L2 Learners' Communication Strategies: A Data Convergence Analysis

Su-Ja Kang[*]

Department of English Language and Literature, Pai Chai University

제 2 언어 학습자의 의사소통 전략: 자료융합 분석

강수자[*]

배재대학교, 영어영문학과

Abstract   L2 learners deal with communication problems encountered during the course of their oral communication by employing what are known as communication strategies(CSs). As CSs play a significant role in communication and language learning, identifying CSs that facilitate communication has become important in L2 research. However, there have been some controversies about how to identify CSs, especially about data sources: conversation data, retrospective interview data, or combining two types of data. Drawing on the advantages of converged data, this study aimed to identify CSs that L2 learners use in their English communication through a convergence analysis of data. In this qualitative case study, the data were collected from Korean L2 learners' conversations and retrospective verbal reports in stimulated recall interviews. Using a data convergence approach, various CSs were identified: definition replacement CSs, message change CSs, time-gaining CSs, and comprehension CSs. This study suggests the effectiveness of CSs in handling L2 communication problems and the usefulness of data convergence in L2 CS research.

• **Key Words** : Communication Strategies(CSs), Data Convergence Analysis, Communication Problems, L2 Communication, L2 Learners

요 약   제2언어 학습자들은 의사소통전략을 사용하여 그들이 구두 의사소통에서 직면하게 되는 문제들에 대처한다. 이 전략들이 의사소통과 언어학습에서 주요한 역할을 하기 때문에 제2언어 연구에서 의사소통을 용이하게 하는 전략을 찾아내는 것이 중요하다. 그러나 어떻게 전략을 확인하는가, 특히 연구 자료로 대화 자료, 회상인터뷰 자료, 또는 두 가지의 융합된 자료를 사용하는 것에 대해 논란이 있다. 이 연구에서는 융합자료 분석을 통해 제2언어 학습자들이 사용하는 의사소통전략을 발견해 내고자 하였다. 이 질적 사례연구를 위해 한국인 제2언어 학습자들의 대화 자료와 전략사용을 회고하는 인터뷰 자료가 수집되었다. 이 수집된 자료들의 융합분석을 통해 한국인 제2언어 학습자들이 사용하는 정의대치 전략, 메시지변환 전략, 시간얻기 전략, 이해전략 등의 다양한 의사소통전략들이 확인되었다. 이 연구는 제2언어 의사소통시의 문제점을 해결하는 데 의사소통전략들이 효율적임을 보여주며, 의사소통 연구에 융합자료 분석이 유용하다는 것을 시사해준다.

• **주제어** : 의사소통 전략, 자료융합 분석, 의사소통 문제, 제2언어 의사소통, 제2언어 학습자

1. Introduction

L2 learners often experience communication difficulties during their oral communication. L2 communication problems occur due to four main sources: resource deficiencies, processing time pressure, perceived deficiencies in one's own language output, and perceived deficiencies in the interlocutor's performance[1].

When L2 learners encounter various problems during the course of communication, they tend to use what are known as communication strategies(CSs)[2]. Employing CSs, they try to convey a message to the interlocutor or understand the message via alternative plans, making use of their limited linguistic means[2]. L2 speakers using CSs can cope with their problems, attempting to hold the floor, to have the time to think, and not to appear incompetent before other students[3,4].

In addition to their role in overcoming problems, CSs can lead to language learning by eliciting unknown language items from an interlocutor[5], providing the learners with more language input[6], and contributing to developing learners' autonomy[7]. Supporting these roles of CSs in language learning, Nakatani[8] stated that the use of specific CSs can play a role in improving learners' oral proficiency. As learners become more proficient in the target language, their ability to use CSs becomes more native-like[9].

Given the advantages of using CSs, it is necessary to provide L2 learners with effective CSs and to encourage them to use CSs. If this is the case, it is also imperative to identify CSs that are used effectively in L2 learners' actual communication.

In CS literature, identifying CSs has been a controversial issue. As the identification of CSs can be different depending on the data, it is important to use appropriate data in identifying CSs.

This study was motivated by the importance of CSs in communication and language learning. It was also grounded by research findings that have demonstrated the advantages of combining performance data and retrospective data in CS research. Despite the advantages, there has been a lack of research on Korean L2 learners' CSs using a data convergence approach, which also provides the need for this study.

To fill the gap in the literature, the purpose of this study was to identify CSs that Korean L2 learners employ through data convergence and to demonstrate the need for using a data convergence approach in L2 CS research.

2. Background

2.1 Definition of CSs

Reflecting their own theoretical perspectives, CS researchers have suggested different definitions of CSs.

1) Psycholinguistic definition:
"Communication strategies are potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular communication goal"[10, p. 36]

2) Sociolinguistic definition:
"a mutual attempt of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in situations where requisite meaning structures do not seem to be shared (Meaning structures included both linguistic and sociolinguistic structures"[11, p. 72]

3) Extended definition:
"every potentially intentional attempt to cope with any language problem of which the speaker is aware during the course of communication"[12, p. 179].

In this study, I adopted Dörnyei and Scott's[12] extended definition as it was believed to be appropriate for addressing L2 learners' various problems with production, comprehension, and processing time.

2.2 Data for CS Research

Researchers have suggested different ways of

identifying CSs, depending on data sources: (a) performance features, (b) retrospective verbal reports, and (c) a combination of the two.

2.2.1 Performance Features

Some researchers have identified CSs based on conversation data. It was suggested that three types of performance features serve as evidence for strategic intervention: (a) temporal variables, such as the rate of articulation, pauses, drawls, and repeats; (b) self-repair, such as false starts and new starts; and (c) speech slips, such as lapses and speech errors[10,13].

In addition, when a learner uses almost the same meaning twice, it could be taken to indicate that he or she is experiencing a problem[2,10]. A learner's rising intonation and looking at her interlocutor in an inquiring manner appear to appeal to the interlocutor to signal whether she has understood what the learner is trying to say[2].

Researchers, however, have demonstrated that identifying learners' problems on the basis of strategic performance features can be inconclusive. This view is consistent with L1 researchers on strategies. Almasi[14] stated that since strategic processing is normally covert and occurs in one's mind, it is not usually available for public inspection. According to her, it is difficult to determine what strategies a reader is using as well as when and how the reader is using those strategies.

In this view, no performance feature can in itself be taken as unambiguous evidence for strategic planning[10] for several reasons. First, quite frequently, it is not easy to identify CSs because they may be unmarked[13]. In the same line, Færch and Kasper[10] stated that the majority of problems the learner experiences do not show up in discourse. If learners are able to plan ahead and conceal their use of strategies, it is next to impossible for the analyst to identify such strategies on the basis of the occurrence of strategy markers in performance data[10].

Furthermore, a problem may not be a problem for the speaker, and it could go unnoticed by the hearer[15]. In other words, the learners' activation of successful strategies usually passes unnoticed[16]. Especially for learners at a high proficiency level, performance data is unsuited for the analysis of CSs since the advanced learners are able to predict communicative problems and find solutions at normal planning points in their discourse[16]. Highly proficient non-native speakers have been shown to be very good at anticipating and circumnavigating bottlenecks so that there is no obvious trace of difficulty in their speech protocols[17].

Second, the use of temporal variables identified in performance data can be due to factors other than communication problems. Færch and Kasper[10] warned that all non-native-like use of temporal variables should not be attributed to specific planning or execution of problems that the learner experiences when performing in Interlanguge since the speaker might simply be transferring his L1 performance behaviors to Interlanguge production. Supporting Færch and Kasper's[10] view, Abdesslem[15] argued that although pauses, hesitancies, and repetitions could be signs of the speaker experiencing a problem, it is not safe to say that pause and hesitation always signal learners' problems in conversation. For these reasons, identification of CSs that is based on the problem indicators in the conversation data is not always very reliable.

2.2.2 Retrospective Verbal Reports

With the recognition of the inappropriateness of performance data as a way of identifying CSs, researchers have argued for the need for supplemental analyses of performance data by introspective evidence. Researchers who rely on retrospective protocols have referred to Ericsson and Simon's[18] model of cognitive processing, pointing out that problematic information is under attention during task completion and hence reportable[19].

Tarone[11] stated that since the intended meaning

are not easily accessible from observation data, the use of verbal report data may be able to aid in the study of this phenomenon. Similarly, Poulisse[2] demonstrated that it is only through the learners' retrospective commentary that the researchers are made aware of the existence of such difficulties. Poulisse[2] also showed that retrospective data can help the researcher identify strategies that would otherwise have remained unnoticed.

However, it is not reliable to elicit L2 learners' CSs solely based on their verbal reports as it is possible that they can report what are not actually used in their actual conversation. Despite the usefulness of retrospective data, therefore, relying on one method of strategy identification seems risky[17].

2.2.3 Combination of Different Data

With the awareness of the limitation of both approaches, a convergence approach was presented. Kasper and Kellerman[17] suggested that researchers have to rely on two sources of evidence to identify CSs: (a) markers in the discourses, such as an explicit strategy marker (e.g., "I don't know how to say this.") and implicit indicators, such as an increase in hesitation phenomenon and (b) retrospective protocols.

The combination of two identification procedures can be found in Poulisse's[2] study. In order to arrive at reliable identification of the more obscure strategies, Poulisse[2] identified strategies on the basis of two sources of data. First, two independent judges identified strategies on the basis of the problem indicators in the conversation data. Second, the researcher made use of retrospective data. The criteria for a clear case of strategies were set up as identified by both of the judges on the basis of problem indicators and by the researcher on the basis of the retrospective comments[2].

Based on the advantages of data combination, I will identify CSs using the data convergence analysis.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The participants of this study were 12 Korean students studying at a university in the U.S. There were two Ph.D. students, four Master's students, one undergraduate student, and five English language institute students. Five students were male and seven female. The age of the participants varied from 23 to 43. The participants' English fluency also varied from a beginner level to an advanced level.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Drawing on the advantages of data convergence, the data were collected through both recording of conversations and stimulated recall interviews. The participants' conversations in various situations were recorded on videotapes and/or audiotapes.

Reviewing the recorded conversation, I tried to identify moments in which the participants appeared to experience problems and use CSs. This identification coding procedure was based on the performance features such as pause, drawl, repeat, self-repair, speech errors, and saying almost the same meaning twice, which were suggested as evidence for strategic intervention in the literature[10,13].

For the retrospective verbal report data, stimulated recall interviews were also conducted. During the stimulated recall interviews, participant watched a 1 or 2 minute clip of their previously recorded conversations that included a problematic moment identified by my observation in the coding procedure. Watching their conversation, they reported what they were experiencing, doing and thinking in relation to communication problems and CSs.

After that, I identified CSs based on problem indicators in the conversation data and retrospective verbal reports. In the process of data analysis, two types of data were converged. CSs were identified only if they were found in conversation data and if speakers confirmed their use of them during the stimulated

recall. In other words, CSs were discovered only when the performance features for strategies were found in the conversation data and the participants reported that they intentionally or consciously used the strategy to cope with their problems in conversations. What was not confirmed by the participants during the stimulated recall interview was not considered as a CS.

4. L2 Learners' CSs

In this study, various types of CSs were identified. In this section, however, I will present only four types of CSs that show the effectiveness of data convergence analysis.

4.1 Definition Replacement CSs

Problematic Word: [tourist]
Conversation Data:
Participant(P): I never went some place some place <u>people who go go to tour</u> want to go.

Stimulated Recall Interview Data:
I tried to retrieve the pronunciation of *tourist* by repeating *some place*, but I couldn't. Thus I decided to go around and said *people who go to tour* instead of using the problematic word, *tourist.*

As expressed in the stimulated recall data, the participant did not know how to pronounce the word, *tourist.* Thus, employing a definition replacement CS, he provided a definitional description, *people who go go to tour* instead of saying the problematic word. By using this CS, the participant was able to deliver his intended meaning despite his problem.

4.2 Message Change CSs

Problematic Word: [opportunity]
Conversation Data:
P: I missed Clinton's speech.
NNS: There was a speech by a famous activist for environmental problem. Her his name is bla bla Butterfly. . . he lived on the tree for two years.
P: Wow, (*put his head down*) There is a lot of a lot of (pause) <u>interesting things</u> around here. We just missed a lot.

Stimulated Recall Interview Data:
I wanted to say "*There are a lot of opportunities here*," but I did not know the word *opportunity.* I tried to come up with it by repeating *a lot of,* but I couldn't. To hide my vocabulary problem, I changed what I originally wanted to say into a new message "*There are a lot of interesting things around here.*"

According to the participant's comments, he changed his intended message due to a lexical problem with a word *opportunity*. This message change CS was not able to be found without the stimulated recall interview data. Employing this message change CS, the participant could continue conversation without revealing his communication problem.

4.3 Lengthening Time-Gaining CSs

Problem: Time to retrieve [*appreciate*]
Conversation Data:
P: I was [rea:::lly] appreciate that.

Stimulated Recall Data:
I knew the word *appreciate,* but I could not say it immediately . . . . In this case, I usually try to gain time to retrieve the word by lengthen a word that comes right before the problematic word. I think it is very effective way to hide my problem. They seems to think I just emphasize the lengthened word.

According to the participants verbal reports, she employed a lengthening time-gaining CS to retrieve a problematic word *appreciate* that was not available for

him immediately.

4.4 Implicit Appeal Comprehension CSs

Problem: Comprehension of [avoid]
Conversation Data:
NS: How could it have been to avoid it?
P: To avoid?

Stimulated Recall Data:
I did not know the meaning of *avoid*. As I had to answer the question, I could not pretend to understand it. . . . In order to express my problem and to elicit help from the interlocutor, I repeat the problematic part. . . . When we repeat what native speakers say, native speakers usually detect our problem and try to explain it in a different way. So I use this repetition method when I don't understand a certain part or word. . . . the native speaker, the conversation partner, kindly explained the meaning of his question again.

The stimulated recall data revealed that participant used an implicit appeal comprehension CS by repeating the incomprehensible word *avoid*. Employing this appeal CS, the participant managed his comprehension difficulty and led their conversation naturally. This comprehension CS was able be identified only through the data convergence, the combination of conversation data and retrospective interview data.

5. Discussions and Conclusion

This study was conducted to identify L2 learners' CSs through a data convergence analysis and demonstrate the need for data convergence in CS research.

The findings of this study reveals that the participants employed various CSs to cope with the problems they encountered during the course of their oral communication. Using a convergence approach, effective CSs that helped the participants continue their conversation were identified: definition replacement CSs, lengthening time-gaining CSs, message change CSs, and implicit appeal comprehension CSs. Despite their lack of linguistic knowledge, the participants who employed these CSs were able to handle their problems successfully without any communication breakdown. Drawing on this finding, it is recommended that L2 learners should learn various types of effective CSs and develop their ability to use them autonomously.

This study also illustrates that two different types of data, conversation and stimulated recall interview data, are mutually supportive and should be converged to arrive at reliable identification of CSs. Retrospective stimulated recall data could confirm and reject the participant's use of CSs. The participants' retrospective verbal reports helped the researcher identify strategies that would otherwise have remained unnoticed in the analysis of conversation data[2]. As stated in Poulisse[2], they also played a role in rejecting to consider the utterance that were incorrectly identified as a strategy on the basis of problem indicators in the performance data to be a CS.

Using the stimulated recall data, CSs that could not be recognized in the conversation data could be identified. Nonetheless, researchers should be careful to consider CSs that are reported in the stimulated recall, but not found in the conversation data. For these reasons, it is necessary to converge two different data sources: conversation data and stimulated recall data.

The data convergence approach was especially useful for eliciting CSs that are difficult to identify, such as topic avoidance, message change, and message abandonment. As the identification of these avoidance strategies is difficult[20], their elicitation should be done through data convergence analysis.

This study is limited in that it only presents four types of CSs. Future studies should be carried out to identify more various types of CSs used to manage different problems: vocabulary problems, pronunciation problems, syntactic problems, processing time

problems, and comprehension problems. These studies are expected to contribute to increasing L2 learners' repertoire of CSs that can be used to cope with different types of problems during their L2 oral communication.

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저자소개

강 수 자 (Su-Ja Kang)   [정회원]

· 1989년 2월 : 성균관대학교 영어
  영문학과 (영어학 석사)
· 1996년 2월 : 성균관대학교 영어
  영문학과 (영어학 박사)
· 2005년 5월: 뉴욕주립대-버팔로
  (영어교육 박사)

· 2008년 3월 ~ 현재 : 배재대학교 영어영문학과 교수
<관심분야> : 영어 교육, 질적 연구, 제2언어 의사소통
  전략