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Developing Accuracy by Using Oral Communication Strategies in EFL Interactions

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***Abstract*—This paper explores how a group of language learners develop the accuracy level of their target language in oral communication, particularly when they encounter a problem. Adopting a qualitative research approach, I collected data from a series of group discussions with a group of Persian learners of English Literature and Translation. Analysing audio recorded data, this paper provides a descriptive account of the participants' performance in problematic moments of L2 oral communication, the type and the function of CSs for promoting language accuracy in problematic moments of L2 oral communication in an EFL context. The majority of face-to-face interactions between participants were comprehensible and successful and can be interpreted as communicative successes. I concluded that CSs usage in L2 interpersonal communications enables participants to promote accuracy level of their target language, in addition to the negotiation of meaning. L2 oral interactions, thus, can be considered as a place where all sorts of knowledge come into play, particularly from the oral interaction perspective. The study shows that a lot is to be gained, in communication, by making learners use CSs and work together in groups (184 words).**

***Index Terms*—accuracy development, English as a foreign language (EFL), second language interaction, discourse analysis, communication strategies**

I. Introduction

Foreign language learners, despite spending years developing their language competences, have all probably, at some point, experience the frustrating feeling of not being able to participate effectively in L2 oral communication. They often struggle with lack of the very resources needed to communicate their intended meaning, so that what they '*want* to say' might often be moderated by, or even subordinated to, what they *can* say (Ervin, 1979, p.359).

Although most EFL learners and perhaps some of the teachers believe that oral communication problems can be solved through "more practice" in vocabulary and structure, some successful L2 speakers, in spite of their limited knowledge of the target language, can communicate effectively in a foreign language. How do they do it? They rely entirely on their 'ability to communicate within restrictions' (Savignon, 1983, p. 43) by using communication strategies (hereafter CSs).

CSs are used to overcome 'breakdowns', 'gaps' or 'problems' in communication which are 'pervasive and even intrinsic' in language use and communication even for native speakers' (NSs) (Coupland, et. al., 1991, p. 3).

II. Communication Strategies and Language Knowledge in Interaction

Appearing in literature first in the early 1970s, the term 'communication strategies' within an L2 (second language) context was coined by Selinker (1972), to connect CSs with 'errors in learner's interlanguage system'. Interest in communicative language teaching (CLT), since the 1980s, has also led researchers in applied linguistics to focus on the use of communication strategies (CSs) by second language (L2) learners (Littlemore, 2001, p. 241). It is believed that the use of specific communication strategies enables language learners to compensate for their target language deficiencies and improve their communicative proficiency (e.g., Færch & Kasper 1983, 1986; Tarone & Yule, 1989; Willems, 1987; Dörnyei & Thurrell, 1991, 1994).

For more than three decades after the coining of the term CS by Selinker, the function of CSs has been almost neglected or exclusively limited to compensating for L2 learners' lexical deficiencies (Ellis, 2008, p.509) while other possible functions of CSs have become neglected in traditional CSs studies, thanks to the dominant psycholinguistic approach in CS definition, identification and classification. However, more recently, a number of CS studies, in a challenge to the traditional view, have started investigating CSs beyond the cognitive approach (*i.e.* Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991; Rababah, 2003; Manchón, 2000; Foster & Ohta, 2005). They focused on the other functions of CSs usage in interaction. They found that:

- CSs allow the learner to remain in the conversation; by allowing them room to manoeuvre in times of difficulty, CSs provide the learners with more language input and also a sense of security in the target language (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991).
- CSs can also lead to learning by eliciting unknown language items either from an interlocutor (the appeal for help strategy) (Rababah, 2003, p. 25), or from their own language knowledge through paraphrasing or circumlocution.

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- CSs instruction may develop learners' autonomy perhaps, which is the last but not the least significant achievement awarded by communication strategy to the L2 learner (Manchón, 2000, p. 23).

Kaur (2008, p.19), analysing English as Lingua Franca (ELF) interactions in an academic setting, also showed that ELF speakers do give attention to form when 'deviations' threaten inter-subjectivity or when the interlocutor signals a problem. In doing so, the NNS speakers demonstrate a native-like linguistic authority or expertise. This authority/expertise, however, is not constant; expertise roles may switch as the interaction progresses, 'whereby the speaker who does 'correcting' in one exchange may several turns later be corrected'. Furthermore, Kaur (2008) also suggested that ELF speakers collaborated with each other by providing language support when they were faced with linguistic diversity and variability.

In fact, through CSs usage, learners might simultaneously be engaged in problem solving and knowledge building. This kind of oral interaction has been called 'collaborative dialogue' by Swain (2000, p.102). Solving a problem through collaborative dialogue, in Swain's (2000, p.102) opinion, is a joint with 'knowledge building'. Collaborative dialogue centres on how learners assist one another in reconstructing linguistic forms rather than engaging in the negotiation of meaning caused by communication breakdowns (Donato, 1994; Foster & Ohta, 2005; Lee, 2004; Swain, 2001). Many collaborative dialogue studies (e.g. Kowal & Swain, 1994; Leeser, 2004; Storch, 1998; Swain, 1998; Swain & Lapkin, 2001; Williams, 1999) have showed that learners discuss both lexical items and grammatical forms when they carry out a variety of pair and small group activities.

This paper investigates how the use of CSs in L2 communication might provide opportunities to EFL language learners to collaborate together in problem solving and also to develop and practise their knowledge of the target language.

III. Methodology

L2 spoken interaction has primarily been studied from a psycholinguistic or cognitive perspective to examine how individual learners acquire linguistic knowledge and skills through interaction with native speakers or with other language learners (e.g. Long, 1985). Reviewing the traditional research on L2 oral performance, Hughes (2002, p. 27) shows that these studies are generally based on empirical, semi-real world data, gathered through recording and transcribing oral performance to investigate a central research question or a hypothesis. As a part of L2 oral performance, CSs studies have also primarily been concerned with the mental process underlying the use of strategies with particular emphasis on lexical problems (Ellis, 2008, p. 502).

However, I chose the qualitative approach as an appropriate research methodology perspective as it provided my research with an opportunity to investigate the pattern of the function of strategies, which are used to manage problematic situations, with a deeper understanding of the participants' construction of L2 oral communication.

A. Participants

To choose a group of EFL learners as research participants for this CSs study, it was necessary for me to be familiar with their L1, which can be used as one of the strategies in communication; so I chose Iranian students as 'participants' who shared my L1. To prevent continuous interruptions in the process of communication caused by a low level of language proficiency, I chose university students from an English language department, who needed to have at least an upper- intermediate level of English to pass the entrance exam and enter the university. Furthermore, these students had studied English for at least three years at their universities and had passed several courses in grammar, reading, conversation and writing to an advanced level. So it was assumed that they had enough proficiency in L2 oral communication to take part in communicative events without a lot of hesitation.

I found 12 Iranian undergraduate students of English Literature and Translation and one postgraduate student in TEFL, both male and female, aged 20-24, who were interested in my study when I called and invited them to take part in my research. They did not receive any formal instruction of communication strategies before the study, so their usage of CSs is not affected by their formal language learning. All participation was voluntary. I guaranteed their anonymity although they gave me permission to use their real names in my research report.

B. Data Collection and Coding

To investigate participants' performance and perception, I employed oral communication recording as the main tool for data collection. All the sessions of the participants' group discussions were audio recorded and transcribed. Audio recording allowed me to record every word (and other audio events) during the L2 interaction between the participants. Therefore, the main source of data in this project was the audio recording of a series of communication events in which a group of 2-3 participants from both genders discussed different topics, usually chosen by them. A café, a hotel lobby, the office of the Language Department at University, the teachers' office in a language institute and the room in a research institute were the locations I chose to create a variety of appropriate oral communication for my data collection.

To analyze the participants' performance in L2 communication, I decided to rely on different sources of evidence: discourse markers of problems, and interlocutor's signalling of the problems. Discourse markers or problem indicators include errors, and non-fluencies, such as pauses or pause fillers, hesitation phenomena, such as repetitions or false

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starts, and explicit statements, like *I mean* or *how do you say...?* which become much more frequent when linguistic difficulties were encountered and they were often interpreted by the researcher as evidence of instances of CSs.

IV. Data Analysis and Findings

Based on Dörnyei and Scott's (1997, pp. 188-194) inventory of Strategic Language, I initially analyzed the transcripts of the problematic moments of the recorded oral communication sessions and discovered that the participants employed 15 different strategies which are listed below in Table 1.

TABLE 1:
THE GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF STRATEGIES USED BY PARTICIPANTS BASED ON DÖRNYEI AND SCOTT'S (1997) INVENTORY

	STRATEGY	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLES OF DISCOURSE MARKERS
1	**Clarification request**	Requesting for more explanation, clarification or repetition to solve a comprehension problems.	*What do you mean? You... what?*; also '*question repeats*', that is repeating a word or a structure with a question intonation (Dörnyei & Scott,1997:16)
2	**Confirmation request**	Asking the speaker to confirm whether the heard or understood utterance is correct or not	using '*question repeat*' or questions such as '*Do you mean...?*', '*You mean ...?*', '*You said ...?*' and etc.
3	**Comprehension check**	Asking questions to check if the partner can follow the speaker	*You know what I am saying?* *Do you understand what I mean?*
4	**Interpretive summary**	Paraphrasing the interlocutor's message to check if they understood it correctly or not	*Hossein: so, you mean you saw your friends are learning English and makes you ...*
5	**Expressing non-understanding**	Expressing that the interlocutor does not understand properly what was going on in the communication.	*Hamid: you surely don't believe it I have ever read books?* *Kabi: .... I don't ... understand.*
6	**Requesting help**	Requesting assistance from other partners when they are faced with a deficiency in self-expression	*How can I put it in English?* *What you call them*? *I don't know... how can I put the word?*
7	**Use of general words**	Extending a general lexical item without needing to locate an exact referent(Carter &McCarthy,1997:16)	*Thing, stuff, make, do*
8	**Use of L1 knowledge**	Using the knowledge of the mother tongue (literal translation and switching to L1) as a resource to express the meaning in breakdown communication	Jafri: from ... Eighty ... (laughing) ... HASHTADO DO (L1 equivalent for eighty two)
9	**Use of similar sound words**	Using an alternative lexical item which sounds are more or less like the target phrase	Hamid: ...how do you enjoy your **place** here (instead of: enojoy your presence here)
10	**Repairing**	Repairing self or other errors in oral performance	No, he ***don't*** ... he ***doesn't*** know, I cannot put myself in ***their*** in ***those*** shoes
11	**Own accuracy check**	Checking the accuracy of the produced utterances	repeating a word or phrase with rising intonation or by asking a concrete question,
12	**Verbal strategy marker**	Using markers to inform other partners that speaker are using strategies to deal with problem in self-expression	I don't know', 'I don't know how to put it in English'
13	**Retrieval**	Retrieving a target word or phrase by saying a series of incomplete or wrong forms or structures before producing the ideal form of target utterance	Rostami: she **be taking** ... she**'s video taking** me, she **was video taking** me... she was taking a video of me
14	**Nothing to say**	Stop speaking as the speaker is faced with a self-expression problem	Hamid: have you seen Chinese before? Kabi: *I don't have anything to say*
15	**Use of Fillers**	Using gambits word and phrases to fill pauses and to gain time in order to keep the conversation open	*well, you know, let say, actually*

Then, I employed Ohta (2001, 2005) and Foster and Ohta's (2005) method to analyse the possible functions of the above strategies. To find the function of each CS, I focused on the differences between the 'surface' form of each observed communication strategy (e.g. *clarification request*) and its possible pragmatic function(s) (e.g. *to express interest rather than confusion*), by looking at the wider context. To do that, I analyzed the interlocutors' responses to the strategy usage in the following turns to see if there was any sign of problematic communication. I employed Ohta's (2005, p. 388) method in analysing at least three turns in conversation : (1) the initial turn which contains the utterance causing the problem in communication, (2) the turn containing the signal of strategy usage, and (3) the turn containing the response to the problem.

My analysis, therefore, involved the discourse following the problematic moment of communication. This included analyzing the immediately subsequent talk as well as additional contextual material, including the speaker's next turn at talk (the fourth turn) and beyond, as relevant. The CSs analysis, therefore, involved examining at least three turns of the sequences in their discourse contexts to indicate the problems in expression-comprehension. In other words, I looked at a wider selection of the data, to find other functions of interactional discourse in L2. I summarised my classification of the types and functions of CSs and the overall distribution of observed CSs represented in the corpus through statistical values for each category in Table 2. Table 2 facilitates this by summarizing the raw frequencies of the strategies used by the participants:

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TABLE 2:
THE FUNCTIONS AND PRIORITY USE OF CSS BY EFL LEARNERS

Interpreted Functions	CSs	Observed Frequency
Promoting meaning transfer (Solving or avoiding problems in self-expression and comprehension)	*Clarification request*	15
	Confirmation request	7
	Comprehension check	2
	Interpretive summary	8
	Expressing non-understanding	2
	Requesting help for meaning negotiation	5
	General words	1
	Use of L1 knowledge	2
	Use of similar sound words	1
	Total	**43(31%)**
Promoting accuracy form of language in communication (Monitoring, Improving and warning about the accuracy level of performance)	*Repairing*	23
	Own accuracy check	7
	Verbal strategy marker	6
	Retrieval	1
	Requesting help for negotiation the form	11
	Nothing to say	4
	Total	**52(37%)**
Maintain the flow of conversation (Collaboration to continue, complement and repair, ignoring the problem and use of fillers)	*Inviting to Continue*	21
	Collaborative complementary and repair	8
	Let it pass	11
	Use of Fillers	4
	Total	**44(32%)**

Table 2 helps me to interpret the general and specific picture of the strategies used in each category of performance. As can be seen in the above table, the frequency of strategies employed to promote the accuracy level of language in communication are more than those for maintaining the flow of conversation and those for promoting meaning transfer. In fact, the participants' first concern is to promote the accuracy level of their utterances through CSs for monitoring and improving their own and their partners' performance, for helping each other and also for signalling or avoiding the less than perfect performance in communication.

The following extracts are examples of CSs with the function of developing accuracy in interaction.

Extract 1: **Repairing**

Speakers often repair their own or others' oral performances. It is also called error correction, particularly when it refers to self-repair (Rieger, 2003).The following extracts show how participants repair their morpho-syntactic errors in their speech.

- Kabi: No he ***don't***, he ***doesn't*** know how to act with the (Group Discussion, 10/08/2008).
- Jafri: I lost my partner, I stop watching TV more, ***I haven't any*** ... ***I didn't have any*** one to talk to, I guess my English is not as much as good as past (Group discussion 09/08/2008).
- Jalili: I cannot put myself in ***their*** in ***those*** shoes, I always take my own jobs seriously (Group Discussion, 07/09/2008).
- Delgarm: he try ***to learn*** the ... ***to teach*** us in a friendly (Group Discussion, 10/08/2008).

As can be seen in the above examples, the participants repair their errors without any signal of communication failure. In fact, they monitor their own performances in the L2 for its accuracy level. Formal accuracy is such as an important concern for the participants that sometimes they use the polite signal of apology (*sorry*) when they repair their errors in conversation. This is an example of this type of repairing:

Khajeh: if I was ... if I was him, **sorry**, if I were him, ha, if I were him I believe I could do much more better (speech continues) (Group Discussion, 09/09/2008).

Khajeh repairs his error with a polite signal of apology without any signal of the other interlocutor's misunderstanding or of there being a problem in transferring meaning which would make repairing necessary. In fact, participants took plenty of opportunities to repair their output and to focus on the accuracy of their utterances without either a requirement to exchange information or a request by the other participants to do so. By using the repairing strategy, participants could pay more attention to displaying their L2 skill through monitoring both their own and their partners' language. As there is no signal of miscomprehension caused by these errors, I interpret the main function of this strategy as a performance for improving the accuracy level of utterances. It seems that all participants see the conversation as a chance to improve their L2 and collaborate in the repair strategies to improve communal accuracy.

Extract 2: **Own accuracy Check**

One strategy used by L2 speakers to check the accuracy of their speech is to repeat the word or phrase with rising intonation at the end of the sentence, thereby re-presenting the phrase as a question. The following example is an extract showing the use of an 'own accuracy check' strategy in a group discussion:

Khajeh: University of Petroleum I don't think it's ... ***I don't know*** ... small chance ... ***is it true,*** **small?** ... ... **yes small chance** (interrupted by Mr. Karb giving his idea about the topic, not about the Khajeh's utterance) (Group discussion, 26/08/2008).

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In the above example, Khajeh marks his problem of self-expression by saying '*I don't know*' followed by his offer for the target phrase. As he probably is in doubt about the accuracy of his phrase, he checks it by asking his partners' opinion when he asks: '*is it true*?' As no one answers his question, so he probably interprets the other interlocutors' silence as positive feedback on the accuracy of the utterance, and repeats it again without rising intonation. As there is no verbal signal of any problem in understanding in the above extract, I interpret it as a strategy for 'enhancing' the accuracy level of an utterance, rather than transferring meaning in L2 communication.

Extract 3: **Retrieval**

Dörnyei and Scott (1997, p. 189) defined retrieval as a strategy used by an L2 speaker in order to retrieve a target phrase or structure by saying a series of incomplete or wrong forms or structures before producing an accurate form of speech. The following is an example of this type of strategy:

Rostami: she **be taking** ... she**'s video taking** me, she **was video taking** me (Group discussion, 18/08/2008)

The strategy user, Rostami, tries to retrieve the phrase '*video recording*' in her speech through repeating incomplete forms of it (*be taking, is video taking*). As there is no signal of any problem in the partner's understanding, I interpret that she is trying to promote the accuracy of her utterance in L2 communication, albeit unsuccessfully.

While participants in extracts 1 and 2 'repair' and 'check' their less-than perfect phrases or structures, with their use of the own accuracy check strategy, in extract 3, they search for an ideal form of utterance by testing the different forms of the target phrase on their own.

Extract 4: **Verbal Strategy Markers**

Sometimes, participants use markers such as 'I don't know', 'I don't know what ...', before or after a strategy usage, to inform other partners about the production of 'less than-perfect' L2 forms that may require extra effort to be understood. The following extract is an example of the use of a marker strategy followed by a switch to L1:

Arjani: I have gone to several places, I've gone to **HERASAT** (*security office*), ***I don't know the word in English*** (laughing)...emmm at University and ahhhh ... I complain about this teacher I told you (speech continues) (Group discussion, 24/08/2008).

As can be seen in the above example, Arjani was faced with a problem in remembering the phrase '*security office*'. He switched to L1 and then said '*I don't know the word in English*' probably to inform his partners that 'he knows that switching to L1 is not a perfect way to convey his meaning in an L2 communication, but he has no other way of getting the meaning the meaning across'. I interpret the use of the marker strategy in this interaction to mean that Arjani probably wants to signal for his switching to L1, or even to excuse for producing less-than perfect accuracy. This leads me to understand that a shared L1 can be considered as a strategic resource to fill any vocabulary gap, but it contains a potential face-threatening effect in L2 communication.

Extracts 5: **Requesting Help for Negotiation of Form**

Participants employ a requesting help strategy for promoting the accuracy level of their less-than perfect utterances. I found a new function for the use of the requesting help strategy, other than transferring meaning which is its traditional function in L2 communication (e.g. in Tarone, 1981; Dörnyei & Scott, 1997). Speakers employ a 'requesting help' strategy to find an accurate form of a word or a phrase through negotiation with the other partners.

The following extract describes the negotiation of form in a situation in which participants assist each other and negotiate the accurate form of a phrase in the target language:

1. Hamid: you know it's depend how you define rich and poor, economically all three of us just ... (laughing) we are under the poor line, ***I don't know how they say it***?
2. Kabi: yes, yes under the poor under the,
3. Jafri: Under the line of ... it is the Farsi structure.
4. Hamid: I know it is a Farsi but ***I couldn't find a better structure than that***
5. Kabi: ***Under the poverty line***?
6. Hamid: Yes, under the poverty line (Group discussion in shopping centre, 12/08/2008).

Hamid signals the use of a requesting help strategy when he feels that the produced phrase (*under the poor line*) might not be accurate in the first turn (line 1). This turn includes the signal for help (*I don't know how they say it?*) and a phrase which seems to be an approximate alternative to the target phrase. Kabi, one of his partners, helps him by confirming and repeating his phrase (line 2). But Jafri denies Hamid's phrase as a phrase with L1 structure (line 3). Hamid admits that it is an L1 structure, but he cannot find a better structure (line 4). As the meaning seems clear, I interpret the function of the other turns, except the first one, as a negotiation of the correct form of Hamid's utterance, rather than the meaning. Finally, Kabi suggests a phrase which seems to be more appropriate and it is accepted. Hamid confirms Kabi's phrase by integrating it in his speech and continues (line 6). With his appeal for help in line 4, Hamid probably shows his commitment to completing the turn in L2 and defends his proficiency against Jafri's threat when she calls Hamid's utterance an L1 structure. Therefore, I interpret that the main function of the requesting help strategy in the above extract is for negotiating the accurate form of a less-than perfect utterance. Finally, this requesting help strategy provides the participants with an opportunity to collaborate together and find an appropriate form in the target language, which could reflect the fact that one of the purposes of the conversation overall is to improve all the participants' L2 proficiency.

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V. Discussion and Conclusion

Based on studies of collaborative dialogue (Swain & Lapkin, 1998, 2002; Swain, 2000, 2005; Lapkin et al., 2002, Tocalli-Beller & Swain, 2005), I found the following language development opportunities, co-constructed by CSs usage in the L2 communication tasks of this research:

1. to notice what the participants do not know, particularly when they signalled the problem through verbal strategy markers, requesting for help, or expressing non-understanding;

2. to form and test their language hypotheses, probably through, own accuracy check, and retrieval; and

3. to co-construct language or linguistic knowledge, through the use of CSs, for the promotion of accuracy in communication. In fact, in foreign language contexts, a great deal of CSs usage is related to language form.

This interpretation supports Ohta (2001) and Swain's (2001) findings. Like the Japanese language learners in Ohta's (2001) study, participants in my study employed CSs to provide and receive assistance in a variety of ways. Participants also spent plenty of their time in interaction to modify their output and focus on form without the requirement to exchange information (see Extract 1). One justification could be that the intelligible message, alongside the collaborative and supportive environment, constructs an ideal situation for participants to focus on the mismatch between the forms in their own interlanguage system and those of the target language. This interpretation is partly supported by researchers who claim that a great deal of learners' assistance in collaborative interaction is related to reconstructing linguistic forms rather than engaging in the negotiation of meaning caused by communication breakdowns (*i.e.* Foster & Ohta, 2005; Lee, 2004; Swain, 2001; Ohta, 2001). However, these researchers did not consider the use of strategies other than the negotiation of meaning to modify and promote the accuracy level of utterances in L2 communication.

In short, the use of CSs in a friendly, co-constructed environment enables participants to promote accuracy of their produced utterances in L2 oral communication. Promoting the accuracy of the target language is one of the most frequent functions of CSs through which participants collaboratively repair, negotiate and discuss both lexical items and grammatical forms in their L2 interaction. L2 oral interactions, thus, can be considered as a place where all sorts of knowledge come into play, particularly from the oral interaction perspective. In fact, non-native communicators often see themselves as learners even in oral interactions outside of the classroom, an interpretation supported by the few studies in non-educational settings (e.g., Varonis & Gass, 1985). That is, their language skills and competencies are seen to be underdeveloped (Firth & Wagner, 1997, p. 292). CSs usage in L2 interactions provides communicators with the opportunity to carefully monitor their own and their partners' linguistic behaviour and facilitate the identification of the nature or source of problems as a precondition for moving on to collaborative problem solving or knowledge construction.

L2 interaction thus reflects the participants' communicative intentions to overcome any difficulties of language knowledge through maintainity a cooperative and interpersonal relationship. In fact, CSs in L2 interaction enable participants not only to co-construct knowledge or solve problems, but also to go beyond it to test their hypotheses, or expand their knowledge to wider aspects of the language. So, not only novice learners, but also more proficient learners, can benefit from the L2 interaction. The implication for learning a target language in an EFL context is therefore to encourage language learners to take part in interaction regardless of their linguistic ability, and to learn strategies for successful L2 communication.

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