Identifying Strategies That Facilitate Chinese EFL Learners’ Oral English Communication and Learning in the UK: A Case Study

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This research investigates Chinese English as a foreign language (EFL) learners’ oral English communication strategies (CSs) and oral English learning strategies when studying in an English speaking context. For this purpose, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with four Chinese EFL learners who are studying in the UK with different English proficiencies, analysed their strategies of oral English learning and communication, and compared changes in strategies during one year of studying abroad. It showed that, when confronted with difficulties in oral English learning, participants usually employed affective strategies to adapt to the new learning environment. And learners from different levels have different performances in meta-cognitive learning strategies use. In addition, the English speaking context made some differences to learners’ learning. When it comes to CSs, on the one hand, strategies, such as negotiation for meaning, and so on, were shown as being primarily used by participants, even though participants from different levels might have some differences to some extent. On the other hand, strategies like less active listener, and so on, were relatively less employed by participants. These results would probably help learners and teachers understand oral English learning and teaching in native contexts better.

Keywords: oral English, learning strategies, communication strategies (CSs)

Introduction

Since the 1970s, an increasing amount of research attention in the field of English as a foreign/second language (EFL/ESL) studying has been paid to individual differences. People have gradually acknowledged that individual differences are important factors that could not be neglected in influencing language learning. As a result, an abundance of EFL/ESL studies has been focused on individual differences like cognitive styles, learning styles, as well as personalities, and so on. Among these various individual differences, the language learning strategy is one factor that has always drawn much attention from researchers (Chamot, Barnhardt, El-Dinary, & Robbins, 1996, pp. 175-187; Cohen, 1998; MacIntyre & Noels, 1996).

After years of research, there is still much to debate in the area of the learning strategy, in many different kinds of EFL/ESL learning strategies, as well as the relationship between the learning strategy and other aspects in learning which have been identified from different academic points of view. Different from mainly

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identifying general learning strategies before the 1990s, more research attention has recently been devoted to studying specific strategies in certain aspects. It is known that oral English competence has always been the weak point for EFL/ESL learners, and it has been shown that different learners have different choices of strategies in communicating with native speakers as well as improving their oral English proficiency. As a result, some research has endeavoured to investigate oral learning strategies and communication strategies (CSs) among EFL/ESL learners. Although important advances have been made in the area of oral English learning strategies and CSs, qualitative research on learners who are in the native language contexts still has been relatively rare.

The essay focuses on four main questions. First, what oral English learning strategies did participants usually use? Second, what CSs did participants usually use when communicating in English? Were there differences between advanced learners and intermediate learners in strategies choices? And finally, were there changes or improvements among participants through one year of study in terms of their strategies choices and their English learning? It is worth noting that all these research questions and data analysis are set in the situation of participants’ one year of learning in the UK, to distinguish from their prior study.

**Literature Review**

**Learning Strategies**

Strategies usually refer to planning, competition, conscious manipulation, and movement toward a goal. While strictly speaking, although there has been considerable research in the area of learning strategies, there has not been a mainstream consensus in its definition. For example, Schmeck (1988b, pp. 3-19) considered strategy as the implementation of a set of procedures or tactics for accomplishing something. Whereas Oxford (1990) defined strategy as a plan, step, or an action that is taken for achieving a specific objective. Accordingly, he stressed that strategies are particularly important for language learning. The uncertainty of the definition of strategies results in the complex condition for strategies research.

When it comes to learning strategies, different scholars also define this term in different ways according to different research problems and research hypotheses. First, some scholars claimed that it is a conscious process, for example, Cohen (1998) stated that,

> Those processes which are consciously selected by learners and which may result in action taken to enhance the learning or use of a second or FL, through the storage, recall and application of information about that language. (p. 4)

While McDonough (1995) claimed that it is an automatic behaviour instead of a conscious one, Nisbet and Shucksmith (1986) defined language learning strategies as “always purposeful and goal-oriented, but perhaps not always carried out at a conscious or deliberate level” (p. 25).

Second, some scholars define learning strategies as a “process,” for instance, Dörnyei (2005) reckoned learning strategies as general learning processes. What is more, according to Weinstein and Mayer (1986),

> Learning strategies are behaviours or thoughts that a learner engages in during learning that are intended to influence the learner’s encoding process. (pp. 315-327)

Third, some scholars (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990) had paid considerable attention to the role of learning strategies play in the self-directed leaning. Oxford and Crookball (1989) defined language learning strategies as “steps taken by the learners to aid the acquisition, storage, and retrieval of information” (pp. 404-419). And...
many pieces of research have shown that advanced learners have their own preferred learning strategies which help them achieve improvement in learning.

Despite the debate in how to define learning strategies, it is probably not be denied that learning strategies are actions or steps that EFL learners take during their study, which would contributed a lot to their learning process. This point of view is also how we interpret learning strategies in this essay. Learners who want to improve their English level would always spare no effort to develop their own methods or tactics of learning; they would also plan and organize their own learning on their own initiative. At first, it seems like a conscious process that leads the learning process. Over time, some strategies would become unconscious. As a result, learning strategies help language learners achieve successful language learning in both conscious and unconscious ways.

With the development in the area of learning strategies, more attention has been paid to the clarification of different types of learning strategies. Rubin (1981, pp. 117-131) divided learning strategies into two types: cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies, communication and social strategies. In the studies carried out by Oxford (1990) and her colleagues, factor analysis was used to investigate learning strategies, then learning strategies were divided into two main classes: direct strategies, such as memory strategies, cognitive strategies, and compensation strategies, and indirect strategies, such as meta-cognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies. Cohen (1998) classified language learning strategies into language learning strategies and language use strategies.

In this essay, the clarification that O’Malley and Chamot (1990) once supported for will be adopted. They divided language learning strategies into three types: meta-cognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, and social (affective) strategies. Meta-cognitive strategies concern factors, like self-management, functional planning, self-monitoring, delayed production, and self-evaluation, and they refer to methods used to help learners understand the ways they learn; in other words, it refers to processes when learners “think” about their “thinking”. In oral English learning, for example, it could be associated with making plans for everyday practice, and so on. Cognitive strategies require direct analysis of learning and they can be general or specific (Pressley & Woloshyn, 1995). General strategies refer to the steps or operations used in problem-solving, including transformation, organization, summarizing, elaboration, or synthesis of materials, and they are used to work out learning problems or complete tasks directly. Whereas specific strategies are usually channelled toward a particular kind of task, for example, when doing listening tasks, learners try to get the gist from the contexts or previous information they have heard. Social and affective strategies involve either interaction with another person or ideational control over affect in order to complete a task, such as cooperation, questioning for clarification, and self-talk. In addition, affective strategies are concerned with managing emotions, both negative and positive. For example, how do we manage learning anxiety related to affective strategies? At the same time, social cognitive theorists emphasize the role of efficient strategy use in becoming a self-regulated learner.

As for the factors that influence strategies choices, there are various elements which could have an influence on strategies choices, such as language proficiency, age, gender, personalities, motivation, language learning goals, and so on. This essay will mainly discuss what learning strategies choices and CSs choices the Chinese participants used during one year of study in the UK, where there are differences between now and then, and whether there are differences between intermediate level English learners and advanced level English learners. Concerning the last question, with respect to proficiency and learning strategies use, one result similar to many studies is that a learner’s language proficiency affects the use of learning strategies. Most researchers
believe that there is a positive relationship between proficiency and strategy use, while Green and Oxford (1995, pp. 261-297) argued that the proficiency level significantly affected factors, like the use of compensation, cognitive, meta-cognitive, and social strategies, but showed rare effect on the use of memory and affective strategies. The research presented here is qualitative in nature, adopting the technique of the semi-structured interview. It aims to explore the real experience of participants, and through the data of the interview, to investigate the learning and CSs behind them.

Communication Strategies

What has been discussed above was concerned with language learning strategies, while the other research purpose of this essay is to investigate CSs. Here, it is mainly about CSs that Chinese participants use when communicating with native speakers in the UK. With the development of the research into learning strategies, an increasing number of attention has been paid to relative sub concepts, among which CSs should not be neglected. Similar to the learning strategy, although there has been no consensus among researchers on the exact definition of CSs, it is widely accepted that “CSs are potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular goal” (Faerch & Kasper, 1983, p. 36). It is believed that when struggling to communicate meaning, native speakers as well as non-native speakers of any language, on occasion, try to find appropriate expressions or accurate grammatical constructions, but fail to do so. By doing so, communicative problems are sometimes created between what the individual wants to communicate and their immediately available linguistic resources.

The ways in which people try to fill the information gap are known as CSs. For EFL/ESL learners, Bialystok (1990) and Dörnyei (1995) believed that learners can improve communicative proficiency by developing an ability to use specific CSs that enable them to compensate for their target language deficiency. When participants were in China, although they often did some reading and writing practice, they did not have many opportunities to communicate in English, while in native contexts they had much more time to listen to and speak English; under this circumstance, they would probably exhibit more changes in oral English learning and improvement. Besides, as learning in the native contexts means studying in a totally new learning environment, it has a relatively high possibility that learners are confronted with new difficulties and problems, especially in oral English. As a result, what CSs they would use is a question worth further research. In this essay, in order to avoid some confusion, the concept of CSs specifically focuses on strategic behaviours that learners use when communicating with native speakers in an English language context.

It is argued that traditional approaches concerned with CSs could be divided into two groups: interactional and psycholinguistic (Døagaruni, 2013, pp. 176-205). Concerning the first approach, the external and interactional perspective of learners is dealt with and the focus is on the interaction between interlocutors and negotiation of meaning (Rost & Ross, 1991; Tarone, 1983, pp. 61-74). In contrast, internal and cognitive processes are taken into account from a psycholinguistic perspective. For example, according to some psychological findings, some scholars (Bialystok, 1990; Dörnyei & Scott, 1997, pp. 173-209; Faerch & Kasper, 1983) divided CSs into two categories: achievement or compensatory strategies and reduction or avoidance strategies. They argued that good language learners would make use of all resources and opportunities on offer to them to attain their goals; these strategies could be collected into achievement and compensatory strategies. On the contrary, it would be more likely for poor language learners to avoid problems or just give up, which means that they intend to use reduction and avoidance strategies.
As research continues, some scholars (Doqaruni, 2015, pp. 1-15) had found that these two dominant approaches could probably not be explained adequately in the CSs research and, what is worse, following these two approaches often produced the same results. They began to try to use new thoughts to investigate. For example, some researchers found that traditional research methods were merely focused on simply listing surface linguistic forms, so they created classifications related to what was currently known about psychological processing. In addition, Hymes (1974) set the stage for recognizing the importance of contextual factors, such as settings, participants, and end purpose on communicative interaction; as a result, the role of contexts in the SLA (second language acquisition) processes has been one of the important focuses of research. It shows that sometimes communication is not just about language and linguistics, it also depends on many other factors, like different contexts, interlocutor, as well as different motivations. In this essay, in order to gain an in-depth understanding of CSs of the participants, we will adopt a semi-structured interview, because in a different way from the inventory, this method would provide further results beyond linguistics issues.

In order to understand the valid information of learners’ perception of CSs better, some questionnaires and inventories have been put forward. The strategy inventory for language learning (SILL) could well be the most widely used instrument for assessing the frequency of good strategy use by learners. It is regarded as an effective tool in identifying a certain learners’ learning proficiency. However, some scholars have claimed that this questionnaire just focuses on general statements, failing to identify the underlying processes. Politzer (1983, pp. 54-67) developed a 5-point scale—a self-report questionnaire consisting of three parts: general behaviours, classroom behaviours, and interaction behaviours. Later, Politzer and McGroarty (1985, pp. 103-123) created a yes-no questionnaire consisting of three parts: classroom behaviours, individual study, and oral CS use outside the classroom. It should be noted, however, that criticism concerning the reliability and validity rapidly emerged.

More recently, Cohen, Weaver, and Li (1998) designed strategy checklists specifically to understand learners’ strategy use for speaking tasks. Nakatani (2006, pp. 151-168) developed a questionnaire called oral communication strategy inventory (OCSI). “Factor analysis was used to identify eight factors in strategies for coping with speaking problems and seven factors in strategies for coping with listening problems during communicative tasks” (Nakatani, 2006, pp. 151-168). The reliability of the scale was confirmed. In this essay, the semi-structured interview is based on this inventory. With the help of questions related to the OCSI (Nakatani, 2006, pp. 151-168), questions in it were modified to adapt to the interview context. However, qualitative research like the interview should still help to gain a deeper understanding. So, in this essay, the researcher attempted to use semi-structured interview to explore more that inventory could probably not find.

In conclusion, from what has been discussed before, deeper exploration in the area of learning strategies and CSs in second language learning is necessary. In terms of learning strategies, there has been little attention paid to examining deeply how Chinese learners use strategies in order to improve their oral English in an actual English context. Besides, most research used inventory to investigate individuals learning strategies instead of the interview which would probably gain much more details that inventory could not get. In addition, recently, an increasing number of Chinese students have chosen to study abroad, as they are studying in a totally different learning environment, they are faced with many new problems and difficulties in improving their oral English. As a result, it would probably help people gain a better understanding of how intermediate and advanced language learners organise their methods and strategies in learning oral English in an actual English context as a foreign language.
What is more, there is also complex connection within oral English strategies, learning strategies, as well as CSs. So, how these oral English strategies and learning strategies interact with each other is also worth considering.

Methodologies

Participants

Generally speaking, there are four participants in this study, two of whom are seen as intermediate level English learners (here we call them Participants A and B), while the other two are regarded as advanced learners (here we call them Participants C and D). All of participants are students whose major is English teaching and learning, so it is an important part of their study to enhance their proficiency of oral English. And one of purpose of studying abroad is to improve their English proficiency. In this way, we could say that all participants have a relatively similar high motivation in learning English. The purpose of choosing four students majoring in the same subject with relatively high motivation to learn English is to eliminate the interference of different subjects and motivation. Two intermediate level language learners all have bachelor degree of English. After graduating from university, they applied for studying in the UK. Their the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) scores are 6 and 6.5, and the score of speaking is 6. The two advanced learners in this research are two Ph.D. students, and both of them have passed Test for English Major-8 (TEM-8) and have taught in universities in China for three to five years. They were active in taking part in this research, because they regarded this as a good opportunity to reflect on their learning.

Data Collection

This research was focused on the qualitative research method. The semi-structured interview has been adopted. The semi-structured interview is one of the less rigid research methods, in which the researchers use a list of questions as a guide, but still have more opportunities to ask more questions depending on the feedback during the interview than in the application of a formal interview. Interviewers make good use of communicative skills, helping subjects to open up and express themselves in their own terms and at their own speed. Data were recorded and transcribed with each participant. Open-ended questions were used and participants were not only encouraged to express their difficulties in improving oral English in communicating with native speakers, but they were also asked to list strategies in the oral English learning process. Because Chinese is the mother tongue of the participants, considering that participants could probably give more details and express clearer if they answer questions in Chinese, so participants were permitted to answer questions in Chinese. After the interview, the researcher transcribed the recordings into English.

Data Analysis

Data were recorded and transcribed with each participant. According to the terms that have previously been listed, the researcher first identified the implicit strategies used by participants. After working this out, the researcher identified certain characteristics of each group of participants when learning and improving oral English in the native context. Besides, researcher figured out strategies that are mostly used by each group of participants as well as differences between each group of participants. In addition, it was also an important part to analyse how the experience like is and participants’ true feeling towards enhancing oral English through one year’s study.
Results

This part mainly presents the results of the interview. First, as has been discussed above, learning strategies in this essay are divided into three types (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990): meta-cognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, and social (affective) strategies. And interview questions were presented according to this classification. So, the results analysis will also adopt this method to classify. Second, according to Nakatani’s (2006, pp. 151-168) OCSI, all questions about participants’ oral English communication in this inventory are to be classified into two groups: strategies for coping with listening problems and strategies for coping with speaking problems (see Tables 1 & 2). In this essay, results of the interview will be analysed according to this criterion.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Strategies name</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Negotiation for meaning while listening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Fluency-maintaining</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Scanning</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Getting the gist</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Nonverbal strategies while listening</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Less active listener</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Word-oriented</td>
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</tbody>
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Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Strategies name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Social affective strategies</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Fluency-oriented strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Negotiation for meaning while speaking strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Accuracy-oriented strategies</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Message reduction and alteration strategies</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Nonverbal strategies while speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Message abandonment strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Attempt to think in English</td>
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Oral English Learning Strategies

When studying in a new environment, it is likely that learners will feel anxious and have tension in mind, this was the case with the participants. Participants in this research, no matter from which level, all felt unconfident about their oral English when they had just arrived in the UK. Although they have attained the intermediate or advanced levels, they still usually encountered communication problems, especially in contexts out of classes. One participant talked about her experience while she was renting a house with an agency when she had just arrived:

Because the university had not begun yet, dealing with the local letting agency was the first time I came into contact with native speakers out of school. I was not familiar with native people’s ways of working and my oral English was not fluent. That was a shock for me and I was frustrated. (B)
When I wanted to express something while I did not know the appropriate words, I would regret not memorizing enough words beforehand and I felt frustrated. (D)

As a result, in terms of oral English, participants in this research all experienced a difficult time when just arriving in the UK. When confronted with this kind of problem, all participants firstly felt even more unconfident. Although participants had the motivation to improve their oral English, they were frustrated by their amateurish behaviour in communication. Two intermediate participants even tended to avoid talking in English. Sometimes, they also felt anxious when communicating in English.

During about two or three months, I did not want to speak English, sometimes I avoid speaking. (B)

However, they gradually accepted the reality and encouraged themselves to look for ways to improve. At that time, they all resorted to affective strategies. In other words, after participants noticed their learning problems and felt frustrated, they tried to encourage themselves and lower their anxiety in speaking English. Besides, it also implies that learners were evaluating and monitoring their learning, which means meta-cognitive issues also played an important role in the beginning of their learning abroad. In addition, it seems likely that there is no significant difference in strategies choices between intermediate learners and advanced learners when facing these kinds of difficulties.

I tried to tell myself that this is only the beginning, I still have a long time and chances to improve through the year. (A)

Although two types of learners in this research had similar reactions when just arriving in the UK, as time went by, advanced learners tended to use more social strategies and meta-cognitive strategies than intermediate learners. To be specific, through one year of learning, the learners all found that communicating in English is a good way of improving their oral English. They all pointed out that the main cause of the improvement of oral English is communicating. They tried to look for chances to communicate with teachers, friends, and other local people, or took part in various local activities, like *Bible* study. They all agreed that it was really helpful in improving their oral English. While advanced learners tended to experience potential and non-linguistic factors behind the communication, and through reflecting on them, they monitored their language learning. For example, advanced learners usually reflect upon their English conversational skills and are more focused on content of conversation. On the other hand, it seems that intermediate learners were more focused on forms of language.

When talking with other people, when I found that with the help of language, we could exchange and share ideas, it meets the need to socialize. I would feel good about it. (D)

In terms of cognitive strategies, every learner has already developed learning styles during their years of study, and they had different preferred learning strategies from each other. When asked whether there were differences in cognitive strategies use during their academic year in the UK, the general reply was that they had not developed any new cognitive strategies. One intermediate participant pointed out that she just regarded oral English learning as a part of her life, she did not practice it especially by herself. She thought this is the biggest difference from when she was learning English before. This result tallies with Krashen’s (1981) theory of second language acquisition. In addition, when making a comparison between the two levels’ participants, although advanced learners replied that they also did not often use cognitive strategies, results
showed that they still exhibited a higher percentage in employing cognitive strategies than intermediate level students.

Maybe before I arrived in the UK, I often practiced speaking and listening or watching English movies, however, when I was studying here, I did not pay much attention to practicing it by myself. Except for talking with native speakers or classmates from other countries, I did not find another specific strategies to improve oral English. (B)

Improving oral English has become one part of my life, although I wanted to improve my oral English, I did not specifically pay much attention to practicing by myself. (A)

Sometimes, I listened or watched BBC to practice listening and speaking. (C)

Communication Strategies

Because the participants are intermediate level and advanced level English learners, so it is not so difficult for them to listen to and understand their interlocutors for easy daily conversations. According to interview, all strategies listed above, more or less, were used by four participants. After analysing the data, strategies like negotiation for meaning, fluency-maintaining, nonverbal strategies, scanning, attempt to think in English, and social affective strategies, were shown as being usually used by all participants, although participants from different levels might have some differences to some extent. On the other hand, strategies like less active listener, word-oriented strategies, message reduction and alteration strategies, and accuracy-oriented strategies were relatively less employed by participants. Besides, participants exhibited more changes in social affective strategies and attempted to think in English.

Strategies which are usually employed by participants. To be specific, negotiation for meaning while listening and speaking involves repeating, rephrasing, and restructuring. When learners did not understand the interlocutor, they usually asked the interlocutors to repeat or speak slowly. There was no fixed way to ask for clarification, and they usually firstly said “sorry, pardon”; if they still did not understand, they would ask the interlocutor to slow down or just said “I do not understand”. Participants said they would also give some detailed explanations and specific examples to express clearly.

I usually say “sorry, pardon” and if I still do not understand, I would ask the interlocutor to slow down. And then I would usually understand. (A)

I usually described more details or gave some examples if people did not understand me. (D)

Some scholars claimed that in the process of negotiation, learners would improve their oral English. Three participants saw communication as a good way to improve their English. And they thought they improved their oral English learning efficiency because they were in the real context. However, Participant C thought that there were differences if communicating contexts change. In other words, social distance, power, and imposition would interfere the strategy use. This recognised the importance of contextual factors, such as settings, participants, and end purpose on communicative interaction, which was proposed by Hymes (1974).

Although I would usually ask for clarification in many contexts, sometimes when I talked with my teachers and professors, even I do not understand, sometimes I do not ask for pardon. But if I talked with my classmates, I asked whenever I do not understand. (D)

For example, “could you drop me a line”, if I was in a certain context, I would know the meaning of it, and I would remember efficiently. (D)

It is, however, important to add that, Participant D thought that only if the learners have prepared well before conversation could they gain the efficient learning. And if the flow or contents in a conversation is
beyond her ability, she would gain rare improvement from it. This implies that, although EFL learners could improve their own performance during communication, it depends on the characters of the conversation. If the conversation is so difficult for learners, they could probably not gain an understanding of much of it. Vygotsky (1978) proposed the term “zone of proximal development (ZPD)”, which means that providing the appropriate assistance will give the student enough of a “boost” to achieve the task. It is likely that the same truth also applies to these conversation contexts. Besides, if learners did not have sufficient preparation before conversation or reflection afterwards, the improvement probably could not be so evident.

What I learned before were strictly standard English, while when learning in the UK, I noticed more diversified forms of language, especially when communicating with native speakers, I learned authentic means of expression, and I know where I could simplify and where I cannot. On the other hand, if the flow, words, or content in a conversation are far beyond my ability, I cannot learn much from it. (C)

In order to maintain the fluency of conversational flow, participants usually use fluency-maintaining strategies and scanning strategies. The former refers to learners taking notice of a speaker’s rhythm, intonation, and pronunciation to capture his/her intention. This strategy is related to scanning strategies, which means people endeavour to gain the main point instead of grasping every word during the conversation. All participants experienced a change in scanning strategies. When they had just arrived in the UK, they wanted to get every detail of their interlocutor’s discourse, and if not, they would be frustrated. However, gradually they noticed that it was almost impossible for them to gain every detail. Although they felt frustrated at first, they modified their strategies. They thought it was enough for them to understand the main points. Intermediate level Participant A said she did not care about the fact that she could not hear or understand every detail, whereas when she spoke, it was her intention that she expressed details clearly.

At first, if I did not get every detail, I would get really annoyed. While later, it seemed that I have more tolerance about this circumstance, and I thought it was enough for me to understand the main points. (C)

Sometimes if I do not understand, I would say some circumlocution words like “interesting” to keep the conversation going and ask for some examples to help me understand. (B)

Nonverbal strategies while listening and speaking played an important role in these learners’ conversation. According to the results of the interviews, participants not only improved their comprehension through eye contact, facial expression, and gestures, sometimes they were also encouraged by interlocutors’ nonverbal behaviour. It seemed that advanced level learners were influenced more by this kind of strategy, although two intermediate level participants thought nonverbal strategies could help them understand, they did not regard it as important as advanced learners did. This phenomenon, to some extent, implies that learning a language is not only about linguistic matters, it is also a social activity. As a result, some non-linguistic factors influence language learning as well.

We Chinese may not have many body language or physical contacts, even I did not usually shake hands back in China. While in the UK, I found that people usually shake hands or hug. Body language let me have more confidence, feel more motivation to talk. For example, the lady in my host family is very kind and will always give me a hug, this kind of interaction makes me have more willingness to talk. (D)

Participants all talked about one change in their communication: They all gradually attempted to think in English. One advanced learner pointed out that sometimes it was not about words or ways of expression that she had obstacles for improvement, it was the differences in the logic of thinking that made her confused.
Without regards to pronunciation that is especially difficult to change, as a result, she found that the biggest problem is to learn the logic of thinking.

At first, I wanted to be like native speakers, while I found that usually my interlocutor would say that “OK, I understand what you mean”. That means my interlocutor tried their best to process my information, which means what I said was not authentic. Gradually, I found that it was too difficult to be native-like, I thought it was enough to make my words clear for other people. (D)

**Strategies which are rarely employed by participants.** Getting the gist means that interlocutors would make some guess through conversation contexts and the speakers’ previous sentences in which way they would get the main point when they did not understand each other. According to Cunningham (1982, pp. 42-47), it is one of the important strategies forgetting the gist of a conversation. But when asked how they get the main point of a conversation, it seemed that participants did not have any specific strategy. None of the participants talked about getting the gist. On the contrary, after learners processed the main points, they would usually reflect their behaviour to improve themselves.

Less active listener strategies refer to the phenomenon that learners do not use strategies on their own initiative. For example, they would not try their best to keep the conversation or they would not care about words and sentences the interlocutor used. On the contrary, participants in this research held a positive attitude to keep the fluency of the conversation. Although they experienced difficulties and felt frustrated when they just arrived in the UK, they all tried to encourage themselves to talk and practice. And this also results in the improvement of English proficiency.

I usually reflected on my communication and conversation with other people, I observed how they talked and what expression they used. I want to improve my oral English by more communication. (D)

Message reduction and alteration strategies refer to strategies that EFL learners would reduce original message, simplifying their utterances or using similar expressions that they can use confidently. Bialystok (1990) stated that EFL learners would be inclined to use familiar words and avoid taking risks by using new or unfamiliar words, and they would use words or phrases even though they know that these expressions could not express the original ideas in their mind. Nevertheless, when participants were asked whether they avoided taking risks in using expressions that they are not sure about, they replied that, in some casual contexts, they would try to speak even though they were not sure about the accurate way of putting something:

In casual contexts, I was not afraid to make mistakes, and I would ask my interlocutor to remind me if I made some mistakes. (C)

Why should I simplify my utterance? On the contrary, I usually give more detailed information is I was not clear to the interlocutor. (D)

**Conclusions**

In conclusion, in terms of oral English learning strategies, this analysis demonstrates that learners employed affective strategies effectively to relieve their anxiety when essentially immersed in English speaking contexts. Even though advanced and intermediate participants were similar in strategies choices to some extent, for example, they all rarely employed cognitive strategies to improve their oral English in native contexts, although advanced learners conducted more cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies. In addition, English speaking contexts provided them with more opportunities for experiencing various dimensions other than
merely language, which made them develop different learning habits and helped them make improvements. Learners found that they acquired English instead of learning English. This implies that as English teachers and learners, it is probably important to enhance the awareness of other important dimensions, such as social variables and contextual factors, of language within second language (L2) contexts which could affect CSs.

As for CSs, first, learners in this research all tried to employ various strategies to communicate, and at the same time, they all improved in their communicative ability. This proved an interactional approach (Doqaruni, 2015, pp. 1-15), which emphasized the importance of interaction between interlocutors and negotiation of meaning. Second, it also proved the fact Hymes (1974) enunciated contextual factors, such as settings, participants, and end purpose on communicative interaction, play important roles in communication. Third, it seemed that learners in this research were all inclined to acquire English instead of learning English in the English speaking context. They took use of much input and at the same time reflected on their communication skills continuously to improve their oral English competence.

Finally, the author would like to point out some limitations of this study, which affected the assessment of the results and analysis. First, interviews were conducted after one year’s study, however, in order to investigate changes of strategies choices, it should be better to conduct more interviews every once in a while through the year. Second, there have been some other individual differences that probably interfered with the results analysis. Thus, more “noise” variables should be taken into consideration in future. For example, before the interview, the researcher could conduct a simple questionnaire survey to acquire a better understanding of participants. Third, the current research still stays around superficial with formality, more details and mechanisms worth further study.

References


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