Communication Strategies in Language Learning: A Case Study

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This study examines the communication strategies employed by an English learner to compensate for linguistic shortcomings. It is placed within the context of the Nijmegen Project, an influential benchmark in the study of L2 communication strategies. The tasks were adapted from the Nijmegen Project. Due to the small data set, a very simple quantitative approach was employed to analyse the learner's use of communication strategies. The findings broadly support those of the Nijmegen Project, although there were variations that point to some potentially interesting areas for further study.

I. Introduction

There has for the past 30 years been broad recognition of the usefulness and importance of communication strategies (CSs) to L2 speakers. In fact, some of the claims have been so lofty as apparently to conflate the notion of communication strategy with that of actual communication: "The study of CSs is important, as it looks at how learners are able to use L2 to convey meaning" (Littlemore, 2001). While we may want to moderate Littlemore's claim slightly, we can perhaps accept without controversy that CSs comprise at least a part of how learners are able to use L2 to convey meaning. Dornyei and Scott make the point that even a cursory glance at a piece of L2 discourse will show the effort which learners expend on trying to "make up for their L2 deficiencies" (1997, p. 174). In other words, the value of CSs is evidenced by the extent to which learners rely on them. Others have taken a less empirical approach and argued a priori for the value of CSs. Chen (1990), for example, suggests that even if learners did not use CSs naturally in L2 production, it would be the responsibility of instructors to encourage their use.

While there may be general acceptance of the importance of CSs, the issue is

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clouded by the fact that there is so little agreement as to exactly what comprises them. The identification of CSs in any given study will depend on the defining criteria employed (Faerch and Kasper, 1984), and given that researchers have such differing defining criteria, we are left with "a rather confusing multitude of...taxonomies with little agreement on the terminology" (Poulisse, 1987, p. 143). Before turning to this study proper it will be necessary to locate it within a confused context.

The research into CSs can be separated into two broad approaches, which are delineated on conceptual and, to some extent, chronological grounds. Exemplified in the work of Tarone, Varadi and Paribakht (1977, 1980 and 1985 respectively, as cited in Ellis, 1994, p. 396), the ‘interactional approach’ identified and classified CSs purely as observable phenomena, such that one CS differed from another in terms of the language through which it was realised. This would mean that, for example, circumlocution and mime are distinct strategies because they are manifested very differently (Tarone, 1977, as cited in Ellis, 1994, p. 397).

This conception of CSs has two problems. Firstly, if we accept (as most do (Dornyei & Scott, 1997, p. 180)) that the value of understanding CSs lies in determining the cognitive processes which underpin them, then the interactive approach is of little use (Dornyei & Scott, 1997; Ellis, 1994; Faerch & Kasper, 1984; Poulisse, 1987, 1993, 1994; Poulisse & Schils, 1989). Poulisse encapsulates the issue when she argues: "By focusing on the differences in form the similarities between...utterances in terms of propositional content is concealed and the generalisation which could have been made with respect to the analytic processes underlying these utterances remains unnoticed" (1987, p. 143). In other words, the distinction between circumlocution and mime may be arbitrary. Both strategies involve the deconstruction of the item into essential elements, and so are cognitively identical. This issue can perhaps be seen as symptomatic of a more fundamental shortcoming of the interactive approach, that it lacks psychological plausibility (Ellis, 1994, p. 398; Poulisse, 1994, p. 620). This is because it makes little or no appeal to current models of language processing.

The 'psycholinguistic approach' to identifying CSs was developed largely as a response to the perceived shortcomings of the interactional approach. Where the latter saw CSs as social procedures, as "a mutual attempt of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning" (Dornyei & Scott, 1997, p. 178), to Faerch and Kasper, the ‘pioneers’ of the psycholinguistic approach, CSs were primarily a mental process (Dornyei & Scott, 1997, p.180). Faerch and Kasper defined CSs as consisting of two criteria: "problem orientedness and potential consciousness" (1984, p. 47).
Although not without critics\(^2\) the idea of problem orientedness, in particular, has proved influential and has been a feature of most studies since it was proposed (Abdesslem, 1996, p. 49; Dornyei & Scott, 1997, p. 182). Faerch and Kasper's criteria are at the root of the most comprehensive and extensive study of CSs to date (Ellis, 1994, p. 400; Littlemore, 2001, p. 243). The taxonomy of CSs employed in the Nijmegen Project eliminated the weaknesses of the earlier interactional approach. Psychological plausibility stems from its basis in Levelt's model of speech processing. Levelt (1995) suggests that processing is modular, with each stage depending on the success of its predecessor. For the Nijmegen taxonomy, the crucial point is the transition from the "conceptualizer", which "decides what to express" (Levelt, 1995, p. 15), and the "formulator", which imparts linguistic properties to the message (Levelt, 1995, p. 15). It is thought that if the preverbal message is deemed by the formulator to be 'unencodable', a second message is produced in the conceptualizer. This message takes the form of a communication strategy (Dornyei & Kormos, 1998, pp. 357-358).

Because the taxonomy is not concerned with product, it is also parsimonious. Poulisse posits only two broad categories of CS: "Avoidance strategies are used when people give up their original plans, while achievement strategies...are aimed at solving problems" (1994, p. 620). Achievement strategies are further divided into two "archistrategies", conceptual and linguistic, within which there are further subdivisions. With conceptual strategies "the speaker analyses the concept by deconstructing it into its criterial features" (1987, p. 146), while linguistic strategies manipulate linguistic knowledge (see Table 1). Returning to the example of circumlocution and mime, we find that for the Nijmegen taxonomy these are the same strategy. Despite their ostensible differences they are both 'conceptual-analytic' strategies.

### Table 1: The Nijmegen Typology of communication strategies (Ellis, 1994, [Table 9.10] p. 402)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Archistrategies</th>
<th>Communication strategies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual</td>
<td>• Analytic (circumlocution, description and paraphrase)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Holistic (the use of a superordinate, coordinate, or subordinate term)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linguistic</td>
<td>• Transfer (borrowing, foreignizing, and literal translation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Morphological creativity</td>
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</table>

\(^2\) Bialystock (1990, as cited in Ellis, 1994, p. 399) developed a competing psycholinguistic approach which dispenses with both of Faerch and Kasper's criteria. Bialystock's ideas have been praised as being "firmly grounded in cognitive psychology" (Ellis, 1994, p. 400), but they have proved much less influential than those of Faerch and Kasper, and as such will not be examined here.
The Nijmegen study produced two main findings. Over four tasks, it found an "enormous" effect for task type on the choice of CSs (Poulisse & Schils, 1989, p. 37), and a smaller proficiency effect, with more proficient learners less likely to use communication strategies (Ellis, 1994, p. 401).

The first of these findings relates to one of the primary aims of this study. The extent to which the use of communication strategies is determined by the demands of the task has implications for the teaching of CSs because it provides an indication of what types of strategy are likely to be most useful in authentic settings. One aim of this study was to look for a similar effect. A second, connected aim was to determine what the participant’s performance might indicate about useful teaching and learning strategies. In other words, are there substantial gaps in his use of communication strategies which might benefit from explicit focus? A final aim was in response to a perceived gap in the research literature. Past studies have tended to afford participants the ‘luxury’ of using L1 transfer strategies because the interlocutors have usually been L1 speakers. In fact, such situations are in fact not very authentic, given that people are unlikely to converse in L2 if they share an L1, and L1 transfer is probably an ineffective strategy in the target language domain. For this study, a Chinese speaker was deliberately selected because the interlocutor was entirely unfamiliar with Mandarin. The aim was to measure whether L1 transfer appeared at all, which would suggest the possibility that this feature is not always strategic.

The taxonomy used here is that of the Nijmegen project, although there was no attempt to measure for avoidance strategies (message abandonment was included, given its importance as an indicator of a failure to communicate). This was for practical reasons, inasmuch as it is difficult to measure what is essentially an absence. The tasks were based on two of the four used by the Nijmegen project. These similarities were logical given that the aims of the study were tied to the findings of the Nijmegen project. Additionally, the Nijmegen Project now stands as something of a benchmark in the study of communication strategies, and its taxonomy has been called the "best" devised (Ellis, 1994, p. 403).

II. Method

1. The Participant

ZL is a 25-year-old native Mandarin speaker from northern China. Unfortunately there was no reliable measure of L2 proficiency for him, which precluded using the data collected to examine the Nijmegen findings regarding a proficiency effect in CS use. He has studied English for around fifteen years, although most of his formal instruction has been in a form of the grammar-translation method.
ZL relocated to Japan three years ago, and has been studying at university since last year, majoring in ‘English communication’. ZL hopes to return to China with a view to becoming a “Professor of English” at some point in the future. His instructors all consider ZH to be a highly motivated, gregarious and intelligent man whose ability to use English communicatively his improved substantially during his two years at the university. ZL himself believes that his communicative ability is "much better" than when he first arrived in Japan.

After three years in Japan, ZL has acquired a level of Japanese such that he can function quite easily in everyday life, including social occasions. He considers his Japanese to be stronger than his English.

2. Procedures

The two tasks were based on tasks one and four in the Nijmegen Project (as outlined in Poulisse, 1987). For the first task ZH was shown a total of 22 line drawings depicting animals and artefacts, most of which he was not expected to know (occasionally an easier item was used so he did not become discouraged). He was asked to name the object if he was able to, and if not, to offer whatever information he thought would enable someone listening to the recording to identify the picture. The task continued until equal numbers of unknown animals and artefacts had been shown. This was because recent research into the nature of semantic memory indicates that different lexical types access different types of lexical knowledge, and that this distinction is largely between animate and inanimate lexical sets (Forde & Humphreys, 1998). It was thought that if either animate or inanimate items were overrepresented, certain CSs might be artificially preferred. When it was considered appropriate (when the initial 'definition' was unsatisfactory, for example), ZL was pressed to give more information. It was hoped that this would push him further toward his "linguistic ceiling" (Merrylees & McDowell, 1991, p. 34), and thereby establish the limits of his CS use in accordance with the second of the aims outlined above.

The second task took the form of a short, informal discussion/interview in which ZL was left largely free to define the extent to which he wanted to stretch his own linguistic resources, although the interlocutor did press him on occasion. This format was chosen not only to follow the lead of the Nijmegen Project, but also because of the relative authenticity it gives to language use. It should be noted of course that in itself an interview (especially between teacher and student) is not a definitively authentic task. In fact Van Lier rather damningly calls such an approach "asymmetrical and pseudosocial" (1989, p. 502). However, inasmuch as it was unscripted the task did at least in principle satisfy one of Van Lier's
conversational criteria, that of "mutual contingency" (1989, p. 502)\(^3\), and it was certainly more authentic than task one. This was particularly important in determining whether there was a task effect on CS use.

3. Analysis

The use of CSs was measured quantitatively. For task one this proved to be a straightforward exercise. When ZL did not name the object it could safely be inferred that he was using a CS. This said, there were occasions when retrospective comments were needed from ZL in order to determine which category of CS was being used.

The identification of CSs for the interview task was substantially more problematic. As far as was practical, the methods employed at Nijmegen were also used here. The data were examined for what have been called "problem indicators" (Poulisse & Schils, 1989, p. 20) or "strategy markers", including "pauses, repeats, false starts, rising intonations, sighs and laughs" (Poulisse, 1994, p. 622). More useful were the retrospective comments which ZL made after the data collection. Unfortunately triangulation was out of the question, so that where Nijmegen had two judges in addition to the participants, this study was limited to the interlocutor and the participant. A decision was made here to be stringent in identifying CSs in task two, so that so that an item was only accorded ‘CS status’ if ZL could clearly remember it as such.

The relative paucity of data this produced was problematic in that it limits what inferences can be made. In any case, the approach taken to data analysis was simply to count instances of particular CSs and divide them according to task. Because of the disparity in CS use between the two tasks (36 for task one and 10 for task two) it was considered useful to calculate percentages for the use of each CS, both across tasks and within each task.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CS Type</th>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>conceptual-analytic</td>
<td>anco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>conceptual-holistic</td>
<td>hoco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>linguistic-transfer</td>
<td>litran</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>linguistic-morphological creativity</td>
<td>morph</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: CS labelling conventions (Poulisse, 1987)

\(^3\) Unfortunately the reality proved to be more of a ‘one-sided contingency’, with ZL satisfied simply to respond to his interlocutor's questions.
III. Results and Discussion

1. Overview

A glance at Table 3, below, clearly suggests two points. The first is that ZL showed a clear preference for achievement strategies over message abandonment. Even when this is qualified with the fact that avoidance was not measured, a count of 42 to 4 is substantial. It is interesting however that ZL employed proportionately more abandonment strategies for task two. Table 3 also shows that ZL used significantly more CSs in task one than in task two, which is interesting given that the amount of language he produced in each task was roughly equal.

Table 3: Division of CS instances across both tasks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Task 1</th>
<th>Task 2</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Achievement strategies</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message abandonment</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 again shows the extent to which abandonment strategies were underrepresented (9% overall). More interesting perhaps is the extent to which he favoured conceptual over linguistic achievement strategies (76% and 15% respectively).

Table 4: Types and subtypes of communication strategies as a percentage from combined tasks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Achievements strategies</th>
<th>conceptual</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>anco</td>
<td>17.5 (n.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>hoco</td>
<td>19.5 (n.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ho+an</td>
<td>39 (n.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>linguistic</td>
<td>litran</td>
<td>13 (n.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>morph</td>
<td>2 (n.1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Message abandonment     | 9 (n.4)   | 9      |

From Table 5 it is interesting to note that where holistic/analytic combined CSs were preferred by some margin for task one (53%), they did not feature at all for task two. 75% of CSs for task two were holistic, a category which features only 8.8% of the time for task one.
Table 5: Division of achievement strategy types across tasks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Task 1 (n. 34)</th>
<th>Task 2 (n. 8)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conceptual strategies</strong>&lt;br&gt;(n. 35)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>analytic</td>
<td>7 (20.5%)</td>
<td>1 (12.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>holistic</td>
<td>3 (8.8%)</td>
<td>6 (75%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>holistic + analytic</td>
<td>18 (53%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Linguistic strategies</strong>&lt;br&gt;(n. 7)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>transfer</td>
<td>5 (14.7%)</td>
<td>1 (12.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>morphological creativity</td>
<td>1 (3%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Support for the 'Nijmegen task effect'

Even with insufficient data for a powerful statistical analysis it is clear that the two tasks elicited very different strategic approaches. The most obvious feature is that ZL used many more CSs for task one (the item description) than for task two (the interview). The Nijmegen researchers encountered the same phenomenon and offer a plausible explanation for it. Poulisse and Schils point out that in an interview task participants are "relatively free...to hide their problems or to avoid them" (1989, p. 21), and Poulisse again that "the subjects adapted their [CSs] to the task demands and gave no more than what was required" (1987, p. 150). This means that participants will tend to adopt more "elaborate and time consuming" strategies when it is important for the interlocutor to understand the individual item, while strategies which do not impede fluency will be adopted when it is less important that each item be understood (Poulisse, 1994, p. 622). We therefore find that there is a preference for more analytic strategies for the picture description, while less explicit holistic strategies were used in the interview.

The results here did not entirely mirror those of the Nijmegen Project however. Where Nijmegen found a preference for analytic strategies in task one, ZL showed a marked inclination toward combined analytic and holistic strategies. The use of these strategies followed a regular pattern, of which turns 3 and 4 are examples:
3. ZL: ((watering can)) it's a **kind of thing to**... **water the flower** or **some kind of like flower.**

4. ZL: ((kettle)) it's **kind of a pot**... **just used to**... **pour water to the glass** or **warm the water.**

The manner in which the holistic element is employed here and throughout task one, at the beginning of the turn and preceding a prolonged pause, indicates a possibility that ZL is in fact using a less demanding strategy to buy himself time. This may point to a weakness in the Nijmegen taxonomy. Unlike many others (Dornyei & Scott, 1997, for example) the Nijmegen taxonomy does not admit such things as 'stalling' as CSs, but as this example shows, such strategies may in fact be the psychological motivation for the use of 'surface' strategies, like the holistic example above. Thus Nijmegen researchers may be open to the same criticism as that which they levelled at the interactional approach, that it does not point to the processes which underlie certain strategies.

3. Transfer

As it transpired, ZL did resort to transfer, but in a language with which he knew the interlocutor had at least some familiarity. For all five cases of transfer in the study ZL used Japanese rather than his native Chinese. This suggests that his use of transfer is wholly strategic and intended to convey meaning directly to his interlocutor. This claim needs to be tempered slightly with what occurred in task one, turns 44 and 48 (below). On both occasions the Japanese word was whispered. This suggests one of two possibilities; firstly that ZL was genuinely attempting to communicate meaning strategically but was trying to conceal this fact (that the interlocutor was also his teacher strengthens this possibility). It is also possible that ZL is genuinely using his 'L2' (Japanese) to 'prime' his 'L3' (English) and is not trying to communicate meaning at all. Unfortunately ZL's retrospective comments did not touch on this, but the second possibility, while speculative, would provide an interesting avenue of investigation into what has been called the 'hierarchical model of bilingual lexical representation' (Fox, 1996).

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4 i.e. that lexical representations for L1 and 'acquired' languages are stored separately in the brain, and so lexical items from an acquired language will prime another acquired language more successfully than L1 will.
IV. Implications for Teaching and Learning

This section must be prefaced with a reminder that the merits and practicality of teaching CSs remain controversial. Faerch and Kasper, for example, state explicitly that where consciousness is involved, a strategy can be taught (1984, p. 47). In contrast, the Nijmegen group, despite being heavily influenced by Faerch and Kasper, concluded that there are no significant differences in the cognitive processes involved for L1 and L2 CSs, and so they need not be taught (Ellis, 1994, p. 401).

Two responses can be made in response to the Nijmegen project here. Firstly, even if we accept that there is no difference in the cognitive processes involved, there is certainly a great deal of difference in how they can be encoded linguistically. There remains the question of whether learners have the ability to communicate meaning through communication strategies, irrespective of cognitive processes. One role of the teacher is to help learners develop the resources to express their 'intention', as Levelt puts it (1995). Unsurprisingly, Russell and Loschky found that learners tend to look first to simpler, less effective types of CS (such as L1 transfer) when they lack the resources to use more sophisticated strategies (1998). Dornyei (1995, pp. 63-64) also points out the importance of all of the roles of formal instruction. The Nijmegen position seems to equate instruction entirely with direct teaching, whereas Dornyei points to five other means and reasons for giving instruction in CSs (see Table 6, below).

Table 6: Dornyei's functions of teaching communication strategies (1995)

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Raising learner awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Encouraging students to be willing to take risks and use communication strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Providing L2 models</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Highlighting cross-cultural differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Direct teaching of communication strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Providing opportunity for practice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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In task one, ZL showed a fairly effective formal command of such complex strategies as circumlocution. Where there were significant problems, such as in the communication of 'spanner' (turns 13-17) these seemed to stem more from lexical shortcomings than from formal issues.

13. ZL: ((spanner))..it's a kind tools to use..to [lu:'z]...the screw?...I think.  
14. T: like a screwdriver?  
15. ZL: no..((makes twisting motion with hands)) it just [lu:'z] something..it's from in in door or window or ((laughing)) something like that=
16. T: OK  
17. ZL: =I don't know

More interesting from a pedagogical perspective was the interview task in that it elicited comparatively few CSs. As previously noted, the nature of the task allowed ZL to remain within his linguistic 'safety zone', and the relative lack of CSs indicates that ZL did not push himself particularly hard. This view is supported by a third task which was actually performed by ZL but whose data were not included because it elicited no explicit instances of CSs. The task, which required ZL to describe the differences between two similar pictures, had generated a number of clear strategies during piloting. However, when ZL performed the task it was clear that he was simply avoiding more difficult items in favour of those which he could express directly. Finally, the higher proportion of message abandonment in task two is further indication of a reluctance to use achievement strategies in more naturalistic settings.

While it should be noted here that ZL's interlocutor was his instructor, and this may have contributed to his reticence, ZL's tendency not to challenge himself points to the second of Dornyei's functions (Table 6). It would be to ZL's benefit if he were encouraged to take advantage of the classroom to reach his linguistic ceiling more often. Not only would this improve his communicative range, but by doing so he would spend more time operating within his 'zone of proximal development', where it is thought that much language learning takes place (Van Lier, 2001).
V. Conclusion

All findings from this study need to be qualified with a reference to the small size of the sample, the lack of powerful statistical analysis, the single subject, and the subjective manner in which CSs were identified. The findings are perhaps best described as interesting rather than compelling. This said, there are possible implications here, both for the study of CSs and on a personal level for ZL as a language learner.

Although in broad terms the study found a similar effect for task type on CS to that of the Nijmegen Project, there were small differences. Most significant among these was the use of holistic-analytic combinations, and the suggestion that these may sometimes point to a psychological process for which the Nijmegen taxonomy fails to account. This suggests that the Nijmegen taxonomy, although comprehensive, is in need of refinement. ZL’s use of transfer strategies seemed to be deliberate and strategic, but there was also a hint that CSs may prove a fruitful area of research for those looking at the nature of the bilingual mental lexicon.

It was also suggested that the results indicate a failure on ZL’s part to extend himself sufficiently. While it was accepted that this may in part be due to a testing effect, it was noted that the pilot participant showed herself less reluctant to enter 'unknown territory'. How formal instruction can effectively encourage learners to take a more adventurous approach in their production would be a very useful area of investigation and would be of benefit to much more than simply communication strategies. The focus here has been more on how ZL does use communication strategies and less on how he perhaps ought to use them.

References


