

Investigating Oral Communication Strategy Use Qualitatively: Risks of Obtaining Inaccurate Data

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Abstract

Oral communication strategy (OCS) literature reveals that the vast majority of relevant research has adopted qualitative approaches to identify the OCSs used by second language (L2)/ foreign language (FL) learners. The problem in investigating the OCSs through solely qualitative techniques lies in the fact that participants, when performing limited qualitative tasks, cannot employ all the OCSs they actually utilize in reality or have in their own OCS repertoire. Additionally, it is argued that participants could be aware of those OCSs if asked consciously by answering a questionnaire. Thus, it could be hypothesized that numerous OCSs failed to be detected in the past research because of the 'absence' of another technique that could have elicited all the OCSs that must have been existent in the participants' repertoire. Therefore, this paper sheds light on this problematic issue that many OCS researchers may not be aware of, urging them to think before deciding to adopt only qualitative instruments in an OCS use investigation. It also attempts to suggest some recommendations that may hopefully help address this dilemma.

Keywords: Oral communication strategies (OCSs), OCSs taxonomies, qualitative techniques.

INTRODUCTION

OCSs: Nature and Categorization

While communicating orally, L2 speakers usually encounter various communication breakdowns, where they fail to express their intended messages due to deficiency in their L2 knowledge (Bialystok, 1983; Faerch & Kasper, 1983ba; Faerch & Kasper, 1983b; Tarone, 1980). Therefore, in order to reach a mutual understanding with their interlocutors, L2 speakers commonly resort to particular means such as paraphrasing their ideas, describing the function or the characteristics of the terms they would like to express, asking their interlocutors to help provide the lacked terms, and others (Faerch & Kasper 1983; Tarone, 1981). These tools that enable L2 speakers to bridge their oral communication gaps are called oral communication strategies (OCSs) (Faerch & Kasper 1983; Tarone, 1981, 1983).

Generally, OCSs have been divided into two major categorizations: achievement strategies (aka compensatory strategies) and avoidance strategies (aka reduction strategies) (Bialystok, 1990; Dornyei & Scott, 1997; Faerch & Kasper, 1983; & Tarone, 1981). Achievement strategies (such as paraphrasing, translation, mime, and asking for help from interlocutors) are employed to communicate the whole message as perceived by the speaker. As a result, the message is neither lost nor altered. However, avoidance strategies result in communicating either an imperfect message or a message different from the one initially intended. That is, it leads to either reducing the message (due to the speaker’s failure to convey the whole intended messages and accordingly, only a partial solution may be resorted to) or to find no solution (as the speakers abandon the message and maybe try to convey messages they can manage) (Faerch & Kasper, 1983).

Reviewing literature shows that a number of OCS taxonomies have been developed (and organized based on certain criteria), the most prominent of which are those proposed by Tarone, (1977), Bialystok (1983), and Faerch and Kasper (1983). However, Dornyei and Scott’s (1995a, 1995b) taxonomy is regarded as a summary of all the dominant taxonomies proposed in OCS research as shown in Table 1 below.

INVESTIGATING OCSS QUALITATIVELY: UNAVOIDABLE RISKS

Undoubtedly, investigating the OCS use by L2 speakers is of a paramount importance as it can demonstrate what OCSs are resorted to by those speakers to enhance their oral communication patterns. Importantly, it shows whether L2 speakers tend to achieve their communicative goals or prefer to avoid or reduce communication.

Table 1: Dornyei and Scott’s (1995a, 1995b) OCS Taxonomy. Adapted from Dornyei and Scott (1997, p.197)

OCSs		
1. Direct Strategies	2. Interactional Strategies	3. Indirect Strategies
A. Resource Deficit-Related Strategies * Message Abandonment * Message Reduction * Message Replacement * Circumlocution * Approximation * Use of all-Purpose Words * Word-Coinage * Restructuring * Literal Translation * Foreignizing * Code Switching * Use of Similar Sounding Words * Mumbling * Omission * Retrieval * Mime B. Own-Performance Problem-Related Strategies * Self-Rephrasing * Self-Repair C. Other-Performance Problem-Related Strategies * Other-Repair	A. Resource Deficit-Related Strategies * Appeals for Help B. Own-Performance Problem-Related Strategies * Comprehension Check * Own-Accuracy Check C. Other-Performance Problem-Related Strategies * Asking for Repetition * Asking for Clarification * Asking for Confirmation * Guessing * Expressing Non-Understanding * Interpretive Summary * Responses	A. Processing Time Pressure-Related Strategies * Use of Fillers * Repetitions B. Own-Performance Problem-Related Strategies * Verbal Strategy Markers C. Other-Performance Problem-Related Strategies * Feigning Understanding

Over four decades, however, the majority of OCS research (e.g. Tarone, 1977; Varadi, 1980; Bialystok, 1983; Tarone and Yule, 1987; Poulisse, 1990; Poulisse, 1997; Rababah, 2001; Wannaruk, 2003; and Binhayeeraong, 2009, Majd, 2014) has employed qualitative approaches of collecting data (e.g., interviews, role plays, and concept descriptions) to elicit OCS use by the participants. Although qualitative tasks could elicit a number of OCSs used by participants, the obtained results may not give a comprehensive picture of the actual use of the OCSs by L2 learners.

For example, Mei and Nathalang (2010) investigated the OCSs used by Chinese EFL non-English major undergraduates. Data were collected from 117 first-year students classified with either a high or low English proficiency level and belonging to two different academic departments (i.e., Arts and Sciences). Data were collected from participants' performance on both one-way (i.e., concept identification task) and two-way tasks (i.e., role play task). Apart from the results obtained, a number of important questions strongly impose themselves here such as: Were the few minutes allocated for performing the two tasks mentioned above enough for the participants to reflect on all the OCSs their repertoire contained? How accurate were the data obtained in terms of representing all the OCSs that participants used in reality? How long did it take for the researchers to study such a big number of participants (117 students) using concept identification and role play? Was it a wise way to conduct such a study without utilizing another technique that might have helped 'controlling' and 'validating' the data attained?

In another case where a different qualitative technique was used, Wannaruk (2003) used a five-to-seven-minute interview to examine the OCSs used by 75 students majoring in engineering, information technology, and agriculture. Though the data used in the analysis were taken from one-to-one interviews of students by native English teachers, and the interviews were videotaped, similar arguments could also be raised regarding how accurate and actual the data obtained were. Was a five-to-seven-minute interview adequate for both the participants to use all the OCSs they actually employ, and the researcher to elicit those OCSs?

THE CORE OF THE PROBLEM

Based on the above discussion, the accuracy and actual representation of the OCS use investigated by adopting qualitative techniques only could be easily questionable. That is because these qualitative tasks primarily rely on respondents' performance as the only source of the data. Additionally, the duration of performing those tasks usually takes few minutes. Needless to say, it is almost impossible for participants to employ and reflect on all the OCSs they actually have when performing those limited qualitative tasks within relatively short periods of time, though those particular participants could be aware of those "unutilized" OCSs if asked consciously by answering a questionnaire (AlSaqqaf, 2015; Mei, 2009). Furthermore, importantly too, there are some OCSs (e.g. topic avoidance) that are too difficult to identify from speakers' utterances or the context (Rababah, 2001).

RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Undoubtedly, qualitative techniques are of tremendous significance in social and educational research. However, researchers must first examine thoroughly the nature and essence of the area they are going to investigate, and decide whether adopting only qualitative techniques would be enough to elicit all the possible issues under investigation.

In the case of exploring the OCS use, employing qualitative techniques would definitely be effective if they were mixed with another instrument that could elicit all the OCSs participants actually own. As discussed previously, identifying OCSs using qualitative approaches could be highly susceptible to the risks of obtaining inaccurate data. Consequently, in order to avoid such situations in which real and accurate data about the use of OCSs might not be attained by adopting qualitative technique only, and in order to make sure that all the OCSs the students use are detected, an OCS questionnaire can be the best applicable research tool to incorporate with qualitative instruments and, thus, solve these problematic aspects. That is because a questionnaire results in self-reported data that give the respondents the chance to express their preferences and linguistic behavior in using OCSs.

Some OCS questionnaires have been developed such as Nakatani's (2006) Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI) and AlSaqqaf's (2015) Oral Communication Strategy Scale (OCSS), though the former has its share of criticism due to some weaknesses. Those scales include items that represent a large number of OCSs. Thus, in case a participant did not employ all the OCSs they actually own, such questionnaires could compensate for that deficit and allow participants to inform researchers of all the OCSs they actually utilize.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to shed some light on a serious issue related to the investigation of OCS use through a sole adoption of qualitative techniques such as concept identification, role plays, and interviews. It thoroughly discussed the unavoidable risks expected from using such techniques only in terms of the accuracy of the data obtained as well as their actual representation of the OCS use investigated. Thus, this paper is considered as a call to all OCS researchers to consider all the risks and problematic issues raised here, and think before deciding to adopt only qualitative data in an OCS use investigation.

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