

# Communication Strategies of Chinese EFL Learners: The Impact of Interlocutors

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## Abstract:

The use of communication strategies (CSs) by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners is a crucial aspect of second language acquisition, particularly in immersion contexts. This study investigates how Chinese EFL learners adapt their communication strategies when interacting with interlocutors who share their first language (L1), Chinese Mandarin versus international English-as-a-second-language (L2) interlocutors. Drawing on Dörnyei and Scott's (1997) taxonomy of CSs, this research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining observation, questionnaires, and interviews to assess the frequency, preference, and rationale behind learners' use of various CSs. The findings highlight significant differences in strategy use depending on the interlocutors' linguistic backgrounds. Interlocutors who do not share the same L1 as Chinese EFL learners can encourage Chinese students to resort to more strategies when they need to solve communicative problems in discussions. Speaking with non-Chinese interlocutors (NCIs) can not only increase the frequency of CS use, but also expand the variety of CS types. The study also reveals learner perspectives on their communication challenges, providing valuable pedagogical insights. The results underscore the need for tailored language instruction that accounts for interlocutor variability and encourages flexible strategy use in real-world language contexts.

**Keywords:** second language acquisition, communication strategy, interlocutor

## 1. Introduction

Communication strategies (CSs) have long been a focal point in second language acquisition (SLA) research, particularly in understanding how learners manage communicative difficulties in real-time language use (Dörnyei and Scott, 1997). These strategies allow learners to convey their intended meaning even when their linguistic competence in the target language is limited. Given the increasingly globalised context in which English is used as a lingua franca, the dynamics of communication between learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds have gained scholarly attention. One aspect that remains underexplored, however, is the influence of interlocutors on the choice and effectiveness of CSs employed by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners.

This study aims to bridge this gap by examining how Chinese EFL learners modify their CSs when interacting with interlocutors who either share their first language (L1) or are other international speakers of English as a second language (L2). By focusing on learners from immersion settings, where English is the primary medium of instruction in classroom, this research seeks to offer a more nuanced understanding of the role interlocutors play in shaping CS use. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative data from observations and questionnaires with qualitative insights from learner interviews. This triangulated methodology allows for a comprehensive analysis of the frequency, types, and rationale behind learners' strategy choices, offering valuable implications for both theory and practice in language teaching.

Communication strategy research has predominantly focused on either the cognitive mechanisms involved in strategy selection or the linguistic challenges learners face (Ellis, 1994). However, the impact of interlocutor characteristics on strategy use remains less understood. Previous studies have highlighted the importance of interlocutor types, with shared-L1 interlocutors often leading to greater reliance on L1-based strategies, while interactions with L2 interlocutors promote more target-language use (Yule and Tarone, 1990, 1997). Despite these insights, the interaction between strategy use and interlocutor variability in immersion settings warrants further investigation, especially as immersion programmes become more common in EFL contexts worldwide.

The present study thus seeks to contribute to this ongoing conversation by examining how learners' CSs vary when interacting with interlocutors of different linguistic backgrounds. Specifically, this research explores the frequency and preference of strategy use across different interlocutor types, as well as learners' subjective experiences of communication challenges in these interactions. By integrating quantitative data on strategy use with qualitative insights into learners' perspectives, the study provides a holistic understanding of the factors influencing strategy selection in English immersion interaction contexts.

## 2. Background and Rationale

Communication strategies, defined as methods employed by speakers to compensate for linguistic deficiencies or communication breakdowns, have been a key area of inquiry in second language acquisition (Tarone, 1980). These strategies serve as a bridge between linguistic competence and communicative performance, enabling learners to express their intended meanings despite gaps in their linguistic knowledge. The theoretical foundation of CSs has evolved from early psycholinguistic models, which focused on the cognitive processes underlying strategy selection, to more interactional models that consider the role of interlocutor dynamics in shaping strategy use (Dörnyei and Kormos, 1998).

Traditional taxonomy categorises CSs into two types, including *avoidance* or *reduction strategies*, *achievement* or *compensation strategies* (Tarone, 1981; Faerch and Kasper, 1983a, 1983b; Bialystok, 1990; Dörnyei and Scott, 1997). While these categories provide a useful framework for analysing strategy use, they do not fully account for the influence of interlocutors on learners' strategic choices. Previous studies have suggested that the presence of shared-L1 interlocutors may lead learners to rely more on L1-based strategies, such as code-switching or borrowing, while interactions with L2 speakers promote greater use of target-language strategies (Si-Qing, 1990). However, this area of research remains relatively underexplored, particularly in immersion settings where learners are exposed to both shared-L1 and L2 interlocutors on a regular basis.

The current study builds on this theoretical foundation by examining the role of interlocutor variability in CS use among Chinese EFL learners in an English immersion context. By comparing learners' strategy use when interacting with shared-L1 interlocutors versus other English-as-L2 interlocutors, the research seeks to uncover patterns of strategy preference and frequency that are influenced by interlocutor type. This investigation is particularly relevant in today's globalised world, where learners frequently engage in international interactions with speakers from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Understanding how interlocutor dynamics shape strategy use can offer valuable insights for language teaching, particularly in designing curricula that promote flexible and adaptive communication skills.

In addition to contributing to the theoretical understanding of CSs, this study has practical implications for language pedagogy. By identifying the types of strategies that are most effective in different interactional contexts, educators can tailor their instruction to better equip learners with the skills needed to navigate real-world communicative challenges. The findings of this study will thus have implications not only for researchers but also for practitioners involved in language teaching and curriculum development.

## 3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical underpinnings of this study are grounded in Dörnyei and Scott's (1997) taxonomy of communication strategies, which categorises strategies into several types based on their function in communicative interactions (see Table 1 below). These include *direct strategies*, such as *circumlocution* or *restructuring*; *interactional strategies*, such as *comprehension check*, *recall* or *interpretive summary*; and *indirect strategies*, such as the *use of fillers* or *self-repetition*. The taxonomy provides a comprehensive framework for analysing the types of strategies learners employ in response to communicative difficulties.

Table 1. Expanded CS Taxonomy Based on Dörnyei and Scott (1997)

<b>Direct Strategies</b>	<b>Interactional Strategies</b>	<b>Indirect Strategies</b>
<i>Resource deficit-related strategies</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Message abandonment</li> <li>• Message reduction</li> <li>• Message replacement</li> <li>• Circumlocution</li> <li>• Approximation</li> <li>• Use of all-purpose words</li> <li>• Restructuring</li> <li>• Literal translation</li> <li>• Code switching</li> <li>• Use of similar sounding words</li> <li>• Mumbling</li> <li>• Omission</li> <li>• Retrieval</li> </ul>	<i>Own-performance problem-related strategies</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comprehension check</li> <li>• Own-accuracy check</li> <li>• <b>Recall</b></li> <li>• <b>Request for information</b></li> </ul> <i>Other-performance problem-related strategies</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Asking for clarification</li> <li>• Asking for confirmation</li> <li>• Interpretive summary</li> <li>• Responses <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Confirm</li> <li>- Expand</li> <li>- Reject</li> <li>- Repeat</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<i>Processing time pressure-related strategies</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of fillers</li> <li>• Repetitions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Self-repetition</li> <li>- Other-repetition</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Self-confirmation</b></li> </ul> <i>Own-performance problem-related strategies</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Verbal strategy markers</li> <li>• <b>Closing mark</b></li> </ul>
<i>Own-performance problem-related strategies</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-rephrasing</li> <li>• Self-repair <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Self-denial or apology (before self-repair)</b></li> </ul> </li> </ul>		

While Dörnyei and Scott's (1997) model offers valuable insights into the types of strategies learners use, it does not explicitly account for the role of interlocutors in shaping these strategic choices. Interactional models of communication, such as those proposed by Yule and Tarone (1997), suggest that the nature of the interlocutor—whether they share the learner's first language or are also L2 speakers—can significantly influence the types of strategies learners employ. Shared-L1 interlocutors may provide a sense of comfort, leading learners to rely more heavily on L1-based strategies, whereas interactions with L2 speakers may encourage learners to use more target-language strategies in an effort to maintain mutual understanding.

The psycholinguistic perspective, which focuses on the cognitive processes underlying strategy selection, is also relevant to this study. From this perspective, learners are viewed as problem-solvers who use CSs to overcome linguistic gaps and achieve their communicative goals. However, the interactional perspective suggests that these cognitive processes are influenced by the social dynamics of the interaction, including the perceived linguistic competence of the interlocutor and the social norms governing the use of L1 versus L2 in a given context. By integrating both psycholinguistic and interactional perspectives, this study aims to provide a more holistic understanding of the factors that influence CS use in multilingual interactions.

#### **4. Methods**

To explore how Chinese EFL learners modify their communication strategies when interacting with different interlocutors, this study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating observation, questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews. The primary objective was to assess the frequency, preference, and rationale behind learners' use of various CSs in interactions with interlocutors who either shared their L1 or were other L2 speakers. In this study, they were particularly Chinese speakers (CIs) and non-Chinese speakers (NCIs).

##### **4.1 Participants**

The participants in this study were EFL learners enrolled in a master's degree programme at a university in the UK. A total of 45 participants were recruited, representing various first language backgrounds, including Chinese, Spanish, Arabic and so on. The learners had been exposed to both shared-L1 and L2 interlocutors in their immersion experience, offering a rich context for exploring CS use across different interactional settings.

## 4.2 Data Collection Instruments

Three primary instruments were employed to gather data: (1) observation, (2) a questionnaire, and (3) semi-structured interviews. These methods allowed for a comprehensive understanding of learners' CS use, providing both quantitative data (through observation and questionnaires) and qualitative insights (through observation and interviews).

- 1) **Observation:** Observational data were collected during classroom interactions and informal group discussions. Each interaction was recorded and transcribed, and instances of communication breakdowns were identified and analysed. The focus was on how learners attempted to overcome these breakdowns using CSs and whether these strategies differed depending on the linguistic background of the interlocutors. A coding scheme based on Dörnyei and Scott's (1997) taxonomy of CSs was employed to categorise the strategies used by learners during interactions.
- 2) **Questionnaire:** Modified OCSI (Oral Communication Strategy Inventory) questionnaire was administered to all participants, collecting quantitative data on the frequency and types of CSs used in different interactional contexts (Nakatani, 2006, 2010). The questionnaire included Likert-scale items, asking learners to rate their frequency of using different CSs when interacting with Chinese and non-Chinese interlocutors. The questionnaire also gathered demographic information and language learning backgrounds (e.g., personal character and language proficiency level) to account for individual variability.
- 3) **Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain a deeper understanding of participants' rationale behind the use of specific CSs. The interviews explored learners' perceptions of their interactions, focusing on the challenges they faced when communicating with different types of interlocutors and how they adapted their strategies to meet these challenges. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for subsequent thematic analysis.

## 4.3 Data Analysis

For the observation and questionnaire data, descriptive statistics were used to summarise the frequency of different CSs across the two interlocutor types. The observational data were coded according to Dörnyei and Scott's (1997) taxonomy and then analysed to identify patterns in strategy use across interactions with Chinese and non-Chinese interlocutors. Frequency counts and percentages were calculated for each category of strategy. Participants' responses regarding their use of CSs in the CI and NCI groups, as reported in the OCSI questionnaire, were also compared to identify any differences.

The interview data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify common themes and insights related to learners' strategy use. The qualitative data helped contextualise the quantitative findings by providing a richer understanding of the motivations and reasoning behind learners' choices of CSs.

## 5. Results

### 5.1 Observation Data: Classroom Discussions

Observation data from classroom discussions and general communicative contexts revealed the dynamic nature of CS usage by Chinese EFL learners. Their choices were mainly influenced by the nature of the interlocutors (Chinese or non-Chinese). The primary focus was on the frequency, variety, and types of CSs used in these different contexts.

#### 5.1.1 Frequency and Variety of CS Use

Across classroom discussions in English immersion background, learners demonstrated different frequencies and varieties of CS use depending on the linguistic background of their interlocutors.

When interacting with non-Chinese interlocutors (NCIs), learners frequently employed strategies aimed at overcoming vocabulary gaps. *Circumlocution* and *approximation* were the most common strategies. Circumlocution involves describing the characteristics or functions of an unknown object or concept instead of providing the exact word. For instance, when learners struggled with the word "cutlery," they opted for circumlocutory descriptions like "things you use to eat food." These strategies were seen in

29% more instances during interactions with NCIs than in Chinese interlocutor (CI) conversations. This preference indicates a prioritization of fluency and the smooth flow of communication over precision.

Learners used *code-switching* five times more frequently in interactions with CIs compared to NCIs. *Code-switching*, the act of switching between languages, typically occurred when learners encountered lexical gaps or struggled with grammar. This was especially prevalent in CI interactions, where learners shared a common linguistic background, allowing for quick transitions to their L1 for clarification. The shared background lowered the perceived linguistic risk, reducing anxiety and encouraging learners to engage in additional strategies like *word coinage* and *topic avoidance* without fear of communication breakdowns. These interactions highlighted a sense of comfort, where learners managed misunderstandings without disrupting the conversation or losing face. However, in NCI interactions, where learners were more acutely aware of linguistic appropriateness, code-switching was almost entirely avoided. Instead, learners prioritised CSs that ensured clarity, such as *self-repair* and *asking for clarification*, reflecting a heightened need for precision and comprehensibility. This divergence in strategies across different contexts underscores the adaptive nature of learners, who adjusted their approaches based on the perceived risk and familiarity with their conversation partners.

### 5.1.2 Interactional vs. Direct Strategies

The data also highlighted a distinction between *interactional strategies* (involving negotiation of meaning) and *direct strategies* (more straightforward problem-solving). With NCIs, interactional strategies were prevalent, particularly *request for information* and *asking for clarification*. These accounted for around 22% of all CSs in NCI conversations. Learners seemed more comfortable engaging in negotiated communication with NCIs, seeking assistance, and collaborating to overcome linguistic barriers. For example, learners tended to direct these appeals to more proficient speakers or instructors, using phrases like “What’s the word for...?” or simply asking for confirmation with “Is that right?” This strategy was not only a means of seeking immediate linguistic aid but also reflected learners’ awareness of the collaborative nature of communication.

In contrast, CI interactions favoured more *direct strategies* such as *message abandonment* (abandoning difficult messages) and *self-repair*. This behaviour suggests that learners felt more comfortable simplifying their speech with CIs, possibly because of a shared cultural understanding or a belief that their communication breakdowns would be more easily accepted in these interactions.

### 5.1.3 Non-Verbal Strategies

Non-verbal strategies, such as gestures and facial expressions, were frequently observed in classroom discussions, especially when learners communicated with NCIs. These strategies were often used to reinforce meaning or convey abstract ideas when verbal communication alone was insufficient. In interactions with NCIs, non-verbal cues were employed in nearly 20% of cases, significantly higher than with CIs, where verbal strategies tended to suffice. This reliance on gestures and other non-verbal signals underscores the learners’ awareness of how such cues can supplement verbal communication, enhancing mutual comprehension, particularly in complex conversations involving abstract topics or where language barriers were more pronounced. The prominent use of these strategies with NCIs highlights their role in bridging communication gaps, ensuring that meaning is conveyed effectively even when verbal attempts fall short.

### 5.1.4 Contextual Factors Influencing Strategy Use

The context in which communication occurred (formal vs. informal settings) also influenced the types of CSs used. In more formal classroom discussions with NCIs, learners were more deliberate in employing strategies that maintained linguistic accuracy. For instance, *self-repair* (correcting one’s own speech) and *approximation* (substituting less accurate but related terms) were prevalent. Learners in these settings prioritised clarity and correctness, likely because of the higher stakes involved in formal discourse.

In more informal settings, the learners relaxed these concerns. *Circumlocution* and *approximation* were still frequent but were used in a more flexible, casual manner to maintain conversation flow rather than

ensuring precision. Learners allowed for more linguistic risks in these settings, as there was less pressure to maintain a high degree of grammatical accuracy.

## 5.2 Questionnaire Data: Learner Preferences and Attitudes

This section provides an overview of the results from the Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI) (see Table 2 below) questionnaire, focusing on learners' preferences for different communication strategies and a comparison between their use in conversations with Chinese interlocutors and non-Chinese interlocutors. The analysis explores which strategies learners favour when dealing with speaking and listening challenges and highlights significant differences in strategy use between CI and NCI groups. The findings offer insights into how learners adapt their communication strategies based on the interlocutor's background and language proficiency.

Table 2. Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI) (Nakatani, 2006)

CS for speaking issues	CS for listening issues
A: social affective strategies	I: negotiation for meaning while listening
B: fluency-oriented strategies	J: fluency-maintaining strategies
C: negotiation for meaning while speaking	K: scanning strategies
D: accuracy-oriented strategies	L: getting the gist strategies
E: message reduction and alteration strategies	M: nonverbal strategies while listening
F: nonverbal strategies while speaking	N: less active listener strategies
G: message abandonment strategies	O: word-oriented strategies
H: attempt to think in English strategies	

### 5.2.1 Communication Strategy Preferences

The OCSI questionnaire identified 15 communication strategies, split between strategies for coping with speaking problems (8 types) and strategies for coping with listening problems (7 types). When addressing speaking issues, learners showed a clear preference for negotiation for meaning while speaking (type C), message reduction and alteration strategies (type E), and nonverbal strategies while speaking (type F). These strategies suggest that learners actively seek to manage communication challenges by negotiating meaning, simplifying or altering their message, or relying on nonverbal cues.

In contrast, message abandonment strategies (type G), where learners give up when they encounter communication difficulties, were rated the lowest. However, despite this, real-life discussions revealed frequent use of message abandonment, highlighting a discrepancy between self-reported data and actual behaviour. This suggests learners may not always recognise how often they resort to abandoning messages when under pressure during real-time interactions.

For listening-related difficulties, nonverbal strategies while listening (type M) were ranked highest, similar to the findings for speaking problems. This emphasises the importance learners place on visual cues to aid comprehension in both speaking and listening contexts. The least utilised strategy was less active listener strategies (type N), where learners adopt a more passive role during conversations, showing a preference for more active approaches to ensure understanding.

### 5.2.2 The Impact of Interlocutors

The presence of different interlocutors had a notable effect on learners' communication strategy use. When interacting with NCIs, participants reported using a broader range of strategies, particularly scanning strategies (type K), nonverbal strategies while listening (type M), and word-oriented strategies (type O). These results suggest that learners take a more active approach in conversations with non-Chinese speakers, using a wider variety of strategies to overcome potential communication barriers.

In contrast, when speaking with CIs, learners reported using fewer strategies, likely due to the shared linguistic and cultural background. This familiarity appeared to facilitate smoother conversations, reducing the need for extensive communication strategies. Learners expressed greater confidence in

these interactions, leading to fewer interruptions and a more natural dialogue, which in turn lessened the need for strategies like negotiation for meaning or scanning.

Additionally, participants noted that when conversing with NCIs, they were more likely to ask follow-up questions and seek clarification, driven by curiosity and a desire to understand differing perspectives. This active engagement was less common with CIs, where learners tended to defer resolving misunderstandings, assuming they could clarify things later outside of the classroom setting. These findings underscore the role that NCIs play in encouraging more frequent and diverse strategy use, pushing learners to engage more actively in communication.

### **5.2.3 Interlocutor Proficiency**

A significant factor influencing learners' use of CSs was the perceived proficiency of their interlocutor. Learners reported using fewer CSs and focusing more on grammatical accuracy when they believed their interlocutor was more proficient. In these situations, learners seemed to prioritise accuracy over strategic competence, likely in an attempt to present themselves as more proficient speakers.

On the other hand, learners were more willing to use a wider variety of CSs when interacting with peers of similar or lower proficiency levels. This suggests that the social dynamics of communication play an important role in shaping learners' strategic choices, as they felt more comfortable experimenting with strategies like circumlocution and non-verbal cues in less intimidating contexts.

## **5.3 Interview Data: Learner Reflections on CS Use**

The semi-structured interviews provided deeper insights into how learners reflected on their use of communication strategies, offering qualitative perspectives that supported the quantitative data from both the observational and questionnaire phases.

### **5.3.1 Strategic Adaptation Based on Interlocutor**

A key theme that emerged from the interviews was learners' adaptation of strategies based on their interlocutor's linguistic and cultural background. Learners reported feeling a greater need to use strategies like *circumlocution* and *approximation* when communicating with NCIs, as they were more aware of potential misunderstandings. One learner noted, "I feel like I have to explain more when I'm speaking to someone from another country because I don't want to confuse them." This sentiment underscores the learners' heightened sense of linguistic responsibility when engaging in intercultural communication.

In contrast, learners felt more relaxed when interacting with CIs and were more likely to take linguistic risks. They expressed a greater willingness to use strategies like *word coinage* and *use of all-purpose words*, as they believed their shared cultural and linguistic background with their peers would make communication breakdowns less severe. This flexibility was often described as a sense of comfort, where learners felt that even if they made mistakes, their CI interlocutors would still understand them.

### **5.3.2 Emotional Responses to Strategy Use**

The interviews revealed a range of emotional responses to the use of CSs. While many learners recognised the value of CSs in allowing them to maintain communication, others expressed frustration at their reliance on these strategies. Several learners mentioned that they felt "stuck" using strategies like circumlocution, which they believed impeded their overall language development. As one participant remarked, "It feels like I'm always finding ways around my vocabulary problems, but I'm not actually improving my English."

Despite these frustrations, many learners acknowledged that communication strategies empowered them to participate in conversations, especially in NCI interactions, where the stakes of communication failure were higher. Learners appreciated having a repertoire of strategies to fall back on, which allowed them to contribute to discussions even when their linguistic resources were limited.

## **5.4 Comparison of Results**

The triangulation of observational, questionnaire, and interview data provides a comprehensive picture of how Chinese English learners use communication strategies in different interlocutor settings. The observation data shows a clear preference for certain strategies (e.g., *circumlocution*, *approximation*) in NCI interactions, while the questionnaire and interview data provide additional insights into learners' emotional responses and perceptions of strategic use.

## **6. Discussion**

The current study offers an in-depth exploration of the communication strategies employed by Chinese EFL learners, with a focus on how learners adapt their strategic communication behaviours in response to different types of interlocutors. The results reveal substantial differences in CS use when learners interact with Chinese interlocutors versus non-Chinese interlocutors. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of strategic competence and highlight the complex interplay of social, linguistic, and contextual factors that influence learners' CS preferences.

### **6.1 Interlocutor Influence on Communication Strategies**

One of the most significant findings of the study is the clear distinction in how learners adapt their CSs depending on whether they are communicating with CIs or NCIs. The observational, questionnaire, and interview data consistently demonstrate that learners are more likely to employ a broader range of CSs, such as circumlocution and approximation, when interacting with NCIs. This adaptation suggests that learners perceive interactions with NCIs as linguistically and cognitively more demanding, thus requiring more effort to maintain conversational flow.

This observation aligns with findings from previous studies, which suggest that interlocutor type plays a crucial role in learners' strategic behaviour (Tarone, 1980; Dörnyei and Scott, 1997). The use of strategies such as circumlocution in NCI interactions could be attributed to learners' heightened awareness of potential communication breakdowns and their attempts to mitigate these breakdowns by providing detailed explanations of unfamiliar terms or concepts. This supports the argument that learners modify their communicative behaviour based on their perception of the interlocutor's linguistic background and proficiency level.

The increased reliance on direct strategies, such as code-switching and message abandonment, in CI interactions provides further insight into how learners tailor their strategies based on perceived linguistic proximity. Given the shared cultural and linguistic background, learners may feel more comfortable relying on direct strategies, which allow them to bypass complex language constructions. This contrasts with interactions with NCIs, where learners might feel the need to sustain the conversation at a higher linguistic level to avoid misunderstandings.

### **6.2 Role of Anxiety and Social Comfort**

The influence of anxiety and social comfort in strategic behaviour cannot be overlooked. The questionnaire data, in particular, highlights that learners report higher levels of anxiety when interacting with NCIs, which, in turn, impacts their choice of strategies. Learners indicated that they feel more self-conscious about potential errors in NCI interactions and are more inclined to use strategies such as *circumlocution* or *approximation* to avoid communication breakdowns. This reflects earlier findings in the literature that suggest a relationship between anxiety and language learning (Horwitz *et al*, 1986; Liu and Jackson, 2011; Rahmatollahi, 2016).

Interestingly, despite the increased anxiety, learners also reported feeling more motivated to use strategies that actively engage their interlocutors, such as asking for clarification and self-repair. This suggests that while anxiety may heighten learners' awareness of their linguistic limitations, it also drives them to employ strategies that foster interaction and negotiation of meaning, particularly in NCI settings. The willingness to engage in interactional strategies reflects an attempt to minimize the impact of anxiety by maintaining control over the communicative process.



Conversely, learners reported feeling more relaxed and willing to take risks in CI interactions, where they felt less pressure to maintain fluency. As a result, strategies like word coinage and guessing were more frequently employed. The learners' comfort in relying on these riskier strategies indicates that the shared linguistic and cultural background reduces the stakes of communication, allowing them to experiment with language use. This aligns with the notion that anxiety and social distance significantly impact the level of strategic risk learners are willing to take.

### **6.3 Negotiation of Meaning and Interactional Competence**

The results also highlight the role of negotiation of meaning as a key component of strategic competence in L2 communication. The observation data showed that learners frequently employed interactional strategies, such as asking for clarification or repetition, particularly in NCI interactions. These strategies were often used to ensure mutual understanding and to prevent communication breakdowns, which suggests that learners perceive NCI interactions as opportunities for active negotiation of meaning.

This aligns with Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1996), which posits that interactional modifications, such as clarification requests, serve as a crucial mechanism for language development. The use of these strategies in NCI settings may provide learners with valuable opportunities to receive comprehensible input and feedback, which can facilitate second language acquisition. Moreover, the frequent use of interactional strategies in these settings indicates that learners are willing to invest additional effort to maintain the conversation and ensure successful communication.

However, in CI interactions, the use of interactional strategies was less frequent, as learners relied more on direct strategies such as code-switching and message abandonment. This difference suggests that learners perceive less need for negotiation of meaning when interacting with CIs, as the shared linguistic and cultural background reduces the likelihood of misunderstandings. This could imply that CI interactions are seen as less valuable for language development, as they do not require the same level of strategic engagement as NCI interactions. The finding raises important questions about the role of interlocutor familiarity in promoting or inhibiting opportunities for meaningful language practice and development.

### **6.4 Communication Strategies as a Reflection of Linguistic Competence**

The findings also provide insight into how learners view CSs as reflections of their overall linguistic competence. The interview data revealed that many learners associate the frequent use of CSs with a lack of proficiency, particularly when it comes to strategies like appeals for help or message abandonment. This perception suggests that while learners recognize the practical value of CSs in maintaining communication, they also view their reliance on these strategies as indicative of their limitations in English.

This finding is consistent with Dörnyei and Kormos' (1998) framework, which posits that learners' perceptions of their linguistic competence influence their strategic behaviour. Learners who feel confident in their abilities are more likely to use strategies that allow for flexibility and experimentation, such as circumlocution and approximation. Conversely, learners who perceive themselves as less proficient are more likely to resort to safer, more conservative strategies, such as asking for help or abandoning the message altogether.

Interestingly, while learners expressed some frustration with their reliance on CSs, they also acknowledged the necessity of these strategies in maintaining communication, particularly in NCI interactions. This suggests that learners experience a tension between their desire to appear proficient and their recognition of the practical value of CSs in enabling them to participate in conversations. This tension highlights the complex role that CSs play in learners' perceptions of their linguistic competence and their communicative self-efficacy.

## **7. Pedagogical Implications**

The findings of this study have several implications for language teaching and curriculum development. First, language instructors should be aware of the role that interlocutor variability plays in learners' CS

use and should encourage learners to adopt more target-language strategies in their interactions. One way to achieve this is by creating opportunities for learners to interact with L2 interlocutors, as these interactions promote the use of English-based strategies and provide valuable practice in real-world communication.

Second, language teachers should explicitly teach CSs as part of the language curriculum. By raising learners' awareness of the different types of strategies available to them, teachers can help learners develop a more flexible and adaptive approach to communication. This includes teaching learners how to use circumlocution, approximation, and other compensatory strategies when they face communication challenges. By incorporating strategy training into classroom activities, learners can be equipped with practical tools to manage communication breakdowns more effectively and increase their confidence in using the target language.

Additionally, the study highlights the need to address learners' reliance on strategies related to their mother tongue and the reduction of meaning in shared-L1 interactions. Teachers can encourage learners to engage more actively with the target language even when speaking with interlocutors who share their L1. This can be achieved by setting clear expectations for target-language use in classroom discussions and group activities. Teachers might also design tasks that specifically require learners to practice English-based strategies, such as role-plays or problem-solving activities with mixed-L1 groups.

Moreover, providing feedback on learners' use of CSs is crucial for helping them refine their approach. Teachers should observe how learners navigate communication challenges in different contexts and offer constructive feedback on their strategy choices. This feedback can guide learners in recognising when to shift from reliance on 'conservative' to more effective L2 strategies, depending on the interactional demands.

Lastly, the findings suggest that language learners benefit from metacognitive reflection on their own CS use. Teachers can facilitate this reflection by incorporating debriefing sessions after speaking activities, where learners can discuss the strategies they employed and assess their effectiveness. Encouraging learners to reflect on the impact of different strategies can help them become more autonomous and self-aware language users, better prepared to handle future communication challenges.

## **8. Limitations and Future Research**

While this study provides valuable insights into learners' use of CSs, it is not without limitations. The sample size, while sufficient for qualitative analysis, may limit the generalisability of the findings to broader populations of Chinese EFL learners. Future research could address this limitation by conducting similar studies with larger and more diverse samples, including learners from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Additionally, the study did not explore the impact of learners' proficiency levels on their strategic behaviour. Future research could investigate how different levels of linguistic competence influence learners' use of CSs and whether more proficient learners exhibit different strategic patterns compared to less proficient learners.

## **9. Conclusion**

This study provides valuable insights into the communication strategies employed by Chinese EFL learners in L2 immersion settings, particularly how their strategy use shifts depending on the linguistic background of their interlocutors. The results indicate that learners can be encouraged to use more CSs, both types and frequencies, when engaging with NCIs. In other words, interlocutors who do not share the same L1 stimulate the use of more active strategies, prompting learners to fully explore their limited linguistic repertoire to resolve communication challenges. This appears to happen less frequently in interactions with CIs. These findings underscore the importance of social dynamics in shaping learners' strategic choices and highlight the need for instructional interventions that promote greater engagement with the target language.

The pedagogical implications of this study are clear: language educators should encourage the use of English-based strategies and provide learners with explicit training in CS use. By fostering an awareness of these strategies and creating opportunities for meaningful interaction in the target language, teachers can help learners develop the skills needed to manage communication challenges and enhance their overall language proficiency.

Future research could further investigate how learners' CS use evolves over time in immersion environments and explore the role of other variables, such as proficiency level, cultural background, and motivation. Additionally, examining the impact of explicit strategy training on learners' ability to manage communication breakdowns in various contexts would provide further insights into the effectiveness of pedagogical interventions.

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