



ELSEVIER

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

System

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/system

The effect of cultural background and language proficiency on the use of oral communication strategies by second language learners of Chinese



Amy Fang-Yen Hsieh*

Department of Theoretical and Applied Linguistics, University of Cambridge, Sidgwick Avenue, Cambridge CB3 9DP, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 22 July 2013

Received in revised form 17 February 2014

Accepted 15 April 2014

Available online 5 May 2014

Keywords:

Cultural background

Communication strategies

Language proficiency

Chinese as a foreign language (CFL)

Study abroad

ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to investigate how cultural background and target language proficiency affect L2 Chinese learners' choice of oral communication strategies. A total of 176 participants from 21 countries completed the Oral Communication Strategy Inventory for CFL learners and seven of them were interviewed. Factor analysis revealed seven factors relating to strategies for coping with speaking problems and six factors relating to strategies for coping with listening problems. With regard to cultural background, the results showed that the North American group employed more social-affective and conversation maintenance strategies than the other cultural groups; the East Asian learners reported using more strategies of focussing on small parts. In terms of language proficiency, the findings suggested that learners at lower proficiency levels tended to use more avoidance/reduction strategies and to focus on what they have known. In addition, it was found that learners from different cultural groups used oral communication strategies significantly differently as their language proficiency increased. To conclude, this study has made a significant contribution to re-developing an Oral Communication Strategy Inventory in the CFL context and the findings provide significant insights into how learners' cultural backgrounds and L2 proficiency relate to communication strategies, which has some pedagogical implications.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

One of the more intriguing issues prevailing throughout the last few decades of second language acquisition research is the question of how language learners use strategies differently and how effective the use of strategies can be. Strategies, as defined by Brown (2000), are “specific methods of approaching a problem or task, modes of operation for achieving a particular end, planned designs for controlling and manipulating certain information” (p. 113). In the field of second language acquisition, two types of strategy have been distinguished: learning strategies and (oral) communication strategies (OCS). The former relates to inputs, or how learners take in messages from others. The latter facilitates the output process, and relates to how learners produce language and deliver messages to others.

The role of learning strategies in the process of second language acquisition can be described as follows (Ellis, 1994). Individual learner differences and situational and social factors influence learners' choice of learning strategies. This decision

* Tel.: +44 7531412605.

E-mail address: hfyamy@gmail.com.

about learning strategies will affect two aspects of learning: the rate of acquisition and the ultimate level of achievement. The relationship also can work the other way round: the learning experiences that the learners have and their L2 proficiency level can also influence their choice of learning strategies.

The same idea can also be applied to the concept of (oral) communication strategies. Learners' choice of OCS will be affected by individual differences and situational and social contexts. The goal of using communication strategies is to maintain the fluency of communication, and whether the communication is successful or fails can also influence the choice of strategy to form a two-way relationship. If the strategy can help the learner compensate for gaps in communication, he/she will continue using it; otherwise, the learner has to adopt an alternative way of solving the problem. Since L2 learners still lack the linguistic knowledge to express their ideas freely, it is worth examining how they use OCS to compensate for the gaps.

The L2 studied in this article is Chinese, the learning of which is gradually becoming more of a practical mainstream priority throughout the world. Every year, thousands of Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) learners travel to a Chinese-speaking country to study Chinese, where the environment provides them with excellent opportunities to practice the target language. In this "study abroad" learning context, learners come from different countries with different cultural backgrounds. Thus, this study examines the effect of cultural background as a variable affecting the use of OCS by learners, focussing on L2 learners of Chinese, as well as the relationships between their L2 proficiency and their use of OCS.

2. Literature review

2.1. Definitions and taxonomies of communication strategies

The definition of "communication strategies" has been subject to debate by researchers for decades. Although controversy exists, there seems to be a general consensus about two criteria for defining communication strategies: problem-orientedness and consciousness (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997; Færch & Kasper, 1984). Communication strategies are regarded as language devices that can be used to solve communication problems when linguistic resources are lacking; that is, these strategies are used only when a speaker perceives a problem that may cause communication breakdown (Bialystok, 1990). Furthermore, since a "strategy" refers to a conscious technique used to achieve a goal (Macaro, 2006), "consciousness" becomes the second major criterion.

Even though the two criteria are the predominant features of communication strategies, opinions still diverge on what constitutes a communication strategy, and researchers in this field have come up with several different taxonomies for communication strategies. In particular, two approaches have been adopted to conceptualise communication strategies: interactional and psycholinguistic.

Tarone (1980) introduced an interactional perspective in which communication strategies were viewed as tools for the negotiation of meaning, in which language use and interactional function were considered to be the two basic defining characteristics of communication strategies. According to this view, communication strategies are seen as being directly related to language use; they are not part of the speaker's linguistic knowledge. Furthermore, analysis of communication strategies has placed much emphasis on how both interlocutors attempt to use alternative means to agree on one interlocutor's intended meaning.

On the other hand, the psycholinguistic camp puts emphasis on the underlying thought processes that learners undergo. Færch and Kasper (1983) proposed the view that communication strategies are verbal plans within a speech production framework. They suggested that speech production involves two phases, a planning phase and an execution phase, and that communication strategies are a part of the planning process. In their words, "communication strategies are potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal" (p. 36). This definition reflects the two criteria discussed above: problem-orientedness and consciousness.

Researchers have proposed taxonomies for communication strategies that differ in their details. In general, however, there is a consensus among interactional and psycholinguistic researchers that communication strategies can be categorised into two types: achievement/compensatory strategies and reduction/avoidance strategies (Bialystok, 1990; Dörnyei & Scott, 1997; Færch & Kasper, 1983; Nakatani, 2005, 2006; Tarone, 1981). Using compensatory strategies, learners adopt an alternative plan to convey their meaning using whatever resources are available. On the other hand, avoidance strategies involve sidestepping communication problems and/or giving up on conveying the intended message.

Several taxonomies have been offered from interactional perspectives (see Dörnyei & Scott, 1995; Nakatani, 2006; Tarone, 1981). In contrast to the product-oriented taxonomies proposed by researchers in the interactional group, psycholinguists have aimed to produce a context-free, process-based taxonomy that meets three requirements: parsimony (the fewer categories the better), generalisability, and psychological plausibility (reflecting language processing, cognition, and problem-solving behaviour; see Bialystok, 1990; Færch & Kasper, 1983; Kellerman & Bialystok, 1997; Poullisse, 1993; Willems, 1987). In fact, although there is no consensus on the definitions and taxonomies of communication strategies proposed by the two groups, the strategies discussed by researchers are similar in nature. They simply adopt different approaches to interpreting the use of those strategies. In other words, researchers may be able to agree that certain observable phenomena occur in interlanguage communication, but they may differ in what they think is important about the phenomena. For example, "circumlocution" exists in the taxonomies of both groups, since it is indeed an observable feature. From the interactional perspective, it is an attempt to find an alternative, manageable way to negotiate and convey an intended meaning to avoid communication breakdown. On the other hand, psycholinguists classify circumlocution as an "analytic strategy" under

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/373329>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/373329>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)