Cross-cultural communication strategies used by Taiwanese and Japanese college students in multilingual distance communication

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Abstract

This paper aims to investigate the communication strategies employed in a distance contact situation between Taiwanese (TW) and Japanese (JP) students through a two-way interactive communication chat-rooms system. The following results have been observed. Firstly, when communication problems occurred during communication, both parties attempted to solve the problems by actively employing various communication strategies. TW students would use various communicative strategies equally, as compared to JP students' obvious tendency to choose certain strategies. Secondly, the study observed that a 'mumbling strategy', i.e. seeking help from other group members when problems occurred, was often used by TW and JP participants. Thirdly, due to the use of a multimedia chat-rooms system, students frequently employed a 'mode switching' strategy, that is instead of using only voice chat, students simultaneously switched to texts, pictures, videos or websites to foster a better understanding in their communication. The findings of the study are expected to contribute to instructional design and the development of teaching materials for successful cross-cultural communication.

1. Introduction

With the advent of the globalization era, cross-cultural communication opportunities have considerably increased, not only for business executives but also the general public. The demand for learning foreign languages has consequently become pressing and multifarious. In regard to the effectiveness of foreign language learning, research studies (Hymes, 1972; Canale & Swain, 1980; Bachman & Palmer, 1996[1]; Peck, 1998; Ramirez, 1995; Wringe, 1989; Shin et al. 2011[2]) and our experience have shown that learning grammar does not necessarily help people achieve mutual intelligibility; and, by contrast, people can still communicate well even if they do not have sufficient grammatical knowledge. Many research findings remind us that for the learning of foreign languages in the globalization era, apart from the grammar and language skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing and cross-cultural communication skills are equally important (Littlewood, 1981; Samovar et al., 1981; Byram, 1989; Wringe, 1989; Steele, 1990; Kramsch, 1993; Abdollahi-Guilani et al., 2012). We have to try to achieve mutual understanding of each other's cultures, ideas and communication manners so as to reduce conflicts and achieve the goal of communication.

Another feature of globalization is the development of Internet and multimedia information technology, which opens up various channels of communication, rather than being confined to face-to-face interaction. In the past, studies of cross-cultural contact situations mostly centred on face-to-face discourse data. In recent decades, however, researchers have shown great interest in computer-mediated communication, particularly in the aspects of communication strategies (henceforth CSs). In the era of globalization and Internet technologies, are there any differences in terms of communication problems and difficulties? If yes, how do interlocutors deal with situations when problems occur? How do we develop and equip ourselves for effective communication with people from different cultures? To answer these questions, it is necessary to carry out research, to observe the communication difficulties or problems that occur in actual contact situations, and to analyze the immediate strategies that people use to promote better understanding between one another. The research findings will, hopefully, contribute to the development of more effective communication strategies that adapt to a multicultural society.

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1 Bachman and Palmer (1996) believe that the language used in actual communication should involve the speaker's background knowledge and contextual information. They also suggest that strategic competence and language competence are two quite different and completely independent abilities.
2 Shin, Eslami & Chen (2011) consider that, in order to achieve better cross-cultural communication, it is essential to employ non-verbal communication strategies, such as greetings in daily life, or the appropriate use of body language and facial expressions etc.

The CSs that we analyze in this paper refer to strategies that are used to solve communicative problems or difficulties and to maintain or facilitate effective communication. We consider two types of strategies: one is 'the strategies that interlocutors apply to their own resources to achieve the goal of communication'; and the other is 'the strategies that interlocutors to make use of mutual resources interactively and cooperatively to facilitate effective communication'. Thus, the paper defines CS, from an interactional and harmonious perspective, as 'the verbal and non-verbal strategies that interlocutors use repeatedly and systematically in order to maintain or facilitate effective communication'. This study aims to investigate the communication strategies employed by Taiwanese and Japanese university students in multi-language multimode distance communication.

2. Literature Review

In the 1960s, the term 'language competence' usually referred to a language user's grammatical knowledge of lexis, syntax, phonology and the like. The sociolinguist Dell Hymes (1972: 283) first pointed out Noam Chomsky's (1965) influential and yet inadequate distinction between 'competence' (knowledge of grammatical rules) and 'performance' (actual language use in context). He objected to the marginalization of the importance of social context in communication and proposed the broad sense of 'communicative competence', a term he coined to refer to a language user's grammatical knowledge as well as the social knowledge necessary to use language in a social context.

Hymes' concept was further developed by Canale and Swain (1980:1-47), who defined communication competence in terms of the following three components: (1) grammatical competence, (2) sociolinguistic competence, and (3) strategic competence. A brief summary of the three components is as follows:

(1) Grammatical competence: knowledge of lexical items and rules of morphology, syntax, semantics and phonology.
(2) Sociolinguistic competence:
  a) Sociocultural rules: knowledge of the relation of language use to its non-linguistic context, e.g. choosing appropriate topics, role-play, proper interaction etc.
  b) Discourse rules: governing cohesion and coherence.
(3) Strategic competence: verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be used to compensate for breakdowns in communication due

to performance problems or insufficient competence. These strategies usually relate to grammatical competence (e.g. to explain unfamiliar grammatical concepts) or sociolinguistic competence (e.g. how to address a stranger in an unknown social situation).

As far as strategic competence is concerned, it is a prerequisite not only for native speakers, but also for all second language (or L2) learners to develop （Færch & Kasper, 1980; Kasper & Kellerman. 1997; Nakatani, 2005; Iwai, 2006). Given L2 learners' inadequate language proficiency, they may encounter difficulties or problems during the communication process. Hence, in order to demonstrate communicative competence, learners need to learn how to employ communication strategies to solve these problems.

The term 'communication strategies' was previously proposed by Selinker (1972) in his discussion of L2 language learning. However, he did not expound it in great detail. Later on, although Savignon (1972) and Varadi (1973) also successively referred to CS in their studies, it was not until the late 1970s and early 1980s that research on CS gradually started to become popular. Notable research in this area includes Tarone et al. (1976), Tarone (1977, 1978, 1981, 1983), Canale (1983), Faerch and Kasper (1983, 1984), Paribakht (1985) and Bialystok (1990). These scholars have their individual multifarious standpoints regarding the definition and typology of communication strategies. Among those studies, Tarone's proposal is still seen as one of the most influential in the field. He defined CS as the 'mutual attempt of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in situations where requisite meaning structures do not seem to be shared' (Tarone, 1981, p. 288).

Tarone's (1978) CS typology comprises the following categories:

(1) Paraphrase: (a) Approximation; (b) Word coinage; (c) Circumlocution;
(2) Borrowing: (a) Literal translation; (b) Language switch;
(3) Appeal for assistance: usually by using questions;
(4) Mime;
(5) Avoidance: (a) Topic avoidance; (b) Message abandonment.

Later, Færch and Kasper (1983) discussed CS from the perspective of interlanguage. They located these strategies in an individual speaker's mental plan, and defined CS as 'potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a

problem in reaching a particular communicative goal' (Faerch & Kasper, 1980, p. 81). Their overall scheme for the communication strategies used in the speech production process is shown below:

     (1)   Reduction Strategies:
       (1a) Formal Reduction Strategies;
       (1b) Functional Reduction Strategies;
     (2)   Achievement Strategies:
       (2a) Compensatory Strategies:
           (i) Non-cooperative Strategies:
                ・L1/L3-based Strategies:
                   Code Switching; Foreignizing; Literal Translation;
                ・L2-based Strategies:
                   Substitution; Paraphrase; Word Coinage; Restructuring;
           (ii) Cooperative Strategies: Direct Appeal; Indirect Appeal;
       (2b) Retrieval Strategies:
           Waiting; Using Semantic Fields; Using Other Languages.

In the early 1990s, researchers turned their attention to the relationship between CS and pedagogical issues. There were two opposing standpoints, 'the Cons' and 'the Pros', with regard to the teachability of communication strategies. The Cons, e.g. Bialystok (1990) and Kellerman (1991), did not advocate teaching CS. Bialystok considered that the use of CS was not a particular phenomenon that merely belonged to L2 learners, but rather an inevitable concurrence during cognitive processing for all language users. Kellerman, observing within a psycholinguistic framework, also suggested that both L1 and L2 learners should have implicit knowledge of communication strategies and make use of them, thus L2 learners' instruction in these strategies may not be necessary.

On the other hand, the Pros, such as Yulel and Tarone (1987, 1997), Tarone and Yulel (1989), Dörnyei and Thurrell (1991) and Dörnyei (1995), advocated that CS training should be incorporated into school syllabi. From an interactional perspective, these researchers believed that teaching learners how to use CS effectively could help enhance their linguistic expressive competence. Tarone and Yulel argued that the task-based approach to CS teaching in particular would facilitate learners' language ability. Dörnyei and Thurrell also suggested that a solid training in CS could help learners have some guidance to rely on whenever they encounter communication difficulties or problems in their interactions with others.

Despite the controversies over the teachability of CS, teaching CS is considered to be beneficial, particularly from learners' point of view. Scholars may argue that the use of CS is an inherent ability or implicit knowledge acquired as part of L1 language acquisition. However, without proper teaching or training, language users might be unable to use them effectively or appropriately, particularly in multicultural contexts or cross-language interactive scenarios. Therefore, more researchers have praised the positive role of teaching communication strategies.

In the 1990s, Dörnyei and Scott (1997) reviewed the literature on communication strategies and categorized them into the following three types:

(1) Own-performance strategies: the realization that something one has said is incorrect or only partly correct – associated with self-repair, self-rephrasing and self-editing strategies, which may be attributed to psycholinguistic behaviours.
(2) Other-performance strategies: something perceived as problematic in the interlocutor's speech, either because it is thought to be incorrect (or highly unexpected), or because of a lack of (or uncertainty over) understanding something fully – associated with various meaning negotiation strategies.
(3) Processing time pressure: the speaker's frequent need for more time to process in order to make the communication fluent – associated with strategies such as the use of fillers, hesitation devices and self-repetition.

The communication strategies that we observed in actual conversations may include own-performance strategies and other-performance strategies (Dörnyei and Scott, 1997). Since the 2000s, researchers such as Lam (2005) and Archibald (2006) have tended to support the necessity and effectiveness of teaching CS in L2 learning. In order to improve speech competence and problem-solving ability, L2 learners should at least know that various strategies are of great use for their daily communication. How to incorporate CS into research and teaching is also a question worthy of further investigation. Despite the great wealth of research focusing on CS, few studies have examined CS in cross-cultural, computer-mediated communication in which multiple languages such as English, Mandarin and Japanese are used. The study aims to address this under-researched area; the findings are expected to contribute to pedagogy.

3.Research Subjects and Methodology

3.1 Participants and data collection

The data collection was conducted over five weeks between October and December 2012. There were, in total, 105 students who participated in a distance contact situation, including 56 Taiwanese sophomores from the Department of Foreign Languages and Applied Linguistics at Yuan Ze University, and 49 Japanese freshmen from Waseda University. The division of the research participants is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Participants in the study

Participants	JP students	TW students
Females	13	47
Males	36	9
Total	49	56

The 105 participants were divided into 18 groups, in groups of four or more subject to their available communication time; each group comprises both TW and JP students. Via a two-way interactive online chat-room system, the 18 groups communicated once (one 50-minute session) per week, for five weeks in total, resulting in the collection of 90 sessions. However, it is fairly time-consuming to transcribe the audio data into texts, examine the data precision and categorize the CS used by the participants. Due to the constraints on time and the research budget, the authors selected two representative groups, Group 1 and Group 18, for further data analysis. This selection was based on the following two criteria: (a) 80% of the group discussion focused on the scheduled topics; and (b) the group members showed a higher degree of involvement.

The two selected groups, Groups 1 and 18, produced 10 sets of corpus data for our analysis. Group 1 had six participants in total: three TW students (female x3) and three JP students (female x1 and male x2). Group 18 had five participants in total: two TW students (female x2) and three JP students (male x3). This paper aims to observe the cross-cultural differences, if any, between TW and JP college students in a distance contact situation, by investigating the communication strategies employed by these students during the five-week online interaction. The weekly topics for discussion were scheduled as shown below:

Week 1: Self-introduction;
Week 2: Invitation to a sightseeing spot in your own country;
Week 3: How to thank and apologize in English, Japanese and Chinese;
Week 4: How to request and invite in English, Japanese and Chinese;
Week 5: Dos and Don'ts in your own country (social etiquette / manners).

The collected corpus data included audio and visual files (soundtracks and images) and textual messages exchanged between TW and JP students. The data were then sorted in a systematic way, as shown in Table 2. The first column in Table 2 indicates the communication mode, i.e. voice or text. The second and third columns show, respectively, the serial numbers of the conversational turns and the names of the interlocutors. The last column presents the content of the utterances.

Table 2 A sample of corpus data

Mode	No.	Speaker	Utterance
Voice	150	Helen	How long…
Voice	151	Kazuyuki	Um … half year
Text	152	Shunusuke comments	I can't speak English.
Voice	153	Helen	Oh oh oh
Voice	154	Kazuyuki	Six months.
Voice	155	Helen	Oh~
Voice	156	Kazuyuki	Yes.
Voice	157	Kitty	ろく…ろくがつ？ (Ju .. June?) hahaha
Voice	158	Helen	是這樣嗎哈哈哈哈 (is that it hahaha)
Voice	159	Kitty	ろくがつ嗎 (June?)
Voice	160	Kazuyuki	ろっかげつ。 (six months)
Voice	161	Kitty	Oh! ろっかげつ。ろっかげつ (six months, six months)
Voice	162	Kazuyuki	Yes, Yes, Yes
Voice	163	Helen	難しい。 (so difficult) Haha
Voice	164	Kazuyuki	Yes, Japanese is very difficult. I think so.
Voice	165	Taiwanese all	Hahahahaha

In the distance contact situation, both TW and JP students communicated in English, so that neither party was constrained in a relation of 'native vs non-native speakers of the target language'. In order to achieve mutual understanding and effective communication, three languages were used interchangeably by the students. As shown in Table 2, during Turns 150-156, the conversation was conducted in English. In Turn 157, TW student Kitty tried to use Japanese (ろくがつ?) (June?) to express her understanding of 'six months' that her JP group member had expressed in Turn 154. Another group member, Helen, replied in Chinese in Turn 158, and then Japanese-Chinese code-switching (ろくがつ嗎?) (June?) was seen in Kitty's utterance in Turn 159. Japanese student, Kazuyuki, then replied with the correct answer (ろっかげつ) (six months) in Japanese. Apart from the phenomenon of a plurilingual approach to achieve understanding, the interchange between voice and text communication modes could also be observed, as shown in Turns 151, 152 and 153. In addition, Turns 158 and 159 were messages exchanged between two TW members. The three features mentioned above point to the difference between a distance contact situation and a face-to-face contact situation for L2 learners. These features will be incorporated into our

CS analytical framework, and the adjustment to the CS categorization will be discussed in the following section.

3.2 Definition and categorization of communication strategies

The communication strategies that the authors consider in this paper take account of the definitions and taxonomies proposed by Tarone (1977), Faerch and Kasper (1983) and Dörnyei and Scott (1997), as reviewed in Section 2. Communication strategies are seen as 'verbal and non-verbal strategies used by language users in order to solve communicative problems or to compensate their insufficient language competence'. However, given that the paper does not focus merely on an L2 learning context but also on cross-cultural and multimode distance communication, the authors thus add a newly observed form of 'mode switching', i.e. switching between text, voice and image modes, into the analytical framework. In addition, as the study was conducted in the form of small group communication, a new 'mumbling strategy', i.e. seeking help from other group members when problems occur, was also added to our analytical framework. Below is a brief summary of the CS definition and categorization used in this paper:

CS definition: the strategies used by participants in order to solve communicative problems or difficulties, and to maintain or facilitate effective communication.

CS categorization: communication strategies broadly include *linguistic* and *non-linguistic* strategies. The linguistic strategies have two sub-categories: *direct* strategies and *interactional* strategies.

Table 3 Categorization of communication strategies adopted in the paper

(1) Linguistic Strategies	
Direct strategies:	**Interactional strategies:**
① Approximation	① Comprehension check
② Word coinage	② Asking for repetition or clarification
③ Circumlocution	③ Asking for confirmation
④ Literal translation	④ Expressing non-understanding
⑤ Code switching	⑤ Topic avoidance
⑥ Self-repair	⑥ Mumbling
⑦ Self-repeat	⑦ Feigning understanding
⑧ Message abandonment	
⑨ Fillers	
(2) Non-linguistic Strategies	
① Mode switching: visual info., text	
② Laughter	
③ Silence	

4. Data Analysis and Results

The collected corpus data were analyzed based on the CS categorization shown in Table 3. In particular, the participants in Groups 1 and 18' use of 'topic avoidance' and 'mode-switching' will be discussed and explained in detail in this section as these two strategies are the ones most frequently used.

4.1 Observed communication strategies used in the contact situations

4.1.1   Direct linguistic strategies.

Group 1 students' use of direct linguistic strategies is proportionally 39.3% in week 1 (the lowest among the five weeks), and above 50% in the following four weeks. The top three direct linguistic strategies that the Group 1 students adopted to solve their communication problems are, successively, 'code switching' (19.7%), 'filters' (17.7%) and 'self-repair' (8.9%), as shown in Table 4.

Table 4 Direct linguistic strategies used by Group 1 during the five weeks

G1 Direct strategy	Wk1	Wk2	Wk 3	Wk 4	Wk 5	Total
① Approximation	0.0%	0.6%	0.2%	0.2%	0.0%	0.2%
② Word coinage	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
③ Circumlocution	0.0%	0.2%	0.2%	0.0%	0.5%	0.2%
④ Literal translation	9.8%	7.5%	2.5%	4.8%	5.3%	6.0%
⑤ Code-switching	20.2%	15.3%	22.0%	25.0%	16.0%	19.7%
⑥ Self-repair	1.2%	13.2%	5.8%	8.2%	16.3%	8.9%
⑦ Self-repeat	0.0%	3.3%	5.2%	6.3%	0.9%	3.1%
⑧ Message abandonment	0.6%	6.3%	3.3%	5.9%	5.6%	4.3%
⑨ Fillers	7.5%	25.5%	13.9%	17.8%	24.0%	17.7%
Total	39.3%	70.2%	53.1%	68.3%	68.6%	59.9%

Code-switching may occur in two different situations. One is the speaker code-switching within his/her own turn, as shown in Turn 126 in Example 1, 'I think 敬語 is difficult'. In this turn, the JP student, Takumi, included a Japanese phrase (敬語) (honorific) in his English utterance. The other situation is where two speakers express the same things in different languages. For example, in Turn 124, Helen said 'I … I haven't learned', and then in Turn 125, Kazuyuki repeated the same information in Japanese, '習ってない'.

Example 1 Data from Group 18 in Week 3

G18	NO.	Speaker	Utterance
Voice	124	Helen	Um ... I … I haven't learned
Voice	125	Kazuyuki	Hum … 習ってない (I haven't learned)
Voice	126	Takumi	I think 敬語 (honorific) is difficult
Voice	127	kazuyuki	Very difficult

The use of linguistic strategy 'filters' is illustrated in Example 2, such as 'um' in Turns 124 and 127, as well as 'Ok … let me think about' in Turn 126. The purpose of using this strategy is to adjust the speech rhythm, to gain extra time to search for appropriate expressions, to indicate hesitation or uncertainty, or to hold the conversation floor.

Example 2 Data from Group 18 in Week 2

G18	NO.	Speaker	Utterance
Voice	124	Kitty	Um … 台湾はいろいろな … 有名な …料理がありま す。 (Taiwan has a variety of … famous … cuisine)
Voice	125	Shunsuke	例えば (for example)… For example?
Voice	126	Kitty	Ok … let me think about…
Voice	127	Kitty	Um … um…

In Example 3, TW student Lillian, in Turn 104, mentioned the escalators in the Mass Rapid Transit system in Taipei. We can see that she made several attempts to modify what she intended to express, from 'elevator', 'The… ', 'ele… ' to the final correct word 'escalator'. The linguistic strategy of 'self-repair' is shown in the speaker being aware of her own mistake and searching for the correct expression.

Example 3 Data from Group 1 in Week 5

G18	No.	Speaker	Utterance
Voice	104	Lillian	In the train or MRT station, we have the elevator. The … how to say … ele、escalator
Voice	105	Sophia	エスカレーター！(escalator)

The Group 18 students' use of direct linguistic strategies is proportionally 48.9% in week 1, the highest among the five weeks, which contrast with Group 1, and approximately 40% for the following four weeks. In addition, with a result not dissimilar to Group 1, the top three direct linguistic strategies that Group 18 students adopted to solve their communication problems are, successively, 'code-switching'

(24.4%), 'filters' (7%) and 'self-repair' (4%), as shown in Table 5.

Table 5 Direct linguistic strategies used by Group 18 during the five weeks

G18 Direct strategy	Wk 1	Wk 2	Wk 3	Wk 4	Wk 5	Total
① Approximation	0.4%	0.0%	0.6%	0.2%	0.0%	0.2%
② Word coinage	0.0%	0.1%	0.4%	0.1%	0.0%	0.1%
③ Circumlocution	0.1%	0.0%	0.7%	0.2%	0.2%	0.2%
④ Literal translation	1.4%	0.8%	3.8%	1.4%	1.8%	1.8%
⑤ Code switching	23.9%	24.6%	23.8%	25.4%	24.2%	24.4%
⑥ Self-repair	4.5%	2.2%	3.3%	3.6%	6.3%	4.0%
⑦ Self-repeat	1.2%	1.6%	0.0%	3.2%	1.5%	1.5%
⑧ Message abandonment	4.1%	1.3%	1.5%	2.2%	3.8%	2.6%
⑨ Fillers	13.4%	4.7%	5.0%	5.3%	6.7%	7.0%
Total	48.9%	35.3%	39.0%	41.5%	44.5%	41.8%

Although Groups 1 and 18 show different patterns in their communication modes and their overall volumes of conversational turns, both groups tend to use similar direct linguistic strategies to facilitate their communication. The higher proportion of 'code-switching' practice accords with many researchers' (Firth & Wagner, l997; Poulisse, 1997) results regarding foreign language communication or contact situation studies. For example, 'code-switching' helps to solve the problem of vocabulary insufficiency (lexical compensatory strategy), allowing speakers to communicate complex messages, preserve conversational turns, and not impede interaction. Besides, from the viewpoint of coordination theory (Legenhausen, 1991; Macaro, 1997; Ogane, 1997), switching to their partners' native language is a way to show friendliness or recognition. It also shows the interlocutors being considerate to their partners of lower language proficiency, by using their native language to help them understand and enhance their mutual involvement in conversation. In our study, although the main language used for communication is English, the participants are not restricted to English. At their discretion they can speak in Japanese or Chinese whenever they see a need to foster effective communication. Therefore, we may see three-language code-switching in the study, i.e. English-Japanese, English-Chinese, and/or Japanese-Chinese.

As illustrated in Example 1, we see (English-Japanese) code-switching in a speaker's individual turn or within different speakers' conversational turns. In addition, as JP and TW students are learning each other's language, we can also observe English-Chinese and Japanese-Chinese code-switching examples. As shown in Example 4 below, in Turn 73, Helen asked her JP members in English via text about the current temperature in Japan. JP student Kazuyuki replied, also using text mode, 'wu℃' in Chinese ('5 degrees

Celsius', 'wu' is the sound of five in Chinese). And then, all the students repeated '5 度'
(5 degrees Celsius) in Chinese. In Turn 81, Helen made a comment in Japanese about
the low temperature, '寒いです' ('very cold').

Example 4 Data from Group 18 in Week 4

G18	No.	Speaker	Utterance
Voice	68.	Helen	So, what is the temperature in Japan?
Voice	69	Japanese all	Five
Voice	70	Japanese all	Five
Voice	71	Helen	Huh?
Voice	72	All	Haha
Text	73	Helen comments	and you?
Text	74	Kazuyuki comments	wu℃
Text	75	Takumi comments	5
Voice	76	Helen	5 度?!
Voice	77	Takumi	5 度?!
Voice	78	Japanese all	5 5 5
Voice	79	Taiwanese all	Haha
Text	80	Helen comments	!!!
Voice	81	Helen	寒いです (very cold)
Voice	82	Japanese all	寒い 寒い (very cold very cold)

4.1.2   Interactional linguistic strategies.

Group 1 students' use of interactional linguistic strategies is proportionally 32.9% in
week 1 (the highest among the five weeks) and approximately 10% to 15% for the
following four weeks. If we observe in more detail, we see that a 'topic-avoidance'
strategy is frequently used throughout the five weeks, at 6.9% on average. A second
frequently-used interactional strategy is 'asking for confirmation', at 3.7% on average.
Both strategies share a common feature, i.e. their usage in week 1 is much higher than
in the other four weeks, as shown in Table 6.

Table 6 Interactional linguistic strategies used by Group 1 during the five weeks

G1 Interactional strategies	Wk1	Wk2	Wk 3	Wk 4	Wk 5	Total
① Comprehension check	1.2%	0.4%	0.4%	0.7%	1.6%	0.9%
② Asking for repetition or clarification	1.2%	1.3%	2.5%	0.6%	0.5%	1.2%
③ Asking for confirmation	8.1%	1.9%	3.1%	3.0%	2.3%	3.7%
④ Expressing non-understanding	1.2%	1.3%	2.3%	0.6%	0.5%	1.2%

⑤ Topic avoidance	19.7%	3.3%	3.9%	4.8%	2.8%	6.9%
⑥ Mumbling	1.7%	1.0%	3.3%	0.7%	1.9%	1.7%
⑦ Feigning understanding	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%
Total	32.9%	9.2%	15.4%	10.6%	9.5%	15.5%

It is not difficult to understand why the two strategies, 'topic avoidance' and 'asking for confirmation', are frequently used in week 1. As week 1 is the time when TW and JP students make their first contact, they may try to understand one another and keep the conversation flowing by constantly changing topics to confirm what information can be shared, and also attempt to establish friendly and harmonious contact situations.

Below is an example of the 'topic avoidance' strategy used by the students. In Example 5, Japanese student Kazuyuki states in Turn 123, 'I can't understand' and then repeats 'Chi shi me' in Turn 127, trying to imitate the Chinese sound he heard in Turn 118. It is observed that the TW students realize that their JP partner could not understand the topic question ('What is your favourite food?' in Turn 118) and thus decide to change the conversation topic. As shown in Turn 128, TW student Helen raises another conversation topic by asking, 'How long have you learned Chinese?'

Example 5 Topic Avoidance strategy

Type	No.	Speaker	Utterance
Voice	118	Kitty	你喜歡吃什麼? (What do you like to eat?)
Voice	119	Kazuyuki	對 (Yes)
Voice	120	Japanese all	Hahahahahahahaha
Voice	121	Kitty	Hahahaha
Voice	122	Helen	What?
Voice	123	Kazuyuki	I … I can't understand.
Voice	124	Kitty	Hahahaha
Voice	125	Helen	Oh~so…
Voice	126	Shunsuke	＃＃＃＃＃＃
Voice	127	Kazuyuki	Chi shi me? Chi shi me?
Voice	128	Helen	How long have u learned Chinese? How long?
Voice	129	Kazuyuki	How long?

Group 18 students' use of interactional linguistic strategies, in proportional terms, is 40% in week 3, the highest among the five weeks, and approximately 30% for the other four weeks. If we observe in more detail, we see that the 'mumbling' strategy is frequently used throughout the five weeks, with an average usage of 15.7%. A second frequently-used interactional strategy, as in Group 1, is 'asking for confirmation', with an average of 5% usage. In addition, Group 18 students' use of 'expressing non-

understanding' and 'asking for repetition or clarification' strategies is higher than the Group 1 students. By contrast, a 'topic avoidance' strategy is used often in Group 1, but this strategy is ranked number five in Group 18, with an average of 3.2% usage. The results are shown in Table 7.

Table 7 Interactional linguistic strategies used by Group 18 during the five weeks

G18 Interactional strategy	Wk1	Wk2	Wk 3	Wk 4	Wk 5	Total
① Comprehension check	0.1%	0.0%	0.6%	0.2%	0.1%	0.2%
② Asking for repetition or clarification	3.6%	3.1%	6.2%	2.5%	4.7%	4.0%
③ Asking for confirmation	5.8%	6.1%	7.8%	2.7%	2.4%	5.0%
④ Expressing non-understanding	4.2%	3.6%	6.1%	2.7%	5.1%	4.3%
⑤ Topic avoidance	4.4%	2.2%	2.8%	2.5%	3.9%	3.2%
⑥ Mumbling	12.5%	13.8%	16.5%	15.8%	20.0%	15.7%
⑦ Feigning understanding	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%
Total	30.9%	28.7%	40.0%	26.6%	36.2%	32.5%

From Tables 6 and 7 above, we see the difference in the use of interactional linguistic strategies between the Group 1 and Group 18 students. Instead of changing conversation topics easily, Group 18 students tend to use a 'mumbling' strategy, i.e. seeking help from other group members when problems occur. When they encounter a comprehension problem or have difficulty in answering questions, they first consult with their own group members before they reply, and try to maintain the conversation topic.

Below is an example of the 'mumbling' strategy used by the students. As shown in Example 6, the JP and TW students repeat the same question, 'Where?', in Turns 119 and 120. The JP students realize that they are unable to communicate their message clearly, thus they start to discuss with the other Japanese members in their own native language, in an attempt to solve the communication problem encountered.

Example 6 Mumbling strategy

Type	No.	Speaker	Utterance
Voice	119	Japanese all	Where? Where?
Voice	120	Helen	Where?
Voice	121	Japanese all	Ah?
Voice	122	Japanese	違う… (No)

Voice	123		うん？なんだ？何の話してんだ？ (What? What was she talking about?)
Voice	124		うん、where's て言ってた (She said where's)
Voice	125		いやそーゆー問題じゃない。 (No. That's not her question.)
Text	126	Kitty comments	today's topic is?
Text	127	Japanese	today's topic is…

4.1.3 Non-linguistic strategies.

The overall usage of non-linguistic strategies in Group 1 is approximately 24%, which accounts for a quarter of all the communication strategies. Among the three non-linguistic strategies, 'mode-switching' is frequently used throughout the five weeks, with an average usage of 18.8% (see Table 8).

Table 8 Non-linguistic strategies used by Group 1 during the five weeks

G1 Non-linguistic Strategy	Wk1	Wk2	Wk 3	Wk 4	Wk 5	Total
① Mode-switching	20.8%	14.4%	22.0%	17.8%	19.1%	18.8%
② Laughter	6.9%	4.4%	9.5%	3.3%	2.8%	5.4%
③ Silence	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Total	27.7%	18.8%	31.5%	21.2%	21.9%	24.2%

The overall usage of non-linguistic strategies in Group 18 is similar to Group 1, at approximately 26%, which also accounts for a quarter of all the communication strategies. In addition, the use of a 'mode-switching' strategy in Group 18 is 16.4%, which is similar to, but slightly lower than, its usage in Group 1 (see Table 9).

Table 9 Non-linguistic strategies used by Group 18 during the five weeks

G18 Non-linguistic Strategy	Wk1	Wk2	Wk 3	Wk 4	Wk 5	Total
① Mode-switching	8.3%	24.0%	13.0%	24.9%	11.8%	16.4%
② Laughter	11.9%	12.0%	8.0%	7.0%	7.5%	9.3%
③ Silence	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Total	20.2%	36.0%	21.0%	31.9%	19.3%	25.7%

The frequent use of a 'mode-switching' strategy indicates that the TW and JP students are strategically using computer facilities to compensate for their insufficient linguistic communication competence in an attempt to communicate effectively and maintain conversational fluency. When one party cannot understand what the other party intends to communicate, they normally try to use a different approach to convey their intended message. The most common approach is to try a textual message in place of oral communication, or to use other visual aids (such as pictures, photos etc.) to help their explanation.

Example 7 below is an instance of 'mode-switching'. In Turn 128, TW student Helen asks her JP group members the question: 'How long have u learned Chinese? How long?' As the JP student repeats the last two words of the question, 'How long?', the TW students realize that their JP group member did not understand the question, and thus try to switch to text mode. Hence, in Turn 134, TW student Kitty repeats the same question via a textual message.

Example 7 Mode-switching strategy

Type	No.	Speaker	Utterance
Voice	128	Helen	How long have u learned Chinese? How long?
Voice	129	Kazuyuki	How long?
Voice	130	Japanese	日本工作人員跟學生說話 (A Japanese staff member is talking to students)
Voice	131	Helen	欸我們可以用那個嗎 (Can we use that?) 可以用板子嗎? (Can we use the board?)
Voice	132	Helen	是…是要怎麼按阿 (Yes … How to press?)
Voice	133	Helen	喔喔喔喔~~ (ohohoh)
Text	134	Kitty comments	How long do you learn Chinese?
Voice	135	Helen	How long have you learn Chinese...
Voice	136	Japanese all	hahaha

4.2 TW vs JP communication strategies comparison

Observing the overall CSs that the participants used in the study, we see that the TW and JP students in Groups 1 and 18 show different patterns. First of all, as shown in Table 10 (see also Table 12) in Group 1, the TW students present higher average percentages for adopting each type of CS, as compared to their JP group members. Moreover, due to the fact that the TW and JP students in Group 1 prefer text mode to

oral communication, they apply fewer interactional linguistic strategies; both parties have an average usage of less than 10% (whereas the JP students in particular have an average of less than 6%). They tend to use direct linguistic strategies to solve their communication problems. The TW students' have an average usage of 34.9% and the JP students 25.4%. Their respective use of direct strategies accounts for a quarter of all communication strategies.

Table 10 Group 1 TW-JP students' communication strategies during the five weeks

CS Weeks	Direct Linguistic Strategies		Interactional Linguistic Strategies		Non-linguistic Strategies	
	TW	JP	TW	JP	TW	JP
Wk 1	17.3%	22.0%	22.0%	11.0%	14.5%	13.3%
Wk 2	40.8%	31.2%	4.8%	4.4%	10.0%	8.8%
Wk 3	35.1%	18.0%	9.7%	5.8%	21.4%	10.0%
Wk 4	41.7%	26.5%	7.4%	3.2%	12.1%	9.1%
Wk 5	39.5%	29.1%	5.0%	4.0%	10.0%	11.9%
Avg.	34.9%	25.4%	9.8%	5.7%	13.6%	10.6%

In contrast to Group 1, the TW students in Group 18 present lower average percentages for adopting each CS type, as compared to their JP group members (see Table 11). Unlike the Group 1 participants, the TW and JP students in Group 18 do not particularly favour text mode communication. Therefore, both the TW and JP students in this group use the three types of CS evenly. In terms of direct linguistic strategies, the TW students have an average usage of 18%, the JP students 23.9%. In terms of interactional linguistic strategies, the TW students have an average usage of 12.9%, the JP students 19.6%. In terms of non-linguistic strategies, the TW students have an average usage 12.5%, the JP students 13.2% (see Table 11). The results show variation between the two groups, despite the fact that the strategies are commonly used in their interactions.

Table 11 Group 18 TW-JP students' communication strategies during the five weeks

CS Weeks	Direct Linguistic Strategies		Interactional Linguistic Strategies		Non-linguistic Strategies	
	TW	JP	TW	JP	TW	JP
Wk 1	27.6%	21.3%	16.8%	14.1%	11.0%	9.2%
Wk 2	14.4%	20.9%	10.3%	18.4%	17.3%	18.6%
Wk 3	10.7%	28.4%	9.7%	30.3%	7.3%	13.7%
Wk 4	16.7%	24.9%	10.1%	16.4%	16.4%	15.5%
Wk 5	20.6%	23.8%	17.6%	18.6%	10.5%	8.8%
Avg.	18.0%	23.9%	12.9%	19.6%	12.5%	13.2%

Nonetheless, there are some common features in terms of CS application between Groups 1 and 18. Neither TW nor JP students show any drastic weekly increase or decrease in their CS application. Rather, over the five weeks, their overall use of CS varies due to the influence of weekly topics, e.g. college life, honorific or speech acts. For example, the TW and JP students present very different tendencies in using communication strategies in weeks 3 and 4, as highlighted in Table 12 for ease of observation. For group 1 in week 3, the TW students have an average CS usage of 66.2%, whereas the JP students have an average of only 33.8%; and in week 4, the TW students have an average CS usage of 61.2%, whereas the JP students have an average of only 38.8%. For group 18 in week 3, in contrast to Group 1, the TW students have an average CS usage of only 27.7%, whereas the JP students have a higher average of 72.4%.

Table 12   Groups 1 and 18 TW-JP students' overall weekly CS application

Overall CS \ Week	Group 1 TW	Group 1 JP	Group 18 TW	Group 18 JP
Wk 1	53.8%	46.3%	55.4%	44.6%
Wk 2	55.6%	44.4%	42.0%	57.9%
Wk 3	66.2%	33.8%	27.7%	72.4%
Wk 4	61.2%	38.8%	43.2%	56.8%
Wk 5	54.5%	45.0%	48.7%	51.2%
Avg.	58.3%	41.7%	43.4%	56.6%

The very different tendencies in using communication strategies between the TW and JP students may well be attributed to the difficulty of the topics scheduled in weeks 3, 'appreciation and apology', and 4, 'request and invitation'. The TW and JP students are sophomores and freshmen at university and they have not received proper linguistic training in these social topics. For students who have not studied pragmatics or speech acts theory, the topics in week 3 and week 4 could be difficult, as compared to those in the other three weeks. They may touch on some topic-related linguistic expressions at superficial level, but would be unable to take into account sociocultural differences, different situations or interpersonal relationships for an in-depth discussion. Due to the difficult conversational subject matter, e.g. speech acts or politeness, the students' use of communication strategies thus shows huge discrepancies.

All in all, it is suggested that the factors that influence TW and JP students' use of CSs are mainly due to their different communication approaches and the difficulty of the

conversation topics. Thus, we may presume that the participants' interactional attitudes, as well as their ability to exchange or deliver messages, would affect their use of CS. The nationality of the participants and their linguistic competence in the target language become secondary factors that influence CS usage.

5. Concluding Remarks

This paper has analyzed the communication strategies used in a cross-cultural distance contact situation. The study shows the similarities and differences in terms of the strategies used by TW and JP students. The students from both parties tend to use direct strategies to solve their communication problems. Nevertheless, the TW students use various communicative strategies equally, as compared to the JP students' obvious tendency to choose certain strategies. Besides, as in the form of small group communication, it is observed that a 'mumbling strategy' is often used by the TW and JP participants, which is very different from a one-to-one interaction pattern. We have also seen that, due to the use of a multimedia chat-rooms system, students frequently employed a 'mode switching' strategy, an approach that is particularly noted in this paper.

When problems arise during cross-cultural communication, they should not be completely attributed to learners' insufficient language competence. There are other possible factors that should be taken into account. For example, the language learners may not have shared knowledge regarding a particular topic, or they might have different habits or characteristics (e.g. longer silence in Japanese students' interaction) when interacting with other group members. Besides, since distance communication relies heavily on the Internet, when there is a listening comprehension or understanding issue, whether learners are able to use computer facilities effectively (e.g. switching between voice and image modes) could be another important factor that impedes or helps communication. The participants learning from a cross-cultural distance contact situation should employ multiple languages and various modes to facilitate effective communication and mutual understanding. Thus, the strategies for distance communication should be somewhat different from the strategies for more traditional face-to-face interaction. The application of cross-cultural communication strategies to distance communication is a new challenge to be tackled, not only for language learners, but also for teachers and researchers.

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