Exploring the Use of Oral Communication Strategies by Speakers of French as a Foreign Language

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Abstract
The study investigates the use of communication strategies (CSs) as a factor mediating foreign language speaking proficiency. Ten learners of French at a Pre-Intermediate - Intermediate level speaking Swedish as L1 were asked to watch six short cartoons and present their contents. All participants have also completed a Placement test prior to performing the task. The resulting set of narratives has been analyzed with a specific aim of identifying the word searching situations and the CSs used to overcome problems caused by difficulties in retrieving the lexical items needed. Additionally, each set of narratives has been evaluated in terms of its informational density. Taken on a case by case basis, the data shows a variety of individual styles adopted by learners to tackle lexical problems. In fact, the use of CSs that are especially instrumental seems to be a far better predictor of communicative efficiency than vocabulary tests scores. It follows that acquiring a foreign language entails becoming a proficient user of CSs and an important pedagogical implication is that explicit training in using such strategies can be highly beneficial.

Keywords: Communication Strategies, SLA, Interlanguage

1. Introduction

It has been noted that the mismatch between the linguistic resources that foreign language (FL) learners dispose of and the communication goals they are trying to achieve when speaking a FL gives rise to a number of systematic phenomena that function as coping mechanisms helping to prevent breakdowns in communication (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997). These are known as communication strategies (CSs) and have been studied quite extensively see (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997 for a comprehensive review). However, despite the fact that CSs have been attracting the attention of researchers for more than four decades, there still is no definition or taxonomy that would be accepted by all the researchers in the field (see the discussion in Dörnyei & Scott, 1997).

Even though there is a wide array of potential definitions offered in the literature, they are seem to build upon two essential properties of CSs – problem orientedness and consciousness.

With regards to problem orientedness, it has been suggested that FL production entails handling a specific set of problems including:
- own-performance problems: lack or improper use of linguistic resources (Tarone & Yule, 1987),
- other-performance problems: elements of the interlocutor's speech perceived as problematic (Dörnyei & Scott, 1995),
- processing time pressure: the learner's need for more time to plan and process speech than in L1 production (Tarone & Yule, 1987).

While problem orientedness as an essential property of CSs has never been called into question, with regards to CSs being conscious, it has been suggested that consciousness in this case is a continuum rather than an "all or nothing" phenomenon (Færch & Kasper,1983). Indeed, efficient and frequently used CSs can be automated (Gass & Selinker, 1994).

For the purposes of this paper, the notion of CSs has been operationalized as "any potentially intentional attempt to cope with any language related problem of which the speaker is aware during communication" (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997:179).

While this definition is wider than some others offered in the literature (see Dörnyei & Scott, 1997 for a review) and thus encompasses a wide array of phenomena, the scope of this paper includes CSs deployed in a specific context: word searches during oral production of a narrative. A word search could be best described as instances of perceivable effort to convey the message connected with the fact that the word the speaker initially planned to produce is, for some reason, unavailable.

Such situations are a common phenomenon in foreign language production and the CSs deployed by the speakers to avoid potential breakdowns in communication are varied. The taxonomy adopted for the purposes of the current analyses is the one originally proposed by Poulisse (1993) and further refined in Dörnyei & Kormos (1998). It should be noted that, even though most taxonomies of CSs including the one used here were developed in 90s, they remain relevant and are still used by researchers in the field (see, for instance, Rosas 2018; Montero, 2019).

Poulisse related the taxonomy suggested to Levelt's (1989) model of speech production and proposes that, when the lexical item needed cannot be retrieved, the speaker can either (a) abandon or change the original speech plan or (b) keep the original macro plan and modify the preverbal message only. Solution (a) results in Content reduction strategies – Message abandonment, Message reduction or Message replacement – while solution (b) results in Substitution strategies (where a problematic lexical item is replaced with another item) or Reconceptualization strategies (communicating the message according to an alternative plan e.g. exemplifying, illustrating, providing descriptions).

Dörnyei & Kormos (1998) relate these strategies to own-performance problems (Tarone and Yule 1987) and also note that the list of CSs would be incomplete without strategies that help speakers deal with other FL oral production problems. Of particular interest for the present study are CSs that are related to processing time pressure (Tarone & Yule 1987). Since FL speech production is not as automated as L1 speech, it stands to reason that some processes would require more time to complete creating a need for "stalling mechanisms" that would "keep communication channel open and provide more time and attentional resources" (Dörnyei & Kormos 1998: 368) to retrieve a problematic item or deploy an alternative CS. These include various types of fillers (e.g. hesitation markers) and repetitions (see Dörnyei & Kormos 1998 for a detailed overview).

2. Methodology

Ten native speakers of Swedish learning French as a foreign language were asked to watch six short cartoons and present their contents in a form of a narrative. All participants have completed a placement test and were estimated to be between B1 and B2 levels. They watched each cartoon twice and were instructed to try to be as precise and informative as they could when presenting it.

The narratives produced were video recorded and transcribed using ELAN 6 software. A total of 128 sequences qualifying as a word search were identified and further analyzed. Instances of speakers' linguistic (and gestural) behavior that seemed instrumental for handling lexical difficulties were annotated using the taxonomy of Dörnyei & Kormos (1998). The choice in favor of this taxonomy was made due to the level of specificity it offers. Even though a revised and updated version of this taxonomy was offered by Nakatani (2016), the difference resides in the fact that Nakatani adds a phochological dimension to it (e.g. positive attitude as a CS) that cannot be fully investigated based on speech samples alone. For that reason, the original version of it was chosen for the purposes of analysis.

It should be noted that the data was collected for the purposes of the author's PhD project which had much broader research questions. Another set of data collected as a part of the PhD project included the oral production of 32 native speakers of French and 18 native speakers of Swedish who watched the same set of stimuli and followed the same set of instructions, the only exception being that they produced narratives in their native language. This allowed for some interesting observations regarding the differences between L1 and FL oral production.

3. Analysis

3.1 General remarks

First of all, it should be noted that word searches are a phenomenon that is not limited to FL speakers' oral production. However, there are factors that make word searches in FL production a rather peculiar phenomenon and set them aside from what we can observe in L1 oral production. Firstly, they are much more frequent in learners' language. Secondly, because learners are aware of the discrepancy between their communicative competence and the situation's demands, every word search is a potentially face threatening situation. See, for instance, excerpts (1) and (2). In (1), produced by a native speaker, one can see that no attempt was made to preserve the initial message (a shark fin appears over the water). After two pauses followed by fillers and a comment the speaker changes the message for a more general one (there is a shark in the water) and doesn't seem to be bothered by her inability to retrieve the exact word. In contrast, the speaker in (2) seems quite intent on preserving the message. She produces an English word first hoping that it also exists in French. However, she suspects that it doesn't (note the hesitant "maybe") so she substitutes it with a description.

(1) *ils voient un (.) erm (.) erm ben j'ai oublié le mot (.)*
Eng: they see a erm (.) erm well I've forgotten the word
erm bon on peut en conclure que c'est un requin
Eng: erm well we can conclude that it's a shark

(2) *on voit la la fine peut-etre je sais pas le mot mais c'est la partie*
Eng: we see the the fin maybe I don't know the word but it's a part
de poisson qui est visible (.) erm (.) erm (.) oui sur (.) la surface (.) de la mer
Eng: of fish that is visible (.) erm (.) erm (.) yes (.) on (.) the surface (.) of the sea

This tendency to be very specific and include as many details as possible is something that actually sets the FL narratives aside from those produced by native speakers. One example illustrative of this trend is (3) where a speaker is trying to produce a more specific term (a handbag) instead of a generic one (a bag). It is remarkable that in a group of 32 native speakers, 30 used the generic term *sac* (a bag) and were not trying to be more specific. The speaker in (3), however, seems extremely dissatisfied with that level of genericity and actually does not seem to treat the sequence as a communicative success.

(3) *le voleur (.) erm (.) il (.) il (.) vole la (.) c'est pas un sac mais c'est un (.)*
Eng: the thief (.) erm (.) he (.) he (.) steals the (.) it's not a bag but it's a (.)
gestures
huh! je sais pas j'ai oublie le mot mais la femme a une chose que
Eng: huh! I don't know I've forgotten the word but the woman has a thing that
le voleur il vole cette chose
Eng: the thief he steals that thing

3.2 Overview of the Communication Strategies used by the participants

Participants that were most successful in the task tended to use clusters of strategies to tackle problems caused by vocabulary deficiencies. For instance, in (3) the speaker is trying to find a French equivalent to a Swedish expression *tar ner* (take down) and starts with a series of self repetitions and fillers which then is followed by a description of what it means exactly to

take a cat down from the tree. She then comments letting the interlocutor know that she has a particular concept in mind but does not find the right words in French. After that, she produces the word in English, makes another comment and finally, at the end, retrieves the word.

(4) *pour erm pour re- erm ah pour hah pour prendre le chat dans ses mains*
Eng: to erm to re- erm ah to hah to take the cat in his hands
et le m le mettre dans la rue alors pour (.) comment ce mot en français
Eng: and it p put it on the street so to (.) how this word in French
**save it* je ne sais pas le mot en français erm alors oui (.)*
Eng: *save it* I don't know the word in French erm so yes (.)
c'est ça le sauver
Eng: that's it save it

The fact that FL speakers generally produce more output that L1 speakers to achieve a particular communicative goal is well attested in the literature as the "waffling phenomenon" (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986; Edmondson & House, 1991). There can be many explanations to why this happens. Blum-Kulka & Olshtain (1986) suggested that it could be related to the learners' "lack of confidence and eagerness to ensure that the message gets across" since even advanced learners "still feel uncertain of the effectiveness of their communicative interaction" (p. 177). This explanation seems to be specifically relevant to the learners' 'behaviour in word searching situations. Indeed, a word search is a clear indication of the speaker's being aware of a certain communicative problem and, as we have seen in (3), even when the solution found is indeed satisfactory, a learner does not always perceive it as such. An alternative (or complementary) expalation would be L1 interference manifesting itself as learners striving to frame the information in the exact same was way as in their L1 (see 3.4 for more details and further examples).

Overall, the speakers tendency to use bundles of strategies to overcome a specific problem in communication also accounts for the fact that the number of word searches and the number of CSs deployed generally do not add up meaning that for one word search more than one CS would be deployed. Furthermore, both are subject to great variation, as can be seen from Figure 1.

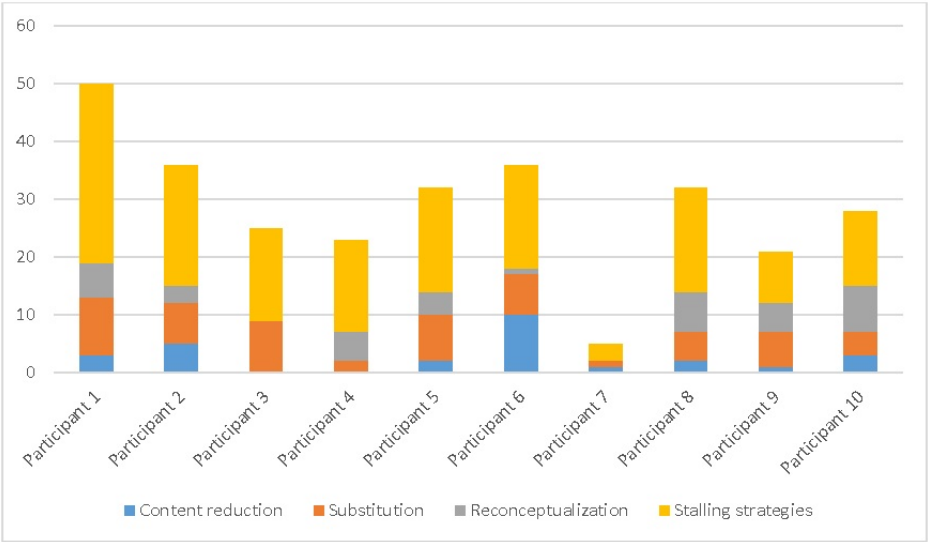

Figure 1. Number of word searches and specific SCs deployed by each participant

In what follows, an overview of different types and subtypes of CSs use will be presented and accompanied by the illustrations from the data.

3.3. Stalling strategies

Stalling strategies are mechanisms used to "keep communication channel open and provide more time and attentional resources" for a communicative problem to be solved (Dörnyei & Kormos 1998: 368). As can be seen from Figure 1, these strategies seem to be widely practiced by learners. This is because even at advanced levels processing time is still an issue and speakers often need to gain time to come up with a solution to the communicative problem at hand while keeping the communication channel open. The first sign of disfluency in communication is long pauses and, therefore, all strategies of this type are circling around various ways of filling these.

Dörnyei & Kormos (1998) distinguish between pauses and repetitions as means of addressing processing time demands. While unfilled pauses have not been attested in data, there were various types of filled pauses and self-repetitions.

There were various types of filled pauses (depending on the type of fillers employed) attested in the data.

Nonlexicalized pauses feature instances of what Dörnyei & Kormos (1998) call "umming and erring". In other words, these refer to sounds that are not words but rather used by the speakers to mark hesitation. For instance, in (4) above the speaker opens with a series of non-lexicalized fillers coupled with self-repetitions before proceeding with other CSs.

Lexicalized pauses feature "filling words or gambits to fill pauses, to stall and to gain time in order to keep the communication channel open and maintain discourse at times of difficulty" (Dörnyei & Kormos, 1998:369), such as *actually, your know, okay,* etc.
A rather specific type of such fillers attested in the data are metalinguistic comments and think-aloud protocols.

Metalinguistic comments refer to instances of speakers explaining their communicative difficulties to the interlocutor. For instance, in (4) the speaker makes two such comments; first she utters *comment ce mot en français* (how *is* this word in French) and then *je ne sais pas le mot en français* (I don't know the word in French). Similarly, *j'ai oublié le mot* (I've forgotten the word) in (1) is also an instance of a metalinguistic comment. These seem to not only fill the pause but also show the interlocutor that they have a specific concept in mind but struggle to find the right word.

In contrast, in (5), straight after a self-repetition and a nonlexicalized filler *eh*, the speaker seems to verbalize her thinking process as she searches through a specific semantic domain (vehicles) in order to find the right word.

(5) *dans un dans un eh pas un train pas un bus*
English: in a in a eh not a train not a bus
mais cet objet qu'on utilise pour se rendre dans un autre planète
English: but this object that one uses to get to another planet

In addition to non-verbalized and verbalized pauses described in Dörnyei & Kormos (1998), there also were instances of gesture/mime filled pauses where a specific gesture was used to fill the gap where a problematic item would otherwise be.

As can be seen from Figure 2, some of the Stalling strategies are fairly common across participants (e.g. Umming and erring) while others seem to be subject to great individual variation (e.g. Metalinguistic comments).

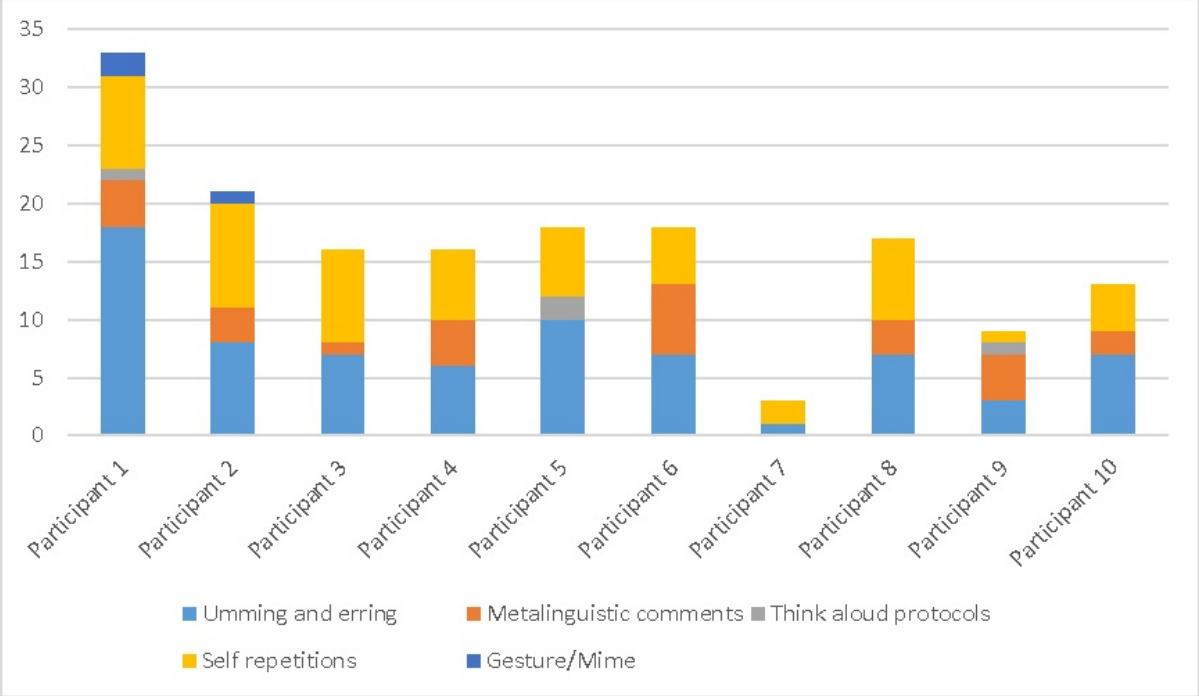

Figure 2. Stalling strategies used by the participants

3.4 Content reduction strategies

According to Poulisse (1993), when the intended lexical item cannot be retrieved, one possible solution is to simply stop the speech production and give up the message thus resorting to Message abandonment.

Dörnyei & Kormos (1998) note furthermore that abandoning the message entirely is not the only way of reducing the content communicating and add Message reduction (reducing the message by avoiding certain problematic topics and thus leaving out some of the intended elements) and Message replacement (feeling incapable of executing the original speech plan and substituting the original message with an alternative one) to the list. They group all the three into a group of Content reduction strategies. In practice, of course, in order to analyze something as an instance of Message replacement, there needs to be the evidence of Message abandonment first. For instance, in (6) the speaker's original plan was to say that there was no gravity, however, the term "gravity" proved to be problematic. She, therefore, changed the original message (there was no gravity) for a more general one (they are in space).

(6) *parce qu-il y a pas de erm parce qu'ils sont erm en l'espace*
English: because there is no erm because they are erm in space

3.5 Substitution strategies

Based on Poulisse (1993), if the message is not abandoned, and the speaker does not seek the help of the addressee, they can use a Compensatory strategy, which implies that "he will attempt to find an alternative way of encoding his original communicative goal" (p. 179). Poulisse (1993) lists two types of substitution strategies (Substitution and Substitution Plus) as subtypes of such Compensatory strategies. In essence, the problematic item is replaced by another and differences between subtypes of Substitution strategies boil down to what is used as a replacement. As can be seen from Figure 3, there is a lot of individual variance in terms of preferences to various Substitution CSs so each speaker's production presents as a unique set problem solving techniques.

Code switching refers to instances of speakers inserting lexical items in a language other than the language of the speech production. While it is often assumed that it is L1 that the speaker would resort to, the participants actually tended to use English as a resource more often than their native language (Swedish). For instance, while in (7) the speaker switches to her L1, (3) contains a switch to English. This is all the more interesting considering that English was not the language of interaction between the participants and the researcher. Neither was it the language of the task. This seems to be a consequence of Sweden being a predominantly multilingual society where in most situations being able to fluently speak and understand English is assumed and not really put into question.

(7) *Eah (.) et (.) après (.) erm (.) l'oiseau (.) erm (.) eh (.) eh (.)*
English: Eah (.) and (.) after (.) erm (.) the bird (.) erm (.) eh (.) eh (.)
l'oiseau se lève eah (.) eah (.) sort?
English: the bird gets up eah (.) eah (.) exits?
flugar ut foglen men
English: flies out the bird but

There is another noteworthy feature of a word search in (7): the speaker actually gets it right before the code switch. Indeed, it is perfectly natural in French to use the path verb *sortir* (exit) to describe the situation (a bird flying out of the cage). However, the speaker herself doesn't seem to think this is the right term and this might be connected to the fact that Swedish does have preference for more specific, manner encoding verbs for motion events description (Zlatev et al., 2019). In other words, at least some of the instances where speakers kept deploying additional CSs even though what they produced is perfectly acceptable might also be due to L1 interference.

Approximation refers to insertion of an "alternative item that shares semantic features with the target word or structure" (Dörnyei & Kormos, 1998:359). For instance, in (8) the word in question is *fauteuil* (armchair). However, when the speaker realizes the exact term cannot be retrieved, she uses *chaise* (chair) as something that is "close enough".

(8) *qui s'est assied sur une (.) erm (.) eh (.) chaise*
English: who is seated on a (.) erm (.) eh (.) chair

All-purpose words are generic lexical items, such as "thing" in English, used in contexts where more specific words are lacking. For instance, in (9) the word used is *chose* (thing) which can, in principle, replace any concrete noun:

(9) *et il sort pour (.) erm (.) pour obtenir pour chercher une (.)*
English: and he exits to (.) erm (.) to get to fetch a (.)
erm (.) oh j'ai oublié ce mot erm et il prend cette chose
English: erm (.) oh I've forgotten this word erm and he takes this thing

Foreignizing refers to picking a word in a language that is not a language of the speech production and adjusting it to fit into the FL phonological and morphological rules. For instance, in (10) the speaker uses an English expression *shopping cart* to adjust it according to the rules of French phonology and morphology. Again, many instances of English words used in this way shouldn't come as a surprise given that all participants were fluent in English.

(10) *erm (.) et elle prend une erm (.) carte du shoping?*
English: erm (.) and she takes a erm (.) *shopping cart*?

Grammatical word coinage refers to creating a non-existent word while following the rules or word formation in a given language. For instance, in (11) the speaker coins a word to designate researchers using the word *recherche* (research) as a base and adding the appropriate suffix *–eur* generally conveying a meaning of agency. One should note it is almost right – the exact term is *chercheur,* so such communicative behavior has its potential rewards: one might actually guess the right word without having previously learned it.

(11) *ces deux hommes erm (.) rechercheurs? je crois (.) scientifiques?*
these two persons erm (.) researchers? I believe (.) scientific?

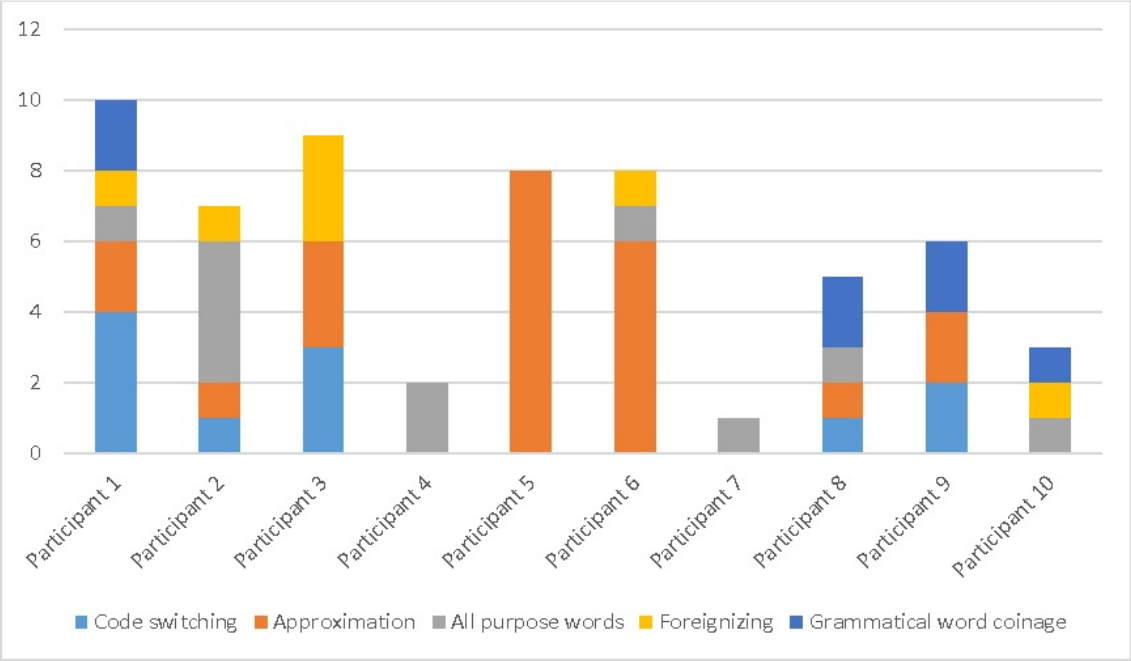

Figure 3. Substitution strategies employed by the participants

3.6 Reconceptualization strategies

Reconceptualization strategies involve "a change of preverbal message involving more than one chunk <…> The change can take various forms" (Poulisse, 1993:181). For instance, the

speaker can choose to replace a word designating the concept in question by a list of words referring to its conceptual features or select a few items that together combine to refer to the concept in question. In (12), for instance the speaker lists both visual attributes and functional characteristics of the object in question (a shopping cart):

(12) *mais alors c'est comme un panier mais sur les roues (.) je sais pas comment le dire (.)*
English: but well it's like a basket but on the wheels (.) I don't know how to say it (.)
pour mettre les choses qu'on achète
English: to put the things that on buys
<…>
dans ce panier je vais le dire comme ça
English: in this basket I will say it like that

Again, it is noteworthy that reconceptualization is not all the speaker is doing. She also makes a meta linguistic comment to let the interlocutor know of her uncertainty and, in the end, realizing that she will need to go back to the concept in question again and again during the narration, she introduces a generic term *panier* (basket) to facilitate reference tracking.

3.7 Individual differences

When it comes to oral production, it is logical to assume that the students at higher proficiency levels would be more efficient communicators and that part of that proficiency would come from successful use of CSs (Fernández Dobao, 2001; Safont Jordá, 2001). It is true that those who scored higher in the placement test tended to also be more informative. However, the relationship between proficiency scores and informational density is not as straight forward as one might think. Indeed, as can be seen in Figure 4, some students with almost identical scores still got very different scores when their narratives were evaluated for informational density.

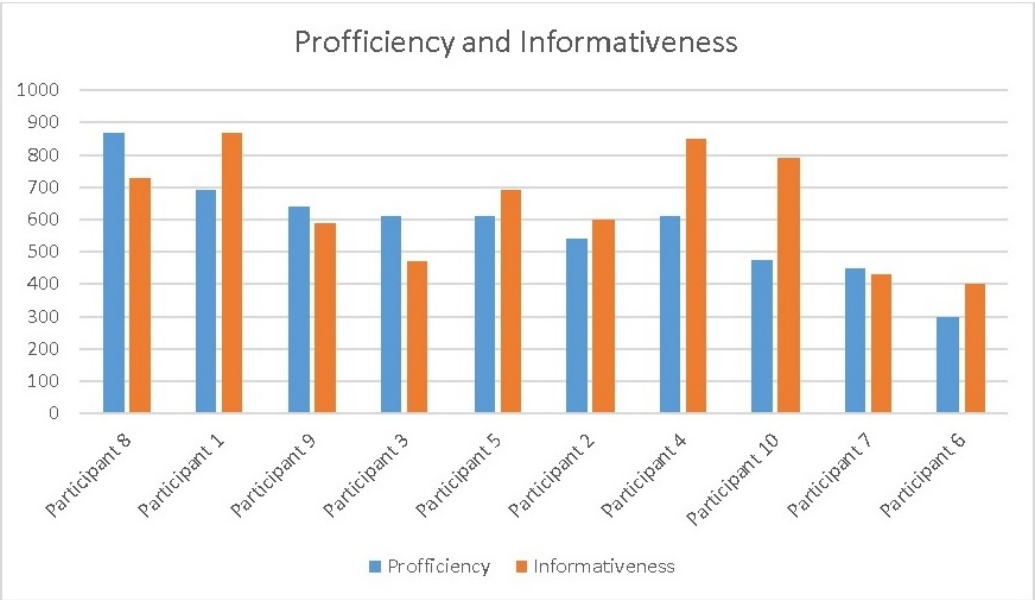

Figure 4. Proficiency levels and informational density of the narratives produced

See, for instance, a sharp difference in the levels in informativeness between Participant 7 and Participant 10 even though their proficiency scores were almost identical. When one examines closer the two sets of narratives produced by the learners, what becomes immediately obvious is that the two speakers have different approaches to handling communicative difficulties. More specifically, there is a difference in the use of CSs.

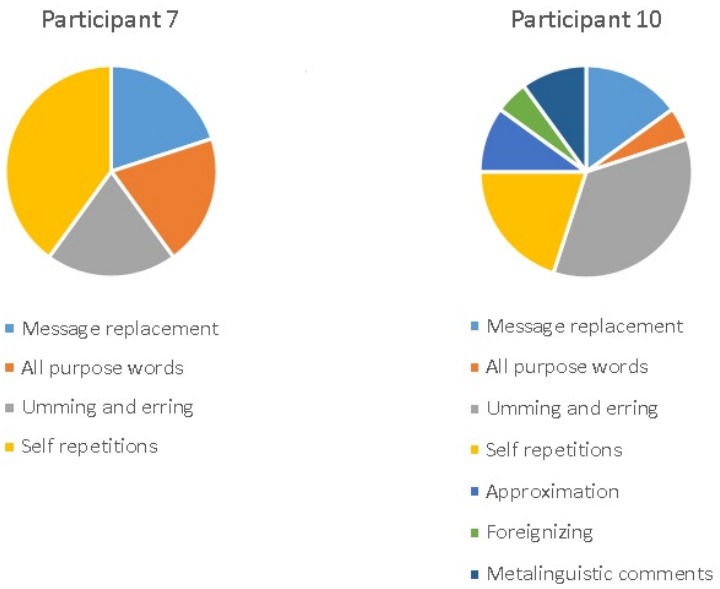

Figure 5. SCs employed by Participant 7 and Participant 10

The difference in CSs used is both quantitative (Participant 10 engages in many more word searches) and qualitative (Participant 10 uses a wider variety of CSs), which is presented in Figure 5. One could say the two learners have different styles when it comes to communication in FL.

This, of course, is the most extreme example in the data set. However, the same tendency is observable in other participants (see Figure 1 and Figure 4).

4. Discussion and Conclusions

A major factor explaining keen interest in CSs within the SLA research community is the observable discrepancy between what is taught in the classrooms and what learners actually need in real life. From that point of view, much has been said about relative efficiency of various CSs vs their processing cost. Poulisse (1993), for instance, notes that, even though ideally the speakers strive to produce the message at minimal cost and high level of comprehensibility thus satisfying Grice's (1975) *Least Effort Principle* and *Cooperative Principle*, in foreign language learners' production those are often in conflict. Poulisse goes on to state that, from that perspective, Substitution strategies and Reconceptualization strategies differ: Substitution strategies (*Code Switching, Approximation* and *All purpose words)* tend to be least comprehensible but require less effort while *Reconceptualization* tends to be the most successful but also costly. One should, however, be careful not to overgeneralize since every communicative act is embedded in a unique set of circumstances and being sensitive to those is also a big part of strategic language use. For instance, in (12) *Reconceptualization* and a use of an *All purpose word* are parts of the same solution to a communicative problem where an *All purpose word* is indeed needed for the sake of more

economical reference tracking. Similarly, even though Dörnyei & Scott (1997) put *Message replacement* into the Content reduction category of CSs, one can see that in many cases it is a perfectly valid solution that does not lead to any information loss. This is because every speaker also considers the addressee's knowledge of the world and the situation described making a calculated guess of how much will be inferred and thus can be omitted. Therefore, change from a more specific (there is no gravity) to a more general (they are in space) message in (6) is justified, as long as the context allows the addressee to infer the omitted information. After all, any situation can be described in a multitude of ways each of those being equally valid, which also is why, as can be seen from (1), native speakers often resort to Message replacement too. In other words, when it comes to exact solutions adopted in each situation, there is always a lot of room for creativity regardless of the language one speaks.

This creative side of the speech process is something that is always subject to individual variation. As can be seen from the present data analyses, many factors can potentially contribute to that. One of the factors in play is a specific cultural environment and the amount of language learning experience one has had. In this case, the fact that all participants had previously learned at least one language in addition to their L1 has played a role. Firstly, the very experience of actively reflecting on L2 grammar can boost analytical skills that many of the CSs (for instance, *Grammatical word coinage*) rely on. Secondly, speakers that grew up in an environment where English is widely used as lingua franca come to use it as a communicative resource.

Other factors contributing to successful strategic language use might stem from both personality traits and commitment to the task since it is obviously speakers that are willing to engage in risk taking communicative behavior (to make an effort to express themselves despite lack of words rather than avoid the topic altogether) that become successful communicators. In light of that, it seems worthwhile to promote that mentality during foreign language instruction.

At the same time, successful communication seems to be about more than positive attitude, confidence and willingness to take risks. As some of the examples demonstrate, sometimes the speaker is successful without actually realizing that. Perhaps some conscious reflection on strategic language use (e.g. appropriates of generalization) could help boost learner's communicative competence by helping them realize that sometimes it's ok not to be 100% precise. In that respect, the data presented here seems to suggest, once again, that CSs can and should be taught as a part of the curriculum, as previously proposed in Dornyei (1995) and Nakatani (2005) among others.

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