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Abstract

The purpose of the present study is to analyze the communication strategies used by EFL learners. In the study, participants were 318 students at a university in northern Taiwan. The instruments consisted of a role-play task, a communication strategy questionnaire and an interview guide. The questionnaire of communication strategies was mainly based on the Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI) designed by Nakatani (2006). The questionnaire included 26 strategies of seven factors for coping with listening problems and 32 strategies of eight factors for speaking problems. A simulated conversation of the role play was individually administered in class. Then, participants reported their task behaviors by filling out the questionnaire of communication strategies. Finally, follow-up interviews were held with ten participants to probe their perceptions of communication strategy use. Results of the current study show that 'nonverbal strategies while speaking' has the highest average frequency among the 15 categories of communication strategies. The strategy most often used by the participants among the 58 strategies is 'I use words which are familiar to me.' Effective learners had significantly higher frequent use of 19 communication strategies, and less proficient learners had more frequent use of six strategies. Besides, there were nine strategies adopted significantly more often by female learners, and two strategies were used more often by males. By providing empirical evidences and descriptions, the current study can seek to facilitate our understanding of L2 communication strategy use, and further to assist Taiwanese college students to become more effective EFL speakers.

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Introduction

According to Littlemore (2003), the steps taken by language learners in order to enhance the effectiveness of their communication are known as *communication strategies*. Although there still is not a consensus among researchers, communication strategies have been generally defined as the means that speakers use to solve their communicative problems. 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 (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997). The present study aims to analyze the communication strategies used in EFL context. The major research questions include: (1) What are the communication strategies more 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 descriptions, the study seeks to facilitate the understanding of communication strategy use in EFL context.

Literature Review

There have been a number of studies conducted to examine the various aspects of communication strategies. Three main fields have been identified in terms of the focus of the current research, including definition and taxonomy of communication strategies, use of communication strategies, and instruction of communication strategies. A review of the CS literature reveals that there are two main approaches for defining communication strategies. According to the psycholinguistic definition proposed by Færch and Kasper (1980), communication strategies are "potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal" (p.81). This definition distinguishes communication strategies from other verbal plans by two criteria, i.e., problem-orientedness, potential consciousness. Besides, as suggested by the interactional definition (Tarone,1980), a communication strategy is "a mutual attempt of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in situations where requisite meaning structures do not seem to be shared" (p.419). This definition implies that the *negotiation of meaning* as a joint effort between the interlocutors is central to the concept of communication strategies.

As for the research on the use of communication strategies, a number of studies have investigated the relationship between various factors and communication strategies. With regard to 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 Lier (2001) investigated how meaning is negotiated in two different types of interaction between native speakers and nonnative speakers. Results show that the conversational activity provides learners with more chanllenging language practice than the information-gap activity. In addition, the study by Poulisse and Schils (1989) examined the effects of profieciency and task-related factors on the compensatory strategies used by Dutch learners of English. Findings indicated that the most advanced students used fewer compensatory strategeis than did the least proficient ones. Whereas the subjects predominantly used analytic strategies in the picture naming/description task, they frequently adopted holistic strategies and transfer strategies in the story retell task and the oral interview.

In terms of 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. Moreover, Paribahkt (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, the advanced learners are in the mid-position between the native speakers and the 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.

Recently, several researchers have examined the communication strategies employed by Chinese EFL learners. For example, Huang and Naerssen (1987) and Chen (1990) investigated the communication strategies used by EFL learners in China. Some studies have also been conducted with EFL students in Taiwan. For example, Liao and Bresnahan (1996) designed a contrastive study of refusal strategies between Mandarin Chinese and American English. Hsieh (1998) examined the relationship between anxiety and the use of communication strategies. Tuan (2001) studied the relationship between extroversion-introversion tendency and the choice of communication strategies. Zhang (2005) investigated the use of communication strategy in dyad talks and the function of proficiency level in strategy selection. Furthermore, Jackson (2002) investigated the reticence of EFL students in Hong Kong in their case discussions. Besides, Derwing and Rossiter (2002) found that the most common used strategies when ESL learners are faced with communication breakdown were paraphrase and self-repetition.

Methodology

Participants

The participants (see Table 1) were 318 students at a university in northern Taiwan. There were 118 students who majored in English and 200 students with other majors. The participants included 175 females and 143 males. They ranged in age from 18 to 23 years old. They were uniform in first language

background and had relatively homogeneous cultural background. All of them have completed at least six years of EFL study prior to entering the university.

Table 1. Information of Participants

	English Majors	Non-Majors	Total
Female	92	83	175
Male	26	117	143
Total	118	200	318

Instruments

The instruments used in the study included a role-play task, a communication strategy questionnaire and an interview guide. With the task of role play, 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 based on the Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI) designed by Nakatani (2006). The questionnaire mainly consisted of 32 items for coping with speaking problems and 26 items 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 indicates how often they use the strategy described. Besides, a background survey covering gender and academic major was also included in the questionnaire. Finally, an interview guide was developed to further explore participants' perceptions of their use of EFL communication strategies during the role-play task. There were mainly three questions on communication problems and strategy use. To elicit more valid information from the participants, the questionnaires and the interview were asked and answered in Chinese.

Procedures

The 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, follow-up interviews were held with ten participants to probe their perceptions of communication strategy use.

Data Analysis

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

Analysis of Participants' Use of EFL Communication Strategies

Based on the frequency counting of each item, the results of the strategy questionnaire completed by participants are described below. First, Table 2 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.'

Table 2. 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

Furthermore, Table 3 lists the ten strategies most often used by the participants among 58 communication strategies. Results show that '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', followed by 'While speaking, I pay attention to the listener's reaction to my speech'.

Table 3. Ten Communication Strategies Most Often Used by Participants

No.	Communication Strategies	Rank
S23	I use words which are familiar to me.	1
L1	I ask for repetition when I can't understand what the speaker has said.	2
S15	While speaking, I pay attention to the listener's reaction to my speech.	3
S26	I use gesture and facial expression if I can't communicate how to express myself.	4
S25	I try to make eye contact when I am talking.	5
L14	I try to catch the speaker's main point.	6
L2	I make a clarification request when I am not sure what the speaker has said.	7
L20	I pay attention to the speaker's eye contact, facial expression and gestures.	8
L24	I guess the speaker's intention by picking up familiar words.	9
S3	I try to give a good impression to the listener.	10

Besides, Table 4 lists 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'.

Table 4. Ten Communication Strategies Least Often Used by Participants

No.	Communication Strategies	Rank
S29	I give up when I can't make myself understood.	58
S20	I try to emphasize the subject and verb of the sentence.	57
S6	I try to use fillers when I cannot think of what to say.	56
S11	I take my time to express what I want to say.	55
S21	I try to talk like a native speaker.	54
L22	I only focus on familiar expressions.	53
L11	I pay attention to the subject and verb of the sentence when I listen.	52
L15	I don't mind if I can't understand every single detail.	51
L21	I try to translate into native language little by little to understand what the speaker has said.	50
L26	I pay attention to the first word to judge whether it is an interrogative sentence or not.	49

Differences in EFL Communication Strategies between Proficient and Less Proficient Learners

The study also aims to analyze the differences between proficient and less proficient EFL learners in their use of communication strategies. The results indicate that there are significant differences in seven strategy categories

between proficient and less proficient learners. Among them, 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'.

In addition, the findings 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. They are 'I pay attention to my pronunciation.', 'I take my time to express what I wan to say.', 'I try to speak clearly and loudly to make myself heard.', 'While speaking, I pay attention to the listener's reaction to my speech.', 'I give examples if the listener doesn't understand.', 'I pay attention to grammar and word order during conversation.', 'I correct myself when I notice that I have made a mistake.', 'I try to emphasize the subject and verb of the sentence.', 'I try to talk like a native speaker.', 'I replace the original message with another message because of feeling incapable of executing my original intent.', 'I try to make eye-contact when I am talking.', 'I use gestures and facial expressions if I can't communicate how to express myself.', 'I abandon the execution of a verbal plan and just say some words when I don't know what to say.', 'I send continuation signals to show my understanding in order to avoid communication gaps.', 'I pay attention to the speaker's pronunciation.', 'I anticipate the speaker's intention based on what he/she has said.', and 'I pay attention to the speaker's eye contact, facial expression and gestures.' On the other hand, there are six strategies adopted significantly more often by less proficient learners than by proficient learners. They are 'I ask other people to help when I can't communicate well.', 'I think first of what I want to say in my native language and then construct the English sentence.', 'I ask the speaker to use easy words when I have difficulties in comprehension.', 'I ask the speaker to slow down when I can't understand what the speaker has said.', 'I try to translate into native language little by little to understand what the speaker has said.', and 'I only focus on familiar expressions.'

Analysis of Participants' Perceptions of EFL Communication Strategies

In terms of EFL students' perceptions of 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 participants 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. Of course, I feel embarrassed in that situation. Usually, I'll ask the interlocutor to repeat his or her question again. Then, I'll try to answer it with simple English expression. 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 speaking with many difficult English words. It's hard to comprehend all the speakers' words especially when they speak with 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?' participants' responses include the following. 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 expression to illustrate my meaning. Communication strategies remind me of something I don't pay attention, for example, speaking louder, speaking slowly, or giving some examples. English is not our mother tongue. As a result, 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. Only if you understand the context, you can communicate with others. Through more and more communications, one can understand what people have in minds. 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. After communicating in English, you can remind yourself that you use some sentences inappropriately. Then you have to improve your sentences.

As for the third interview question 'Do you have any particular EFL communication strategies that you find especially helpful? What are they?' the strategies mentioned by participants include the following. I will use the strategy such as guessing based on the context. Being familiar with the topics will help me understanding 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 the television or the movie stars. Don't be afraid of making mistakes. 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 expression, 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 with low speed. I used to using the strategy called repeating what others said. I think this is useful. The key is to understand what others are talking about. In addition, 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.

Discussion

The 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 Chen's (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 of studying English and were not regarded as high-proficiency learners. As a result of their deficient linguistic knowledge, the participants adopted most often nonverbal strategies and least often accuracy-oriented strategies.

Besides, results 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 common used strategy when ESL learners were faced with communication breakdown. Moreover, the participants' interview responses reveal that repetition was the communication strategy most frequently mentioned by the interviewees. Their responses included the following, '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', and 'In order to overcome the obstacles, I will ask the interlocutor to repeat the words that I don't understand'.

The study also 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 frequent 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 recognized 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.

Finally, in terms of the problems encountered by the participants when they used English to communicate with others, one of the interviewees answered that the biggest problem for him is that he 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, the listeners' limited vocabulary. The problems are also related to the taxonomy of listening skills proposed by Richards (1983), such as distinguishing word boundaries, 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.

Conclusions

By providing the research findings, the study is expected to provide empirical evidences 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 conducting the instruments of questionnaire and interview, it is

suggested that future research can investigate EFL students' strategy use on actual discourse data to get helpful information for validating their self-reported strategy use. Furthermore, 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. Last but not the least, 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.

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