THE FUNCTIONS OF COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES: AN ANALYSIS OF CHINESE EFL LEARNERS’ TRANSACTIONAL PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT
Since speaking is one of the most difficult skills for Chinese EFL learners to manage, mastering the skills to communicate effectively in a L2 context has attracted the attention of many researchers. There were number of studies conducted on communicative strategies, however less attention was given in analysing EFL learners on transactional practice on communicative strategies. Therefore, this study aims to analyse upper-intermediate Chinese EFL learners’ communication strategies in a transactional context so as to investigate the appropriate functions of communication strategies, utilising the qualitative method (Jackson, 2011 & Creswell, 2014). Data was collected from a pair of Chinese master students in one the higher learning institutions through audio-recording, pair discussion and stimulated recall interview. It was found that the participants appeared to be lack of sufficient knowledge about communication strategies prior to the study. The findings also reveal there was an improvement in the participants’ communication strategies; conveying meaning, ensure language accuracy (self-repair and others repair), and to keep conversation going. Since oral communication is the most commonly used means of communication, ‘to convey meaning’ is the most effective and quickest method of sending and receiving messages.

Keywords: communication strategy; functions; pair discussion; oral communication; recall; interview.

INTRODUCTION
For most English language learners, the primary reason for learning English is to communicate effectively, and consequently improve their chances in further education and employment. There are two main types of communication: verbal and non-verbal (Ross & Arthur, 2002), with oral communication being the most effective communicator. Numerous studies have been undertaken to improve communication effectiveness among English learners. Cohen, Weaver and Li (1998) and Dornyei (1995) believe that communication strategies can strengthen learners’ communicative competence through frequent practice. Thus, from early 1970s, researchers, like Selinker (1972) first put forward the concept “strategies of second-language communication” (p. 229) for the purpose of dealing with speaking errors caused by language learners’ inter-language in L2 context. Therefore, when interlocutors try to use a target language to convey their meaning, there exists a gap between L1 and L2, and one method to overcome this weakness is by employing communication strategies. Similarly, Canale and Swain (1980) coined the term ‘communication competence’ to define language learners’ strategies in choosing appropriate utterances grammatically and socially. One of the definitions of Communication strategies accepted widely is attributed to
Faerch and Kasper (1983). “Communication strategies are possibly deliberate approaches for overcoming issues an individual considers to be an obstacle in arriving at a precise target” (Faerch and Kasper, 1983, p. 36). Tarone (1980, p. 420) and Dornyei and Scott, (1997, p. 179), have also stated that communication strategies work as meaning negotiation mechanisms, “communication strategies relate to a mutual attempt of interlocutors to agree on a meaning in situations where requisite meaning structures do not seem to be shared and general problem-solving mechanisms in L2 communication, “every potentially intentional attempt to cope with any language related problems of which the speaker is aware during the course of communication”.

Evidently, different researchers may view the same phenomenon in a different perspective as this is the nature of research work (Otha, 2005). Previous studies focused mainly on identifying and classifying communication strategies. However, subsequent researches have broadened the range of communication strategies into a specific context that investigated communication strategies employed by Chinese EFL learners, such as Chen (1990) and Huang and Naerssen (1987). Moreover, Teng’s (2012) study successfully combined communication strategies with pedagogical perspective in the EFL classroom context. Nevertheless, a gap has been found in the functions of different communication strategies employed by Chinese EFL learners. Hence, this study aims to investigate further the possible communication strategies employed by Chinese EFL learners in a transactional practice as well as the functions of communication strategies employed by Chinese EFL learners in a transactional practice.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Communication strategies’ functions have not been given sufficient emphasis or attention among language researchers for the past forty years until Ellis (2008) elicited one function of communication strategies to improve learners’ lexical defect. However, adequate knowledge of the functions of communication strategies can provide ample insights into learners’ ability regarding how to overcome their communicative deficiencies in L2 oral communication. This was a suggestion stated by Tarone (1979) implying that communication strategies can be split into two aspects which are; learning strategies, “an attempt to develop linguistic and sociolinguistic competence in the target language’, and production strategies, “an attempt to use one’s linguistic system efficiently and clearly, with a minimum of effort”. There are three types of speech: interactions, transactions and performances (2008). Interaction speech focuses on interlocutors’ social needs, while transaction speech looks for information provided by the interlocutors. Likewise, Brown & Yule (1983) defined interactional and transactional as the two main functions in oral communication. In an interactional discourse, interlocutors attempt to follow a line of speech to create social relationship while transactional discourse obtains messages. This interactional perspective would permit the addition of various repair mechanisms, which Tarone considered as communication strategies if their purpose was “to clarify intended meaning rather than simply correct linguistic form” (1980, p. 424). There are a number of research approaches to communication strategies, for instance, House (2003) and Kasper & Kellerman (1997) considered two main strategies: psycholinguistic and interactional. Nevertheless, their strategies were viewed negatively for excluding the other interlocutors’ performances in the oral communication. Tarone’s (1980) approach, on the other hand, focused on ‘both areas of interaction’: “Link to a reciprocal effort of two speakers to concur on a definition in instances where required
denotation frameworks do not appear to be shared” (p. 420). Overall, nearly every approach of communication strategies is more inclined to transactional function rather than interactional in L2 oral communication (Aston, 1993) resulting in few academic papers available for research purposes. Since scant research has been done on functional approaches to communication strategies, this study focuses on the functions of communication strategies conducted by Chinese EFL learners in a transactional practice.

**METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative method (Jackson, 2012 & Creswell, 2014) was utilized in this study. Communication strategies are seen as a ‘tool’ to fix the ‘interruptions’ in the process of transactional practice. As a consequence of the participants having had little knowledge about communication strategies before commencement of the study, the results appear more authentic and reliable. One of the limitations of this pilot study was small sample size and the application of Opportunism (Holliday, 2007) Strategy became necessary in selecting the participants because of time constraints and difficulty in collecting data from Chinese learners abroad.

**Participants**

In order to avoid unnecessary problems caused by interlocutors’ inadequate English proficiency, five master’s students who are both majored in English were selected from the University of Malaya. These Chinese international students needed to achieve at least band 6 in IELTS (International English Language Testing System) in order pursue their master’s degree in the UM.

Students aged between 23-30 were selected and respectively with the former males achieving band 6.5 while the latter females attained band 7 in IELTS. The male students were in their second semester, and the female students were still in their first semester. They expressed their interest and consented to be part of the study, after the author provided them with a comprehensive explanation regarding the study.

**Instruments**

Pair discussion and stimulated recall interviews were both employed as the main instruments in data collection (see Table 1). However, a greater reliability can be attached to the latter because of the one-to-one nature of examining the participants’ perspectives based on their performances.

Data obtained was based on topics selected by the interlocutors themselves depending on their interests. However, since it was going to be a transactional practice focused on conveying message (Jack, 2008), the social context is secondary to this study. Data was collected through audio-recording their pair discussion and also recall interviews. In a stimulated recall interview, researchers recorded participants’ responses to questions about their recently completed tasks by playing back the tape and interrupting it when the participants wished to comment or provide additional data. In general, the researchers required them to describe problems and difficulties they encountered in the oral communication process and how they addressed them. Lam (2006) applied this method in her study and considered that the recall interview ‘effective’ as it went beyond just a cursory examination into an in-depth study of the oral communication process.
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The difficulties encountered by the participants’ during oral communication were transcribed by the researcher. In order to access the communication strategies of participants, the researcher employed the inventory of strategic language (Dornyei, Zoltan, Scott, Mary & 2007). Table 2 shows Communication strategies used by the participants.

Table 2: Communication strategies used by the participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Clarification request</td>
<td>Requesting for more explanation, clarification or repetition to solve a comprehension problems.</td>
<td><em>What do you mean by...? What?</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Confirmation request</td>
<td>Asking the speaker to confirm whether the heard or understood utterance is correct or not</td>
<td>Using ‘question repeat’ or questions like ‘You mean...?’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Interpretive summary</td>
<td>Paraphrasing the interlocutor’s message to check if they understood it correctly or not</td>
<td>Yan: so, after graduation, they got married and then had a baby a year after...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Expressing non-understanding</td>
<td>Expressing that the interlocutor does not understand properly what was going on in the communication</td>
<td><em>I didn’t get that.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Requesting help</td>
<td>Requesting assistance from other partners when they are faced with a deficiency in self-expression</td>
<td><em>How to say that...</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Repairing</td>
<td>Repairing self or other errors in oral performance</td>
<td><em>At that time, he is about ... She is about 27 years old...</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Use of fillers</td>
<td>Using gambits words and phrases to fill pauses and to gain time in order to keep the conversation open</td>
<td><em>You know, see, ok, well, um</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: *Communicative Strategies* (Dornyei & Scott’s inventory, 1997)

As for ascertaining the functions of Communication strategies that participants used in this study, Ohta’s (2005) methods of ‘turn’ analysis was employed in the recall interview with questions focused on the following three turns in their conversation:

“(1) the initial turn which contains the utterance creating the problem in communication; (2) the turn containing the signal of strategy usage; (3) the turn containing the response to overcome the problem” (p.388)

Language is basically sounds or utterances that convey meaning. It is a means or tool for communicating thoughts or messages from one person to another. Various types of conversations are used in different ways for different purposes such as conversation between individuals and groups, sending message to a large group (audience), instructing, and conveying of knowledge (teaching). Without verbal communication that convey precise meaning that is understood by the receiver (listener), civilization as we know it and advances
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in science, technology, commerce and education could not have been achieved. Therefore, the application of communication in strategic ways is vital to convey the intended message and avoid miscommunication. The use of communication strategy is explained further in selected extracts 1 through 7.

**To convey meanings**
The clarification request strategy is used when users want to get more information and explanation about an ambiguous utterance as shown in extract 1 below:

**Extract 1:**

David: Let’s choose some aspects of marriage.

Anne: What?

David: I want to talk about responsibilities in the marriage.

(* David and Anne are nicknames of the two participants)

In the above example, Anne seeks further clarification from the interlocutor regarding the topic for discussion. In the initial turn *(some aspects of marriage)*, the listener’s reply indicates lack of comprehension of the utterance, and thus can be regarded as problematic utterance in oral communication. In the third turn, therefore, David explains his intention and is more specific about the topic to be discussed. In their recall interview, Anne explained why she raised the question: Sophie *: So why did you raise the question? Anne: Because I didn’t fully understand his suggestion. I wanted to know more (information) about it. (* Sophie is the nickname of the researcher). The findings from extract 1 echoes with Tarone’s (1980) statement that phrases are considered Communication strategies once their intention was “to clarify intended meaning” as was the case in Anne’s speech act of asking a question. Furthermore, the interpretative summary strategy was occasionally employed to facilitate interlocutor’s understanding as shown in extract 2 below:

**Extract 2:**

David: I would like to take an example of a friend of mine.

Anne: Yes?

David: When graduation, when (she) graduated in 2006, she, she married quickly, and a year after, 2007, baby’s coming...

Anne: oh, really, you mean that after graduation, she got married and then she got a baby a year after, right?

David: yeah!

Extract 2 indicates that this strategy is employed to ascertain that listeners grasped the correct meanings. Also, this strategy facilitates transfer of meaning in L2 communication. Occasionally, the requesting help strategy can assist users to convey their meanings successfully so as to ensure messages given and received are clearly understood by both
interlocutors.

**Extract 3:**

Anne: At that time, I mean when they get older enough, and they get financially, um, **how to say that? Oh, they got enough money...**

Extract 3 indicates, Anne’s attempt to describe a situation. However, because of inadequate vocabulary, she struggles to find the appropriate words, and expressions to convey her message. Ultimately, she directs a question seeking help to complete her utterance. In this example, she partly answers the question herself. Sometimes, confirmation request is used where users will repeat words, phrases or ask questions to confirm meaning. Extract 4 below is a sample of confirmation request. The data in Extract 3 rings with Tarone’s (1979) study that speakers make use of production strategies, attempts at using one’s current linguistic system as efficiently as possible as Anne demonstrates in explaining her idea through lexical items and phrases that she understands.

**Extract 4:**

David: she thinks it’s enough, because she has finished the **core responsibility**.

Anne: **so you mean that** for your friend, the mean responsibility is to give birth to baby, and raise the baby...

In David’s first turn (*core responsibility*), Anne is rather unsure of the meaning of his statement. As a result, Anne attempts to clarify and assure herself the meaning of ‘core responsibility’ in this instance.

*To ensure language accuracy*

Repairing strategy is often used by interlocutors to make the utterance accurate when transferring meanings. However, there is a difference between repaired by speakers themselves and repaired by other interlocutors, as shown in extract 5 below:

**Extract 5:**

David: My friend found a job, at that time, he is about...

Anne: She is about...

David: twenty-seven years old.

Extract 5, one participant initiates the conversation while the other repairs errors in the communication. There is also an element of self-repairing going on (twenty-seven years old). However, these repair strategies are more focused on language accuracy rather than conveying meaning.

*To keep conversation going*

The use of fillers to avoid long pauses and keep momentum in conversations, speeches, announcements and other oral events is a common strategy adopted by interlocutors. Fillers
come about when speakers need time to figure out correct grammar, recall words or subject matter, and the common utterances used as fillers are well; see; you know; and I mean... Extract 6 below is an example of a filler:

**Extract 6:**

Anne: you see... when two lovers are in a relationship...

There are multiple examples similar to the one described above in oral communication in extract 6. Nevertheless, there are instances in a conversation where meaning is not grasped fully by one or both interlocutors. The party concerned expressed immediately express this difficulty to avoid confusion as the example below shows:

**Extract 7:**

David: it sounds discriminative? for the women’s rights.

Anne: dis.. discri ? What do you mean? I didn’t get it.

David: For woman, they have a lot more restrictions than men...

In extract 7, because of the word ‘discriminative’ is mispronounced, Anne appears to have not understood and appears confused. She indicates this problem to David, who then provides a clear explanation of his earlier statement, so as to keep the conversation on course.

**IMPLICATION OF THE STUDY**

As the participants, whom comprise of Chinese EFL learners, have successfully improved in both their understanding as well as proficiency in using communication strategies, this study may aid in teaching communication strategies in language, particularly English, as a foreign language. The participants partook in this study being informed and given a chance to reflect on their own proficiency in communication strategies, allowing them to improve as well as continue their conversations with ease. Therefore, EFL learners may benefit well from the outcome of this study as it shows that the participants have shared meaning of lexical items and overcome issues of expressing ideas as interlocutors through interacting with each other and the interviewer.

**CONCLUSION**

For Chinese EFL learners, one of the deficiencies in learning English is speaking effectively. Although there could be many factors which may be causing the deficiencies, the lack of communication strategies could be a very important one. This study provides a brief but important insight about issues regarding Chinese upper-intermediate EFL learners’ communication strategies usage and their problems when conducting an oral communication. It may provide teachers with some pedagogical input on teaching spoken English. The study also indicates that learning English by practicing oral communication could lead to effective communication by students. A suggestion for further studies is to create and include a larger pool of data through mixing together weaker EFL learners with more proficient EFL learners within a conversation, then creating another conversation with all weak EFL learners and all more proficient EFL learners in separate conversations. Through this method, the improvement and usage of communication strategies will be even more apparent in the data.
REFERENCES
