

# The Effects of Task Types on Communication Strategies in SLA: Looking Back and Forward

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**Abstract**—Studies on the effects of task types on Communication Strategies (CSs) in second language acquisition (SLA) have been carried out for more than two decades and have made great contribution to the development of second language teaching and acquisition. This paper mainly reviews the existing empirical studies to investigate how different task types employed can lead to the application of various CSs by L2 learners. The existing literatures are reviewed under the scope of three periods: the initial attempts, further investigation and recent studies. It is found that existing research has demonstrated well that both the frequency and the type of CSs are influenced by the tasks under completion. Albeit more systematic and rigorous studies are still called for to further support the findings of some studies and further CS research from newer and broader perspectives are still needed. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of these findings for SLA in English as second language (ESL) classrooms.

**Index Terms**—Communication strategy, implications, limitations, second language acquisition, task type.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In academia, it has long been noticed that when some learners of a foreign language encounter problems in verbal communication in the target language, they tend to employ different strategies – they may alter the meaning they intend to convey, omit some items of information, make their ideas simpler and less precise, or they may simply abandon the message. This actual observation is also in line with what other researchers have noticed – L2 learners who venture to put their knowledge into practice often run into communication problems due to deficiencies in their linguistic repertoire [1], [2]. Given this background, various types of Communication Strategies play an important role in helping L2 learners to solve practical problems they may encounter in actual communication.

One case in which different Communication Strategies are put into use is via the completion of various tasks. As Chan [3] has noted, communicative tasks provide second language learners the opportunity to exchange and negotiate meaning under different situations. Tasks serve as an effective vehicle through which L2 learners engage in interaction [4]. During the past decades, scholars have worked on the different Communication Strategies adopted by L2 learners to

accomplish different communicative tasks in L2 interaction, each from its own perspective and with its own conclusions. A more comprehensive study in the general effects of different task types on the choices of Communication Strategies in L2 communication is however, still seeking for its place in this field.

Prompted by the realization that a significant proportion of real-life communication in L2 is problematic [5] and yet language classes do not generally prepare students to deal with practical performance problems, the present study tends to raise L2 learners', as well as teachers', awareness about the linguistic potential of certain categories of Communication Strategies in developing students' communicative competence, and to investigate how different types of tasks lead to different communication strategies.

To fulfill these objectives, this paper will first give a brief introduction to the definitions and taxonomies of Communication Strategies, as well as an overview of the role of tasks in SLA. Then, special attention will be given to the existing empirical studies on Communication Strategies adopted in different types of tasks. The paper will conclude with a discussion of the implications of these findings for SLA in ESL environment.

## II. DEFINITION AND TAXONOMY OF COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

The term “Communication Strategies (CSs)” is first coined by Selinker in 1972 to represent various notions of processes/strategies adopted to smooth and naturalize interlanguage communication [6]. Selinker's idea of CSs is later elaborated by Tarone [7], who brings systematic taxonomies to CSs, and introduce many of the categories and terminologies which are adopted popularly in subsequent CSs research. Since these early studies, many investigations have been conducted to identify and classify different taxonomies of CSs, including different ranges of language devices, from paraphrase to filled pauses, from code switching to interactional meaning-negotiation mechanisms [8]-[10]. However, despite the numerous studies in this field, there is still no complete consensus on the definition of CSs. One working definition which many researchers accept and which we adopt here is that CSs are “a systematic technique employed by a speaker to express his [or her] meaning when faced with some difficulty” [11]. The study of CSs has been a heated area of research over the past four decades and has contributed significantly to the development of SLA.

The importance attributed to CSs study is noticeable in the myriad of taxonomies proposed by different scholars in this domain, among which the two most widely employed

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versions are the “interactional approach” proposed by Tarone [7], and the “psycholinguistic approach” developed by Faerch & Kasper [10]. From the interactional perspective, CSs are considered as “tools used in a joint negotiation of meaning in situations where both interlocutors are attempting to agree as to communicative goal” [7]. While from a psycholinguistic approach, CSs are closely related with individual speaker’s experience of communication problems and the solutions they pursue – whether these solutions are cooperative or non-cooperative [10]. To make things easier, Hua, Nor & Jaradat [12] rework taxonomies of CSs from both approaches into the following Table I:

TABLE I: TAXONOMIES OF CSS PROPOSED BY TARONE [7] AND FAERCH & KASPER [10]

Avoidance or Reduction Strategies		
1	<b>Message Abandonment:</b> the interlocutors start their talk but fail to keep talking because of language difficulties, so they give it up.	Avoidance
2	<b>Topic Avoidance:</b> the learners refrain from talking about the topics which they may not be able to continue for linguistic reasons.	
Achievement/Compensatory Strategies		
3	<b>Literal translation:</b> the learners literally translate a word, a compound word, an idiom, or a structure from L1 into L2.	Interlingual Strategies (strategies that involve transfer from L1 to L2)
4	<b>Borrowing/code switching:</b> the learners use an L1 word or phrase with an L1 pronunciation.	
5	<b>Foreignizing:</b> the learners utilize an L1 word or phrase by morphologically or phonologically adjusting it to an L2 word.	
6	<b>Approximation/Generalization:</b> the learners employ an L2 word which is semantically in common with the targeted lexical item.	Intralingual strategies (strategies that involve only L2)
7	<b>Word coinage:</b> the learners coin a non-existing L2 word by overgeneralization.	
8	<b>Circumlocution:</b> the learners describe or exemplify the action or object instead of using the right L2 structure or item.	
9	<b>Use of all-purpose words:</b> the learners use a general word to fill the vocabulary gaps.	
10	<b>Self-repair/restructuring:</b> the learners establish a new speech plan when their first attempt fails.	
11	<b>Appeals for assistance:</b> the learners turn to partners for assistance	
12	<b>Stealing/Time-gaining strategies:</b> the learners employ such hesitation devices as fillers or gambits to gain time to think.	

In the latter half of the 1980s, researchers at Nijmegen University (Netherlands) criticized the existing taxonomies of CSs as being product-oriented by focusing only on the surface structures of underlying psychological processes, thus resulting in a proliferation of different strategies of ambiguous validity [9], [13], [14]. Therefore, the Nijmegen Group proposes an alternative process-oriented taxonomy of CSs, which is presented in Table II.

TABLE II: TAXONOMY OF CSS PROPOSED BY THE NIJMEGEN GROUP

Conceptual Strategies	Manipulating the target concept to make it expressible through available linguistic resources.	
	Analytic strategies	specifying characteristic features of the concept
	Holistic strategies	using a different concept which shares characteristics with the target item
Linguistic/code Strategies	Manipulating the speaker's linguistic knowledge.	
	Morphological creativity	creating a new word by applying L2 morphological rules to a L2 word
	Transfer	transferring from another language.

What we should also notice here is that a number of other scholars also propose their own taxonomies of CSs [11], [15]. However, the above-mentioned approaches are among the most influential and widely adopted taxonomies in this domain upon which the empirical studies reviewed in this paper are conducted.

### III. THE ROLE OF TASK TYPES

As Dobao [16] has noticed, existing literature on L2 classroom tasks mainly focuses on three issues: definition and typology of tasks, implementation issues of tasks, and the relationship of task use to L2 acquisition. Linguistic tasks may be defined differently depending on different theoretical orientations and contexts. One of the most widely accepted definitions of linguistic tasks is given by Norris *et al.* [17] as “real world activities that people do in everyday life and which require language for their accomplishment” (p. 33).

As for the taxonomies of task, after reviewing literatures over a period of several years in taxonomy-building for tasks, Putri [18] reaches the conclusion that there is still no recognized typology of tasks, which suggests that no single typology provides an exhaustive presentation of tasks. Under such a situation, it is normal in present task-based studies to adopt some of the accepted task types and apply them to an empirical study. A set of task typology that is frequently adopted in linguistic researches is proposed by Pica *et al.* [19]. In their model, Pica *et al.* delineate task types in relation to their impact on opportunities for learner comprehension of input, feedback on production, and interlanguage modification, proposing five commonly used task types as jigsaw, information gap, problem-solving, decision-making and opinion-exchange (on a continuum from potentially most facilitative to least facilitative for SLA).

However, all these do not rule out the possibility that there are other task types absent in this typology of tasks. For example, Beauvois [20] adds another task named free discussion which focuses on the content and on how students express their ideas. While Dobao [21] adopt various terms in naming tasks like “object description”, “picture story narration”, “photograph description”, and “spot-the-difference task” which are actually very similar tasks.

Although there is no consensus upon the typology of tasks, one of the commonly recognized foundations in task-based learning is that tasks have to be meaningful and should reflect what has been taught. Nunan [22] defines a task as “a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form.” Skehan [23] considers task as “an activity where meaning is primary” (p. 39). The importance of meaning construction in a classroom task is also emphasized by Ellis [24], who considers the goal of a linguistic task as to “exchange meaning” (p. 193). This idea is further supported by Poulisse and Schills [25] who state that task-based pedagogy offers L2 learners opportunities for learner-to-learner interaction which encourages authentic use of language and can lead to meaningful interlanguage communication.

All these show that CSs are closely related with different tasks, thus opening the ground for communicative tasks in L2 classroom. As a sum, these studies laid a firm foundation for our investigation of CSs adopted in various L2 tasks and well support our attempt to propose certain tasks in L2 classroom to improve learners' communicative efficiency in the target language.

#### IV. THE EFFECTS OF TASKS ON CSs EMPLOYED IN L2 INTERACTIONS

In the field of language teaching, it has been widely recognized that tasks are effective pedagogical tools to develop learners' communicative competence. Tarone [7] notes that communicative tasks give language learners the opportunity to negotiate and exchange meaning in real-world-like situations. Language learners take on active roles during task completion; helping each other when they do not understand, and making themselves understood by adopting various strategies when their message is incomplete or ambiguous. This indicates that, to achieve the task goals, L2 learners will very likely resort to CSs in the communication process. Different types of tasks lead to different ways of negotiation of meaning, CSs and alteration in L2 interaction. In a L2 classroom, certain tasks are in general more likely to elicit CSs from learners and their interlocutors to compensate for their linguistic deficiencies. In this respect, many studies have been carried out to investigate CSs employed by L2 learners in accomplishing different types of tasks. Generally, the investigation on the effects of task types on CSs in SLA could be classified into three periods: the initial attempts, further investigation and recent studies, which will be discussed in the following sections.

##### A. *Initial Attempts: Task Types Touched Upon*

Corrales & Call [26] and Poulisse & Schils [25] are among the earliest group of scholars who have paid attention to the influence of task types on CSs employed by L2 learners. Adopting Blum & Levenston's [26] taxonomy which categorizes CSs into Process-based Strategies (transfer and overgeneralization) and Task-influenced Strategies (circumlocution, language switch, appeal for assistance and avoidance), Corrales & Call [27] investigate the CSs used by native Spanish-speaking students of different English levels to express lexical meaning while accomplishing two different tasks – answering structured questions and participating in simulated conversations. Results show that each of the two different tasks elicits its own pattern of strategy use. For the Process-based CSs, although both tasks evoke considerable percentage of overgeneralization strategies, the simulated conversation task draws more instances of transfer. While the Task-influenced CSs are significantly related with time (at the beginning of the term or five weeks later) and proficiency level (intermediate or advanced) — the advanced group use more task-influenced CSs than the intermediate group at the beginning of the term, while after five weeks' training the intermediate group use a greater number of this type of strategy. Thus, the authors conclude that L2 learners are likely to go through a period of maximum application of task-influenced CSs which peaks and then drops off as they

become more proficient L2 users.

Poulisse & Schils [25] conduct a quantitative investigation on the effects of task and proficiency related factors on the use of CSs (in line with the taxonomy proposed by the Nijmegen Group) in ESL learners. Three groups of Dutch learners of English with different English proficiency levels are tested on three tasks: picture naming/description task, story retell task, and oral interview with a native speaker of English. It is found that the types of CSs used by the subjects are not to any large extent related to their proficiency levels, but rather are related with the different tasks to be accomplished. Whereas the participants predominantly resort to analytic strategies in the picture naming/description task, they frequently adopt holistic strategies and transfer strategies in the oral interview and story retell tasks.

As initial attempts, both studies focus only on the expression of lexical meaning in the interlanguage with L2 proficiency as the major independent variable. However, they demonstrate explicitly and successfully that task types have significant influence on the choices of CSs, thus opening the ground for later more influential and insightful investigations in this domain.

##### B. *Further Investigation: Entering the Phase of Maturity*

Following the initial attempts, Flyman [28], Dobao [21] and Smith [29] conduct further research on the effects of different task types on the selection of CSs. Flyman [28] investigates the role of CSs in communication between two Swedish learners of French in three different tasks which are classified according to different degrees of control – translation, picture story narration and topic discussion (from the highest to the lowest). The taxonomy of CSs adopted in this study is from the Nijmegen Group (with revision from the author by adopting the concepts of “compensatory strategies” and “reduction strategies” from Fcerch & Kasper [10] as illustrated above. Results of this study show that the translation task gives rise to the highest number of compensatory strategies followed by the picture story narration, with few compensatory strategies in the discussion task. The difference of the reduction strategies in the three tasks are mainly reflected on the morphological level with 73% of the morphological avoidance strategies employed in the picture task, but only 8% in the discussion task. Besides, it is noted that the translation task leads to a large number of conceptual strategies whereas the picture and discussion tasks involve a higher number of transfer and appeal for assistance strategies.

Dobao's [21] research is carried out on a group of Spanish and Galician learners of English with altogether 629 CSs identified. In spite of task types, other learner-related factors such as proficiency level and native language are also considered in this study. The subjects are asked to accomplish three tasks: picture story narration, photograph description and a ten-minute conversation. The results demonstrate a significant causality between task types and CSs. The L2 learners tend to use considerably higher number of achievement strategies in the conversation and photograph description tasks compared with the story narration task. Conversation task also elicits most of the L1 based strategies. Besides, a considerable higher percentage of avoidance strategies are used in the narration task than the description

task.

Adding to these studies on traditional communication in L2 classroom is Smith's investigation on adult learners of English in computer mediated communication (CMC) [29]. Combining elements of taxonomies from a number of sources [10], [7], this study is conducted with 18 intermediate–low level adult English learners of mixed L1 backgrounds. Two practice tasks (jigsaw and decision-making in line with Pica *et al.*'s [19] task typology) are assigned to the subjects to explore the CSs applied in CMC. Results show that the decision-making task tends to elicit many more compensatory strategies than the jigsaw task. To be more specific, the learners use more compensatory conceptual–analytic, conceptual–holistic and mixed CSs in the decision-making task. What is worth noticing here is that while completing the decision-making task, the conceptual–holistic strategies are employed thrice as many times as the jigsaw task, albeit the linguistic–transfer strategies only occur in the jigsaw task.

Compared with the initial attempts, the tasks in these studies are more carefully selected, and the CSs investigated are more specific in nature with refinement by the author from the original taxonomy. Besides, the subjects involved are more representative with people from different age groups. The non-traditional computer-based communication also comes into the picture. As such, the investigation on the effects of task types on CSs has entered a mature phase. The research designs and results of the above three studies are widely borrowed and cited in later research, which will be illustrated in the next section.

### *C. Recent Studies: The Feast of Diversification*

With the opening of the third millennium, the importance of tasks in developing students' communicative competence is increasingly recognized by SLA scholars as well as many L2 teachers. Besides, the maturity of taxonomies and research designs in CSs also allows more detailed and insightful studies in this field. Following Flyman [28], Dobao [21] and Smith [29]'s works, a great many studies are carried out to examine the effects of tasks used on the CSs elicited.

Adopting Smith's [29] taxonomy, Khmis [30] investigates the use of four CSs (hypothesis testing, forward inferencing, topic continuation, and off-task discussion) in problem-free CMC interactions of 15 Egyptian university learners of English. The tasks employed are synchronous written chat and asynchronous threaded discussion. Results of this research show a statistically significant difference in the use of topic continuation and hypothesis testing between the two tasks – while topic continuation accounts for 39.1% of the CSs used in the synchronous written chat task, it occupies more than half (65.4%) of the strategies in the threaded discussion task. Besides, the hypothesis testing strategy which plays a role in the written task (13.0%) is totally abandoned by L2 learners in the discussion task.

Following this trend, Kaivanpanah, Yamouty, and Karami [31] conduct a survey in 2012 with 227 ESL learners at elementary, pre-intermediate, and intermediate levels to investigate the effects of proficiency, gender, and task type on the frequency of CSs. To elicit CSs, three different tasks – picture description, telling a story, and telling a joke – are

assigned to the subjects. Four CSs are examined in the data collected: circumlocution, appeal for help, time-stalling devices, and message abandonment (adapted from Tarone, [7]). The result suggests that task types do influence the frequency of CSs. The picture description task elicits the greatest number of circumlocution and message abandonment strategies, while appealing for help strategy is employed most frequently in the task of telling a joke. On the other hand, the story telling task resorts mostly to time-stalling devices with a low frequency of all the other strategies.

In the meantime, cross-linguistic studies also arise during this phase and add further plausibility to the effects of task types on CSs. Rabab'ah & Bulut [32] examine the various strategies used by 24 male Arabic learners from 8 different countries speaking 8 different languages in performing two tasks: an interview and a role play. Adopting Faerch & Kasper's [10] taxonomy of CSs, the research finds that the number of CSs adopted in the role play task is highly limited when compared with the interview task. To be more specific, although both tasks elicit a large number of paraphrase and restructuring strategies, the role play task shows a much greater tendency for message abandonment strategy than the interview task.

However, the role of task type is never the only or even the major independent variable in all the above mentioned studies. Till present, the only one study that is specifically designed for the causal relationship between the task types used and the CSs employed to fulfill those tasks is Ghout-Khenoune's [33] investigation on the effects of task type on learners' use of CSs. Based on Tarone's [7] taxonomy of CSs (illustrated above on page 4) and Bialystok's [34] tripartite division of CSs into L1-based, IL-based and non-verbal based strategies, this study observes the performance of a group of Algerian learners of English in two communication tasks: free discussion and object description. Analysis of the data collected reveals that the free discussion task generated 108 instances of CSs which is significantly higher compared to the 32 instances in the picture description task. Moreover, the restructuring, circumlocution, and approximation account for a much larger percent in the in the picture description task than in the free discussion task. In free discussion tasks, there tend to be much more cases of repetition and message abandonment strategies. Besides, the strategies of word coinage and appeal for assistance which play a role in the discussion task are totally abandoned in the picture description task. The strategy of literal translation is absent in both tasks.

As we can see from the above studies, during this phase, great diversity has been exhibited in the investigation of the influence of task types on CSs with the subjects from a variety of countries and learning a second language other than English. Computer-mediated communication has become a new area of interest for many scholars. The research design has also been expanded to include both quantitative and qualitative methodology, questionnaire and survey which are absent in the early stage. The diversification of studies in this domain to some extent reflects the increasing weight people attached to CSs in completing various tasks.

V. DISCUSSION: LIMITATIONS OF EXISTING STUDIES

Relating back to the research question as to how the task types influence L2 learners' choice of CSs, the existing studies, each from its own perspective, provide us some evidence that both the frequency and type of CSs are related to the tasks under completion. Altogether they build a diversified blueprint of the effects of task type on CSs. However, by blueprint, it suggests that the existing literature, although has opened the ground for and shed light on further studies in this domain, is insufficient in itself to represent the general patterns of the projection from task types to CSs, and thus needs to be fine-tuned and expanded.

First, as mentioned above, few existing studies are specifically designed for the causal relationship between the task types used and the CSs employed to fulfill those tasks. The findings concerning the effects of task types on CSs are sometimes influenced by the more "central" variables in the research such as language proficiency or gender. Besides, considering the tasks adopted, the existing literature only (and repeatedly) focuses on a small scale of task types (e.g. interviewing, picture description), while leaving a great many other tasks which is used popularly in L2 classroom (e.g. guessing, self-introduction, etc.) unconsidered. These half-baked tasks partly lead to the derivation of an incomplete range of CSs. As we can see from Table III, no particular tasks are demonstrated till present as particularly useful in the derivation of CSs like "use of all-purpose words", "morphological creativity", "topic avoidance", "literal translation". Further research is needed before generalizations are made.

TABLE III: EFFECTS OF TASK TYPES ON CSS IN THE EXISTING LITERATURE

General CSs	CSs in detail	Tasks to complete
<b>Avoidance/Reduction Strategies</b> (picture story narration task)	<b>Message Abandonment</b>	picture description task; free discussion task; role play task
	<b>Topic Avoidance</b>	
<b>Achievement/Compensatory Strategies</b> (translation task; story telling task; ten-minute conversation task; photograph description task; decision-making task)	<b>Literal translation</b>	
	<b>Borrowing /code switching</b>	
	<b>Foreignizing</b>	
	<b>Paraphrase</b>	role play task; interview task
	<b>Retrieval</b>	interview task
	<b>Repetition</b>	interview task
	<b>Approximation/Generalization</b>	structured question task; simulated conversation task; picture description task; role play task
	<b>Word coinage</b>	free discussion task
	<b>Circumlocution</b>	picture description task
	<b>Use of all-purpose words</b>	
	<b>Self-repair/restructuring</b>	role play task; interview task; picture description task
<b>Appeals for assistance</b>	picture story narration task; topic discussion task; telling a joke task; free discussion task	
<b>Stealing/Time-gaining</b>	story telling task	
<b>Conceptual Strategies</b> (translation task)	<b>Analytic strategies</b>	picture description task; decision-making task
	<b>Holistic strategies</b>	story retell task; oral interview task; decision-making task

<b>Linguistic/code Strategies</b>	<b>Morphological creativity</b>	
	<b>Transfer</b>	simulated conversation task; story retell task; oral interview task; picture story narration task; topic discussion task; jigsaw task

This situation is partly owing to the fact that there is no agreed-upon taxonomy of either CSs or task types. Even when researchers agree upon certain types of strategies or tasks, they tend to use different terminology to refer to them (like "ten-minute conversation task" and "topic discussion task"; "communication strategy" and "compensatory strategy"). The controversies over classification of CSs and task types support the view that research in this domain is still far from perfect. More detailed and comprehensive studies on a variety of tasks are still crying out to be done.

Moreover, when design the tasks, the difficulty and complexity level of the tasks employed need also be taken into consideration. The same task with different difficulty and complexity levels might derive significantly different frequencies of a particular CS or might even result in totally different types of CSs employed. One case in point is the role play task. In Rabab'ah [35], it is found that the role play task results in the lowest number of compensatory strategy use (CSs in Tarone's term) when compared with other tasks. This is in sharp contradictory with Green's [36] finding which shows that the role play task generates more CSs than a picture description task does. This contradiction, according to Rabab'ah & Bulut [32], is directly resulted from the fact that the role play task used in Green [36] is much more difficult and demanding than the one applied in Rabab'ah [35]. However, in the existing studies, the levels of difficulty of the tasks used haven't been examined yet, partly because of the limited number of studies specifically designed to investigate the relationship between task types and CSs. As an important variable that influences L2 learner' choice of CSs, the difficulty level of tasks deserves further exploration.

VI. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Since its emergence in the 1970s, CS research has made a lot of progress during the past half a century, and has remained a potentially fertile source of investment today. Prompted by the realization that a significant proportion of real-life communication in L2 is problematic, yet language classes do not generally prepare students to cope with practical communication problems, this study sought to bridge the gap between task types and the application of various CSs by L2 learners.

Drawing on findings from previous studies, it is revealed that while scholars generally accepted that task type influences both the quantity (frequency) and quality (type) of CSs application, it is also true that the efficiency of some CSs types might outweigh others in accomplishing particular task types. As Poulisse and Schils [25] have noticed, tasks are different in nature from four perspectives – task demands, lack of context, time constraints, and the presence of the interlocutor – therefore, different tasks resort to different sets of CSs. Considering this, L2 teachers should draw students'

attention to desirable CSs by adopting appropriate task types to improve L2 learners' consciousness of certain communication skills. For instance, telling a joke could be the best task for eliciting appeal for help strategy, while telling a story might be a good task to derive time-stalling devices, and with regard to the task of free discussion, appeal for assistance could be very useful in the process of learner - learner interaction. A brief summary of the task types that are significantly attached to particular CSs as already identified in the existing research is illustrated in Table III above. The CSs in this table are generally in line with Tarone [7], Faerch & Kasper [10] and the Nijmegen Group with small revision in the detailed CSs accordingly.

Besides, L2 teachers also need to consciously stimulate the use of these less frequent strategies, namely "use of all-purpose words", "morphological creativity", "topic avoidance", "literal translation", "borrowing/code switching" and "foreignizing", as they are normally absent in a typical classroom task but play equally important roles in smoothing and naturalizing interlanguage communication.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

#### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Chaowei Pang conducted the research; Xiaobo Liang analyzed the data; Rong Xiao wrote the paper; all authors had approved the final version.

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