AN INVESTIGATION OF COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES USED BY CHINESE NON-ENGLISH MAJOR POSTGRADUATES

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Abstract

This paper through tape recording students' conversations with native speakers makes an attempt to examine the use of CSs by Chinese non-English major students at postgraduate level. The results show that the students are not competent in using CSs which is easily seen in their heavy reliance on the L1-based strategies and appeal for assistance strategy rather than the more efficient and effective L2-based strategies. Inexperienced in oral communication and unaware of CSs, the students in general need awareness training in the use of CSs. Suggestions are then given as to how to conduct the training in terms of form, procedure and materials.

Key words
communication strategies, postgraduate students of non-English majors, communication strategy training

The use of communication strategies, CSS, is an interesting phenomenon that occurs when language learners are confronted with communication breakdowns due to their insufficient language resources. It is generally believed that there will be considerable attainment if learners can compensate for their linguistic deficiency by employing CSSs in an appropriate way. Theoretically, the use of strategies in communication is a major reflection of strategic competence which in turn forms one of the four components of communicative competence. Canale and Swain in 1980. Accordingly, the teacher can develop students' communicative competence by building up their strategic competence. What is by enhancing their ability to use CSSs.

Recently the focus of English teaching in China has been shifted to developing students' communicative competence. Some Chinese scholars begin to investigate CS use and advocate that CSs training programs be into college English teaching. Wang 2001, Tan 2002, Zhang 2002, Kong 2004. As far as postgraduate non-English majors are concerned, however, little empirical work on their use of CSs has been reported. Hence the present study serves as a preliminary investigation into CSs used by students at this level.

1. Literature review

CSs are generally defined as the means employed by language learners to express their meaning when faced with some difficulties. Corder 1981, Faerch, Kasper 1983. An example from Faerch and Kasper 1983: 233 may help explain what CSs are:

NS: How do you get on with girls —
L: Oh giggles — very oh — what do you call it — you know — laughs — I get a red in my head —
NS: Yer shy
L: Shy yer — giggles
NS: — native speaker L: — learner
In this conversation the learner tries to convey the meaning of the unknown word "shy" by using many kinds of CSs.

Various taxonomies of CSs have been proposed by researchers. Among them, Tarone's taxonomy [1984] and Bialystok's taxonomy [1983] have been much quoted in previous research and will serve as a basis for the present study. Tarone's taxonomy consisted of five categories of CSs: avoidance, paraphrase, conscious transfer, appeal for assistance and mime. Bialystok, with an alternative classifying criterion, renamed the paraphrase category in Tarone's taxonomy as L2-based strategies and the conscious transfer category as L1-based strategies to which she added a new subcategory, foreignizing.

Table 1: Tarone's taxonomy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>Avoidance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>Topic avoidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>Message abandonment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2</th>
<th>Paraphrase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>Approximation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>Circumlocution</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3</th>
<th>Conscious transfer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>Language switch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>Literal translation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>4</th>
<th>Appeal for assistance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

| 5 | Mime |

Different categories of CSs vary in efficiency and effectiveness in conveying meaning. In discussing the strengths and weaknesses of each category of CSs, Ellis [1984] concluded in his study that a learner who paraphrased extensively but did not avoid was to be considered a better performer than one who avoided extensively. Bialystok's study [1983] indicated that more proficient learners were able to use more L2-based strategies while less proficient learners tended to use more L1-based strategies.

2 Research method

2.1 Research questions

Some researchers believe that as long as learners reach a "certain level" of their ability to use CSs in their native language, they will freely transfer to the target language. Considering the situations in China, however, many Chinese researchers suggest that formal CS training be incorporated into English teaching. Then what is this "certain level" that is adequate for CSs to transfer? As for non-English majors at postgraduate level, the most advanced learners in university need to be capable of applying CSs competently in target language communication. This study, therefore, is an attempt to examine the use of CSs by postgraduate students of non-English majors. The specific research questions include:

1. What CSs are used by non-English majors at postgraduate level?
2. What is the proportion of each type of CS used by these students?

2.2 Data collection method

To obtain authentic data and to capture a general picture of CS use, the researcher decided on observation in natural communication settings as the data collection method. It happened that many of the non-English major postgraduates at Beijing Normal University would come to visit four of their native-speaker teachers during their office hours to have free talk with them on a voluntary basis. The researcher then acting as an indirect participant observed and took notes of and taped their conversations while the students virtually ignored the researcher and the tape recorder. The conversations took place either between one teacher and one student or one teacher and several students or sometimes among two teachers and several students and covered a variety of topics such as art, sports, education, culture, social life, entertainment as well as English learning. Generally one hour each time and two to four times a week, the data collection process lasted for six weeks.
3. Data analysis and discussion

The relevant parts of the recorded conversations were transcribed and CSs were identified and analyzed based on Taron's and Bialystok's taxonomies.

3.1. Types of CSs used

The results show that all types of CSs reported in Taron’s and Bialystok’s taxonomies were used by these postgraduate students. The following examples for each CS category are taken from the collected data in the study.

1. Avoidance

- Michael Jackson has lost his oh —
- It may be established that what the student gave up was the word “popularity” as he was saying “a lot of American don’t like him now because they felt boring”.

2. Paraphrase L2-based CSs

A. Approximation

S1: It is a a parrot
S2: Parrot
S1: Yeah a parrot
S1 — Student 1
S2 — Student 2
The first student used the word “bird” to refer to “parrot”.

B. Circumlocution

Some books are about someone’s things. Some books are about [from someone] from his young to his old.
The student tried to convey the meaning of the unknown word “biography”.

C. Word coinage

His husband is [ban] [bankist]
The student created the word “bankist” for “banker” by adding the suffix “ist” to the word “bank”.

3. Conscious transfer L1-based CSs

A. Language switch

Yeah [like] [er] [wen xue] literature, so I
The student directly used the Chinese word “wen xue” for the English word “literature”.

B. Literal translation

It is called [silver] [silver] apricot [silver apricot tree].
The student referred to the “ginkgo tree” by making a word for word translation of its Chinese name “lin xing” into English.

C. Foreignizing

S: How about Madonna
NS: She is still very popular.
The student referred to the name of the American singer Madonna by pronouncing her name in Chinese in a foreign accent.

4. Appeal for Assistance

He had [tuberculosis]. How do you say in English
The student asked another student for the word “tuberculosis”.

5. Mimes

It is [like] a fruit [like] [m m] like this big.
The student mimed the size of a Chinese hawthorn.
Often several strategies were combined to express one concept as illustrated in the example below:

- S1: I play the pipe [panpipe]
- NS: Silence
- S2: A musical instrument
- S3: Flute
- S4: A kind of flute
- S5: What does it look like?
- S1: A lot of little flutes [flute] It's shape is like [fan] fang de [square]
- S5: Square
- S1: It's not big. You can blow it [like this] [mimic] the action of playing panpipe.

Another interesting example found in the data was that to express the same concept “airline stewardess” three students used three different strategies on different occasions:

- I want to be a kong [act] Language switch
- air lady   Word coinage
- waitress in the air   Word coinage and circumlocution

### 3.2 Proportion of each type of CS used

To have a better understanding of CS use, the number of CSs for each type employed by the students was counted and the proportion of CSs for each type was calculated. The results are shown in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6/85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L2-Based [Paraphrase]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approximation</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1/07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circumlocution</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2/55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word Coinage</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4/78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L1-Based [Conscious transfer]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language switch</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>3/25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literal translation</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3/42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreignizing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2/37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appeal for assistance</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1/33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mime</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1/37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown in Table 2, altogether 146 clear instances of CSs were identified. Among them, L2-based CSs reached 40/40, including approximation 15/07, circumlocution 20/55, and word coinage 4/78. L1-based CSs amounted to 39/04, where the subcategory of language switch reached 34/25. Other types of CSs, appeal for assistance, avoidance, and mime turned out to be 12/33, 6/85, and 1/37, respectively.

### 3.3 Discussion

The results in this descriptive study demonstrate that the postgraduate level students were able to employ all types of CSs reported in previous research literature. When the students encountered communication breakdowns due to their deficiency in the target language, they tried to use synonyms, coin new words, provide explanation and examples, switch to Chinese, or avoid saying the unavailable words. The results manifest in accordance with Canale and Swain's theory (1980) that all speakers have strategic competence, which is developed in the speakers' L1 and is transferable to L2 learning situations.
Weaknesses in the use of CSs can be identified from the statistics. On one hand, the use of L1-based CSs, which is believed to be a reflection of higher communicative competence, did not reach a high proportion of the total number of the CSs used. The two effective paraphrase strategies of circumlocution and approximation, though ranked the second and third in number among all the subcategories, only equaled roughly to the L1-based strategy of language switch when the two are added together.

On the other hand, the weaknesses are also exhibited in the students’ heavy reliance on the use of L1-based CSs, especially the use of language switch. When faced with a communication problem, the students often inserted a Chinese word directly into the utterance. In such cases, the students usually felt embarrassed waiting for the fellow students to help them out or hoping the native interlocutor could figure out the meaning of the inserted Chinese word. Given the students’ English level, such frequent switch back to Chinese is considered far from satisfactory. Given the context of communicating with native speakers, such practice is also inappropriate.

The use of appeal for assistance also reached a noteworthy proportion. As shown in the data, the students usually resorted to this strategy by stopping in the middle of an utterance where an inaccessible word arose and asked the other students for the word in English. In a sense, the use of appeal for assistance is similar to that of language switch in that in both cases the students did not try alternative ways of expression themselves. In addition, the students used avoidance strategy from time to time.

It might be argued that the students used a high proportion of CSs of language switch and appeal for assistance because they knew they were conversing with native speakers in informal situations and with other Chinese students present. However, this might also suggest that since the data were collected in such natural language environments that what the data reflected was the authentic situations of language use by the students.

It can be seen from the above discussion that the use of CSs by the postgraduate students is not satisfactory despite their relatively high language proficiency. The deficiency in CS use may be accounted for from the following aspects.

First, few English textbooks published in China have introduced the concept of CSs. Most students are not aware of the existence of CSs, let alone receiving any formal training on how to use them. The students’ use of CSs is primarily out of intuition and spontaneity so that they are able to use unsophisticated and acceptable CSs sometimes while at other times they may switch back to their native language for the sake of convenience.

Secondly, although researchers generally agree that people can communicate effectively in a second language with only 100 words, Dornyáki (1995) points out many students share the false belief that their inability of expressing themselves is primarily due to inadequate mastery of vocabulary. They have not realized that with their current vocabulary they have already been able to solve most of the lexical problems in communication.

Thirdly, the traditional teacher-centered teaching method adopted in China has lead to the students’ heavy reliance on their teachers for help when running into difficulties rather than seeking solutions themselves. The traditional teaching method also emphasizes on accuracy, which renders the students afraid of making mistakes and taking risks. It is not uncommon to see that when students are having discussion in pairs or groups in class and encounter an unavailable word instead of trying other ways of expression, they often give up or check a dictionary if they have one with them.

Finally, the natural transfer of CSs from native to target language is not easy for the Chinese students because they do not have sufficient amount of practice in spoken English. Although it is generally considered that students’ strategic competence can freely transfer from native to target language, such transfer is likely to take place in genuine communication situations. Chinese students of English, including those at postgraduate level, however, have been learning English in a monolingual environment and have few opportunities to be exposed to real communication situations. Even in the English class, the focus of teaching is seldom placed on spoken English. Therefore, it will take a rather long period of time for the natural process of CS transfer to complete.
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4 Conclusion and recommendations

As far as postgraduate students are concerned it may be concluded from this study that although these students have reached a higher English proficiency in general their ability of using CSs is relatively weak. In order to help them successfully cope with difficulties in communication it is necessary to raise their awareness of CSs and accordingly enhance their communicative competence. Explicit CS training may be a practical and economical way in formal classroom settings and acquisition [ ] poor language environments in China.

When providing direct CS instruction to postgraduate students the teacher should clarify two points to the students. One is that it is quite normal to encounter inaccessible words and expressions in communication and that their currently available vocabulary already allows them to solve such problems as long as they make use of CSs. The other point is that effective use of CSs is an exhibition of communicative competence and the use of CSs is encouraged in the learning process. In addition the teacher has to carefully plan the training in terms of form procedure and material development where some suggestions will be given below.

The recommended form of CS training is an awareness-raising lecture one of the seven strategy training models described by Cohen 1998[ ]. The lecture which can be provided apart from regular language classroom instruction to make students become aware of the use and value of CSs and give them opportunities to practice using CSs. Considering that the students are of a higher English level one 90 minute lecture with explanation discussion and practice will well serve the purpose.

The suggested training procedure is adapted from the guideline that was proposed by Chamot and Rubin 1994[ ] for strategy training of both language learning and use and is reconstructed by taking into consideration the characteristics of CSs. The major steps consist of 1 discussing the CSs students use with examples 2 presenting new CSs with examples 3 explaining why and when to use CSs 4 comparing the appropriateness and effectiveness of different categories of CSs and 5 providing practice activities.

Since few materials specially geared to CS training are available in textbooks especially those published in China the teacher has to develop their own materials appropriate for the students level if necessary by referring to previous research. For example Dornyei 1995 systematically presented the materials used in a CSteaching program with Hungarian middle school students where students were instructed to use particular CSs for solving particular problems Kong 2004 described in detail the communicative tasks such as definition and picture description used in her CSteaching study with 205 Chinese undergraduates. The tasks were set purposefully with words a little beyond students vocabulary so that they were forced to use CSs.

Of course the knowledge of the effective use of CSs will be more helpful with students at lower levels who have less target language resources. However the delayed CS training conducted to postgraduate students as a supplement to developing their communicative competence will prove to be worthwhile and rewarding.

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Blogging in English from China

A community where learners combine personal stories and learning in English

In2english.com.cn is an interactive English website which is produced by the British Council in conjunction with China and Radio Television University CRTVU and its sister CRTVU online. The BBC has also contributed staffing and resources to the project which was launched in 2001.

Five years later, usership has grown to have 3 million visits per month across China. Users can study through a series of English language resources including units on Business English as well as learning about UK Culture whilst studying through a number of audiovisual streams. The site also supports English Language Teachers in China with downloadable lesson plans and teacher development courses.

The biggest success of the website is the community zone. This has an active membership of 30,000 members with over 40 posts per day ranging on various topics in English. Users can now own a weblog which is similar to a diary and can be read by anyone accessing the site.

There are over 3 million blogs in China and this number is increasing daily. Though few rise to the challenge of writing their experiences in a second language. The weblog board as it is known, gives a personal insight into personal life which makes it engaging reading for any learner. This piece of “live reading” also highlights user errors and with the sense of community that has been built on the forum users are not afraid to point out mistakes. In turn, the writer is keen to improve his or her writing skills and receives feedback as constructive criticism.

The community forum can also be used as a classroom resource as learners can practice writing skills by posting messages and waiting for replies from other community members. This can infuse learner motivation and can build a foundation for exchange similar to a pen pal.

In2english will soon move to video casting of the weblogs where users can create video diaries which then enables users to visualize the writer and as well more importantly have a greater bank of listening resources for their MP3 players. This type of learning being the most requested from the sites ever increasing user base.

Andrew Newton
Managing Editor
In2english.com.cn