Gender, High School Background and Use of Strategies by English Majors in Vietnam for Coping with Communication Breakdowns

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Abstract- This study explored the relationship of gender, high school background and strategy use by English Majors studying at universities in the South of Vietnam to cope with communication breakdowns. Communication Strategy Questionnaire was used for data collection. Data analysis involved Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), Chi-square tests. The results showed significant variations the students' choice of individual strategies according to gender and high school background. Gender and high school background has only minor relationship with students' communication strategy use.

Index Terms- communication strategies, English majors, gender, high school background

I. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, English has become the one of the most commonly used language for communication information (Crystal, 1997; and Alptekin, 2002). However, as estimated by Crystal (2003), approximately a quarter of the world's population has only 'reasonable' competence in conversation. Therefore, being able to communicate in English has been considered the fundamental of English teaching and learning in many countries around the world; and in Vietnam, where English is considered a key to the world of academic and economic development, it is not an exception. For Vietnamese English majors, one of the objectives of a four-year training program is to enable students to communicate in English effectively and confidently with native and non-native speakers in different communication situations related to common general or professional topics (Decision 36/2004/QĐ-BGD&ĐT, 2004). The highlight point of the objective is the appropriate use of communication strategies, which, according to Dörnyei and Scott (1997), was introduced in the early 1970s as ways to tackle difficulties caused by the mismatch between learners' linguistic knowledge and the communication intentions.

So far, many different definitions have been proposed regarding the communication strategies of second language learners. They are formulated based on the personal perceptions and beliefs of experts and the context of their research. However, in general, they can be identified as learners' attempts to maintain the conversation when facing difficulties (Corder, 1983; and Dörnyei and Scott, 1997); or to enhance the effectiveness of the conversation (Littlemore, 2003). These attempts involve the use of, e.g., paraphrase, approximation, word coinage, literal translation, language switch, appeal for assistance, mime, and fillers or hesitation devices. They help the two interlocutors reach their goal of communication despite the inefficiency in the knowledge of linguistic rules, sociolinguistic rules and discourse rules. More interestingly, as pointed out by Dörnyei and Thurrell (1991), they help language learners become more confident in communication. Additionally, some learners are believed to perform successful communication with only one hundred words as they rely mostly on communication strategies (Dörnyei and Thurrell, 1991).

In terms of communication strategy classification, various taxonomies have been developed. Similar to the definitions, different researchers have different ways of classifying strategies. Their classification may be generated from their own investigation (e.g., Tarone, Cohen and Dumas, 1976; Corder, 1983; Færch and Kasper, 1983; Paribakht, 1985; Poulisse, 1987 and 1993; Bialystok, 1990, Nakatani, 2006; Mariani, 2010; and Somsai and Intaraprasert, 2011); or from reviewing and modifying other research works (e.g., Bialystok, 1983; Willems, 1987; Dörnyei, 1995; and Dörnyei and Scott, 1997). Variations have also found in the proposed classifications due to the principles of terminology and categorization of researchers. Notwithstanding, the core group that has been shared by most taxonomies includes three types: (1) avoidance or reduction strategies, (2) achievement strategies, and (3) stalling or time-gaining strategies. Additionally, in terms of purpose of strategy use, communication strategies have been categorized as strategies for dealing with speaking difficulties and strategies for dealing with listening difficulties.

Communication strategies have attracted many researchers. A number of research works on communication strategies have been conducted, focusing on the natures of communication strategies, i.e., the definitions, identifications and classifications (e.g. Tarone, 1977; Corder, 1983; Bialystok, 1983 and 1990; Poulisse, 1987 and 1993; Lam, 2006; Nakatani, 2006; Mariani, 2010; and Somsai and Intaraprasert, 2011). Then there are empirical studies which investigate the use of communication strategies in relation to different factors, e.g., communicative tasks, learners' general language proficiency, types of program (e.g. Corrales and call, 1985; Liskin-Gasparro, 1996; Wannaruk, 2003; Rabab'ah and Bulut, 2007; Paramasivam, 2009, and Dong and Fang-pen, 2010). However, the available research works on communication strategies have shown that despite the important role of these strategies in developing leaners' ability in effective oral communication, very few studies have been conducted with Vietnamese students. Besides, no empirical works on

communication strategy use have been carried out with English major students in the South of Vietnam. Furthermore, it is revealed that research works on the relationship between communication strategies and the two factors: gender and high school background seem scarce. Therefore, the present investigation aims to fill the gaps. In this study, communication strategy questionnaire was conducted to elicit information about communication strategies employed by the students for coping with communication breakdowns.

II. RESEARCH ELABORATIONS

A. Terms Used in the Study
- Communication Strategies

The term 'communication strategies' (CSs) for the present investigation has been defined as attempts made by students in order to deal with oral communication difficulties in making the intended message across to the interlocutor and understanding the message sent from the interlocutor. They may be employed in pseudo or real-life communication both inside and outside the classroom settings.

- Students

The term 'students' in the present study refers to Vietnamese full-time undergraduate students who are studying English major at eleven universities in the South of Vietnam. These universities consist of University of Pedagogy, Hochiminh City; University of Humanities and Social Sciences, Hochiminh City (UHSS); Ho Chi Minh City Open University; Hochiminh City University of Foreign Language and Information Technology (HUFLIT); Saigon University; Nong Lam University, Hochiminh City; University of Technical Education, Hochiminh City; Binh Duong University; An Giang University; Can Tho University; and Tra Vinh University.

- High School Background

The term 'high school background' in this study refers to the location of high schools where the students attended before they started their university level. This variable was grouped into 'urban schools' and 'rural schools'.

B. Research objectives
The present study lent itself to exploratory purposes. It aims at:

- Investigating whether the choices of communication strategy use vary significantly by the students' gender and high school background

- Examining the patterns of a significant variation in the frequency of the students' reported communication strategy use at different levels with reference to the gender and high school background

C. Participants
Stratified random sampling was employed for data collection. The universities in the South of Vietnam were divided into two groups: the ones at the center of Hochiminh City, the most developed area, and the ones from other locations. 995 English majors were purposively selected from 11 universities (5 universities from the first group with 500 students and 6 from the second group with 495 students). Of the 995 participants, 181 were males and 814 were females; and 519 attended high schools in urban areas and 476 did that in rural areas. Besides, based on the results of the chi-square (χ^2) tests on the distribution of the students from each group under the two investigated variables - gender and high school background, it is demonstrated that:

- Compared with female students, there was a significantly greater proportion of male students perceiving their levels of oral proficiency as fairly good or higher.

- Compared with the students who attended high schools in rural areas, there was a significantly greater proportion of students who went to high schools in urban areas perceiving their levels of oral proficiency as fairly good or higher.

- Compared with the students who attended high schools in rural areas, a significantly greater proportion of students who went to high schools in urban areas falls into the group with non-limited exposure to oral communication to classroom settings.

D. Instrument
For the present investigation, the most recently established topologies by Dörnyei and Scott (1997), Nakatani, (2006), Mariani (2010), and Somsai and Inatarprasert (2011) have been modified. The strategies were selected with considerations of the research context and the operational definition of communication strategies of the present study. Accordingly, the communication strategy questionnaire (CSQ) included 56 items (55 as a result of validation, and 1 suggested by the students through piloting). Besides, it included questions about the students' demographic information, i.e., name of university, gender, name and address of attended high schools. The students' perceived oral proficiency levels (average or lower, fairly good, good or higher) and their exposure to oral communication in English (limited to classroom settings or non-limited to classroom settings), which would be useful for discussion of the findings, was also included.

The questionnaire's general instruction followed Dörnyei's (2003) suggestion. It covered: the purpose and importance of the study; the organization responsible for conducting the study, stating there is no right or wrong answer, requesting honest answers; and promising confidentiality and appreciation. That helped the researcher ensure that the respondents knew the purpose of investigation and answered the questionnaire with less fear and honesty, which, as stated by lntaraprasert (2000) is very important. The questionnaire was translated into Vietnamese to prevent misunderstanding or unanswered questions due to the respondents' language problem (Mackey & Gass, 2005).

E. Procedure
The CS questionnaires were administered to 995 students from different 11 universities in the South of Vietnam. To ensure the desirable number of quality responses, the researchers themselves administered the questionnaire at each university. The data collection process lasted two months from February to April, 2012.

F. Analysis
The data gathered were analyzed as follows:
1. Information about the students' gender and high school background was coded with numbers.
2. The data about the students' communication use, gender, background information, and perceived oral proficiency level input into SPSS was done and cross-checked to avoid mistakes that might influence the results. The strategy items were categorized into two groups: strategies the students used to

express the intended message to the interlocutor (MS) with 38 items; and strategies the students used to comprehend the message sent by the interlocutor (MR) with 18 items.

4. First, the reliability was examined to see whether the data would be qualified for quantitative analysis. The results of Alpha Coefficient (α) or Cronbach Alpha were used to check the internal consistency of the CSQ. The reliability estimate according to 995 Vietnamese English majors is demonstrated in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Reliability Estimate of the CSQ as a Whole and the Two Categories

CS category	CSQ as a whole (56 items)	Category 1 (38 items)	Category 2 (18 items)
Reliability Estimate (Alpha Coefficient: α)	.90	.85	.80

As Fraenkel and Wallen (2007) hold it, the acceptable reliability coefficient of .70 as a rule of thumb for research purposes. Therefore, the reliability estimate of the present study was acceptable.

5. Next, ANOVA, and Chi-square test were conducted. The data were considered at three levels: CS use in overall, CS use in the two categories, and individual CS use.

III. FINDINGS

A. *Variation in Frequency of the Students' Overall Reported CS Use*

Table 2: Summary of the first level analysis

Gender					
Male (n = 181)		Female (n = 814)		Comments	
Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Sig. Level	Variation Pattern
2.55	.32	2.56	.30	N.S.	-
High School Background					
Urban (n = 519)		Rural (n = 476)		Comments	
Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Sig. Level	Variation Pattern
2.54	.29	2.58	.32	N.S.	-

Note: S.D.: standard of deviation; Sig. level: significant level; N.S.: Not significant

Table 2 also demonstrates based on the results of the ANOVA. It was found that the frequency of the students' overal1 CS use did not vary according to either the students' gender, or their high school background. In other words, the students, whether they were male or female, did not report employing strategies, as a whole, differently. That is also true with the students who attended high schools in urban areas and those who did that in rural areas.

B. *Variation in Frequency of the Students' Use of CS under the Two Categories MS and MR*
- *Variation according to the students' gender*

The results of ANOVA (Table 3) show that no significant variations in the frequency of students' reported strategy use in either the MS or MR categories were found according to students' gender.

Table 3: Variation in Frequency of Students' Use of CS under the Two Categories according to Their Gender

Category	Female (n = 814)		Male (n = 181)		Comments	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Sig. Level	Variation Pattern
MS	2.52	.31	2.52	.32	N.S.	-
MR	2.64	.36	2.61	.39	N.S.	-

Note: S.D.: standard of deviation; Sig. level: significant level; N.S.: Not significant

- *Variation according to the students' high school background*

The results of ANOVA (Table 4) reveal no significant variations in the frequency of the students' reported strategy use in the MS category according to the students' high school background. However, they demonstrate significant variation in the use frequency in the MR category in association with this investigated variable. For the purpose of comprehending the purpose sent by the interlocutor, the students with rural high school background reported more frequent use of CSs than did those with urban high school background.

Table 4: Variation in Frequency of the Students' Use of CS under the Two Categories according to Their High School Background

Category	Rural (n = 476)		Urban (n = 519)		Comments	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Sig. Level	Variation Pattern
MS	2.53	.33	2.51	.30	N.S.	-
MR	2.67	.38	2.60	.36	p < .01	Rural > Urban

Note: S.D.: standard of deviation; Sig. level: significant level; N.S.: Not significant

C. *Variation in Frequency of the Students' CS Use at individual level*

- *Variation according to the students' gender*

The results of the Chi-square tests reveal that the use of 10 out of 56 individual CSs (17.86%) varied significantly according to the students' gender, with two different patterns of variation: Male>Female (3 strategies); and Female>Male (7 strategies).

The first variation pattern illustrates that a significantly higher percentage of male students than their female peers reported high employment of 3 individual CSs. These strategies, which are mostly risk-avoiding strategies, consist of *'trying to imitate native speaker's pronunciation'* (MS35), *'saying 'well', 'let me*

see' ... *to gain time to think how to get the intended message across to the interlocutor'* (MS15), and *'avoiding new topic by sticking to the old topic'* (MS23).

The second variation pattern shows that a significantly greater percentage of female students than their male counterparts reported high employment of 7 individual CSs. Regarding the CSs for getting the message across to the interlocutor, high frequency of use were reported for *'using a familiar word instead of the exact intended word'* (MS2), *'actively encouraging oneself to express what he wants to say'* (MS31), *'using an all-purpose word instead of the exact intended word'* (MS1), *'using examples instead of the exact intended word'* (MS7), and *'thinking first of what one wants to say in Vietnamese and then constructing the English sentence'* (MS21). In terms of CSs for comprehending the message sent by the interlocutor, two reported strategies are *'asking the interlocutor to slow down'* (MR3) and *'asking the interlocutor to explain what he/she has just said'* (MR2). These strategies which a higher percentage of female reported at high frequency of use are most self-reliant, achievement, risk-taking ones.

- ***Variation according to the students' high school background***

The results of the Chi-square tests demonstrate that the use of 11 out of 56 individual CSs (19.64%) varied significantly according to the students' high school background. Two different patterns of variation are: Urban high schools>Rural high schools, and Rural high schools>Urban high schools. The first variation pattern shows that a significantly higher percentage of the students who attended high schools in urban areas than those who attended high schools in urban areas reported high employment of 4 individual CSs. These strategies are *'trying to catch the interlocutor's main point'* (MR9), *'noticing the words which the interlocutor slows down or emphasizes'* (MR13), *'trying to imitate native speaker's pronunciation'* (MS35), and *'using categories instead of the exact intended words'* (MS4). In respect of the other variation pattern, it is indicated that a significantly higher percentage of students with urban high school background than those with rural high school background reported high use of 7 individual CSs. This group comprises *'asking the interlocutor to slow down'* (MR3), 'asking the interlocutor to explain what he just said' (MR2), *'thinking first of what one wants to say in Vietnamese and then constructing the English sentence'* (MS21), 'asking the interlocutor to repeat what he/she has just said' (MR6), *'asking the interlocutor to simplify the language'* (MR1), *'asking the interlocutor to spell or write out his/her intended word'* (MR5), and 'trying to translate into Vietnamese little by little to understand what the interlocutor has said' (MR12). They are mostly help-seeking strategies which are less demanding regarding efforts and linguistic ability.

IV. DISCUSSIONS

- **Use of CSs and the Students' Gender**

The present study has been intended to explore the actual relationship between the students' gender and their choices of their CS use. Notwithstanding the lack of significant variations of CS employment in overall use or by the MS and MR categories, the findings of the present investigation have shown a minor

relationship between the gender of students and their choices of individual strategy use, being consistent with the study by Somsai (2011) where both male students and female students respectively showed higher frequency of use of certain strategies than did their counterparts.

As Oxford and Nyikos (1989, p.296) concluded from their study on learning strategies which was conducted with university students, gender differences had 'a profound influence' on strategy employment. Different use of 'social', or 'conversational input elicitation' strategies among male and female language learners have been found in research works, namely Polizer's (1983), Oxford and Nyikos' (1989), Green and Oxford's (1995), and Ok's (2003) where females were found having significantly higher frequency of use of strategies than males. Given that these strategies involved interaction between the language learners and their interlocutors, they could be considered communication strategies. Thus, their results are applicable to communication strategies. Besides, according to Ghani (2003, p. 33), 'males do better than females in the use of some strategies'. This is supported by the findings of the present study where male participants did also report using certain strategies significantly more often than did their females counterparts.

Besides, in the present study, it was found that male students tend to use more risk-avoiding strategies. Meanwhile, more risk-taking strategies tend to be preferred by their female peers. This could possibly be explained by certain factors which have been hypothesized by the researcher.

One possible explanation for such significant variations is women's greater social orientation as evidenced in Ehrman and Oxford's (1989) and Oxford and Nyikos's (1989). As Green and Oxford (1995) put it, it might be biology and socialization causes that have resulted in the gender difference in strategy use. Besides, Ok (2003, p. 26) affirms that 'females are superior to, or at least very different from, males in many social skills with females showing a greater social orientation'. More specifically, Mori and Gobel (2006) reported from their studies on motivation of Japanese students that compared with their male counterparts, female students have a greater desire to make friends and to have direct contact with L2-speakers. In other words, females are more willing to use English as a foreign language to communicate and deal with people than do male students. That may explain why in the present investigation female students are more risky than their male counterparts in expressing their ideas when facing communication breakdowns.

The second possible factor which may explain the difference in strategy use by female is their motivation to learn English in order to satisfy social expectations. As found in Ehrman and Oxford's (1989), and Oxford and Nyikos's (1989), gender differences may have been associated with women's greater social orientation, stronger verbal skills, and greater conformity to norms, both linguistic and academic. That means, women are generally expected to succeed in language learning; and failure in English for female may well be more face-threatening than for male students. That may lead to a higher proportion of female who reported using more risk-taking strategies which helped them express their intended meaning by themselves.

Besides, the findings of Narayanan, Nair and Iyyapan's (2008) and Abidin, Pour-Mohammadi and Alzwari's (2012) works conducted with Indian and Libyan English language learners

respectively. From these two studies, it was found that when compared with male counterparts, female students have greater motivation in language learning. The greater motivation of female students may be associated to their tendency to strive more than male students to make themselves understood through high use of CSs in the target language as seen in the findings of the present study.

Another possible reason which the difference in gender choice of CSs in the findings might be attributed to is the characteristics of males' over-confidence in their oral abilities. From the research findings, it can be inferred that male students rely more on risk-avoiding strategies when coping with oral communication breakdowns which seem to be more appropriate for low level students. However, a look at the perceived oral proficiency levels of the students demonstrate that a higher proportion of male students than their female counterparts ranked themselves as fairly good or higher. Thus, their preference of risk-avoiding strategies should have been accounted to other reasons rather than oral proficiency.

According to Maubach and Morgan (2001), males tend to over-confident in their oral abilities. In the present investigation, male students are likely to employ risk- avoiding strategies more often than do their female peers when having difficulties in the course of conversation. This could be because they think they only have breakdowns in too difficult cases which are beyond their ability to solve. Besides, cases like this has been pointed out by Alexander, Graham and Harris (1998) who asserted that the shift in knowledge sometimes has an impact on strategic behavior of students. In other words, the more frequent use of these strategies in male participants may not be the sign of weaknesses but may be due to the needs of this group of students.

In sum, based on the findings, we found that female English majors studying at universities in the South of Vietnam were more risky than their male counterparts in using CSs to cope with communication breakdowns. The possible explanations hypothesized by the researcher for the significant differences in the choice of strategy by gender of the students in the present study may be accounted for (1) female students' social orientation, (2) female students' positive motivation in language learning, and (3) males' over-confidence in their oral language ability. However, we cannot be definitely certain about what really caused these significant differences. Thus, research to investigate these aspects is possibly needed.

- **Use of CSs and the Students' High School Background**

Through the extensive literature, no empirical research on CSs has been conducted with college learners in consideration of their high school background. However, the present study found this variable significantly related to the students' strategy frequency use at category level and at individual strategy level.

The students who attended rural high schools reported employing CSs to deal with comprehending the interlocutor's message more often than their peers who attended urban high schools. The possible reasons of this difference in frequency use of two groups might be attributed to the students' level of oral proficiency. While of all language skills, listening is considered the least successful (Graham, 2006) and the most difficult (Bacon, 1989; Farrell and Mallard (2006), a look at the students'

perceived level of English oral proficiency demonstrated that compared with the students who went to urban high schools, a significantly greater proportion of the students who went to urban high schools are of fairly good or higher levels.

In the present study, at individual level, there were significant variations in CS choice of the students with urban high school background and those with rural high school background. The students from urban high schools prefer strategies which involve their own effort to make their communication easier for them or for their interlocutors to understand, such as *'trying to catch the interlocutors' main point'* (MR9), 'trying to imitate native speakers pronunciation' (MS35). Meanwhile, their counterparts from high schools in rural areas tend to rely on other sources, namely other people and mother tongue when coping with breakdowns in oral communication. Levels of oral proficiency, together with opportunity to speak the language and the experience in language learning, were hypothesized by the researcher to be the factors associated with the variation in CSs choice of the two groups.

One finding of the present study is that the students from rural high schools are likely to use mother tongue strategies more frequently than those who attended urban high schools. This may possibly be explained by the fact that a significantly greater proportion of the students from rural high schools perceived their level of oral proficiency as average or lower. This is in line with the works by Wannaruk (2003) and Werrarak (2003) who investigated the relationship between oral proficiency and Thai university EFL learners. The results of these two studies show that students of lower level of oral proficiency employed more CSs, except the target language-based strategies, than their counterparts of higher levels. That is to say, students with low level of oral proficiency are likely to use mother-tongue based strategies (translation) more frequently. Besides mother tongue strategies, from the present study's findings, the students who attended rural high schools also rely more on help-seeking strategies which are not as linguistic demanding as the ones preferred by their peers who attended high schools in urban areas. This may also be accounted for their level of oral proficiency.

Another possible explanation for the findings of the present study in terms of use of CSs and high school background is the learning experience. Previous language learning experience has been found a factor affecting students' choice of strategies in past research works carried out by Porte (1988), Wharton (2000) and Siriwan (2007). That is, the amount of experience that students have had in language learning affects their choice of strategies (Siriwan, 2007). In the present study, though students have passed the university entrance examination to become English majors, the test was in written form; and uneven levels of oral proficiency are likely to exist. It may be because the students from urban and rural high schools have different length of time of language learning due to the availability of teachers and language centers in different contexts. This may be a factor leading to the variations in CS choice of the students in respect of high school background.

Besides, according to Kouraogo (1993), learners' desire to learn a language is associated to what opportunities to practice are readily available to them. Compared with the students from rural areas, the students from urban areas enjoyed much better

opportunities to practice the language, especially in oral communication. As mentioned above, a significantly greater proportion of students who have had more exposure to oral language opportunities are those who attended high schools in urban areas. In other words, the students who attended urban high schools have had more opportunities to communicate in English and deal with different types of interlocutors. This may enable this group of students to employ more complicated and demanding strategies than do the students who attended high schools in rural areas.

To conclude, the variation in the students' choice of CSs with regard to high school background is hypothesized to be attributed to (1) level of perceived oral proficiency, (2) amount of experience in language learning, and (3) opportunity to speak English. Nevertheless, there is no definitely certain about what really caused these significant differences. Thus, research to investigate these aspects is possibly needed.

V. CONCLUSION

The present study investigated the use of strategy in relation to gender and high school background of English majors studying at universities in the South of Vietnam for coping with communication breakdowns.

It found that male students tend to use one avoidance strategy, namely avoiding new topic by sticking to the old topic more often than their female peers. As it belongs to reduction strategies, which, according to Margolis (2001), are considered not beneficial for both language learning and communication, teachers should point this out to students, especially the male group. Meanwhile, as Tarone (1980) suggests, CSs can help learners expand language. The learners' language output may be imperfect grammatically and lexically in the course of communication, but through employing CSs, they may be exposed to language input that may result in language learning. Thus, teachers should show students that they don't have to avoid the new topic because there are other CSs which can save them from problems; that despite their difficulties, they can still communicate successfully with the new topic if they use appropriate strategies; and that they can even be able to improve their oral communication skill when they speak and use CSs more often.

Another finding of the present study demonstrates that students who attended rural high schools are more likely to rely on translation. According Paramasivam (2009), when functioning as a CS, translation helps communication. However, it seems not to be advisable if students abuse translation which seems to take a lot of time and not really suitable for oral communication. This may shed some light on teaching oral communication skills. Teachers whose students are from rural high school background should be aware of this feature of their student's CS use. Teachers should make clear to the students that translation is not always the best choice during the conversation. For this purpose, small seminars on CSs which focus on how to cope with communication breakdowns are recommended. This will provide students chances to observe and analyze the use of a variety of strategies so that they can see how people can successfully deal with communication breakdowns without translation.

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