication with the interviewers possible. This type of code switching in fact shows a positive sign in language development in that the speaker will try his or her utmost to keep conversation continued by filling in the intended meaning with words from the first language instead of letting the conversation fail or be terminated. This is a typical performance of a less proficient speaker or a learner in an early stage of language acquisition.

## 9. Conclusion

The paper examines strategic competence in terms of verbal and non verbal strategies performed by Primary 6 and Secondary 3 students at their communication skill levels. The contents of this paper deal with the fifth domain in the main study: (1) lexis or word (2) syntax or sentence structure (3) discourse or conversational turns, (4) interactions, and (5) strategic competence in the use of verbal and nonverbal strategies.

Research in bilingual education is a major requirement in operations of a bilingual school. Its significance is seen in both local and international literature on the significance of language proficiency assessment (Sukket, 2007; Panti, 2007; Kittitharawat, 2008; Roberts, 2008; Yanyan, 2009). Satit Bilingual School of Rangsit University or SBS is no exception in this type of research. Language performance assessment is periodically conducted to ensure learners' target language development at specific levels. It is important that the school's academic team should carefully examine strengths and limitations of students in the strategic competence domain to be assessed at the levels of Primary 6 and Secondary 3 as suggested and guided in this paper.

As for implications of the results of the study, the obtained and exemplified data presented in the results and discussion sections can serve as an example for bilingual schools to adopt as possible criteria to evaluate their students, especially those criteria at the proficient level [Level 1] or functional level [Level 2]. Communication skills evaluation can in turn help students to perform at a relatively high level on the national test.

It should be noted that the identified limitations of language communication skills shown in learners' performance in the strategic competence domain could be applied as contents for an enhancement program to accelerate language mastery or acquisition in weaker students. In addition, the instruments constructed with specifications could potentially serve as guidelines for language performance assessment in different domains as seen appropriate in particular bilingual school contexts.

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### 11. The Author

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