Perceptions of Chinese EFL learners
on communication difficulties and communicative strategies
in use in the Australian context

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Abstract
This paper reports on the results of an investigation into the perceptions held by a group of Chinese EFL learners, who currently studying in Australian tertiary institutions, on communication difficulties and communicative strategies they have employed in Australian academic and casual contexts. The aim of the study is to present a Chinese perspective of the issue being investigated. In particular, the significance of teaching communicative strategies to Chinese learners of English is proposed.

Key words
Communication difficulties  communication strategies  Chinese learners of English

1. Introduction and Background

Last decade witnessed an increasing number of Chinese EFL students coming to Australia for their tertiary education. It is found for the overseas students, “a significant proportion of real-life L2 communication is problematic” (Dornyei 1995:51), especially when being exposed to a completely new language and culture environment. They have encountered great difficulties in their daily communication with the native speakers. In particular, “participation in seminars or academic discussion has been noted as an area of major difficulty” (Jordan 1997:46).

There are bodies of research addressing the EFL students’ difficulties in listening and speaking tasks when living and studying in native speaking countries (Jordan and Mackay 1997; Clennell 1999; Ferris & Tagg 1996; Christison & Krahank 1986; Dornyei 1995; Mornica 2000). Jordan and Mackay’s (Jordan 1997:45) survey of the spoken English problem of overseas postgraduates showed that on arrival in the UK, understanding spoken English was the biggest difficulty for 70 percent of the postgraduates taking part in the survey and six months later, “Expressing themselves in speech (involving fluency and self-expression) become the biggest problem”. Another survey by Christison and Krahank (1986) at five universities in the USA also suggested, in order of difficulty, overseas students ranked speaking as the first (35%) and closely followed by listening (32%)(ibid: 45). In spite of the large number of
studies in this area, as far as a Chinese perspective is concerned, there is very few studies focus on communication difficulties Chinese learners of English encounter in social and academic contexts when studying in native speaking countries, Australia for example.

Thus, this study is significant in that it provides language educators a unique view on perceptions of a group of Chinese learners of English who study in Australian tertiary institutions on the communication difficulties encountered and communicative strategies employed in Australian social and academic contexts.

Two questions are raised as the focus of the project:

- What difficulties do Chinese learners of English perceive when communicating with native speakers in Australian social and academic contexts?
- What communicative strategies do they report to employ to cope with the difficulties?

The purpose of this study is not to generalize the research findings to a larger population, rather, the researcher attempts to, first, have some insights of the difficulties encountered by some Chinese EFL learners who currently study in Australia; second, explore what strategies they employ to cope with the difficulties, which might be helpful for the future learners. At last, it is hoped this study might provide language learners who plan to study overseas with some useful strategies they could employ when communicating with native speakers.

2. Literature Review

Communication difficulties
Reviewing the literature, we may find researchers in this field have different views as to the problems and difficulties facing by the oversea students when studying in the English speaking countries. According to Ferris and Tagg, “class participation, asking and responding to questions and general listening comprehension (as opposed to lecture comprehension)” are the three major problematic areas (Ferris & Tagg 1996:297). However, Oster’s (1980) study found that her subjects felt much proficient at everyday listening and conversation (e.g., with friends, store clerks) than with listening and speaking tasks in their classes. Mason (1995) claims even students with TOEFL scores high enough for admission to most U.S. university programs (550-600) may not be linguistically proficient enough for the academic listening and speaking tasks confronting them (ibid: 299). Jorden in his study (1997:45) found the most persistent problem for the oversea students was the inability to express themselves adequately in the spoken language due to the little time students spent in actually speaking English in a typical day. Clennel also points out many of oversea students have difficulties interacting professionally and socially with their native-speaking
peers and teachers in academic context due to their insufficient knowledge of the “pragmatic content of the message” (1999:84).

Despite of the discrepancy of the difficulties and problems facing the oversea EFL learners, the researchers also share some common consensus that the oversea students do have the similar problems in the following three areas: problem with listening comprehension in lecture or seminar, difficulties in expressing themselves properly in academic and social context and problems in classroom discussion with native speaking peers. Even though some EFL learners achieve high score in a certain standard English test such as IELTS or TOFEL and are labeled as competent users of English, they are still confronted with such difficulties in the real studying context. As Riggenbach suggests, linguistic competence alone does not guarantee successful communication, rather, foreign language learners need other competence such as sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competence to effectively communicate (1999:6).

In summary, the literature suggests various difficulties facing the overseas students. Generalizing the difficulties identified by different studies is not sensible as the subjects in each study are different in terms of their L1, cultural background, language proficiency and learning styles. Thus, there is still room for further research in this area from a Chinese perspective, which may enhance our understanding of the issue being investigated.

**Communicative strategies**

It is commonly accepted that EFL learners have difficulties when communicating with native speakers. What communicative strategies they employ to cope with such difficulties is another area that are researched thoroughly. Reviewing the literature, communication strategy is defined as “a systematic attempt by the learner to express or decode meaning in the target language (TL), in situations where the appropriate systematic TL rules have not been formed” (Tarone, Frauenfelder and Selinker 1976; Tarone, Cohen and Dumas 1983; cited in Tarone 1983:63). According to Dornyei and Thurell, learners need some specific communication strategies such as “message adjustment or avoidance, paraphrasing, approximation, appeal for help, asking for repetition, asking for clarification, interpretive summary, checking, use of fillers hesitation devices” to function well in the informal everyday conversation (1994:40).

The literature review within the framework of communication strategy suggests that there are both advantages and drawbacks for EFL learners to employ such strategies in real communication. Lam and Wong’s (1997:136) study suggests that communication strategies such as “seeking information, clarifying oneself and checking the other people have understood one’s message” can help learners “play an important part in discussion”. Wales asserts that the use of “pidginized variety of English” is necessary, otherwise, communication is “as little as possible” (1993:146).
Pica also points out it is essential to teach students “how to participate in the negotiation of meaning” in order to change the comprehensible input into output, which are crucial to second language acquisition (1987:3). However, Johnson’s study finds that the “success” in real communication is achieved too early with students employing the communicative strategies, thus learners make no progress in terms of their linguistic competence and their interlanguage fossilized in a too early stage, which means they become the victim of their own highly developed strategic competence (1997:182).

Different views on the pros & cons of communicative strategies pose another question: are communicative strategies teachable? Dorney points out L2 learners might benefit from instruction on how to cope with performance problem since a significant proportion of real-life L2 communication is problematic (1995:51). Supporting this view, Hatch posits (1978:434) that learners should be told to use “whatever fillers they can to show the Native Speaker that they do not give up”. Dorney also asserts that strategies training provide the learners with a sense of security in the L2 by allowing them room to maneuver in times of difficulty. Rather than giving up their message, learners may decide to try and remain in the conversation and achieve their communicative goal (1995:80). In this sense, communicative strategies are teachable.

However, some researchers strongly believe communicative strategies are acquired rather than being learned. According to Bialystok and Kellerman (1987), “most adult language learners already have a fairly developed level of this competence, involving a repertoire of applicable CSs (communication strategies), regardless of their level of L2 proficiency” (cited in Dorney 1995:60). Canale and Swain (1980) also assert that communicative strategies are most likely to be acquired in real-life communication and not developed through classroom practice (ibid: 61). The discrepancies between the pros and cons of using communicative strategies and whether it is teachable or not provide more room for further research, especially from a particular group of learners perceptive, say, Chinese EFL learners.

As far as a Chinese perspective is concerned, studies first focuses on introducing theories of communicative strategies into Chinese context (Dai and shu 1994, Wen 1996). Later research proposes the significance of integrating communicative strategies training into Chinese EFL teaching programs (Chen and Luo 1997, Zhang and she 1999). Current empirical studies mostly investigate what specific communicative strategies Chinese learners of English prefer to use (Gao 2000,) or use in Chinese ELT context (Wang 2002) rather than explore what communicative strategies they employ to overcome the difficulties in authentic English speaking context. Thus, the present study is significant in that it attempts to explore a group of Chinese learners’ perceptions of communicative strategies they employed to cope with the communicative difficulties they encountered when studying in Australia.
3. The study

Research methods

Taking account the specific research context, the exploration of the perceptions of a particular group of Chinese EFL learners, which are not quantifiable and opinion oriented, the researcher adopts the qualitative tradition because they emphasize on ‘rich’ data collection with extensive explanations and details being provided on the contexts and participants in the research” (Burns 1999:22).

Within the qualitative tradition, case study is adopted to address the research question first because it is “particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic” (Merriam 1988:16), which means, it draws attention to the question of what specially can be learned from the single case rather than generalization beyond (Stake 2000:435). Questionnaire and focus group discussion are adopted for the data collection as they both cater for the specific needs of the researcher in addressing the research questions.

Participants

Two groups of subjects were invited to participate in this study. One group gave response to the questionnaire, the other participated in the focus group discussion.

Group one participants’ profile

Sixteen subjects, aged from 23 to 38, were invited to answer the questionnaire. All of them were Chinese EFL learners of English who studied at tertiary educational institutions in Melbourne (13 from Melbourne University, two from Victoria University and one from Monash University). The subjects, though from different faculties, were all doing their master degrees when participating in this project. They are all labeled as competent users of the target language (IELTS Band 6 at least).

Group two participants’ profile

Six subjects were chosen from group one for the focus group discussion. Five of them are currently studying in the University of Melbourne and one from Victoria University. Table 1 provides detail information about the six subjects in the focus group discussion.

Table 1: Focus group discussion participants’ profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subjects</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Year(s) of learning English</th>
<th>Faculties</th>
<th>IELTS Score</th>
<th>Time stay in Australia (months)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S1</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S2</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
4. Results and discussion

Data collected through questionnaire and focus group discussion was analyzed and interpreted in accordance with the research questions.

Communication difficulties

- Findings
The major problem identified by the 16 subjects when they first arrived in Australia, was comprehension difficulty due to different pronunciation and accent, quick speed of speech and different word choice. For example, two subjects mentioned they couldn’t understand native speakers simply because they used different and unexpected words. As one subject put it, “I spent the whole first month to figure out what G’Day means” (S2).

As far as communication difficulties in academic context is concerned, the major difficulties reported by the subjects are listening comprehension problem due to native speakers’ fast and incomplete structure of utterances in lecture or seminar discussion (70%) and lack of opportunities to contribute in academic discussion as they could not assert in (50%). Apart from the major difficulties, one subject mentioned he had great difficulty in understanding his peers because most of his classmates are non-native speakers from worldwide and “their accent are terrible” (S2).

Six months later, the biggest problem turned out to be using English appropriately in a certain context. Fifteen subjects expressed similar expressions. Some mentioned they had no problem to understand and to be understood; yet they felt frustrated about the fact they had to “express themselves in a round about way” (S3). Sometimes, they felt embarrassed to use awkward expressions, for instance, instead of asking for a straw, one participant required a “pipe” from the cashier for her coke (S5). Thus, perceived by most participants, they actually did not have the sense of achievements even though they could succeed in communicating successfully with native speakers.

- Discussion
As mentioned in the literature review, the source of difficulties encountered EFL learners includes listening comprehension of what native speakers say, lack of opportunities to participate and maintain conversation in academic discussion and lack of competence in using English correctly and appropriately in a certain social and academic context (Ferris and Tagg 1996; Clennell 1999; Morita 2000 et. al.). The subjects in this study identified similar difficulties compared with the previous studies.
in spite of their cultural and language backgrounds.

In the casual context, most subjects reported they had difficulties communicating with native speakers successfully due to their accents, speed of speech and word choices. Lack of confidence to talk to native speakers was also a problem reported by the subjects. All these seemed to indicate and to some extent support the findings in Clennell’s study that allowing non-native speaking (NNS) learners to experience authentic oral interaction with NSs could raise awareness of language in context thus build confidence in the learners’ oral skills (1999:83).

Similarly, in academic context, the major problems exist in the comprehension of lecture and the participation in academic discussion. Even all the subjects had passed the IELTS test and were labeled as competent users of English; they still perceived great difficulties in listening and speaking due to various reasons. This strongly support Morita’s assertion that displaying advanced English skills in the exams does not guarantee successful communication with native speakers (2000:298). Another finding in this study was also back Ferris and Tagg’s observation that students did better with new scientific (academic) vocabulary than with ‘common’ English vocabulary (1996:310), as many subjects in their questionnaire answers mentioned they couldn’t function well in daily communication with native speakers because “they (NSs) always use different words”.

However, the study reveals some findings beyond what the literature suggests. Firstly, the researcher compares the difficulties facing this group of Chinese EFL learners between “they first arrived” and “they arrived six months later”, which suggested differences did exist. When first arrived, most of the subjects feel it is difficult to understand what the native speakers say. Six month later, the problem becomes they do not know how to express themselves appropriately in a certain social or academic context. This finding indicated that it was easy for EFL learners to adapt to Australian English in terms of pronunciation but difficult to acquire the sociocultural knowledge to interact with native speakers appropriately. The latter may need more exposure to authentic use of native English in various contexts.

Another interesting finding concerning the participation difficulty in seminar discussion is that most of the subjects know they are expected and valued to contribute in classroom discussion, because they were told so even before they arrived. However, it was difficult, because they don’t know how. As one subject reported “How could I interrupt the lecturer when he delivered his lecture and other students listened attentively (S1)?” In this sense, culture of learning also played a part in increasing the difficulties in EFL learners’ academic experience. To sum up, the difficulties facing the subjects in this study partly reflected the difficulties identified in previous studies such as linguistic difficulties in combination with sociocultural and psychological ones (Morita 2000:299), partly differed from what had been suggested by the literature.
Communicative strategies

- **Finding**

The findings in the use of communicative strategies, to some extent, differ from the findings suggested by the previous studies. To begin with, the majority (12/16) of the subjects in this study have never heard of “communicative strategies”. Only one subject, an English teacher, reported to be trained to use communication strategies. What interests me most was, even though most of the subjects had never heard or learned to use communicative strategies in their foreign language classroom, they unconsciously used the strategies in the interaction with native speakers when encountered the difficulties. This finding seems to support the views hold by some researchers (Bialystok & Kellerman 1987; Canale and Swain 1980 et.al.) that communicative strategies are acquired in real-life communication and not development through classroom learning.

In terms of *when* the subjects employ communicative strategies to cope with the difficulties, differences also arise compared with the literature. For example, the subjects mostly would ask repetition in casual context and keep silent or ignore the topic in academic context, which indicated they did be aware of different social contexts. The study also suggested due to the lack of training in using communication strategies, many subjects chose to keep silent or give up the conversation when there were difficulties. This indicated in our language-teaching program, teachers should provide good models to use communicative strategies and teach language-learning strategies explicitly (Liu 1999:99).

Even though they realized the inappropriacy of using certain awkward expressions, most subjects in this study held positive attitudes towards using communicative strategies as it at least facilitated negotiation of meaning. However, two participants mentioned the use of communicative strategies hindered their progress in using English accurately, which was back Johnson’s findings that the “success” in real communication by using communicative strategies may cause fossilization in learners’ interlanguage (1997:182).

In spite of the differences, what strategies employed by the subjects in the study was within the framework suggested in the previous studies. For example, the specific strategies such as “message adjustment or avoidance, paraphrasing, approximation, appeal for help, asking for repetition, asking for clarification, interpretive summary, checking, use of fillers hesitation devices” (Dornyei and Thurell 1994:40) were all reported to be used by the subjects to cope with different situations in their daily communication with native speakers. Thus, we may conclude it was helpful for Chinese EFL learners to learn communication strategies in order to function well in
their future study in English speaking countries.

5. Conclusion

Implications

This study explored a group of Chinese EFL learners’ perceptions of the difficulties encountered when communicating with native speakers and the strategies they employed to overcome such difficulties. Both similarities and differences were identified between this particular group of Chinese EFL learners and learners from other backgrounds, which, to some extent, support or differ from the previous studies.

There are two major implications emerged. To begin with, currently in China, English training programs are mostly exam oriented to prepare learners who intend to study abroad to pass certain standard English test, such as IELTS or TOFEL. However, passing these exams with high marks does not guarantee learners’ success in communication in the native speaking countries, particularly in the academic context. Thus, considering the increasing number of Chinese learners of English intending to study overseas, it is of critical importance to provide them with the English training program, EAP (English for Academic Purpose) for instance, before rather than after they depart from China. Practically, this may save learners large amount of money they spend on EAP program in order to adapt to the English academic culture. Pedagogically, this may provide learners with the opportunities to get some ideas of the differences between Chinese and Western academic cultures and to be well prepared for their future study.

Secondly, for so many years, learning English for Chinese learners merely means learning grammar and vocabulary, which is far from being sufficient. Learners can neither speak nor understand the target language competently, let alone to use English appropriately in various social and academic contexts. With a sense of humor, Chinese learners call it “deaf and mute English”, a fruit harvested by the teacher-centred traditional approach (Tan 2001, Wang 2002). Suffering from the deaf and mute English, Chinese learners call for changes in their English teaching. Thus, it highly suggested the teaching of communicative strategies should be integrated into Chinese oral English teaching programs in order to facilitate learners to deal with communication difficulties thus to function successfully when they study in the native speaking counties.

Recommendations of further study

To sum up, as the number of the subjects in this study is quite limited, the findings might not be representative for all the Chinese EFL learners. Yet, since the goal of this study is not to generalize its findings, but to provide Chinese EFL teachers and learners with some valuable information as to how to teach more effectively and how
to learn better. In this sense, this case study is fruitful in term of its findings and results. However, due to the scope of this study, it is not possible to portrait a complete picture of the issue being investigated. Some questions remain unanswered. For instance, to what extent, communicative strategies help or hinder learners’ English learning; how culture of learning affects EFL learners’ communication; are there any difference between the strategies that learners employed when communicating with native or non-native speakers? All these questions merit further research, which would contribute to our knowledge to know whether and how the perceptions of different groups of learners vary with different variables such as cultural background and proficiency level.
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