

# Gender Effect on the Use of CSs

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## Abstract

This paper explores the gender effect on the use of communication strategies (CSs). The study collected the data of 36 Chinese EFL learners when they fulfilled communicative tasks as the basis for analysis. The statistical results show that no sex-related significant, direct effect was identified on the frequency and types of CS use, but the sex variable affects the effectiveness of females' and males' use of CSs. Those findings bring some implications for foreign language teaching and learning.

**Keywords:** CSs, Gender effect, frequency, Types, The effectiveness of CSs

## 1. Introduction

Communication strategies (CSs) have been defined as "strategies which a language user employs in order to achieve his intended meaning on becoming aware of problems arising during the planning phase of an utterance due to (his own) linguistic shortcoming." (Poulisse, 1990, from Ellis, 1994, p.44). The factors that influence the use of CSs have been discovered, such as language users' proficiency, the nature of tasks, and their cultural and learning background (Parihkt, 1985; Chen Siqing 1990; Bialytok 1990). But how does the gender vary? Since females have been believed to use languages differently (Zhao, 1999), do female learners use CSs also differently from the males?

Still, this is a contentious problem. In some related researches, such as Oxford and Ehrman's (1987, from O'Malley & Chamot, 1990), female students definitely report different use of strategies compared to male students. In their view, males are more direct and braver, thus, they look for opportunities to take risks to communicate with people in English while females, relatively speaking, are quiet and considerate. Does the difference of this kind bring any effect on their use of CSs?

Among the CS research in China, no study except those by Hou Songsang (1998) and Wang Limei (2008) has explored the sex difference in CSs. According to Hou Songsang (1998), the female learners tend to use more appeal for assistance strategies than the male EFL learners in the interactional task. They acted much the same in the narrative task. Wang Limei, adopting a questionnaire for CS study, concluded that female and male learners differ only in the code-switching strategies. Therefore, more research is needed to testify whether there exist differences between female and male students in using CSs. This paper attempts to examine the issue.

## 2. The study

### 2.1 Subjects

36 senior English majors from an university in Lanzhou participated in the study. At the time of data collection, they were in their final year of undergraduate English programme. All those 36 subjects shared the following features in common: a) age (22 plus); b) L1 (Chinese); c) use of the same kinds of textbooks; d) taught through the same method of teaching; e) about the same period ( ten years) of exposure to the target language (English); and f) similar cultural and social background. They were chosen at random and composed of 18 males and 18 females.

### 2.2 Tasks

The communicative tasks employed in this study are a concept-identification task.

In designing communicative tasks for this study, those employed by other researchers in their CS research, such as Erin (1979), Ellis (1994), Paribakht (1985), Tarone & Yule (1997), Kumaravndivelu (1988), Chen (1990) and Musau (1995) are consulted. However, this study differs from theirs in that the tasks involved both oral and written productions by the subjects in order to gain a global picture of CS use by female and male EFL learners in the Chinese context.

### 2.3 Data Collection

In the concept-identification task, each subject was required to communicate two concrete and two abstract concepts to a native speaker in an interview situation. All of the concepts were first checked by consulting the dictionary *Essential English Dictionary*, and then by two experienced Chinese professors to ensure that they are universal concepts for both native English speakers and Chinese EFL learners. The subject was not allowed to use the exact

target words so that he was forced to make use of CSs. The interaction between the subject and the native speaker continued until the native speaker identified the target concept or the subject would give up. A tape-recorder was placed on the table nearby the subject to record the interview. The researcher remained in the room, sitting close to the subject so that she could observe when the subject mimed, or made gestures and note any accompanying information that the subject used to solve his communicative problem.

After the task, subjects were required to examine in retrospect what problems they had encountered in the process, how the problem was solved and why this strategy was used. Later, their retrospective data were consulted not only for the strategy identification, but also for the discussions of findings.

#### *2.4 Data Analysis*

First, CSs were identified in the transcribed utterances. To ensure reliability of the identification, two independent judges were invited and the retrospective comments of the subjects and the Chinese version of the pre-selected meaning were consulted. The two judges independently identified the types of CSs and subsequently discussed their decisions. The inter-reliability of identification has reached .95. Drawing from previous taxonomies which have been successfully used by Færch&Kasper (1983), Paribakht (1985) and Yule& Tarone(1997), thereby a taxonomy of the CSs of EFL learners in Chinese context was established as shown in Table 1.

Then the quantitative and qualitative analyses were done, first by simply counting the frequency of CS use for each category, and then by employing the percentage calculation or  $\chi^2$ -test to discover the difference between the Chinese female and male learners in their use of CSs.

### **3. Results, Discussions and Implications**

#### *3.1 Frequency of Communication Strategies*

According to Oxford and Ehrman (1989), Macaro(2000); Oxford & Niykos (1989) and Sheorey, (1999), female students tend to use more strategies than males. Thus, we want to see whether it is true for Chinese students or not. To get the result, the frequency count of CSs used by both females and males was done and then the results were used for the analysis of variance on CSs. Table 2 and Table 3 shows that there is no significant difference between females and males in their frequency of strategy use ( $F = 0.383$  &  $F = 0.002$ ,  $P > 0.05$ )

This can be explained in reference to the subjects' retrospective data. As one subject said, he was eager to communicate with the foreigners and be understood by them in a real communicative situation. He would therefore try every means to realize his intended meaning and would not give up easily. Li Jin's study on the Chinese culture of learning (2001) supports this idea and suggests that Chinese students are achievement-motivated and perseverant in general. Especially when they are set in the competitive world, almost all of them know clearly the significance of English. Therefore it is understandable that they are all actively involved in the language learning and use no matter who they are, male or female.

#### *3.2 Types of Communication Strategies*

To get more detailed result, we used percentage calculation to see whether there is difference in females' and males' use of each category of CSs. The results show that the strategies which male students adopted most often are much the same as those used most often by female students (as shown in Table 4). This is proved to be true by analysis of variance whose results are represented in Table 5 ( $P > 0.05$ ).

This result is quite different from those obtained by Hou Songsang(1998) and Wang Limei(2008). According to Hou Songsang's research, females used more appeal for assistance strategies because they are more field-dependent than males. Although Wang Limei (2008) found female used more code-switching strategies, she failed to explain it convincingly. The statistical analysis in our study shows that there are few differences between males and females when adopting different types of strategies, i.e., Chinese male and female learners tend to use strategies in the same way. This may be because Chinese learners, both males and females, learn English in the same environment. Or the sex variable has not been a major factor as proficiency that could influence learners' choice of CSs greatly. As Freed says (1996), the language use is decided by the particular communicative situations and the nature of tasks. If females and males are set in a similar context to fulfill the same communicative tasks much similarity will be found in the use of language. This has been evidenced by our present study.

#### *3.3 Effectiveness of Communication Strategies*

Now it is proved that female and male students use strategies almost in the same ways, i.e., the same amount and types of strategies. Then is there any difference in their executing strategies, i.e., the effectiveness of CSs? An account of scores obtained by females and males in the evaluation of effectiveness of CSs was made respectively. Female students got 227 scores while male students got 198 scores. To ensure the difference, analyses of variance

were done and the results are presented in Table 6. The tables clearly show that female learners are more efficient than male learners in their use of CSs ( $F= 34.85$   $P<0.05$ ).

Table 6 shows that female and male students differ in the effectiveness of their use of CSs. As Wen Qiufang and Johnson (1997) point out, female students perform better on language-related activities. According to Levelt's model of language production, the language user will go through the three phases before producing any actual utterances: conceptualizer, the formulator and the articulator. In the conceptualizer, the language user develops a propositional pre-verbal message which acts as input to the formulator. Then the formulator gives this propositional message an acceptable grammatical form in language. The formulator at last delivers its outcome to the articulator which produces the external speech. Even though female and male students have the same strategic plan for solving the same problem, difference could be made while they execute the plan. The research on language and sex has shown females and males are different while using language at phonological, lexical and even at the suprasentential level. Females' better clearer pronunciation or more standard form in their use of language at least makes their speech or writing more comprehensible and thus enhance their communication. The study on native-speaker judgments of second- language learners' efforts at communication show that increased intelligibility and more native-like ratings of comprehensibility are linked to measures of L2 oral production. Phonemic and phonetic production accuracy have been examined to be significantly correlated with comprehensibility (Munro & Derwing, 1998, 2001), and intelligibility (Anderson-Hsieh & Koehler, 1988; Tajima, Port, & Dalby, 1997). Investigating the contribution of these factors to the effectiveness of communication, namely, intelligibility and comprehensibility may provide researchers, teachers, and learners (especially the male language learners) with additional ways to enhance successful L2 communication. Therefore more research is needed concerned about the gender difference that may lead to the difference in the effectiveness of communication. These findings will undoubtedly bring implications for evaluating learner pronunciation and for training learners in successful L2 communication strategies.

#### 4. Conclusion

Our present study shows that there are few differences between males and females when adopting strategies, i.e., Chinese male and female learners tend to use the same frequency and types of strategies. However, they show themselves the difference in the effectiveness of CSs. This is meaningful to foreign language teaching and learning. Foreign language teachers should attend to this and analyze the causes for the difference in the effectiveness of CS use so that they could offer the male students the help to improve their oral English.

Do the male students need more regular communicative practice, working from a variety of prepared and spontaneous materials so that they can be more familiar with the pitfalls of every- day L2 use? As we know, sustained doses of real communicative practice can help the L2 student strengthen or improve their ability to communicate effectively. Besides, Shall teachers help male students improve their pronunciation? If the effectiveness of communication is not just a matter of intelligibility, and intelligibility is not just a matter of a speaker's pronunciation quality, what else can teachers do, besides targeting their learners' pronunciation, to help them communicate effectively in an L2 environment?

Since no other sex-related significant, direct effect was identified on the frequency, and types of CS use, how the sex variable affects the effectiveness of females' and males' use of CSs could also be a promising area for future research.

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Table 1. Taxonomy of Communication Strategies

Reduction strategies	Topic avoidance, message abandonment, semantic reduction	
Achievement strategies	Linguistic-based strategies	L2-based: antonym, substitution, metalanguage, Circumlocution, word-coinage
		L1-based: foreignizing, literal translation, code switch
	Knowledge-based: exemplification, cultural knowledge...	
	Cooperative strategies: appeal for assistance...	
	Paralinguistic strategies: mime...	
Repetition		

Table 2. Analysis of Variance by Reduction Strategies, Proficiency and Sex

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	P
Main Effects	.173	2	.086	42.381	.000
Level	.172	1	.172	84.380	.000
Sex	.001	1	.001	.383	.541
2-way Interactions	.002	1	.002	.890	.353
Level Sex	.002	1	.002	.890	.353
Explained	.174	3	.058	28.551	.000
Residual	.065	32	.002		
Total	.240	35	.007		

Table 3. Analysis of Variance by Achievement Strategies, Proficiency and Sex

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	P
Main Effects	.352	2	.176	2.415	.105
Level	.352	1	.352	4.829	.035
Sex	.000	1	.000	.002	.968
2-way Interactions	.054	1	.054	.741	.396
Level Sex	.054	1	.054	.741	.396
Explained	.406	3	.135	1.857	.157
Residual	2.332	32	.073		
Total	2.738	35	.078		

Table 4. The Difference in Types of CSs by Female and Male Learners

<b>Gender Type</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>
Topic Avoidance	0.1798	0.1924
Semantic Reduction	0.1609	0.1609
Substitution	0.1640	0.1609
Circumlocution	0.0662	0.0630
Word-Coinage	0.0600	0.0662
Approximation	0.2019	0.1767
foreignizing	0.0063	0.0095
Literal Translation	0.1483	0.1577
Repetition	0.0126	0.0126

Table 5 Analysis of Variance by Sex and Types of CSs (simplified by just representing Sig. of F)

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Sig. of F</b>
Topic Avoidance	.763
Semantic Reduction	1.00
Substitution	.918
Circumlocution	.840
Approximation	.381
Literal Translation	.768

Table 6. Analysis of Variance by Sex and Effectiveness of CSs

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	P
Main Effects	746.000	2	373.000	20.802	.000
Level	625.000	1	625.000	34.857	.000
Sex	121.000	1	121.000	6.748	.014
2-way Interactions	32.111	1	32.111	1.791	.190
Level Sex	32.111	1	32.111	1.791	.190
Explained	778.111	3	259.370	14.465	.000
Residual	573.778	32	17.931		
Total	1351.889	35	38.625		