Empirical Studies on L2 Communication Strategies over Four Decades: Looking Back and Ahead

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Abstract

Studies on communication strategies (CSs) have been carried out for nearly four decades and have contributed a lot to the development of such fields as applied linguistics and second language acquisition, but they are still inadequate and there remain controversies over certain issues. Thus, more systematic and rigorous studies are needed to check or confirm the findings of some studies and further CS research from newer and broader perspectives. This paper mainly reviews the existing empirical studies from different perspectives: CS classifications and research methods, factors affecting the choices of CSs, teachability and teaching of CSs, and effectiveness of CSs. It is aimed to provide a clear picture of research on L2 CSs and offer some suggestions for further research.

Key words: communication strategies; empirical studies; classifications; limitations; suggestions

1. Introduction

Communication strategies are the steps taken by language learners in order to enhance the effectiveness of their communication (Littlemore, 2003: 331). Research on second language (L2) communication strategies (CSs) has a history of almost four decades starting from 1972 when Selinker coined the term of interlanguage to refer to the product of the central cognitive processes, one of which is communication strategies. Learners’ employment of CSs is a reflection of both the degree of their interlanguage development and their communicative competence. By investigating CSs, researchers can more adequately explain interlanguage and gain better understanding of how learners use their interlanguage
However, Language teaching has traditionally been aimed at developing linguistic competence and the strategic competence is most neglected by language course books and teachers, although it is of crucial importance for foreign language learners (Dörnyei & Thurrell, 1991). Therefore, it is of great importance to study CSs in learners’ interlanguage use and help researchers and teachers learn more about CSs and further their research and teaching.

2. Empirical studies on L2 CSs over four decades

Studies on CSs have contributed a lot to the development of such fields as applied linguistics and second language acquisition. The theoretical discussion of CSs used to dominate empirical research, but empirical research into CSs has been accompanying theoretical studies and is rapidly developing (Ellis, 1985: 183). Based on a systematic review and analysis of the previous studies on CSs, this paper will mainly classify and summarize the empirical studies on L2 CSs over the four decades in the following respects: CS classifications and research methods, factors affecting the choices of CSs, teachability and teaching of CSs, and effectiveness of CSs.

2.1 CS classifications and research methods

Empirical studies have been conducted to classify CSs and to explore the methods for CS research. It is Váradi (1973) who first conducted a study on CSs. Váradi employed the method of a picture story description task which has subsequently been adopted in varied versions by many other researchers (Pollisse, 1990: 36). In this study, Váradi made a classification of CSs and his work was influential in the development of Tarone’s ideas (Bialystok, 1990: 42).

Tarone (1977) conducted a study on CSs by taking an interactional approach and observing how different second language learners solve specific communication problems. The subjects of her study were nine adult EFL students from three language backgrounds, Spanish, Turkish and Mandarin (with three subjects from each native language background). The subjects were shown two series of simple drawings and an illustration and then asked to describe the illustrations in both their native language and English. By dealing with and analyzing the real data produced by the subjects, Tarone reorganized the Tarone et al. (1976) and Váradi (1973) classifications of CSs and categorized CSs into avoidance, paraphrase, conscious transfer, appeal for assistance and mime. “This methodology was an important contribution to the field and modifications of it have provided the basis for most of the research subsequently conducted in this area” (Bialystok, 1990: 39). Bialystok and Frohlich (1980) and Paribakht (1985) also conducted a study and developed a detailed taxonomy of CSs essentially based on the new data.

So far, there have been various classifications of CSs, but those of Tarone (1977), the Nijmegen group (Pollisse, 1990), and Færch and Kasper (1983) are considered the most typical (Liu, 2006). Færch and Kasper (1983) took a psychological approach and classified
CSs into two kinds: reduction strategies and achievement strategies, each of which has some subcategories of CSs. The Nijmegen group held that L2 learners have three choices to avoid the breaking down of communication process when confronted with communication problems. The first is to give up or revise their original communication intention by resorting to the strategies of avoidance or reduction. The second is to ask their interlocutor for help. The third is to try to find the alternative of encoding their original message. They referred to the process leading to alternative encodings as compensatory strategies consisting of conceptual strategies and linguistic strategies. The former include analytic strategies and holistic strategies; the latter consist of morphological creativity and transfer.

Two Chinese researchers, Zhang and Wang (2005), conducted a study on reliability and validity of CS questionnaires. The subjects in their study were 30 PhD students involved in a test-retest procedure, which provided the quantitative data for correlation and matching analysis. Eight of the subjects participated in the think-aloud and retrospective studies designed for obtaining the qualitative data for the analysis of acceptability of each item and the validity of the scale in the questionnaire. Their study concluded that the questionnaire is, to a certain extent, acceptable in measuring a speaker’s communication strategies.

Nakatani (2006) conducted a study to examine how valid information about learner perception of strategy use during communicative tasks can be gathered systematically from EFL learners. First, in order to develop a questionnaire for statistical analysis and name the Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI), Nakatani conducted a three-stage research project: an open-ended questionnaire to identify learners’ general perceptions of strategies for oral interaction, a pilot factor analysis for selecting test items and a final factor analysis to obtain a stable self-reported instrument. The resulting OCSI includes 8 categories of strategies for coping with speaking problems and 7 categories for coping with listening problems during communication. Second, Nakatani examined the applicability of the survey instrument in a simulated communicative test for EFL students. The results of the study showed that the inventory was reliable and valid.

In truth, each strategy assessment method has its weaknesses and strengths (Cohen, 1998: 24). Therefore, it is necessary to employ several assessment methods in a study in order to compensate for problems inherent in the questionnaire method (Nakatani, 2006).

2.2 Factors affecting the choices of CSs
Some factors influencing the learners’ choices of CSs have been proposed in the existing studies. This section will review such factors as target language proficiency levels, task types, genders and personalities, and learners’ first languages, which have certain effects on learners’ choices of CSs.

2.2.1 Target language proficiency and CSs
Tarone (1977) suggested that second language proficiency level may be related to CS preference. Paribakht (1985) studied the nature of the relationship between speakers’ proficiency level in the target language and their choices of CSs. Three groups of 20 adult
subjects each participated in the study: two groups of Persian ESL students at intermediate and advanced levels of target language development, and a group of native speakers as the comparison group. The strategy elicitation method designed for the study was a concept-identification task. All subjects were required to express twenty single lexical items of concrete and abstract concepts to native speakers. Paribakht categorized the subject’s CSs and classified them into four approaches: Linguistic, Contextual, Conceptual and Mime. The results showed that the native speakers and the advanced students used relatively more frequently the linguistic approach while the low-proficiency students used relatively more frequently the conceptual approach. The groups didn’t demonstrate any significant difference in use of the contextual approach. Mime was employed less frequently by the native speakers than by the learners.

Poulisse and Schils (1989) conducted a quantitative study on the influence of task- and proficiency-related factors on the use of CSs. The subjects involved in this study were 45 Dutch learners of English. They were divided into advanced, intermediate, and beginning learner groups according to the years they have learned English. Poulisse and Schils used three strategy elicitation tasks: story retelling, picture description, and a 20-minute interview with a native speaker of English. They found that the most advanced subjects used fewer compensatory strategies than did the least proficient ones while the type of compensatory strategy chosen by the subjects was not to any large extent related to their proficiency level. 

Chen (1990) studied the relationship between L2 learners’ strategic competence and their target language proficiency. The subjects were divided into two groups according to their English proficiency and they were required to perform a concept-identification task in an interview with a native speaker. The CSs used by the learners were identified and analyzed. The results indicated that the low-proficiency learners used more CSs than the high-proficiency learners and that high-proficiency learners employed linguistic-based CSs more frequently while the low-proficiency learners used more knowledge-based and repetition strategies. In addition, there was a positive relationship between the Chinese EFL learners’ proficiency level and their communicative competence: the high-proficiency learners were more efficient in the use of CSs.

Wannaruk’s (2003) study showed that students of different proficiency levels used different communication strategies. The study divided 75 non-English majors equally into high, middle and low groups according to their oral proficiency levels and then native English teachers interviewed the students one by one. The data used in the analysis was taken from the videotaped and transcribed interviews. The results of this study indicated that the learners with a low level of oral proficiency used more avoidance strategies, paralinguistic CSs and L1-based CSs while those with high and middle levels of oral proficiency employed more L2-based CSs.

In many cases, the reason why the L2 learners employ CSs is that their IL systems are developing and insufficient. Their proficiency levels are the reflection of their inadequate IL systems. Therefore, it is not surprising that L2 learner’s proficiency levels have certain effects on their choices of CSs. Some other studies like Nakatani (2006) also reveal that L2 learners’ proficiency levels are closely related to their use of CSs.
2.2.2 Learning and communicating contexts and CSs

It is likely that the learners’ use of CSs is affected by the situation of use (Ellis, 1985: 186). For example, Piranian (1979) (Cited in Ellis, 1985: 186) found that American university students learning Russian used more avoidance strategies while those learners with natural exposure also used paraphrases.

Bialystok and Frohlich (1980) examined the conditions for the choices of certain CSs in terms of the learner’s inferencing ability, the formal proficiency level and the communicative situation. Two groups of subjects participated in the study: one group of students learning French at school and one group of adults in a civil French service program. The strategy elicitation tasks consisted of a cloze test, a Danish sentence translation task, and pictures reconstruction and description tasks. One of the results is that the CS choice was highly contextual.

Smith (2003) studied communication strategy use among adult learners of English in a computer-mediated environment by using jigsaw and decision-making tasks. Specifically, the study explored communication strategies employed during problem-free discourse as well as compensatory strategy use during task-based computer-mediated communication (CMC). The subjects were 18 intermediate-low level ESL students studying at an American university. They were of mixed L1 backgrounds and constituted an intact ESL class. Data collection took place in a campus computer lab and each session was a regularly scheduled part of their classroom activities. Based on a pretreatment questionnaire, the subjects were determined to be similar in their experience with and attitudes toward using computers as a pedagogical tool in the ESL classroom. The results suggested that learners used a wide array of communication strategies during task-based CMC and that the CMC environment shaped this use. Smith (2003) held that CMC may encourage the use of substitution, framing, and fillers, as well as politeness strategies, at least among intermediate-low level learners of English.

Lafford (2004) examined the effect of the context of learning on the number and types of CSs used by learners of Spanish as a second language. The 46 learners in this study came from two 2 groups: an AH (at home) group of 20 learners studying at the University of Colorado and a SA (studying abroad) group of 26 learners in Spain. All learners were tested and completed relevant questionnaires at the beginning and end of a semester (pretest and posttest). The results indicated that both the AH and SA groups significantly reduced their reliance on CS use over time and that the SA group used significantly fewer CSs than the AH group in the posttest while the AH group preferred CSs that focused on their own production of the L2.

“The verbal interaction is structured by the goal and contextual conditions of the entire communication” (Wagner, 1983: 160). L2 communication occurs in various spatiotemporal situations that are not equally demanding. For instance, “learners may use fewer CSs in a classroom environment than in a natural environment particularly if the pedagogic focus is on correct L2 use, rather than on fluent communication” (Ellis, 1985:186). Similarly, communication strategies in non-interview situations would be different from those in interview situations where the status of the interlocutors is not equal, and the interviewer has more control over the situation than the interviewee.
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Thus, the employment of CSs, to a great extent, is contextual.

2.2.3 Task types and CSs

According to Poulisse and Schils (1989), task-related factors have great effects on strategy choices and the learners usually make estimation of how much information they need to deliver based on demands, the context, and the interlocutor, and choose a strategy that is appropriately informative.

Corrales and Call (1989) studied CS use with two groups of learners (intermediate and advanced) from whom two tasks were used to elicit data: one was answering structured questions and the other one was a simulated communication situation. The data was elicited twice with an interval of five weeks. The results indicated that the unstructured task elicited significantly more transfer strategies from both groups of learners and that there was a significant correlation between time and proficiency level with respect to the use of task-influenced strategies.

Fernández Dobao (2001) investigated the use of CSs by Galician learners of English in terms of such factors as proficiency level, learner’s native language, contextual conditions and cognitive complexity of the task. The results showed, among other things, that certain task-related factors such as cognitive complexity and interlocutor’s role had a significant effect on the use of CSs.

Rabab’ah and Bulut (2007) made an investigation of the CSs used in the oral discourse of second year learners studying Arabic as a second language (ASL). The 24 learners involved in the study were male and from 8 different countries. In terms of task types, they found that the interview task yielded more CSs than the role-play task did. Rabab’ah and Bulut pointed out two reasons for the difference. One was that the interview task was more demanding, which required a wider and more difficult range of vocabulary items than the role-play task. The other reason might be that the speakers limited their talk to the speech acts they were asked to perform and did not use vocabulary items of their own.

In fact, the task-related factors such as the purpose of each task, the formality of the communication situation, the cognitive complexity of the task and the status of interlocutors may vary greatly and have unequal effects on the interlocutors. Therefore, it is understandable that L2 learners may, based on their estimation about the tasks and the limited interlanguage resources, employ different CSs to deal with or perform the tasks. However, the existing studies on the relationships between the use of CSs and tasks are far from enough; the frequencies and types of CSs, the comparisons of task types, and even the reliability and validity of task-based strategy questionnaires can be the focus of future research.

2.2.4 Gender differences and CSs

Zeynep (1997) reported an investigation of CSs by Turkish ESL learners focusing on the gender influence on use of CSs when communication problems were resulted from limited English proficiency. Ten Turkish ESL learners and 10 native English speakers (NS) were paired and had conversations which were recorded and transcribed. The results indicated
that the gender of the NS interlocutor had an important impact on use of CSs. All Turkish ESL learners employed more CSs with the female rather than the male native speakers because the female native speakers of English were more cooperative and encouraging than the male ones.

Wang Limei’s (2008) study explored the gender differences in the use of CSs by Chinese EFL learners. The participants of this study were 140 male learners and 69 female learners. Research instruments included classroom observation, questionnaire, interview and the learners’ videotaped talks. Besides, strategy-based instruction (SBI) was conducted for a week. The results showed that female and male learners were significantly different in the use of borrowing strategies (like literal translation from Chinese and language switching). Female learners used this kind of CSs more frequently both before and after the SBI.

Hou (1998) employed two tasks to investigate the gender difference in use of CSs: telling stories in both English and Chinese based on a picture and identifying in English objects in five photos. The results revealed that female and male learners showed no significant difference in their overall use of CSs for the first task while their choices of some CSs were significantly different when performing the second task. The female learners used more code-switch, asking for help and so on. Hou remarked that the reasons lay in that the first task was simple and the learners did not have to resort to many CSs while the second task was relatively difficult and the female were more talkative, active in communication and field dependent.

Chen et al. (2005) examined the gender differences in self-repairs and repair markers by Chinese non-English majors in their spoken English. The data for analysis came from a spoken English corpus produced by 21 male and 21 female learners. The results showed that the males tended to use the same repairs more than the females while the females tended to employ more different, appropriate and error repairs. In addition, the female learners used repair markers more frequently than the males. The differences could be attributed to the learner’s different proficiency levels and the learners’ disposition to use conversational strategies.

Gender is one of the important variables involved in the CS research and some studies have indicated the communication strategies used by learners of different genders vary in both type and frequency. The reason may lie in that females hold more positive attitudes and stronger motivations towards language learning and culture, and tend to achieve higher marks (Catalan, 2003; Wang Limei, 2008). This may also reflect their employment expectations. The female learners may think that a foreign language is of great vocational value for them (Ellis, 1994). Gender is not only a physical category but also a social category (Li, 2009), so more factors should be taken into account, when the effect of gender differences on CS use is further analyzed.

2.2.5 Personality and CSs
In her (1977) study, Tarone noticed that there were differences in learners’ methods of telling a story and she suggested that learners’ personality characteristics may be closely related to CS preference.
Wang (2005) article examined the effect of learners’ L2 formal proficiency and personality traits on the use of communication strategies (CSs) among Chinese ESL learners. The subjects were 40 second-year non-English majors selected according to their L2 formal proficiency and personality traits. The analysis of the data from the questionnaire survey and interview indicated that personality traits also had important influences on learners’ choice of specific CSs besides L2 proficiency levels and that the higher-proficiency learners, especially extroverts, employed more L2-based strategies in an effective and flexible way, while introverts with lower-proficiency resorted to more L1-based strategies, and even more reduction strategies.

Lin and Li article (2009) studied the relevant factors affecting the use of communication strategies. One of their findings is that English learners of different personality traits were significantly different in using some CSs. The extroverted learners used more cooperative strategies and imitation strategies; in contrast, the introverted ones employed more reduction strategies. Lin and Li held the reasons for the differences lay in that the extroverted learners were more sociable and eager to exchange viewpoints, but the introverted learners were too shy and conservative to ask for help and would rather employ reduction strategies, simplification strategies or avoidance than try some expressions they were not sure about.

The personality of the learners play an important role in communication (Tarone, 1977). Extroverted learners seem to be more successful in the conversations (Zeynep, 1997), because they may be more sociable and willing to communicate than introverted ones, and they will demonstrate greater interactiveness and use more interactive strategies in communication (Zhang, 2008). However, the employment of some CSs might not be influenced by the learners’ introversion or extroversion orientations (Zhang, 2008), and introversion is not necessarily a weakness in the whole process of L2 learning and using.

2.2.6 First language and CSs

Some components of a learner’s interlanguage system may be a result of the first language transfer (Selinker, 1972). Fernández Dobao (2001) investigated the use of CSs by Galician learners of English and learner’s native language was one of the explored factors influencing CS choice. Fifteen EFL learners with different linguistic backgrounds were selected; seven of the spoke Galician as their mother tongue and the rest spoke Spanish. All the subjects were required to accomplish three communicative tasks: a picture story narration, a photograph description and ten-minute conversation. The results showed that no significant differences existed between Galician and Spanish native speakers in their choice of specific types of CSs such as avoidance, achievement and L1-based strategies. However, there was a statistically significant difference between the two groups in frequency of CS use. Fernández Dobao did not provide any well-founded explanation for the difference but suggested that further research should be carried out on this issue.

In terms of the relationship between a learner’s native language and his or her strategy use, Rabab’ah and Bulut (2007) made an investigation of the compensatory strategies used in the oral discourse of second year learners studying Arabic as a second language (ASL). The 24 male subjects were all high school graduates who were from...
different countries and spoke eight different native languages (Russian, Albanian, Wolof, Tajik, Urdu, French, Malay and Somali). In the study, two data-eliciting tasks were used: an interview and a role-play. The results showed that the subjects used a range of compensatory strategies in their oral production. Moreover, the individual learners’ strategies varied a lot over their native languages and task types. In the interview task, the Wolof native speakers used compensatory strategies more frequently than all other subjects of other languages, followed in descending order by Albanian speakers, Malay speakers, Tajik speakers, Russian speakers, and Urdu native speakers. Somali and French native speaker used the fewest compensatory strategies. In addition, Malay and Tajik native speakers did not use clarification request strategy, Urdu, Malay and French native speakers didn’t ask for repetition, and Somali, Albanian and Tajik native speakers did not resort to word coinage strategy. It was also found that paraphrase was the most frequently used strategy, followed in a descending order by restructuring, word coinage, clarification request and asking for repetition. For the role play task, Russian native speakers used more compensatory strategies than all other native languages speakers and they were followed by Somali native speakers, and Tajik native speakers. Rabab’ah and Bulut (2007) argue that these differences could be attributed to their native language interference, and educational and cultural background.

It is a popular belief that the learners’ first language has a strong influence on the second language acquisition (Ellis, 1985). Therefore, the choice of CSs may be more or less influenced by the learner’s first language. Apparently, CSs are a multi-factor phenomenon, and the first language is just one of factors. However, compared with other factors, to what extent a learner’s first language influences the use of CSs remains unexplored.

2.3 Teachability and teaching of CSs
The teachability of CSs has been controversial. There are different arguments for or against CS instruction. According to Dörnyei (1995), one of possible reasons for the controversy is that most of the arguments on both sides are based on indirect evidence. Hence, there is great need to conduct empirical studies to examine the effect of CS teaching.

Rost and Ross’ (1991) study indicated “that prior training of learners in specific questioning strategies can exert an effect on their subsequent behavior in interactions and can influence their immediate comprehension of a text as well”. Dörnyei’s (1995) study concentrated on the teachability of CSs. The subjects were 109 students studying English at secondary schools in Hungary. The subjects were divided into a treatment group (receiving training of CSs) and control group (following regular EFL curriculum). The research focused on the training of three CSs and offered both awareness and practice activities. These strategies included: topic avoidance and replacement, circumlocution, and using fillers and hesitation devices. The findings showed that the subjects in the treatment group made a significant improvement both qualitatively and quantitatively in their strategy use and oral performance and, in addition, they found the strategies in the training were useful and the students took positive attitudes towards strategy training.

Similarly, Nakatani (2005) investigated to what degree oral CSs could be explicitly taught, and to what degree strategy use could lead to improvements in oral
communication ability. The findings showed that subjects in the strategy training group significantly improved their oral proficiency test scores whereas those in the control group did not make significant improvements and that the training group’s success was partly due to an increased general awareness of oral CSs and to the use of specific oral CSs. Maleki’s (2007) study on the teachability of CSs found that CS teaching was pedagogically effective, that interactional strategies were employed in a more effective and extensive way, that CS were helpful to language learning, and that language teaching materials containing CSs were more effective than those without them.

Some Chinese researchers also conducted similar studies. Wang (2002) study focused on the teaching of three CSs to 109 Chinese undergraduate students of English in classrooms. The research findings showed that some CSs were used more frequently than before after the one-term strategy instruction and CSs also contributed to the development of oral fluency to some extent. Besides, 75.5% of the students took favorable attitudes toward CS training.

Tian and Zhang (2005) investigated the effectiveness of the training of CSs on non-English majors. Some of their findings of the study showed that the students in the experimental class used more CSs in group discussion after training, that with the help of the CSs in group discussion, the students’ communicative competence improved greatly, and that the students held a positive attitude towards CSs. Similarly, Kong (2004) and Wang Jin-an’s (2008) studies also found that the CS training had a positive effect on helping students to overcome communication barriers, enhancing their confidence in spoken English communication and improving the efficiency of their spoken English study.

“Communication, learning and instruction interact and influence each other” (Candlin, 1983: X). Teaching CSs seems acceptable. However, “no single strategy will be appropriate for all learners or for all tasks, and individual learners can and should apply the various strategies in different ways, according to their personal language learning needs” (Cohen, 1998: 266). Therefore, teachers should make it clear to the students that CSs contribute to L2 communication and learning but they should selectively learn and use CSs for learning. For example, teachers can suggest that students use more L2-based strategies and employ as few avoidance strategies as possible and that they have the courage to take risks by using the linguistic items they have just recently learned. Besides, too much dependency on CSs should be avoided. “If learners repeatedly use CSs successfully, they may become so skillful in making up for the lack of L2 knowledge that the need for learning accurate L2 expressions can be attenuated; they may bypass the concise, correct use of L2 and as a result fail to improve their L2 system” (Ding, 2004: 165).

2.4 Effectiveness of CSs

The effectiveness of CSs in promoting L2 communication is of central importance in the study of CSs (Ellis, 1985: 186). Haasstrup and Philipson’s (1983: 155) study found that “L1-based strategies nearly always lead to partial or non-comprehension and IL-based strategies often lead to full comprehension”. They hold that L1-based strategies
are the least effective while IL-based strategies are most effective and undoubtedly have
the great potential leading to communicative success. Chen (1990) study found that
the effectiveness of CSs varied according to learner’s proficiency level. High-proficiency
learners used CSs more efficiently that the low-proficiency learners.

Littlemore (2003) examined the communicative effectiveness of different types of
CSs. Eighty-two French speaking, university-level learners of English participated in the
study. Each participant was given a booklet containing some items, and was asked to
record in English what item they saw, either by naming it, or in any other way, so that an
English speaker would later listen to the recordings and be able to identify the objects.
The strategies employed by the learners were categorized based on Poulisse’s (1993)
taxonomy. The findings indicated that strategies favored by ectenic learners were more
effective than strategies favored by synoptic learners and reconceptualization was the most
communicatively effective in the study.

In order to examine how the use of specific communication strategies can improve
learners’ English proficiency in communicative tasks, Nakatani (2010) carried out a
classroom study using multiple data collection procedures. The subjects were 62 Japanese
college students participating in a 12-week English course using a communicative
approach with strategy training. To investigate the influence of specific strategy use, the
subjects’ performance on a post-training conversation test was analyzed and an oral
communication strategy inventory was introduced to elicit subjects’ communication
strategy use. The findings indicated that strategies for maintaining discourse and
negotiation of meaning could enhance learners’ communicative ability.

“The effectiveness of a strategy will depend on the characteristics of the given learner,
the given language structure(s), the given context, the interaction of these” (Cohen, 1998:
264). There is not a single factor that has the explanatory adequacy. Therefore, researchers
should take as many factors as possible into account when examining the effectiveness of
CSs.

3. Limitations of the existing studies and suggestions for further research

CS research has been carried out for many years and fruitful findings have been obtained,
but there remains much room for exploration and improvement in this field. For example,
many researchers such as Tarone (1977, 1983), Corder (1981), Færch and Kasper (1983)
and Nakatani (2006) claim that CSs are what the second language learners take to deal with
the communication problems they encounter; Dörnyei and Kormos (1998) distinguish
four main sources of L2 communication problems: resource deficits, processing time
pressure, perceived deficiencies in one’s own language output, and perceived deficiencies
in the interlocutor’s performance, but there is still a lack of empirical research exploring
how communication strategies and communication problems are related. More limitations
of the existing studies on CSs and suggestions for further research are as follows.

First, L2 communication involves not only speaking, interpreting and listening
but also writing, translating and reading (Guo, 2010). The recent decade has witnessed a diversified development of CS research. Researchers began to explore CSs from new perspectives besides the general oral production. For instance, Sionis (1995) and Chimbonda (2000) studied the communications strategies used by L2 learners in writing. Al-Khanji and El-Shiyab (2000), Liu (2009), and Guo and Li (2009) discussed the use of communication strategies in interpreting. However, the previous studies on CSs at home and abroad mainly focus on learner’s oral communication; few explore CSs used in written communication. Therefore, “it is particularly important to investigate some specific communication strategies one of whose aspects is the use of productive strategies in context-poor situations, e.g. in written communication” (Færch & Kasper, 1986: 191).

Second, most of the previous studies on CSs are cross-sectional; very few longitudinal studies have been conducted. It is acknowledged that second language learners with different language backgrounds experience a similar path of interlanguage development which Brown (1994: 211) divides into four stages: random error stage, emergent stage, systematic stage and stabilization stage. Each of the four stages has its own characteristics and learners’ proficiency also differs on different stages. Thus, learners are also likely to use different CSs on different stages. Longitudinal studies have one major advantage over cross-sectional studies in that they are able to construct a reliable profile of SLA of individual learners by providing data from different points of time (Ellis, 1985: 58). Therefore, a longitudinal approach is quite necessary to study and compare the CSs used by learners on the different stages.

Third, “there exists an inevitable gap between what learners taught and what they need in present and future non-educational situations” (Færch & Kasper, 1986: 191). However, the majority of previous studies just focus on the CSs employed in educational situations where the subjects use the target language mainly for the purpose of learning the language. Strategic competence is one of communicative competence and the ultimate goal of language learning and teaching is to develop communicative competence in actual communication, so whether or not the learners will use CSs as they do on the campus when they graduate and work is worth exploring.

Fourth, most researchers regard CSs as devices dealing with communication problems or difficulties. It seems that learners would not resort to CSs, if no communication difficulties occur; the reality, however, is not the case. “Communication strategies can occur in the absence of problematicity” (Bialystok, 1990: 4) and “a good deal of IL development must occur through the use of strategies where problems (however defined) are not involved” (Selinker, 1984: 340). Thus, in order to further examine the development of interlanguage and have a more comprehensive knowledge about learners’ CSs, it is important to extend CS research to the problem-absent situations.

Fifth, language communication involves both production and reception. “Because of the interactive nature of communication, the study of CSs is twofold: productive and receptive strategies” (Paribakht, 1984: 5). Both speakers and hearers use communication strategies (Rabab’ah, 2005) to solve productive and receptive problems, but receptive communication strategies have received much less consideration than the productive
ones (Færch & Kasper, 1984: 48). Although a few researchers (Farrell & Mallard, 2006; Vandergrift, 1997) have studied communication strategies from a receptive perspective, the studies are still far from enough. Hence, further studies are called for on the receptive communication strategies.

4. Conclusion

As a whole, research on CSs has a history of almost 40 years, but there remains much room for exploration and improvement. CS research in China is quite new and relatively inadequate (Liu, 2006; Zhang, 2008), some studies focus only on introducing and analyzing theoretical aspects and only a few empirical CS studies have been carried out (Liu, 2006). Moreover, the CS studies conducted by Chinese researchers involved very limited variables and issues such as the English proficiency, personality, communication task and teaching of CSs, and almost all the studies were based on the definitions and classifications of CSs by western researchers. Therefore, empirical CS studies with Chinese characteristics are needed. In addition, language teaching has traditionally been aimed at developing linguistic competence and the strategic competence is most neglected by language course books and teachers, although it is of crucial importance for foreign language learners (Dörnyei & Thurrell, 1991). This is also true in China. One problem with EFL teaching in China is that great importance is attached to the accumulation of knowledge rather than the development of EFL learners’ ability to use the language (Dai, 2001; Dai & Zhang, 2001). According to Widdowson (1999: 67), linguistic skills are one of the components of communicative competence, but not the reverse; the acquisition of linguistic skills does not guarantee the consequent acquisition of communicative competence and even over-emphasis on drills and exercises for the production and reception of sentences would prevent communicative competence from development. The lack of strategic competence may account for situations in which learners with a good command of grammatical knowledge and a wide range of vocabulary get stuck and are unable to express their communicative intent (Dörnyei & Thurrell, 1991). Therefore, “the learner needs to acquire not only a repertoire of linguistic items, but also a repertoire of strategies for using them in concrete situations” (Littlewood, 2000: 4). Correspondingly, researchers and teachers need to know CSs well to further their research and teaching.

As a system underlying learners’ target language use, CSs can account for certain features of the learners’ interlanguage performance (Paribakht, 1984: 1). Besides, “choosing an effective strategy depends on many factors” (Cohen, 1998: 266) and the forms of interlanguage communication also vary in terms of different criteria. Furthermore, any CS research with a particular focus is not likely to be totally independent of other factors and the classification of empirical studies on CSs has almost never been made elsewhere, so the classification in this paper is tentative and further adjustment or reclassification is necessary.
References


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