

**A Case Study of Seven Taiwanese English as a Foreign
Language Freshman Non-English Majors' Perceptions about
Learning Five Communication Strategies**

Grace Hui Chin Lin

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Majors' Perceptions about Learning Five Communication Strategies*

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ABSTRACT

A Case Study of Seven Taiwanese English as a Foreign Language
Freshman Non-English Majors' Perceptions about Learning
Five Communication Strategies (November, 2007)

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The primary purpose of this study was to identify what were Taiwanese University English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' perceptions about learning communication strategies. This study collected qualitative data about students' beliefs and attitudes as they learned communication strategies. The research question guiding the study was: What are Taiwanese University EFL learners' perceptions about learning five communication strategies?

Twenty-four university students were trained for 10 weeks to use strategies in Faerch and Kasper's (1983a) taxonomy, and seven volunteers were interviewed. None of the students majored in English but were enrolled in a required Basic English course in a Freshman English Non-Majors' (FENM) program in Agriculture College at Tunghai University. In the middle and at the end of the training period, participants were interviewed and videotaped for 90 minutes. The results were as follows:

- 1) In the reduction set of communication strategies, seven volunteers tended to admit that "topic avoidance" (1.) was applicable; however, they disagreed about "keeping silence" because of their concern about politeness.

- 2) Students had mixed views about “message abandonment” (2.) that ranged from a neutral position to appropriate and inappropriate usages.
- 3) In the meaning replacement strategy (3.), most of the students believed that it was convenient to have access to getting to know their interlocutor’s intended meaning.
- 4) In the second achievement set, four students perceived it was useful, but three students provided their vague attitudes with various suggestions for usage. For the interlanguage strategy (4.), six students noticed it offered a function of enhancing their comprehensibility in English communication, and one student had a neutral attitude. The data revealed students had sufficient and complex perceptions about “word-coinage.”
- 5) In the cooperation strategy (5.), six students believed it assisted them to achieve the purpose of learning, but two of seven students believed it was losing face when appealing for help.
- 6) The constant method of analysis revealed eight themes associated with topic avoidance (1.), message abandonment (2.), meaning replacement (3.), interlanguage (4.), and cooperation (5.) strategies, were mentioned by seven participants. They were comprehension, politeness, intentionality, native language, face-saving (losing-face), interlanguage system, time-saving, and keywords.

DEDICATION

This book published in the states is dedicated to my loving parents, Min Syong Lin, and Jhan Ling Chou Lin. I appreciate their continuous sufficient economic support and powerful encouragement over the past 20 years, since I decided to devote myself to the academic field of Teaching English as a Second Language.

Dedication also is extended to my sisters and brothers-in-law, Helen Hui Wen Lin and Peter Jhen Peng, and Diane Hui Hwa Lin and Michael Hui Fong Liu, who have supported my study in everyway either when I was in New York, California, Texas, in the US, or in Taipei, Taichung, Changhua, in Taiwan. Because of you being around me, I can develop my knowledge in the fields of Curriculum and Instruction, Sociolinguistics, and Teaching English as a Second Language. My first book published in the states is dedicated to my intelligent niece and nephew, Freeda Yi Ru Liu and Yorge You Cheng Liu. Their passionate faces appeared on web-cam inspired my study anywhere in the world. I anticipate my academic research also will motivate them in their studies at school.

I thank all of my brothers and sisters in Our Saviour's Lutheran Church of College Station, who were concerned about my progress toward this challenging research four years through. They still emailed me from time to time after I was back home in Taiwan, after my long term Ph.D. study (2003~2007). Thank you, Pastor Erich Schaefer, Ms. Joan Logan, Ms. Margie Boyd, Ms. Joyce Nelson, Dr. John Fackler and Naomi Fackler, Dr. Werner Rose and Beverly Rose, Dr. Carol Rach, Dr. Laurine William Marlow, Dr. Joel Lovell and Anni Lovell, and Dr. Su Beall. I wish I can go back to see you in Texas if possible.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Today, increasing numbers of Taiwanese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) adult learners are pursuing their goals of communicating in English in worldwide institutions. This need has caused more attention to be focused on their communicative competence. The urgent need to communicate in English has increased due to Taiwan's wish to join global organizations, such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations (UN). If Taiwan were to be accepted by the United Nations, it would have more opportunities to participate in UN-related organizations and other forms of multilateral cooperation (Chen, 2005).

Moreover, Taiwan should be allowed to participate in the WHO because the health authorities of Taiwan are the only ones possessing the relevant information about any outbreak of an epidemic that could pose a threat to global health (Government Information Office, Republic of China, 2005). For joining the above global institutions where English is used as a communication tool, Taiwanese people's communicative competence needs to be raised to fulfill the urgent need of international communication (Wei, 2005).

Another reason why communicative competence currently is emphasized is because of the joint entrance examination that drives high school students to develop reading and writing proficiencies and ignore the importance of communicative competence. Very few, if any, communicative questions exist on the examination. Therefore, since communicative competence is not tested, students have less

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opportunity to practice communicating in English. The standard entrance examinations obviously constrain the application of communicative language teaching and democratic teaching in most schools in Taiwan (Wei, 2005).

The term “communicative competence” has been credited to Hymes (1972). Canale and Swain (1980) identified four components of communicative competence: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic. To fulfill Taiwanese EFL learners’ increasing need to use English to communicate in international situations, this study focused on the component of strategic competence because it helped the learners start communicating in English within a shorter time.

The scholars in the communication strategy field had advised that language learners can use communication strategies to resolve their linguistic problems and talk more comprehensibly (Ansarin & Syal, 2000; Bialystok, 1990; Faerch & Kasper, 1983a, 1984; Rababah, 2003) because of “their role in facilitating communication by helping to overcome a communication problem” (Andrioti, 2005, p. 1). Faerch and Kasper (1983a) described communication strategies as: “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 study recommended, through communication strategies, that the Taiwanese EFL university learners might know how to expand their limited linguistic knowledge during communication and make themselves interact better in the current global village. In Taiwan, because of international communication needs, the government changed the policy of compulsory English education from 8 years to 10 years in 2005 (Ministry of Education, ROC, 2005). Therefore, compared to younger generations, the current university students' ability to communicate in English might

not be as great. The use of communication strategies might assist the adult learners in compensating for their finite English knowledge, and integrate their reading and writing competence into practical communication.

However, communication strategies might not be valued highly by the Taiwanese EFL adult learners. The reason for this is that using these strategies could make communication easier and help the learners start interacting in English more rapidly; nevertheless, strategies also might lead to markedly non-native sounding speech (Tarone, 1980) or result in a loss of face (Faerch & Kasper, 1984). Inspired by these effects or characteristics of strategy application that Tarone (1983), and Faerch and Kasper (1984) had recommended, this study attempted to explore further how the Taiwanese EFL learners would react to the foreign-like speech production generated through a communication strategy and what they could perceive about their learning, besides the perceptions of face-losing. This study searched for factors that influenced the learners' perceptions of learning a communication strategy. More specifically, it regarded an in-depth discussion of the students' perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes toward learning communication strategies as both significant and necessary.

Understanding students' feelings helps the educators humanize their methods of education (e.g., Alsop & Watts, 2000; Heaton, 1951; Rogers, 1972). Alsop and Watts (2000) emphasized it is necessary to explore the "affective interference" in students' feelings and the relationship between students' cognition and emotion. They suggested to educators that, "Learning is influenced by feelings and emotions and that, in turn, learning can influence feelings and emotions" (p. 132). Researchers implied that feeling in learning is an important factor in successful learning of

communication strategies, since humans have basic psychological needs and will be most motivated to engage in activities responsibly and enthusiastically when those needs are met (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Skinner, Wellborn & Connell, 1990).

Besides, in the field of English Education, Krashen (1982) also argued that emotional factors, such as confidence and anxiety, are influential components in language acquisition. As he remarked, “The best methods are therefore those that supply ‘comprehensible input’ in low anxiety situations, containing a message that students really want to hear (Krashen, 1982, p. 6). He further stated that, “These methods do not force early production..., but allow students to produce when they are ready” (Krashen, 1982, p. 6).

Accordingly, this study succeeded two in-depth discussions that had addressed the issues of the learners’ perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs associated with the students’ language generated through the use of communication strategies, and the learners’ characteristics of using communication strategies (Faerch & Kasper, 1984; Tarone, 1980). Faerch and Kasper (1984) revealed that higher level English learners need to use a communication strategy “confidentially,” because of “their less clearly marked foreigner roles and their need for face-saving” (p. 61). Faerch and Kasper’s discussion for face-saving issue implied that besides the advantage of comprehensible communication, the strategy learners’ psychological level is another significant issue that the researchers and English language educators should involve in their studies of strategy application.

Also, Tarone’s foreign-like issue associated with the learners’ willingness of using communication strategies was thought-provoking. Tarone (1980) mentioned

that the strategy application might present a problem for non-native like speech, including language forms of “inappropriateness,” “excessive verbosity,” or “informality” (p. 12). Accordingly, this study followed Tarone (1980, 1981) and Faerch and Kasper’s (1983a, 1983b, 1984) model of in-depth discussions and examined whether the learners had similar perceptions or opinions that the previous researchers had mentioned, and if they detected some other characteristics of the strategy application that were different from the past reports.

Statement of the Problem

Today in Taiwan, communicative competence has become an important issue due to the globalization phenomena. Thus, the communication strategy is an important topic to discuss for raising the communicative competence of Taiwanese EFL adult learners. In communication strategy research, various studies have focused on different categories (e.g., Bialystok 1983, 1990; Dornyei & Scott, 1997; Ogane, 1998; Rababah, 2002c). Additionally, many researchers have conducted studies based on different taxonomies (e.g., Ansarin & Syal, 2000; Dornyei, 1995; Kocoglu, 1997; Rababah 2002c; Yoshida-Morise, 1998). However, very few empirical studies have been conducted for the purpose of investigating students’ perceptions of learning communication strategies. Therefore, it was difficult to access a sufficient number of qualitative references that state the learners’ experiences and comments regarding their evaluations for skills in communication strategies.

Although Faerch and Kasper (1984) and Tarone (1980) noted the issues of face-saving and non-native like language that were associated with the learners’ perceptions of learning communication strategies, no existing studies revealed students’ attitudes and feelings for communication strategies. Based on more than 10

skills associated with the five communication strategies from the taxonomy of Faerch and Kasper (1983), this study provided information on how the Taiwanese EFL university learners perceived their learning.

Statement of the Purpose

The primary purpose of this study was to find out what the Taiwanese university EFL learners perceived in learning the five communication strategies, and students' attitude and beliefs toward learning communication strategies. This study collected qualitative data about students' perceptions and reflections as they learned the five communication strategies in Faerch and Kasper's (1983) classification. The results of the study should contribute to the research field of communications strategies. Also, the results could be used as the guidelines for English educators in practicing their communicative teaching.

Research Questions

The general research question was: "What are Taiwanese university EFL learners' perceptions about learning five communication strategies?" More specifically, the questions were:

1. What are Taiwanese university students' perceptions about learning the topic avoidance strategy?
2. What are Taiwanese university students' perceptions about learning the message abandonment strategy?
3. What are Taiwanese university students' perceptions about learning the meaning replacement strategy?
4. What are Taiwanese university students' perceptions about learning the interlanguage-based strategy?

5. What are Taiwanese university students' perceptions about learning the cooperation strategy?

Significance of the Study

This study addressed how Taiwanese university EFL learners perceived in learning five communication strategies. More specifically, this study reported various factors that influenced EFL learners' perceptions and their intentions of learning communication strategies. This study revealed how students valued learning various types of communication strategies and how their English language was developed through the use of communication strategies.

Through interacting with five communication strategies, the students' different attitudes of learning communication strategies were revealed from the learners' perspectives, and not from the researcher's perspectives. The report of the students' perceptions was significant because it provided information related to the students' beliefs, attitudes, and characteristics of learning communication strategies. In other words, through listening to students' voices and opinions of learning communication strategies, researchers in the field of communication strategies might access issues different from those of face-saving and non-native like speech discovered by Faerch and Kasper (1984), and Tarone (1980).

Definitions

1. Communication strategies: systematic conversation skills applied by a speaker to convey his meaning when encountering linguistic difficulty. They are "potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal" (Faerch & Kasper, 1983a, p. 36).

2. Strategy: “Procedures used in learning and thinking, which serve as a way of reaching a goal. In language learning, learning strategies and communication strategies which language learners make use of in learning and using a language” (Richards, Platt & Platt, 1998, p. 444).
3. Topic avoidance strategy: The speakers should avoid some topics, which are perceived as problematic, because of the interlocutors’ shortage of background knowledge about that topic. Also, the speakers should avoid pronouncing some vowels, or consonants that are difficult for them (Tarone, Cohen & Dumas, 1983; Corder, 1983; Faerch & Kasper, 1983a; Tarone, Frauenfelder & Selinker, 1976).
4. Message abandonment strategy: The speakers should skip difficult words during interactions, or reject to explain a difficult word for their interlocutors (Corder, 1983; Faerch & Kasper, 1983a; Tarone, Cohen & Dumas, 1983).
5. Meaning replacement strategy: This also is termed “semantic avoidance.” When a learner encounters a situation where he needs to use a word he does not know in English, he should use a general expression to replace the meaning without abandoning it altogether. The meaning generated through this strategy can be expressed vaguely (Blum-Kulka & Levenston, 1983; Corder, 1983; Faerch & Kasper, 1983a; Tarone, Cohen & Dumas, 1983; Tarone, Frauenfelder & Selinker, 1976).
6. Interlanguage strategy: This strategy applies the techniques to “generalize” (Blum-Kulka & Levenston 1983; Faerch & Kasper, 1983a), “paraphrase” (Faerch & Kasper, 1983a; Tarone, 1983), “coinage new words,” (Faerch & Kasper, 1983a) and “restructuring” (Bialystok, 1990; Faerch & Kasper,

1983a). For example, using “tree nut” to refer to acorn (generalize), using “a cykel there is a motor” to refer to motorcycle, using “airball” to refer to balloon (word coinage), and using “my tummy is empty” to refer to hungry (restructuring).

7. Cooperation strategy: Learners should signal their interlocutor for help and solve communication problems by requesting a second language (L2) usage that they do not know or by indicating that they cannot express the intended meaning (Blum-Kulka & Levenston, 1983; Corder, 1978; Faerch & Kasper, 1983c; Tarone, Cohen & Dumas, 1983; Tarone, Frauenfelder & Selinkier, 1976). For example, they may ask their partners what a certain word means.
8. Interlocutor: In colloquial use, an interlocutor is someone who takes part in a conversation, a conversation partner, and a schmoozer (Lott, 1993).

Organization of the Study

The organization of the study is as follows. Chapter I is the introduction, which includes statement of the problem, statement of the purpose, research questions, significance of the study, theoretical base for the study, definitions, and organization of the study. Chapter II is the literature review, and it mainly discusses the history of how communication strategies evolved. Chapter II is organized with an investigation on history of communication strategies, a significant issue of psychological status of strategy application, the earlier studies, recent studies, theoretical base/conceptual framework, and a summary.

Chapter III discusses the methodology of this study, and is organized with an introduction of methodologies, descriptions of qualitative methodologies, methods of data collection, data analysis, and assumption and limitation of this study. Chapter IV

presents the findings regarding the five research questions. Chapter V contains discussions, summary, and recommendations for further research topics. Finally, Chapter VI contains the discussions, summary, and recommendations of further studies.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is to pursue a background about communication strategies and the history of communication strategies. It provides the concepts about the meaning of communication strategies. Various definitions of communication strategies are presented, and the speech generated through communication strategies sound are revealed. In the end of this chapter, a significant theoretical base of Faerch and Kasper's taxonomy is illustrated, which also explains why these five communication strategies were selected and tested: (1) topic avoidance, (2) message abandonment, (3) meaning replacement, (4) interlanguage, (5) cooperation.

History and Trends of Communication Strategy

To investigate communication strategy, Selinker (1972) was the first scholar who concretely proposed the original notion of communication strategy. Selinker (1972) suggested strategy application in his paper entitled, "Interlanguage," to account for certain classes of errors made by second language learners. He also identified the acceptable inaccuracy in communication as a by-product of the attempt of the learner to express his meaning in spontaneous speech with an inadequate grasp of the target language system. All in all, Selinker (1972) suggested that the interlanguage in the second language learners' speech productions should be regarded as tolerable and supportable. Indeed, in the communication strategy history, Selinker (1972) was a pioneer who had a great deal of influence on the next researchers of the communication strategy field. These researchers had added to Selinker's work by either designing alternative communication strategies or promoting the communication strategy application.