Researching L2 Strategic Competence

—Conceptualization, Mechanism, and Teachability

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Abstract—**Strategic competence as a crucial component in the construct of communicative competence has been widely recognized. Previous studies mostly focused on distinguishing, defining and advancing CS taxonomies. However, few studies were concerned with the underlying approaches to the defining of CS and with the proper mechanism of how strategic competence operates. This paper firstly revisited the two primary approaches to CS conceptualization, i.e. the process oriented linguistic approach and the product oriented cognitive psychological approach. Then, the study continued to analyze the operating mechanism, i.e. psycholinguistic model of speech production (Faerch & Kasper, 1980, 1983a), in which planning phase is differentiated from execution phase. Finally, the study lent support to the clarification of the controversial question that the CS should be taught or not. As pointed out in the end, CS in L2 communication context supposedly should and could be taught by taking into such factors as Transfer of L1 skills, learners' motivation to communicate, etc.**

Keywords—conceptualizations; operating mechanisms; teachability; strategic competence; communication

I. INTRODUCTION

L2 learners are often faced with problems in lexical level due to insufficient mastery of second language vocabulary, which brings about communication failure or difficulties to learners now and then. However, they are capable to address the problems if one or more of their communication strategies (CS), namely strategic competence, are brought into use. Ever since Canale and Swain (1980) situated strategic competence as an essential element in their construct of communicative competence, it has been widely known that CS plays a crucial role in language performance. And Canale and Swain (1980) defined it as "verbal and non-verbal strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient competence" (p.30).

In considering the past, present, and (by implication) future of strategic competence studies (Tarone, Cohen and Dumas, 1976; Tarone, 1977; Corder, 1978; Faerch & Kasper, 1980, 1983a; Tarone, 1981; Bachman & Palmer, 1996, 2010), I will draw heavily upon the aspects directed at identifying, defining CS. This paper, by revisiting the various conceptualizations of CS and the mechanism, in which

strategic competence operates, reiterates the variability of CSs teaching in L2 learning setting.

II. THE CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF CS

No complete agreement yet has been reached on the conceptualization of CS. However, the last decades has seen an evolution in the definition of communication strategy, shifting from the linguistic perspective to the cognitive-psychological perspective (Dörnyei and Scott, 1997).

A. Product-oriented Linguistic Approach

The linguistic approach primarily taken by such researchers as Tarone, Willems, Faerch & Kasper, and Dörnyei etc., focusing 'on the description of the language produced by L2 learners, essentially characterizing the means used to accomplish reference in terms of the observed form' (Yule and Tarone, 1997. p.19). CS then had been defined characterized with the nature of interaction and psycholinguistics.

1) The Interactional Definition

From the perspective of interactions, CS can be regarded as discourse strategies and devices used to maintain conservation in which second language learners are involved in the interactions (Ellis, 1994). When communication occurred among interlocutors from different ethnic groups, these discourse techniques are frequently used to avoid communication difficulties and facilitate the communication. An early definition of communication strategies was given by Tarone et al. (1976), who believed that CS is "a systematic attempt by the learner to express or decode meaning in the target language, in situations where the appropriate systematic target language rules have not been formed'' . Later she revised and extended her definition and pointed out that the term actually refers to a ''mutual attempt[s] of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in situations where requisite meaning structures do not seem to be shared'' (Tarone, 1980). Usually these strategies are considered as interactional in nature due to the fact that they demonstrate learners' intention to ensure their interlocutors understand them.

It is Tarone's (1977) revision of Tarone et al. (1976) that has been cited extensively in terms of taxonomy deriving from this interactional approach to communication strategies. The taxonomy consists of five categories, i.e. avoidance, paraphrase,

conscious transfer, appeal for assistance, and mime, along with sub-categories of each. On the basis of this typology, researches have mostly centered around the description of the communication strategies learners used and the factors affecting choices of strategy, say, learners' proficiency level, personality, learning situation as well as the nature of the task being performed (Ellis, 1994).

Tarone's definition, however, is far from being well-established. Faerch and Kasper (1984) observed that the interactional view of communication strategies is too narrow to be used in some specific situations, as it's only applicable to 'the negotiation of meaning as a joint effort between two interlocutors' (p.195). Specifically, in some language use for communication, such as silent reading or writing, only one individual is involved, preventing the possibilities of receiving feedbacks from a second interlocutor. However, Tarone (1981) described another kind of strategy, the production strategy, as 'an attempt to employ one's linguistic system effectively and explicitly, with the least effort' (p.289). Same as communication strategies, production strategies are different from the language users' language competence, but they 'are short of the interactional focus on the negotiation of meaning'. (Bachman 1990, p. 99)

2) The Psycholinguistic Definition

From the perspective of psycholinguistics, communication strategies must be cast into a general psycholinguistic model of speech production, including two phases: the planning phase and the execution phase. Feedback or monitoring occurs in each of these phases and their components so that 'errors' in planning or execution phases can be instantly corrected.

The key of Faerch and Kasper's approach lies in the two defining criteria: problem-orientedness and potential consciousness. Problem-orientedness is responsible for the distinction-making between non-strategic communicative goals (which are goals that can be achieved without obstacles), and strategic goals (which present themselves as problems to the interlocutor). Only when those plans include strategic goals can they be regarded as strategies within this framework. As regards to when communication strategies occur, Faerch and Kasper suggest two situations to determine it by depending on whether the problem is a problem during the planning or the execution phase. In the planning phase, the appearance of problems may be due to the inadequate linguistic knowledge concerning a specific goal, or due to problems forecasted by language users during the execution of a particular plan. Often problems occurred in the execution phase are related to withdrawal of the items or regulations in the plan. Potential consciousness is subordinated as it emerges from problem orientation. Supposing that an interlocutor encounters a problem in achieving a goal, it suggests that he is aware that there might be a difficulty. In potential consciousness criterion, only the always consciously used plans and sometimes consciously used plans can be referred to potentially conscious plans. Through the combination of the two defining criteria, communication strategies can be conceptualized as "Communication strategies are potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal (Faerch & Kasper, 1983, p.37)"

The psycholinguistic model of communication strategies made it possible to classify the communication strategies into categories instead of simply listing them out. Based on two basically different ways, the broad classification of communication strategies can be made, i.e. Reduction Strategies and Achievement Strategies. In other words, when confronted with problems in communication, L2 learners might either solve such problems by changing their communicative goal or address the problem directly by figuring out an alternative plan.

B. Process-oriented Cognitive-psychological Approach

Different from the linguistic approach mentioned above, the process-oriented cognitive-psychological approach has been developed by Bialystok (1990) and the Nijmegen Group. In spite of their similar definition of CS to Faerch and Kasper's (1983), they insisted that communication strategies belong to mental procedures in nature. They proposed that researches on communication should probe into the cognitive processes as they determine strategic language use. According to this viewpoint, the soundness of taxonomies would be put in doubt if we center our attention only on the superficial verbalization of essential psychological processes and don't get the cognitive, psychological and psycholinguistic aspects of communication use understood. Therefore, they proposed a fresh new perspective for analysis, focusing on the cognitive "deep structure" of strategic language use rather than engaging in product-oriented research only.

1) Bialystok's cognitive model

Bialystok (1984) offered a more comprehensive approach, aiming to provide an explanation for L1 and L2 speakers, who are learning to employ CS.

It was claimed that it might be of significance to employ problematicity, consciousness and intentionality to define communication strategies from the perspective of applied linguistics or pedagogy, and the three criteria seemed to be questionable when they were adopted to analyze child language development. To take a further step, it does make sense as the three major criteria all involve in the metacognitive skills, which are not available for children when learning their first language. In this context, she again proposed a model of language proficiency in which two processing components are included: analysis of knowledge and control of processing. Each of the components corresponds to a different dimension of processing. They are part of the mechanism responsible for language use and for progress in proficiency. The first processing component represents the process to make mental representations of information cumulatively structured. Interestingly, through necessary analysis, representations of meaning and representations of language could be converted. The second component is to control processing or to select attention. Whatever cognitive activity is and whenever it happens, only those selected sections of available information can be paid attention to.

In conformity with her cognitive theory about language processing, Bialystok came up with two kinds of communication strategies, i.e. analysis-based and control-based strategies. Analysis of knowledge means that learners are

capable of ''representing the structure of knowledge along with its content'' (p. 45). In other words, it's the capability to alter the information content through utilizing the concept's knowledge. To fulfill that, such strategies as giving a concept or object a definition, or applying circumlocution, may be used. Cognitive control is the learner's capability to ''deliberately deal with related aspects of a problem and not be misled by distracting alternatives'' (p. 46) while control-based strategies are able to control the ways of utterance by virtue of integrating resources from outside the L2 so as to deliver the message that we intend to express.

2) *Views from the Nijmegen Group*

The Nijmegen group aimed to study the differences beyond linguistic level, and to investigate thoroughly the basic psychological processes behind the use of communication strategies. Based largely on the well-known psycholinguistic model of speech production, the group put forward their own taxonomy (Levelt, 1989, 1990). In that way, they initiated their researches, focusing mainly on examining a subclass of communication strategies, i.e. compensatory strategies, which was to inquire into the relationship between those strategies and learners' proficiency level, and to work out the relative effectiveness of specific strategy types (Poulisse, 1990).

According to Nijmegen's viewpoints, compensatory strategy consists of two types: conceptual or code compensatory strategies (Kellerman, Bongaerts and Poulisse 1987; Bialystok and Kellerman 1987; Poulisse 1987; Kellerman 1991). Here, conceptual strategies are the ones that the participant employed to manipulate the concept of the target object so as to expound the item. Generally speaking, this manipulation is accomplished by the two secondary strategies: conceptual–analytic strategy and conceptual–holistic. The former is one type of conceptual strategies that the learner used for choosing and expressing explicit characteristics of the target object. Conversely, the latter one is another type of strategy that the learner names a substitute target which shares properties with the target object, or which constitutes part of the same hierarchically organized structure. When linguistic or code compensatory strategies are executed, learners usually apply their linguistic knowledge to their end. Linguistic strategies can also be divided into two subcategories of which morphological creativity is a part. The creative use of morphological form in L2 happens when learners are trying to produce new vocabularies, presuming that the interlocutors may well understand without difficulties in communication. This creative strategy was known as coinage of words. Strategy of transfer, another one of the subcategories, capitalizes on the similarities between different languages and gives expressions of the insufficiency in L2 proficiency.

III. THE OPERATING MECHANISMS OF CS

Canale and Swain's (1980) description of strategic competence in the framework of communicative competence is to show a compensatory function when language users are lacking in the linguistic competence. Canale (1983) further stressed the dimension of the prior definition so that both the compensatory characteristics of communication strategies and the enhancement characteristics of production strategies had been taken into consideration here. However, they are still limited in that they do not situate strategic competence in the construct of its operating mechanism though these definitions provided some indication of the function of strategic competence which definitely facilitates real-life communication.

By drawing on the previous researches in cognitive and psycholinguistic studies, Faerch &Kasper (1983) bought the psycholinguistic model of speech production into use. This model basically claimed that there are two phases in speech production, i.e. a planning phase and an execution phase. The execution phase is comprised of neurological and physiological processes, in which the speech organs produce sounds and gestures and signs are used etc. while the planning phase includes three components, i.e. communicative goals, a planning process and plan. During the planning phase, the language user chooses the most proper regulations and terms to organize a plan whose execution would result in speech acts which are intended to reach the original goal.

Three elements are included in communicative goals, actional element, modal element and propositional element. And the actional element shares some characteristics with speech acts, the modal element dealing with the relationship between the interlocutors, and the propositional element relating to the communication content.

By undergoing a situational analysis, L2 learner formulates an assumption about what linguistic knowledge are grasped by both him/her and his communicators. It is quite significant across all communicative situations in order to understand one's actual communicative resources in the designated situation, rather than one's underlying resources.
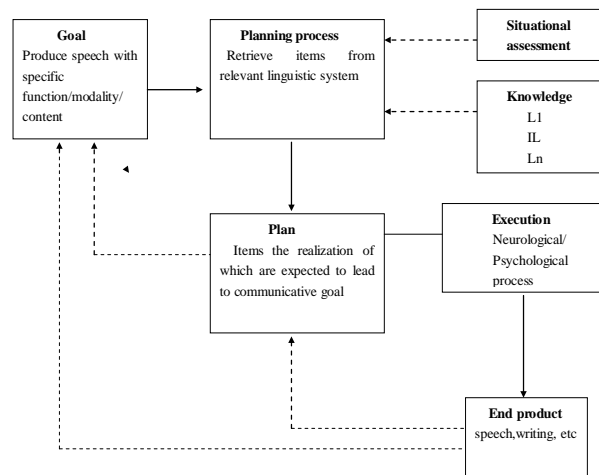

Fig. 1. A Model of Speech Production (Faerch and Kasper, 1983)

IV. THE VARIABILITY OF CS TEACHING

Should CS be taught? That seems to be a question along with the development of CS. In general, there are four main relatively congruent arguments to explain the idea that CS should be taught in classrooms.

A. Strategic competence: part of learner's communicative competence

As Canale & Swain's famous framework (Canale & Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983; Swain, 198 5) pointed out, communicative competence consists of four elements: linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competence (Bachman, 1996). And the first three elements point to the knowledge of language code, the socio-cultural restrictions and regulations directing the employment of the language code, and of the discourse rules used to deliver coherent and cohesive information. Strategic competence, as a different element from others, deals with the capability of making use of the strategic devices of solving problems in communication when L2 learners get across communication barriers resulting from the insufficient command of the second/foreign language competence.

Dörnyei & Thurrell (1991), together with Manchón (1988), Tarone (1984) and Willems (1987), specifically pointed out that developing students' use of CS should be listed as one of the goals of L2 teaching to strengthen their communicative competence. From Tarone's perspective, each component of communicative competence should be paid attention to in the foreign language setting because 'a student who has failed to develop competence in any of these components cannot truly be said to be proficient in the foreign language' (Tarone, 1984: 129).

It could be assumed that not only these important strategies are not regarded as necessary part in language teaching but also they are not successfully implemented, unless learners are called to pay attention to this specific component of their communicative competence. Both Tarone (1984) and Willems (1987) emphasized that, contrary to traditional learners, simply by "doing" method, classroom learners can't learn well if the foreign language classroom doesn't constitute the proper language context where learners will involve 'naturally' in a range of communicative situations that promote the progressing of their strategic competence. Thus learners should receive training of using CS. Those proposals correspond to the advantages of strategy teaching. People found that explicit (or implicit) instruction on how to make use of strategies brings about an reinforced meta-cognitive consciousness to the L2 learners, this in turn supports strategies to maintain with the passage of time and the transfer of their use to other new learning tasks.

B. L1 skills Transfer

In spite of the apparent similarities between L1 and L2 communication, significant dissimilarities can also be found still.

Firstly, in L2 communication, learners may be confronted with a broader variety of difficulties and therefore some more strategies need to be manipulated to address them. As Wiese (1984) illuminated, L1 and L2 speakers show differences not only in how much they know about language, but also in how much knowledge are available for them and can be used. Besides, a great deal of evidence show that L2 learners, because of insufficient knowledge (i.e. linguistic deficits) or lacking automatized resources, are slower than their L1

counterparts when planning or executing their speeches (Dechert, 1984, from Manchón, 2000). More problems need yet to be solved with the implementation of communication strategies.

Secondly, just as Faerch & Kasper (1986) held, L2 users have access to and are able to use extra devices of solving problems. That's due to their problem-solving devices which can be procured from two kinds of knowledge sources: their L1 and their L2. However, strategies exclusive to second language learners do not exist as we expected.

Thirdly, although Willems (1987) recognized that L2 users possess a series of CS which are produced in L1 and thus an "inherent" strategic competence (p. 351), he still insisted CS training on condition that there are many significant individual discrepancies in terms of how many strategies students grasp and of how skillful learners could employ them. He claimed it is advisable that differences in age should be considered. Seeing from the similar perspective, Faerch & Kasper (1986) assert that a series of available CS doesn't lead us to think that L2 users "necessarily know in advance what strategy types are most adequate under various communicative conditions" (p. 187). They make the proposition that teaching students how to use CS can be considered as a method of increasing student's meta-communicative consciousness of the aspects which influence selection of appropriate strategies.

C. Classroom and real-life communication gap

Dissimilar to the traditional idea that teaching language should be focused on classroom teaching with explicit instructions, it claimed that the strategies can be developed naturally without instruction and there is 'an inevitable gap between what learners are taught and what they need in present and future non-educational situations' (Faerch & Kasper, 1986: 17 9). Some empirical studies managed to validate CS teaching to be a solution of bridging the gap between classroom and face-to-face communication (Faerch & Kasper, 1983b; Manchón, 1987). Previous researchers like Faerch & Kasper (1986: 180) believed that "bridging the gap between learners' linguistic and pragmatic knowledge in the L2 and the specific communicative means needed to cope with unforeseen situations".

What we have discussed before could be understood in the way that instructional CS use will enable L2 learners more automated about how to use them. It was mentioned (Cohen, 1998) that programs of strategy training should be oriented to enabling learners to improve their extracurricular use of the target language to some extent.

D. Student's security, self-confidence and motivation to communicate

Another viewpoint in favor of teaching CS shows that the training is conducive to strengthening students' sense of security and confidence when trying to make use of his/her L2 resources for communication, and thus they feel much more encouraged to study the L2 (Willems, 1987) or to communicate in the L2 (Manchón, 198 8; Dornyei & Thurrell, 1991; Kebir, 1994). These ideas have gained some empirical evidence in a Danish context, in which secondary school students being the

participants, an experiment of teaching CS was conducted, primarily consisting of the following three subparts: (1) replaying a video recording (to discuss the effectiveness of the strategies employed); (2) direct instructions of CS and the interactional use of CS; and (3) role play activities (to oblige the learners to employ CS). After a teaching program about 3 months, a large shift was found in the student's attitude towards communication. Also, students were found to become more tolerant of mistakes, with most of them believing that holding on communication is much more important than hardly seeking precision. Coincidently, another study in Australia with adult migrants got similar outcomes (Faerch & Kasper, 1986). It was found that L2 learners ended up being more conscious of how to become competent in later communication, and being more self-confidence and more intentional to take risks in communication. Meanwhile, they became even more experienced in facing up communication failure at the cost of accuracy.

V. SUMMARY

In the last decades, it has been a centrality of understanding the strategic competence and strategic language use in SLA and EFL/ESL pedagogy. This paper provided a brief historical context of CS studies with the discussion of several essential issues of communication in L2. Firstly, the two primary theoretical approaches to conceptualizing CS, namely, linguistic approach and cognitive-psychological approach, together with the perspectives which they rely primarily on, have been discussed. Then, as the basis for the interpretation of communication strategies use, Faerch and Kasper's psycholinguistic model of speech production (1983, as in Fig. 1) has been presented as a whole, which was featured as appealing to individual's general psycholinguistic process in real-life communications. Lastly, after going through the discussions of two arguments, great support was lent to the

clarification of the controversial or contestable question that CS should be taught in L2 communication context.

ACKNOWLEGMENT

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