Compensation Features for Task Fulfilment in Discussion

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Abstract

The introduction of the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) has sparked the urgency to train pre-university students to communicate effectively and spurred the interest of language researchers to develop speaking skills among students in Malaysia. New methods and strategies are attempted to overcome various communication problems, and ease communication especially in the discussion component of MUET. However, due to its spontaneity, speaking remains the most difficult skill to acquire. This paper presents findings of an ongoing research on compensation features for task fulfilment in discussions. It discusses instances of how compensation features, in particular corrections and alterations, are used in discussions. This paper highlights such features as used by pre-university students in discussions which involve self-correction/self-repair, false start, repetition and restructuring/rephrasing.

Keywords: MUET; compensation features; correction; alteration; discussions

Abstrak

Pengenalan Malaysian University English Test (MUET) telah mencetuskan satu keperluan untuk melatih para pelajar pra-universiti berkomunikasi dengan berkesan dan merangsang minat penyelidik bahasa untuk mempertingkatkan kemahiran berbahasa di kalangan pelajar di Malaysia. Pelbagai kaedah dan strategi baru telah dicuba bagi mengatasi pelbagai masalah komunikasi dan bagi memudahkan komunikasi terutama dalam perbincangan. Walau bagaimanapun, disebabkan aspek spontan dalam perbincangan, kemahiran bertutur kekal sebagai satu kemahiran yang paling sukar untuk dikuasai. Di samping itu, kerana masa yang terhad untuk merancang semasa perbincangan, pelajar kerap membuat pembetulan dan perubahan dalam ucapan mereka. Strategi ini berkesan untuk memastikan bahawa mesej yang disampaikan difahami dan kehendak tugasan dipenuhi. Kertas kerja ini membentangkan hasil penyelidikan yang berterusan ke atas ciri-ciri memperbaiki bagi memenuhi kehendak tugasan dalam perbincangan. Ia akan membincangkan contoh-contoh bagaimana ciri-ciri tersebut terutamanya pembetulan dan pengubahsuaian digunakan dalam perbincangan. Kertas kerja ini membincangkan ciri-ciri memperbaiki yang digunakan oleh para pelajar pra-universiti dalam perbincangan yang melibatkan pembetulan, salah mula, pengulangan dan penyusunan semula.

Kata kunci: MUET; Ciri-ciri memperbaiki; pembetulan; pengubahsuaian; perbincangan

■1.0 INTRODUCTION

Speaking has always been referred as the most difficult skill to acquire and often regarded as the yardstick indicator for general language ability since the ability to speak and interact confidently and efficiently is often seen as one of the hallmarks of success (Chan & Bee, 2004; Wan Hassan *et al*., 2009). The challenge of teaching it is prevalent in the ESL context because most of the students are able to participate in social and academic contexts (such as in discussions and presentations) only to a certain extent. Knowing the vocabulary and mastering the interaction strategies only do not necessarily ensure the success of a discussion. Other

aspects like topic development, organization, production skills as well as the skills of resolving communication problems have equal importance in fulfilling the demands of the task assigned.

In the ESL context, Chan & Bee (2004) claimed that speaking or oral ability is of paramount importance and students often cite it as the most desirable language skills. In Malaysia, proficiency in English has become a necessity and the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) has been introduced to gauge English proficiency of students entering Malaysian universities. The test is now entrenched as one of the national standards for language performance. It is an examination administered by the Malaysian Examinations Council thrice a year and designed to measure the

English language proficiency of candidates planning to pursue tertiary education in Malaysian universities. In fact, the test has become a compulsory university entrance English test for all candidates seeking to enter local universities to pursue first degree studies (MUET Test Specifications, 2006).

Indeed, speaking is a real challenge to most language learners since it is a skill that needs to be developed and practised independently. It is more than just the ability to form grammatically correct sentences and to pronounce them correctly. The spoken language is commonly used to maintain social relationship as well as to convey information and ideas. Since it is interactive and has little time for detailed planning, it requires the learners *"to marshal a store of memorised lexical chunks"* (Thornbury, 2005: iv). Thus, due to the spontaneity and the unpredictability aspects of speaking, most language teachers resort to the teaching of rules of interaction and language expressions in the classroom to reduce the complexity of speaking skills and anxiety among students. The rules involve negotiation, clarification, attending signals, turn-taking as well as topic nomination, maintenance, and termination while the language expressions deal with common expressions used to initiate, maintain and end a discussion (Brown, 2001).

Other related studies on oral skills have shown that in order to participate effectively in a discussion, students must have the basic interactional skills and know the proper ways of managing a discussion. Skills such as initiating a discussion, nominating turns, interrupting a discussion, expressing agreement and disagreement would enable students to interact, participate and contribute to better management of the discussion. In fact, in some situations, students were trained explicitly using the interaction strategy phrases such as to disagree, to agree, to seek clarification, to clarify and to redirect the discussion in order to improve group interaction and task performance (Zainal, 2005; Lourdunathan & Menon, 2005).

However, developing speaking skills is more than just knowing about the interactional skills and using the interaction strategy phrases. Bygate (1987) pointed out that to develop the oral skills, learners have to make a distinction between language knowledge and language skills. Language knowledge is the knowledge about how grammar, pronunciation rules and vocabulary are normally used whereas language skills are seen as the learners' ability to use them. Not only that, learners need to know the devices that facilitate language production as well as devices that compensate language difficulties to resolve communication problems. For example, formulaic expressions are ready sets of expressions which have more than the normal meanings. These chunks of expressions contribute to oral fluency as speakers do not have to monitor their choice of words and do not have to construct each new utterance for each new occasions. Another feature is the use of fillers and hesitation devices known as 'time-creating devices'. These devices give speakers more time to formulate what the speakers intend to say next. The speakers use fillers that are frequently used such as 'well', 'you see', 'ermm', 'kind of', 'you know' and so on. At times the speakers rephrase or repeat what they or their interlocutors have said or simply hesitate, repeating words while trying to find the needed word.

This paper will look closely at the type of compensation features used by students in discussions and instances on how compensation features, in particular corrections and alterations, are used in discussions.

■2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Authentic discourse as in discussion or conversation usually contained a lot of redundant language and a range of discourse features such as false starts, repetitions, pauses and hesitations.

False starts and repetitions are common occurrence in spoken discourse and often regarded as performance errors. In addition, pauses in conversation are natural as speakers consider their responses while formulating and communicating their ideas. At times, a pause can be an indication for a new turn or a chance to take over, however, with hesitation devices such as 'erm' or 'er', the speaker will be able to keep the floor while formulating the next utterance (Gilmore, 2004).

A discussion is interactive as it involves collaborative exchange of thoughts, feelings or ideas between interlocutors (Brown, 2001). Since interaction is very much directed to meanings and messages and not the linguistic forms, it requires strategic competence for the students to make decisions on how to say or to interpret and to repair their language when communication is blocked during discussions. Often in the process of formulating ideas during a discussion, consequences of a slowing down or a pause, subsequent backtracking and rephrasing of an utterance would occur. According to Thornbury (2005), it is very likely for speakers to repair the utterances while monitoring either in the form of an immediate correction or 'retrace-and-repair' sequences in which the speaker 're-winds' an utterance and starts again using a different sequence of words and phrases. David (1999) in her study found that interlocutors often flounder when interacting, therefore communicative strategies would serve to compensate inadequacies in the target language. In such situations, a speaker who lacks proficiency in the target language can still communicate intent by using achievement strategies to increase fluency and facilitate communication, thus providing the learners the benefit of overcoming grammatical and lexical difficulties.

Communication strategies are what L2 learners need in order to solve problems they may encounter in actual communication. These strategies serve to compensate for the inadequacies of speakers and listeners in the target language (Tarone, 1981) and attempts to bridge the gap between the linguistic knowledge of the L2 and the target language (Tarone, 1983). Faerch and Kasper (1983) categorised communication strategies into avoidance strategies and achievement strategies. Through avoidance strategies, L2 learners reduce or abandon a message to evade from producing incorrect, non-fluent utterances. Achievement strategies on the other hand, allow L2 learners to solve communication problems due to insufficient linguistic resources for example through repairing, paraphrasing or restructuring.

A recent study by Rabab'ah (2013) confirmed the use of two types of repair namely repetition and self-initiated repair among the German and Jordanian EFL learners in overcoming communication breakdowns and passing comprehensible messages to other interlocutors. Another related study on communication strategies among Chinese learners in China indicated that Chinese students seldom used achievement strategies and to avoid any mistake in speech they would normally abandon the message or stop in mid-utterance upon encountering meanings that were too difficult for them to express (Yang & Gai, 2010).

However, in a local context, a study by Ting & Lau (2008) on the use of communication strategies among Malaysian learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) indicated that ESL learners used more achievement strategies such as the frequent restructuring of the utterances when groping to find words to express their intended meanings during discussions. Ting & Phan (2008) pointed out that the use of communication strategies was influenced by the target language proficiency of the speakers of English. The study has identified the choice of communication strategies and the type of communication strategy categories based on the students' oral interaction patterns. The less proficient speakers inclined towards strategies based on L1 and language switch to overcome communication difficulties. The more proficient speakers used tonicity to show salience of information to enhance the negotiation

of meaning. Thus, it was found that proficient speakers compensated linguistic problems between the other interlocutors by using conversational adjustment through the diversified use of lexical repetition to maintain the conversation. In addition, Wan Hassan et.al. (2009) studied a small corpus of discussions carried out by graduating students in a public university in Malaysia. The aim of the study was to identify and classify grammatical errors and other performance factors in students' oral communication. The analysis of the discussions indicated that students frequently face lexical, grammatical and formal errors thus displaying performance phenomena such as hesitations, repetitions, incomplete structures and redundancy.

It can be seen from these studies that due to the time constraints, the speakers have limited time to decide on what to say and how to say as well as to check whether the speakers' intentions are achieved. In fact, with the limited time planning, it was common to see speakers do a lot of corrections and alterations in their speech. Thus, with the gist of the whole conversation held in the speaker's mind, the speaker needs to reformulate what has been said, to give people time to understand and to remind them of things that were said (Bygate, 1987). In addition, since L2 production is always hesitant, it has much slower speech rate and often the production of ungrammatical sentences is noticeable. The degree of automaticity depends very much on the speaker's proficiency and when retrieving or encoding a lexical item, L2 speakers use compensatory strategies (Poulisse, 1990).

Since this study is interested in investigating the type of compensation features used by students in discussions and instances on how compensation features are used in discussions, the researchers will consider several existing theories on oral skills by Bygate (1987), Dörnyei & Scott (1997) and Dörnyei & Kromos (1998). According to Bygate (1987), the compensation features include self-correction, false start, repetition and rephrasing. Similarly, Dörnyei & Scott (1997) outlined restructuring, self-rephrasing and self-repair as direct strategies used to solve communication problems. These devices enabled a speaker to make changes to his message and convey the intended meaning across. In addition, Dörnyei & Scott (1997) and Dörnyei & Kromos (1998) noted that due to the time pressure, a speaker could also make use of stalling mechanisms which included time-gaining devices such as unfilled pauses or non-lexicalised filled pauses (e.g. 'ermm' or 'er'), fillers (e.g. 'you know', 'well') and repetitions. Therefore, for the purpose of the study, the compensation features are confined to *self-correction/self-repair, false start, repetition and restructuring/rephrasing*.

■**3.0 METHODOLOGY**

The study is part of a larger on-going study which investigated compensation features for task fulfilment in discussions. Twelve pre-university students voluntarily participated in the study. However, for the purpose of the study, only data concerning students who obtained a Band 3 performance in the MUET Speaking school-based examination were analysed. In total, eight Band 3 students were involved and they were placed in three different groups (Group A, Group B, Group C) and were asked to participate in a group discussion task in English. Only Group A consisted of all Band 3 students whereas Group B consisted of two Band 3 students and two Band 4 students, and Group C consisted of two Band 3 students and two Band 5 students.

In the MUET speaking test, Band 1 students are known to have very limited understanding of language and context, and hardly able to use the language. Band 2 students are rated as limited users of the language who are not fluent and have limited ability to function in the language. Band 3 students are fairly fluent with fairly appropriate use of language and fair understanding of language and context. Band 4 students are satisfactory users who display satisfactory understanding of language and context, generally fluent and able to function satisfactorily in the language. Band 5 students are proficient users of the language who obviously fluent and have high ability to function in the language. Thus, Band 6 students are very fluent, have very good understanding of language and context with very high ability to function in the language (Malaysian Examinations Council, 2006).

The Band 4 and 5 students were chosen to assist the Band 3 students in the discussion and to ensure enough data to be explored and exploited for the study. The rationale of putting the Band 3 students together with other higher bands students was to maximise the interaction of the Band 3 students and to observe compensation features used for task fulfilment in the discussions. A summary of the sampling method is depicted in Table 1.

Table 1 Diagrammatic form of sampling method

GROUP	BAND 3	BAND 4	BAND 5	NUMBER OF STUDENTS
A	4	-	-	4
B	2	2	-	4
C	2	-	2	4
Total	8	2	2	12

Video recordings of the mock MUET discussions were the main data in this study as it would enable the researcher to analyse the compensation features used in the students' discussions. The three discussions were recorded by a teacher of the school concerned at the school Resource Centre. For all the recordings, the same two people were the Examiner 1 and Examiner 2 to ensure a MUET-like speaking setting. All the three groups were given the same topic on a current issue with four different choices or alternative solutions to discuss. Figure 1 displays the sample question for the discussion which followed closely the MUET Speaking format in which the students had to perform Task A (individual presentation) and Task B (group discussion). In Task A, each student was assigned to talk on one of the four options whereas for Task B, the students were allowed to choose and discuss any of the options thus working towards achieving a consensus on the task assigned at the end of the discussion.
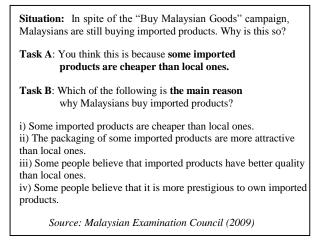
Situation: In spite of the "Buy Malaysian Goods" campaign, Malaysians are still buying imported products. Why is this so?

Task A: You think this is because **some imported products are cheaper than local ones.**

Task B: Which of the following is **the main reason** why Malaysians buy imported products?

i) Some imported products are cheaper than local ones.
ii) The packaging of some imported products are more attractive than local ones.
iii) Some people believe that imported products have better quality than local ones.
iv) Some people believe that it is more prestigious to own imported products.

Source: Malaysian Examination Council (2009)

Figure 1 Sample questions for discussion

Even though the focus of the study was the pre-university students' discussion (Task B), both tasks were carried out consecutively. This was due to the fact that the discussion (Task B) was very much related to the individual presentation (Task A) since the students could use the ideas gathered in Task A for the discussion in Task B. The students were placed in a group of four and given a task to be discussed. For Task A, the students were given two minutes to prepare their responses. Then, the students were given two minutes each and required to present their point of views individually. At this stage, the students were allowed to write down the notes as they listened to the other candidates' ideas. For Task B, the students were given two minutes to prepare for the group discussion and ten minutes to discuss the ideas.

The discussions were recorded and transcribed verbatim adapting Jefferson's (2002) transcription convention. The transcription would assist in identifying the types of compensation features used to ensure task fulfilment in discussions. Each recording took approximately 30 minutes which involved four individual presentations and a group discussion. However, for the purpose of this study, only the 10-minute group discussion data in Task B were analysed since the primary aim of the study was to look at compensation features in discussions and not the individual presentation. To analyse the discovered compensation features, the coding of the data was made on the basis of classification provided by Bygate (1987) which involved self-correction/self-repair, false starts, repetition and restructuring/rephrasing.

■4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

In this section, the description of the types and instances of compensation features are illustrated using data extracted from the transcripts. The data analysed in this study consisted of three oral discussion transcripts from Group A, Group B and Group C. As stated in the previous section, there were three different groupings with only Group A consisted of all Band 3 students whereas Group B consisted of two Band 3 students and two Band 4 students, and Group C consisted of two Band 3 students and two Band 5 students. Table 2 displays a list of communication strategies used by the students in the three discussions either to facilitate language production or to compensate for language difficulties. The findings revealed the emergence of a few communication strategies used by the Band 3 students in the discussions such as approximation, message abandonment, non-lexicalised filled pauses, prefabricated expressions, unfilled pauses, topic avoidance, restructuring/rephrasing, repetition, self-repair/self-correction and false start.

The findings also suggested that the Band 3 students used mostly compensation devices (*restructuring/rephrasing, repetition, self-repair/self-correction, false start*), and other strategies of facilitation to ensure satisfactory task fulfilment and task performance in discussions. One important thing that emerged from the transcripts is the prevalence of three compensation features which are *self-repair/self-correction*, *repetition* and *rephrasing/restructuring*. *False start*, however was surprisingly not a preferred compensation feature among the Band 3 students. These compensation features can be seen as attempts by the students to clarify their intended ideas, to get the meaning across, to keep the conversation going and to ensure the fulfilment of task. From Table 2, it could be seen that compensation features which include *restructuring/rephrasing*, *false starts*, *repetition* and *self-repair/self-correction* contributed to almost 40% of the overall communication strategies used in the discussions. Although the percentage is not high, it has proven to have some significant importance to the fulfilment of task in discussions and these features can be effective strategies to improve students' communicative ability.

Table 2 Communication strategies used by band 3 students in discussions

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES	STUDENTS								TOTAL
	Group A (*All Band 3 students*)				Group B (*grouped with Band 4 students*)		Group C (*grouped with Band 5 students*)		
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	
Approximation	-	1	-	-	3	-	-	-	4 (2.5%)
Message abandonment	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	1 (0.6%)
Non-lexicalised filled pauses	6	-	3	4	5	-	9	1	28 (17.2%)
Prefabricated expressions	4	6	4	2	8	6	6	6	42 (25.8%)
Unfilled pauses	2	1	4	3	6	3	1	3	23 (14.1%)
Topic avoidance	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	1 (0.6%)
Restructuring /Rephrasing	1	-	2	1	3	1	3	-	11 (6.7%)
Repetition	7	-	2	1	11	5	5	1	32 (19.6%)
Self-repair/ Self-correction	-	2	4	-	2	5	6	1	20 (12.3%)
False start	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1 (0.6%)
TOTAL	20	10	20	11	38	21	31	12	163

Five different samples of compensation features used in the discussions are presented and discussed below. Sample 1 indicates the common *self-repair* which allowed immediate correction at the beginning of the speech and a few occurrences of common *repetition* throughout the speech. In this situation, *repetition* was used mainly to keep the conversation going and functioned as a self-monitoring device for the students to decide whether alteration or corrections to the lexical items needed to be done. Thus, if no correction is needed, the use of *repetition* would allow more time for the students to construct and complete their ideas. Although it affected fluency in delivery, *repetition* definitely worked as a time-gaining strategy for the students to recall the appropriate words and to plan for the next message (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997; Dörnyei & Kromos, 1998) thus ensuring the fulfilment of task.

Sample 1

*"In my opinion, Malaysians are still buying imported product. This is because the quality is better than local ones. Ermm... Malaysian, some of Malaysian (**self-repair**) do not believe that our quality is good. Ermm... maybe some the... some... some people (**repetition**) they make the products....they don't use the real ...the... real (**repetition**) material to... produce the product. So... some product may... may (**repetition**) get the bad effect to peoples".*

(Student A Group A)

A *false start* is a common phenomenon in interaction and seen as performance errors in spoken discourse. Usually, a *false start* is kept to a minimum as they would cause difficulty in comprehension. (Gilmore, 2004). However, in the context of a MUET Speaking discussion particularly for the Band 3 students in this study, it was rather unusual to find *false starts* since the students were observed to have been sufficiently taught the

repertoire of formulaic expressions used to start a discussion. This situation could be seen from the use of routinised expressions in the discussions such as *'In my opinion'* (to give opinion), *'This is because'* (to give reason), *'I agree with your opinion'* (to agree)*, 'I do not agree with your statement'* (to disagree) and *'So I think'* (to conclude). These formulaic frames are common features in non-native speakers and as claimed by Wray (2000), formulaic sequences save processing time and 'hold the key to native-like idiomaticity'. Thus, it can be concluded that with adequate practice, students may be able to perform and communicate well in discussions thus reducing the occurrence of a *false start*. Although, such situations may be true for school candidates, the results may vary when it concerns private candidates. From the three oral discussions, *a false start* occurred only once and was altered with immediate correction through *self-repair/self-correction*. Quite similar to *repetition*, a *false start* functioned as a strategy to keep the communication going and for the speaker to gain extra thinking time. However, it appeared occasionally and usually at the beginning of a speech, thus requiring the speaker to reformulate the idea to ensure the clarity of message conveyed (Refer Sample 2).

Sample 2

> *"Ermm I agree with your opinion but I think important products are cheaper than local ones. So, err they... (**false start**) now people (**self-repair**) want only err now people want (**repetition**) cheaper products so that they can afford for it. So I think imported products are cheaper than local ones. Local ones nowadays already ... local ones now nowadays already (**repetition**) very expensive and they want to... make money so they are ... they are willing to ...they are willing to... (**repetition**) (pause) (0.03) sold they are willing to sold (**repetition**) in a high price... so I think imported products are cheaper than local ones".*

(Student G Group C)

Sample 3 below indicates immediate correction of errors and how the speaker used *self-repair/self-correction* for phonological errors for example, *'quali quali err quality'* and *'pre presit prestigious'* as well as lexical error such as *'imported err prestigious'* while speaking. These examples demonstrated the ability of the speaker to monitor the errors in the speech and correct the word to ensure the clarity of ideas and fulfilment of task. Consequently, due to time constraints, it could be seen in Sample 3 that the *self-repair/self-correction* led to *restructuring/rephrasing* of ideas in which the speaker abandoned the initial plan and used an alternative plan (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997) or applied the 'retrace and repair' sequences in which the speaker reformulated the utterance using a different sequence of words and phrases (Thornbury, 2005) to communicate the message. Thus, it could be seen in Sample 3 that *self-repair/self-correction* and *restructuring/rephrasing* successfully compensated for vocabulary problems and minimised errors in the structure to ensure the clarity of ideas conveyed in the discussions.

Sample 3

> *"I agree with your statement, Candidate D. Ermm because... imported products are even though it is quality quali quali err quality (**self-repair**) and so reasonable price. But I think pris err some people believe that it is more (**restructuring**) pre presit prestigious (**self-repair**) to own imported products. Because imported err prestigious (**self-repair**) products err like they want to own their own... branded... clothes like that so, I think prestigious, they want for prestigious (**restructuring**) not for quality".*

(Student G Group C)

In some situations, the process of correcting and altering the messages is enhanced by the occurrence of pauses and hesitation devices. The unfilled pauses indicate the formulation of ideas or a sign of a new turn while hesitation devices such as *'err'* or *'ermm'* enable the speaker to hold the turn and formulate the next message. Pauses and hesitation devices are indeed good tools for speakers to gain time to plan or restructure (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997) in order to get the meaning across and to fulfil the task. In Sample 4, the unfilled pauses occurred concurrently with *repetition* to provide extra thinking time for the speaker to restructure and complete the ideas.

Sample 4

> *"I do not agree with your statement. Err I think... the packagings... are more attractive. This is because the... the (**repetition**) local products... are (**pause**) (**0.06**) more attractive...than...the imported products. (**pause**) (**0.06**) And the (**pause**) (**0.12**) and the (**repetition**) imported products are...some of them are (**restructuring**) not very attractive ah".*

(Student E Group B)

Since the students are forced to plan and re-plan in real discussion time, it is common to see the occurrences of multiple compensation features in a speech. Sample 5 highlights the usefulness of *repetition* as time-gaining strategy and self-monitoring device both to complete an existing idea and to indicate detection of lexical or phonetics error which later led to *restructuring/rephrasing* of ideas or *self-repair/self-correction*. The instances of compensation features such as *restructuring/rephrasing* of ideas and *self-repair/self-correction* in the discussions revealed the gap in the students' language. The errors in structure and grammar were frequent that *restructuring/rephrasing* of ideas and *self-repair/self-correction* often needed to ensure the fulfilment of task.

Sample 5

> *"Yeah, I totally agree with you. Err... I think that...the (pause) (0.05) imported products have better quality than local one because... the (pause) (0.05) the (pause) (0.05)(hand gestures) ingredients use to... make the products have a (pause) (0.08) better quality than...in the...local. "If... if (**repetition**) we have the... better if we have a (**self-repair**) better ingredient to make our products then we can get a long...then the product can be used last longer (**restructuring**) than... the the (**repetition**) product that is used that that (**repetition**) is make (**self-repair**) from the...worst ingredients. So... do you agree with me, Candidate D?".*

(Student E Group B)

Overall, the results of the study confirmed Bygate's (1987) findings on compensation features which included *self-repair/self-correction, false start, repetition* and *restructuring/rephrasing*. There were no apparent difference in the use of compensation features across the three groups. Regardless of the different groupings, all the Band 3 students displayed the ability to use compensation devices in the discussions. It was noticed that *repetition* was the most commonly used feature as compared to *self-repair/self-correction*, *restructuring/rephrasing* and *false start*. The study indicated that *repetition* allowed more time for students to construct their ideas and was used in attempts to plan for new utterance or to gain time to recall a lexical item (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997; Dörnyei & Kromos, 1998; Rabab'ah, 2013). It was found that the repetition of some words or phrases helped to gain more time in retrieving the required lexical item and maintain conversation (Rabab'ah and Bulut, 2007). Another frequent compensation mechanism was *self-repair/self-correction* which was used to remedy mistakes in conversation (Drew, 1997) and as in this study, mostly used to correct lexical and phonological errors.

A *false start* hardly occurred in the discussions as it was compensated with the use of formulaic expressions and it could be seen that the presence of pauses and hesitation could offer stalling mechanism (Dörnyei & Scott 1997; Dörnyei & Kromos, 1998) in the process of correcting and altering the message.

Although compensation features affected fluency and reflected on some problems in language use, it was found that the ability to restructure the ideas and to correct when errors were noticed in the discussions successfully aided in conveying the intended ideas and contributed to the fulfilment of task. It could be seen from the study that the discussion is maintained, enhanced and made comprehensible through *repetition* to retrieve appropriate lexical items, and mistakes were repaired using *self-repair/self-correction* and *restructuring/rephrasing* to produce correct forms or structures.

■5.0 CONCLUSIONS

The study revealed that compensation features such as *self-repair/self-correction, false start, repetition* and *rephrasing/restructuring* used by the pre-university students could be important strategies to compensate for task fulfilment problems in discussions. It was discovered that corrections and alterations are apparently necessary for Band 3 students to ensure that message conveyed is understood and task is fulfilled. In this study, r*epetition* is clearly seen as time-gaining mechanism used to keep the conversation going. Often through *repetition*, the thinking time is extended to enable the completion of an existing idea and to enhance the planning of the next message. Other compensation devices such as *self-repair/self-correction* and *restructuring/rephrasing* occurred concurrently with *repetition* and are commonly used to correct errors in the speech through either immediate correction or reformulation of utterance using different structure. Consequently, it was found that formulaic frames and routinized expressions succeeded in reducing communication problems and kept the occurrence of *false start* to the least. In addition, similar to *repetition*, pauses and hesitation devices provide extra thinking time for the Band 3 students to repair and restructure the message for satisfactory fulfilment of task.

Understanding language difficulties in the pre-university students' discussions would offer some insights for teachers to assist the students to become more proficient in discussions. The findings on the compensation features used by the Band 3 students to compensate for the fulfilment of task should be highlighted to teachers and students, and translated into classroom practices. The pre-university students should be taught to apply compensation mechanisms rather than resorting to avoidance strategies leaving the task unfulfilled. Thus, students should be taught to exploit these features as time-gaining devices and self-monitoring mechanisms in order to keep the communication going, to clarify their intended ideas, to get the meaning across, and to ensure the fulfilment of task. At the same time, although corrections are tolerated and considered inevitable in speech, students should be advised to avoid excessive *repetition* and *restructuring/rephrasing* of ideas during discussions. Although some might argue that compensation features would affect fluency in delivery, it would definitely help students to improve performance and to fulfil the task in discussions.

The analysis of the discussions revealed that the students were quite familiar with the types of compensation features used to

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enhance task fulfilment in discussions, however, the students especially the Band 3 students should be taught to use the features tolerably to achieve fluency in delivery and better task performance in discussions. In addition, although this study looked at a small number of students, it has proven that compensation features in discussions were not seen as communication failure but rather as an important strategy in compensating the lack in the linguistic knowledge. Despite the Band 3 being the focus, it could also be assumed that Band 2 and Band 4 students to a certain extent might show similar patterns in their speech.

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