Communication Strategies of College Non-English Major Students at Guizhou University

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Abstract

This paper reports on an investigation into the communication strategies (CSs) of College English students (non-English major students) at Guizhou University in China. These students are a large group who are studying English and need to use CSs to facilitate their communication because they do not have sufficient exposure to English in daily life. All of the subjects are first-year bachelor students from the Arts and Science fields and they are grouped into high and low proficiency levels. The data is collected by means of a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. Frequencies and Chi-square tests are conducted to analyze the data. The results indicate that variables of proficiency level, academic field and gender are probably related to CSs use to varying degrees. The results of this study could be a great help in the teaching of English to Chinese EFL learners by making them aware of CSs already in their repertoire and by encouraging them to use CSs more frequently.

Keywords: Communication strategies; Interlanguage; Communication competence; Chinese EFL learners

Introduction

This paper investigates the interlanguage communication strategies of Chinese EFL learners and examines the role communication strategies play in the maintenance of communication in a classroom. The interest in the issue of CSs sprang mainly from the nature of the interaction among college

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non-English major Chinese students in class. They make "a systematic attempt to express meanings in the target language, in situations where the appropriate systematic target language rules have not been formed completely" (Tarone, 1983, p. 63). Such students may have learned English for more than six years and formed a sort of repertoire of the target language, but they still have many difficulties in communication.

When Chinese students learn English as a foreign language in a classroom, there is often a lack of opportunity for communication in English for them, which leads to their inability to communicate in a native-like way even after several years of learning the language. This lack of communication training is partly due to the great number of students that a teacher is responsible for. It is not an easy task for a teacher to allow more or less forty students to communicate freely in a situation which is strictly limited in time. Most of the English teachers in China realize this.

Although English learning in China has been given much more importance and indeed progress is still going on in terms of EFL teaching and learning, the situation is not satisfactory especially with regard to learners' communicative competence. Most college graduates are, for example, "deaf and dumb" when facing English native speakers and are handicapped in their work after graduation. Thus a reform of English education in China is impending. In 1990, the Chinese Ministry of Education (CME) started major teaching reforms to improve English education so as to meet the needs of qualified English-speaking professionals in the society. In the past fifteen years, great achievements have been made with the teaching reforms. However, it seems that the emphasis has been placed more on reading comprehension than on the other skills. Once the graduates are in a real life outside the school, they still face a lot of communication problems.

Recently, College English Reforms carried out in 180 universities all over China at the request of CME have been a hot topic. The reforms aimed at improving students' listening and speaking abilities have aroused much heated discussion among teachers in the circle of college English teaching. All teachers seem to agree that over decades, college English teaching in

China had cultivated students' fundamental language skills, such as reading, listening, writing, translation, with a focus on students' skills to pass examinations in English. Hence, many of our college students, after more than 10 years of learning English, may have developed their reading and writing abilities, but still find much trouble in communicating fluently and effectively. This is a kind of paradox. Students are often frustrated by face-to-face interaction in English. This situation requires us to refer back to the language classroom that should be made more communicative and should foster communicative language use. In addition, researchers and teachers in China suggest that students' inadequate communicative competence is probably responsible for this paradox (Chen, 1990).

There are various communication problems that Foreign language (FL) learners may come across when their interlanguage (henceforth, IL) is deficient and lacks the necessary resources. In order to best convey their messages and remain in the conversation until their communication goal is reached, EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners need to employ communication strategies (CSs) being characteristic of their IL communication.

The notion of "interlanguage" has been central to the development of the field of research on SLA (Second Language Acquisition). In the past few years research emphasis in the field SLA has shifted. Linguists and researchers are becoming more interested in the study of the learning process than the learning product, in the behavior of learners than that of teachers, in the development of communicative competence than that of linguistic competence (Ellis, 1982; Taylor, 1983). Communication strategies, as one of the factors which affect IL development, have been investigated by researchers since the notion of communication strategy was offered by Selinker in 1972.

Research on IL development of foreign language learners has shown that when faced with communication difficulties in various classroom activities, learners tend to use communication strategies to cope with these difficulties. Analysis of these strategies provides us with rich insights into the complex process of language acquisition and gives us ideas about how

to help learners develop their IL.

The component of communicative competence most neglected by language course developers and teachers, however, is strategic competence. The assumption that strong strategic competence leads to high communicative competence has already been theoretically proved (Canale & Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983). One can develop learners' communicative competence by building up their strategic competence, that is, their ability to use communication strategies that allow them to cope with the various communicative problems that they might encounter.

The lack of fluency or conversational skills that students often complain about is, to a considerable extent, due to the underdevelopment of their strategic competence. Since strategic competence involves strategies to be used when communication is difficult, it is of crucial importance for FL learners. Learners may employ CSs to keep their conversations going smoothly and build up their English conversation by cooperative participation. However, to my knowledge, there have been few studies of CSs to date related to learners' IL development in China, especially with the examination of such variables as proficiency, academic field and gender.

The present study attempts to investigate interlanguage CSs used by college non-English major students at Guizhou University in their communication in English. More specifically, it seeks to determine the common CSs of the students and the extent to which the use of these strategies is affected by students' L2 proficiency, academic field and gender. Therefore, the study is designed to answer the following questions:

1. What are the CSs most frequently and least frequently used by non-English major students at Guizhou University?

2. Is there an effect of learner's L2 proficiency, academic field or gender on the types of CSs employed?

Review of Literature

Definitions and Classifications of Communication Strategies

It is difficult to find a rigorous definition of communicative strategies on which CSs researchers have reached an agreement. There have been many

definitions proposed regarding CSs of second language learners. The following definitions will provide us with an insight into the nature of communication strategies.

CSs are mutual attempt of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in situations where requisite meaning structures do not seem to be shared. (Tarone, 1983, p. 65)

CSs are potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal. (Færch and Kasper, 1983, p. 36)

Both the previously mentioned definitions support the claim that CSs are employed when L2 learners encounter a problem in communication.

As Kasper and Kellerman (1997) use the term *communication strategies* (CSs):

"Identification of CSs depends to a great extent on what one considers CSs to be, and in this respect, it matters very much whether one conceives of CSs as intra-individual or inter-individual events." (p. 3)

The intra-individual view locates CSs in models of speech production (e.g. Dechert, 1983; Færch & Kasper, 1983) or cognitive organization and processing (Bialystok, 1990). In early work, most notions of CSs restricted the concept to problem-solving activity. Færch & Kasper's definition of CSs (see above) relates to the learner, or more precisely, to the problems experienced by the learner, in speech reception and in the planning and execution of speech production. The definition conceives of CSs as mental plans implemented by the L2 learner in response to an internal signal of an imminent problem, a form of self-help that does not have to engage the interlocutor's support for resolution. This implies that the learner may make use of a communication strategy without signaling to his interlocutor that he is experiencing a communication problem and consequently, that the presence of a repair on the part of the interlocutor is not a necessary condition for the identification of a communication strategy.

The inter-individual view with Tarone as one of its main proponents was cited as a key source by Kasper and Kellerman (ibid). Tarone's definition included the negotiation of meaning as a joint effort between the interlocutors

which is central to the concept of *communication strategies*. This inter-individual perspective would allow for an inclusion of various repair mechanisms. If those repair mechanisms were applied to "clarify intended meaning rather than simply correct linguistic form" (Tarone, 1980, p. 424), Tarone considers them communication strategies.

Both inter-individual and intra-individual views on CSs will be taken into consideration when we develop the taxonomy for the present study and analyze our data which in turn should show the choice of CSs.

Taxonomies of CSs

The literature review shows that there are many kinds of CSs taxonomies, most of which are rather similar (For more taxonomies of CSs, see Poulisse, 1987 and Paribakht, 1982). Since the present study aims to cover the intra-individual view of CSs (conveying meaning) as well as the inter-individual view of CSs (requiring the listener to be involved in the conversation), there is a difficulty in depending on only one taxonomy from the literature.

In Tarone's studies (1977, 1983), she provided a taxonomy of CSs, which highlights social aspects of communication. Both interlocutors are trying to overcome their lack of shared meaning. When things go wrong, both interlocutors try to devise a communication strategy to get out of the difficulty. In Tarone's study, CSs such as *paraphrase, borrowing* and *avoidance* reflect learners' attempts to make themselves understood to their interlocutors. Tarone's taxonomy has served as a basis for subsequent studies of CSs, resulting in further taxonomies (see Paribakht, 1985).

Based on the approach of Fᵌrch and Kasper, another taxonomy concentrates on the psychological dimension of what is going on in the L2 speaker's mind. L2 learners want to express something through the second language but encounter a hitch. To get around this psychological difficulty, they resort to CSs. Fᵌrch and Kasper divide these into two main groups: achievement and avoidance. An achievement strategy aims at communicating the whole message as perceived by the speaker. Examples are the use of L1 items, translation, paraphrasing, miming or pointing, eliciting/asking for help

from the interlocutor. Accordingly the message is not lost or altered. An avoidance strategy, on the other hand, results in reducing the message (i.e. the learner fails to convey all of the intended messages and therefore, only a partial solution may be managed) or finding no solution (i.e. the learner abandons the message and perhaps tries to express other things that s/he can manage more easily).

The above two taxonomies on which most of the further CSs research are based are still narrow in that they focus predominantly on learner's gaps in lexis and overwhelmingly on individual production. However, William et al. (1997) proposes a more inter-individual approach which focuses on comprehension problems in particular. This taxonomy includes terminologies different from those in the above two traditional taxonomies. CSs in this taxonomy deal not only with lexical gaps but also other kinds of gaps in knowledge, for example, gaps which are primarily information-based, rather than code-based. Such gaps in knowledge tend to show up in comprehension problems rather than in production.

There is an overlap of a few CSs among the three taxonomies, particularly in the first two. As an example, the CS *paraphrase* in the first two taxonomies has almost the same meaning with *self-reformulation* in the third. *Circumlocution* is excluded in the study because it has more or less the same meaning as *paraphrase* and it is not necessary to include both of them in the taxonomy. *Paraphrase* is often seen as the most important achievement strategy, and most of the existing taxonomies focus on it. As a result, *paraphrase* will be used instead of *self-reformulation* and *circumlocution* in the present taxonomy. *Using semantic field* is regarded by the researcher to have almost the same meaning as *generalization* and is eliminated from the present taxonomy. *Neutral confirmation checks* are excluded because it is the same as *positive confirmation*. Redundancies were thus eliminated in this way after the researcher closely examined all the CSs among the three taxonomies. However, two CSs *meaning replacement* and *foreignizing* (in the taxonomy of Willems 1987) are added to the taxonomy due to the fact that they belong to avoidance and L1-based CSs respectively which the researcher is interested in examining in order to get a more complete understanding of CSs.

Therefore, the CSs included in the taxonomy for the present study are those which the researcher considers closely by combining the three taxonomies together, based on intra-individual and inter-individual views of CSs.

Table 1: CSs Used for the Present Study

Intra-individual CSs	Notes
Topic avoidance: not to talk about the concept **Message abandonment:** to stop in mid-utterance **Meaning replacement:** to use another expression	**Avoidance**
Generalization: to use a generalized IL item **Paraphrase:** to focus on characteristic properties of the intended referent **Word coinage:** to create a new IL word **Restructuring:** to restructure one's utterance **Approximation:** to use an item incorrectly but sharing some semantic features	**IL-based CSs**
Literal translation: to translate literally **Language switch:** to insert words from native language **Foreignizing:** to apply TL modification to the L1 term **Mime:** to serve in the place of a missing word nonverbally	**Transfer by using L1-based strategies**
Intra-individual CSs	**Notes**
Code-based confirmation check: to repeat the previous utterance for confirmation **Positive confirmation check:** to offer information for confirmation **Clarification request:** to ask for clarification **Comprehension check:** to attempt to check comprehension **Other reformulation:** to model the speaker's previous utterance **Repetition:** to duplicate the exact utterance	**IL Negotiation**

Previous Research on CSs

There is much evidence to suggest that the use of CSs varies according to the proficiency level of the learner as Bialystok (1990) writes "The first

factor that may be expected to predict the choice of a specific communication strategy is the proficiency level of the speaker. The strategies make different linguistic demands, and may be too sophisticated for less advanced language learners" (p. 48). The relationship between language proficiency and CSs has become the subject of much CSs research. Bialystok (1983) finds that advanced learners use significantly more L2-based strategies and significantly fewer Ll-based strategies than less advanced learners. In addition, the more advanced they are, the more sensitive they become to some specific strategies.

Chen (1990) is one of the few researchers who have investigated communication strategies by Chinese ESL learners. Chen looked into the relationship between the language proficiency of the Chinese EFL learners and their strategic competence. The findings showed that the low-proficiency group employed significantly more communication strategies than the high-proficiency group did. Linguistic-based CSs are more frequently employed by the high-proficiency learners whereas knowledge-based and repetition CSs are more extensively used by the low proficiency learners.

Nakatani (2006) recently reached a different finding on CSs in research. The results indicate that a significant difference was found in students' awareness of strategy use according to their oral proficiency level. In particular, it is interesting to note that there was a significant difference in the use of negotiation of meaning strategies between the two proficiency groups. The high oral proficiency group reported frequently using such strategies. This behavior indicates that there could be a positive relationship between the incidence of negotiated interaction and an increase in language proficiency. The higher level learners also reported using strategies for maintaining conversational flow and controlling affective factors. The lower level learners, however, used these positive strategies infrequently.

Some studies investigating CSs also deal with the effect of L1 on the use of CSs. In Chen's study (1990), he indicates that the language distance between the learners' L1 (Chinese) and L2 (English) is found to affect their choice of CSs. None of the obvious L1-based CSs such as *foreignizing, code-switching* and *literal translation* etc. was found in this study. Chen states that this was probably caused by the great distance between the

learners' L1 and L2 because the prerequisite for occurrence of L1-based CSs is formal similarity between the two languages. Even the low-proficiency learners did not resort to any L1-based CSs.

Ellis (1984) discusses a way of evaluating communicative performance in a second language by concentrating on CSs. Ellis states that "the notion of communication strategy may be a useful one for evaluating L2 communicative performance. By attending to the degree to which learners avoid reference to important items of information, and paraphrase information they do decide to encode, teachers may be able to form a fairly reliable assessment of learners' performance". It is likely that some CSs listed by the researcher could be used to evaluate communicative performance.

Paribakht (1985) explains his finding that "…learners' use of CSs has specific characteristics at different developmental stages of their interlanguages. That is, learners seem to abandon or adopt certain CSs and also alter their proportional use of certain strategies as they approach the TL. Learners' behavior in terms of strategy use seems, therefore, to be transactional and dynamic" (p. 141).

After reviewing the related literature of CSs studies, we found that much of the previous research on CSs elicited strategies from a certain perspective of CSs. However, the present study makes use of both the intra-individual and inter-individual views to form the taxonomy, and also explores the relationship between the employment of these CSs and language proficiency, academic field, and gender. With regard to the two variables, i.e. academic field and gender, the literature review does not tackle them due to the fact that there seems to be very little information about their effects on EFL learners' CSs use. Therefore, this study shows somewhat originality in conducting research on the relationship between CSs use and the two variables, i.e. academic field and gender.

Research Design

Table 2 shows that the subjects of the present study include 116 non-English major first year students from the two fields of Arts and

Science at Guizhou University. The reason for choosing these subjects is that they are representative of the main fields of study in China. The researcher has selected purposive samples to meet the purpose of her research.

Table 2: Subjects of the Study

Variable	Subcategory	Number	Total
Gender	Male	60	116
	Female	56	
Field	Science	58	116
	Arts	58	
Proficiency	High	59	116
	Low	57	

The researcher was able to take advantage of the Nation-wide Standardized Matriculation Test (NSMT) to obtain the students' English scores so as to establish two different levels (high and low). This examination is official and used widely in China, so it is highly valid and reliable. Unfortunately, as there isn't an English speaking part included in the NSMT, all subjects were given a speaking test called CET-SET (Band 4) which is the national examination for non-English major College students in China. The two kinds of test were used to determine the subjects' proficiency level. The high proficiency students include those students whose NSMT English score is more than a median score of 106 and the oral test grade is either A or B. In the NSMT English test the maximum score is 139 and the minimum score is 60. The low proficiency students are those who have an NSMT English score less than the median score and the oral test grade of either C or D.

The present study used a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview as instruments to collect data. Part A of the questionnaire (see Appendix I), which was used to obtain demographic information, was administered to all subjects at the beginning of the research in order to elicit their academic fields and NSMT scores. Then CET-SET (Band 4) was offered to test the subjects' speaking ability. Their NSMT and CET-SET scores were combined to determine their proficiency as either high proficiency or low

proficiency. Soon after the subjects were given speaking tasks by the researcher, they were asked to answer part B of the questionnaire (see Appendix I) which attempted to elicit their behaviors regarding 18 communication strategies constructed closely from the taxonomy of the present study. All the questions in the questionnaire were translated into Chinese for students to understand thoroughly and the Chinese version was checked by two other raters. Finally, a semi-structured interview was conducted to obtain part of the qualitative data for answering the research question and to elicit further and detailed information about choice of CSs, particularly L1-based strategies, from these subjects (for the questions in the interview, see Appendix II). The subjects were asked to perform speaking tasks including concept identification and role play. Each subject had to complete the concept description which covers one concrete concept and one abstract concept, adapted from Chen's research (1990). Also, each pair of subjects had to do the role play task which depends on a situation asking students to solve some problems in order to achieve their goal.

The data from the questionnaire was used to determine the strategies of the subjects, which were entered into the computer and processed by SPSS 15.0 for quantitative analysis. However, the data from the speaking tasks and the semi-structured interview were coded and then submitted to qualitative analysis.

Results and Discussion

The English scores of NSMT from the demographic information questionnaires and the SET scores were put into SPSS in order to obtain the correlations between them. The Pearson correlation between NSMT and CET-SET was shown 0.58 at $p = 0.00 < 0.05$, which means that there was a significant correlation between the NSMT score and the SET score. And both of them were used to decide on the subjects' proficiency level.

Different types of CSs employed by non-English major students

By answering their questionnaires, all the 116 subjects were found to be involved in the use of CSs while performing their speaking tasks in class. Frequencies and percentages were adopted to examine each communication strategy in the questionnaire in order to answer the first research question.

In terms of frequencies, Table 3 shows that 116 respondents generally agree that they employ the 18 communication strategies in the questionnaire to solve their communication problems. However, there appear to be some differences in their use of each communication strategy.

Table 3: Frequencies and Percentages of Overall CSs Employed by the Subjects

CSs	Number of subjects	Frequency		Percentage %		Chi-square p value
		Yes	No	Yes	No	
1	116	70	46	60.3	39.7	.171
2	116	55	61	47.4	52.6	.269
3	116	94	22	81	19	.701
4	116	65	51	56	44	.441
5	116	91	25	78.4	21.6	.220
6	116	103	13	88.8	11.2	.033
7	116	33	83	28.4	71.6	.252
8	116	77	39	66.4	33.6	.742
9	116	72	44	62.1	37.9	.039
10	116	83	33	71.6	28.4	.747
11	116	66	50	56.9	43.1	.037
12	116	40	76	34.5	65.5	.001
13	116	85	31	73.3	26.7	.992
14	116	67	49	57.8	42.2	.977
15	116	95	21	81.9	18.1	.006
16	116	84	32	72.4	27.6	.028
17	116	89	27	76.7	23.3	.747
18	116	102	14	87.9	12.1	.945

*p $\leq$ .05 **p.01

Considering CS 3, 6, 15 and 18, there are 81%, 88.8%, 81.9% and 87.9% respondents (more than 80%) respectively who chose *yes* in the uestionnaire. This shows that students tend to employ these four CSs most frequently in their communications. CS 3 is about *generalization (to use a generalized IL item)* "I keep the "topic" e.g. of running sports, but refer to it

by means of a more general expression." 81% respondents tend to use this CS while only 19% respondents are reported as not using it. CS 6 is about *restructuring (to restructure one's utterance by giving examples)* "I give examples if the listener does not understand what I am saying." 88.8% respondents tend to exploit this CS to deal with their communication problems whereas only 11.2% respondents do not. CS 15 is about *comprehension checks (to attempt to check comprehension)* "When I attempt to confirm that the listener has understood what I have said, I use utterances like 'Understand?' or 'Do you know what I mean?'." 81.9% respondents use this CS of *comprehension checks* in their communications whereas 18.1% respondents do not. CS 18 is about *clarification requests (to make utterances for clarification)* "When I fail to understand the speaker, I ask him/her 'What do you mean?' or say 'Sorry, I didn't understand'." 87.9% respondents tend to employ this CS *clarification requests* to cope with their communication difficulties whereas only 12.1% do not.

Most of the subjects (103, 88.8%) employed the strategy of *restructuring (by giving examples)* to solve their communicative problems. By using a *restructuring* strategy, learners communicate their intended message without meaning reduction after they begin to realize they cannot complete their original plan and develop an alternative one. This strategy is different from *message abandonment* in that the latter can be considered the reduction parallel to *restructuring* (Færch & Kasper, 1980). A *restructuring* strategy can take the form of exemplification. Learners may decide on giving examples to restructure their intended meaning in order to make it understandable by keeping the conversation going. Examples can help listeners figure out the intended meaning in the continuum of more related information. The following examples show the strategy of *restructuring*.

(1) **It means** we have skills in doing something.
In reference to the strategy of *comprehension checks*, subjects (102, 87.9%) reported that they used the utterances attempting to confirm that the listener has understood what they have said. These are not limited to *code*, but are extended to comprehend the task. They may be as simple as "understand?" or take more extended form, such as in the following questions.

(2) How will you feel?

With regard to the strategy of *clarification request*, it has been found that subjects (95, 81.9%) attempt to resolve inadequate communication by making requests for clarification. *Clarification requests* do not present the listener with information to respond to. Thus, in these cases the respondent has to do more interactional work since the request is an open one, as in the following example of a clarification request.

(3) A: I want to get my money back and return the t-shirt.
B: ***What?***

The preceding discussion is concerned with the most often used CSs. On the other hand, with regard to CS 2, 7 and 12, for example, there are 47.4%, 28.4% and 34.5% respondents (fewer than 50%) respectively who chose *yes* in the questionnaire. It means that the respondents tend to use these three strategies least frequently in their communications. CS 2 is about *message abandonment (to stop in mid-utterance)* "I begin to talk about a concept, e.g. 'equal opportunity', but am unable to continue and stop in mid-utterance." 47.4% respondents tend to use this CS *message abandonment* to deal with communication problems while 52.6% respondents do not use it. CS 7 is about *word coinage (to create a new IL word)* "I create a new word, e.g. 'airball' for 'balloon'." Only 28.4% respondents tend to use this CS *word coinage* while 71.6% respondents don't use it. CS 12 is about *language switch (to insert words from native language)* "When I cannot remember something in English, I use Chinese words instead during my communication." 34% respondents tend to use this CS *language switch* while 66% respondents do not use it.

With regard to the strategy of *message abandonment*, learners tried to communicate but gave up. The distinction between *topic avoidance* and *message abandonment* is that the learner says nothing at all about a given topic for *topic avoidance* whereas he tries to say something but gives up in mid-utterance for *message abandonment*. As an instance of this strategy the following example can show how learners resorted to *message abandonment* in the study.

(4) S14: The king hope people for … for … his …. I'm sorry. My English is poor.

Although it was found in the questionnaire that students rarely use the strategy of *word coinage* in their communication, in the semi-structured interview a few high proficiency students (interviewees) told the researcher that sometimes they tried to get themselves through communication difficulties by coining new words. The findings show us two examples as *beautiful fishwoman* for *mermaid flower* and *powder* for *pollen*. The strategy of *word coinage* used here could be said to be successful.

Less frequently some subjects switched to Chinese words like (how to say?) when they cannot go on with their utterances. But *language switch* did happen in their English speaking in class. And in the semi-structured interview, some students stated that they resorted to Chinese in their interactions with their peers when they could not express themselves.

Effect of learner's L2 proficiency, academic field and gender on types of CSs

Through Chi-square tests, the subjects' responses to the questionnaire elicited the following results as shown in Table 4. These Chi-square tests indicate whether there are relationships between the employment of these CSs and the three variables of proficiency, gender and field.

Table 4: Frequencies and Chi-square *p* values according to their proficiency and gender

Variables	Proficiency					Gender				
	HP		LP		*p*	M		F		*p*
CSs	(Yes)	(No)	(Yes)	(No)	value	(Yes)	(No)	(Yes)	(No)	value
6	56	3	47	10	.033					
8						32	28	45	11	.002
9	42	17	30	27	.039					
11	28	31	38	19	.037					
12	12	47	28	29	.001					
15	54	16	41	11	.006					
16	48	11	36	21	.028	49	11	35	21	.021

*p≤.05 **p.01

It was found that there is a significant relationship between HP students and LP students in the use of CSs 6, 9, 11, 12, 15 and 16, because their p values are less than 0.05. The result for strategy 6 indicates that HP respondents tend to employ the strategy of *restructuring (by giving examples)* more frequently than LP respondents, according to their frequencies (56 and 47 by ticking *yes*) and $p = .033 < .05$. The result for strategy 9 shows that HP respondents tend to employ this strategy of *approximation* more frequently than LP respondents according to their frequencies (42 and 30 by ticking *yes*) and $p = .039 < .05$. In contrast, the result for strategy 11 suggests that HP respondents employ this strategy of *literal translation* less frequently than LP respondents according to their frequencies (28 and 38 by ticking *yes*) and $p = .037 < .05$. This result for strategy 12 means that HP respondents use this strategy of *language switch* less frequently than LP respondents according to their frequencies (12 and 28 by ticking *yes*) and $p = .001 < .05$. However, the result for strategy 15 suggests that HP respondents tend to employ this strategy of *comprehension checks* more commonly than LP respondents, according to their frequencies (54 and 41 by ticking *yes*) and $p = .006 < .05$. Also, the result for strategy 16 indicates that HP respondents tend to employ the strategy of *reformulation* more often than LP respondents, according to their frequencies (48 and 36 by ticking *yes*) and $p = .028 < .05$. Thus, CSs 6, 9, 11, 12, 15 and 16 have a relationship with the respondents' proficiency.

The findings in the study indicate that the high proficiency group employed *restructuring (by giving examples)* and *approximation* significantly more frequently than the low proficiency group. The two CSs are IL-based ones which are, as a whole, more effective in support of achieving understanding than L1-based CSs. Haastrup and Phillipson (1983) claim that their research findings support the hypothesis that IL-based CSs were inherently of greater communicative potential than the others and have great potential for leading to full comprehension.

High proficiency students were found to use the two negotiation strategies of *reformulation* and *comprehension check* more frequently than the low proficiency students. *Reformulations* are defined by form only and may play

a variety of functions in negotiating meaning. *Comprehension checks* are utterances attempting to confirm that the listener has understood what the speaker has said. These are not limited to *code*, but are extended to comprehend the task. They may be as simple as "understand?" or take more extended form. The high proficiency group seemed to have a greater repertoire and could resort to the two negotiation strategies easily.

Low proficiency students tended to use the two strategies of *literal translation* and *language switch* more commonly than high proficiency students. *Literal translation* means that learners translate word for word from the native language. The probable explanation of this is that in the classroom most of the tasks are performed in dyads, so students thought the strategy of *literal translation* could make their partners understand their inappropriate English and even switching to Chinese sometimes could solve their communication problems.

The preceding discussion dealt with the CSs employed by high proficiency and low proficiency students. The following discussion will take into account the effect of gender on the use of CSs. The results in Table 4 also suggest that there was a significant relationship between male and female students in using strategy 8 of *restructuring*, according to their frequencies (32 and 45 by ticking *yes*) and $p = .002 < .05$. This means that the male students tend to use this strategy more commonly than the female students. And there was another significant relationship between male and female students in using strategy 16 of *reformulations*, according to their frequencies (49 and 11 by ticking *yes*) and $p = .021 < .05$. This suggests that the male students use the strategy of reformulation more commonly than the female students.

By using a *restructuring* strategy, learners communicate their intended message without reduction after they begin to realize they cannot complete their original plan and develop an alternative one. A *restructuring* strategy can also have the form of self-correction. Self-correction normally demonstrates the learner correcting a grammatical item, removing an error so that output conforms to target language norms. There is thus a communication disruption, but there was never any risk of a misunderstanding

and the correction does improve comprehansion. The following examples can show the restructuring.

(5) **That is to say**, *I watch something, but I can't do it, even though I can't do it, I*

(6) *Ye… you hope it, wish to have it.*

It is suggested in the present study that male students seemed to model their own utterances and their speaking partners' utterances more often. The probable explanation is that they need to make sure whether their words have been understood by the interlocutors and whether they have understood their interlocutors' words. Young and Oxford (1997) concluded that gender-ased differences in strategic behavior might not reside in general categories, but rather at the level of specific strategies. The present study also supports the idea that the difference between male students and female students might be present at the level of specific strategies.

As for the other variable of academic field, it is found through SPSS that all the significant values are more than 0.05, which means there is no relationship between these 18 CSs and the variable of academic field. The present study, therefore, finds that there are no differences between Science students and Arts students in their behavior in using CSs. This finding should be verified and triangulated in future research.

Conclusion

As can be seen from the present study, the first year students at Guizhou University were reported to use the CSs in the taxonomy to different extents. Among them *generalization, restructuring (by giving examples), comprehension check* and *clarification request* appear to be the most frequently used CSs by these respondent students, whereas *message abandonment, word coinage and language switch* occur least often. When teachers plan and arrange their in-class tasks, they should think about what kinds of CSs can be adopted to facilitate students' communication and develop their communication competence by improving their strategic competence.

This study also reveals that HP learners resort to strategies of *paraphrase* and *approximation* more often than LP learners, but resort to *literal translation and language switch* less often than LP learners. And HP learners were also found to resort to *clarification requests* and *reformulation* more commonly than LP learners. The *IL-based CSs* such as *paraphrase* and *approximation* are more beneficial since they reflect the fact that learners make more positive attempts to tackle the difficulties they face in the process of communication instead of avoiding them. Teachers normally believe that once students are willing to deal with their difficulties, gradual improvement will follow. Probably due to the fact that LP students have less confidence in using the English language, they sometimes use *literal translation* or switch to L1 (Chinese). After students have learned English for six years or more and their grammatical competence is not so limited, their strategic competence should be paid particular attention to. The improvement of learners' strategic competence (as a major component of communicative competence) can contribute to the development of their communicative competence. However, in China this is not the case in the EFL context, because so far the materials containing CSs still seem largely absent from the textbooks.

It is suggested in this study that male students resorted to *restructuring* and *reformulation* more frequently than female students. Teachers should pay attention to the difference between male students and female students in learning English, particularly in using CSs. Students' awareness of CSs could be raised and strengthened further based on teachers' well-defined objectives in terms of gender differences.

Communication strategies are an important component of strategic competence, namely the competence required to make effective use of one's linguistic and pragmatic resources. Communicative competence is an important component of strategic competence which can help one get meaning across successfully to partners in conversation, especially when problems arise in the communication process and the interlanguage system seems unequal to the task. Strategic competence is then a kind of ability to compensate for learners' insufficient knowledge of the L2. The results of

the present study suggest that CSs make up an integral part of learners' interlanguage and linguistic behavior in spite of the fact that almost all the participants in the present study showed no previous CSs. CSs are ways to enable learners to cope with their inadequate knowledge of the L2. The importance of strategic competence, therefore, should be recognized and attention should be directed to teaching students the ways to cope with communication problems. This view concerning communicative competence and the results of the learners' use of CSs indicates that it is reasonable for English teachers to build into their instruction elements through which learners can develop their strategic competence.

One of the most important limitations of the study is that the subjects of the present study are 116 Chinese EFL non-English major students who fall into only two fields − Arts and Science. The results of the study, thus, may not be generalized to all Chinese EFL learners. Despite the limitations of this study, it has succeeded in investigating some of the communication problems that Chinese EFL learners may encounter and also how they try to solve those problems within their English repertoire by the use of various communication strategies.

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Appendix I

Questionnaire

I would like to ask you to help me by answering the following questions concerning communication in English. This survey is conducted to investigate whether you know and use some strategies in your conversation when you lack linguistic knowledge. This is not a test and there is no "wrong" or "right" answer. I am just interested in your personal opinion and behavior. Please give your answers sincerely as only this will guarantee the success of the investigation. The results will not be publicly posted or shared with others, will not be compared with the results of any other individual students, will not be used for grading or for any negative purpose, and will be used only to help you become better learners. Thank you very much for your cooperation.

Part A: Background Information

Directions: In the following section, you are asked to put a tick in the box which you choose and answer the questions in a few words.

1. Name:
2. Gender: ☐ Male ☐ Female
3. Major: ☐ Arts ☐ Science
4. English Score of NSMT:
5. How long have you been studying English?
   ☐ six year ☐ seven years ☐ eight years ☐ over eight years
6. Have you participated in any program or course focusing on spoken English? If "yes", please specify:
7. Have you known anything about strategies which you can use to solve communication difficulties? If "yes", please specify:

Part B: Behavioral Questions about Communication Strategies

Directions: In the following section, after each item you are asked to put a tick in the box by choosing from *yes or no*.

	Yes	No
1. When I don't know an English item, e.g. "pollution", I simply try not to talk about concepts for it.		
2. I begin to talk about a concept, e.g. "equal opportunity", but unable to continue and stop in mid-utterance.		
3. I preserve the "topic" e.g. of running sports, but refer to it by means of a more general expression.		
4. I assume that my original goal can be reached by using a generalized item, e.g. "animals" for "rabbits".		
5. When meeting an unknown word, I choose to describe the object, e.g. "the thing you open wine bottles with" for "corkscrew".		
6. I give examples if the listener does not understand what I am saying.		
7. I create a new word, e.g. "airball" for "balloon".		
8. I develop an alternative plan which enables me to communicate my intended message without reduction, e.g. getting around the word "daughter" by restructuring the utterance: "…my parents have I have er four elder sisters…"		
9. When coming across difficulties in conversation, I use items which are incorrect but share something common with the correct one, e.g. "fish" for "carp".		

	Yes	No
10. I repeat what I want to say until the listener understands.		
11. I think first of what I want to say in my native language and then translate that into the English sentence, e.g. producing "He invites me to drink".		
12. When I cannot remember something in English, I use Chinese words instead during my communication.		
13. If I cannot remember something, I directly ask for assistance from others, e.g. "what's this"?		
14. If I cannot remember something, I do not request assistance, but show the need for help by means of a pause, eye gaze etc.		
15. When I attempt to confirm that the listener has understood what I have said, I use utterances like "Understand?" or "Do you know what I mean?"		
16. I reformulate or model the previous speaker's utterances by using examples like "So you are saying…" or "You mean…"		
17. I replace the original message with another message because of feeling incapable of executing my original intent.		
18. When I fail to understand the speaker, I ask him/her "What do you mean?" or say "Sorry, I didn't understand".		

Appendix II

Semi-structured Interview Questions

A semi-structured interview is conducted to elicit further and detailed information about choice of CSs, particularly *L1-based CSs*. The following are questions for the semi-structured interview:

1. Are you aware that you employ various CSs to deal with communication difficulties while you are speaking English?

2. What CSs do you choose when you are working on concept identification and role play? Can you make it clear what CSs they are?

3. While speaking English, your mother tongue (Chinese) can have some effects on your choice of CSs? Can you give some examples?