Effects of Task Types and Language Proficiency on Communication Strategy Use of English-speaking L2 Chinese Learners

Tzu-Hua Bailey Chen
Department of English Language and Literature, Fu Jen Catholic University
baileychen517@gmail.com

Abstract

The cross-sectional study reports on the impact of task types and language proficiency on the use of communication strategies (CSs) by English-speaking learners of L2 Chinese. A total of 14 intermediate (n=7) and advanced (n=7) proficiency students from United States (n=13) and Canada (n=1) at a Mandarin Training Center in Taiwan were randomly selected as the research participants. The research design included two oral elicitation tasks, a retrospective interview, and member checks. Participants were asked to perform a semi-structured interview task and a picture-cued storytelling task in target language (TL) individually. Retrospective interviews were conducted to investigate L2 Chinese learners’ communication difficulties while engaging in the two oral tasks. All the data were tape-recorded, transcribed, coded using Tarone’s (1978) typology of CSs, and analyzed primarily taking qualitative approach. It was found that the L1-based strategies, such as language switch, were preferred by most intermediate-level learners in the two speaking tasks, while topic avoidance strategy was also frequently used in the picture-cued storytelling task. The advanced-level learners generally preferred word coinage, approximation, and circumlocution strategies. Certain picture prompts and interview questions could elicit the same CS from both intermediate-level and advanced-level L2 Chinese learners. The research concluded that both task types and Chinese proficiency are important variables in determining L2 Chinese learners’ CS use.

Key words: communication strategies, English-speaking L2 Chinese learners, communicative competence, strategic competence

1. Introduction

In 1999, Chinese Language Association of Secondary-Elementary School-CLASS proposed Standards for Chinese Language Learning. Among the five proposed goals (5C), communication tops as the primary objective of learning Chinese as a foreign/second language. To communicate successfully and efficiently, second language (L2) learners should be encouraged to tactfully use communication strategies (CSs) to compensate for their deficient lexical knowledge. Canale and Swain (1980) regarded such strategic competence as an integral part of the communicative competence. Tarone and Yule (1989) assumed strategic competence is associated with the skill of the use of CSs in speech production. Knowing how L2 learners use CSs could help teachers improve the way they teach communicative classes and help students with limited oral proficiency to communicate better in Mandarin Chinese.

The present study aims to explore the roles of task types and language proficiency play...
in English-speaking L2 Chinese learners’ CS choices. It adopts the typology proposed by Tarone (1978), as shown in Table 1. As the current research focused specifically on verbal communication, mime, the use of nonverbal expressions like gestures, were not investigated.

Table 1
Tarone’s (1978) typology of communication strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I. Paraphrase (L2-based Strategies)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Approximation: Use of a term which shares a number of semantic features with the target lexical item or structure.</td>
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<tr>
<td>b. Word coinage: Making up a new word to communicate a desired concept.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Circumlocution: Use of L2 phrases to describe the properties of the target object or action instead of using the appropriate word for that object.</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>II. Transfer (L1-based Strategies)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Literal translation: Translation of words from the learner’s L1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Language Switch: Use of native language without bothering to translate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Appeal for assistance: Asking for the correct L2 expressions from TL dictionaries, interlocutor, or native speaker of the TL.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
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<tr>
<th>III. Avoidance (Avoidance Strategies)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Topic avoidance: Refusal to talk about certain topics or to use certain vocabulary or syntactic structures due to lack of the linguistic resources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Message abandonment: The L2 learner starts out to talk about a concept but then abandon the effort in mid-utterance due to lack of meaning structure.</td>
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</table>

2. Literature Review

In an attempt to embed CS in a theoretical framework, Farch and Kasper (1983), Yule and Tarone (1987), Poulisse (1987), and Bialysyok (1990) took rather different views and approaches towards the classification of CSs in ESL (English as a Second Language) field. Yule and Tarone’s (1987) perspectives of outside factors such as contexts, the speaker’s knowledge of the world, the linguistic knowledge of the speaker, and his or her assessment of the listener’s knowledge of the language and the world, which lead to different CS use by people, nevertheless stands out as the most plausible interpretation of how L2 learners try to convey their intended message to interlocutors from different cultural background. Additionally, Tarone’s (1978) classification of different types of CS in terms of L1-based strategies, L2-based strategies, and avoidance strategies sheds light on the ways used by learners at different proficiency levels of a target language (TL) to get their message across.

Previous empirical investigations demonstrated that CS use is either proficiency-related or task-specific. The first study was made to quantify data by Paribakht (1985), who compared the use of CS by English native and non-native speakers in a task which required subjects to describe concrete and abstract concepts. She concluded that CS use and L2 proficiency level were related. As a proficient learner-researcher of L2 Chinese, Yuta Gawakana (2005, in Chinese) used herself to conduct a longitudinal case study on the CS used by Japanese students while communicating in TL in casual conversations with a
Taiwanese interlocutor. Stalling strategy and circumlocution were found to be the two most frequently used CSs. Yule and Tarone (1987) used task-based method by asking ESL learners and native speakers of English to perform three separate tasks, including picture description, giving instructions, and storytelling. The results showed that native speakers were more likely to use the strategies of circumlocution and approximation, and that learners’ assumptions of the listener’s knowledge and whether the listener knows his or her language had an obvious effects upon the strategies employed (as cited in Yule & Tarone, 1989, p.104). Poulisse (1990) also found that participants employed different strategies in picture description, storytelling, and oral interview tasks. Moreover, Wongsawang (2001) designed two tasks containing cultural-specific notions and found circumlocution and approximation were the most preferred CSs among 30 Thai ESL intermediate learners.

Other empirical research, employing task-based method as well, have pointed out that CS use vary according to the types of tasks and proficiency levels. In a comprehensive study done at the University of Nijmegen (Poulisse 1990), for instance, proficiency effect was explored through three groups of Dutch learners of English at three different proficiency levels, who were asked to perform four tasks, including picture description, storytelling, having conversation with a native speaker, and referring to objects. As evidenced by the findings, both proficiency and task types influenced L2 English learners’ CS use.

A review of the existing literature revealed the crucial role of task effects, L2 language proficiency, or both play in L2 learners’ use of CSs in ESL field. However, few studies investigated the impact of both task types and proficiency level on L2 Chinese’ CS choice. On the basis of Tarone’s taxonomy of CS and her assumptions of the influences of outside factors on CSs, this study adopted task-based methodology in looking at the proficiency and task effects on learners’ strategy choice in their efforts to communicate in Chinese.

3. Research Questions

1. What are the effects of task types on the use of communication strategies by English-speaking intermediate- and advanced-level learners of L2 Chinese?
2. In what ways does language proficiency influence the use of communication strategies by English-speaking intermediate-and advanced-level Chinese learners?

4. Research Methods

4.1 Participants

A total of 14 adult native speakers of English with non-heritage Chinese background were recruited in the summer of 2011. They learned Chinese at the Mandarin Training Center (MTC) of National Taiwan Normal University (NTNU) when the research was conducted. These participants, selected on the basis of the performance on the Placement Test at that particular MTC, were divided into intermediate (n=7) and advanced proficiency (n=7) groups. One intermediate learner was from Canada (n=1) and the rest came from the United States (n=13). The intermediate learners had been learning Chinese for one year and three months on average; the advanced learners, three years and five months.

According to the course offerings, the admission of the MTC, and participant background information, the intermediate group was studying Practical Audio-Visual Chinese III and IV, while their advanced-level counterparts were studying one of the following
textbooks when the research was conducted: Practical Audio-Visual Chinese V, Mini Radio Plays, News Reading II, or Thought and Society: an Advanced Spoken Level Textbook.

4.2 Materials

The research instruments comprised two oral elicitation tasks and a list of retrospective interview questions. The first task was a semi-structure oral interview. The 16 oral interview questions contained their experience of and thoughts on Chinese language learning and the comparison of American/Canadian and Taiwanese culture and society (See Appendix A). The second task consisted of three wordless comic strips derived from <small>A mī zi gùshì huì</small> (2005, in Chinese). The participants were asked to use three sets of pictures as a sequence of cues to tell the stories (See Appendix B). The storyline of the three comic strips centered on animals performing various actions to achieve various goals.

The retrospective interview explored (1) communication difficulties English-speaking L2 Chinese learners faced in the two elicitation tasks, (2) how learners strived to solve communication difficulties while performing the semi-structure oral interview and picture-cued storytelling tasks, respectively, and (3) the comparison of the two tasks in terms of difficulties.

4.3 Procedures

Participants were asked to fill in background information form and given five minutes to look at picture prompts before starting out to perform the tasks individually. The duration of the two tasks was about 40 to 60 minutes, with the presence of a Taiwanese interlocutor. After the completion of the two elicitation tasks, a retrospective interview was then carried out in English (Mckay, 2009). Data were tape-recorded, and listened at least twice by the research to increase the reliability of the transcription. The researcher broke all the utterances of the two oral elicitation tasks into sentences and classified the utterances according to Tarone’s (1978) coding scheme of CSs. Any controversy arose in coding the data was resolved through member checks (Rallis & Rossman, 2009). In total, there were 571 and 1086 sentences in the semi-structured interview of learners at the intermediate proficiency level and advanced level respectively. In picture-cued storytelling task, a total of 602 and 1101 sentences were found in the transcription data of the L2 intermediate-level Chinese learners and advanced ones respectively. The findings were analyzed primarily qualitatively using content analysis (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). Frequency and percentage of the CSs in each task were counted quantitatively (See Table 2 & 3).

5. Findings

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communication strategy use in semi-structured oral interview task</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication Strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approximation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word coinage</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Circumlocution  |  (11) 6.88  |  (16) 12.31
Literal translation |  (22) 13.75  |  (10) 7.69
Language switch  |  (58) 36.25  |  (22) 16.92
Appeal for assistance |  (5) 3.13  |  (4) 3.08
Topic avoidance  |  (8) 5  |  (6) 4.62
Message abandonment  |  (13) 8.13  |  (10) 7.69
Total  |  (160) 100  |  (130) 100

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communication Strategy</th>
<th>Intermediate Group</th>
<th>Advanced Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(frequency) percentage %</td>
<td>(frequency) percentage %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approximation</td>
<td>(11) 3.57</td>
<td>(40) 22.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word coinage</td>
<td>(15) 4.87</td>
<td>(40) 22.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circumlocution</td>
<td>(6) 1.94</td>
<td>(16) 9.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literal translation</td>
<td>(14) 4.54</td>
<td>(11) 6.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language switch</td>
<td>(180) 58.44</td>
<td>(32) 18.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appeal for assistance</td>
<td>(5) 1.62</td>
<td>(8) 4.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic avoidance</td>
<td>(68) 22.08</td>
<td>(15) 8.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message abandonment</td>
<td>(9) 2.92</td>
<td>(15) 8.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>(308) 100</td>
<td>(177) 100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. Discussion

6.1 Research Question 1: What are the effects of task types on the use of communication strategies by English-speaking intermediate and advanced learners of L2 Chinese?

Intermediate proficiency learners were found to be less likely to use circumlocution than their high proficiency counterparts in both semi-structure oral interview (6.88% versus 12.31%) and picture-cued storytelling tasks (1.94% versus 8.47%). Certain interview questions and picture prompts, however, could generate specific CSs in both proficiency level groups, which is consistent with the results demonstrated in Poulisse’s (1990) research.

In semi-structured interview task, L2 Mandarin intermediate-level learners employed circumlocution strategy most frequently while expressing their beliefs towards Chinese language teaching and learning; their advanced-level counterparts, culture-specific notions, as exemplified by the utterances below:

(A) Dú xiě bǐjiào nán hái yòu nàgè shēngyīn mǎ má mà mà    (literally, Reading and writing are more difficult. And that sound ma1 ma2 ma3 ma4.)
(B) Táiwān yǒu hēnduō miào zhèxiē miào chángcháng huì jǔ hěn qīguài de shénme huódòng zài mǎlù shāng gùnzhē nà nǎgè miào de shén ránhòu jiǔ zhǒu yī zhǒu jūshǐ ràng shén dōufēng (literally, Taiwan has many temples. These temples often hold very strange what activity. On the street will follow that temple’s God and then just walk and walk. That is, letting the God drive around for fun.)

In (A), the intermediate learner was trying to describe the properties of four tones in Chinese language by saying “hái yǒu nàgè shēngyǐn mǎ mà mà mà (And that sound ma1 ma2 ma3 ma4)” because he did not know the exact word “shēngdiào (tone).” In (B), “káng jiào”, the term of the traditional religious activities hold by local Taiwanese temples on special occasions, was unknown to the advanced learner, so the learner elaborated on the desired referent by describing the characteristics of it. Surprisingly, an intermediate learner who had experienced “káng jiào” before expressed the same cultural-specific term in similar expressions that could be found in (B). The interview questions were more a determining factor than language proficiency in learners’ CS choice.

Circumlocution strategy use was elicited in the oral interview task primarily because all the interview questions were concerned with expressions of Chinese learning and cultural-specific concepts. Interestingly, as illustrated by the aforementioned examples, “shēngdiào” and “káng jiào” are deeply, specifically rooted in Chinese language and traditional Taiwanese society. There are therefore no Chinese equivalents in English, so the participants resorted to describing the properties of these intended referents. The findings correspond to the results of Wongsawang’s (2001) investigation of the impact of culturally loaded referents on the use of CSs by Thai learners of L2 English.

In a similar vein, it was found that the picture prompts in picture-cued storytelling task could generate considerable amount of circumlocution, regardless of the language ability of the English-speaking L2 Chinese learners. Some participants did not know some specific names of the objects, figures, and animals, while others failed to recall their exact terms such as “Nàxiē huā shì shèngdàn jié de huā (literally, those flowers are those will bloom on Christmas)” for “X’mas Flower” and “Yǒu yīgè dàn shèng jié zhègè rén zhǎng de húzì de gěi dājiā lǐwù de tā kàn qǐlái kěnéng bìngle” (literally, there is a Christmas, this man, wears a beard, gives everyone gifts. He looks maybe sick)” for “Santa Claus”.

However, sometimes the picture prompt itself contains novel ideas which may not possibly convey without resorting to certain CS. Picture A, for instance, elicited two utterances of circumlocution from intermediate learners; five, advanced learners, which account for one third of the utterances of circumlocution in picture-cued storytelling task in the two proficiency level groups. “Tā tòushàng yǒu zhège guài guài kěyǐ zhùān de dōngxi (literally, on his head there has this strange thing which can be turned)”. Apparently, there were no exact English and Chinese equivalents, so the participants, no matter how proficient their Chinese was, unanimously adopted circumlocution strategy to describe its key features.
In addition to circumlocution strategy favored by most intermediate-and advanced-level participants, lexical and syntactical complexities of the actions performed by the animals in picture-cued storytelling task were found to stimulate avoidance of vocabulary items and syntactic structures (topic avoidance strategy). L2 Chinese learners were more likely to skip either Picture B or C, or both directly and talk about the subsequent pictures instead. It was not until the interlocutor asked them to describe what have been done to the lion that they replied, mostly with the response like “I don’t know how to describe the actions in Chinese.” Some used incorrect syntactic forms instead, as can be seen in (C) below:

(C) After the participant skipped Picture B, the interlocutor tried to elicit the correct form from the speaker again.

Interlocutor: Shīzi zěnme liǎo? (literally, How is the lion doing?)

Speaker: Zhīhǎo tā de tūdi dāi tā zǒu (literally, Having no choice, his apprentices bring him away.)

It is interesting to note that difficult as the action verbs are in both pictures, most learners at two different Mandarin proficiency levels also avoided using Ba-construction, the disposal form denotes what has been actively done to the patient, lion, by agents, elephant and three cats in Picture B and C respectively, as in Qu’s (1999) discussion about the form of the particular sentence structure:

Agent (Subject) + Ba-+ Patient (Object) + Verb+ Complement

Sandra A. Thompson (1983, in Chinese) interpreted it as a sentence that answers the question, “What did X do to Y?” where X is the subject and Y is the object. Although it has been taught by their Taiwanese teacher earlier in Lesson 7 of Practical Audio-Visual Chinese II (2008, in Chinese) when they were at beginner level, their inability to recall and use it in the obligatory contexts pushed the learners to adopt avoidance strategies.

In their efforts to make themselves understood by the researcher in the two speaking tasks, both proficiency groups applied not only circumlocution but word coinage frequently as well. Similar to rationales behind using circumlocution CS, the participants coined new words for conveying cultural-specific notions, such as “Zhēnzhū chá (literally, Pearl Tea)” for “Zhēnzhū nǐchá (Pearl Milk Tea)” and Taiwanese tourist attractions, like “Zhōngzhèng tā de jīnǐntáng (literally, Kai-shek… his Memorial Hall)” for “Zhōngzhèng jīnǐntáng (Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall)” and unknown specific names of objects and animals, like “Shèngdàn jié yéye (literally, Christmas Grandpa)” for “Shèngdàn làorén or shèngdàn làogōnggōng (Santa Claus)”, “Dà hóuzi (literally, big monkey)” for “Dà xīngxīng (gorilla)”.

6.2 Research Question 2: In what ways does language proficiency influence the use of communication strategies by intermediate-level learners and advanced-level learners?

The transcription data demonstrated communication strategy use was closely related to L2 Chinese learners’ proficiency. Though intermediate learners spoke less than their advanced counterparts, CSs used by the former significantly outnumbered the latter (Wannaruk, 2003). The findings revealed that language switch topped the lists of frequency and percentage distribution of CSs in both semi-structured oral interview (36.25%) and pictured-cued storytelling tasks (58.44%). Falling behind language switch strategy were topic avoidance (22.08%, as opposed to 9.03% in high-level group) in storytelling task and word coinage (18.13%) as well as literal translation (13.75%) in oral interview task. These most frequently
used CSs were primarily L1-based strategies and avoidance strategy. The results confirm Wannaruk’s (2003) research attempt that L1-based and avoidance CSs were more often used by less proficient L2 learners.

On the other hand, the coded data of advanced-level group revealed a consistency of CSs use in the two speaking tasks. Approximation (14.62% in interview task; 22.6%, storytelling task), word coinage (17.69 in interview task, 22.6%, storytelling task), language switch (16.92% in interview task; 18.08%, storytelling task), and circumlocution (12.31% in interview task; 9.03%, storytelling task) were four most preferred CSs by the advanced-level students of L2 Chinese. As indicated by the findings, high-proficiency group tended to adopt L2-based strategies, which parallels Tarone’s (1978), Yule and Tarone’s (1987), Paribakht’s (1985), as well as Wannaruk’s (2003) claims that L2-based CSs were employed more often by those with high proficiency level. Though the preceding discussion about task effects suggested that some elements in the two speaking tasks were more likely to elicit L2-based circumlocution CS by both proficiency groups, the percentage distribution of advanced-level students in regards to circumlocution use were significantly higher than their intermediate proficiency counterparts (6.88% in interview task; 1.94%, storytelling task).

Despite the fact that language switch was found to be one of the most preferred CS by high-level students, the percentage counts were far less than the intermediate-level group (36.25% & 58.44%, as opposed to 16.92 & 18.08%). Additionally, the purpose of switching Chinese to their native language, namely, English, was somewhat different. Intermediate-level group was found to code switch to their native language due to their limited lexical knowledge. Sometimes they were unaware that they were using L1. The high–proficiency group, nevertheless, resorted to language switch when referring to convenience store (they used “seven” instead), or ICLP, the particular name of a Chinese language training program in National Taiwan University. These referents also used by local Taiwanese people, and were definitely not a manifestation of their deficient lexical knowledge. Furthermore, students with high language proficiency also had a stronger preference for switching to L1 simply for exclamations or as an expression of their emotion. The findings are in juxtaposition with Wannaruk’s (2003) empirical investigation on Thai ESL students—the participants switched back to their L1 for exclamations simply because they felt more natural using them.

6.3 Retrospective interviews

Generally, most participants regarded lack of lexical knowledge as the greatest challenge in their attempt to communicate fluently and accurately. The participants were a bit frustrated as they failed to recall the learned vocabulary items while performing the speaking tasks. In answering the semi-structured interview question and in telling stories using picture as prompts, many participants strove to describe the distinctive features of the intended referents, particularly cultural-specific notions and specific names of animals and object, which is consistent with the analysis of the coded data. When they had no slightest lexical knowledge of the desired referent (or the characteristics of it), they resorted to avoidance and language switch strategies. When comparing the two tasks in terms of difficulties, 11 out of 14 participants agreed picture-cued storytelling task posed greater mental challenge, as opposed to oral interview task, which allowed more selection of lexicon and topics.

7. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

In general, the findings of the current research indicated task types and L2 Chinese
proficiency are of paramount importance in determining English-speaking learners of L2 Chinese’s communication strategy choice. Specifically, the culturally loaded notions and participants’ belief in Chinese teaching and learning were found to elicit circumlocution CS, while in picture-cued storytelling task, avoidance of lexical items and syntactic construction, language switch, and circumlocution CSs were most likely to be generated by all the participants due to the novel ideas of the prompts and L2 Chinese learners’ limited lexical knowledge of certain specific names. Moreover, this study revealed that L2 Chinese language learners’ CS preferences are associated with their Chinese proficiency. Learners with intermediate proficiency level had a higher tendency to adopt L1-based and avoidance strategies. Their CS use significantly outnumbered the advanced-level group. Advanced-level participants tended to employ L2-based strategies. All the above findings are in agreement with the existing literature in ESL/EFL contexts. It is interesting to note that while less proficient group switched to their native language, their high proficiency counterparts coded switch to English mostly for expressing their emotions and for some common English terms, which could also be found in local Taiwanese’s conversations. Communication strategy use, based upon the preceding discussion, varies in accordance with proficiency levels and tasks, which parallels the results of Nimegen project (Poulisse, 1990).

During this research, it had been noticed that an advanced Chinese learner, who could use extremely difficult expressions such as “Wāngluó (recruit talented people)”, “Chuánbò (spread)”, and “dǔpǐn (drug)” in semi-structured oral interview task, was unable to use TL to describe actions and animals in pictured-cued production task. This particular learner employed avoidance strategies quite often and spoke not as specific as the rest of the advanced learners. “If I don’t know the word, I cannot continue to talk,” he said twice. This extreme case underlined a must of integrating training of CSs into regular Chinese curriculum to facilitate successful communication between L2 learners and native Chinese speakers.

On the basis of the aforementioned case and the findings of the present research, three pedagogical implications are offered: First, classroom activities and materials related to promoting the development of strategic competence should be designed. In helping students acquire core vocabulary useful for the strategies of circumlocution and approximation, language teachers are recommended to encourage the use of monolingual dictionaries and to provide students with the core vocabulary items. Another approach suggested by Nelson (1989) is that implicit instruction on CSs can be done by asking students to evaluate the success of various strategies used by learners through transcript the teachers offer. Second, based upon previous implication, the researcher supports the inclusion of simple Chinese as explanations of each vocabulary item to replace English explanation in Practical Audio-Visual Chinese, especially Book 3, 4, and 5 for intermediate-level students who had acquired basic Chinese. Third, Chinese language teachers are expected to encourage students to talk in TL.

8. Limitations

Some limitations are worth noting prior to generalize the findings to all the English-speaking adult learners of L2 Chinese. First, this is a small-scale study of communication strategies used by 14 Chinese learners while interacting with a Taiwanese interlocutor and picture prompts. Second, for research on learners’ strategy use, recruitment of several raters is highly recommended to increase the reliability of coded data. Third, most of the retrospective interviews and member checks were not carried out straight after the completion of the two speaking tasks by the participants. Credibility should be taken into serious consideration when conducting such kind of qualitative study.
Acknowledgements

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**Appendix A: Sample semi-structured interview questions**

1. 你覺得聽、說、讀、寫，哪一部份比較困難？
   Among all the four language skills, listening, speaking, reading, and writing, what is the most difficult part for you in learning Mandarin?
2. 你對台灣的第一印象是什麼（像是文化、食物、和台灣人）？
   What is your first impression on Taiwan (culture, people, food, etc.)?

**Appendix B: Sample picture prompt**

Source: Ā mī zi gūshì huì (2005, in Chinese)