

# COMMUNICATION STRATEGY TRAINING: A STEP TO STRATEGIC COMPETENCE IN L2 INTERACTION

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## บทคัดย่อ

การสอนภาษาแบบสื่อสารไม่ควรจะมุ่งเน้นเพียงการสอนภาษาที่ผู้เรียนจำเป็นต้องใช้ในการสื่อสารเท่านั้น แต่ควรจะเน้นกลยุทธ์การสื่อสารเพื่อจัดการปฏิสัมพันธ์ในภาษาอังกฤษด้วยการสอนกลยุทธ์ที่ชัดเจนเป็นวิธีการที่ถือว่ามีประสิทธิภาพในการเพิ่มความตระหนักของผู้เรียนและทำให้ผู้เรียนมีสมรรถนะทางกลยุทธ์ในการแก้ปัญหาปฏิสัมพันธ์และปรับปรุงการเรียนของตนเอง งานวิจัยนี้เสนอคำจำกัดความของกลยุทธ์การสื่อสาร (CSs) ตามด้วยคำอธิบายผลสัมฤทธิ์ของกลยุทธ์การสื่อสารและกลยุทธ์การหาเวลา เพื่อช่วยผู้สอนฝึกผู้เรียนให้รู้จักวิธีใช้กลยุทธ์การสื่อสาร งานวิจัยนี้ชี้ให้เห็นถึงความจำเป็นในการกระตุ้นผู้เรียนให้ตระหนักถึงการใช้กลยุทธ์การสื่อสาร และบทบาทที่สำคัญของผู้สอนในฐานะเป็นต้นแบบที่ดีในการใช้กลยุทธ์การสื่อสาร ในขณะที่เดียวกัน ผู้วิจัยได้เพิ่มเติมด้วยว่าผู้เรียนจำเป็นต้องใช้เครื่องมือทางภาษาศาสตร์เพื่อช่วยในการใช้กลยุทธ์การสื่อสารและจำเป็นต้องมีโอกาสในการฝึกฝน

## Abstract

Communicative language teaching should not just aim to teach learners the language they need in communication, but also the communication strategies to manage interaction in English. Explicit strategy instruction is acknowledged to be effective in raising learners' awareness and equipping them with the strategic competence to solve interaction difficulties and improve their performance. This paper first presents the definition of communication strategies (CSs), followed by the description of CSs achievement strategies and time gaining strategies. To help teachers train their learners how to use CSs, the paper points out the necessity of arousing learners' awareness of using CSs, and the crucial role of teachers as good examples of using CSs. Meanwhile, the researcher also elaborates that learners' need linguistic devices to pave the way for using CSs and the opportunities to practice.

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## INTRODUCTION

The domination of communicative language teaching is based on the belief that language is a system for the expression of meaning and learning is expected to be promoted through the conduction of activities which involve real communication (Nunan 1999). That is to say, teachers should try to ensure that learners can practise the target language not only in a controlled way with accuracy concerned, but also in purposeful communication with fluency involved (Hedge 2000). No doubt, the precious interaction time in class is supposed to be devoted to L2 practice.

However, spontaneous communication can be very problematic in L2 classroom due to the fact that it is hard to control the linguistic knowledge. Learners always meet difficulties in expressing themselves freely. They stumble and talk in a very low speed to gain time for the search of suitable expressions. Even learners themselves are impatient and finally revert to their L1 from time to time during the process of interaction, which is acknowledged as a big problem (Ur 1981, 1996; Gower, Phillips & Walters 1995; Harmer 2001). In a monolingual foreign language class, sometimes it's quite challenging to push learners to speak L2 when it is time for L2 practice (Gower, Phillips & Walters 1995).

The use of communication strategies (CSs) is suggested as a solution to help learners achieve their communication goals (Hedge 2000; McDonough 2006). CSs are 'particularly useful when interlocutors meet with some difficulty of expression or communication' (Hughes 2002: 91). And these strategies are seen as 'ways of continuing a conversation and conveying meaning'

(Bailey 2005: 21). Therefore, it is argued that communicative language teaching should not just aim to teach learners the language they need in communication, but also the CSs to manage interaction in L2 (McDonough 2006).

## DEFINITION OF CSs

Canale and Swain (1980: 30) assert that strategic competence is composed of 'mastery of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient competence'. Nevertheless, Canale (1983: 10) extends the view of strategic competence and claims that the alternative purpose of adopting CSs can also be 'to enhance the effectiveness of communication'. In other words, strategic competence and the functions of CSs are viewed in a broader sense.

For L2 learners, however, it is very crucial for them to firstly get their meaning across when the gap arises between the communication intention and the limited linguistic resources. So, this paper follows the original view and defines CSs accordingly from the interactional view as 'verbal and nonverbal devices used to overcome communication problems related to interlanguage deficiencies in interaction'.

In terms of the communication problems that CSs aim to reduce or solve, Dörnyei and Scott (1997) summarize and classify them into four types mentioned by researchers (e.g. Dörnyei 1995; Tarone and Yule 1987; Willems 1987). The first type is resource deficits, which refer to the gaps between the L2 speakers' linguistic knowledge

and their intention in conveying meaning; the second type is own-performance problems involving the L2 speakers' own incorrect or partly correct expression; the third type is other-performance problems including the interlocutor's speech problems, either because the expression is incorrect or partly incorrect or because it causes understanding difficulty; the last type is named as processing time pressure caused by the nature of fluent communication, which allows little time for speakers to search for ways to express themselves. To sum up, L2 learners will encounter different problems in interaction and need to adopt different strategies flexibly and automatically to overcome them and maintain the flow of communication.

## **TYPES OF CSs FOR TRAINING**

When it comes to the types of CSs, taxonomies offered by researchers vary to some degree. However, Bialystok claims,

The variety of taxonomies proposed in the literature differs primarily in terminology and overall categorizing principle rather than in the substance of the specific strategies. If we ignore, then, differences in the structure of the taxonomies by abolishing the various overall categories, then a core group of specific strategies that appear consistently across the taxonomies clearly emerges.

(Bialystok 1990: 61, cited in Dörnyei 1995: 57)

Therefore, a list of CSs for training have

been collected and adapted based on those produced by researchers such as Tarone (1977, cited in Ellis 1994: 397), Færch and Kasper (1983), Bialystok (1983), Dörnyei and Scott (1997). Since the training aims to help learners solve their communication problems and avoid their L1 use, the reduction strategies such as message abandonment and L1-based strategies like code-switching and literal translation are excluded. So, the following types of CSs are recommended for training:

1. *Achievement strategies*: strategies that are adopted to achieve the goals to convey meaning.

1) Paraphrase: the use of exemplification, synonym, antonym or description and analysis of the properties of the target object or action to explain the meaning. Learners are allowed to call a laptop creatively a mobile computer.

2) Word formation: the use of supposed rules such as prefixes, suffixes and roots to produce existing L2 words. It's natural for learners to produce some words which may not exist in the target language in natural interaction. However, learners should be informed of the exceptions when they are trained according to their proficiency. For instance, the suffix 'er' is added to a verb to indicate a person that does like 'teach - teacher'. Regarding the verb 'operate', the case is changed and the letter 'e' should be deleted and the suffix 'or' should be added.

3) Output modification: the rephrase, restructuring or repair of the utterance. Learners need to monitor their own utterance and try to get their meaning across easily. They rephrase their utterance through paraphrase for further explanation; they

abandon the original verbal plan if they realize there is language difficulty and revert to an alternative plan through restructuring; they monitor and correct their own mistakes consciously.

4) Mutual assistance: the offer of help and the appealing for assistance when there are expression difficulties. Learners should make efforts to help each other search for or modify the expression and utterance.

5) Meaning negotiation: the asking for repetition, clarification, or confirmation to get the meaning.

6) Non-linguistic strategies: the description of meaning nonverbally relying on miming, pictures or real objects. It should be made clear that non-linguistic strategies are normally accompanied by verbal strategies.

2. *Time-gaining strategies*: strategies that help learners remain in the conversation and gain time to think for the solution of the communication difficulties.

1) Using fillers: using gambits to fill pauses and to gain time in order to keep the communication channel open and maintain discourse at times of difficulty.

2) Repetition: the repetition of something the interlocutor said or the learners said themselves to gain time.

## TEACHABILITY OF CSs

As learners try to express themselves in the target language in interaction, certainly teachers can respond to learners' appeal for help. However, if learners are offered training in how to cope with problems by themselves, then learners are really trained about

how to handle the communication flexibly. Chen (1990) also suggests that the aim to increase learners' strategic competence and their ability to use proper CSs for smooth interaction can be achieved through guidance. Meanwhile, Chen (1990: 180) emphasizes that the CSs training is 'a more practical and economical way to develop learners' communicative competence especially in the formal classroom setting, and the acquisition-poor environment'. The question arising is whether CSs can be trained.

Tarone and Yule (1989: 114) claim '...for the purpose of developing communication strategies, we feel that a more focused and even explicitly didactic approach is possible'. Meanwhile, explicit strategy instruction is acknowledged to be effective in raising learners' awareness and equipping them with the strategic competence to solve interaction difficulties and improve their performance (see Dörnyei 1995; Nakatani 2005). The experiment conducted by Dörnyei (1995) focuses on the teachability of CSs and shows that the quality and quantity of the learners' use of at least some CSs can be developed through focused instruction. Additionally, the study carried out by Nakatani (2005) examines the effects of awareness-raising training on CSs and indicates that learners' improvement in oral communication ability is partly due to an increased general awareness of CSs and to the use of specific CSs to solve interactional difficulties. It is safe to draw the conclusion that explicit instruction of CSs shows promising results and should be incorporated in daily teaching.

## **PROCEDURES AND TECHNIQUES OF TEACHING CSs**

It is apparent that there is the possibility and necessity to train certain CSs and it is crucial to know how to conduct the instruction. It is not common, nevertheless, to find language teaching materials containing the content about how to equip learners with the use of CSs (Hedge 2000). As a teacher involved in the L2 classroom situation, I propose the following interrelated procedures and related techniques based on my own teaching experience and those produced by researchers (see, Dörnyei 1995; Dörnyei and Thurrell 1991; Nakatani 2005):

To begin with, learners should be given opportunities to be aware of the nature and communicative potential of CSs through making comparison between the expression of their interlanguage and the preferred target language, guessing games when CSs are deliberately adopted to get meaning across, reflection and evaluation on their own or others' performance. The process can help learners conscious of strategies already in their repertoire, sensitize them to the appropriate situations for certain CSs, and make them realize that these CSs can really help them out if flexibly applied to their performance.

Secondly, teachers should set good examples to use various CSs for avoiding L1 use in class and create relaxed environment to encourage learners to take risks in CSs

use. Teachers are vivid models for learners and their behavior will play a great role in building the dynamics of the class. Additionally, teachers should treat error correction wisely to avoid negative effects such as learners' frustration caused by being corrected too frequently.

Thirdly, learners should be equipped with linguistic devices for certain CSs to verbalize them. For instance, when learners wish to use fillers to buy time, they should have list of common fillers to come in handy such as: as a matter of fact, how shall I put it, what I have in mind is... Direct presentation about the basic core vocabulary and structures and decomposition of models of CSs use are desirable techniques. Regarding decomposition, learners are required to find out content words and words and structures for certain CSs. Learners are expected to find the attributive clause structure 'it's a kind of thing that are used to...' in the paraphrase model 'it's a kind of thing that are used to clean the floor by suction'.

Last but not least, the opportunities for practice in strategy use should be incorporated into daily teaching, especially for learners who usually only use the target language in classroom. This is because 'CSs can only fulfill their function as immediate first aid devices if their use has reached an automatic stage' (Dörnyei 1995: 64). So, the specific focused practice does not mean the end of CSs practice and the mastery of the use of CSs.

## **CONCLUSION**

The emphasis on the learning process has lead to the study on communication strategies. Studies have revealed that learners

can manage to convey their meanings and reach their communication goals by using CSs. Therefore, the difficulty to help learners express themselves freely without using L1 could be overcome by communication strategy training. Meanwhile, learners should also be reminded it is crucial for them to be active in helping each other to overcome expression obstacles.

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