

Negotiating Meaning in Interaction between English and Spanish Speakers via Communicative Strategies

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Abstract

The main purpose of this paper is to describe and understand how learners and their interlocutors manage to communicate meaning through the use of communication strategies (CSs). Drawing on the collaborative theory of communication, CSs episodes are identified and examined to describe how learners and their interlocutors co-construct meaning. The data analyzed in this study was collected at the University of Santiago through a task-based experiment, which was both audio and video recorded. Thirty-two subjects were paired on four different dyad conditions: four dyads of intermediate learners, four dyads of advanced students, four dyads of intermediate learners interacting with native speakers and, finally, four dyads of advanced students in interaction with native speakers. For the CSs identification process three different sources of evidence were used: problem indicators, native language base line and retrospective interviews. The results obtained show different kinds of communication grounding techniques. In some cases CSs are accepted by the addressees (acknowledgments, displays and demonstrations, initiation of a relevant next contribution and continued attention) while in some others the initial CS uttered by the learner is not accepted and has to be followed by a negotiation of meaning process. The conclusions reached are mainly based on a qualitative analysis.

Key words: strategy, communication, negotiation of meaning, interlanguage, language interaction

1. Introduction

When learners attempt to communicate, they may need to resort to communication strategies – hereafter CSs – in order to get their meaning across. In this paper we set out to describe and understand how learners and their interlocutors manage to achieve

successful communication of their messages when a CS needs to be used in a face-to-face oral interactional context.¹

With the term CSs we make reference to all those techniques language learners use when, in their attempt to communicate in the foreign language with a reduced interlanguage system, they find that the target language items or structures desired to convey their messages are not available. In order to keep communication steady, learners may circumvent linguistic difficulties by changing or reducing the content of their messages. In other words, they may avoid reference to a concept or topic in order to overcome the lack of the target language term or expression needed to convey this meaning. These strategies are usually known in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) research as “avoidance” (Tarone 1981) or “reduction” (Færch and Kasper 1983; Dörnyei and Kormos 1998) CSs. More often, however, learners are able to keep their communicative goals and convey the original content of their messages by developing an alternative means of expression. For this purpose they resort to “achievement” (Færch and Kasper 1983) or “compensatory” (Poulisse *et al.* 1990) CSs, such as the use of an approximate term, a descriptive circumlocution, a word coinage, a native language transfer, a gesture or an appeal for assistance. These different kinds of techniques can be used to compensate for or avoid all sorts of interlanguage deficits: lexical, grammatical, pragmatic or sociolinguistic. In this study, however, attention is focused on the use of CSs to compensate for lexical difficulties, i. e. on lexical compensatory strategies.

Most research into CSs so far has focused almost exclusively on the strategies in isolation. This paper, however, will look at how the strategies operate in the context of the ongoing interaction. We approach the study of foreign language strategic interaction building on the belief that communication of meaning, whether strategic or not, is

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always a collaborative activity between participants (Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs 1986). For communication to succeed, speakers and addressees need to work together and coordinate their individual actions and beliefs in order to build a mutual agreement on the content of their messages. From this perspective, we consider that communicative problems arising in foreign language interaction are mutually shared problems, in the sense that their solution is the responsibility of all the interactional participants and that, subsequently, CSs need to be considered in relation to “a mutual attempt of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in situations where requisite meaning structures do not seem to be shared” (Tarone 1981: 288).

In the present study we analyze a sample of foreign language interactional data extracted from SULEC (Santiago University Learner of English Corpus) with the aim of describing how to accomplish this process of building a mutual agreement on meaning. Drawing on previous research carried out in the field of SLA, as well as on L1 communication studies conducted within the framework of the collaborative theory of communication (Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs 1986; Clark and Schaefer 1987, 1989; Wilkes-Gibbs 1997), firstly we intend to identify what actions are taken by both the learner and their addressee when the target language lexical items desired to convey their messages are not available. Secondly, we want to analyze how the two of them coordinate their individual actions and beliefs in order to establish the desired final agreement on meaning. Thirdly, we will examine to what extent the communicative outcome of this strategic exchange results from the collaborative effort of all the interactional participants.

2. Review of the literature

The study of CSs has received quite a lot of attention in the field of SLA and, as a result, a considerable amount of both theoretical and empirical research has been accumulated in this area. This work has been conducted from two main theoretical perspectives: the psycholinguistic and the interactional. Psycholinguistic researchers, interested in the cognitive processes the learner engages in when becoming aware of a linguistic difficulty, have defined CSs as internal and individual mental plans, and tried to explain CSs use by drawing on cognitive models of speech production (Færch and Kasper 1980, 1983, 1984; Bialystok 1990; Poulisse *et al.* 1990; Poulisse 1993, 1997; Kellerman and Bialystok 1997). Interactionist scholars, however, following Váradi (1973), Tarone (1977, 1981) and Corder (1978), have treated CSs as elements of discourse and focused their attention on the linguistic realization of CSs.

In this light, CSs have been traditionally agreed on the taxonomy presented in table 1 below, which is, in fact, a reworking of the list of strategies proposed among others by Tarone (1977, 1980, 1981) and Poulisse (1993, 1997).

Communication strategy	Description of strategy
AVOIDANCE STRATEGIES	
a) Topic avoidance	The speaker, lacking the necessary vocabulary to refer to an object or action, avoids any mention to it. Eg. <i>'wears a ... pair of enormous trousers'</i> (braces)
b) Message abandonment	The speaker begins to talk about a concept but, feeling unable to continue, stops before reaching their communicative goal. Eg. <i>'a shirt with ... eh ... umm ... I don't know'</i> (tie)
c) Semantic avoidance	The speaker says something different from what was originally intended. Eg. <i>'an eye mm ... very damaged'</i> (black eye)
d) Message reduction	The learner reduces their original message, reports the same idea but with less precision and detail. Eg. <i>'some kind of ... uniform'</i> (school uniform)
ACHIEVEMENT STRATEGIES	
1 Paraphrase	
a) Approximation	The speaker substitutes the desired unknown target language item for a new one, which is assumed to share

	enough semantic features with it to be correctly interpreted. Eg. ‘ <i>you can see aaa ... a pigeon hole</i> ’ (letterbox)
b) Word coinage	The learner makes up a new word following the target language rules of derivation and composition. Eg. ‘ <i>houseshoes</i> ’ (slippers)
c) Circumlocution	The learner describes an object or action instead of using the appropriate target language item. Eg. ‘ <i>it’s like ja- jacket without the arms?</i> ’ (waistcoat)
2 Conscious transfer	
a) Borrowing	The learner uses an L1 item or structure modified in accordance with the features of the target language. Eg. ‘ <i>a bit more ... a bit more debilish no well</i> ’ (weak)
b) Language switch	The speaker uses an L1 item with no modification at all. Eg. ‘ <i>and he has mm... umm ... unha pucha</i> ’ (cap)
3 Appeal for assistance	
The learner asks the interlocutor for lexical help. E.g. ‘ <i>how do you call this?</i> ’ (chin)	
4 Mime	
The learner uses a gesture or any other paralinguistic form. E.g. ‘ <i>(learner mimics knocking)</i> ’ (doorknocker)	

Table 1: Communication strategies taxonomy

From both perspectives, the analysis of CSs has been approached as a study of learner language. Interactionist and psycholinguistic scholars have relied on corpora of interlanguage data for the purposes of their research.

The main concerns of this kind of corpus-based research have been to identify the different types of CSs available (Tarone 1977, 1981; Færch and Kasper 1980, 1983; Poulisse *et al.* 1990; Poulisse 1993; Dörnyei and Kormos 1998); the factors affecting the learner’s choice of specific CSs types, such as proficiency level (Tarone 1977; Bialystok 1983; Paribakht 1985; Poulisse *et al.* 1990; Jourdain 2000; Fernández Dobao 2001, 2002), native language (Palmberg 1979; Si-Qing 1990), personality and learning style (Haastrup and Phillipson 1983; Luján-Ortega and Clark 2000; Littlemore 2001), or task-demands (Galván and Campbell 1979; Bialystok 1983; Poulisse *et al.* 1990; Luján-

Ortega 1997; Fernández Dobao 2001); the potential communicative effectiveness of the different types of strategic utterances produced by the learner (Ervin 1979; Palmberg 1982; Bialystok 1983; Poulisse *et al.* 1990); and finally, the possibility of instructing the foreign language learner on the effective use of CSs (Færch and Kasper 1986; Dörnyei and Thurrell 1991; Dörnyei 1995; Scullen and Jourdain 2000; Faucette 2001; Jourdain and Scullen 2002).

With these objectives in mind, researchers from both approaches have focused on the language produced by the learner. They have treated CSs as independent and isolated units of analysis, paying little or no attention at all to the interactional context in which they are used or to the possible collaboration of the interlocutor in the strategic communication of the meaning process. CSs have thus been generally studied as part of the learner's use of the language and not as the product of the interaction taking place between a learner and, at least, one other interlocutor.

In the last few years, however, new studies have appeared adopting what can be considered as a strict interactional approach to the description of CSs use. Following Yule and Tarone's (1991) claim that for a comprehensive understanding of strategic communication, attention needs to be paid to "both sides of the page", i.e. to the actions of both learners and interlocutors, scholars, such as Wagner and Firth (1997), or Anderson (1998), have tried to describe strategic communication as an interactive activity. In these studies CSs are analyzed as elements of the ongoing and co-constructed context of the interaction and their communicative function is established taking into account the actions of all the conversational participants. **As already explained, we consider, like the previous authors, that strategic communication is a collaborative activity involving the joint and coordinated actions of learners and their interlocutors. We therefore adopt this same approach for the purposes of our research.**

The work conducted from this perspective is still limited in scope and has not yet offered a model of analysis able to describe in a systematic way how learners and their interlocutors manage “to agree on a meaning in situations where requisite meaning structures do not seem to be shared” (Tarone 1981: 288). However, studies carried out on L1 communication within the framework of the collaborative theory have been able to outline a theoretical framework that accounts for communication of meaning as a collaborative activity, co-constructed by the speaker and the interlocutor: the collaborative model of communication (Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs 1986; Clark and Schaefer 1987, 1989; Wilkes-Gibbs 1997).

The starting point of the collaborative model is the assumption that communication of meaning is a “common ground” building activity (Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs 1986: 7; Clark and Schaefer 1989: 260). This mutual agreement on meaning is achieved through a “grounding process” (Wilkes-Gibbs 1997: 239), in which the addressee accepts the speaker’s presentation providing some kind of evidence of their understanding, and the speaker recognizes and accepts this evidence. If addressees believe they have not been able to understand the speaker’s presentation, i.e. what meaning they are trying to contribute with their utterance, they are expected to show their difficulty and initiate a “side sequence” (Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs 1986: 7; Clark and Schaefer 1989: 278). The initial presentation is then refashioned until a new version is achieved that can be correctly understood and accepted by all the interlocutors. **In this view, any communicative act involves the specification and understanding of content, plus its grounding, i.e. the speaker and the addressee building the mutual belief that the content contributed to the discourse has been correctly understood and satisfactorily added to their shared common ground (Clark and Schaefer 1987: 20; 1989: 262).**

In this study we draw on the collaborative model, originally designed to account for L1 non-strategic communication, to analyze foreign language strategic interaction. CSs are here described as interactional tools used by the learner and their interlocutor in order to establish a mutual agreement on a meaning when the target language lexical items desired to convey this meaning are not available. We intend thus to explain strategic communication as a collaborative creation of meaning process involving the joint action and effort of all the conversational participants.

3. Method

The data for the present study was collected at the University of Santiago de Compostela between 2001 and 2004. A task-based research experiment, specifically designed to elicit samples of interactional discourse, was performed by a total of sixteen dyads of subjects.

With the aim of enhancing the representativeness of our data and the generalizability of our results, we decided to analyze interactions involving Spanish learners of English as a foreign language with two different proficiency levels, intermediate and advanced, working either with other same level learners or with English native speakers.

The English language learners who participated in the project were, at the moment of the collection of the data, undergraduate and graduate students at the English Department of the University of Santiago de Compostela. They were selected on the basis of their results on a proficiency level test – *The Oxford Placement Test* (Allan 1999). Twelve of them had an intermediate level while the other twelve were advanced students. The English native speakers, a total of eight, were international students,

taking Spanish language courses at the Modern Languages Centre of this same university.

As shown in table 2 below, these thirty-two subjects were paired on four different dyad conditions: four dyads of intermediate level learners of English as a foreign language (INT), four dyads of advanced level learners (ADV), four dyads of intermediate learners interacting with English native speakers (NS), and four dyads of advanced learners working in interaction with native speakers. This means that twelve of them were intermediate learners, a second group of twelve were advanced students and the remaining eight were native speakers of English.

DYAD TYPE	N
INT/INT	4
ADV/ADV	4
INT/NS	4
ADV/NS	4

Table 2: Dyad distribution of subjects participating in the study

We thought it was important to have native and non-native informants to see whether they used similar or different interactional procedures. Furthermore, we also thought it would be interesting to see to what extent the level variable was responsible for any changes in the learners' behaviour when they negotiated meaning in order to decode and finally understand a given message. However, this factor was not closely surveyed in the present paper since it has been left for further research in a subsequent study.

Most previous research in the field has relied on the use of photograph description or picture-story narration tasks for the purposes of data collection (Váradi 1973; Tarone 1977; Hyde 1982; Ellis 1984; Palmberg 1984; Marrie and Netten 1991; Anderson 1998; Gullberg 1998; or Wongsawang 2001). In order to elicit CSs use,

learners are given a set of images and are asked to describe them and/or narrate the story they illustrate. The images provide a well-defined and stable content which forces the subject to communicate about pre-selected topics, while at the same time allowing considerable freedom for individual variation. In this way the researcher can obtain representative samples of unplanned and extended interlanguage discourse but maintaining a certain degree of control of the content. The constant content facilitates the study of CSs and makes it possible to establish comparative analyses across subjects.

For the purposes of the present study, the traditional picture-story narration task was adapted and converted into a spot-the-difference activity. Each member of the dyad was given a different version of the same picture story and asked to describe it in as much detail as possible so that they could identify the differences existing between their two sets of pictures. We encouraged our participants to ask each other as many questions as necessary in order to be able to identify the differences without looking at each other's pictures. We managed thus to keep the necessary level of control on the content of the data while at the same time fostering interaction between our participants.

The set of pictures given to the learner included a total of thirty-two referents that were missing in the interlocutor's pictures. These thirty-two elements involved objects, such as *a waistcoat* or *braces*, and actions, such as *to punch* or *to roll up*. They were selected on the basis of a previous piloting experience, which guaranteed that they would pose frequent linguistic difficulties to both intermediate and advanced level learners. We intended in this way to encourage our different dyads of subjects to try to establish a mutual agreement on the same fixed set of items. The CSs used to communicate about these pre-selected referents would constitute the object of our analyses.

After the performance of this task, learners were asked to make a second native language description of the pictures. This second version is assumed to reflect the intended meaning, that is, what the subjects would have said if they had not been constrained by an imperfect command of the target language (Tarone 1977; Hyde 1982) and, in this way, provide native language baseline data for the analysis of CSs use.

The spot-the-difference task was followed by a post-interview in which the researcher asked the participants to listen to their performance of the task and to comment on the linguistic difficulties they had encountered and how they had tried to overcome them. The purpose of this interview was to elicit retrospective data to be used in the identification and analysis of CSs, since it is known from previous studies that there are always some instances of CSs which can be only identified with the speaker's help (Poullisse *et al.* 1987, 1990; Tarone and Yule 1989).

The performance of the spot-the-difference task was audio and video recorded. Video recording was used to analyze paralinguistic features which could represent possible examples of CSs. The interlanguage data collected was then transcribed following conversation analysis conventions of transcription (Atkinson and Heritage 1984; Edwards 1993; Lazaraton 2000) and computerised by means of the SULEC application tool.² We were thus able to elaborate a dataset of interactional data containing almost twelve hours of transcribed interactions between dyads of English language learners and dyads of learners and English native speakers. The native language version of the task and the retrospective interview provided the necessary additional data for this data to be analyzed in search of possible CSs uses. In our analysis we will be mainly using the notion of CSs episode, which will be explained in

² For further information about this corpus being compiled at the University of Santiago, visit the following website <<http://sulec.cesga.es>>.

the next section in more detail. The CSs episode involves actions from both the speaker and the interlocutor, and may consist of a variable and unpredictable number of turns.

4. The analysis of the corpus data

The procedures designed for the collection of the data provided us with a raw database of complex and unplanned interactional discourse, which was later on computerised and organised as part of the SULEC corpus. This dataset forms a monitor corpus and at the moment of writing contains over 400,000 words of written and spoken learner language. Three language levels are represented: elementary, intermediate and advanced. This corpus also includes a computer tool to conduct analyses of different nature, considering both textual and personal variables.

Although the spot-the-difference task imposed a certain control on the content of the data, participants had a considerable degree of freedom to decide on the specific aspects of the content they wanted to focus on, and how or when they were going to try to communicate those aspects. We intended, in this way, to make our data as close as possible to spontaneous and unplanned naturally occurring foreign language interactions. This posed, however, an added difficulty for the researchers, who had to screen learners and interlocutors' interlanguage performance in order to identify the lexical difficulties confronted and the CSs used to solve them. We explain here how we conducted these initial analyses on the corpus.

Following Tarone's (1981) description of CSs, and taking into account the interactional approach adopted in our study, we consider that a CS is used when:

1. The speaker desires to communicate an intended meaning to the interlocutor.
2. The speaker and/or his/her interlocutor believe the lexical item desired to communicate this meaning is unavailable in their interlanguage system.

3. The speaker and/or their interlocutor choose to
 - (a) avoid –the speaker does not attempt to communicate the intended meaning– or
 - (b) try out an alternative means of expression to communicate the intended meaning.

Drawing on this working definition of CSs, we initiated the CSs identification process. In order to guarantee the highest possible degree of reliability and consistency, we decided to rely on a triangulation of three different sources of evidence: problem indicators, native language baseline data and retrospective comments.

Problem indicators include errors, non-native like forms, non-fluencies, such as pauses or pause fillers, hesitation phenomena, such as repetitions or false starts, and explicit statements, like *I mean* or *how do you say...?* These become highly frequent when linguistic difficulties are being confronted and they often served as evidence of CSs instances.

As already explained, the native language data elicited was assumed to reflect the learner's originally intended message, that is, what the learners would have actually said if they had not been constrained by an incomplete command of the target language. Differences between the content of this version and that of the foreign language one were taken as possible indicators of linguistic difficulties and subsequent CSs uses.

The subjects' retrospective comments on their performance turned out to be the most fruitful and reliable source of evidence for CSs identification purposes. They served to corroborate the results of the problem indicators and native language data analyses, to clarify certain ambiguous uses of CSs and to disclose new CSs instances impossible to identify through external observation.

We have seen that most previous research on CSs has focused almost exclusively on the analysis of the strategic utterances produced by the foreign language learner. In this study, however, we intend to analyze CSs as elements of the interaction and to describe strategic communication as a collaborative process jointly co-constructed by the speaker and the interlocutor. **Therefore we need to consider CS within a higher order, as a more encompassing unit of analysis, able to capture the interactional nature of the process involving strategic communication of meaning.**

In order to establish the limits of what we consider to be strategic interaction, we elaborated the concept of *CSs episode*. The CSs episode begins with the learner's intention to communicate a message and the realization that the target language lexical items or structures desired to convey this message are not available. It ends when the speaker and the interlocutor establish a mutual agreement on the learner's originally intended meaning or, in the case of failed communication, when they decide to abandon their attempt to agree on this meaning and to move on to the next topic in the conversation. Within this process, learners and their interlocutors may use one single CS or a combination of different CSs, and resort to both verbal and nonverbal behaviour. **In order to answer those questions which prompted our research, the basic unit of our analyses will be the CSs episode.** The CSs identified in our data will be presented and analyzed as elements of a CSs episode, understood as a higher order construct which extends the limits of the CSs unit in order to offer a fixed and coherent framework for the **analysis of interactional CSs use.**

5. The analysis of CSs episodes

The main objective of our research is to describe and understand how learners and their interlocutors manage to communicate meaning through CSs use. **that is, how they**

manage to establish a mutual agreement on the content of their messages when the lexical items desired to convey this content are not available and an alternative means of expression needs to be used. Building on the collaborative theory of communication (Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs 1986; Clark and Schaefer 1987, 1989; Wilkes-Gibbs 1997), we analyze here the CSs episodes identified in our corpus in an attempt to describe strategic communication of meaning as a collaborative process, co-constructed by the learner and their interlocutor.

We understand that communication is a common ground-building activity and that learners use CS to present the content they want added to their interlocutors' shared common ground. However, for communication to succeed, this content also needs to be grounded. The speaker and the addressee need to establish the mutual belief that the meaning of the CSs uttered by the speaker has been understood by the addressee well enough for the current purposes of their interaction and satisfactorily added to their shared common ground. In other words, they need to coordinate their individual actions and beliefs in order to establish a mutual agreement on the meaning of the CSs.

This implies that the use of a CS by the foreign language learner always needs to be followed by a grounding process in the interaction. The addressee has to respond to the learner's CS by offering some kind of evidence of their state of understanding. They need to recognize that the learner, who lacks the target language lexical item originally desired to convey their message, is making use of an alternative means of expression; apart from this, it is also necessary to interpret this alternative means of expression, and somehow to make evident in the interaction that they have correctly inferred the learner's intended meaning. If the addressees feel unable to interpret the CS as just uttered by the speaker, they should also indicate this, so that the CS can be refashioned as many times as necessary until the learner's message can be correctly understood by

the addressee. Only when the speaker recognizes and accepts the addressee's evidence of understanding can the communicative process be considered successfully accomplished.

In the following pages we analyze a set of selected CSs episodes in order to illustrate how this grounding process is carried out. These episodes exemplify the different kinds of grounding techniques identified in our data. We pay attention, first, to the grounding of those CSs which were directly understood and accepted by the addressee. We then examine those CSs episodes in which the initial CS uttered by the learner could not be accepted by the addressee and had to be followed by a negotiation of meaning process before the desired mutual agreement on meaning could be established.

5.1. Acceptance grounding procedures in CSs episodes

Analysing L1 non-strategic communication, Clark and Schaefer (1989) identified five different categories of grounding devices addressees may use in order to indicate their understanding and acceptance of a just uttered presentation: acknowledgments, displays, demonstrations, initiation of a relevant next contribution and continued attention (Clark and Schaefer 1989: 267). The following examples illustrate how these different kinds of grounding procedures work in foreign language strategic interaction.

5.1.1. Acknowledgements

In the first extract of interaction, CSs episode 1, an advanced level learner, Raquel,³ desires to communicate the meaning *rolled up* to her native speaking interlocutor, Anne. She needs to present an utterance that can specify this content, but in the attempt to do so she finds that the target language lexical item she wants to use in her presentation,

³ We used pseudonyms in order to safeguard our informants' identities.

i.e. *rolled up*, is not yet part of her interlanguage system. In order to compensate for this interlanguage gap, she decides to try out an alternative means of expression. She uses an approximation CS, that is, she presents a related interlanguage term, *up*, which she believes shares enough semantic features with the originally intended one to be correctly interpreted by her interlocutor. She also gestures the action of rolling up a sleeve, hence supporting the oral approximation strategy with a nonverbal CS.

CS EPISODE 1:

1 Raquel: he remains with the:: tch {with the:: (0.5)⁴ sleeve (0.5) of
2 {A's LH mimics rolling up her
3 right sleeve}
4 Raquel: the tshirt (1.8) up?
5 Anne: {{uhuh}}
6 {{B nods}}
7 Raquel: a::nd an:d now the man with glasses, (0.5) seems to be
8 very: happy

The CSs episode enters thus the grounding phase, in which the addressee, Anne, is expected to provide some kind of evidence of her state of understanding of Raquel's CS. Here the addressee believes she has been able to identify the content of the speaker's intended message and **shows** so offering an asserting "uhuh" and a head nod. Within the collaborative theory framework these are considered to be acknowledgments, i.e. affirmative verbal or nonverbal signals offered by the addressee

⁴ The following transcription conventions have been adopted: *A* stands for speaker A's turn and *B* for speaker B's turn; (0.6) pause measured in tenths of seconds; *wo:rd* indicates the lengthened sound or syllable, more colons prolong the stretch; (.) non-falling or continuing intonation contour; *hhh*, audible inhalation; *hhh* audible exhalation; (xx xx) unintelligible speech, each double *x* represents one unintelligible word; *heh*, laughter; more laughter symbols indicate laughter of extended duration and, finally, °*word*° means soft speech, quieter than surrounding talk.

in order to assert their acceptance of the previous presentation (Clark and Schaefer 1989: 267, 280-281).

For agreement on meaning to be reached, the learner also needs to accept these acknowledgments as enough evidence of the addressee's satisfactory understanding of her intended message. In lines 7 and 8 of the transcript we can see how Raquel initiates a new contribution. By allowing the conversation to proceed to the next topic, Raquel is accepting the evidence of understanding offered by Anne, i.e. the speaker is acknowledging the addressee's acceptance. Mutual acceptance is thus established. Raquel and Anne have built the mutual belief that what the speaker meant with her initial CS has been correctly understood by the addressee.

The joint and coordinated actions of Raquel and Anne along three different conversational turns have allowed them to establish a mutual agreement on the meaning *rolled up*. The successful communication of the learner's originally intended message has been collaboratively achieved. It has involved the learner's use of a combination of oral and nonverbal CSs, and the learner's and the interlocutor's collaborative effort to ground the meaning of these CSs.

5.1.2. Displays and demonstrations

Studies on L1 non-strategic communication have shown that addressees sometimes repeat or paraphrase speaker's presentations in order to provide evidence of their state of understanding (Clark and Schaefer 1989: 267). They intend thus to display or demonstrate what they have actually understood. In the analysis of strategic interaction we have found that on certain occasions interlocutors repeat learner's CSs for grounding purposes although, more often, they attempt to paraphrase them. They try to reformulate the learner's original CS in order to provide a more appropriate or comprehensible

target language form to convey the intended message. In this process both native and non-native speaking interlocutors are sometimes able to offer the learner the target language lexical item they are struggling for. That is, they are able to infer not only the learner's intended meaning, but also what target language expression they are trying to compensate for, and to offer it as a form of corrective feedback.

In CSs episode two an advanced level learner, Silvia, unable to retrieve the target language lexical item *letterbox*, resorts to a combination of oral and nonverbal CS. **She first shows to her interlocutor that** she has encountered a linguistic problem with an indirect appeal for assistance strategy: "I don't know how to say it". She then describes the meaning she is trying to communicate: "the place where you introduce the letters". Simultaneously, she illustrates the content of her message representing with gestures the object of reference, a letterbox, and an action related to this object, i.e. the action of dropping letters in a letterbox.

CS EPISODE 2:

1 Silvia: and a:::, {i don't know::,} how to say it, (1.2) e::h the
2 {A's II draw a rectangle in the air}
3 Silvia: {place where you: introduce the:: (1.2) the: letters,}
4 {A opens her RH and mimics dropping letters in a letterbox}
5 (1.8)
6 Olvido: oh! the letters! the letterbox

Olvido, another advanced learner, is able not only to understand that Silvia is trying to convey the meaning *letterbox*, but also to infer that she is making use of a CS in order to compensate for the lack of the target language lexical item *letterbox*. In her response she offers this item to the learner. **With her prompting** she is demonstrating her understanding of the speaker's message and in this way she is collaborating to build an

agreement on the meaning *letterbox*. Furthermore, she is also negotiating for a more accurate native-like expression to express this meaning. Olvido's movement is not only an acceptance signal but also corrective feedback and new input for the learner.

By allowing the conversation to continue, Silvia **shows** that she accepts Olvido's **prompt**. This means that she recognizes *letterbox* as the correct target language lexical form to express her message. Agreement on both meaning and form is thus collaboratively reached, through the joint and coordinated actions of all the interlocutors taking part in the interactional exchange.

5.1.3 Initiation of a relevant next contribution and continued attention

By offering acknowledgments, displays and/or demonstrations, addressees assert their understanding and acceptance of the learner's previous CS, but acceptance can also be presupposed. Addressees may allow the speaker to proceed with the conversation by showing continued attention or by initiating a relevant next contribution that evidences, in its structure and/or content, the correct understanding of the preceding utterance (Clark and Schaefer 1989: 267, 270-271).

CSs episode three is initiated by an intermediate level learner, Lola, presenting a question for her interlocutor to answer. Within this question the speaker intends to make reference to a knocker and, lacking in her interlanguage system this target language lexical item, she describes the object of reference with a circumlocution CS: "the thing to knock". This circumlocution is accompanied by a nonverbal strategy that illustrates the oral description: gesturing the action of knocking on a door.

CS EPISODE 3:

1 Lola: you: you still watching the:, (1.2) {the:: thing to knock.
2 {B's RH mimics knocking
3 on a door}

4 Lola: (1.0) on the door?={
5 Carla: {=no!} because the door is completely open,
6 {A shakes her head}

The utterance by the addressee, Carla, another intermediate level learner, of a relevant and expectable answer **shows** that she understands what the learner intends to mean. Following Clark and Schaefer (1989: 271), we can say that Carla is providing evidence of her understanding at three different levels. She is passing up the opportunity to ask for a repair, which is taken as an implicit acceptance of the presentation. By initiating an answer she is recognizing that a question has been asked and, through the content of this answer, she is also displaying her correct understanding of the question.

The speaker, Lola, now moves on to the next topic in the conversation; this, definitely, indicates that she has accepted Carla's response. Lola and Carla establish thus the mutual belief that the question has been satisfactorily asked and answered, and the content contributed to discourse added to their shared common ground. The communication of the meaning *knocker* has been collaboratively established through the speaker and the addressee's coordination of their individual actions and beliefs.

5.2. *Non-acceptance grounding procedures in CS episodes*

CSs are never, by definition, the learner's preferred means of expression to convey their messages and, quite often, they result in erroneous or non-target-like utterances that cannot always be interpreted in their literal sense. Strategic utterances require, in general, a higher level of inference on the part of the addressee than non-strategic speech. Problems of understanding are, therefore, relatively common in strategic interaction.

In this section we analyze those CSs episodes in which the original CS offered by the learner could not be fully understood by the addressee. As already explained, in this kind of situation addressees are expected to **show** their trouble to the speaker. The analysis of our data reveals that for this purpose they make use of two different kinds of negotiation of meaning strategies: confirmation checks and clarification requests. In this way they initiate side sequences in which all the interlocutors collaborate in order to solve the comprehensibility problem encountered, refashioning the initial CS as many times as necessary until a mutual agreement on its meaning can be satisfactorily established. The following CSs episodes illustrate how this process is carried out.

5.2.1. Confirmation checks

The use of confirmation checks involving a variety of contexts and speakers in foreign language interaction has been widely documented in the literature on the negotiation of meaning (Long 1981, 1983; Pica *et al.* 1987; Pica 1994). **Confirmation checks can be defined as a move, immediately following a speaker's utterance, designed to elicit confirmation that the utterance has been correctly heard or understood by the listener.**

The analysis of CSs episodes reveals that, in order to check for confirmation, addressees may repeat all or part of the learner's preceding strategic utterance with rising intonation. However, they may also try to guess the speaker's communicative intention and, sometimes, even the learner's desired but unavailable target language lexical item.

In CSs episode four an advanced level learner, Silvia, employs an approximation CS in order to present the content she intends to contribute to the discourse. In the lack of the desired target language lexical item *rhombus*, she makes use of the approximate term *diamonds*.

CS EPISODE 4:

1 Silvia: a:n:::d there a::re e::h (2.0) diamonds? {on the floor,
2
3
4 Silvia: (1.5) so:me black and some white,}
5 (0.8)
6 Olvido: diamonds?
7 (0.4)
8 Silvia: yeah, (0.7) e::h (0.4) {°rombos ('rhombuses').° heh=
9
10
11 Olvido: =oh! (2.2) diamonds, sí ('yes').

Her interlocutor, another advanced level learner, Olvido, is not certain about the meaning the speaker is trying to convey and indicates so by means of a confirmation check. She repeats, with rising intonation, that part of the speaker's utterance she has not been able to understand: "diamonds?".

In order to solve the comprehensibility problem, the speaker, Silvia, decides to refashion her initial CS. She substitutes the previous approximation strategy for a code switching CS, i.e. she makes use of a native language term in order to compensate for the lack of the target language one: *rombos*. She also illustrates the meaning of this oral CS with a pictographic representation of the target referent: outlining the shape of a rhombus with her hand.

Olvido is now able to understand Silvia's originally intended meaning and shows this by an acknowledgment, "sí", and a repetition, now with falling intonation, of the original CS, "diamonds". With this move Olvido admits her understanding of everything said before and thus accepts the speaker's initial CS, lines 1-4 of the transcript, as well as its refashioned version, lines 8-10.

The CS episode comes to an end as the participants decide to move on to the next topic in the conversation. A mutual agreement on the meaning *rhombuses* has been satisfactorily established. The final successful communicative outcome of the CS episode is the result of the joint, collaborative actions of both the learner and their interlocutor throughout four different conversational turns and could not be understood by an analysis of the learner's initial CS alone.

The next excerpt of interaction, CSs episode **four**, illustrates a **different** use of the confirmation check strategy. This episode is initiated by Bárbara, an advanced level learner, who, lacking the TL (target language) lexical item *braces*, decides to make use of a nonverbal CS.

CS EPISODE 4:

1 Bárbara: e::h (1.8) {he's wearing::, hhh} e:h
2 {A's HH point to where the braces would be on
3 her body and mimic stretching them}
4 Sean: braces?
5 Bárbara: {{yeah!}} heh} heh [heh heh] heh
6 {{A nods}}
7 Sean: [heh heh]

Her native speaking interlocutor, Sean, is able to infer that she is trying to convey the meaning *braces* and also to offer this target lexical item. The rising intonation reveals, however, that he is not totally confident that he has understood the learner's intended meaning and, consequently, needs some kind of confirmation. The addressee is **showing** that he believes the previous presentation has not been understood well enough for current purposes; furthermore, he is making **it** clear that he has really understood that part of the message, and what lexical item he assumes may be the correct target language form to present the speaker's originally intended message.

Sean's move can therefore be seen, not only as a confirmation check, but also as a form of corrective feedback.

The acknowledgements provided by the learner in lines 5 and 6 of the transcript serve to confirm the correctness of the addressee's understanding. Bárbara accepts "braces?" as evidence of understanding, which also means that she has been able to recognize the input offered by the native speaker. Accepting Sean's contribution, she is also accepting *braces* as correct target language lexis to communicate her originally intended message.

Through collaboration, coordinating their individual actions in the pursuit of one common communicative goal, speaker and addressee are able to reach an agreement, not only on meaning, but also on form. They establish the mutual belief that the content originally presented by the speaker has been correctly understood by the addressee, and that the term *braces* is the most effective and appropriate form to present this content.

5.2.2. Clarification requests

When the speaker's strategic presentation cannot be directly understood by the addressee, they can show this by means of a clarification request, that is, an expression "designed to elicit clarification of the interlocutor's preceding utterance(s)" (Long 1983: 137). Clarification requests imply a lower level of understanding on the part of the addressee, who is asking for an explanation of the words or expressions that have not been understood. They therefore tend to require more collaborative effort than confirmation checks.

In CS episode [five](#), an advanced level learner, Isabel, tries to compensate for the unavailability of the target language lexical item *frowning* with a combination of a circumlocution and a nonverbal strategy. She tries to describe the action of frowning by

making reference to the related position of the eyebrows, which she depicts with an outlining nonverbal strategy.

CS EPISODE 5:

1 Isabel: the: father has a:: an upset face, (0.8) because
2 (0.5){his eyebrows are
3 {A's II outline the shape of frowning eyebrows on
4 her face, B is not looking}
5 Mary: what do you mean (heh)upset?
6 (0.7)
7 Isabel: he's upset. (0.6)like, (.) that. (1.2){his eyebrows are
8 {A's II outline
9 the shape of
10 frowning eyebrows
11 on her face x2}
12 Isabel: going like that, (.) you know?
13 Mary: {{(heh)completely like that?} }}
14 {{B's RI draws a downwards line in the air, B holds the
15 gesture}}
16 (0.5)
17 Isabel: {yeah,
18 {A's II form a vi over her eyebrows}
19 Mary: {{his eyebrows are like (heh)that?={}}
20 {{B's HH form a vi in the air}}
21 Isabel: =yeah.} (0.5) like when you're (0.4) upset.
22 Mary: yeah

The nonverbal strategy is, however, ignored by her native speaking addressee, Mary, who, as a result, cannot understand the meaning the learner is trying to convey. She [shows](#) her non-acceptance with a clarification request: “what do you mean ‘upset’?” The learner responds to this request by expanding her initial oral CS and repeating the

previous nonverbal strategy, which is now attended to by her interlocutor. Mary needs to check for confirmation on two more occasions, lines 13-15 and 19-20 of the transcript, before being totally confident of her understanding of the speaker's CS.

At the end, lines 21 and 22 of the transcript, learner and addressee accept each other's contributions, thus building the mutual belief that the message originally intended by the speaker has been successfully understood by the addressee. Agreement on meaning is established after a relatively complex and long negotiation of the meaning process in which both learner and interlocutor collaborate to achieve the final successful communication of the message.

6. Conclusions and suggestions for further research

The CS episodes analyzed here show that strategic communication in face-to-face foreign language interaction is a collaborative activity, involving actions from all the interlocutors taking part in the conversational exchange. When linguistic problems arise, learners and interlocutors collaborate in their solution. They coordinate their use of CS, negotiation of meaning strategies and grounding procedures in order to be able to reach a mutual agreement on the learner's originally intended meaning. The successful communication of the message is the result of the collaborative effort of all the interactants.

The CS episodes analyzed here show that strategic communication cannot be simply accounted for as the result of the learner's utterance of a CS alone. To understand how meaning is communicated, attention always needs to be paid to the two sides of the conversational exchange. Focus on the foreign language learner's actions, and the analysis of strategic utterances ignoring the interactional context in which they

are used, can only provide a partial understanding of the process of strategic communication.

Drawing on the collaborative model of communication, as described in Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs (1986), Clark and Schaefer (1987, 1989) and Wilkes-Gibbs (1997), we have been able to identify the different procedures that learners and their interlocutors use in order to solve their communicative difficulties, and to describe in a systematic way how they coordinate them in order to establish the final agreement on meaning. We have thus contributed to the interactional study of CSs at both a theoretical and a practical level, by showing that strategic communication in face-to-face interaction is a collaborative activity and by outlining a model of analysis able to explain this collaboration.

The results of our analyses reveal that both native and non-native speaking interlocutors, independently of their foreign language proficiency level, collaborate with both intermediate and advanced level learners by making use of the same kind of interactional procedures. This supports the global nature of our model and suggests its suitability for following research on foreign language strategic interaction.

In the present study we have not carried out comparative analyses across different proficiency level groups of students or different dyad conditions. The corpus of interactional data compiled for the purposes of our study is, however, open for future research comparing CSs use and collaborative work in CSs episodes involving intermediate versus advanced level learners and native versus non-native speaking interlocutors. This kind of research should be able to answer some pending questions: do intermediate level learners need to make more effort than advanced level students in order to be able to establish with their interlocutors an agreement on the meaning of their CSs? To what extent does the interlocutor influence this process? Do learners need

to devote more time and effort to build this agreement with other students of the same language level than with native speakers? To what extent do the type and features of the CSs used by intermediate and advanced level learners have an effect on collaboration in strategic interaction? To what extent does all this data reveal new aspects of strategic interaction in SLA which completely differ from their equivalents in the acquisition of the native language?

The analyses conducted on our data also **reveal** that when a CS is used by the learner, the interlocutor is sometimes able to infer, not only the meaning the speaker is trying to convey but also the target language lexical item they are compensating for. In the process of trying to achieve a mutual agreement on meaning, they may respond to the strategic utterance providing this target language lexical item; that is, offering new input for the learner. This particular kind of behaviour, occurring in certain CSs episodes as a direct result of a CSs use, also needs to be discussed in further detail. Future research should be conducted in order to identify whether the strategic interaction context offers the necessary conditions for this new input to be internalized by the foreign language learner and, subsequently, whether CSs episodes can also be seen as an occasion for language learning.

In sum, the results of our study suggest that future research adopting a strict interactional approach to the analysis of CSs can provide new and interesting insights on CSs use. **This kind of approach, able to provide a more comprehensive account of the complexity of the process of strategic communication of meaning, can help to clarify pending issues concerning CS use and in this way enhance our understanding of foreign language communication.**

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