

Communication Strategies as Forms of Mediation: Toward a Sociocultural Approach to Language Learning

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Abstract

The use of communication strategies (CS) is an important phenomenon that has been widely investigated in the field of second language acquisition. It has drawn the interest of many psycholinguistic and interactional researchers with a focus on understanding how L2 speakers recruit different resources to communicate in spite of their insufficient knowledge of the target language. In other words, most CS studies have put emphasis on exploring the types and functions of strategies that deal with the gap between communicative intention and linguistic resources. As previous CS studies based on diverse analytical perspectives have generated results that are often controversial and at times conflicting, a more comprehensive approach is urgently needed for investigating the complexity of CS. This critical review aims to look into CS phenomena from a different framework; namely, the sociocultural dimension of CS that takes both cognitive and social aspects into account. More specifically, the concept of mediation is applied as a means to understand how EFL learners use strategies to maintain and develop speech in L2 communication.

Keywords: second language acquisition (SLA), English as a foreign language (EFL), communication strategies (CS), sociocultural theory, mediation

Introduction

In this paper, I locate CS phenomena within a sociocultural context¹ by first explaining why former approaches are inadequate to fully capture the nature of CS. Then, having reviewed the previous definitions and criteria, I offer a tentative model to re-conceptualize the traditional CS criteria of problem-orientedness and consciousness. In particular, Dörnyei and Scott's (1995) taxonomy is adopted as the tool to analyse CS with the concept of mediation. This in turn allows us to see the use of CS at both the surface and underlying levels.

¹ Research on SLA, which established its foundation mainly in the domain of cognitive studies, has undergone a

1. CS from a Sociocultural Perspective

Viewing the use of CS as a sociocultural practice, I propose looking into CS phenomena through sociocultural theory, which would allow the scope of CS to encompass a wider range of real life issues. The theoretical position that underpins my viewpoint is motivated by the following observation by Rampton (1997):

Communication strategies should indeed be central in L2 investigation, but that their full significance can only be understood if the domain of CS research is expanded beyond the particular kinds of psycholinguistic and interactional approach that currently dominate the field. More specifically, investigation could usefully look beyond grammar and lexis to other kinds of problematic knowledge, beyond referential to social and interpersonal meaning, beyond individuals and dyads to groups, and beyond experiments with undergraduate informants. (p. 279)

Drawing from these critical insights on CS studies that have accumulated in recent research, I agree with Rampton that psycholinguistic and interactional approaches can no longer offer a thorough account of the use of CS in L2 communication. The former concentrates on underlying cognitive processes, whereas the latter stresses surface linguistic variation (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997; Yule & Tarone, 1997). The problem with each of these approaches originates not from their theoretical standpoints, but that they only see part of the whole picture of CS, often neglecting the fact that it is a situated entity that should be examined holistically in relation to the context it lies in.

In earlier CS research, the interactional approach was developed with an aim to identify different types of CS that would separate them from other interlanguage phenomena, such as production strategies, language learning strategies, and foreigner talk. The result was a proliferation of CS categories that lacked psychological validity, which led to the emergence of the psycholinguistic approach. However, the psycholinguistic perspective was also potentially problematic as it mostly relied on abstract information-processing to explain the use of strategies (Kellerman & Bialystok, 1997; Rampton, 1997). Communication in such a view became an act of transferring messages from one speaker to another, and the intricacies of CS were sacrificed when behavioral outcomes placed a limited focus on lexis. Summing up from a close inspection on previous studies, Varadi (1992) pointed out the importance of having “due attention paid to the principles and constraints of the communicational setting” in addition to the psycholinguistic grounds for analyzing CS (p.

440). In order to better understand communication in authentic contexts, there is still an indispensable need to examine “how communication is accomplished as a situated, contingent, ‘locally managed’ achievement” within the framework of speech production (Wagner & Firth, 1997, p. 325). As such, it is a necessary step to converge the conventional binary distinction of the interactional and psycholinguistic approaches, or at least integrate some interactional elements into the psycholinguistic framework, which has a stronger theoretical foundation. Nevertheless, even though the interactional approach addresses more diverse issues of meaning-negotiation, it still falls short of including other wider social factors that exist between interlocutors, such as affect, subjectivity, and power relations.

As such, a more comprehensive perspective is required to fully capture the use of CS in L2 communication. According to Thorne (2005), sociocultural theory “offers a framework through which cognition can be investigated systematically without isolating it from social context or human agency” (p. 393). This approach was also recommended by Kasper and Kellerman (1997) when they urged future studies to incorporate “an awareness of the sociocultural impact” into the psycholinguistic processing of strategies (p. 26). The selection and execution of CS is not merely a cognitive decision of the individual, but a dynamic phenomenon that is built from moment-to-moment interaction, varying from setting to setting. As Vygotsky argues for a dialogic approach towards the interpretation of people and activities (Swain, Kinnear, & Steinman, 2010), it is therefore reasonable to position CS in the framework of sociocultural theory, bringing together cognitive and social aspects that highlight interrelatedness and contextualization in analysis.

2. Re-conceptualizing CS through the Concept of Mediation

In specific, I would like to apply the concept of mediation to examine the use of CS for the maintenance and development of speech in L2 communication. Before doing so, an explanation of the controversial issues regarding the traditional criteria of CS will be discussed, which then enables us to understand why it is important to transform the criteria from a problem-oriented approach to a goal-oriented focus. A model for re-conceptualization is presented in *Figure 1*:



Figure 1. A model for re-conceptualizing CS

2.1 The Traditional Criteria of CS: Problematicity and Consciousness

The most prevalent features that have been widely employed to distinguish CS from other mental processes are problematicity and consciousness, with the former being the primary criterion that characterizes the use of strategies (Bialystok, 1990). Adopting a psycholinguistic approach, Faerch and Kasper (1983) derived the two features from their definition of CS as “potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal” (p. 36). The criteria have become a point of reference for many following CS studies; however, they have also been questioned in terms of their empirical validity, raising the concern that problematicity and consciousness may not be the central components that best determine CS phenomena.

Problematicity, also more generally known as problem-orientedness, refers to “the idea that strategies are used only when a speaker perceives that there is a problem which may interrupt communication” (Bialystok, 1990, p.3). Awareness to a problem is a useful way to signal the imminence of a CS; nevertheless, two issues arise when we assume that a linguistic problem exists prior to the use of a strategy. First, interlocutors do not necessarily notice any communicative problems or come to fix them when they are engaged in an ongoing dialogue. As discovered by Wagner and Firth (1997), in many cases, individuals “carry out their work without solving the communication problem at all” (p. 336). In other words, the focus is usually not to interrupt the conversational flow, but instead to assist each other to express meaning and continue the exchange of ideas. Williams and his colleagues (1997), who examined CS in an interactional context, also suggested that strategies “function more widely to adjust the communicative plan to the situation, rather than being strictly a response to a ‘problem’ (i.e., compensatory) or the result of an isolated internal process” (p. 306). As reported in Foster and Ohta’s (2005) study, overtly signaled breakdowns were not prominent characteristics in their observation of L2 speech. There was a wider variation of

conversational moves that were applied to keep the communication going, such as those that were used to enhance the quality of speech or interaction.

The second concern of using problematicity as a criterion of CS originates in its underlying assumption that L2 speech is deficient in nature, while nativeness is the standard, unproblematic form (Kasper & Kellerman, 1997). It should be acknowledged that the use of strategies “is not a unique interlanguage property” (Paribakt, 1985, p. 140); native and advanced learners adopt them as well. As language is always strategic, it is important to see problems as occurring in interaction instead of coming from the interactants themselves. Firth and Wagner (1997) explained that “it may be more useful to view problems in communication as contingent social phenomena, as intersubjective entities, and not invariably as ‘things’ possessed by individuals” (p. 291). Researchers could also keep in mind that dealing with problematicity often raises political issues, and thus reconsider making it a distinctive feature that constitutes L2 CS.

The other characteristic that is also commonly identified in many CS definitions is consciousness. Consciousness is often understood as awareness of a problem, intentionality, and awareness of strategic language use (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997). Theoretically, consciousness is organized hierarchically, which is “more a matter of degree than of either-or” (Faerch & Kasper, 1983, p. 35). However, there are several practical concerns when applying this criterion to introspective analysis of CS. Aside from detecting the use of strategies through neurological investigations, does introspective analysis such as stimulated recall interview provides an alternative way of doing so? Are strategies validated only if speakers report on using them? Furthermore, what happens when speakers are young learners who are not able to fully conduct conscious monitoring of their cognitive processes? Does this deny their use of strategies? Each of these critical issues has been consistently brought up in previous CS research. It is therefore necessary to investigate the extent of how the criterion of consciousness defines CS phenomena.

2.2 Mediation as a New Conceptual Framework

As the psycholinguistic focus on problematicity and consciousness has been insufficient to explain the use of CS in full detail, the notion of mediation may serve as a tentative means for re-conceptualizing the traditional CS criteria. The re-conceptualization of CS as forms of mediation goes in line with the sociocultural approach that has been urgently called for to better understand the true nature of CS (Firth & Wagner, 1997; Rampton, 1997).

Extending from Vygotsky's theoretical standpoint, Lantolf (2000) argues that "the most fundamental concept of sociocultural theory is that the human mind is mediated" (p. 1). This is also confirmed in Wertsch's (1991) statement that "a sociocultural approach to mind begins with the assumption that action is mediated and that it cannot be separated from the milieu in which it is carried out" (p. 18). Mediation goes beyond recognizing cognition as a confined body that functions on its own. Mediation is seen as an auxiliary device that connects the Cartesian dichotomy of the individual and the social world. Drawing from the original works of Vygotsky, humans employ physical and symbolic tools as forms of mediation; the former operates in concrete ways whereas the latter in a more abstract dimension (Poehner, 2008). Symbolic tools, which are directed inwards to organize and control cognition, have become of particular interest to many educational researchers as they are often used for the purpose of learning. These are mainly cultural artifacts, such as language, numbers, gestures, and graphs. In the field of SLA, symbolic tools play an important role in the acquisition of the L2. Similarly, CS are also indispensable mediators in the process of communication, either presented in intra- or inter-mental forms.

Borrowing from sociocultural studies on L2 learner strategy, the use of CS can be viewed as "a learner's socially mediated plan or action to meet a goal" (Oxford and Schramm, 2011, p. 48). This is also supported in Donato and McCormick's (1994) study, where they argued that strategies are often "generated in goal-directed, mediated activity" (p. 456). As such, acknowledging the mediating function of strategies implies significant meaning towards how we investigate the nature of CS. Instead of restricting strategies to the realm of problem-solving mechanisms, we can see them as processes that mediate the maintenance and development of speech in L2 communication. A goal-oriented approach expands the conventional scope of CS, where attention has specifically been put on how compensatory strategies tackle problems of resource deficits. Depending on the communicative goal, there are much more complex issues for balancing the principle of clarity and economy when speakers decide on which strategies to use (Poulisse, 1997). Furthermore, a goal-oriented approach liberates itself from the accusation of treating L2 speech as laden with errors and problems. This resolves the two concerns that were brought up previously regarding the criterion of problematicity.

Likewise, the concept of mediation also allows us to re-conceptualize the gray areas of consciousness in concrete terms of agency; that is, the individual who actively applies strategies for the purpose of mediation. Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001) established a

sociocultural idea of agency that is closely linked to motivation and intentionality. As delineated by Thorne (2005), agency is “continually constructed (or deliberated) as a qualitative function of orientation to activity” (p. 400), with its development “shaped by participation in specific social practices” (ibid). To understand the use of CS from this angle means to recognize the self-regulating properties of strategies in the process of communication. The focus here is not on how teachers and experts should assist learners, but how learners can carry out L2 communication independently by using CS, either in forms of intra- or inter-mental mediation. According to Labarca and Khanji (1986), L2 discourse is often “a sustained attempt to regain self-control” (p.78). In metaphorical terms, if the external scaffolds are gradually withdrawn, the L2 learner will have to take over and build it by him or herself. To briefly conclude, using the concept of agency allows us to preserve aspects of consciousness in addition to explaining CS phenomena through the concept of mediation.

3. Dörnyei and Scott’s Taxonomy in Relation with Mediation

In order to explain CS phenomena in relation to the concept of mediation, I would like to place the intricate CS taxonomy established by Dörnyei and Scott (1995) within a larger sociocultural setting, and further apply this as the heuristic device for examining the use of strategies in this review. In particular, Dörnyei and Scott formulated a multi-level structure regarding the use of CS, where a higher order description of CS phenomena (direct, indirect, and interactional strategies) consists of specific instantiations of CS (32 strategy tokens). This was also a suggestion given by Kasper and Kellerman (1997), in which they proposed to conceptually combine the dichotomy of a condensed taxonomy with one that is more detailed. This balances the proliferation of categories characteristic of the interactional approach, and the psycholinguistic classifications of CS that are aimed to be parsimonious, generalizable, and psychologically plausible.

As mentioned by Bialystok (1990), a systematic organization of strategies that is based on strong psychological grounds possesses a certain degree of explanatory power. When this is integrated with more refined illustrations of interactional and linguistic variations, the taxonomy comes closer to fully reflecting the true nature of CS. To date, Dörnyei and his colleagues have created one of the most robust and comprehensive enterprises of CS research, with studies covering strategic competence (Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, & Thurrell, 1995), guidelines for teaching (Dörnyei, 1995), an empirical study (Dörnyei & Scott, 1995), a review of major definitions and taxonomies (Dörnyei & Scott,

1997), and an in-depth conceptual analysis (Dörnyei & Kormos, 1998). These brought together a substantive account of different perspectives, enlarging the parameters of existing CS research that has been preoccupied with explaining the use of strategies in terms of information-processing or meaning-negotiation in isolation.

In particular, the decision to adopt Dörnyei and Scott's (1995) taxonomy is based on two main deliberations. First, Dörnyei and Scott provide a multi-leveled organization of a variety of CS that goes beyond the traditional reduction-achievement dichotomy. Second, their higher order classifications of direct, indirect, and interactional strategies offer a potential connection with sociocultural concepts of intra- and inter-mental mediation. These two reasons for selection will be further delineated in detail as the following.

3.1 A Comprehensive Model of CS

As presented in Table 1, I have attempted to create a 4x3 matrix that demonstrates a cross-reference of the problem types and each of their possible CS counterparts (Dörnyei & Kormos, 1998; Dörnyei & Scott, 1995). This provides us with the opportunity to view the full scope of the surface and underlying structures of CS phenomena, and locate gaps in the model that need to be addressed in the review at hand.

In their study, Communication strategies: an empirical analysis with retrospection, Dörnyei and Scott (1995) identified the specific types of communicative problems that triggered the use of CS, which encompassed problems of resource deficits, processing time pressure, own-performance problems, and other-performance problems. In order to tackle the different problem sources, they also established three higher order categories of CS. The first ones are direct strategies which are mainly the traditional achievement and reduction strategies that are described as "alternative, manageable, and self-contained means of getting the meaning across" (p. 198). The second category includes interactional strategies, mostly for meaning-negotiation, which are used when participants carry out "trouble-shooting exchanges cooperatively" (ibid). The final ones are indirect strategies that "facilitate the conveyance of meaning indirectly by creating the conditions for achieving mutual understanding" (ibid). From this expansion of the taxonomy, we can see that Dörnyei and Scott progressed from examining compensatory strategies in a restricted sense to all possible CS that enhance communication.

Table 1

Dörnyei and Scott's (1995) CS Taxonomy in Relation to Underlying Problem Types

Problem types CS	Resource deficits	Processing time pressure	Own performance problems	Other performance problems
Direct strategies	Message abandonment, message reduction, message replacement, circumlocution, approximation, use of all-purpose words, word-coinage, restructuring, literal translation, foreignizing, code switching, use of similar sounding words, mumbling, omission, retrieval, mime		Self-rephrasing, self-repair	Other-repair
Interactional strategies	Appeals for help		Comprehension check, own-accuracy check	Asking for repetition, asking for clarification, asking for confirmation, guessing, expressing non-understanding, interpretive summary
Indirect strategies		Use of fillers, repetitions	Verbal strategy markers	Feigning understanding

Having briefly explained the terminology and logic behind the design, two important observations can be highlighted in the matrix. Firstly, most CS are categorized in the section of direct strategies that aim to overcome problems of resource deficits. This result is not surprising as these CS are the traditional compensatory strategies that are found in most CS studies. Secondly, there are identifiable gaps in the column of CS related to the processing of time pressure; the strategies that correspond to this problem are categorized as indirect

strategies. This raises the question of whether the processing of time pressure exists as an independent type of problem in L2 communication, or whether it is more suitable to be viewed as a subcategory of resource deficits, with indirect strategies being employed prior to deciding which direct or indirect strategies are to be used. It is, therefore, imperative to have a closer look into this section through stimulated recall interviews as a way to uncover the cognitive processes that are involved in the selection and execution of strategies, which would then suggest whether the classification of problem types can adequately account for the complexity of CS phenomena, and how this stimulates the re-conceptualization of the current criteria of CS.

3.2 CS as Forms of Intra- and Inter-Mental Mediation

As we seek the underlying functions regarding the use of CS, mediation can be further divided into intra- or inter-mental forms according to from where the resources are elicited. Corresponding to the higher order CS categories in the taxonomy proposed by Dörnyei and Scott (1995), we can provisionally consider direct and indirect strategies as forms of intra-mental mediation, and interactional strategies as those of inter-mental mediation. In specific, direct and indirect strategies are called into action when an individual attempts to mediate the goal of communication on his or her own. As CS are employed to self-regulate one's performance in the process of communication, they function very similarly as private speech, which is often the center of discussion for sociocultural studies that look into intra-mental mediation (Frawley & Lantolf, 1985; Ohta, 2001; Swain et al., 2010).

In research conducted by Saville and Troike (1988), private speech was examined in relation to strategic purposes that included (1) repetition of others' utterances, (2) recall and practice, (3) creation of new linguistic forms, (4) paradigmatic substitution and syntagmatic expansion, and (5) rehearsal for overt social performance. Ohta (2001) also carried out a longitudinal in-depth study to investigate private speech by audio-recording the oral production of Japanese learners in a classroom setting. From the results she obtained, features such as repetition (repeating others' utterances), vicarious responses (answering or repairing others' utterances), and manipulation (adjusting one's utterances) were identified.

To widen the scope of private speech, the use of gestures is another common form of intra-mental mediation to assist in communication (DiCamilla & Antón, 2004; Lee, 2008; McNeill, 1992; McCafferty, 1998 & 2002). DiCamilla and Antón (2004) observed that nonverbal expressions allowed speakers to concentrate on tasks and distance themselves from

communicative problems, which in turn helped them to gain control of their speech when they were engaged in a conversation. In addition, findings from McCafferty's (2002) study showed that gestures facilitated positive interaction between interlocutors as they "create a sense of shared social, symbolic, physical, and mental space" (p. 192). As they are all self-regulatory in nature, it would be useful to apply some insights from studying the phenomena of private speech and gestures to analyse direct and indirect strategies as forms of intra-mental mediation.

On the other hand, interactional strategies are usually employed to recruit resources that are external to the individual's capacity for attaining a communicative goal. The use of interactional strategies often takes place in collaborative dialogues, which is the main focus of many studies on inter-mental mediation. Ohta's (2001) research revealed that peer-to-peer mediation enabled learners to distribute cognitive burdens during communication, so that attention could be allocated to every minute aspect of phonology, lexis, and syntax. Moreover, such forms of mediation stimulated the verbalization of thoughts, leading to the construction and co-construction of knowledge (Swain, 2000; Swain, Brooks, & Tocalli-Beller, 2002). Another point to mention regards the collaborative relationship that is compulsory for a successful mediation. This was brought out by Storch (2002), who indicated that interactions between interlocutors that shared high mutuality and equality were most likely to lead to learning. Other studies that addressed more intricate contextual issues on interaction or negotiation for meaning include those from Varonis and Gass (1985), Nakahama, Tyler, and Lier (2001), as well as Foster and Ohta (2005), to name a few. These features are important to bear in mind when we discuss interactional strategies as forms of inter-mental mediation.

4. Emerging Questions for Future Research

Having acknowledged the development of CS research and identified the gaps in existing literature, two research questions can be raised to investigate CS phenomena at both surface and underlying levels: by identifying typological variations of CS in L2 speech, and then analyzing them with the concept of mediation.

The first research question is: *What types of CS do EFL learners use in L2 communication?* This first research question is descriptive in nature. It addresses the issue of "what", aiming to locate the different strategy tokens that occur in the speech of EFL learners. The strategy tokens are the ones that are listed in the taxonomy established by Dörnyei and Scott (1995). They can also be further classified according to the higher order categories of

direct, indirect, and interactional strategies. These in turn serve as points of departure for analyzing strategies in relation to the concept of mediation.

The second research question takes an analytic perspective that endeavors to address the mediating role of CS. The second research question is: *How do EFL learners use CS as forms of mediation to maintain and develop speech in L2 communication?* Different from the first research question, the target is to provide explanations of processes in addition to descriptions of outcomes; in particular, how direct and indirect strategies function as intra-mental mediation, and how interactional strategies operate as forms of inter-mental mediation. In order to answer the ultimate question of “how” CS mediate L2 communication, it is also important to understand “why” the learners choose certain strategies for what specific purposes. This can be done through introspective analysis followed by an in-depth interview. Knowing the reasons and motivations behind the use of a CS offers a reliable way to understand the self-regulatory processes in the human mind that are not directly observable to the researcher. Ultimately, the sociocultural approach for analysis enables us to evaluate the appropriateness of applying the concept of mediation to re-conceptualize the traditional CS criteria. As the use of CS is a higher mental function, it takes a more nuanced investigation to fully capture its nature.

Conclusion

This critical review has offered a new perspective for re-conceptualizing the traditional CS criteria of problem-orientedness and consciousness to that of goal-orientedness and agency. Future studies that follow in this vein of investigation may shed light on whether the current problem types of CS need to be further adjusted, and whether experiencing a problem is a prerequisite for the use of CS. The analysis of underlying processes and functions also allows researchers to measure the degree of consciousness regarding the use of CS. When the basic criteria of CS are more systematically revised and understood, this will help lead to “designing activities and teaching materials that more effectively enhance fluency, coping skills, and communicative confidence in a second language” (Dörnyei & Kormos, 1998, p. 382). Moreover, a sociocultural view reminds both language instructors and learners of the situatedness and dynamics of CS. Depending on the communicative goal, strategies are best employed flexibly with sensitivity to the context and interpersonal relationships between the interlocutors.

As the current review is exploratory in nature, it would be valuable for future research to continue to work on uncovering the use of strategies within a sociocultural framework. By taking social and cognitive aspects of CS phenomena into account, we move beyond investigating variables on the linguistic level to the discourse level, analyse natural-occurring speech in addition to task-based performances, with awareness to the topic of discussion and the speaker's cognitive style, age, gender, and relation with the interlocutor. Furthermore, it may also be important to merge L1 and L2 strategies given that the use of CS in both situations serves the same ultimate purpose of attaining a communicative goal. With this direction in mind, the next challenge will be how to operationalize a more social and situated approach. As indicated by Firth and Wagner (1997), researchers who work with "a re-conceptualized SLA will be better able to understand and explicate how language is used as it is being acquired through interaction, and used resourcefully, contingently, and contextually" (p. 296). As the traditional criteria of problem-orientedness and consciousness fall short of fully defining the dynamics of CS, a new model of goal-orientedness and agency is proposed, which together serves to explain CS as forms of mediation for the maintenance and development of speech in L2 communication.

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