

Communication strategy use of EFL college students

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The purpose of the present study is to examine the communication strategy use of EFL college students. The participants were 318 students at a university in Taiwan. The instruments consisted of a role-play task, a communication strategy questionnaire and an interview guide. The questionnaire of communication strategies included 26 strategies of seven factors for coping with listening problems and 32 strategies of eight factors for speaking problems. Results show that the participants adopted most often nonverbal strategies and least often accuracy-oriented strategies. The strategy most often used is "I use words which are familiar to me." Besides, the more proficient EFL learners had significantly more frequent use of fluency-oriented strategies and negotiation for meaning while speaking. By providing empirical evidence and descriptions, the study can facilitate our understanding of L2 communication strategy use, and further assist Taiwanese college students to become more effective EFL speakers.

本研究は、EFLの大学生におけるコミュニケーション・ストラテジーに関する調査報告である。台湾の大学で318人の学生を対象に行った。研究方法としては、ロールプレイ、コミュニケーション・ストラテジーのアンケート、インタビューなどを用いた。コミュニケーション・ストラテジーのアンケートは主に中谷（2006）がデザインしたオーラルコミュニケーション・ストラテジー使用認識の測定法に基づいたものである。調査内容には、リスニングの問題に26の処理法とスピーキングの問題に32の処理法が含まれている。調査した結果から分かるように、ほとんどの被調査者は非言語的ストラテジーを使ったが、正確さを追求するストラテジーはあまり使わなかった。最も頻繁に用いられたのは「いつも使い慣れた単語を使う」というストラテジーである。また、熟練したEFLの学習者であればあるほど頻繁に「流暢さを追求する」と「意味伝達を主としたコミュニケーションの話し方」などのストラテジーを使用する傾向がある。本研究の調査結果により、L2コミュニケーション・ストラテジーにおける使用実態への理解、そして台湾人大学生がより優れたEFLの話者に成長するための助けとなれば幸いである。

SINCE NO individual's linguistic repertoire is perfect, most people have experienced struggling to find the appropriate expression or grammatical construction when attempting to communicate their meaning. The steps taken by language learners in order to enhance the effectiveness of their communication are known as *communication strategies* (Littlemore, 2003). Although there still is not a consensus among researchers, communication strategies (CS) have been generally defined as the means that speakers use to solve their communicative problems. According to Dörnyei and Scott (1997), the notion of second language (L2) communication strategies was raised with the recognition that the mismatch between L2 speakers' linguistic resources and communicative intentions leads to systematic language phenomena whose main function is to handle difficulties or breakdowns in communication.



The purpose of the present study is to examine the communication strategy use of EFL college students. The major research questions explored in the study include: (1) What are the communication strategies most often used by EFL college students? (2) Are there differences in communication strategies used by proficient and less proficient EFL learners? (3) How do EFL college students perceive their use of communication strategies? By providing empirical evidence and descriptions, the current study seeks to facilitate our understanding of L2 communication strategy use, and further to assist Taiwanese college students to become more effective EFL speakers.

Literature review

For the past three decades, there have been a number of studies conducted to examine the various aspects of communication strategies. Regarding the use of communication strategies, a number of studies have investigated the relationship between various factors and communication strategies. In terms of task type, Yarmohammadi and Seif (1992) found that Iranian EFL learners' preference for the use of achievement strategies remains independent of the task type although the nature of the task may affect the type and proportion of some individual strategies used. Nakahama, Tyler and van Lier (2001) investigated how meaning is negotiated in two different types of interactions between native speakers and nonnative speakers. Results show that a conversational activity provides learners with more challenging language practice than an information-gap activity. In addition, the study by Poulisse and Schils (1989) examined the effects of proficiency and task-related factors on the compensatory strategies used by Dutch learners of English. Findings indicated that the most advanced students used fewer compensatory strategies than did the least proficient ones. Whereas the subjects predominantly used analytic strategies in a picture naming/description task, they frequently adopted

holistic strategies and transfer strategies in a story retell task and an oral interview. Other researchers have also examined the L2 learners' use of communication strategies (e.g., Smith, 2003; Skantze, 2005; Bataineh & Bataineh, 2006).

With regard to language proficiency, Rost and Ross (1991) found that the use of certain strategies is correlated with L2 proficiency. They proposed that proficiency is the weightiest predictor of strategy use. Moreover, Paribakht (1985) studied the relationship between strategic competence and language proficiency, and suggested a directionality of transition in the learners' use of CS toward that of the native speakers. That is, advanced learners are in the mid-position between native speakers and low-proficiency learners. The results of Magogwe and Oliver's study (2007) revealed a dynamic relationship between use of language learning strategies and proficiency level, level of schooling, and self-efficacy beliefs for English learners in Botswana.

Research on communication strategies is now being conducted in China and Taiwan (e.g., Huang & Naerssen, 1987; Chen, 1990; Liao & Bresnahan, 1996; Hsieh, 1998; Tuan, 2001; Derwing and Rossiter, 2002; Jackson, 2002; Zhang, 2005). Among them, Zhang (2005) examined the use of **communication strategies** in dyad talks and the function of proficiency level in strategy selection by Taiwanese elementary school EFL learners. Results show that the four most frequently employed strategies are language switch, mime, appeal for assistance and approximation. The higher proficiency learners were inclined to use L2-based strategies while the lower proficiency learners employed more L1-based strategies. Besides, Derwing and Rossiter (2002) investigated the perceptions of 100 adult ESL learners with regard to their pronunciation difficulties and their strategies when they were faced with communication breakdown. They found that the most commonly used strategies when the participants had not been understood were paraphrasing, self-repetition, writing/spelling, and volume adjustment.



Methodology

Participants

Participants in the current study were 318 students at a university in northern Taiwan. Since EFL proficiency was the factor to be examined in the study, the participants included 118 junior and senior students who major in English and 200 freshmen with other majors. The English majors had about 20 hours of English classes per week, while the non-English majors had only 3 hours of English classes per week. Furthermore, most of the English majors had TOEIC scores above 750, but only a few of the non-English majors had scores that high. With more EFL learning experience and better standardized test scores, the English majors were considered to be proficient EFL learners, while the non-English majors were designated less proficient EFL learners.

Materials

The instruments used in the present study consisted of a role-play task, a communication strategy questionnaire and an interview guide. The task of a role play was adopted to activate participants' reflections on their communication strategies. Each student found a partner and engaged in a simulated conversation derived from a situation described on a card. Each pair was given five minutes to prepare the role play in which one student assumed the role of a customer and the other was a clerk. Moreover, the study adopted a questionnaire of communication strategies which was mainly based on the Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI) designed by Nakatani (2006). The questionnaire consisted of 32 items of 8 factors for coping with speaking problems and 26 items of 7 factors for coping with listening problems experienced during the communicative task. On a five-point scale ranging from "never" to "always", participants circled the response which indicated how often they

used the strategy described. An interview guide was developed to further explore participants' perceptions of their use of EFL communication strategies during the role-play task. There were three questions on communication problems and strategy use. To elicit more valid information from the participants the questionnaire and interview were asked and answered in Chinese.

Procedure

The present study was conducted during the class hours of courses related to EFL learning. At the beginning of the experiment, students were told in detail what they were required to do in the study. They were informed that the study was designed to obtain empirical information about the strategies they adopted for EFL communication tasks. The simulated conversation was individually administered in class. No assessment was carried out during the role play. Immediately following the completion of the task, participants reported their task behaviors by filling out the questionnaire of communication strategies. Finally, ten participants were randomly selected for follow-up interviews to probe their perceptions of communication strategy use.

Data analysis

There were two parts in the data analysis of this study: the strategy questionnaire and the interview. For the scoring of questionnaires, the scale range for each item is 1~5. Frequency counting was conducted to analyze participants' responses to the CS questionnaire. t-tests were conducted to analyze participants' scores on the questionnaire. As for participants' answers to the interview, they were transcribed and categorized according to the three main questions in the interview guide.



Results

Participants' use of EFL communication strategies

One of the main purposes was to systematically investigate the EFL communication strategies used by Taiwanese college students. Based on the frequency counting of each item, the results of the strategy questionnaire completed by participants are described below. First, Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the 15 strategy categories used by participants. Among the 15 strategy categories, 'nonverbal strategies while speaking' has the highest average frequency, followed by 'message reduction and alteration strategies', 'negotiation for meaning while listening', and 'negotiation for meaning while speaking'. 'Accuracy-oriented strategies' has the lowest average frequency, and next is 'less active listener strategies.'

In addition, in terms of individual strategies for coping with EFL speaking problems, results indicate that among the 32 speaking strategies, the strategy 'I use words which are familiar to me' has the highest average frequency. The next four most common strategies are "While speaking, I pay attention to the listener's reaction to my speech", "I use gesture and facial expression if I can't communicate how to express myself", "I try to make eye contact when I am talking", and "I try to give a good impression to the listener". The strategy "I give up when I can't make myself understood" has the lowest average frequency. Among the 26 listening strategies, the strategy "I ask for repetition when I can't understand what the speaker has said" has the highest average frequency. The next two most common strategies are "I try to catch the speaker's main point", and "I make a clarification request when I am not sure what the speaker has said". The strategy "I only focus on familiar expressions" has the lowest average frequency.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of communication strategy categories

No.	Strategy Category	N	Mean	SD	Rank
SC1	Social Affective Strategies	318	3.46	0.54	10
SC2	Fluency-Oriented Strategies	318	3.24	0.62	13
SC3	Negotiation for Meaning While Speaking	318	3.78	0.65	4
SC4	Accuracy-Oriented Strategies	318	3.16	0.66	15
SC5	Message Reduction and Alteration Strategies	318	3.95	0.57	2
SC6	Nonverbal Strategies While Speaking	318	4.05	0.72	1
SC7	Message Abandonment Strategies	318	3.33	0.54	11
SC8	Attempt to Think in English Strategies	318	3.27	0.82	12
LC1	Negotiation for Meaning While Listening	318	3.84	0.63	3
LC2	Fluency-Maintaining Strategies	318	3.62	0.64	8
LC3	Scanning Strategies	318	3.55	0.68	9
LC4	Getting the Gist Strategies	318	3.66	0.63	6
LC5	Nonverbal Strategies While Listening	318	3.77	0.76	5
LC6	Less Active Listener Strategies	318	3.18	0.83	14
LC7	Word-Oriented Strategies	318	3.64	0.64	7

The study also examined the ten strategies least often used by the participants among 58 communication strategies. Results



indicate that “I give up when I can’t make myself understood” has the lowest average frequency, and next is “I try to emphasize the subject and verb of the sentence”, followed by “I try to use fillers when I cannot think of what to say”.

Differences in EFL communication strategies between proficient and less proficient learners

A second purpose was to examine the differences between proficient and less proficient EFL learners in the use of communication strategies. Table 2 indicates that there are significant differences in seven strategy categories between proficient and less proficient learners. Among the listening strategies, the average frequencies of five categories used by proficient learners are significantly higher than those by less proficient learners. They are *fluency-oriented strategies*, *negotiation for meaning while speaking*, *accuracy-oriented strategies*, *nonverbal strategies while speaking*, and *fluency-maintaining strategies*. On the other hand, there are two categories adopted significantly more often by less proficient learners than by proficient learners, including *attempt to think in English strategies* and *less active listener strategies*.

Table 2. t-test for communication strategy categories of proficient and less proficient participants

Category	Proficient (N=118)		Less Proficient (N=200)		t	p-value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
SC2	3.38	0.63	3.16	0.61	3.078	0.002
SC3	3.91	0.62	3.70	0.66	2.804	0.005
SC4	3.33	0.64	3.06	0.65	3.527	0.000
SC6	4.23	0.72	3.95	0.70	3.490	0.001
SC8	3.11	0.85	3.36	0.79	-2.549	0.011

Category	Proficient (N=118)		Less Proficient (N=200)		t	p-value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
LC2	3.79	0.69	3.52	0.64	3.804	0.000
LC6	2.83	0.79	3.39	0.79	-6.094	0.000

Moreover, results show that there are significant differences in 25 communication strategies between proficient and less proficient learners. Among them, the average frequencies of 19 strategies used by proficient learners are significantly higher than those by less proficient learners. Six strategies are adopted significantly more often by less proficient learners than by proficient learners.

Participants’ perceptions of EFL communication strategies

The remaining purpose was to examine college students’ perceptions of EFL communication strategies. The following section shows the ten participants’ responses to the interview questions. For the first question “What problems did you encounter when you use English to communicate with others?” the reasons provided by seven interviewees are presented as follows:

- The different culture and variable intonation will make me misunderstand part of the conversation.
- I can’t figure out the appropriate English words or phrases to express my feeling. I am too nervous to speak logically. Sometimes, I even forget how to express the meaning with English.
- I’m afraid that my utterances are ungrammatical. I’m afraid we can’t understand each others’ utterances. I try to correct the wrong parts in my words even though I can’t make sure whether my words are right or not.



- When I'm not familiar with the speaker's accent, I can't guess the word he or she uses; thus, I can't figure out the meaning.
- When speaking English with others, I get used to understanding the utterances with Chinese; therefore, it's difficult for me to respond to the interlocutor by translating Chinese into English immediately.
- The biggest problem for me is that I can't understand the speakers' utterances especially when they speak too fast, use linking and blending in English, or speak with many difficult English words. It's hard to comprehend all the speakers' words especially when they speak with a foreign accent or speak too fast.
- When it comes to my turn, sometimes, I can't specifically express all in English at once; therefore, I'll try to use body language to explain what I'm going to say.

With regard to the second interview question "Do you think EFL communication strategies are useful? Why or why not?" six interviewees provided the following responses:

- Communication strategies can help me comprehend better, such as the use of familiar words and repetition.
- Before I respond to others in English, I usually translate what I have heard into Chinese. I feel it would be easier and more efficient to use Chinese to communicate with others.
- I find some communication strategies can help others understand better, for example, the use of simple words, body language, and facial expressions to illustrate my meaning.
- Communication strategies remind me of something I don't pay attention to, for example, speaking louder, speaking slowly, or giving some examples.
- Since English is not our mother tongue, communication strategies are useful, necessary and helpful. Communication

strategies are useful because you can ask the interlocutor to repeat if you don't understand the question.

- Communication strategies are useful because I can use the strategies very often. For example, if the interlocutor speaks too fast, you can ask him/her to repeat. You can rethink your sentences after you speak. Next time, when you encounter the same problems, you can express your thoughts fluently.

In terms of the third interview question "Do you have any particular EFL communication strategies that you find especially helpful? What are they?" the strategies mentioned by the ten interviewees include the following:

- I will use the strategy such as guessing based on the context.
- Being familiar with the topics will help me understand more about the dialogue. In addition, paying close attention to the interlocutor's facial expressions or asking him/her to repeat is a useful strategy.
- I will arrange what I am going to say in advance. Then I will speak them out in order.
- I will imitate television or movie stars. I will ask the interlocutor to repeat or use simple words.
- I will tell myself not to be afraid of making mistakes and speak out with courage. In addition, I will use the sign language, facial expressions, and ask others for help.
- I will pay attention to the interrogative sentences. This helps me a lot in understanding the sentences. Furthermore, I will pay attention to the words which the speaker speaks at a slow speed.
- I am used to using the strategy called repeating what others said. I think this is useful.
- I will pay attention to others' facial expressions and body language.



- In order to overcome the obstacles, I will ask the interlocutor to repeat the words that I don't understand.
- I just communicate at my will. I will learn by doing, i.e., improving by accumulating the experiences.
- Usually, I'll ask the interlocutor to repeat his or her question again.
- Communication strategies can help me comprehend better, such as the use of repetition.
- Communication strategies are useful because I can ask the interlocutor to repeat if I don't understand the question.
- If the interlocutor speaks too fast, you can ask him/her to repeat.
- I will ask the interlocutor to repeat or use simple words.
- In order to overcome the obstacles, I will ask the interlocutor to repeat the words that I don't understand.

Discussion

In the current study, results indicate that among the 15 categories of communication strategies *nonverbal strategies while speaking* has the highest average frequency and *accuracy-oriented strategies* has the lowest frequency. The results seem to be consistent with those of Chen (1990) which revealed that high-proficiency Chinese EFL learners more frequently used linguistic-based communication strategies. In the study, about two-thirds of the participants were English non-majors from a university of science and technology. Most of them had limited time to study English and were not regarded as high-proficiency learners. As a result of their deficient linguistic knowledge, the participants most often adopted nonverbal strategies and least often accuracy-oriented strategies.

In addition, the results of the study show that among the 58 communication strategies *I use words which are familiar to me* is the most frequently used strategy, and next is *I ask for repetition when I can't understand what the speaker has said*. This finding confirms the effect of background knowledge on EFL oral communication. It supports Chen's (1990) finding which suggested that knowledge-based and repetition communication strategies were more extensively used by the low-proficiency EFL learners. Derwing and Rossiter (2002) also found that repetition was the most commonly used strategy when ESL learners were faced with communication breakdown. This finding was confirmed in the interviews as the most frequently mentioned communication strategy was repetition. The participants' responses included the following:

The present research found that there were significant differences in strategy categories and individual strategies between proficient and less proficient learners. The findings indicate the crucial role of language proficiency in the use of communication strategies. According to Rost and Ross (1991), proficiency is the weightiest predictor of strategy. They found that the use of certain strategies is correlated with L2 proficiency. Chen's (1990) study with Chinese EFL learners also found a positive relationship between the learners' target language proficiency and their strategic competence. Furthermore, the more proficient EFL learners in the study had significantly higher use of such communication strategy categories as fluency-oriented strategies and negotiation for meaning while speaking and less proficient learners used significantly more less-active listener strategies. The findings confirm Nakatani's (2006) which found that high-proficiency Japanese EFL learners reported more use of the same strategy categories as the present study. It is suggested that the EFL learners recognize their use of the strategies for keeping the conversation flowing. They also acknowledged the use of strategies for maintaining their interaction through negotiation. Although the low-proficiency learners in Nakatani's (2006)



study also reported more use of less-active listeners strategies, no significant difference was found between the two proficiency groups. As suggested by Nakatani (2006), the participants in his study might underestimate on a questionnaire their use of negative behaviors.

Besides, in terms of the problems encountered by the participants when they used English to communicate with others, some of the interviewees answered that the biggest problem for them is that they can't understand the speakers' utterances especially when they speak too fast, use linking and blending in English, or speak with many difficult English words. The statement is consistent with the potential problems in learning to listen to English indicated by Underwood (1989), including lack of control over the speed at which speakers speak and the listeners' limited vocabulary. The problems are also related to the taxonomy of listening skills proposed by Richards (1983), such as distinguishing word boundaries and recognizing reduced forms of words. As Nakatani (2006) stated, because EFL learners often face language difficulties when they communicate in English, they have no choice but to employ communication strategies to compensate for their insufficient proficiency in order to facilitate their interaction.

Conclusion

By providing these research findings this study is expected to provide empirical evidence for the research literature of communication strategies, and to help college students effectively improve their performance in EFL listening and speaking through the understanding of their communication strategies. Since the current study examined the EFL learners' communication strategies through the instruments of a questionnaire and an interview, it is suggested that future research can use actual discourse data to investigate EFL students' strategy use and get helpful information for validating their self-reported strategy

use. Moreover, in the current study, the reported frequency of strategy use may be limited to specific classroom contexts and student proficiency levels. Therefore, future studies can investigate EFL learners' strategy use in actual communication events. Although the present study has certain limitations, it can provide a better understanding of the strategy use of EFL speakers and thus facilitate the improvement of EFL communication. Since practice makes perfect, Taiwanese college students who want to become effective EFL speakers need to do more practice of English communication both in class and in the real world.

Bio data

Huei-Chun Teng got her PhD in Second Languages and Culture Education at University of Minnesota. She is currently a professor in the Department of Applied Foreign Languages at National Taiwan University of Science and Technology. Her research interests include L2 listening research, communication study, learning strategies, and language assessment.

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Appendix I

Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (Nakatani, 2006, p.163-164)

Strategies for Coping with Speaking Problems

Category 1: Social Affective Strategies

1. I try to relax when I feel anxious.
2. I try to enjoy the conversation.
3. I try to give a good impression to the listener.
4. I actively encourage myself to express what I want to say.
5. I don't mind taking risks even though I might make mistakes.
6. I try to use fillers when I cannot think of what to say.

Category 2: Fluency-Oriented Strategies

7. I pay attention to my rhythm and intonation.
8. I pay attention to my pronunciation.
9. I pay attention to the conversation flow.
10. I change my way of saying things according to the context.
11. I take my time to express what I want to say.
12. I try to speak clearly and loudly to make myself heard.



Category 3: Negotiation for Meaning While Speaking

13. I make comprehension checks to ensure the listener understands what I want to say.
14. I repeat what I want to say until the listener understands.
15. While speaking, I pay attention to the listener's reaction to my speech.
16. I give examples if the listener doesn't understand.

Category 4: Accuracy-Oriented Strategies

17. I pay attention to grammar and word order during conversation.
18. I notice myself using an expression which fits a rule that I have learned.
19. I correct myself when I notice that I have made a mistake.
20. I try to emphasize the subject and verb of the sentence.
21. I try to talk like a native speaker.

Category 5: Message Reduction and Alteration Strategies

22. I reduce the message and use simple expressions.
23. I use words which are familiar to me.
24. I replace the original message with another message because of feeling incapable of executing my original intent.

Category 6: Nonverbal Strategies While Speaking

25. I try to make eye-contact when I am talking.
26. I use gestures and facial expressions if I can't communicate how to express myself.

Category 7: Message Abandonment Strategies

27. I leave a message unfinished because of some language difficulty.
28. I ask other people to help when I can't communicate well.
29. I give up when I can't make myself understood.
30. I abandon the execution of a verbal plan and just say some words when I don't know what to say.

Category 8: Attempt to Think in English Strategies

31. I think first of a sentence I already know in English and then try to change it to fit the situation.
32. I think first of what I want to say in my native language and then construct the English sentence.

Strategies for Coping with Listening Problems

Category 1: Negotiation for Meaning While Listening

1. I ask for repetition when I can't understand what the speaker has said.
2. I make a clarification request when I am not sure what the speaker has said.
3. I ask the speaker to use easy words when I have difficulties in comprehension.
4. I ask the speaker to slow down when I can't understand what the speaker has said.
5. I make clear to the speaker what I haven't been able to understand.

Category 2: Fluency-Maintaining Strategies

6. I pay attention to the speaker's rhythm and intonation.



7. I send continuation signals to show my understanding in order to avoid communication gaps.
8. I use circumlocution to react the speaker's utterances when I don't understand his/her intention well.
9. I ask the speaker to give an example when I am not sure what he/she said.
10. I pay attention to the speaker's pronunciation.

Category 3: Scanning Strategies

11. I pay attention to the subject and verb of the sentence when I listen.
12. I especially pay attention to the interrogative when I listen to WH-questions.
13. I pay attention to the first part of the sentence and guess the speaker's intention.
14. I try to catch the speaker's main point.

Category 4: Getting the Gist Strategies

15. I don't mind if I can't understand every single detail.
16. I anticipate what the speaker is going to say based on the context.
17. I guess the speaker's intention based on what he/she has said far.
18. I try to respond to the speaker even when I don't understand him/her perfectly.

Category 5: Nonverbal Strategies While Listening

19. I use gestures when I have difficulties understanding.
20. I pay attention to the speaker's eye contact, facial expression and gestures.

Category 6: Less Active Listener Strategies

21. I try to translate into native language little by little to understand what the speaker has said.
22. I only focus on familiar expressions.

Category 7: Word-Oriented Strategies

23. I pay attention to the words which the speaker slows down or emphasizes.
24. I guess the speaker's intention by picking up familiar words.
25. I try to catch every word that the speaker uses.
26. I pay attention to the first word to judge whether it is an interrogative sentence or not.

