



# **Intercultural Communication Strategies**

by Luciano Mariani

# INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES: HELPING STUDENTS COPE WITH ORAL INTERACTION

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## **Introduction**

Learners and users of a second or foreign language (L2) are bound to face problems due to gaps in their linguistic, communicative and intercultural competence, i.e. gaps between what they would like to understand and express and the limitations of their present level of L2 knowledge (or interlanguage stage). The present paper, after describing the kinds of problems that can be encountered in communication, will argue that a specific type of strategies (intercultural communication strategies) can help both learners and users of an L2 cope with the demands of intercultural oral interaction, and will suggest a few guidelines for pedagogical intervention.

## **Reduction vs achievement strategies**

When a problem arises in using an L2, there are two basic ways to face it: on the one hand, we can avoid the problem by adopting a *reduction* strategy: we keep our message within our communicative resources, avoiding the risk of failure and adjusting our ends to our means - in this way we change our goal. On the other hand, we can decide to keep our goal but develop an alternative plan: we adopt an *achievement* strategy, taking the risk and expanding our communicative resources – in this way we adjust our means to our ends.

*Reduction* strategies can affect the *content* of messages: for example, we can change the topic of conversation, we can abandon our message half-way through, we can replace the original meaning we wished to express with a simpler expression. (Incidentally, the reason why a non-native speaker can sometimes sound vague is possibly the fact that he or she is replacing the original meaning, the original goal, with a more straightforward message). Reduction strategies can also affect *modality* (for example we may miss out markers of politeness) or whole speech acts: for instance, if we cannot use pre-closings in ending a conversation (like “Well, it was nice to meet you” , or “I’m afraid I must go now”), we may simply content ourselves with a simple “Goodbye”, which may make us sound abrupt or even rude.

Teachers and educators are usually more interested in *achievement* strategies, because these invite learners to go beyond their “comfort zone”, to stretch their resources, to make the best possible use of the present stage of their interlanguage level - in turn this is likely to widen their resources, to actively expand their (limited) competence, and last but not least, to develop a positive attitude, by not “giving up” and by getting used to taking risks and tolerating language anxiety.

To illustrate the difference in approach that reduction and achievement strategies imply in learners’ linguistic behaviour, let us refer to one of the most obvious limitations that learners must face, the one at the *lexical* level: learners may simply not know or be able to recall the exact word to use to refer to an entity. Apart from abandoning the message, they can *borrow* words from their L1 or another L2 that they know (“code-switching”); they can “*foreignize*” an L1 word pronouncing it as if it belonged to the L2, or even adjusting its form to take account of typical morphological features of the L2. Or they could fall back on *literal translation* from the L1, which obviously exposes them to all the risks of using “false friends” with all the ensuing consequences.

The main factor which distinguishes achievement strategies is perhaps, as we have already pointed out, the fact of being based on the learners’ developing interlanguage system. Still referring to problems at the lexical level, learners could resort to such strategies as *generalization*: if you don’t know a word, you can fall back on general words, like *thing* or *stuff*; you can use *superordinates*, like *flower* instead of *daffodil*; you can use *synonyms* and *antonyms*, like *not deep* to mean *shallow*; you can use *examples* instead of the general category, like *shirts, jeans, jackets, skirts* ... instead of *clothes*.

Another area of strategies which learners and users of an L2 frequently resort to is *paraphrase*, which includes various devices such as *approximation*, *circumlocution*, and, generally speaking, the use of *definitions* and *descriptions*. General words, followed by a relative clause, are a common way to express meanings: for example, you can say *It's the person who cuts your hair* instead of *hairdresser*; *it's a thing which ... it's when ... it's where ...* In the same way, you can mention various features of the person, object or entity in question, basing your definition or description on such useful phrases as *in the shape of ... it's the colour of ... it's made of ... it's part of ... it is used to/for ...*, emphasizing, in each case, different qualities such the shape, the colour, the material, the structure, the function, etc. of the entity.

### **From compensation to enhancement**

Another series of achievement strategies goes beyond the need to express the meaning of single words and phrases and widens to the *discourse* level. Here the role and status of strategies become more complex and certainly more open to discussion and argument. We know that L2 learners must face problems not just at the *linguistic* level (the lexical level, which we have just focused our attention on, but grammatical, phonological and semantic levels as well), but also, and more importantly, at the higher sociolinguistic and pragmatic levels. These are perhaps the most difficult challenges for an L2 learner, since she/he is faced with the need to understand and express meanings and intentions interacting with an interlocutor who, in many cases, does not share the learner's cultural background knowledge. While mistakes at the linguistic level are usually more readily accepted by native speakers, who are more ready to "make allowances" for a learner's difficulties in this respect, misunderstandings at the pragmatic level can be more serious, as they can be interpreted as "bad manners" or lack of respect. If you interrupt at the wrong time, if you use non-verbal messages which convey a different meaning from what you originally intended, if you choose a topic which can cause embarrassment in your interlocutor's culture, if you say or do something which is misinterpreted ... then the flow of communication can seriously suffer.

So if we take into consideration the possible use of strategies in all these areas, we must be aware of the fact that they take on an additional role: they should not just be seen as *problem-solving behaviour*, but also, and more importantly, as *communication enhancers* – in other words, the use of strategies at the sociolinguistic and pragmatic levels, and even more so in intercultural encounters, should aim at improving the effectiveness of communication *in a given sociocultural context*.

Just to mention a few basic areas where strategies could play a useful role at the pragmatic/discourse level, let us consider the following:

- *strategies for negotiating meanings*: here the important consideration to make is that interlocutors are jointly responsible for the successful completion of the communicative act. The burden of understanding and expressing oneself is in the hands of both parties – conversation is a cooperative enterprise, where both parties are called upon to play an active role. On the one hand, I should be prepared to ask for help, by using both verbal (e.g. *Sorry, I can't follow you there.*) and non-verbal (e.g. eye contact, facial expressions, gestures ...) means. I also need to check that I have understood (e.g. *Does that mean that ...?*) and my interlocutor has understood me (*Do you see what I mean? Did you get that?*). I may need to ask my interlocutor to repeat, to speak more slowly, to explain, clarify, give an example (*What exactly do you mean by ...?*), to supply a missing L2 element (*What's the word for ...?*). I may also need a confirmation of what I have just said (*Is it correct to say ...?*), and so on. On the other hand, however, on the basis of what might be called a *cooperative principle*, my interlocutor should be ready to give help, by “mirroring” my requests for help: he/she should be ready to repeat, slow down, give examples, checking my comprehension, and generally adapting his/her speech to my language level;
- *strategies for managing conversations*: beyond the commonly-taught standard expressions for greeting and wishing farewell (*Good morning ... Hello ... Bye!*), conversations are actually much more complex communicative events. Learners need strategies for opening conversations, including pre-openings (*Lovely day, isn't it?*) and pre-closings (*Just look at the time! I must be off now!*), but above all for keeping the conversation open, expressing empathy and encouraging the interlocutor to talk, by, e.g., asking questions, reversing the question (*But what about you?*), adding comments and exclamations (*Mm, that's interesting ... Really? That's too bad!*), repeating or paraphrasing what has just been heard, and so on. In addition, the difficult area of turn-taking needs careful consideration. Learners may need help in spotting the right moment to interrupt (*Er ... if I can add something there ...*), in attracting attention (*Sorry (to interrupt), but ... Just a minute ...*) and in keeping one's turn. Similarly, they can be helped to avoid, change the topic or go back to a previous topic (*By the way, ... Incidentally, before I forget ... As I was saying before ...*), as well as to use tactics to “gain precious time” to think, at the same time keeping the conversation channel open (by using pauses, “fillers” like *Well, ... I see ... If you know what I mean ... As a matter of fact ...*, and by repeating or paraphrasing the interlocutor's words);
- *strategies for managing intercultural interaction*: in this case the main cause for concern is not so much the learners' limited linguistic competence as rather the lack of a shared background of norms, values, customs and traditions, which can make interaction a source of potential misunderstandings.

Once again, learners need to be encouraged to make their problems explicit and to rely on their interlocutor's possible cooperation. Only by adopting such attitudes can we use such strategies as asking for corrections, comments, advice (*Did I use the right word? Is it all right if I say ...?*), checking if one's interpretation is correct (*Does that mean that ...? I understand ... is it so?*), managing our uncertainty as to the acceptable behaviour in a specific cultural context by asking for advice on what should be said or done (*How should I do/have done this?*), asking (but also avoiding if deemed appropriate) personal questions (*I'd like to ask you a question, but I'm not sure if it's too personal ...*), explaining our culture (*In my country we ... In this case we usually ...*) and asking our interlocutors to explain theirs (*Is that what you usually do? Is it common for you to ...*), and finally, apologizing for possible misunderstandings and trying to correct them (*I'm sorry I didn't know ... I hope you don't mind if I have ... I think I embarrassed you, but I'm not sure why ...*).

### ***Can and should strategies be “taught”?***

Since the early studies on communication strategies in the 1970s there have always been applied linguists and methodologists who are either *for* or *against* the explicit “teaching” of strategies. Those rejecting strategy instruction do this for a variety of different reasons: strategies are just the superficial realization of deeper linguistic-cognitive processes (which as such cannot be taught); strategies can invite learners to “take the easy way out” and fall into the trap of fossilizing their developing interlanguage system; learners already possess strategies in their L1 and therefore what teachers could do would just be to teach them their linguistic equivalents in the L2; strategies could limit learners' creativity with the language; and so on.

While these arguments are certainly interesting and would deserve careful consideration and discussion, proponents of a “strategy approach” in language education point out that, while processes are largely unconscious, it is the learners' *actual performance* in language tasks, assisted by strategies, which can develop their underlying competence; that strategies help learners remain in conversation, thus providing them with more *input* from their interlocutors and inviting them to produce more *output*, which helps them to formulate, check and validate their hypotheses on how language works; that strategies train learners in the *flexibility* they need to cope with the *unexpected* and the *unpredictable*, thus encouraging *risk-taking*, *individual initiative* and, eventually, their cognitive and linguistic *autonomy* as learners. It is on the basis of such considerations that I would like to briefly sketch out a possible approach to *strategy education*.

## Developing *strategic competence*

It should be clear by now that strategy “training”, in its usual “technical” interpretation, is not what I am envisaging in this paper. We are not aiming at making learners “learn by heart” formulae or fixed phrases which they should apply as if they were applying a grammatical rule. Using strategies is only part of a larger educational process which aims at developing learners’ *strategic competence* – and, as we know, a competence implies not just *knowledge* of facts (e.g. a wide range of lexical and grammatical items which, as we have seen, could assist learners in using approximation and circumlocution), but also *skills* or *know-how*, i.e. the ability to put such knowledge into actual use, and, last but not least, an appropriate range of *beliefs* and *attitudes*. For example, using strategies requires learners to believe, or at least not refuse, the facts that you can keep a conversation going even if you don’t understand every single word; that interaction is based on the interlocutors’ cooperation; that a language user should be prepared to run reasonable risks, tolerate ambiguity (and the anxiety which often comes with it) and be flexible enough to change strategies if needed.

What these considerations lead us to is a *strategy education approach* which is

- *descriptive rather than prescriptive*: strategies are not abstract rules or norms, but only reflect what native speakers of the target language would most probably do or say in a given situation. This is why it is so important to expose language learners to authentic examples of spoken language;
- *based on awareness-raising*: starting from authentic texts invites learners to become “reflective observers”, by asking them to notice language uses, test their hypotheses on how language varies according to the interpersonal and intercultural contexts, and gradually build up their own range of ways to cope with problems and the demands of situations;
- *experiential*: observation and exploration can lead learners to try out their own strategies in both authentic and “classroom” situations: thus they become “cultural agents”, i.e. people who use the (however limited) language that they know to face the challenges provided by real or simulated contexts (role-plays, games, tasks). Then they are in a position to evaluate their language use, the appropriateness and effectiveness of their strategies, and to make adjustments for a subsequent experience. It is this *experiential cycle*, which alternates reflection and practice, which can gradually make learners more strategic and more self-confident, while at the same time “closing the gap” between formal instruction and actual language use.

## Suggested reading and Internet references

- The Author's website [www.learningpaths.org](http://www.learningpaths.org) offers a variety of both methodological and practical materials on the topic of this paper and related ones.
- An extensive bibliography is available in the *Bibliographies* section of the above site.
- A teachers' handbook (*Communication strategies. Learning and teaching how to manage oral interaction*) containing a wide range of classroom activities is published by [www.lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com) and is also available free in pdf form from the Author ([luciano.mariani@iol.it](mailto:luciano.mariani@iol.it))