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THE EFFECT OF LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY ON COMUNICATION STRATEGY USE: A CASE STUDY OF GALICIAN LEARNERS OF ENGLISH[1]

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1. INTRODUCTION

The term *communication strategies* –hereafter CS– refers to all those devices language learners use to overcome linguistic difficulties encountered when trying to communicate in a foreign language with a reduced interlanguage system. Two different and at the same time closely related goals have guided the research in this area: firstly, to arrive at a definitive description of the nature of this phenomenon and of the specific types of strategies available (Tarone, 1977; 1981; Faerch and Kasper, 1983; Bialystok, 1990; Poulisse, Bongaerts and Kellerman, 1990); secondly, to explain the use that foreign language speakers make of these strategies. The possible influence on this use of certain learner-related factors –such as proficiency level (Tarone, 1977; Bialystok, 1983; Paribakht, 1985; Poulisse *et al.*, 1990; Liskin-Gasparro, 1996; Jourdain, 2000), native language (Tarone and Yule, 1987; Si-Qing, 1990), personality (Haastrup and Phillipson, 1983) or learning and cognitive style (Luján and Clark, 2000; Littlemore, 2001)– and task-related features –like cognitive demands, time constraints or interlocutor's role (Poulisse *et al.*, 1990; Khanji, 1993)– have been widely studied. Other related issues such as the comprehensibility and effectiveness of different strategies (Ervin, 1979; Bialystok, 1983; Poulisse *et al.*, 1990), the relationship between first and second language strategic behavior (Poulisse *et al.*, 1990) and

the possibility of teaching CS in the foreign language classroom (Tarone, 1984; Dörnyei, 1995) have also been considered.

One of the questions to which more empirical research has been devoted is the study of the relationship between the language learners' proficiency and their use of CS. A better understanding of this relationship is expected to shed important light on the acquisition process and have significant bearing on language teaching practice; however, after more than two decades of research in this area, no definitive conclusions have yet been reached. Although it is now a well-accepted fact that the degree of proficiency affects CS use, to what extent and in which specific ways is still an open question and a fruitful object of research.

The possibility of an influence of the proficiency factor on the foreign language learner's use of CS was suggested even in the early approaches to the study of the phenomena, although no empirical data supporting this idea were available at the time (Tarone, 1977; Corder, 1978). Subsequent studies attempted to test this hypothesis, reaching two main conclusions. On the one hand, Hyde (1982) found that lower level students make more frequent use of CS than more proficient ones because they encounter more problems in communication due to their more limited command of the target language. On the other hand, Bialystok and Fröhlich (1980), and Bialystok (1983) provided evidence of a relationship between the learner's proficiency and their choice of specific CS types, more specifically of what these authors called *L1-based* and *L2-based* strategies. In order to overcome linguistic deficiencies in the second language, low level students resort to the borrowing of lexical items from their first language more often than high level learners, whereas the latter use a significantly higher proportion of L2-based strategies, i.e. strategies based on the speaker's manipulation of their resources in the foreign language.

Although small-scale and fairly exploratory in nature, these studies established the main lines of research for later, more comprehensive analyses. Paribakht (1985), Manchón (1989), Si-Qing (1990) and Liskin-Gasparro (1996), despite adopting different analytical frameworks and methodological designs, obtained similar results and provided further support for the hypothesis that, both in terms of frequency and choice, CS use correlates with degree of proficiency.

However, evidence that contradicts this hypothesis has also been found. During the late 1980s a group of researchers carried out a study considered the most ambitious and comprehensive research on CS to date: the Nijmegen project. Rigorous quantitative and statistical analyses were conducted on more than 4,000 instances of CS obtained from a total of 45 Dutch learners of English with three different levels of proficiency. Although a significant inverse relationship was found between the absolute number of CS used and the degree of proficiency of

the speakers, the results suggest that the proficiency factor has a slightly limited influence on the choice of particular CS types. The impact of proficiency was overruled by that of other factors, such as the nature of the communicative task used in the elicitation of the data (Poulisse and Schils, 1989; Poulisse, 1990; Poulisse *et al.*, 1990). When considering these findings it is necessary to bear in mind that these researchers adopted a psycholinguistic approach to the study of CS. This means that they focused on only a subgroup of CS, *compensatory strategies*, and classified them according to a taxonomy which emphasized psychological plausibility and parsimony, paying little attention to output differences. Furthermore, although the amount of quantitative data is impressive, no qualitative analyses were completed on the question of the influence of proficiency.

In recent years research has widened its scope to focus on the influence that proficiency has, not only on number and types of CS used, but also on their linguistic realization. Jourdain (2000) found that one's ability to make use of certain CS, *paraphrase* strategies, increases with proficiency; that is, more proficient students seem to become more native-like and, consequently, more effective and successful in their strategic behavior.

All these contributions suggest that, although the influence of proficiency on CS use is a widely accepted fact, it seems to be more complex than initially thought and, consequently, further research is still required.

2. THE PRESENT STUDY

The object of the present investigation is the study of the effect of different levels of proficiency on the use that Galician learners of English as a foreign language make of CS. Whereas most previous research has drawn its conclusions from statistical analysis of the data, we aim at obtaining a more comprehensive view on this question by using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis.

Attention will be paid to those strategies Galician learners use to solve lexical problems encountered when trying to communicate orally in the English language; in other words, we will be focusing on communication problems resulting from learners' gaps in the target language lexicon. Most research already undertaken on CS has concentrated exclusively on lexical strategies, and by following the same approach we hope to make our results comparable to those of previous research and at the same time to narrow down the otherwise too broad scope of our study.

Building on the results of previous empirical research on the issue of the relationship between proficiency and CS use and what is known so far about the nature of these strategies, two hypotheses were formulated.

Hypothesis 1. When performing the same tasks less proficient students will make more frequent use of CS than more proficient ones.

Since lower level students have a more limited command of the target language vocabulary than more proficient ones, they are expected to encounter more lexical difficulties in the accomplishment of the same communicative tasks and, therefore, to make more frequent use of CS. As seen above, the results of most previous studies support this hypothesis (Hyde, 1982; Paribakht, 1985; Poulisse et al., 1990).

Hypothesis 2. When performing the same tasks the choice of CS will vary according to the speakers' proficiency in the target language.

Certain kinds of CS make higher linguistic demands than others. On account of this and despite the mixed and inconclusive results of previous research (Bialystok and Fröhlich, 1980; Bialystok, 1983; Poulisse et al., 1990), it can be hypothesized that the patterns of strategy choice of our subjects will vary in function of the development of their interlanguage.

Because of their higher command of the foreign language system, advanced students can be expected to find in this language alternative means to convey their intended messages more often than less proficient students. Consequently, they should need to resort to the less demanding but also communicatively less effective strategies –such as the total omission of their messages or the use of their native languages– less frequently than less proficient students.

3. METHOD

3.1. Participants

The data for this study was collected at the University of Santiago de Compostela and all the foreign language learners participating in the project are Galician students of English at different academic levels. Galician learners differ from students from other areas of Spain in that they have a bilingual background. All the participants in the present study are native speakers of both Spanish and Galician, but some of them have Spanish as their first language while others Galician. However, this difference seems to have no effect on their use of CS in the English language that might interact with their degree of proficiency, as can be seen in Fernández Dobao (1999; 2001).

In order to study CS use in relation to a representative range of degrees of proficiency, three different groups of learners with clear differences in their command of English were selected. No language level test could be administered to the participants. The selection was made rather on the basis of the learners' academic levels, on the assumption that students in the same year, having studied English for the same number of years and passed exams of the same level would have a similar degree of proficiency. Those factors which may affect language proficiency, such as attendance at extra-curricular English classes, stays in English-speaking countries or contacts with native speakers of this language were also checked with the aim of guaranteeing the homogeneity of each group.

The lowest proficiency group was made up of five students in their third year of Spanish secondary education (E.S.O.), who were all attending class in the same school and group. They will be referred to as the elementary level students. The others were undergraduate students of English Language and Literature (English Philology) at the University of Santiago de Compostela, five in their first year, classified as intermediate, and five in their fourth year, categorized as advanced level students since it was supposed that they would have the highest degree of proficiency of the three groups of participants.

Three English native speakers were also asked to participate in the investigation, with the aim of obtaining native speaker data that could be used as a baseline for the analysis of the subjects' performance. These participants were selected on a volunteer basis among a group of British students who were at that moment studying at the University of Santiago de Compostela.

3.2. Materials and procedures

The instruments employed in the elicitation of the data were designed to obtain from the participants a sample of oral production in English that could be considered as representative as possible of natural oral communication in the foreign language. It was also necessary that these instruments should make possible the identification and classification of CS instances with a high degree of reliability. Since it is known from previous research that differences in elicitation task design may affect CS use, interacting with the proficiency factor in complex ways (Poulisse et al., 1990), I opted for using a variety of data collection instruments: a picture story narration, a photograph description and a ten-minute conversation (see Appendix A).

In the first two tasks students were asked to narrate the story depicted in a series of pictures and to describe a photograph in as much detail as possible. The

pictures and the photograph provided a constant pre-selected content to be communicated by all the learners, a factor which facilitates comparative analyses of the data. For this reason, these tasks have become two of the most widely used instruments in CS research (Tarone, 1977; Hyde, 1982; Poulisse *et al.*, 1990).

The conversation task was used in order to obtain a sample of oral language that could be considered as fair an example of normal everyday communication as possible. The aim of this task was to engage the students in a conversation with the researcher, that is, myself, in which they could talk about personal topics of interest and shift freely from topic to topic as in normal social interaction. Whereas in the other two tasks the researcher acted only as an observer, here she took active part as interlocutor in the interaction.

A retrospective interview was also held between the researcher and each of the participants one day after the accomplishment of the communicative tasks. In order to elicit speakers' intuitions on their oral productions, students were asked to look at the transcripts of their performance and to point out to the interviewer all those communication problems they had experienced as a result of a lexical deficiency and the strategic techniques they had used to solve them. Students turned out to be highly collaborative, being in general quite aware of their strategic behaviors and providing invaluable information for the analysis of CS.

3.3. CS identification

The oral language productions of the learners in the accomplishment of the three communicative tasks were audio recorded, transcribed and analyzed in order to identify all CS instances in the data. In this process the researcher was guided by three different sources of evidence: problem indicators, differences between foreign and native language versions of the same task and retrospective data.

Problem indicators include errors, non-native like forms, dysfluencies or hesitation phenomena such as pauses, repetitions or false starts, and more explicit statements like *I mean* or *how do you say...?* These become highly frequent when lexical difficulties in language production are being experienced and they often signal instances of CS use. However, they need to be treated with caution since some of them can also be the result of other kinds of production phenomena, such as interpretation or recall difficulties or even systematic features evidencing the stage of the speaker's interlanguage development.

Native language versions of the picture story narration and photograph description tasks were also elicited for identification purposes. These versions are supposed to reflect the original communicative intention of the speaker -what they

would have said if they had not been constrained by an imperfect command of the target language (Hyde, 1982). Differences between the content provided by the subjects' performance and that provided by the native speakers are quite often the result of foreign language lexical gaps and subsequent CS uses. Although not definitive, since they can also have their origin in memory lapses or restructuring processes, these differences constitute a helpful pointer to possible CS uses.

Finally, the data elicited in the retrospective interview was used to corroborate or rule out the strategies identified with these two techniques. Although introspective techniques do also have certain limitations —speakers cannot always be expected to be aware of the strategic nature of their behavior and sometimes they just forget about it, it is known from previous research that there are always some instances of CS which can only be identified with the speaker's help (Poulisse, Bongaerts and Kellerman, 1987). In fact, in this study retrospective comments turned out to be the most fruitful and reliable source of evidence of CS uses. Students not only clarified the researcher's initial analyses, they also provided evidence of other CS instances unidentifiable by external observation.

Despite the weaknesses observed, the triangulation of three different sources of evidence seems to provide a high degree of reliability in the CS identification process. It also helps to compensate for the lack of a second assessor since both the CS identification and classification tasks had to be carried out by the researcher alone.

3.4. CS classification

The strategies identified in the data were subsequently classified. For this purpose Tarone's (1977; 1981) taxonomy was adopted. Apart from being one of the most widely used classification systems in the field of CS research, this taxonomy seems to be the one which best fits our data and the purposes of our analysis, since Tarone distinguishes three main categories of CS which make it possible to directly test our second hypothesis: avoidance, paraphrase and conscious transfer strategies.

1. *Avoidance.* Avoidance strategies refer to all those techniques by which the speaker, lacking the necessary target language item to convey the originally intended message, does not make reference to it. Within this group two types of strategies can be distinguished:

1.a. *Topic avoidance.* The speaker, lacking the necessary vocabulary to refer to an object, action or idea, avoids any kind of reference to it.

(1) "... the child i:::s (2) wearing a::: jacket (1) and a::: short trousers (.) like a uniform ...".[2] (Tie).

1.b. *Message abandonment.* The speaker begins to talk about a concept but, feeling unable to continue, stops before reaching the communicative goal.

(2) "... the old man (.) is e:::h wearing (1) is (.) he's dressed (.) dressed up (.) with a::: (1) e:::h (1) a::: and the::: (1) the boy is ...". (Tie).

In order to make a distinction between topic avoidance and message abandonment, hesitation devices and speakers' retrospective comments have been crucial.

2. *Paraphrase.* The speaker exploits his/ her resources in the target language to develop an alternative means to convey the original message. This can be achieved in at least three different ways:

2.a. *Approximation.* The speaker substitutes the desired unknown target language item with a new one which, although incorrect, is thought to share enough semantic features with it to be correctly interpreted.

(3) "... and well he's wearing a (1) a::: hat? ...". (Cap).

2.b. *Word coinage.* The learner makes up a new word following the target language rules of derivation and composition.

(4) "... houseshoes ...". (Slippers).

2.c. *Circumlocution.* The learner describes an object or action instead of using the appropriate target language item.

(5) "... it's like ja- jacket without the::: the sleeves ..." (Waistcoat).

3. *Conscious transfer.*[3] The speaker can also communicate their intended meaning transferring items from their first language or any other language they know, and this can be done in two different ways:

3.a. *Literal translation.*[4] The learner uses a first language item or structure modified in accordance with the features of the target language.

(6) "... but (1) I like (.) periodism too (3) I don't ...". (Journalism).

3.b. *Language switch.* The speaker uses a first language item with no modification at all.

(7) "... her (1) e:::h shirtsleeve is mm (2) remangada (laugh) I don't know ...". (Rolled up).

4. *Appeal for assistance.*[5] The learner asks the interlocutor for help.

5. *Mime.* The learner uses a gesture or any other paralinguistic form to refer to an object or event.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to compare the use that the three different language level groups of students make of CS, the strategies identified in the data, classified according to the taxonomy proposed, were submitted to quantitative and qualitative analyses. The results obtained made it possible to test the set of hypotheses formulated at the beginning of the study.

Hypothesis 1. When performing the same tasks less proficient students will make more frequent use of CS than more proficient ones.

A frequency count of the number of CS used by each group of students was carried out. The results reveal differences between them in the number of CS used for the accomplishment of the same communicative tasks, but they do not substantiate the hypothesized inverse relationship between learners' degree of proficiency and frequency of CS use.

Table 1. PROFICIENCY LEVEL AND NUMBER OF CS

	Elementary students	Intermediate students	Advanced students
Number of CS	260	138	221

The lowest level group of students, elementary students, used a considerably larger number of strategies than the more proficient intermediate and advanced learners. These results agree with those of previous research and initially confirm our assumption that, because of their more limited command of the target language vocabulary, less proficient students would encounter greater lexical difficulties, thus needing to make use of a larger number of CS.

But contradictory evidence was also obtained when comparing the strategic behavior of intermediate and advanced learners: intermediate students used fewer CS than the more proficient advanced students. Furthermore, the latter used a relatively high number of CS when compared not only to intermediate but also to elementary students.

Two studies, Hyde (1982) and Poulisse *et al.* (1990), suggested the untested possibility that more important than the total number of CS used in the accomplishment of a task is the relationship between CS instances and amount of content provided. Given their nature the communicative tasks used to elicit our data allow a considerable degree of freedom regarding the amount and specificity of content to be communicated. On account of this, it is likely that advanced students, in their last year of English Philology and therefore expected to have a high level, near native-like command of the English language, will set higher communicative goals for the accomplishment of these tasks than elementary or intermediate students; that is, they will try to produce more language and to provide more accurate and complex information, thus encountering greater lexical difficulties.

In order to test this possibility and find an explanation for the apparently contradictory results obtained, further analyses of the data were carried out. In an attempt to measure the amount of language provided by each of our three groups of students straightforward count of the words used to accomplish the data collection tasks was made. As can be seen in table 2 below, advanced students produced considerably longer renditions than intermediate and elementary ones, and the ratio of CS to words shows that, when considered in relation to the amount of language provided, CS were in fact less frequent in the performance of more proficient students. Even though the differences between advanced and intermediate students are not as clear as those between intermediate and elementary ones, the results obtained initially support our first hypothesis.

Table 2. NUMBER OF WORDS AND NUMBER OF CS

	Elementary students	Intermediate students	Advanced students
Number of words	8,242	8,227	14,603
Number of CS	260	138	221
Ratio of CS to words	1:31	1:59	1:66

The differences in the amount of language provided seem to suggest that in fact intermediate and advanced students approached the tasks in different ways. However, a higher word count does not always imply greater specificity or more content, particularly when dealing with non-native speaker data, prolific in phenomena such as repetitions, false starts, rambling speech and the like. Therefore, in order to confirm that advanced students' renditions were not only longer but also more complete and accurate than those of their elementary and

intermediate counterparts, and that this affected their use of CS, it was necessary to make further qualitative analyses.

With this aim and given the apparent variability of the different accounts of the same tasks, a common baseline was identified which enabled us to establish realistic comparative analyses across the performances of different groups of students. Following Tarone and Yule (1989), the essential structure of the picture story narration task[6] was identified, i.e. "those actions and objects which were mentioned by all (or almost all) the subjects in performing the task" (Tarone and Yule, 1989: 117).

For the purposes of this study the essential structure was outlined on the basis of the performance of the three English native speakers. The items included in the essential structure, which can be seen in Appendix C, appeared repeatedly in their narratives. These items were considered to constitute the core of the information required to complete this task successfully and, on this basis, they can be used as a baseline to find out to what extent one account is more complete or provides more information than another. Furthermore, since the essential structure identifies the objects or actions to be included in the narration and not the vocabulary to be used -speakers may realize this essential structure by means of a wide range of referential expressions including those resulting from a CS use-, the analysis of the essential task structure also makes it possible to compare the accuracy and complexity of the different referential expressions used by different learners to name the same object, action or idea.

Using the essential structure to measure the amount of information provided in each performance, it was found that advanced students made reference to more objects and actions than intermediate ones. Of the items identified as constituents of the essential structure and therefore as necessary topics for the successful accomplishment of the narration, advanced students mentioned 87%, whereas intermediate students only referred to 76%. This again supports our suspicion that advanced learners' accounts of the story were more detailed and complete.

The effect that these different patterns of behavior have on the number of CS becomes evident in the analysis of the following extracts of our students' performance. When describing the clothing of the father character the three native speakers mentioned he was wearing a "shirt with rolled up sleeves". "Rolled up sleeves" is not a common item in the lexicon of English language learners at these levels; in fact, when asked about it in the retrospective interview, only one of the participants in our study claimed to know the appropriate target language expression to convey this idea. This did not constitute a problem for intermediate students who, according to their own retrospective comments, did not consider it a relevant detail. Four of the five advanced students, however, tried to include this

feature in their descriptions. As they were not acquainted with the foreign language expression "rolled up sleeves", they made use of a CS.

ESSENTIAL STRUCTURE ITEM: "shirt with rolled up sleeves".

(8) INTERLANGUAGE SENTENCE: "... a::: (1) a shirt (1) and ...".

CS ANALYSIS: topic avoidance: according to the speaker's own retrospective comments, the rolled up sleeves are not mentioned because the learner lacks the necessary vocabulary to refer to this item.

(9) INTERLANGUAGE SENTENCE: "... and a shirt with long sleeves but the the sleeves are (.) folded...".

CS ANALYSIS: approximation: the speaker uses "folded" for "rolled up", a lexical item thought to be incorrect but to share enough semantic features with the intended one to be correctly interpreted.

(10) INTERLANGUAGE SENTENCE: "... he's wearing a shirt (1) a a long sleeve shirt (.) but he has the the the sleeves up...".

CS ANALYSIS: approximation: the speaker uses "up" for "rolled up", a lexical item thought to be incorrect but to share enough semantic features with the intended one to be correctly interpreted.

(11) INTERLANGUAGE SENTENCE: "... a shirt (.) eh hi- his shirt is (.) is rolled (.) mm (1) pulled rolled (.) rolled up (2) I don't know (.) the word (1) say that mm...".

CS ANALYSIS: approximation: the speaker uses "pulled" and "rolled up"; according to the own speaker's retrospective comments, these items are thought to be incorrect but to share enough semantic features with the intended one to be correctly interpreted.

These extracts constitute only one example of how advanced students' attempts to provide more detailed and complete accounts of the picture story brought them up against a larger number of lexical problems and made them use more CS than intermediate learners. A detailed analysis of the transcripts reveals that advanced students did not only mention a higher number of the essential structure items, they quite often went beyond the essential structure in at least two different ways: by providing additional details, personal comments and in general more information than necessary for the normal accomplishment of the task, and by using more specific and usually more complex expressions than strictly required, in an attempt to be as accurate as possible. As can be seen in the following extracts from advanced students' narratives, the amount and accuracy of the content to be communicated led them encounter new lexical difficulties and to increase their use

of CS, whereas intermediate students, much more cautious, focused on communicating the essential information.

(12) ESSENTIAL STRUCTURE: "door is opened and second man appears".

INTERLANGUAGE SENTENCE: "... the door has been (1) e:::h (1) opened (1) ... the short man is e:::h (2) e:::h (.) in a stair...".

CS ANALYSIS: approximation: the speaker uses "stair" for "step", a lexical item thought to be incorrect but to share enough semantic features with the intended one to be correctly interpreted.

(13) ESSENTIAL STRUCTURE: "house has flowered wallpaper".

INTERLANGUAGE SENTENCE: "... and the the house inside it seems (1) to be::: (.) awful (laugh) ... (.) with a with a wallpaper with (.) flowers...".

CS ANALYSIS: approximation: according to the retrospective interview comments, the speaker uses "awful" for "tacky", a lexical item thought to be incorrect but to share enough semantic features with the intended one to be correctly interpreted.

(14) ESSENTIAL STRUCTURE: "father is wearing trousers".

INTERLANGUAGE SENTENCE: "... a trouser like ... (2) yeah the suit you go when you (.) you wear when you go running ...".

CS ANALYSIS: circumlocution: the learner describes "sports trousers" in the lack of the appropriate target language item.

(15) ESSENTIAL STRUCTURE: "little boy is looking at them".

INTERLANGUAGE SENTENCE: "... and the the little boy is looking at the two men ...".

CS ANALYSIS: approximation: according to the retrospective interview comments, the speaker uses "looking" for "staring", a lexical item which is not the intended one, but shares enough semantic features to be correctly used in the same context.

Hypothesis 2. When performing the same tasks the choice of CS will vary according to the speakers' proficiency in the target language.

The second hypothesis concerns the possible relationship between the learners' degree of proficiency and their patterns of strategy choice. All our students are assumed to have enough resources in the English language to make use of all the different categories of strategies identified in the taxonomy, but in different proportions. Table 3 confirms this assumption.

Table 3. PROFICIENCY LEVEL AND CHOICE OF CS

	Elementary students		Intermediate students		Advanced students	
	n.º	%	n.º	%	n.º	%
Avoidance strategies	100	38.46%	21	15.22%	26	11.76%
Paraphrase strategies	119	45.77%	104	75.36%	175	79.19%
Conscious transfer strategies	41	15.77%	13	9.42%	20	9.05%

Less proficient students, compared with their more proficient counterparts –elementary students with intermediate, and intermediate with advanced– used a higher percentage of avoidance strategies; that is, when faced with lexical difficulties, they resorted more often to the abandonment or total avoidance of topics. As hypothesized, lower level students, because of their more limited command of the target language, were not able to develop alternative means to convey their originally intended messages as frequently as more proficient students.

Corroborating our hypothesis and the results of previous research (Bialystok and Fröhlich, 1980; Bialystok, 1983), less proficient learners also made use of a higher proportion of conscious transfer strategies. Again we assume this happened because they felt unable to find alternative means in their interlanguage system to convey their intended messages. Conscious transfer strategies allow speakers to keep their original communicative intentions and, initially have a more enhancing effect on communication than avoidance strategies. However, it is also known from previous research that they are not always effective, particularly when the interlocutor has little or no knowledge of the speaker's native language (Bialystok and Fröhlich, 1980; Bialystok, 1990; Poulisse et al., 1990). Here, of course, where the students were talking to an interlocutor who shared the same native language, it was an effective strategy.

When making use of paraphrase strategies speakers convey their originally intended messages by manipulating their interlanguage resources without resorting to any other language they know; therefore, these strategies have a more constructive effect on communication and are less likely to lead to misunderstanding than either of the other two categories. However, they are also linguistically and cognitively more demanding, which explains why lower level students used fewer of these strategies than more proficient language learners.

In general the results obtained from the quantitative analysis of the data confirm our hypothesis; nevertheless, it is necessary to point out that, although differences in strategy choice between elementary and intermediate level students are quite clear, these become considerably smaller when intermediate and advanced students' patterns of CS choice are compared.

Again these results need to be interpreted in relation to intermediate and advanced students' different performances of the same tasks, taking into account that advanced students, trying to provide a greater amount of information which will be as specific and accurate as possible, carried out a more complex task from both a cognitive and a linguistic perspective.

A comparative analysis of intermediate and advanced students' performances using the essential structure as baseline confirms that advanced students' use of avoidance and conscious transfer CS is often the result of their attempts to provide highly accurate and detailed information. On the one hand, such attempts led them to encounter more and sometimes complex lexical problems. On the other hand, research on referential communication tasks (Yule, 1997) suggests that linguistically and cognitively highly demanding tasks distract speakers' attention and therefore make the use of quite complex referential expressions, such as paraphrase strategies, even more difficult.

Furthermore, it has been suggested in previous research (Poulisse et al., 1990; Poulisse, 1997) that, when an item is not essential for the successful accomplishment of a task, speakers tend to put less effort into their strategies, they prefer to avoid it rather than spend their time and energy in developing a paraphrase strategy. In other words, the *Principle of Economy* –which requires speakers to produce their messages with the least possible expenditure of effort– prevails over the *Principle of Clarity* -which requires them to produce clear, intelligible messages.[7] This would explain advanced students' use of avoidance and conscious transfer strategies in the following extracts and also their relatively high use of these strategies as compared to intermediate students.

(16) ESSENTIAL STRUCTURE: "second boy is very big".

INTERLANGUAGE SENTENCE: "... the child i:::s (2) well the child that I was expecting (.) is rather different (1) because he i:::s eh (.) twice as tall as (.) the father of the child of the other child (1) a:::nd (2) eh many eh more more big (1) or bigger ...".

CS ANALYSIS: topic avoidance: according to the speaker's own retrospective comments, he also wanted to say the child was "burly", "corpulent" or "very heavily-built", but lacking the necessary vocabulary avoided it.

(17) ESSENTIAL STRUCTURE: "child is wearing a school uniform with blazer, tie, shorts and cap".

INTERLANGUAGE SENTENCE: "... he wears (.) the uniform is e:::h (1) is formed by a::: a jacket (1) a::: pair of trousers short trousers (.) a:::nd (1) mm like his father he's al- he also has e:::h (1) a::: (1) a shirt (.) and a tie (1) a:::nd obviously a pair of shoes (.) a:::nd (2) too::: (3) and he also ha:::s (1) a::: well nothing else...".

CS ANALYSIS: topic avoidance: according to the speaker's own retrospective comments, he also wanted to say the child was "smartly dressed", but lacking the necessary vocabulary avoided it.

(18) ESSENTIAL STRUCTURE: "second man appears".

INTERLANGUAGE SENTENCE: "... a::: fellow (.) who has appeared ... and is looking (1) e:::h well he is he's sur- surprised (1) and well...".

CS ANALYSIS: topic avoidance: according to the speaker's own retrospective comments, he also wanted to say the man was "stunned" or "bewildered", but lacking the necessary vocabulary avoided it.

(19) ESSENTIAL STRUCTURE: "child's father is rolling up sleeves".

INTERLANGUAGE SENTENCE: "... e:::h (2) in a::: in an aggressive (1) attitude (.) because he's eh (.) pulling his::: (1) well his shirt up I mean...".

CS ANALYSIS: literal translation: according to his own retrospective comments, the speaker wanted to be more specific and made use of a conscious transfer strategy, literal translation of the Spanish expression "en una actitud agresiva".

5. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The results of our analyses allow us to conclude that the use that Galician and Spanish speaking learners of English make of CS is clearly influenced by their degree of proficiency in the foreign language, both in terms of frequency and choice of specific CS types.

The first hypothesis of the study concerned the inverse relationship between interlanguage development and frequency of CS use. The study of the data provides evidence supporting this idea. However, it also suggests that certain factors of the communicative process may affect speakers' strategic behavior and be influenced by their language proficiency in complex ways.

Quantitative measures of CS use lead us, initially, to the wrong impression that advanced students were using CS more often than intermediate ones. A closer look at the data reveals that the figures obtained are in fact the result of the students' different interpretation of the same communicative task. An analysis of the amount and specificity of the content provided by each of the students suggests that advanced learners, in the accomplishment of a relatively open and natural communicative task such as a story narration, set higher communicative goals than lower level students. They try to provide more complex and detailed accounts, thus encountering more lexical difficulties and needing to resort to a larger number of CS. When the use of CS is related to the number of words uttered and the amount and specificity of detail provided, the hypothesized inverse relationship between frequency of CS and proficiency becomes clear.

Furthermore, the results of our analyses suggest that the perceived complexity of the communicative task in hand may also interact with the influence the student's proficiency has on his/ her choice of specific CS types. An initial quantitative analysis of our students' proportional use of avoidance, paraphrase and conscious transfer strategies did not provide definitive evidence of the hypothesized differences between advanced and intermediate students. However, clear differences emerge when the choice of CS is analyzed in more qualitative terms, taking into account the lexical richness and complexity of the foreign language discourse. Advanced students seem to be more conscious of the different communicative potential of each type of strategy and their choice between avoidance, paraphrase and conscious transfer seems to be guided by a combination of the communicative value of the strategy and the perceived relevance of the item to be communicated.

These findings could also help to explain the mixed and sometimes even contradictory results of previous research. Empirical studies on the relationship between language proficiency and CS use have resorted to quite a wide range of procedures to elicit their data, from highly controlled activities such as object descriptions and naming tasks (Paribakht, 1985) to much more open and natural communicative tasks such as story narrations and interviews (Poulisse *et al.*, 1990). The results of the present study suggest that, although the effect of different task designs on the learner's use of CS has been widely recognized in most of these studies, they might have overlooked the fact that the same task presented with the very same instructions to different learners may be interpreted and completed in different ways, thus directly affecting the data and the results obtained.

Much further research needs yet to be done before reaching a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between CS use and language proficiency. The limitations of our study do not allow us to draw a definitive conclusion on this

issue. Future research should ideally involve a larger number of students with more widely differing degrees of proficiency, language levels that were more clearly delimited than ours, and data that was most comprehensive and allowed for statistical analyses of CS instances. However, the results of our analyses and the conclusions reached so far allow us to identify at least two direct implications for this future research. First, when studying the effect of learners' proficiency on their use of CS, attention needs to be paid to all those features of the communicative process which may interact with this factor in complex ways. And secondly, in this process final conclusions cannot be drawn only from quantitative measurement of CS instances. More qualitative analyses of foreign language discourse are still needed and are certain to provide new insightful evidence on this issue.

Notes

¹. This paper is based on a Master dissertation submitted at the University of Santiago de Compostela under the supervision of Dr. Ignacio M. Palacios Martínez. The research conducted for the study was partially financed by the Galician Ministry of Education (Secretaría Xeral de Investigación PGIDT00PXI20407PR). The author wishes to thank Professor Elaine Tarone for her insightful comments on an earlier version of this paper. Of course I assume full responsibility for the weaknesses and all form of errors still remaining.

². Transcription conventions are included in Appendix B.

³. *Conscious transfer* strategies have also been referred to as *borrowing* strategies in subsequent publications (Tarone 1981).

⁴. *Literal translation* is also known in the field of CS research as *foreignizing*.

⁵. The lack of an active interlocutor in the performance of the picture story narration and photograph description tasks

does not guarantee a totally free and natural use of the appeal for assistance and mime strategies. On account of this and in line with previous similar research, I decided to leave these two types of strategies out of the scope of this analysis. A study of the use that Spanish learners of English as a foreign language make of mime CS was conducted in Fernández Dobao (2002).

⁶. Whereas the description and particularly the conversation are quite open tasks, the picture story narration forces subjects to communicate a pre-selected content organized in a pre-determined time sequence. On account of this, the narration task was chosen to carry out the essential structure analysis, but there is no reason to think the results obtained cannot be generalized to the performance of the other two tasks.

⁷. The principles or maxims which charge the speaker to be both brief and clear have been widely discussed in the literature under these or other names (Grice, 1975; Leech, 1983; Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs 1986).

⁸. Adapted from J. Haunton. 1989. *Think First Certificate*. Essex: Longman. 74.

⁹. From K. Gude. 1996. *Advanced Listening and Speaking*. Oxford: Oxford U. P. 116.

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APPENDIX A: DATA COLLECTION TASKS

Picture story narration task[8]

Look at the pictures and try to tell the story they narrate in as much detail as possible. Use your imagination but do not create a radically different story since afterwards you will have to retell it in your mother tongue.
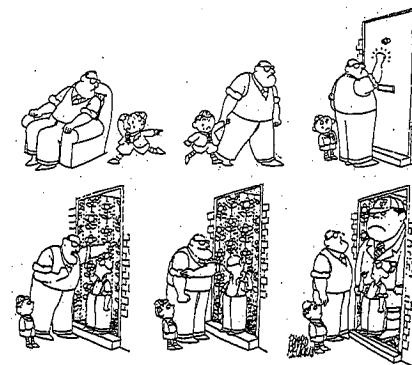
Photograph description task[9]

Look at the photograph and try to describe it in as much detail as possible. Remember you will have to repeat the task in your mother tongue.

Conversation task

> We are going to have a ten-minute conversation. Try to answer the questions you will be asked as completely as possible and feel free to interrupt your interlocutor, ask her questions or shift the orignal topic of discussion whenever you want.

APPENDIX B: TRANSCRIPTION SYSTEM

(.)   pause of less than a second

(1)   pauses measured in seconds

the:::   lengthened sound or syllable

the-   cut-off of the prior word or sound

(*laugh*)   laughter and other nonverbal noises

APPENDIX C: PICTURE STORY ESSENTIAL STRUCTURE

ESSENTIAL STRUCTURE

PICTURE 1

1. little child comes crying and pointing somewhere
2. with black eye because somebody hit him
3. father is sitting on an armchair
4. child is wearing a school uniform with blazer, tie, shorts and cap
5. father is wearing a pullover without sleeves, shirt with rolled up sleeves, tie and trousers

PICTURE 2

6. father is very angry
7. takes the boy by the hand
8. they are going somewhere

PICTURE 3

9. father is knocking on a door
10. door has knocker and letterbox

PICTURE 4

11. door is opened
12. second man appears
13. father of the boy who hit the child
14. second man is short, bald, smaller than first man and weaker
15. second man is wearing trousers, shirt, braces and glasses
16. house has flowered wallpaper
17. little childís father is shouting very angry
18. little boy has stopped crying and is looking at them

PICTURE 5

19. man is calling somebody
20. childís father is rolling up sleeves, he is preparing to hit somebody

PICTURE 6

21. second manís child appears
22. second boy is very big, bigger than anybody else
23. dressed in the same uniform
24. his father is proud and happy
25. first father is surprised and worried
26. little child is worried