

Chapter One

Introduction

One of the essential functions of language is to communicate with other people.

Teaching learners how to communicate with other people, to be sure, is one of the most important goals of language teaching. However, due to the influence of large-scale standardized test, such as Joint College Entrance Examination, as well as the status of English as foreign language rather than second language in Taiwan, the teaching of English in the educational system of Taiwan still puts great emphasis on reading and writing. In a word, there exists a gap between the convenience in teaching--reading and writing, and the need for real communication--listening and speaking. How does such a gap affect learners' use of a foreign language? Does focusing on the training of reading and writing in high school result in differences between learners' performance in speaking and in writing? These questions have interested the author and will be addressed in this paper.

1.1 Research background, motivation and goals

Language learners, who do not have an adequate command of appropriate vocabulary, may encounter some lexical problems in expressing an intended meaning. To avoid conversational breakdowns, most learners will adopt some strategies to

compensate for their linguistic deficits. Such attempt to overcome the gaps in target language system is called ‘communication strategies¹’ (Tarone, 1981 ; Bialystok, 1983). Tarone (1981) points out that communication strategies also occur in one’s native language as well since there is always a gap between speakers and listeners in terms of semantic system. The gap between a learner and a native speaker of the target language, however, occurs more often and the uses of communication strategies are more obvious. Therefore, the present paper focuses on communication strategies in interlanguage system. The study of communication strategies in this area has raised increasing interests in the field of language acquisition because it can shed light on how learners proceed in learning a target language and contribute to how to teach a target language successfully. Most important of all, the use of communication strategies is often regarded as an indicator of the level of learners’ communicative competence, which is the ultimate goal of learning a target language.

Two components can be found in communication strategies; one is production strategies and the other is reception strategies (Paribakht, 1985). Production strategies, including oral output strategies and written output strategies, are employed by learners to cope with linguistic shortcomings in expressing a message while reception strategies, including aural input strategies and written input strategies, are used to

¹ C.S. is sometimes used to refer to communication strategies for briefness.

solve problems in receiving a message. The employment of reception strategies is hard to observe and tends to reflect on learners' production strategies. Therefore, most of the studies on communication strategies have focused on production strategies and put emphasis on the analysis of learners' interlanguage in communicating with other people.

When it comes to 'communication,' the first concept that flashes into one's mind is face-to-face conversation. Therefore, most of the studies regarding the application of production communication strategies have focused on oral output--spoken language (Varadi, 1980; Raupach, 1983; Haastrup and Philipson, 1983; Paribakht, 1985). Many elicitation tasks such as picture description task, oral interview and story-retelling task have been used to induce oral production of communication strategies and based on which various frameworks as well as taxonomies have been proposed to account for such interesting linguistic behavior. As a matter of fact, there are two modes of expression. One is speaking and the other is writing. Communication strategies in speaking have been the interests of many researchers and communication strategies in writing have just begun to raise some attentions (Asao, 2002; Chimbganda, 2000). No study, however, has looked into the similarities and differences between communication strategies used in speaking and writing. The gap has interested the author and stimulated the present study.

According to Bialystok (1983), potential factors that might influence the selection of communication strategies include (a) the proficiency of learners, (b) features of the communicative situation and (c) the nature of tasks, etc. Among these factors, the relation between L2 proficiency level and strategic choice has drawn most of the attentions (Bialystok, 1983; Paribakht, 1985; Poulise, 1990). The results of the relation between proficiency and the use of communication strategies are either inclusive or mixed. Some researchers have argued that the use of communication strategies is under the influence of learners' proficiency level (Tarone, 1977) while others claim that there is only insignificant relation (Bialystok, 1983). The reason for such inconsistency may be that there exists a gap between the proficiency assessed and the way learners demonstrate their communication strategies. For example, Bialystok(1983) administered a cloze test to measure learners' grammatical proficiency and used picture reconstruction task to elicit learners' use of communication strategies. It is suggested that not only the grammatical proficiency but also speaking ability and writing ability would be related to the employment of communication strategies in spoken language and in written language respectively. Therefore, the second purpose of the present paper is to examine the relation between (a) speaking ability and the use of communication strategies in spoken language (b) writing ability and the use of communication strategies in written language. In other

words, we aim to examine (a) the use of communication strategies in speaking between more proficient speakers and less proficient speakers and (b) the use of communication strategies in writing between more proficient writers and less proficient writers.

1.2 Research questions and hypotheses

Based on the motivation of mentioned in the previous section, we list three research questions and respective hypotheses in the following:

The first question is **(a) what are the communication strategies used by Taiwan EFL college learners to solve lexical problems?** In communicating with target language, learners definitely encounter some words that they find them difficult to express. Without the instruction of communication strategies, how learners solve their lexical problems interests the author. We therefore adaptively reduplicate Paribakht's (1985) experiment to elicit learners' use of communication strategies and attempt to compare the results with the communication strategies used by Persian ESL² students in Paribakht (1985).

The second one is **(b) what are the differences between the communication strategies used in Taiwan EFL college students' spoken and written language?** In

² ESL means learning English as second language.

order to answer the question, we have to look into intrinsic difference between spoken language and written language first. The researchers interested in this field have proposed several sets of dichotomy to characterize such difference. In the following chapter, three sets of dichotomy that are hypothesized to be related to the use of communication strategies in spoken language and written language will be reviewed:

- (a) unplanned discourse (spontaneity) versus planned discourse (forethought)
- (b) involvement versus detachment
- (c) contextualized versus decontextualized

Each set of dichotomy might have certain influences on the choices of communication strategies. These influences however may be quite competing. For example, unplanned discourse, i.e. spoken language, imposes greater anxiety on speakers and may therefore hinder the use of communication strategies. The involvement of speaking, on the other hand, might increase the use of communication strategies in spoken language. In a word, the sets of dichotomy between spoken language and written language might interact with each other to determine the use of communication strategies in the two modes of production. The present paper therefore aims to explore the mode-related differences in the use of communication strategies by examining spoken language and written language produced by the same learners.

The third research question is **(c) how do learners' proficiency level in speaking and writing influence the employment of strategies in spoken language and written language respectively?** We hypothesized that more proficient learners would

use more types of communication strategies, because they have more linguistic resources available to them. Once they find that the interlocutor can not grasp the meaning of an intended concept, they would choose another type of communication strategies to make the conversation carrying on. Less proficient speakers and writers, on the other hand, can not help but stick to the limited types of communication strategy, because of the lack of the linguistic knowledge required to adopt some other types of communication strategies.

In addition, we consider that more proficient learners would adopt greater number of communication strategies in spoken language as well as in written language. The number represents the times of using a certain type of communication strategy. For example, when a more proficient learner is asked to express the concept of 'courage,' he/she may describe several different situations such as: 'when you want to confess to the person you like, you will need that.' or 'when you meet a bear in the forest, you will need that to fight against the bear and protect yourself.' The description of these two different situations is counted as using the strategy of *situation* for two times. Supported by better command of language, more proficient learners may use a greater number of communication strategies with an aim to successfully expressing an intended concept. Less proficient learners, by contrast, may just repeat the same proposition or just stop there and hand the time for speaking

to the interlocutor. The hypothesis regarding the relation between language proficiency and the use of communication strategies in terms of the types and the number will be tested in the current study. The purpose is to explore what the less proficient learners lack in using communication strategies. The result of the study can be of great pedagogical implications.

1.3 The significance of the study

Over the past few decades, a great number of studies have examined the relation between input and output, i.e. how input influences output performance (Larsen-Freeman, 1976; Hatch & Wagner-Gough, 1976; Lightbown, 1980; Long, 1981). Few studies, however, have explored the relation between two modes of output--speaking and writing, not to mention the comparison of communication strategies in these two modes. The study, therefore, aims to fill the gap by examining the use of communication strategies used in spoken language as well as in written language and to make a comparison of them.

In addition, we will explore how proficiency level influences learners' choices of communication strategies. It is hoped that the way how more proficient learners adopt communication strategies could be included in the syllabus and could be taught to other learners in order to make the teaching of communication strategies more efficient.

1.4 The organization of the thesis

The thesis includes five chapters, which starts with the introduction of the research background, research questions and hypotheses as well as the significance of the study. Chapter Two reviews previous literatures on (a) intrinsic differences between spoken language and written language, (b) the frameworks and taxonomic systems of communication strategies and (c) the relation between language proficiency and the use of communication strategies.

The experimental design employed in the study for the elicitation of communication strategies in spoken and written language is illustrated in Chapter Three, which describes the subjects, the participants, the materials, the procedures, the coding system and the statistical methods used for data analysis. In Chapter Four, the results and data analysis of the study are demonstrated. Chapter Five focuses on the conclusion with a summary of the main findings, pedagogical implications and the limitations of the study.