Exploring Factors Affecting the Use of Oral Communication Strategies

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Abstract

This study investigates the factors influencing the oral communication strategies of technological university students in Taiwan. Ninety-eight sophomore students of Lunghwa University of Science and Technology participated in it. Nakatani’s Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI) (2006), along with the demographics and English learning backgrounds of students, was used to collect data. Descriptive statistics, a one way ANOVA, the Pearson correlation and multiple regressions using SPSS were applied to analyze the data. The study finds that students most often employed message reduction and alternation strategies and least often employed message abandonment strategies. Students’ self-perceived oral proficiency, the frequency of and motivation in speaking English were significantly correlated with the use of oral communication strategies. However, gender and English proficiency did not have any effect on the use of oral communication strategies. Finally, the frequency of speaking English outside the classroom and motivation in speaking English were the powerful predictors of the use of oral communication strategies among this group of learners. Thus, the inquiry highlights the importance of functional practice and intrinsic motivation in the development of communication strategies and oral competence. It is hoped that this study will encourage a more serious reflection on the oral proficiency of technological university students. At the same time, EFL teachers will find more efficient methods to instruct students in effective communication strategies, allowing them to employ the strategies skillfully in their future communication with native and nonnative speakers.

Keywords: oral communication strategies, communicative competence, intrinsic motivation, out-of-classroom learning, functional practice

1. Introduction

The gap between the English proficiency of technological university students and the requirements of the industries has received increasing attention recently in Taiwan. Because of global competition and industrial transformation, students must integrate their language skills and their specialized knowledge in order to obtain the edge in job market and stay in synchronous with the world as well. Accordingly, in 2009, the Ministry of Education (MOE)
urged technological universities to propose a white paper on an English curriculum reform that emphasizes the centrality of productive skills such as writing and speaking to equip students with the qualifications that industries require, i.e., to have international perspectives plus good English communicative competence so as to interact with people in one’s own field and with those from other courtiers.

After years of learning, the majority of students in Taiwan are neither fluent nor confident English speakers. Some may attribute this deficiency to the limited time for oral practice in classrooms and the lack of conversational opportunities outside of them, especially in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings. However, it may, in fact, stem from the myths that students hold regarding communication in a foreign language, such as the necessary possession of excellent pronunciation, a good accent, a large vocabulary size, and an in-depth knowledge of grammar. Moreover, some learners who perform well in English classes still find themselves at a loss when interacting with native speakers in everyday life (Yang & Gai, 2010). This dichotomy arises from the somewhat unreal and comparatively safe context of the classroom, since teacher-student and peer interactions are often restricted to basic patterns and prefabricated situations or topics (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). Real-life interactions, a major factor for second language acquisition and the development of communicative competence, “demand a great deal of spontaneity and the ability to cope with the unexpected” (Peloghities, 2006, p.48). In authentic communicative situations, language learners are often unable to retrieve a word, to use or comprehend an idiomatic expression, or to grasp a topic; consequently, communication breaks down (Willems, 1987). Therefore, they must develop specific communication strategies that enable them to compensate for their target language deficiencies, enhance interaction in the target language, and eventually develop communicative competence (Willems, 1987; Faerch & Kasper, 1983; Bialystok, 1990; Dornyei, 1995).

Communication strategies play an integral role in language acquisition. Willems (1987) argues that introducing communication strategies allows weaker learners to “develop a feeling of being able to do something with the language” (p.352) and thus derive language learning motivation. A review of the relevant literature showed that studies regarding the use of communication strategies by Taiwanese college students are quite few (King, 2001; Hsieh, 2005; Huang, 2006; Lee, 2006; Weng, 2007; Chen, 2009; Li, 2010) and these say little either about their use in authentic communication with native English speakers (King, 2001 & Huang, 2006) or about the factors other than language proficiency that affect their selection (Li, 2010). This study investigates the use of oral communication strategies by technological university students in Taiwan. It seeks to identify what is common in the communication approaches of these students in authentic interactions. Furthermore, based on the data collected, it examines whether such factors as language proficiency, gender, self-perceived oral proficiency, the frequency of speaking English outside the classroom, and motivation in speaking English influence the use of oral communication strategies. It is hoped that this
study will encourage a more serious reflection on the oral proficiency of technological university students. At the same time, teachers, by better understanding their students’ strategy use, will more effectively develop their communicative competence.

Based on the purposes of the study, this research attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What kinds of oral communication strategies do technological university students use during communication tasks?
2. Do learner variables (gender, English proficiency, self-perceived oral proficiency, frequency of speaking English outside the classroom and motivation in speaking English) influence the use of oral communication strategies?
3. Which of these variables is the best predictor of oral communication strategy use?

2. Literature review

In this part, related theories of and research on communication strategies, in particular, the factors that influence the use of oral communication strategies will be reviewed.

2.1 Communication strategies

Brown (2000) points out that more recent approaches seem to take communication strategies as elements of an overall strategic competence. Thus, before mentioning communication strategies, it is necessary to clarify the concepts of communicative competence and strategic competence.

2.1.1 Communicative competence

Hymes (1972) proposed the term “communicative competence” in contradistinction to Chomsky’s notion of linguistic competence. The latter emphasizes the abilities of speakers to produce grammatically correct sentences, and the former includes linguistic competence and sociocultural dimensions. For Hymes, communicative competence enables learners to “convey and interpret messages and to negotiate meanings interpersonally within specific contexts” (Brown, 2000, p.246). Canale and Swain (1980) further develop this notion, identifying four dimensions of communicative competence: grammatical competence (knowledge of what is grammatically correct in a language), sociolinguistic competence (knowledge of what is socially acceptable in a language), discourse competence (knowledge of intersentential relationships), and strategic competence (the knowledge of verbal and nonverbal communication strategies). In a word, communicative competence includes both the use of the linguistic system itself and the functional aspects of communication. It is a dynamic, interpersonal construct; it is relative and depends on the cooperation of all the involved participants (Savignon, 1983).

2.1.2 Strategic competence

Strategic competence, the manipulation of language by learners to achieve communicative goals, is the pivotal element in communicative competence. Canale and Swain (1980) claim that it relies on “verbal and nonverbal communication strategies…to
compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or due to insufficient competence” (p. 30). Likewise, Yule and Tarone (1990) define it as “an ability to select an effective means of performing a communicative act that enables the listener/reader to identify the intended referent” (p.181). In a later study, Canale (1983) modifies the definition to include both the “compensatory characteristics of communication strategies and the enhancement characteristics of production strategies” (cited in Nakatani, 2005, p.77). Bachman (1990) regards strategic competence as a capacity that put language competence into real communication contexts. Paribakht (1985) suggests that strategic competence is best understood as the skills of a learner to access various solutions to learning and communication problems. These include “both production strategies (oral and written) used to solve lexical, syntactic, and sociolinguistic problems in communicating a message, and reception strategies (aural and written) used to solve similar problems in receiving the message” (p. 142).

In sum, strategic competence refers to language learner’s ability to use communication strategies either to solve communication problems or to enhance the effectiveness of communication, which allows speakers to appear more adept than they actually are (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992, p.72). Thus, strategic competence is especially important for ESL/EFL learners with rather limited oral proficiency.

2.1.3 Definitions of communication strategies

Selinker (1972) proposes the concept of “communication strategies” (CSs), which he defines as a by-product of a learner’s attempt to express meaning in spontaneous speech through a limited target language system. Since he first used the term, it has been the subject of much discussion but also of little consensus as to its correct definition.

In early work, CSs was regarded as language learners’ problem-solving behavior in the process of target language communication. Language learners employed CSs to compensate for their linguistic shortcomings in order to achieve a particular communicative goal. This kind of notion focuses on the language learner’s response to an imminent problem without considering the interlocutor’s support for its resolution. Thus, it is an intrapersonal, psycholinguistic view that “locates CS in models of speech production or cognitive organization and processing” (Kasper & Kellerman, 1997, p. 2). In contrast, Tarone (1980) defines CSs from the inter-individual, interactional view, regarding CSs as the “mutual attempts of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in a situation where the requisite meaning structures do not seem to be shared” (p.420). Thus, CSs are utilized to bridge the gap between the linguistic knowledge of the foreign language learner and that of the target language interlocutor in real communication situations (Tarone, 1981) so as to avoid communication disruptions.

2.1.4 The classifications of communication strategies

Most literature on CSs embodies similar and overlapping taxonomies, which may be divided into avoidance or reduction strategies and achievement or compensatory ones (e.g.
Using the *avoidance* or *reduction* strategies (e.g. topic avoidance, message abandonment, meaning replacement), learners veer away from unfamiliar topics, avoid solving communication problems, and reduce or abandon the messages they intended to convey. These behaviors can negatively affect the content of the interaction and are common among low-proficiency learners. Using the *achievement* or *compensatory* strategies, learners tackle communication problems by an alternative plan for reaching their original goals. The *achievement* or *compensatory* strategies include cooperative strategies (e.g. appeal for help) and noncooperative ones (e.g. L1-bases strategies, such as code switching, foreignizing, and literal translation; interlanguage-based strategies, such as substitution, generalization, exemplification, word-coinage, and restructuring; non-verbal strategies, such as mime and imitation). Other strategies, such as time-gaining strategies (using fillers to gain time to think), prefabricated patterns (using memorized stock phrases, usually for survival purposes) also belong to the category of *achievement* or *compensatory* strategies. Using these strategies helps learners complete or continue an oral communication and is regarded as good learners’ behavior.

**2.1.4.1 Nakatani’s Oral communication strategy inventory (OCSI)**

Nakatani (2006) developed the Oral Communication Strategy Inventory for EFL university students in Japan. According to Nakatani (2010), the term *oral communication strategy* is used to “highlight interlocutors’ negotiation behavior for coping with communication breakdowns and their use of communication enhancers” (p.118).

The questionnaire consists of two parts. The first examines strategies for coping with speaking problems and eight categories consisting of 32 specific strategies are identified: *social affective, fluency-oriented, negotiation for meaning while speaking, accuracy-oriented, message reduction and alternation, nonverbal strategies while speaking, message abandonment, and attempt to think in English*. With respect to strategies for coping with listening problems, seven categories consisting of 26 specific strategies are identified: *negotiation for meaning while listening, fluency-maintaining, scanning, getting the gist, nonverbal strategies while listening, less active listener, and word-oriented*.

To sum up, we can say that communicative competence is what one knows; strategic competence is one’s ability to employ CSs to handle breakdowns in communication. Effectively utilizing the CSs could allow learners to remain in the conversation, which in turn provides them more opportunities to expose to the target language and produce more utterances.

**2.2 Factors affecting the choice of communication strategies**

Understanding the CSs that students employ helps teachers understand their strategic competence so that appropriate strategies could be chosen for pedagogical purposes. However, in guiding students to become competent speakers of English, EFL teachers may need to explore further the influence of other learner variables on the use of OCSs by students. This study investigates, in particular, the effect of five variables — gender,
language proficiency, self-perceived oral proficiency, the frequency of speaking English outside the classroom, and motivation in speaking English, on students’ OCS use.

2.2.1 Gender

In second/foreign language learning, gender differences are discussed mostly in studies of language learning strategies. Several studies have shown that females use language learning strategies more frequently than males (Politzer, 1983; Sy; 1994, Green and Oxford, 1995; Teh, et al. 2009). Besides, females are reported to be more socially interactive than males (Ehrman and Oxford, 1988; Green and Oxford, 1995). However, some findings reveal that males employ more learning strategies than females (Wharton, 2000) and others that there are no significant differences between the sexes in their use of language learning strategies (Chou, 2002, Rahimi, Riazi, and Saif’s 2008). In addition, E-Dib (2004) in a study of the choices of language learning strategies by learners in Kuwait concludes that these may be affected by the culture milieu. As for communication, Baker and MacIntyre (2000) report that girls possess a greater level of willingness to communicate inside the classroom, whereas boys are more willing to use their L2 outside the school context. In Li’s study (2010), female university students in Taiwan are reported to apply CSs more often than male students are.

2.2.2 Language proficiency

A learner’s language proficiency is a potentially influential factor in the choice of CSs. It is found that “learners with different target language proficiency levels drew upon different sources of knowledge to solve their communication problems” (Chen, 1990, p.174). Paribakht (1985) reports that highly proficient language learners with richer linguistic knowledge of the target language tended to rely on linguistic approach, while those with low proficiency adopted a conceptual approach that does not require specific target language linguistic or cultural knowledge to compensate for their weak linguistic knowledge. Similar results are found in Chen’s study (1990), which investigates the relationship between L2 learners’ target language proficiency and their strategic competence. Findings reveal that high proficiency learners were prone to choose linguistic-based and low proficiency learners knowledge-based and repetition CSs. In addition, high proficiency learners employed their CSs more efficiently. Liskin-Gasparro (1996) indicates that the intermediate high speakers relied mostly on L1-and L3-based CSs, such as language switch, transliteration or foreignizing; while advanced speakers called upon a range of L2-based strategies, including circumlocution. No advanced speakers resorted to message abandonment strategies.

Some studies report an inverse relationship between proficiency level and CS use. Poulisse and Schils (1989) indicate that the most advanced subjects used fewer compensatory strategies than the least proficient ones. The researchers reason that this result is explained by the limited vocabulary of the latter, compelling them to resort more often to compensatory strategies. Chen (1990) and Tuan (2001) also indicate that high proficiency
learners employed fewer CSs to convey meaning.

Students with high language proficiency are apt to use specific strategies in oral communication. In Nakatain’s study (2006), students with high oral proficiency tended to use social affective, fluency-oriented, and negotiation of meaning strategies, which are effective for oral communication, since students employed them for keeping the conversation flowing and for maintaining their interaction through negotiation. The low proficiency students relied more on message abandonment and less active listener strategies, which are regarded as ineffective strategies. Chen (2009), who examines the oral communication strategies used by college English majors in Taiwan, maintains that although speaking proficiency is related to the use of oral communication strategies, no direct relationship exists between them. Speaking of the OCS use of students learning English in Taiwan, Li (2010) finds that the highly proficient students utilized CSs more often and relied more on social, negotiation for meaning, and accuracy-oriented strategies than those with mid or low English proficiency.

Generally speaking, high language proficiency students are more likely to resort to linguistic knowledge to convey meaning and they are able to select appropriate and effective strategies for interaction. In comparison, low language proficiency students tend to rely on knowledge-based or conceptual-based strategies and to call on abandonment strategies.

2.2.3 Self-perceived English oral proficiency

Bacon & Finnemann (1990) indicate that speaking is problematic for very deep-seated reasons related to self-concept. A positive view of self can affect the progress of an individual learning. Baker and MacIntyre (2000) argue that “It is not the individual’s actual skill that counts; rather it is how they perceive their communication competence that will determine WTC” (p.316). Both the willingness to communicate (WTC) and perceived competence have an impact on the frequency of communication. However, Cheng (2007) reveals that the CSs used and the self-report of oral proficiency did not have a statistical relationship. She points out that “effective communication takes more than the ability to talk. It also involves the use of one’s mental faculties in the choice of words, the ability to make other person understand what one is saying and vice versa” (Cheng, 2007, p.99).

2.3.4 Frequency of speaking English outside the classroom

Huang and Van Naerssen’s study (1987) find that Chinese EFL students who are successful communicators more often turned to functional practice approaches. These included speaking with native speakers, friends, or other students, and thinking or talking to themselves in the target language. In Bialystok’s study (1981), functional practice is shown to be critical to students’ language performance. MacIntyre and Charos (1996) indicate that if “foreign language learners lack the opportunity for constant interaction in the L2, they should be less likely to increase their perceived competence, willingness to communicate, and frequency of communication” (cited in Baker & MacIntyre, 2000, p.312). Constantly using English also increases one’s linguistic outcomes. Piranian (1979) maintains that
language learners who have had more exposure to the target language or have acquired it in natural situations are more flexible and successful in using communication strategies. Research suggests that students who actively seek opportunities to speak a second language—both in and out of classroom—become more proficient in second language conversation than students who do not seek them. According to Clement (1986), “seeking opportunities to communicate would greatly increase the chances for intercultural contact, L2 communication practice (Larsen-Freeman, 2007) and comprehensible input (Krashen, 2003)” (cited in MacIntyre & Doucette, 2010, p.162). “The L2 learner’s decision to initiate conversation has been linked to the notion of crossing the Rubicon, an irrevocable decision that can lead to success or failure” (MacIntyre & Doucette, 2010, p.162). Thus, habitual exposure to English and interaction with native speakers leads to more successful communication.

2.3.5 Motivation in speaking English

Motivation is the driving force that initiates learning in the first place and sustains learning until the planned goals are achieved. High motivation may provoke learners to interact with native speakers of the target language (Schumann, 1986), which in turn increases the amount of input to learners. McIntyre and Noels (1996) report that those who were substantially motivated were more likely to adopt more learning strategies and use them more frequently than those with less enthusiasm. Motivation is typically examined in terms of the intrinsic and extrinsic motives of the learners (Brown, 2000). Intrinsic motivation refers to the willingness to engage in an activity because it is enjoyable and fulfilling. Extrinsic motivation refers to the desire to do it so as to receive an external reward or avoid punishment. It appears that intrinsic orientations are more powerful learning stimuli (e.g. Maslow, 1970; Crookes & Schmidt, 1991; Dornyei, 1998). However, in both cases, the degree of motivation that an individual learner possesses is the crucial factor for successful learning (Gardner, 1985).

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The participants were 98 sophomore students (22 males and 76 females) in Lunghwa University of Science and Technology. These students were selected from three classes of the required course “English Listening and Speaking III”. They met two hours a week, during which they received instruction from the researcher. The ratio of listening to speaking in the class was about 60% to 40%. The speaking practice usually included the items (repeating sentences, reading simple passages aloud, and answering questions) tested in The General English Proficiency Test (GEPT), a standardized examination in Taiwan. Pattern practice and role play based on the conversation model were the routine activities in class. At the end of the semester, students gave one presentation on topics discussed in the textbook.
3.2 Instruments

Two instruments, a questionnaire and students’ term grades on Listening and Speaking course III, were used in this study.

The questionnaire consists of two parts. The first part was designed to gather data on four learner variables—gender, self-perceived oral proficiency, frequency of speaking English outside the classroom, and motivation in speaking English. Students were asked to rate their own oral proficiency based on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very poor) to 5 (excellent). Three items were used to investigate the frequency of English usage outside the classroom: (1) I use English to express or to talk to myself; (2) I speak English with my friends or other students; and (3) I speak English with native speakers. Motivation was gauged by one item: I enjoy speaking English. Students had to respond to these four items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). The second part consists of eight speaking strategy categories, adopted from the OCSI by Nakatan (2006). Thirty-two items are evaluated by a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (never or almost never true of me) to 5 (always or almost always true of me). The questionnaire was used to assess the participants’ usage of OCS. The Chronbach alpha of the reliability of the questionnaire was .92, which indicated a highly acceptable reliability.

Students’ term grades, the average scores of quizzes, mid-term and final exams, in Speaking and Listening III were used as the criterion for the determination of high, medium, or low language proficiency. Tests included written tests and speaking tests. The written tests focused on examining students’ vocabulary, phrases and idioms, and listening skills. The speaking tests included one picture description and one presentation. The participants’ raw scores were converted into T scores. The conversion formula is $T = (X - M/SD) * 10 + 50$ ($X =$ raw score; $M =$ mean of the raw score; $SD =$ standard deviation of the raw score). The standard score ranged from 17.81 to 81.24. Those whose scores ranked in the top 27% were grouped as high language proficiency students, and those whose scores ranked in the bottom 27% were sorted as low proficiency level students. The remainder were placed in the medium proficiency group. Thus, there were 27.6 % (27) in the high language proficiency level, 30.6% (30) in the medium level, and 41.8 % (41) in the low level.

3.3 Procedure

After the mid-term exam of spring 2010, students were informed that they would be working in groups of four and conducting three face-to-face interviews with exchange students at LHU, who were native English speakers from the U. S. The teacher provided a brief introduction to communication strategies, such as asking for repetition, asking for clarification, using fillers, expressing agreement, self-repairing, and conversation opening or closing. Before the interviews, the students met with their partners to select their conversation topics. Students were asked to video record the interviews and to submit the recording, along with their learning reflection, following each interview. The questionnaire was administered after the completion of the three interviews.

3.4 Data analysis
The statistical SPSS software, version 13.0, was applied to calculate the collected data. Descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviations, were used to analyze the data. A one-way ANOVA, t-test, and a Pearson correlation were used to test the relationship between learner variables and OCS use. Moreover, multiple regression analysis was undertaken to predict the variables that influence students’ use of OCSs.

4. Results

Three research questions will be addressed in this part, including the use of OCSs by technological university students in Taiwan, the factors that influence these students’ OCS use, and the predictors of OCS use.

4.1 Research question 1

*What kinds of oral communication strategies do technological university students use during communication tasks?*

The findings reveal that in terms of overall strategy use, the students used the OCSs moderately (M = 3.460, SD = .44). Comparing the means in the eight categories of OCS, the *message reduction and alternation strategies* have the highest mean (M = 3.765), followed by *nonverbal strategies while speaking* (M = 3.701) and *social-affective strategies* (M = 3.631). On the contrary, the *message abandonment strategies* have the lowest mean (M = 3.143), followed by *accuracy-oriented strategies* (M = 3.176), and *fluency-oriented strategies* (M = 3.330). The mean, standard deviations, and rank of the strategy are shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall strategies</td>
<td>3.460</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message reduction and alternation strategies</td>
<td>3.765</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonverbal strategies while speaking</td>
<td>3.701</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social affective strategies</td>
<td>3.631</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attempt to think in English strategies</td>
<td>3.587</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiation for meaning while speaking</td>
<td>3.528</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fluency-oriented strategies</td>
<td>3.330</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy-oriented strategies</td>
<td>3.176</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message abandonment strategies</td>
<td>3.143</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2 Research question 2

*Do learner variables (gender, English proficiency, self-perceived oral proficiency, ...*
frequency of speaking English outside the classroom, and motivation in speaking English) influence the use of oral communication strategies?

4.2.1 Summary of learner variables

Before the results of data analysis are given, a summary of the five learner variables is presented in Table 2. It should be noted that the five-level questionnaire scale, from poor to excellent or strongly disagree to strongly agree, has been converted into a three-level statistical one, around the terms Good, Average, and Poor or High, Medium, and Low.

As indicated in Table 2, 22.4% (22) of the participants were male and 77.6% (76) female. Of the total number of students, those with high, medium, and low English proficiency were 30.6% (30), 46.9% (46), and 22.4% (22), respectively. Among the participants, 9.2% (9) rated their own oral proficiency as ‘good’, 54.1% (53) rated it as ‘average’, and 36.7% (36) as ‘poor’. As for motivation in speaking English, 39.8% (39) reported they enjoyed speaking English very much, 54.1% (53) avowed medium interest in speaking it, and 6.1% (6) had no interest. The mean of the students’ self-reported frequency of speaking English outside the classroom is 7.60.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>N (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-perceived oral proficiency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation in speaking English</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of speaking English</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean ± SD</td>
<td>7.60 ± 1.67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2.2 Learner variables and the use of oral communication strategies

As shown in Table 3, results of t-test reveal no significant difference between gender and OCS use, which suggests that gender did not influence the use of OCS covered in this study. A one way ANOVA, employed to examine the relationship between English proficiency and the use of OCS, shows no noteworthy dissimilarity between the overall OCS use and language proficiency. The choice of OCSs was thus not affected by students’ English proficiency.

To examine if there’s difference between self-perceived oral proficiency and OCS use, a
one way ANOVA was applied to the data. It indicates a significant difference between self-perceived oral proficiency and the overall strategy use (F = 3.705, p = 0.028). The same is also seen in the use of social affective strategies (F = 6.509, p = 0.002), fluency-oriented strategies (F = 7.066, p = 0.001), and negotiation for meaning while speaking strategies (F = 3.429, p = 0.036). However, none are evident in the use of the accuracy-oriented strategies, message reduction and alternation strategies, nonverbal strategies while speaking, message abandonment strategies, and attempt to think in English strategies.

The Pearson correlation was applied to find the relationship between the frequency of speaking English outside the classroom and the use of OCS. A positive correlation is found between the frequency of speaking English outside the classroom and overall OCSs (r = .435, p < 0.001), social-affective strategies (r = .495, p < 0.001), fluency-oriented strategies (r = 0.525, p < 0.001), negotiation for meaning while speaking (r = 0.383, p < 0.001), accuracy-oriented strategies (r = 0.378, p < 0.001) and message reduction and alternation strategies (r = .217, p = 0.32). No significant differences are seen between nonverbal strategies while speaking, message abandonment strategies, and attempt to think in English and the use of OCS.

A one-way ANOVA was carried out to measure the relationship between motivation and OCS use. It reveals high differences between motivation and overall speaking strategies (F = 10.846, p < 0.001), social affective strategies (F = 0.007, p < 0.001), fluency-oriented strategies (F = 13.341, p < 0.001), negotiation for meaning while speaking (F = 12.231, p < 0.001), accuracy-oriented strategies (F = 5.430, p = .006), and message reduction and alternation strategies (F = 5.9, p=0.004), but no significant ones for nonverbal strategies while speaking, message abandonment strategies, and attempt to think in English.

Table 3
Learner Variables and the Use of Oral Communication Strategies (N=98)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>S1</th>
<th>S2</th>
<th>S3</th>
<th>S4</th>
<th>S5</th>
<th>S6</th>
<th>S7</th>
<th>S8</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M/F</td>
<td>-0.58</td>
<td>-0.47</td>
<td>-1.00</td>
<td>-0.42</td>
<td>-0.55</td>
<td>-0.29</td>
<td>-0.64</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H/M/L</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>1.55</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>0.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral proficiency</td>
<td>3.71*</td>
<td>6.51**</td>
<td>7.07***</td>
<td>3.43*</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>0.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>0.44***</td>
<td>0.50***</td>
<td>0.53***</td>
<td>0.38***</td>
<td>0.38***</td>
<td>0.22*</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>10.85***</td>
<td>9.01***</td>
<td>13.34***</td>
<td>12.23***</td>
<td>5.43**</td>
<td>5.90**</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>1.74</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Overall=overall OCS; S1=social affective strategies; S2=fluency-oriented strategies; S3=negotiation for meaning while speaking; S4=accuracy-oriented strategies; S5=message reduction and alternation strategies; S6= nonverbal strategies while speaking; S7=message abandonment strategies; S8=attempt to think in English strategies; M=male; F=female; H=high English proficiency; M=medium English proficiency; L=low English proficiency; Oral proficiency= self-perceived oral proficiency; Frequency= Frequency of speaking English; Motivation= Motivation in speaking English

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001
4.3 Research question 3

Which of these variables is the best predictor of oral communication strategy use?

Stepwise multiple regression analysis was used to determine the relationship between learner variables and OCS use. Table 4 shows the final model of the stepwise multiple regression analysis. The results indicate a significant relationship between OCS use and two variables (p < .001) with an R² index of 0.246, indicating that 24.6% of the variation is accounted for by the independent variables. These two variables are positively related to the use of OCSs (p < .001). The first significant predictor of students’ use of OCS was the motivation in speaking English (β = 0.29), followed by the frequency of speaking English outside the classroom (β = 0.28).

Table 4
Stepwise Multiple Regression Analysis to Predict Oral Communication Strategy Use
(N = 98)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>R²</th>
<th>Adjusted R²</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
<th>Beta</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Motivation in speaking English</td>
<td>0.435</td>
<td>0.189</td>
<td>0.181</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>22.44</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of speaking English</td>
<td>0.496</td>
<td>0.246</td>
<td>0.230</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>15.48</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>0.20</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Discussion

5.1 Speaking strategies used by technological university students in Taiwan

The participants in this study used message reduction and alternation strategies, a finding that echoes Bialystok’s report (1990) that foreign language learners are inclined to utilize familiar words rather than risking unfamiliar ones. The finding is also in line with Chen’s study (2009) in that the English major students in Taiwan most frequently employed message reduction and alternation strategies. More specifically, students tended to use well-known words or simple expressions to communicate, rather than give up when they have difficulties conveying meaning in authentic discourse. They attempted to make a good impression and try to enjoy the process of oral communication. In addition, the students often utilized gestures to help get meaning across and eye contact to attract the attention of their listeners.

The findings imply that overall, the students’ linguistic competence was insufficient, leading them to seek alternative ways to convey meaning. While struggling to cope with communication problems, they paid less attention to the problem of accuracy. However, it is worth noting that most of them did not abandon their attempts to communicate, indicating a strong intention to achieve communication goals and an impetus that favors their future progress.
5.2 Learner variables and the use of oral communication strategies

This study finds no significant correlation between OCS use and gender, a result that contradicts Li’s study (2010), which reports that female university students in Taiwan applied strategies more often when speaking English. The unbalanced ratio of male to female participants may explain the absence of gender effect.

No significant difference was found between OCSs and English proficiency, a finding that is also at variance with those of several previous studies (e.g. Chen, 1990; Nakatain, 2006; Cheng, 2007; Li, 2010). The finding indicates that language proficiency had a smaller impact on the employment of communication strategies, since the ability to speak is not the same as the ability to employ communication strategies. This result conforms to the view of Willems (1987), who maintains that “…the way we handle language in the classroom not only in traditional structural approaches but also in modern ‘communicative’ ones does not sufficiently help the learner to develop this ‘strategic competence’” (p.361). The divergence of findings may stem from the setting of this study, which was more natural than that of the classroom. Students had to deal with the anxiety in speaking to native speakers who were strangers. Furthermore, the rapid speech rate of these native speakers increased communication difficulties. Finally, intercultural differences produced other problems for the participants. The results suggest that EFL teachers should put more focus on creating authentic communication environment and providing intercultural interaction opportunities for students in order to develop communicative competence.

Self-perceived oral proficiency means that a person believes that he or she can speak or understand a foreign language well. The results show that those who thought they were orally proficient tended to utilize effective CSs. Specifically, they controlled their affection, tried to enjoy conversations, and took risks when making mistakes. While they were speaking, they paid attention to their pronunciation and to the flow of conversation. They also tried to speak clearly and loudly to make themselves heard. This finding, the same as that of Chen’s study (2009), implies that those who have good oral competence tend to have stronger confidence and are more willing to communicate. The more that they communicate, the better their strategic competence will become. This result helps to explain why self-perceived oral competence is so highly correlated with OCSs use.

It is noteworthy that the two predicat ors identified in this study are among the “good language learning variables” proposed by Rubin (1975), who maintained that “good language learning is said to depend on at least three variables: aptitude, motivation and opportunity” (p.42). According to Rubin, good language learners tend to have a high motivation to communicate and they seek opportunities to use or hear the language. Thus, it’s difficult to separate these variables. This explains why frequently using English outside the classroom and high motivation in speaking English has strong link with OCS use. The results also support Bialystock’s (1981) and Huang and Van Naerssen’s (1987) findings regarding the role of functional practice in language learning. As Willems (1987) argues, “a
fluent command of a foreign language…is based on the repeated verbalization of concrete speech intentions…” (p.361). Therefore, generating motivation and encouraging out-of-class English use are the top priorities in helping students develop effective communication strategies and improve their communicative competence.

6. Implications and suggestions for future research

6.1 Implications

Several pedagogical implications arise from this study’s findings. First, EFL teachers should create situations that encourage students to produce oral language. Mere exposure to target language may not be sufficient for fluency improvement. As Swain (2000) proposes, teachers should motivate learners to “process language more deeply, with more mental effort than … input” (p.99). In the process of producing output, a learner’s knowledge of L2 is tested, and the process of verbalizing concrete meaning will gradually form a propensity toward using English for communication. Second, EFL teachers should introduce communication strategies to students and encourage their use. “By learning how to use communication strategies appropriately, learners will be more able to bridge the gap between pedagogic and non-pedagogic communication situations” (Faerch and Kasper, 1983, p.56). Improved strategic competence would also benefit students’ communication fluency and skills. Third, out of classroom learning for communication should be advocated. As Rubin (1975) states, “no course could ever teach all we need to know about a language and the teacher must find the means to help the student help himself, when the teacher is not around” (p.45). Teachers should encourage students to participate in communication-relevant campus activities, such as those held in English corner and Toastmasters International, or activities that are computer-mediated, such as online chat rooms or teleconferencing with native speakers. In sum, students should be equipped with the ability for self-directed learning beyond the classroom. Fourth, emphasis should be given to developing intrinsic motivation in English learning. Students who are internally motivated are more likely to become involved in the language and be interested in learning it for its own sake. They will seek out opportunities to speak it, whether in or outside of class or with learners or native speakers. They will try every means to get their message across, learn from communication, and strive to master the language.

6.2 Suggestions for future research

Considering the limitations of this study, several directions for future research seem fruitful. First, the placement of students in groups of four, permitting them to help each other, may skew the results on their use of strategies. Thus, future research should require one-to-one conversations so that each participant has to tackle individually communicative problems. Second, future research should focus on the relationship between the use of OCSs and motivation from other perspectives, since the latter factor is multifaceted. For example, the utilitarian drive for English learning might deserve further exploration. Third, students’
strategies for natural discourse and interview data should be taken into account to obtain more information for validating their self-reported strategy use. Finally, factors affecting the choice of OCSs are complex and may vary. Other factors, such as the task of interaction type, personality, language distance, years of English learning experience, the environment, psychology, and strategy of learning, and the interlocutor, could be considered to obtain a more comprehensive picture.

7. Conclusion

The results of this study are four-fold. First, students employed the *message reduction and alteration strategies* the most and *message abandonment strategies* the least. Second, neither gender nor English proficiency influenced the choice of CSs. Third, students’ self-perceived oral proficiency, frequent use of English in speaking, and motivation in speaking English were significantly correlated with the use of OCS. Lastly, two variables, frequent use of English outside the classroom and motivation in speaking English, were found to best predict students’ choice of which communication strategies to use. Therefore, in EFL teaching, it is essential to stress functional practice and intrinsic motivation. No matter how developed, the former requires the latter for its success, because with strong motivation, students will take advantage of every opportunity, both within and outside the classroom, to enhance their new language skills, thus building communicative competence.

References


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影響口語溝通策略因素之探討

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摘要

本研究旨在探討影響科技大學學生口語溝通策略使用的因素。98 位龍華科技大學大二學生參與此研究。資料蒐集以口語溝通問卷(取自 Nakatani, 2006)為主，並調查相關影響因素之變項。使用 SPSS 統計軟體進行描述性統計、單因子變異數分析、皮爾森相關、和逐步多元回歸分析。研究結果顯示，學生最常使用「語意縮減及轉換」策略，最少使用「語意放棄」策略。並且，自覺口語能力、說英語的次數、以及說英語的動機和口語溝通策略的使用有顯著相關。而性別和英語程度在口語溝通策略的使用上並未達顯著差異。最重要的發現為內在學習動機（說英語的動機）以及功能性語言練習策略（說英語的次數）最能預測學習者口語溝通策略的使用。冀望本研究喚起英語教師們重視科技大學學生英語溝通能力，並能運用有效的方法以提升學生口語溝通策略的技巧及能力。

關鍵詞: 口語溝通策略、溝通能力、內在動機、課外學習、功能性練習策略