

***How Do Mainland Chinese Learners of English Use Compensatory Strategies to Aid Communication: A Qualitative Analysis in Three Communicative Environments***

**Li Zhang**

*Shanghai Jiao Tong University, China*

**Tongshun Wang**

*Shanghai Jiao Tong University, China*

**Yue Sheng**

*Shanghai University of Engineering Science, China*

Strategic competence is one of the four components in the model of communicative competence. Since 1970s, researches have been done to deal with issues related to communication strategies. The current research tries to investigate what communication strategies are used by mainland Chinese learners of English to compensate for the deficiency of language resources through the analysis of communications in natural conversations, classroom interactions and oral English tests. 48 Chinese college learners of English participated in the study. The instruments include observation, retrospective verbal reporting and interview. The result shows that learners use various compensatory strategies to enhance communication. Besides, learners use such strategies as repetition, restructuring, circumlocution, literal translation, and all-purpose word more frequently than other compensatory strategies. Finally, the strategies learners use in three different learning environments are varied. The results can help teachers appropriately arrange for and guide

the training and teaching of communication strategies according to different learning situations. It will also inform learners of what strategies are over-used or under-used and how to use compensatory strategies consciously to enhance successful communication.

**Key words: compensatory strategies, qualitative analysis, natural conversations, classroom interactions, oral English tests**

## INTRODUCTION

Studies in second and foreign language learning have laid much emphasis on the development of communicative competence. One of its components—communication strategies (CSs) is still a big interest for many researchers today (Gullberg, 2006; Macaro, 2006; Maleki, 2007; Nakatani, 2005, 2006) because the employment of CSs is considered very important in solving communicative problems and facilitating the success in communication. Without strategic competence, learners with a firm knowledge of grammar and a wide range of vocabulary may sometimes find it hard to carry out their communicative intent (Dörnyei, 1995). This is the case for many Chinese learners of English, but there are still others who consciously or unconsciously use CSs to aid communication and become successful speakers of English. This article tries to investigate how mainland Chinese learners use compensatory strategies in three different communicative environments: natural conversations, classroom interactions and oral tests. The reason for the focus on compensatory strategies is that the employment of such strategies will result in the successful conveyance of meaning rather than the mere maintenance of conversation. They are usually considered the most important part among all types of CSs because compensatory strategies serve as the most effective way to a successful communication.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

The approaches to defining CSs generally fall into two major categories: the interactional approach and the psycholinguistic approach (Ellis, 1994). The former views CSs from a social perspective and emphasizes the interactional aspect of CSs. CSs are defined as “mutual attempt of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in situations where requisite meaning structures do not seem to be shared” (Tarone, 1980, p. 65). The latter examines the psychological and cognitive aspects of CSs. CSs are “potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal” (Færch & Kasper, 1983, p. 36). Compensatory strategies, as the most important component of CSs, refer to the adoption of an alternative plan to compensate for the deficiency of linguistic resources in order to fulfill the communicative purpose.

The classifications of compensatory strategies are different in various taxonomies of CSs. The most frequently referred taxonomy is put forward by Tarone (1977). The five groups of CSs in the taxonomy manifest different approaches employed in conversations to achieve communicative goals. Paraphrase and conscious transfer are the two groups that manifest the characteristics of compensatory strategies. In the category of paraphrase are strategies as approximation, word coinage, circumlocution while conscious transfer involves literal translation and language switch.

Based on the mode of speech production, Færch and Kasper’s (1983) taxonomy of CSs comprises achievement strategies and avoidance strategies. In achievement strategies are L1 or L3 (a language other than L1 or L2) strategies and interlanguage strategies, which bear the characteristics of compensatory strategies. The former includes code-switching, foreignizing and the latter are composed of substitution, generalization, exemplification, word-coining, restructuring and description.

The taxonomy presented in the Nijmegen project has reduced the classification of CSs to two succinct items: the conceptual strategies and the

linguistic/code strategies, which serve the function of compensation. The former is concerned with an individual's knowledge of properties of the concept while the latter is related with an individual's knowledge of a word form. The following is a demonstration of this two-way taxonomy, with examples to clarify the meaning of each component.

1. Conceptual strategies—manipulating the target concept to make it expressible through available linguistic resources
  - a) Analytic strategies—specifying characteristic features of the concept (e.g. circumlocution, description, and paraphrase)
  - b) Holistic strategies—using a different concept which shares characteristics with the target item (e.g. a superordinate, coordinate, or subordinate term)
2. Linguistic / code strategies—manipulating the speaker's linguistic knowledge
  - a) Morphological creativity—creating a new word by applying L2 morphological rules to an L2 word (e.g. grammatical word coinage)
  - b) Transfer (e.g. borrowing, foreignizing, and literal translation)

Like the previous classifications, compensatory strategies in the current study are still made up of conceptual strategies (including holistic and analytic strategies) and code strategies. Although the general classification bears some similarities to that presented in Nijmegen project, specific CSs included are different. For example, formulaic speech is considered a holistic strategy because formulaic speech is usually stored in mind as a semantic whole and used as one single concept. Word coinage is not merely a code strategy because semantic word coinage is taken as an analytic strategy in that the employment of such a strategy involves analyzing the meaning of each word and combining them to make a new word, which may not exist. The following table shows all the compensatory strategies, which serve as the foundation of the current research. It is part of the whole taxonomy of CSs developed by means of Confirmative Factor Analysis (Zhang, 2004).

**TABLE 1**  
**The Taxonomy of Compensatory Strategies**

		Formulaic speech
Conceptual Strategies	Holistic Strategies	Synonym
		Superordinate term
		All-purpose word
	Analytic Strategies	Exemplification
		Repetition
		Restructuring
Code Strategies		Circumlocution
		Semantic word coinage
		Grammatical word coinage
		Borrowing/code switching
		Literal translation

## THE STUDY

On the basis of the theoretical considerations, a qualitative analysis is conducted to investigate what strategies Chinese college learners of English employ to compensate for deficiency of linguistic resources in communications in the natural conversations, classroom interactions and oral English tests. The purpose of the study is to support the possibility of the taxonomy by providing examples to explain what each strategy means and to clarify what and how CSs are used by Chinese college learners. Three questions are put forward in the current study:

- 1) What compensatory strategies are employed by Chinese college learners?
- 2) How do they use compensatory strategies in different communicative situations?

## Subjects

Altogether 48 subjects participated in the study. They were all postgraduates of non-English majors in Shanghai Jiao Tong University, who have learnt English for more than 10 years. But these learners are better at reading than

speaking owing to the lack of practice in speaking in their previous stages of English learning. They were observed in conversations in natural, classroom and testing environments. Some of the subjects were interviewed retrospectively after the conversation.

### **Instruments**

The instruments employed in the qualitative study were 1) observation, 2) CS markers, 3) verbal reporting (retrospective protocol), and 4) interview.

#### *Observation*

The researcher of the study tried to observe conversations in naturalistic, classroom and testing environments. Naturalistic observation was made once a week for a month. The researcher participated in ‘free talks’ that were held every Friday evening in a native speaker’s residence. Meanwhile, she also attended some English classes taught by both the native speaker and by Chinese teachers of English. The classroom observation was carried out twice a week and lasted for almost 2 months. The researcher also observed the subjects’ performance in Shanghai Jiao Tong University-Cambridge Spoken English Test (SJTU-CSET). The test consisted of four parts: 1) self-introduction; 2) individual picture-telling; 3) two-way collaborative task; 4) three-way discussion. All the observation processes were recorded by the researcher so that the conversations can be transcribed and tagged with markers of CSs. The researcher also wrote down the sentence whenever she was unsure of the possible use of CSs so that subjects can be asked to listen to the recorded speech and do retrospection for clarifying the uncertainty in the identification of the use of CSs.

#### *CS Markers*

In the current study, CS markers were employed for the identification of

CS use in oral communication. Potential markers of CSs such as pauses, repetitions, lengthening of sound, self-repair and rising tone occurred very frequently in the performance data. The following list displays the means by which they were labeled.

<b>pause</b>	//
<b>repetition</b>	directly shown by the repetition of the letter(s) or word(s) in the utterance
<b>lengthening of sound</b>	—
<b>self-repair</b>	(SR)
<b>rising tone</b>	↗

Although the above-mentioned markers can be employed to identify CSs, they are not absolute because the use of CSs is in fact an underlying psychological process (Wager & Firth, 1997). Therefore, the identification of CSs on the basis of strategy markers in performance data has to be supplemented by verbal reporting.

#### *Verbal Reporting*

Owing to the nature of oral communication in which the speaker needs to converse with a listener, a retrospective procedure is therefore the only option in collecting verbal reports in this situation. It was done by requiring individuals to retrospect immediately after the speech production was finished. By using the retrospective protocol, the study aims to gain insight into Chinese college learners' perception of their use of CSs when they are involved in oral English communication.

#### *Interview*

An interview was performed to clarify the data from the retrospective study if some confusing phenomena occurred. The researcher took down notes in the process of interviewing and recorded the content so that it could

later be transcribed and analyzed.

### **Procedure**

The researcher observed and recorded subjects' speech performance in three different communicative environments. She kept notes to ensure that relevant information was noticed, especially the information showing a problem and a possible use of a CS in their utterances. She recorded with an audio tape the whole process of speech performance (altogether 24 sessions) so that subjects could listen to the recording of their speech immediately after their performance and comment on the problems they had encountered. The retrospection was conducted in Chinese and the retrospective comments were recorded and translated. All the speech performance data were transcribed and tagged with CSs on the basis of CS markers and the retrospective analysis. Utterances chosen for detailed analysis were expected to be representative of the whole data and to illustrate all the taxonomic classes.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Conceptual Strategies**

Conceptual strategies refer to the strategies that learners use to overcome difficulties in communication by manipulating the concept so that it becomes expressible through their linguistic resources (Kellerman, 1991). Conceptual strategies can be sub-categorized into holistic strategies and analytic strategies.

#### **Holistic strategies**

Holistic strategies involve the selection of a different concept, which is similar to the original one, to convey the speaker's intended meaning. They are exemplified by such strategies as formulaic speech, synonym, superordinate

term and all-purpose word.

**Formulaic speech: Using a group of words which function as a fixed speech unit**

**Example 1. (NATURAL)**

Speaker: There are different ways for us to to stay healthy // and what we need do need to do (SR) is // to find the most suitable way for us. And for me //, *I'd rather* choose basketball.

<**Retrospective comments**>: When I learned the expression 'I'd rather', my teacher asked us to do some pattern drills. For example, I'd rather not tell you the news; I'd rather go tomorrow. Having practiced again and again, I can utter the phrase automatically when I need to use it.

<**Explanation**>: The speaker could immediately find the expression since 'I'd rather' was stored as a chunk in his brain. Retrospective comments show that repeated pattern drills can lead to automatic production of the language. Therefore, pattern drills are helpful for learners to learn formulaic speech.

It is found that no matter how many falters there were in the speaker's utterance, the formulaic speech was uttered correctly and readily. The reason why native speakers can manipulate their utterances effortlessly is that they have a rich repertoire of formulaic linguistic knowledge, which reduces processing time in speech production and frees attention capacity for newly created utterance components (Kasper, 1997). Therefore, formulaic speech contributes to both fluency and accuracy of Chinese students' oral communication.

**Synonym: Using a word that has the same, or nearly the same meaning to replace a difficult word**

**Example 1. (NATURAL)**

Speaker: Oh yeah, I think that is good walking // around college after the dinner. I think it has two two *goods*. One is we can do physical exercises // and we can digest.

<**Retrospective comments**>: I should have used the word 'hao chu' (benefits) here but I could hardly recall the word. Therefore, I decided to use 'goods' instead,

thinking that it meant the same thing.

**<Explanation>**: The repetition of the word ‘two’ indicates that the speaker ran into difficulty in retrieving the target language item. The retrospective comments show that the speaker intended to use ‘benefits’, but the word was unavailable to him and he therefore decided to use what he thought was its synonym ‘goods’ to convey his meaning. Although ‘good’ can be used as a noun, when it is used to mean advantage, it is an uncountable noun. The plural form ‘goods’ means ‘movable properties’. Therefore, the use of the word ‘good’ as a countable noun meaning something beneficial is not appropriate. Fortunately, the employment of CSs helped him solve the problem, as is shown in this example.

**Example 2. (CLASS)**

Teacher: Do you think it is possible to have more commercials on TV?

Student: Yes, I think so. Now since the TV commercials are are only books some some *family tools*.

Teacher: Some refrigerators or air conditioners.

Student: Yes, so I think it can enlarge the enlarge the // range such as some others...

**<Retrospective comments>**: What I intended to say is ‘jia dian’ (household appliances), such as the refrigerator, conditioner, micro-wave oven, washing machine. But its English equivalent was unavailable to me. The expression ‘family tools’ sounds somewhat similar in meaning.

**<Explanation>**: The word ‘some’ was uttered twice, which shows that a problem cropped up when the student attempted to express himself. He used the phrase ‘family tools’ to substitute for ‘household appliances’ as ‘family’ is synonymous to ‘household’ and ‘tools’ to ‘appliances’. By using this strategy, the student succeeded in conveying his meaning to the teacher, and the teacher showed her understanding by citing some specific household appliances.

**Example 3. (SJTU-CSET)**

Speaker 1: No, ah—I still you know, I’d like like the post. Actually I actually I try on myself. Different people have have different different // *shape*. This models // but you know, the shape of ladies. I’m not I’m not good-shaped. So it’s

maybe good for her // may not good for me.

Speaker 2: Yeah, the classical should ah—the classical fashion for women ah—always emphasized the ah—the (gesture showing grace) ...

**<Retrospective comments>**: I intended to say different people had different ‘tixing’ (figure), but I forgot the exact word for it. Therefore I used ‘shape’ several times, hoping that my partner could understand me.

**<Explanation>**: The repetitions of ‘have’ and ‘different’ mark the use of a CS when Speaker 1 experienced difficulty in retrieving the appropriate word. She used a synonym ‘shape’ to substitute for ‘figure’ in the hope that she could be understood by her partner. The use of a synonym was a solution to the lexical problem arising in the process of communication.

Synonym can be found a frequently used strategy. However, the problem for most Chinese learners while using a synonym is that they care most for the meanings of the synonymous words and neglect their collocations or the appropriateness of the words in the contexts. Therefore, collocation errors and inappropriateness often occur when they use a synonym to replace an unavailable word. This coincides with the fact that the study of CSs originates from error analysis. However, strategies do not lead to errors, and the occurrence of errors in interlanguage performance is not necessarily the result of the employment of CSs. The question is whether meaning or form should be the first consideration in judging a learner’s communicative competence. This is a controversial issue that has been addressed by many researchers (Koprowski, 1999; Long & Robinson, 1998). However, what is commendable of CS use is that the meaning is successfully conveyed and the communicative goal can be reached.

**Superordinate term: Using a word, the meaning of which generalizes the meaning of the unavailable word**

**Example 1. (CLASS)**

Speaker 1: But I guess that the materials must be improved.

Speaker 2: Yes, I think so.

Speaker 1: Yes, I guess that especially this for mask // a—and such kind of *material* get new techno // nology.

Speaker 2: I think so.

<**Retrospective comments**>: I had no idea what materials they were. Besides, it's difficult for me to name materials in English. Using the word 'material' was safe and I could get my idea across in this way.

<**Explanation**>: The pause prior to the word 'and' and the prolonged vowel /ə:/ in the pronunciation of this word signal a possible use of CSs. Possibly, it was not clearly shown what material it was in the picture, or the speaker did not know the English equivalent for the material. Under such circumstance, the speaker chose to use the superordinate term 'material' to avoid uttering the very word for this particular kind of material. By using a superordinate word, the speaker found a viable means to express her meaning.

In this example, the superordinate term is used to replace its relevant subordinate word, which is a relatively low frequency word. This might be due to the fact that learners are often taught the more general and common core words. These words are frequently repeated so that they can be retrieved more easily.

**All-purpose word: Using a general, empty lexical item to replace a specific word that is unavailable to the speaker**

**Example 1. (CLASS)**

Student 1: And // when people // do *doing sports* with their // with their friends they're also having fun, and having fun, you know, is very make people // usually make people happy.

Student 2: Yes, there are different different kind of sports // make usually make us healthy.

<**Retrospective comments**>: They were playing sports games in the gymnasium in order to keep fit. But I failed to retrieve the words 'jian shen fang' (gymnasium) and 'jian shen' (keep fit). Therefore, I replaced these words with the phrase 'doing sports', thinking that it might serve the same purpose.

**<Explanation>:** Two pauses and the repetition of ‘do’ indicate that Student 1 was confronted with a difficulty and groped to overcome it. The retrospective comments confirm that Student 1 had difficulty in retrieving the word ‘gymnasium’ and the phrase ‘keep fit’. Therefore, he used an all-purpose word ‘do’ followed by ‘sports’ to replace ‘keep fit in the gymnasium’. Student 2, though not knowing the specific sport mentioned by Student 1, tolerated the ambiguity and responded that all kinds of sports could make people healthy. By using the all-purpose word ‘do’, Speaker 1 succeeded in expressing himself and keeping the conversation channel open.

It is found that Chinese college learners tend to use all purpose words when they are unable to use the specific word to express themselves. Such words as ‘do’ and ‘thing’ are usually high-coverage words in language corpora so that it is easier for them to retrieve these words from their linguistic repertoire. These words occur more frequently to learners than other verbs or nouns in the process of learning the language, and they are more readily retrieved while learners are talking in the target language. Consequently, using all-purpose word is another CS with high frequency in speech data.

### **Analytic Strategies**

Analytic strategies involve the conceptual analysis of the originally intended concept by specifying characteristic features of the concept. Exemplification, repetition, restructuring, circumlocution, and semantic word coinage are all strategies of this type.

**Exemplification: Using examples to make the meaning clear when the specific expression is not available**

#### **Example 1. (CLASS)**

Student 1: We should also do some something mm—around us to prevent the white pollution, just the use more nature nature nature thing not the the the (lower

voice) *such as plastic thing* I think. This is my opinion.

Student 2: Yes, I think you make a good opinion.

<**Retrospective comments**>: What I intended to say was something not natural, something like ‘hua he wu’ (chemical compounds), but I didn’t know its English equivalent. Therefore I took ‘plastic thing’ as an example to show what I meant.

<**Explanation**>: The repetition of ‘nature’ and ‘the’ in a lower voice reveals that Student 1 experienced some problems when planning the subsequent speech. According to his retrospection, he anticipated the difficulty and was looking for a substitute. Therefore he cited ‘plastic thing’ as an example to refer to ‘chemical compounds’. The response of Student 2 shows that he understood what Student 1 meant. The strategy that Student 1 employed facilitated their communication and worked well.

The example shows that exemplification is a useful strategy that can help learners achieve their communicative purpose when they have difficulty expressing themselves. But this strategy is not often used as a CS, possibly because when citing examples, learners may not necessarily encounter problems of communication. They use examples to explain in detail so as to be better understood by the listener.

**Repetition: Repeating the uttered word or words when the learner has neither further linguistic knowledge nor world knowledge to rely upon**

**Example 1. (NATURAL)**

Speaker 1: Do you know the life of a spaceman?

Speaker 2: The life of a spaceman? /Mm—mm, they need a lot of training, they need a lot of hard training...

Speaker 1: Yes, the environment in the space is different from from the earth. If they don’t have train, they will not get used to it.

<**Retrospective comments**>: I was not familiar with the life of a spaceman and the words related to the space. Therefore I repeated ‘they need a lot of training’ so that I did not feel embarrassed for not saying anything.

<**Explanation**>: The lengthening of the nasal consonant /m/ and the retrospection

indicate that Speaker 2 had difficulty expressing himself because of his inadequate command of the language or the insufficient knowledge about the topic. But he was reluctant to give up and thus repeated the utterance he had previously made, which enabled him to keep the communicative channel open and meanwhile to be more polite and less embarrassed.

**Example 2. (CLASS)**

Student 1: I think people live in dormitory in campus ah—*relatively* is is ah—*relatively* cheap and and living and *rent ah—ah—ah—rent* out of campus is *relatively* ah. // For many Chinese for a large amount of Chinese students // mm—they are not very very they are not very wealth, I think I think the large amount of the large amount of // had better live in campus and live the dormitory with ah—with their classmates.

Student 2: Yes, I think live in the campus is is // the most suitable for a student.

**<Retrospective comments>:** While repeating ‘relatively’, I was trying to recall the word ‘ang gui’ (expensive). It suddenly failed me though it seemed to be at the tip of my tongue. Therefore, I listed some reasons why Chinese learners usually lived on campus, and my interlocutor could easily figure out the word ‘expensive’.

**<Explanation>:** Student 1 faltered a lot in his utterance. Through the speech forms showing the frustration, there is little doubt that he was experiencing limitations and was groping to overcome them. When he could not retrieve the word ‘expensive’ from his mind at that particular moment, he had to keep on repeating the word ‘relatively’, hoping that the interlocutor could manage to work out his intended meaning through context. In fact, Student 2 understood him quite well and the communication went on smoothly.

It is found from the performance data that Chinese learners use the strategy of repetition most frequently. When asked about the reasons, some interviewees said that they were not willing to take risks and would rather repeat what they felt certain for fear of making mistakes or appearing incompetent. Others told the researcher that they got used to convergent thinking, which made them focus on the production of a single right answer. Still others felt that it was better to say something rather than giving up. But

when they found it hard to find an alternative means of expression, they resorted to the repetition of the previous utterance so that the communication would not break down. The strategy of repetition occurs more frequently in a testing environment possibly because the nervousness in oral English tests hinders their fluent production of speech.

**Restructuring: Leaving the utterance unfinished and using an alternative sentence structure to communicate the intended message**

**Example 1. (NATURAL)**

Speaker: So mm—I think ah—the most most favorite things we already chosen is to *chat with* // *chat using internet*.

<**Retrospective comments**>: I could hardly go on with ‘chat with’ to express my intended meaning of using the internet. I felt I was wrong because ‘chat with’ should be followed by somebody. Therefore, I restructured my utterance.

<**Explanation**>: When the speaker found that ‘chat with’ should be followed by a person and was against his original intention, he decided to use the present participle ‘using’ to suggest the way of chatting. Besides, this example shows that the speaker monitored his output in the process of speech production. When an error occurs, the strategy of restructuring can be used to correct it. Therefore, restructuring serves as a method of error correction as well.

**Example 2. (CLASS)**

Student: *There're* // *sometimes the company* (SR) produce this food in mass production, and they sold it at very low price.

<**Retrospective comments**>: After initiating the sentence by using ‘there are’, I felt so hard to continue that I had to reorganize the sentence by starting with ‘the company’.

<**Explanation**>: The speaker intended to use a ‘there + be’ structure to express himself. But after uttering ‘there’ to start the utterance, he found he had difficulty continuing. He then employed the strategy of restructuring and used ‘the company’ as a subject, changing the structure of the sentence accordingly.

**Example 3. (SJTU-CSET)**

Speaker: I think *the picture above, the disadvantage of the picture above* (SR) is

maybe, mm—maybe what you eat is not very ah—very good ah—as good as the picture ah—below.

**<Retrospective comments>:** I intended to talk about some disadvantages of eating in the open air. However, when I started with the expression ‘I think the picture above’, I felt something was lacking there and had to restructure my words by adding the phrase ‘the disadvantage of’ to my previous utterance.

**<Explanation>:** The strategy of restructuring is usually marked by a self-repair, as shown in this example. The retrospection reveals that the speaker encountered problems in expressing himself and had to change his mind halfway through the utterance. He added a key word ‘disadvantage’ to the subject of the sentence and the sentence structure was thus changed. With such a change, the speaker felt that he was able to continue talking. In this way, the strategy of restructuring helped the speaker to express himself when he had some problems with the original plan.

It is found from the speech data that the strategy of restructuring is the second most frequently employed by Chinese learners in their speech production. In order to find out the possible reasons to explain this phenomenon, some speakers were interviewed. The following are some typical answers: “I am afraid of making pauses for thinking during the test and hasten to start talking immediately after the interlocutor has finished”; “I feel it impolite not to speak at once when it is my turn. But sometimes, when I have uttered something, I feel it not easy to continue and have to restructure the sentence after more thinking”; “I cannot organize my ideas and utterances well in advance as I do in writing. The time pressure exerted by a speaking task always makes me get started once it is my turn to speak. When I find it hard to go on with my original utterance, I usually restructure what I am going to continue with”. On the basis of these viewpoints, the following conclusions can be reached:

Many Chinese learners start the execution of their utterance before they have established a complete plan. They are forced to use the strategy of restructuring in order to improve their utterances. They are eager to show

their cooperativeness and politeness but, because of the processing time pressure and their inadequate linguistic resources, they are incapable of making fluent utterances and have to restructure the sentences they have already made. Since learners are more eager to cooperate and the processing time pressure is heavier in an oral test, this strategy is found to be employed more often in the testing environment than the natural and classroom environments.

**Circumlocution: Describing the desired lexical item or giving its definition instead of using the appropriate target language item or structure**

**Example 1. (NATURAL)**

Speaker 1: Chinese people use mm mm—people use them while having having meals in a Chinese restaurant ah // or a Chinese family, just as you use forks and knives. Mm usually they are made of mm—bamboo, wood, etc.

Speaker 2: Chopsticks, right? I like Chinese dish. It's part of Chinese culture.

<**Retrospective comments**>: I forgot the word 'kuai zi' (chopsticks) although I had learnt the word before. But I knew what chopsticks were usually made of. I tried to explain it so that my interlocutor could understand me.

<**Explanation**>: The lengthening of the nasal consonant /m/ shows that Speaker 1 was manifestly in trouble putting across what he wanted to say. When he could not retrieve 'chopsticks', he tried his best to describe the main features (made of bamboo, wood) and functional characteristics (use them while having meals in a Chinese restaurant or a Chinese family) of chopsticks. He even drew an analogy between 'chopsticks' and 'forks and knives'. The roundabout approach helped the speaker convey his meaning to the interlocutor. Judging from Speaker 2's response, Speaker 1 achieved his purpose and the strategy of circumlocution worked.

**Example 2. (CLASS)**

Student: The second picture describes a mother telling a boy to not use the plastic bag, they should use use ah—*good bag made of chemicals that that can be quickly changed into harmless things*.

Teacher: degradable bag.

**<Retrospective comments>:** I didn't know how to say the word 'ke jiang jie' (degradable) but I tried hard to express what I meant to say. Later my teacher told me that the word was 'degradable'.

**<Explanation>:** The repetition of 'use' and the utterance of the long vowel /ɑ:/ signal the employment of the CS when the student wished to label a concept for which he did not have the lexical resources. Retrospective comments indicate that he had not learnt the word 'degradable' and had to adjust his way of expression so as to bring it within the scope of his encoding capability. He tried to say the word in circumlocutory way, thus the meaning was successfully conveyed with the help of this strategy.

**Example 3. (SJTU-CSET)**

Student 1: But just like you say, in a big company, it is hard to *get your your mm—working position*. After several years that is in a big company, I will change to a small company that will be better for my ah—future future progress.

Student 2: But talk about the company, ah—we should we should consider ah—if the advantage overweigh the disadvantage...

**<Retrospective comments>:** The word 'sheng zhi' (promotion) was unavailable to me, so I had to express my meaning in this way.

**<Explanation>:** The repetition of 'your' and the utterance of 'mm' indicate that Student 1 experienced a problem when he attempted to express himself. Retrospective study reveals that his linguistic resources did not permit him to express his meaning successfully. As a result, he resorted to the CS and expressed himself by defining the word as 'get your working position'. Thus the use of circumlocution helped him circumvent obstacles to communication. And Student 2 succeeded in comprehending the intended meaning of the utterance produced by Student 1.

It is found that speakers often use the strategy of circumlocution in their utterance. This might be due to the fact that teachers usually give definitions and explanations in a target language when they intend to make students understand the meaning of a lexical item. Students are influenced by the teaching process and incorporate it into their own way of explaining a

difficult language item.

**Semantic word coinage: Creating a non-existent L2 lexical item in the target language on the basis of the analytic process in the mind to combine the meaning of two or more individual words**

**Example (CLASS)**

Student: My name my name is Jiang Yong and I'm her class // major // *majormate*.

<**Retrospective comments**>: He is not my classmate. The schoolmate seems to cover too large a population. We study in the same department and therefore, the word 'major' flashed into my mind. For such words as classmate, schoolmate and workmate, the suffix '-mate' means people working or studying together. Therefore, I added '-mate' to make 'majormate', although I was not sure whether there was such a word 'majormate' in English.

<**Explanation**>: The repetition of 'major' and the two pauses prior to 'majormate' indicate that the speaker was confronted with difficulty. The retrospection manifests what the speaker was thinking at that moment. At first, he intended to use the word 'classmate' but felt it inappropriate. Then, he coined a new word 'majormate' by selecting the conceptual feature of the target item 'major' and '-mate'. Although there is no such word as 'majormate' in English, the coinage of the word could at least help the speaker convey his intended meaning.

## Code Strategies

Code strategies are also called linguistic strategies in that they are employed by the manipulation of an individual's linguistic knowledge of a word form either through derivational rules of L2 or through referring to languages other than L2.

**Grammatical Word coinage: creating a new word by applying L2 morphological rules to an L2 word**

**Example 1. (SJTU-CSET)**

Interlocutor: How important do you think it is to do something different on holiday?

Speaker: Doing different things will make me to enlarge my my *knowingment*.

<**Retrospective comments**>: I intended to say my knowledge about the world. Yes, ‘knowledge’ might be a better word. But it was unavailable to me at that moment and I had to use ‘knowingment’ because ‘knowing’ plus ‘ment’ seemed to be a noun and I felt it very natural to say so.

<**Explanation**>: The repetition of ‘my’ and the retrospective comments indicate that problems arose when the speaker attempted to express herself. She intended to say ‘knowledge’ but she failed to retrieve the word at that moment. Since the word ‘know’ was available to her, she changed the verb ‘know’ into a noun by adding suffix ‘ing’ and ‘ment’, thus coining a word. She was creating an L2 word by using L2 word formation rules.

**Literal translation: Translating word by word from one’s native language into the target language**

**Example 1. (NATURAL)**

Speaker: Mm—it it can change your mind. I think once you already stuck in one things, your mind will *get larger* (laugh) you I think you (laugh) will *get larger and larger*. If you change your mind mm—relax and maybe you will mm—you will work more efficiently and study more effectively.

<**Retrospective comments**>: What I intended to express was the feeling of exhaustion and dizziness after being engaged in something for several hours. ‘*tou da*’ entails such a meaning in Chinese. Therefore I uttered ‘your mind will get larger’ although I knew that I was not correct when I did so.

<**Explanation**>: The use of a CS is displayed by the speaker’s laughs in her utterance. She laughed because she knew what she had said was somewhat ridiculous. ‘*Wo de tou da le*’ is a Chinese metaphor which means that one has a headache when s/he is tired or exhausted. The speaker uttered the idiomatic expression from L1 verbatim into L2, which demonstrated a typical example of literal translation.

**Example 2. (CLASS)**

Speaker: I think I also like mm—chatting mm—mm—chatting by the computer because *there was words*: ‘in the Internet no none knows you are a dog’

<**Retrospective comments**>: I think I have learnt that expression, but it was not

available to me at that moment. The expression 'there was words' occurred to me.

**<Explanation>:** There are no overt indications that the speaker was using a CS because his speech production did not look as if he was encountering any difficulty. But the speaker's retrospective comments clearly indicate that literal translation was used. The speaker translated the Chinese expression 'you zhe yang yi ju hua' (as the saying goes), word for word, into the target language expression 'there was words'. By simply slotting English equivalents, the speaker was trying to make an English sentence with a Chinese syntax. It seems that the native language syntactic structure for such an expression has been transferred to the target language. Since literal translation can help learners achieve their communicative purpose, it is frequently employed by Chinese college learners.

It is found that many of the utterances produced by Chinese learners are the literal translation of the Chinese equivalent. This can be explained by the fact that in the process of interlanguage development, the native language plays a very important role and influence the production of the second language. Learners are influenced by their native language so that they are likely to translate the Chinese expression, word for word, into the target language expression. But sometimes, literal translation will result in utterances that are not only inappropriate but actually incorrect by native standards. What is commendable is that the problem has been solved and communication continued.

**Code-switching/borrowing: Using L1 words with L1 pronunciation in L2 speech**

**Example 1. (NATURAL)**

Speaker: What I mean is // the food contains high // high // fat such as // just as (SR) the // *MAI DANG* // *MAI DANG LAOS* the fast food just him has said, the fast food is convenient, but its // its nutrien // nutri // no nutritious.

**<Retrospective comments>:** I often see 'mai dang lao' at the gate of McDonald's. But I have never seen their English equivalent. I always read them as Chinese

words. Therefore, when I was trying to say McDonald's in English, I had no other choice but switch to Chinese.

**<Explanation>:** The repetition of 'high', the pauses and the self-repair are all indicators of the employment of a CS. Retrospective comments also suggest that the speaker ran into difficulty due to insufficient linguistic resources. The fast food chains, McDonald's, are everywhere in China. But what the speaker had noticed was its Chinese equivalent 'mai dang lao'. Since McDonald's was unavailable to the speaker, she had to switch to Chinese. She managed to get her intended meaning across by code-switching.

**Example 2. (CLASS)**

Student 1: I also the nature // the nature (laugh) *zi ran bao hu qu* is also very important to protect wild life, especially some some // wild lives // the number is very low. // I think it's a good way to protect the animal.

Student 2: Yes, I I agree with your opinion.

**<Retrospective comments>:** I didn't know the English equivalent to 'zi ran bao hu qu' (nature reserve). It might be 'nature' plus something but I was not sure of it. I had to switch to Chinese, which in my opinion might be safer because my partner was a Chinese.

**<Explanation>:** A false start, the repetition of the words 'the nature' and the laugh are all CS markers, which show that Student 1 had difficulty in expressing himself. In his attempt to communicate, Student 1 inserted a native expression, untranslated, into the interlanguage utterance to make himself understood by his partner. By using the strategy of code-switching, he succeeded in getting his meaning across.

The strategy of code-switching is more frequently employed in natural and classroom environments. It is sometimes accompanied by the appealing strategy (e.g., how to say ...). In the current research, code-switching occurred more often in the class taught by Chinese teachers because learners were aware that code-switching was useless when they communicated with a native speaker. They could only appeal for help from their peers by code-switching when the native speaker was present, which reduced the frequency

of the use of this strategy. Besides, code-switching is scarcely employed in a test, as one of the interviewees said: “I think it is inappropriate to switch to Chinese in an oral English test. But in free conversations or classroom interactions where all my interlocutors are Chinese, I sometimes switch to Chinese, hoping that my interlocutor can tell me the English equivalent to the problematic word.”

To sum up, the following tables will be clear demonstrations of compensatory strategies used by Mainland Chinese college learners of English. The compensatory strategies are ranked according to the frequencies of occurrence in learners’ speech performance (See Table 2) and the difference of some compensatory strategies used in the three communicative environments are shown in Table 3.

**TABLE 2**  
**The Frequencies of Compensatory Strategies**

No.	Communication strategies	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Repetition	240	22.47
2	Restructuring	137	12.83
3	Circumlocution	115	10.77
4	Literally translation	110	10.30
5	All-purpose word	107	10.02
6	Synonym	78	7.30
7	Code switching	63	5.90
8	Formulaic speech	54	5.06
9	Superordinate terms	49	4.59
10	Grammatical word-coinage	43	4.03
11	Semantic word-coinage	39	3.65
12	Exemplification	33	3.09

**TABLE 3**  
**The Differences of Strategy Use in Three Communicative Environments**

Communication strategies	Natural	Classroom	Testing
repetition	-	-	+
restructuring	-	-	+
code-switching	+	+	-

Note: (+ more frequent; - less frequent)

## **CONCLUSION**

The study aims to investigate how Chinese mainland learners at a later stage of English learning employ compensatory strategies to enhance communication. It yields some similarities to and differences from other studies.

### **Reasons for the Similarities and Differences**

The fact that Chinese mainland college learners use a lot of compensatory strategies to aid communication is different from Poulisse's (1990) finding that in general, advanced learners use fewer compensatory strategies. It shows that Chinese learners, although at the later stage of English learning, still have much difficulty in expressing themselves and find it necessary to use strategies to compensate for inability in speaking. This is because in the past 10 years of English learning, focuses were usually on abilities of reading and writing rather than speaking. Learners had not enough chances to develop speaking abilities so that when they are required to perform the speaking tasks, they find it difficult to retrieve resources in their mind and have to resort to compensatory strategies for communication.

The result that repetition and restructuring are more frequently used than any other compensatory strategies is similar to He and Liu's (2004) findings. But He and Liu found that restructuring was more frequent than repetition for advanced learners of English. But the current study shows that it is repetition that ranks first. The possible reason for this difference is that the postgraduate students, although at a higher stage of English learning, may not necessarily be advanced learners of English. Since little attention was paid to the practice of speaking in their previous English learning, some of them who have little difficulty in reading are still at an initial level as far as spoken English is concerned. They hesitate a lot when speaking English and have to use the strategy of repetition very often.

In the current study, no difference was found in the use of compensatory

strategies between communications in the natural and the classroom environment. This is similar to Haastrup and Phillipson (1983) who found that there was little difference in the selection of CSs between natural and controlled communicative tasks. But our study shows that difference occurs in the testing environment, which is in line with Bialystok (1990) who maintains that the strategies used in the speech made in a classroom would be different from those used in a test. But Bialystok also argues that strategies used in the classroom interaction is different from those used when chatting with a friend, but our study shows that there are not much difference as far as compensatory strategies are concerned. The reasons for this phenomenon might be that learners at a higher level of learning, esp. postgraduates, tend to be more easily adaptable to a classroom learning environment because they have been involved in classroom learning for a long time. Besides, due to their age and life experiences, these learners tend to establish a more casual and close relationship with teachers. Therefore, when communicating in a classroom, learners are just as relaxed as they are in a natural conversation.

## **Findings**

The analysis of the speech data leads to the following findings:

Firstly, the taxonomic structure of compensatory strategies is supported by the performance data. Compensatory strategies can be further divided into conceptual and code strategies while conceptual strategy is made up of holistic and analytic strategies. All these categorizations and sub-categorization of strategies are illustrated with examples from the speech data. Therefore, the examples in the qualitative studies lend strong support to the taxonomy presented.

Secondly, some compensatory strategies are more frequently employed by Chinese learners while they encounter problems in utterance. These strategies include repetition, restructuring, circumlocution, literal translation, synonym and use of all-purpose word. However, whether the same result is applicable to learners in different cultural context is a question requiring further research.

Thirdly, some strategies that are often listed in most researchers' taxonomy (Dörnyei, 1995; Dörnyei & Scott, 1997; Færch & Kasper, 1983; Yule & Tarone, 1997; Willems, 1987) cannot be found in Chinese learners' speech data and thus omitted in our study. For example, foreignizing, which refers to using an L1 or L3 word by adjusting it to L2 phonology or morphology, does not appear in Chinese learners' speech. The reason might be that the phonological and morphological systems of the Chinese language are different from those of English so that Chinese learners hardly use this strategy to compensate for a problematic word.

Fourthly, some strategies are likely to be employed in certain communication environments. For example, code-switching is more likely to appear in natural and classroom environments but scarcely found in a test. On the other hand, repetition and restructuring occur more often in a test than in a natural or classroom environment.

Finally, the use of some strategies might result in speech errors. For example, speakers do not pay attention to the collocation of words when they use a synonym to replace a word they do not know. Literal translation may lead to an incorrect syntactic form. As we know, the research of CSs originates from error analysis (Selinker, 1972). However, strategies do not necessarily result in errors, and errors cannot be regarded as indicators of CSs (Færch, 1984).

### **Implications for Teaching**

Since strategic competence has been recognized as one of the integral components of communicative competence, and compensatory strategies, among all CSs, are most beneficial to successful communication, the teaching of these strategies seems more necessary. Although it is still controversial as to whether CSs can be taught, most researchers agree on the benefit of teaching (Brett, 2001; Dörnyei, 1995; Faucette, 2001; He & Liu, 2004; Maleki, 2007). The current study shows what strategies are over-used and under-used so that teachers can appropriately arrange for and guide the

training and teaching of CSs according to different learning situations. For example, the over-use of repetition might impede fluency. Teachers might therefore suggest using fillers, such as ‘actually’, ‘you know’, ‘how can I put it’ instead of frequently resorting to the strategy of repetition. The use of fillers can not only help learners produce a more fluent utterance but also overcome the processing time pressure in an oral test. Some other strategies such as formulaic speech and exemplification are under-used. Therefore, teachers are supposed to encourage learners to familiarize themselves with more formulaic expressions, which can be very constructive to the accuracy and fluency of speech (Kuiper, 2000; Lancker-Sidtis & Rallon, 2004; Wray, 2002). They can also help learners to use more examples to illustrate their ideas if they find difficulty in expressing themselves.

Besides, language teaching involves not only passing on new knowledge but making learners be conscious of linguistic behavior as well (Chen, 1990; Nakatani, 2005). The current study enables learners to be aware of what strategies they use and how they use them to facilitate communication. Thus, the learners can be more conscious of these strategies and be able to use them when they encounter communicative problems in the future. They can also be informed of what strategies are over-used or under-used with regard to different occasions. For example, although repetition and restructuring strategies can be helpful in communication, the over-use of these strategies in testing will give the impression of lacking fluency and influence the score of the test. Therefore, learners have to be encouraged to use some other compensatory strategies such as formulaic speech, circumlocution, synonym, etc. so as to enhance their performance in the test. All in all, the more learners are aware of their behaviors, the better they can use compensatory strategies to offset the deficiency brought about by the lack of linguistic resources and achieve successful communication.

For the above considerations, the following are the suggested steps for strategy training for Chinese learners whose reading and speaking abilities are not at the same level of development.

- 1) Make learners be aware that communication strategies can help increase their potentials in English speaking.
- 2) Encourage learners to use communication strategies to compensate for deficiency in speaking abilities.
- 3) Indicate the cultural difference in the use of strategies.
- 4) Provide learners with the knowledge of what strategies are over-used and under-used, esp. in different communicative environments.
- 5) Design tasks for the training of specific strategies with regard to learners' current situation of strategy use.
- 6) Provide learners with more opportunities of practice in authentic communication.

## THE AUTHOR

*Li Zhang* is a PhD in applied linguistics and an associate professor in the School of Foreign Languages of Shanghai Jiao Tong University. Her current research interests cover second language acquisition and computer-mediated communication. Her recent publications include *The Study and Application of Communication Strategies* (2008), *The Influence of Presenting New Words in Semantically-Related and Semantically-Unrelated Sets to the Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition with Yue Sheng* (2009 to be published) and *Needs Analysis of Undergraduate English Curriculum: An Investigation of Learners in Shanghai Jiao Tong University with Xin Zeng* (2009 to be published).

Email: zhangli@sjtu.edu.cn

*Tongshun Wang* is a professor in the School of Foreign Languages of Shanghai Jiao Tong University. His research area covers second language acquisition, syllabus design and teaching material development. His publication includes *Graduate English (ME) for the 21st Century* (2006), *New Horizon Graduate English* (2008), etc. He is also the general editor for *Current Research Books in Applied Linguistics* (2008-2009) published by Shanghai

Jiao Tong University Press.  
Email: tswang@sjtu.edu.cn

*Yue Sheng* is an associated professor in Shanghai University of Engineering Science. His research area covers computer-mediated language teaching and learning and teaching material development. His recent publication includes *New College English Fast Reading* (2006) with Hong Ma and *College English Lexical Course* (2008) with Jianqiang Lin.  
Email: sheng.yue@163.com

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