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## What's missing? Compensation strategies – A case for task-specific strategy use

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**Abstract.** After thirty years of research and practice, the field of Language Learner/Learning Strategies (LLS) has witnessed a clear shift away from compiling “good” strategies employed by the “good” language learner to localizing an individual’s strategic reactions to contextualized tasks. The present study’s objective was to investigate if there is a link between strategy use and specific tasks within a specific setting, i.e., task-specific strategy use in an adult EFL (as opposed to ESL) classroom. This direction adds to the strategy research repertoire with more examples from different learning environments, making the research thread richer. This study also measured the effect of learners’ prior strategy knowledge on actual strategy use. Results can help the process of mapping specific strategies to specific tasks.

**Keywords:** Language Learner/Learning Strategies, Task-Specific Strategy Use, English as a Foreign Language

### 1. Background of the study

Just as their apparent reticence in class could be easily misdiagnosed as holding negative attitudes towards English (Liu & Littlewood 1997), Asian students’ low level of self-reported use of a particular set of language learning strategies could be similarly misinterpreted. The present study is a follow-up to my previous study (Hsu 2000) in which a group of Taiwanese EFL college students reported missing one whole set of compensation strategies. (Table 1 in the Appendix is a list of the types of key compensation strategies proposed in Oxford 1990).

In this paper, I would like to argue that what appears to be missing may have a hidden cause. This hidden cause, as will be illustrated by the design and the results of the study, may well lie in plain view: previous learning experiences (students have not been provided with class activities in which compensation strategies need to be activated).

Task-specific strategy use (the linking of specific strategies to specific tasks) echoes what Cohen (1996) has emphasized as a fine-tuned link between strategies and their use on specific language tasks. Previous studies have reported strategies in rather broad, general terms, not closely related to tasks. A few other researchers have also voiced a similar concern (Cohen & Macaro 2007).

In order to better quantify the tie between strategies and specific tasks, a classroom action study was designed. Two groups of naturally occurring adult EFL learners, the same sample population from which subjects in my previous study were drawn, participated in a conversation practice and reported the language learning strategies employed. As a review of related literature quickly reveals, researchers have not yet reached a completely congruous conceptualization of what compensation strategies are. A brief discussion will be attempted before we move on to describe the present study in detail.

## **2. Controversy over the conceptualization of compensation strategies – the muddled nature of the relations of communication strategies to learning strategies**

Over the past two decades, there has been an ever-growing interest in the study of language learner/learning strategies (LLS) in the field of second language acquisition (Cohen 1990a; McDonough 1995; O'Malley & Chamot 1990; Oxford 1990, 1996; Wenden & Rubin 1987) aiming to seek ways to help students become more successful and autonomous in their efforts to learn and communicate in the second/foreign language. The ability of learners to apply learning strategies to different learning contexts has been viewed as a major watershed in describing efficient learners. The result of this movement away from teaching and toward learning has created a plethora of terminology—difficult and elusive for both practitioners and researchers (Cohen 1996). The moving target syndrome has been described by Oxford and Cohen (1992: 13), as category definitions in this field tend to be dependent on “the inclinations or epistemological understanding of the researchers”. Although some agreement has been reached, numerous questions have yet to be answered (Skehan 1991).

Among the many elusive issues in LLS research, one of the most noteworthy is the relationship between communication strategies and learning strategies. Researchers are concerned about whether strategies can contribute directly to language learning or not. Rubin (1987: 25) proposed that compared with cognitive and metacognitive learning strategies, communication strategies are less directly related since “their main focus is on the process of participating in a conversation and getting meaning across or clarifying what the speaker intended”. Oxford (1990) later gave this direct-indirect distinction a more precise definition (see below for the exact categorization): the division line is whether the target language itself is directly or indirectly involved in the use of a given strategy—the mental processing of the L2.<sup>1</sup>

The assumption that communication strategies cannot simultaneously be learning strategies is not accepted by all. Tarone (1983) makes it clear that it is quite impossible to distinguish between learning strategies and communication strategies for three reasons: (a) it is difficult to assess the real purpose for which the person uses the strategy, (b) the motivation might simultaneously be learning and communication, and (c) even when the purpose is communication, learning often occurs. Candlin (1983) points out that communication, learning, and instruction interact and influence each other. Little (1996: 25) discusses and expands the concept of strategic competence, noting two senses in which communication strategies can contribute to learning: first, “[the] deployment [of communication strategies] may elicit precisely the item of linguistic knowledge that the learner lacks; and to the extent that they are successfully deployed, they reinforce the learner’s communicative ability”. Similarly, Dörnyei (1995: 60) shows that a great deal of language attainment occurs through active participation in actual communication, and it is communication strategies that help learners to do so and thus (a) to obtain practice, and (b) to gain new information by testing what is permissible or appropriate. All this points to the whole “paradoxical difficulty” in learning a foreign language as dexterously identified by Klein: “the learner must both interact and communicate in order to learn and learn in order to interact and communicate” (Klein 1986; quoted in Richterich 1996: 45). This may well have also explained why some researchers “do not distinguish learning from communicating” (Cohen, personal communication, May 18, 2007).

As Oxford (1990) points out, another problem embodied in the use of communication strategies is that researchers have used the term in a somewhat restricted sense. Tarone (1983), for instance, uses the term ‘communication strategies’ to include paraphrasing (approximating, word coinage, and circumlocution), borrowing (literal translation, language switch, appeal for assistance, and mime), and avoidance (topic avoidance and message abandonment). Such a classification limits itself to the speaking situation, to the exclusion of listening, reading, and writing.

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Other terms, such as compensatory strategies, are confined either to production-oriented strategies (Ellis 1986) or avowedly lexical (Poullisse, Bongaerts & Kellerman 1987; as reviewed in Cook 1993).

Oxford (1990) uses the term ‘compensation strategies’, which is one of the six major strategy groups in her own strategy classification system. According to Oxford (1989), language learning strategies can be divided into two major classes: direct and indirect. These two classes are then further broken down into a total of six groups: memory, cognitive, and compensation under the direct category; metacognitive, affective, and social under the indirect category.

As Oxford acknowledges, her taxonomy is based in part on earlier work. For instance, it is noted that Faerch and Kasper (1983) distinguish two types of communication strategies: reduction (such as meaning replacement and message abandonment) and achievement. In the case of achievement strategies, two types are also identified: retrieval and compensatory. Retrieval strategies are used when the learner has difficulties in retrieving specific inter-language items. Compensatory strategies include strategies such as language switching, foreignizing, and literal translating, which originate in the learner’s L1, and strategies like approximation, description, word coinage, co-operative, and non-linguistic strategies, which can be available to both L1 and L2 speakers.

Cohen (1996, 1998: 23), after comparing and synthesizing various definitions and taxonomies, proposes the use of second language learning and second language use strategies. According to Cohen, language learning strategies are “the specific thoughts and behaviours used with the explicit goal of improving learners’ knowledge and understanding of a target language”. These strategies help learners personalize the language learning process while achieving their language learning goals (Weaver & Cohen 1997). There are four sub-strategies included in learning strategies: cognitive, metacognitive, social, and affective strategies. On the other hand, language use strategies are “the actions taken by learners to perform tasks in the language classroom, communicate in the target language, and retrieve information about the language already stored in memory” (Weaver & Cohen 1997: 23). In contrast to learning strategies, these language use strategies may or may not have a direct impact on learning, and can be broken down into four types: retrieval, rehearsal, cover, and communication strategies. Taken together, learning and use strategies constitute “the steps or actions selected by learners either to improve the learning of a second language, the use of it, or both” (Cohen 1996: 2). As Cohen himself acknowledges, such a definition is still rather broad since “it encompasses those actions that are clearly aimed at language learning, as well as those that may well lead to learning but which do not ostensibly have learning as their primary goal” (ibid.). This brings us back to the difficulty and paradox that strategy researchers have long experienced in defining and categorizing the many different types of strategies utilized by language learners.

Indeed, after 30 years of research and practice, an international group of strategy experts is again taking a hard look at the one fundamental issue of “what constitutes a language learner strategy.” Their collective self-reflection proves that the construct of “language learner strategy” is multidimensional and elusive – a “moving target” that is still hard to pin down. For each and every major theme discussed: level of consciousness, degree of mental activity, explicitness regarding strategic action, degree of goal orientation, macro-micro strategy distinction, amount of strategy clustering, potential for leading to learning, and strategy selection and effectiveness, one can expect to see the two opposing opinions expressed by these international research representatives (Cohen & Macaro 2007).

For purposes of this study and for ease of discussion, the term ‘compensation strategies’, one type of the more general language learning strategies, as Oxford (1989) proposes, will be used in this paper. (For other reviews of the learning and communication strategy research, see, for example, Cohen 1998; Cook 1993; McDonough 1995.)

### 3. The Study

Mainly following (a) the finding that very few instances of compensation strategy use were reported by a group of Taiwanese EFL undergraduates (Hsu 2000) and (b) Cohen’s claim (1996) that a fine-tuned link between strategies and their use on specific language tasks seemed to be missing from previous research, this study investigated the possibility to establish such a link among adult EFL students.

Two intact groups of EFL learners were used for the present study. The Freshman English Group consisted of 45 Freshman English undergraduates at a four-year public university in Taiwan, while the Strategy Group included 12 students enrolled in an elective course on Learner Strategies in Second Language Acquisition offered in the same university. Both classes met once each week with three 50-minute sessions. Furthermore, the two courses were taught by the same instructor, the researcher herself, to ensure that only the Strategy Group was exposed to strategy awareness training (also known as consciousness-raising or familiarization instruction, Oxford 1990). The two major concerns of this study were:

- (1) the relationship between use of a particular set of strategies and specific language tasks (task-specific strategy use), and
- (2) the effect of learners' prior strategy knowledge on actual strategy use.

### 3.1 Participants

Of the twelve participants in the Strategy Group, five were from the English Department, with the others coming from the Departments of Agriculture, Business Administration, Geography, International Business, Political Science, and Sociology. The students formed six pairs for the conversation task, numbered from Pair 1 to Pair 6 with participants designated as either 'a' or 'b' arbitrarily in each pair. Twenty-two pairs were formed in the Freshman English Group with one pair comprised of three students instead of two in regular pair work. After reviewing the twenty-two written reports (see below Data Collection: The Language Task for details), one for each pair in initial screening, twelve pairs remained. These twelve provided data for the final analysis. The other ten pairs were excluded because they provided only the contents of their conversations, but did not describe the language learning strategies they (might have) employed. These twelve pairs, numbered from Pair 7 to Pair 18, totalling 25 participants (including the one pair with three participants in it), were spread out in five different departments: Chinese, History, Library Science, Philosophy, and Japanese. Table 2 shows the academic major of all participants.

### 3.2 Treatment: Strategy awareness/familiarization instruction

The Strategy Group's course was divided into three parts spread over one semester with fifteen weeks. The first part started with an introduction to the field of second/foreign language learning, and then went on to cover the differences between first language and second language acquisition, and some major issues in second/foreign language learning and teaching (e.g., Brown 2007). This first part of the course took six weeks to complete including the course description week at the beginning of the semester.

The second part of the course was devoted to the focal topic of the course: language learner/learning strategies. After a two-week guided reading on the general development of learning strategies, the two most frequently cited strategy classification systems – Chamot & O'Malley (1994) and Oxford (1990) – were presented to the students through pair work for another two weeks. Each student was given a copy of the Chamot and O'Malley strategy scheme, and in pairs they were asked to go through the individual strategies on the list and to discuss the meaning of each strategy and how it may work. All pairs returned for the second half of the class to share the results and raise any questions. Then the same procedure applied to the other strategy system of Oxford (1990), again, to allow for an overall understanding of this strategy categorization.

The third and last part of the course occupied the remaining five weeks, and was intended as an in-depth focus on the Oxford system in comparison with the Chamot and O'Malley's scheme, where applicable. Two weeks were spent on the direct strategies of memory, cognitive, and compensation for dealing with the language, and another two weeks on the indirect strategies of metacognitive, affective, and social for general management of learning.<sup>2</sup> Only examples and illustrations that were within students' immediate learning experiences were selected for further familiarization.

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### 3.3 Data collection: The language task

Both groups of students were instructed to complete a conversation practice toward the end of one spring semester. Students had 30 minutes to hold an English conversation with a classmate on a topic of their choice. In a week's time<sup>3</sup>, each pair of students handed in a short report that included: (a) a brief description of what they had talked about, (b) any difficulties they might have encountered during the conversation either in understanding what was being said or in producing expressions when the precise words were out of reach, and (c) the methods (strategies) they were able to use to solve the problems encountered.

During the instruction period, the term 'compensation strategies' was not used in order to avoid biasing. Instead, the more general word 'methods' was adopted. Both groups reported using several of other types of learning strategies: cognitive, affective, and social. See Table 3 in the Appendix for the list.

### 3.4 Data analysis: Identification and categorization of strategies

The data for analysis included 18 written reports, one for each pair of students, 6 reports by the Strategy Group and 12 reports by the Freshman English Group. Following the basics of content analysis (Krippendorff 1980; Weber 1990), students' self-reports were coded for identification and categorization of strategies that they reported being able to use in the process of carrying out the conversations.

The analysis comprised two steps. In Step I, each report was individually read line-by-line. Any use of a strategy mentioned (checked against Oxford's strategy scheme) was recorded along with the text segment in which it appeared. The same process was followed until all possible cases of strategy use were identified within each report, starting from Pair 1 in the Strategy Group and finishing with Pair 18 in the Freshman English Group. In Step II, all cases of strategy use together with classification were reviewed and double-checked. Then grouping followed Oxford's (1990) strategy scheme: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social. Within each major strategy group, grouping was done in three tiers for each specific case of reported strategy use (e.g., Cognitive—Practicing—Repeating). The following is a sample of the final coding sheet:

[major strategy group]	Cognitive
[strategy set]	Practicing
[particular strategy]	Repeating
[from student report]	When we talked about flute, HY [4b] explained to me [PF, 4a] that it is similar but different from the clarinet. Then I realized what clarinet is. I repeated that word [clarinet] several times in order to memorize it.

Another example would be Compensation[major strategy group]—Overcoming limitations in speaking and writing[strategy set]—Adjusting or approximating the message[particular strategy]. This article next reports the findings for the compensation strategy group.

## 4. Findings

Quite contrary to my previous study's finding of almost no compensation strategy use, the results showed participants from both groups reporting using many of the compensation strategies. The Freshman English Group recorded using half of the ten sub-strategies within the compensation strategy group: Using other clues, Switching to the mother tongue, Using mime or gesture, Selecting the topic, and Adjusting or approximating the message. The Strategy Group reported using nine out of the ten specific strategies leaving out only that of Using linguistic clues.

Table 4 in the Appendix shows the reported use of compensation strategies by both groups of participants, under Oxford's (1990) taxonomy of two strategy sets: Guessing intelligently in listening (and reading) and Overcoming limitations in speaking (and writing).

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## 4.1 Use of Compensation Strategies

### 4.1.1 Guessing intelligently in listening (and reading) – Using other clues

Pair 5 of the Strategy Group, and Pairs 10 and 13 of the Freshman English Group all reported using the topic of their conversation (self-introduction, study of Chinese dialects, and planning of summer vacation, respectively) as a clue to help understand. One illustration was drawn from a statement by Pair 10a:

*... the main reason that we could understand each other easily is because our topic is his textbook [one of the texts on Chinese dialects his partner was reading to prepare for the graduate school exams], lying just between us on the desk. We could discuss and use the real thing for help. (Pair 10a)*

### 4.1.2 Overcoming limitations in speaking (and writing)

#### A. Switching to the mother tongue

All six Pairs in the Strategy Group, and Pairs 7, 14, and 16 from the Freshman English Group claimed that they switched to Chinese when the precise English words were not within their grasp. The following are three such examples, two from the Strategy Group (Pairs 2 and 5) and one from the Freshman English Group (Pair 7).

*Because both of us didn't know how to say "air current" in English, we just used "氣流 (qiliu)" instead. (Pair 2)*

*I [Pair 5a] told YC [Pair 5b] that one of my senior high school classmates was in the Department of Economics. Because I didn't know how to say "法學院 (faxueyuan)" [The Law School to which the Department of Economics belongs] in English, I switched it to Chinese. (Pair 5)*

*The difficulty in our conversation was that we couldn't find the proper words to express our feelings and we were afraid that we would make mistakes. ... we felt nervous all the time and we couldn't speak fluently. ... (Pair 7)*

Noteworthy here was the anxiety transparently expressed by the two participants in Pair 7, which served as the justification for them to switch to the mother tongue from time to time in their conversation.

#### B. Getting help

Four Pairs from the Strategy Group, 2, 3, 4, and 5, reported that they would seek help from their partners "to provide the missing expression in the target language" (Oxford 1990: 50) if need be.

One time, Pair 2b, got what she needed by hesitating, as her partner Pair 2a stated in a clear and precise way:

*Sometimes, I helped provide words she was looking for. For example, she was trying to find a word for "job applicants." She said, "not the lady asking questions, the others ..." So I asked, "the person being interviewed by? Candidates?"*

On the other hand, Pair 5a exercised this strategy in a rather straightforward manner as shown in the following account.

*When I wanted to say that my dog bit my father, I forgot the past tense form of "bite", so I said "bote?" Then my partner told me that the past tense of bite was "bit."*

### C. Using mime or gesture

Altogether eight pairs, equally distributed between the Strategy Group and the Freshman English Group recorded using the strategy of Using mime or gesture. Quoted below are three such examples provided by Pairs 4, 13, and 18, respectively.

*We used gestures to indicate the musical instrument that we were mentioning. (Pair 4)*

*When we had difficulties in communication, we used body language ... to help us have a better understanding. (Pair 13)*

*If my partner did not know what I was talking about, I could tell from her facial expression and then I repeated what I just said. (Pair 18a)*

Of interest in the case of Pair 18 was that b appeared to be confused and had prompted her partner (Pair 18a) to take some further action—repeating what she just said to help get the meaning across and keep communication flowing.

But the most vivid use of this particular strategy is the one illustrated by Pair 2a, in which she described how her partner Pair 2b used gestures and miming to help convey meaning, as disclosed in the following statements.

*... when she mentioned numbers like 2,000, \$70,000, she would use her fingers to show the numbers as well.*

*Her facial expression was also very communicative. Her face lit up when she told me that Singapore Airlines had called her up to ask her if she wanted to work for them. But then, she told me that since she would be going on to study for her master's, she would have to turn them down. When saying that, she had a saddened look on her face.*

### D. Avoiding communication partially or totally

The use of this strategy was recorded by Pairs 4 and 5 (with no specific examples provided) from the Strategy Group. For instance, Pair 4 stated that they would simply “skip” saying something when difficulties were encountered and nothing much could be done at the moment. This strategy normally involves a total or partial avoidance of certain topics, concepts, or expressions for which the learner does not have needed L2 words/grammatical structures. Our learners knew that at times they needed to step back a bit in order to charge further when the time comes—preserving their ability to be more able to talk about other things later in the exchange of opinions and ideas.

### E. Selecting the topic

Like many other language learners, Pairs 3, 5 (the Strategy Group), and 18 (the Freshman English Group) chose a topic of conversation based on interest and/or ease of vocabulary, as reflected in the following statement provided by Pair 18.

*Luckily, we chose an easy topic (final exams) to talk about. We could easily understand each other because we had the same feelings.*

### F. Adjusting or approximating the message

Pairs 3 and 6 from the Strategy Group, and Pairs 10, 12, 13, 14, 17, and 18 from the Freshman English Group reported the strategy of adjusting or approximating the message, almost half of the total participants under investi-

gation. The reason for this choice is to overcome difficulties, either anticipated or encountered. The following account, from Pair 10, is representative.

*Our English is poor but we want to go further on this topic. So we have to use some short-cuts. That is, instead of long, complete sentences which are difficult for us, we use simple English words to substitute for a whole sentence meaning.*

### G. Coining words

Sometimes, learners would make up new words to communicate a concept for which they did not possess the needed vocabulary. Two interesting examples were elicited from Pairs 2 and 5 (the Strategy Group).

*I [Pair 2b] made up the word “exam-teacher” [chief examiner] to mean the person who asked us questions during the interview because I did not know the exact word for that. (Pair 2)*

*She [partner Pair 5b] said that FLLD [Foreign Languages and Literatures Department] was her first choice after passing the JCEE [Joint College Entrance Examination]. She did not know how to say ‘志願卡’(zhiyuanka) [a computer card on which high school graduates rank their choice of colleges based on the scores they get on their entrance examination]’ in English, so she made up the phrase ‘ambition card’ but I [Pair 5a] understood. (Pair 5)*

### H. Using a circumlocution or synonym

Participants in this study were found to have utilized circumlocutions, but no synonym examples were recorded. The following two examples show a roundabout expression involving several words to describe or explain a single concept (Oxford 1990: 97), provided by Pair 2a and Pair 4a, respectively.

*She [partner Pair 2b] was trying to explain “life jacket.” So she said, “a jacket you wear in water ... when you don’t know how to swim, you can wear it.” (Pair 2)*

*I [Pair 4a] used a description, “a kind of musical instrument ... you use your right hand to play the keyboard and your left hand to pull apart and press it for making sound” for “accordion.” (Pair 4)*

## 5. Discussion

As previously reported, both groups of participants varied their compensation strategies to help understand what was being said, or to produce expressions when the needed vocabulary or information was missing. This finding provides a demonstration of the relations between use of individual strategies and specific language learning activities. A link between a particular set of language learning strategies (compensation) and their use on an assigned task (conversation) was established: the task-specific strategy use. Within an EFL context (input-poor environments, Kouraogo 1993) where exposure to L2 outside the classroom is limited, where can students find opportunities to test and utilize appropriate strategies? The analogy to the Chinese saying, *Who is to blame when a child is not properly raised?* is clear. As teachers, we need to look beneath the surface in order to identify the actual cause of strategies not being used. Unfortunately, the blame lies with instructors ourselves. Have we provided students what they really need?

On the other hand, the results of this study also illustrate the value of strategy knowledge. Of the ten specific compensation strategies, the Strategy Group, though comprised of fewer learners, reported using almost all the strategies while the Freshman English Group used five (not used: Getting help, Avoiding communication partially or totally, Coining words, and Using a circumlocution or synonym). In other words, it can be speculated that while use of certain strategies does not need particular teaching, use of other strategies does. Again, this finding helps demonstrate that prior knowledge of language learning strategies could have an effect on learners’ actual strategy use. During the semester, the Strategy Group was offered a chance to become familiar with the major strategy



classification systems developed in the field. With proper guidance, learners could become more aware of certain strategies they never thought of using on their own, and that will eventually contribute to learning efficiency and effectiveness (Chamot 1987). By the same token, if the effect of strategy knowledge can equally work for the Freshman English Group, the four strategies missing in their task completion, as mentioned earlier, could well become the focus of subsequent instruction for more effective training outcomes.

The biggest target we want to aim for strategy development is the group excluded from our final data analysis. Recall that in initial screening for valid data, we excluded ten pairs from the Freshman English Group because they did not provide any information on the language learning strategies. It is very likely that these are precisely the learners who, despite the possible innateness of learner strategy use, have either no idea or a lack of awareness of strategies, yet need them the most. As Wenden (1991: 18) points out, strategies, as a part of our cognitive software, are acquired in much the same way as language is acquired. Under proper guidance and instruction, “new strategies can be learned and well-functioning strategies can be adapted to new situations”. This implied teachability and flexibility of language learner/learning strategies (see also Grenfell & Macaro 2007) leads us logically to the next section— pedagogical implications.

## 6. Pedagogical implications

The fact that task-specific strategy use (a link between individual strategies and specific tasks) could be observed in an adult EFL classroom, provides EFL teachers a gauge to direct students in employing strategies. One possible implementation is for teachers to compare the learning strategies for a given task used by good and poor learners. With pair or small group work, less able students may profit from strategies and disclosures by more able students through thinking aloud and cooperative learning. In the long run, both groups of students may take advantage of such opportunities to refine/add to their own strategy repertoire (Chamot 1987; Cohen & Macaro 2007).

Such teacher-generated but student-centred activities are essential for successful language learning since Oxford, Lavine & Crookall (1989: 36) have pointed out that many language students “do not inherently share the cognitive, strategy-related personality characteristics of good language learners,” and therefore may not be aware of the facilitating power of strategies in their learning. (For similar statements, see Rubin 1990: 282, now cited in Cohen & Macaro 2007.) Thus, proper guidance is needed. Two basic principles in guiding effective strategy instruction have been discussed: explicitness and sufficient practice (summarized in Oxford 1989). First, strategy training needs to be completely informed—explicitly teaching learners why and how to do the following (see also Dansereau 1985 for modeling): (a) use new strategies, (b) evaluate the effectiveness of different strategies, and (c) decide when it is appropriate to transfer a given strategy to a new situation. Second, in strategy training sufficient practice should be provided to help the new strategies “stick and stay” and, as much as possible, be incorporated with activities of the regular language program. In other words, strategy instruction should be contextualized, conducted in the context of the subject matter, and directed to specific problems related to the students’ experience (Wenden 1991).<sup>4</sup>

These two guiding principles have been tailored into a four-step pedagogical approach, the so-called SBI (Strategy Based Instruction):

- (1) raising awareness of the strategies learners are already using;
- (2) teacher presentation and modeling of strategies so that students become increasingly aware of their own thinking and learning processes;
- (3) multiple practice opportunities to help students move towards autonomous use of the strategies through gradual withdrawal of the initial scaffolding; and
- (4) self-evaluation of the effectiveness of the strategies used and transfer of strategies to fresh tasks (Cohen & Macaro 2007).

Furthermore, as Oxford, Lavine & Crookall (1989) have also suggested, communicative language teaching and strategy training could have a powerful reciprocal relationship. They indicate that the four main principles entailed in the communicative approach (attaining communicative competence as the main goal; dealing communicatively

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with forms and errors; integrating the four skills; and focusing on meaning, context, and authentic language) imply and encourage the use of a wide range of language learning strategies by students. In turn, the utilization of different learning strategies contributes to the process of acquiring different aspects of communicative competence. For instance, use of compensation strategies such as guessing intelligently in listening (and reading), overcoming limitations in speaking (and writing), together with other social strategies, such as cooperating and asking questions, will foster and facilitate authentic communication. In such a learning mode, students are in fact assisted in the achievement of greater self-direction/autonomy, since both research and observational evidence have shown that “much of the responsibility for success at language learning rests with individual learners and with their ability to take full advantage of opportunities to learn” (Cohen 1990b: vii). The importance of this simple statement cannot be overemphasized, and is once again reiterated and witnessed after “thirty years of research and practice” (Cohen & Macaro 2007).

## 7. Limitations of the study and suggestions for further research

There are at least two sources of limitations to the present study. First, 12 participants in the Strategy Group and 45 in the Freshman English Group appear to be an unbalanced design. These two classes of EFL learners recruited for this study are naturally occurring as denoted by Bailey et al. (1991: 95):

“What these various types of studies [ethnography, ethnomethodology, and many types of case studies and correlation studies] have in common is that they investigated factors related to participants in *naturally occurring* situations rather than studying groups carefully selected for the purpose of the study in order to control for extraneous variables” (italics mine).

This is the situation instructors/researchers have to face in conducting this type of naturalistic inquiry studies.

Second, as inherent in all types of introspective methods used in second language research (e.g., think-aloud, questionnaires, interviews, and diary-keeping), the retrospective verbalization elicited in this study might not be a complete representation of our informant-learners’ actual mental processes. Nevertheless, such verbal reports – one source of “invisible insights from learners” (Matsumoto 1994: 377) – are in many cases unattainable from extrospective/quantitative-oriented studies alone (Ericsson & Simon 1993; Faerch & Kasper 1987).

Replication is needed with different groups of language learners. Furthermore, a few strategies could be singled out for an in-depth study. For example, investigate the use of circumlocution/word coinage used in oral tasks, written tasks, or oral versus written tasks.

## 8. Conclusion

In this paper we illustrated the case for task-specific strategy use: compensation strategies and their use on a specific speaking task. More importantly, we illustrated that Asian students, learning in an input-poor environment with insufficient opportunities for oral practice, could be misdiagnosed as having an inability to use those strategies. The Chinese analogy of *Who is to blame?* helps point out a gap between what the teacher should offer and what he/she actually offers in the classroom, so as to help improve students’ speaking ability through use of the needed, good, and effective strategies. Finally, we explained how the teachable and flexible characteristics of language learner/learning strategies could be explored for research and pedagogical benefits in the aspects of both strategy use and instruction, and communicative language teaching. It is hoped that conducting this study could help us gain a deeper understanding of how the cognitive responses of learners (particularly EFL learners in our case) can be connected to task demands (Grenfell & Macaro 2007).

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## Appendix

**TABLE 1 Types of key compensation strategies (Oxford 1990)**

### Compensation Strategies

- A. Guessing intelligently in listening and reading
  1. Using linguistic clues
  2. Using other clues
  
- B. Overcoming limitations in speaking and writing
  1. Switching to the mother tongue
  2. Getting help
  3. Using mime or gesture
  4. Avoiding communication partially or totally
  5. Selecting the topic
  6. Adjusting or approximating the message
  7. Coining words
  8. Using a circumlocution or synonym

**TABLE 2 Profile of participants (major fields of study)**

The Strategy Group		The Freshman English Group	
Pair 1	a (Geography) b (Agricultural Extension)	Pair 7	a (Chinese) b (Chinese)
Pair 2	a (International Business) b (Political Science)	Pair 8	a (Philosophy) b (Philosophy)
Pair 3	a (English) b (Sociology)	Pair 9	a (Philosophy) b (Philosophy)
Pair 4	a (English) b (English)	Pair 10	a (Library Science) b (Chinese)
Pair 5	a (English) b (English)	Pair 11	a (History) b (History) c (History)
Pair 6	a (Business Administration) b (Business Administration)	Pair 12	a (Philosophy) b (Library Science)
		Pair 13	a (Chinese) b (Chinese)
		Pair 14	a (Philosophy) b (Philosophy)
		Pair 15	a (Japanese) b (Japanese)

Pair 16	a (History) b (History)
Pair 17	a (Library Science) b (Library Science)
Pair 18	a (History) b (History)

**TABLE 3 Use of other types of strategies displayed by both the Strategy (Pairs 1-6) and the Freshman English (Pairs 7-18) Groups**

### **Cognitive Strategies**

- A. Practicing
  - 1. Repeating  
4a
  - 2. Recognizing and using formulas and patterns  
4ab; 5ab  
12ab; 18ab
  - 3. Recombining  
4ab; 5ab
  - 4. Practicing naturalistically  
4ab; 5ab  
11abc; 16ab
- B. Receiving and sending messages
  - 1. Using resources for receiving and sending messages  
5ab  
10ab
- C. Analyzing and reasoning
  - 1. Analyzing expressions  
5ab
  - 2. Translating  
2b; 5ab  
16ab
- D. Creating structure for input and output
  - 1. Highlighting  
4ab
  - 2. Taking notes  
5ab

### **Affective Strategies**

- A. Encouraging yourself
  - 1. Making positive statements  
14a; 17ab
  - 2. Taking risks wisely  
4ab

**Social Strategies**

- A. Asking questions
  - 1. Asking for clarification or verification
    - 2a
    - 18ab
- B. Cooperating with others
  - 1. Cooperating with peers
    - 1ab
    - 8ab; 9ab
- C. Empathizing with others
  - 1. Becoming aware of others' thoughts and feelings
    - 9a

**TABLE 4 Use of compensation strategies displayed by both the Strategy (Pairs 1-6) and the Freshman English (Pairs 7-18) Groups**

- A. Guessing intelligently in listening (and reading)
  - 1. Using linguistic clues
    - N/A
  - 2. Using other clues
    - 5ab
    - 10ab; 13ab
- B. Overcoming limitations in speaking (and writing)
  - 1. Switching to the mother tongue
    - 1ab; 2ab; 3ab; 4ab; 5ab; 6ab
    - 7ab; 14ab; 16ab
  - 2. Getting help
    - 2b; 3ab; 4ab; 5a
  - 3. Using mime or gesture
    - 1ab; 2b; 4ab; 6a
    - 13ab; 14ab; 15ab; 18ab
  - 4. Avoiding communication partially or totally
    - 4ab; 5ab
  - 5. Selecting the topic
    - 3ab; 5ab
    - 18ab
  - 6. Adjusting or approximating the message
    - 3ab; 6a
    - 10ab; 12ab; 13ab; 14ab; 17ab; 18ab
  - 7. Coining words
    - 2b; 5b
  - 8. Using a circumlocution or synonym
    - 2b; 3ab; 4b; 6a



## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The field has since moved on. In a recent email discussion with Andrew D. Cohen, he helped point out that "Oxford disowned the direct vs. indirect strategies distinction over 15 years ago. She came to her senses that there is nothing indirect about metacognitive strategies – that they are every bit as direct or more so than what she had called 'direct' strategies. Also, only Oxford distinguished memory strategies from other cognitive strategies, and the field doesn't make this distinction, nor really does she now." This statement of Cohen's is further confirmed by Oxford herself through a follow-up email enquiry (personal communication, May 7, 2007).
- <sup>2</sup> For the strategy group, the last week was reserved for term-project presentations, whereas for the Freshman English group, it was the final exam week. The term project that the strategy group was instructed to complete consisted of two parts: (a) a self-analyzing report on their own English learning experiences and strategy use based on either one of the strategy systems of their choice (as it turned out, three students did the analysis applying both systems), and (b) mini-reports on five take-home assignments which were taken/adapted from Oxford (1990), and were given time for pair discussion in class, of which the task of holding a conversation used in this study was one.
- <sup>3</sup> In an ideal situation retrospective verbalizations would be elicited immediately after the task completion (Ericson & Simon 1984; Faerch & Kasper 1987; Matsumoto 1994). Because Asian students are more reserved than their Western counterparts, students would feel very uneasy if they were required to hand in an assignment without due preparation.
- <sup>4</sup> Also see Rees-Miller (1993) and Chamot & Rubin (1994) for cautions in instituting learner strategy training.