5 Compensatory strategies adopted by Chinese EFL learners in virtual exchange with native speakers

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Abstract

Compensatory strategies play an important role in second language (L2) processing because of limited language knowledge and ensuing anxiety and could help assure understanding and void communication breakdown. Previous studies about compensatory strategies largely adopt laboratory settings and neglect the strategies in authentic oral communication. Accordingly, the present study investigated compensatory strategies used by Chinese university students in online videoconferences with their US peers during a five-week virtual exchange project. We interviewed 27 Chinese students twice, once after the first-week videoconference, the other after the last-week videoconference. The English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in this study could adopt compensatory strategies of different levels. Their strategy use, however, was not flexible enough as several types of strategies were repeatedly used, while other types were rarely implemented. The virtual exchange could help the EFL learners employ compensatory strategies more often, of higher levels, and with increased immediacy. The results can help to establish more targeted English teaching and learning.

Keywords: compensatory strategy, virtual exchange, videoconference, English as a foreign language, China's standards of English language ability.

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1.   Literature review

L2 processing features a high frequency of compensation because of limited language knowledge and ensuing language anxiety (Cieslicka & Heredia, 2011; Galloway, 1981, 1982; Paradis, 1998). English learners often encounter difficulties in initiating and maintaining conversations (Hyter, 2017; Wolfson, 1989), and communication breakdowns result from an inadequate active vocabulary (Poulisse, 1987). These difficulties may hamper collaborative learning with peers. Research has shown that bilinguals exhibit a higher pragmatic sensitivity than monolinguals (Groba et al., 2017) and rely more on pragmatic and paralinguistic cues to achieve understanding and successive output (Yow & Markman, 2011). Those with low L2 proficiency evoke greater adoption of compensatory strategies. Paribakht (1985) mentioned that communication strategy use and proficiency level were related. Poulisse (1987) posited that foreign language proficiency mainly affected the number of compensatory strategies. Poulisse and Schils (2006) later found that proficiency levels were inversely related to the number of compensatory strategies.

Previous studies about compensatory strategies largely adopt an experimental approach that neglects authentic oral communication. Accordingly, this study proposed a descriptive study on compensatory strategies by learners of EFL in natural communication via videoconferences with native English speakers over a five-week virtual exchange project. This study aimed to investigate how Chinese EFL learners used compensatory strategies in a virtual exchange with US native English speakers and how the exchange changed EFL learners' strategy use.

2.   Methods

2.1.   Context and participants

A total of 27 participants at a university in China participated in the study. They were all Mandarin native speakers, second-year university EFL learners. They

participated in a five-week virtual exchange project between an English-skill-based course at their university and a cultural communication course at a US university. During the project, the Chinese EFL learners and 20 US students (all native English speakers) were grouped into ten international groups, each with two to three EFL learners and two native speakers. Every week, each international group held a videoconference on Zoom (free version) in which students interviewed and were interviewed by their international partners following a semi-structured interview approach focusing on a particular topic each week. Each videoconference lasted for at least 30 minutes, with no upper limit.

2.2. Data collection and analysis

We collected data from students' weekly Zoom meeting recordings and interviews. Students were required to submit the recordings as a weekly assignment for the instructors to monitor the progress of their exchange. Eight groups managed to submit all their five meeting recordings, while the other two groups did not, and therefore we abandoned their recordings in data analysis. We carefully watched and coded the total 40 recordings with when and what compensatory strategies were used. All the EFL learners gave us their consent to analyze for academic purposes their English production in the virtual exchange.

Two semi-structured interviews were conducted with each Chinese student, after the first and the last videoconferences following a similar protocol. Typical questions included *Did you use XX strategy often in the Zoom meeting, why and why not?*, *What have you learned concerning dealing with expression difficulty in speaking English?*, and *What will you do if you meet XX difficulties in the Zoom meeting?*. The coding of meeting recordings and interview protocol was developed based on the table *Oral expression strategies: assessment and compensation* in China's Standards of English language ability (CSE[3], p. 69). The CSE classifies different compensatory strategies into nine levels. Each level contains several types of strategies. Given that most EFL learners' English

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3. http://cse.neea.edu.cn/html1/report/18112/9627-1.htm

level in this study falls between CSE Levels 4 to 7 (based on the instructor's evaluation), the present study only included types of compensatory strategies of Levels 4 to 7. The participants' English proficiency was assessed according to their scores in College English Test – Band 4 (CET-4), a test of English proficiency widely recognized in Mainland China (Guo & Sun, 2014). The interviews were conducted in Chinese for more precise understanding and more accurate responses. Then the interview recordings were transcribed and analyzed by thematic data analysis methods. First, we grouped repeating ideas from related passages, synthesized themes by organizing repeating ideas into coherent categories, developed theoretical constructs by grouping themes into more abstract concepts, and finally discussed the results based on related theories and previous studies. We also compared the first-round interview data with the second-round interview data.

3.   Results and discussion

3.1.   Every EFL learner could adopt compensatory strategies of different levels

Through meeting recordings and interviews, we tried to classify EFL learners' compensation competence into different levels. However, it was not feasible as students' compensatory skills were not consistent. For example, one student could infer meaning from context or paralinguistic features (CSE Level 7), but she could not appropriately use paralinguistic features such as stress (CSE Level 5), or self-correction (CSE Level 6).

Also, the compensatory strategies used by the Chinese EFL learners were unevenly distributed within each level. Some strategies were widely adopted; others of the same level, however, were seldom used. For example, many students often inferred meaning from context (CSE Level 7), but very few students tried to confirm details by asking further questions or interject in others' talk for clarification (CSE Level 7). The lack of confirmation and clarification might be caused by the fear that the EFL learners think: "clarification request is face-

threatening especially in an intercultural context". According to the interview data, the uneven distribution was more related to students' conversational styles than to English proficiency.

3.2. Videoconference-based virtual exchange could help EFL learners better apply compensatory strategies

Overall, the EFL learners in this study made progress in trying compensatory strategies more often, of higher levels, and with increased immediacy. Most interviewees reported that they could gradually conduct more timely and dynamic assessments of their oral expressions, and noticed and corrected more language errors with a shorter delay. When misunderstanding occurred in the later phase of the virtual exchange, they gradually tried to request clarification and elaboration from their international partners.

Students owed the development of compensatory strategies concerning the frequency, level, and immediacy to the increased ease and confidence in and courage of speaking English online with their US peers. Familiarity with virtual co-presence, intercultural communication, and their international peers promoted those positive emotions, according to the second-round interview. As one interviewee mentioned,

> "at the beginning of the project, I had to rehearse what I wanted to say and then join the discussion, and also, I felt super anxious if I cannot understand my US partners, but later I found they could understand me despite my grammatical mistakes, so I gradually relaxed and plucked my courage to talk more, to confirm or ask for clarification. They are always very nice and patient to explain".

Therefore, the development of their compensatory strategies was related to a more optimized use of English, positive feelings (such as confidence and courage), improved digital literacy (increasing familiarity with Zoom-based videoconferences), and increased proximity with the virtual exchange partners.

3.3.   English proficiency affected EFL learners' choice of compensatory strategies

The Chinese students with higher English proficiency were more flexible with different compensatory strategies, compensated in a timelier manner for an error or a gap between what they wanted to say and what they could say, adopted more compensatory strategies of higher level, and helped their Chinese peers compensate with communication breakdowns. This finding corroborated previous studies (Paribakht, 1985; Poulisse, 1987). In interviews, one student said: "when I noticed my local partners were silent for quite a moment, I would 'cue' them with questions, so they could join the conversation". In Zoom recordings, we observed that lower-proficiency students, on the contrary, compensated less, used fewer types of strategies and fewer high-level strategies, and showed longer delay before the compensation, as they had a bigger gap between 'what they want to say' and 'what they can say'. One student said in the interview: "I felt frustrated sometimes because when I figured out how to express my idea, the moment had already gone".

It seems that English proficiency influenced the attentional resource EFL learners invested in meaning transfer and focus on language form or logical flow. Students with higher English levels were more likely to have additional attentional resources to notice their non-target-like language use, incomplete understanding, and illogical flow, and therefore, they were more cognitively capable of compensation behaviors.

3.4.   Chinese EFL learners tended to avoid clarification requests, confirmation checks, and comprehension checks

Chinese EFL learners tended to avoid asking further questions to the interlocutor (clarification request or confirmation check) and checking understandings (comprehension check) despite frequent comprehension difficulty and non-understanding among their partners. They would rather search online or ask people physically around them or their Chinese partners on WeChat, as they reckoned that it was less face-threatening than asking for clarification or

confirmation in the Zoom meeting room with the presence of their US partners. "I don't want them [US students] to think that I'm incapable of communicating in English, so I would rather figure things out by myself or ask my Chinese partners later", one interviewee said. They left comprehension checks to the listeners, assuming that the local and international partners would ask for clarification if necessary.

When being asked about reasons why they did not take initiatives to confirm comprehension or clarify confusion, they generally mentioned that "I don't think it's polite to interject while that person was still talking", "since our US partners are native speakers, I would assume it's because my English isn't good enough to understand them", "it's easier to ask my Chinese partners or search online first". Also, the Chinese students were so cognitively occupied with producing English spontaneously in a virtually co-present environment that they did not have the extra cognitive resources to confirm their interlocutors' understanding. Another common reason was that the Chinese students assumed these behaviors suggested incapability or lack of confidence in themselves or their interlocutors.

3.5.   EFL meaning above form

Most interviewees said that they were more focused on communication than on correction so self-repair was mainly done only when the errors affected the message and interaction. The process of self-initiated repair encompasses questioning the meaning or correctness of a language form produced by oneself, noticing errors, and correcting them subsequently (Leeser, 2004).

To self-repair an error, the EFL learners have to allocate selective attention to the gap between their interlanguage and target language (Gass & Torres, 2005) and take initiative to fill up the gap. The self-initiated repair was rare for the errors with low communicative load because the communication in this study was generally meaning-oriented and featured high immediacy, and most of the time interlocutors would not focus on language forms as such behavior might impact the communication flow.

4.   Conclusions

This study has shown that virtual exchanges could boost students' compensatory strategies use, improving their communicative skills. In addition, the five-week videoconference recordings and pre/post interview data gathered in the interviews showed that practice and getting to know the interlocutors increased confidence and improved the use of EFL. Thus, the participation of EFL learners in virtual exchanges on a regular basis could make a difference in their EFL skills. In this sense, virtual exchange offers a meaningful and less costly natural communication environment compared with international physical mobility. We also argue that future virtual exchanges with a longer duration can be more helpful in improving communication skills.

5.   Acknowledgments

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