Learning Paths

Intercultural communication strategies for learner autonomy

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Introduction

Strategies for learning and using a second or foreign language have always been considered as a valuable, indeed necessary, component of the profile of an autonomous language learner. They have often been associated with the more *operational* side of the learning process: the title of Wenden's seminal book *Learner strategies for learner autonomy* (1991), for example, clearly focused on the contribution of *strategies* to learner autonomy.

A few of what are usually considered in the literature as 'communication strategies' already appeared in some of the first, and still very influential,

taxonomies of learning strategies (e.g. 'overcoming limitations in speaking and writing' or 'asking questions' in Oxford 1990, 'questioning for clarification' or 'cooperation' in O'Malley and Chamot 1990). The nature of such strategies was never made completely clear, since they were, in turn, assigned to the cognitive, metacognitive or social-affective domains. In one of the most recent overviews of strategy research, Oxford (2011) groups strategies for contexts, communication and culture in what she terms the 'sociocultural-interactive dimension' of her new *Strategic Self-Regulation* model of language learning.

Communication strategies, however, have had a long history of their own, dating back to the very beginning of the communicative approach. As early as 1980, Canale and Swain (1980) had already included strategic competence as a component of their communicative competence model, as Bachman (1990) and Bachman and Palmer (1996) would do a few years later. But the bulk of the research in this field (Faerch and Kasper 1983, Tarone and Yule 1989, Bialystok 1990, Poulisse 1990, Kasper and Kellerman 1997) has had, all in all, a rather limited influence on the 'strategies for learner autonomy' approach. In addition, some of the applied linguists responsible for much of the early research on communication strategies adopted a rather negative view of the opportunity, and even the possibility, of 'teaching' strategies, for reasons which will be discussed later in this paper.

And yet, for those more directly concerned with pedagogical approaches, and with learner autonomy in particular, communication strategies have never lost a certain appeal of their own. One was left to wonder why learners could not be equipped with ways to assist them in coping with the demands of oral interaction tasks in the same way as they were provided with ample opportunities for coping with other communicative activities. So one crucial way to bring communication strategies back to the front of L2 pedagogy is to look at *why* and *how* they can contribute to learner autonomy.

Strategies as tools for learner autonomy

From the very start of communication strategy research, it was apparent that the role of such strategies in communication could be seen in a double perspective. Strategic competence has been described both as

> the mastery of communication strategies that may be called into action either to enhance the effectiveness of communication or to compensate for breakdowns in communication (Swain 1984: 189)

and as

> the ability to successfully 'get one's message across' … the investigation of strategic competence is very much tied to the use of communication strategies which enable language users to organize their utterances as effectively as possible to get their messages across to particular listeners. Such strategies are also considered to be part of the ability to repair, or compensate for, breakdowns in communication (Tarone and Yule 1989:19).

Strategies themselves have been referred to as 'a systematic technique employed by a speaker to express his meaning when faced with some difficulty' (Corder 1983: 16) as well as 'all attempts to manipulate a limited linguistic system in order to promote communication' (Bialystok 1983: 102).

Two different, but not mutually exclusive, conceptions of communication strategies seem to emerge from these definitions. On the one hand, strategies serve a *compensation* purpose, i.e. they assist learners in bridging the gap between the present state of their interlanguage system and the meanings and intentions they wish to express – or, in other words, between their limited linguistic competence and the communicative purposes they set out to accomplish. Strategies like using paraphrase or circumlocution instead of a specific word or asking one's interlocutor for help would serve this purpose. On the other hand, strategies can also serve an *enhancement* purpose, i.e. they assist learners in making the most of their resources and in improving the effectiveness of their communicative efforts: in other words, they make learners more capable to, e.g. open, develop and close a conversation, manage turn taking, monitor intercultural interactions and, if necessary, repair misunderstandings. In contrast to the former view, implying a deficiency or limitation, this latter view emphasizes the 'normal' function of strategies in managing interactions, stressing the implication that strategies belong to the ways in which communication takes place under ordinary circumstances.

Both such views seem to suggest the important role that communication strategies can play in helping learners to become more autonomous by pushing them to make the best and the most of their present (limited) linguistic and communicative resources, stretching, so to say, their resources beyond their 'comfort zone'. However, to fully appreciate the

contribution that communication strategies can make to learner autonomy, it is necessary to specify in more detail what I have called their *compensation* and their *enhancement* functions.

Compensation strategies: managing problems

The problems that learners may have to face in learning and using an L2 encompass all levels of intercultural communicative competence, and therefore strategies are correspondingly called forth at all these various levels, starting with linguistic competence. The most obvious limitation appears at the *lexical* level, when learners simply do not (yet) know the specific terms to refer to entities. In such cases they may, e.g. use all-purpose words (like *thing, stuff, person* …), use more general words like superordinates (*flower* instead of *geranium*, *animal* instead of *pet*), use a synonym or an antonym (*very small* instead of *tiny*, *not deep* instead of *shallow*), use examples instead of a category (*shirts, jeans, jackets* instead of *clothes*), and, in more general terms, use definitions and descriptions, approximation and paraphrase (*it's the person that cuts your hair* instead of *hairdresser*; *it's like a very tall house* instead of *skyscraper*). Notice that native speakers (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS) employ similar strategies when they have to cope with problem-solving situations of this kind, as the examples in Task1[1] below show.

TASK 1

Consider the following examples of interaction. What problem(s) *are the people experiencing? What* strategies *do they use to manage the problem(s)?*

1.

NNS: Well, my brother has just begun taking driving lessons, you know, and he's just got er... how would you call that... a sort of a document by which he's allowed to drive with a person with the driving licence beside him.
NS: Yes.
NNS: Yes.
NS: Er .. he's a learner driver.
NNS: I see. Would you call that document learner driver? Would you ... would you …
NS: No, you would call it a provisional licence.

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[1] The tasks in this paper are taken, with minor changes, from Mariani 2010. See also the Author's website *www.learningpaths.org* .

NNS: Oh, that's it.

2. *(The woman and the man, native speakers of English, are playing a guessing game)*
WOMAN: Now this is an object that is used in the kitchen. It is used by power that drives this kitchen ...
MAN: You mean electricity?
WOMAN: ... implement. It is used primarily for making cakes or used with cream.
MAN: What, for whipping cream?
WOMAN: Yeah. Er ... it has two metal blades to it ... do you think you know what it is?
MAN: Yes, I know exactly what it is. Right.
WOMAN: Mm.

By closely looking at these examples and the relevant strategies, I am in a position to question three long-standing 'myths' about language and language users. First, there is nothing like 'the ideal native speaker': even in using our mother tongue we often need to resort to strategies in order to, e.g. rephrase or repair our utterances, ask for help, make an effort to make ourselves understood. Second, there is nothing like 'exact communication': the production and reception of messages is always the result of a process of adjustment to interlocutors and settings (and perhaps one of the most extraordinary paradoxes in language teaching is the fact that students are rarely taught, or even allowed, to behave in ways that are common in native speaker usage). Third, there is nothing like 'an independent speaker': meanings and intentions are always negotiated between interlocutors, so that both parties are required to engage in a shared effort to reach an agreement – even more so in intercultural settings, where speaker and listener often do not share the background of knowledge, attitudes and social conventions which underlie effective communication.

Other levels of linguistic competence can cause problems to learners and affect the overall result of communicative interaction. For example, at the *grammatical* level, one might not (yet) master more elaborated verb forms and thus fail to *directly* implement higher level of politeness in addressing her/his interlocutor: instead of producing a request by using a form like *Would you mind if I* …, a learner may have to resort to other (verbal and non-verbal) strategies to mark the intended politeness level. In the same way, problems at the *phonological* level may require the speaker to resort to strategies, as the example in Task 2 (quoted in Nelson 1989) shows.

TASK 2

How do these speakers manage to reach an agreement on the meaning in question?

NNS: My uncle is going to /s---l/ his boat this weekend.
NS: Oh, has he a sailboat?
NNS: Yes.
NS: Oh, are you going with him?
NNS: Uh – no, he's going to /s---l/ the boat.
NS: Yeah, I understand. Are you going sailing with him?
NNS: No, I'm sorry. /S---l/, not /s---l/. Someone is going to buy his boat.
NS: Oh, he's *selling* the boat! I got it!

However, it is at the *sociolinguistic* and *pragmatic* levels that misunderstandings and communication breakdowns can become most serious, since at this level we are concerned with the ability to use language in order to reach a communicative goal in a way that is not only effective but also appropriate to the norms of the specific socio-cultural context. In addition, while mistakes at the linguistic level are often excused and justified, inappropriate behaviours at the pragmatic level, especially if performed by a person with a relatively good linguistic competence, can be interpreted as a sign of bad manners or as individual or cultural 'strangeness'. This happens, for example, when one interprets the American formula 'Let's meet for lunch one of these days' as a real invitation, when in fact it is often just a polite way of closing a conversation, even with a person that one has just met. In the same way, overgeneralizing the (stereotypical) view of Italians as warm and friendly in social relations can lead one to ask an Italian stranger inappropriate questions like, 'How much do you earn each month?'. Of course, *sensitivity to contexts* is crucial in such cases and this is where the autonomy of the language learner/user is most seriously put to the test. How does one know when it is (in)appropriate to ask a question like, 'Have you put on weight lately?'. In many Western *socio-cultural contexts* this would be banned as a question (sometimes even between close friends!), but in a *situational context* like a doctor-patient interaction it would be perfectly acceptable – not to mention strictly *personal contexts*, where asking a very thin person a question like, 'Have you lost weight again?' may cause discomfort and embarrassment. Dealing with such sensitive areas is probably the biggest challenge that must be faced by anyone wishing to promote learner autonomy through intercultural communication strategies – but these are also areas where the *compensation* function of such strategies (dealing with problems) clearly overlaps with their more general *enhancement* function

('protecting' and even optimizing the effectiveness of communication). It is the latter kind of strategies that we now therefore turn our attention to.

Enhancement strategies: managing (intercultural) interactions

As we have seen, the scope of communication strategies can be (and indeed has been) extended to cover pragmatic and discourse competences. Here we are concerned not just with the expression and negotiation of meaning, particularly at the word and sentence 'local' levels, but also, and most importantly, with such more 'global' areas as managing conversations and monitoring intra-and inter-cultural interactions. In this case strategies are called forth to assist a learner in dealing with particularly challenging aspects like opening and closing conversations, trying to keep a conversation open, turn-taking, managing topics and 'gaining time' (see Task 3 below).

TASK 3

A. Listen to the conversation and read the transcript.

- *Who do you think the two people are? How do you think they feel?*
- *Does the conversation "flow"? Why/Why not?*

MAN: Well, how did the party go?
WOMAN: Oh, very well.
MAN: Did Jane turn up in the end?
WOMAN: Yes, she did.
MAN: She's better now, isn't she?
WOMAN: Mm ... much better.
MAN: I'm sorry I couldn't make it but ...
WOMAN: That's all right.
MAN: I had a problem with my boss ...
WOMAN: I see.
MAN: ... she wouldn't let me go before seven o'clock.
WOMAN: Aha.
MAN: And when I left the office it was really too late ...
WOMAN: Mm ...
MAN: ... but anyway, I'm pleased to hear that ...

B. What could the woman say and/or do if she wanted to help keep the conversation going? Describe the people and the context of the dialogue in more detail, then rewrite and rehearse it to see what effect on the conversation "flow" your suggestions would have.

By listening to the conversation and reading the transcript, learners can be made aware of the subtle but crucial aspects of the woman's utterances that express her attitude towards the man and ultimately make the conversation so difficult and even embarrassing: the flat tone of voice and falling intonation, the use of short answers, the absence of questions, exclamations and expressions of empathy, the use of very simple 'fillers' and 'gambits' (like *I see* … *Aha* … *Mm* …), and so on. Making such a conversation 'flow' would imply the use of a range of strategies, which speakers often use in an intuitive way: asking questions, using comments and exclamations to show emotional involvement, rephrasing the speaker's statements, introducing new topics, using a wider range of fillers, etc. The importance of paralinguistic (like the use of a rising (or falling/rising) intonation) and extralinguistic features or non-verbal language should of course not be underestimated.

In intercultural interactions, these strategies play an even more sensitive role since they could help learners to, e.g. ask their interlocutor for comments, corrections or advice; check if their interpretation of the situation is correct; obtain explanations or clarifications by asking 'non-judgmental' questions; apologize for doing or saying something inappropriate; and, generally speaking, deal with the uncertainty as to the acceptable behaviour in unknown or ambiguous contexts.
To introduce the concept of an *intercultural communication strategy*, 'critical incidents' are a very valuable starting point. A 'critical incident' is a situation when there is a gap in assumptions and expectations between people from different cultures. Since we tend to judge what we see or hear on the basis of our own cultural norms, if and when we see these norms broken, we may be struck by the unfamiliar and the 'strange'. The result may be a failure to communicate or a communication breakdown. From the viewpoint of learner autonomy, it is precisely this ethnocentric position that limits the flexibility of interaction and exposes language learners' and users' limited ability to make informed choices in their linguistic behaviour.

People who have had an extensive experience of intercultural contacts are usually able to recall such incidents, but students can often also make reference to things that have struck them as strange or unfamiliar when watching a film, navigating the Internet, using a social network or going abroad on a class trip or a school exchange. A narrative of a critical incident can thus be used as the first step in discussing what lies beneath a cross-cultural misunderstanding and what kind of strategies could be found useful to deal with ambiguous situations (see Task 4 below).

TASK 4

Consider the following situation and answer the questions. Note that there may be more than just one appropriate answer.

THE WEDDING CAKE

Mario was an Italian teenager living in Britain for a month to follow an English course, and staying with an English family, the Crosses. Upon his arrival, Mrs Cross explained that her daughter had got married a couple of months before, and offered Mario a piece of the wedding cake that she still kept in the cupboard. Mario was extremely embarrassed and didn't know how to refuse. He mumbled something and Mrs Cross realized that she had better not insist – but she was sorry and embarrassed too. That was not really a good start for Mario's stay at the Crosses'.

1) Why did both Mario and Mrs Cross feel uncomfortable at the end? Do you think somebody was responsible for what happened?
2) Why did Mario refuse Mrs Cross's offer?
   a) He doesn't like cakes.
   b) He didn't understand what Mrs Cross told him.
   c) He was trying to be polite by not accepting the offer straightaway.
   d) He didn't know what he would have to eat.
3) Why did Mrs Cross *not* make the offer again?
   a) She didn't want to embarrass Mario further.
   b) She felt offended by Mario's refusal.
   c) She realized that Mario doesn't like cakes.
   d) She thought Italians have strange tastes.
4) What would you have done/said *at the moment* if you had been a) Mario? b) Mrs Cross?
5) What would you have done/said *later on* if you had been a) Mario? b) Mrs Cross?

The point in this task is obviously not just to 'discover' the missing piece of cultural information that triggered the critical incident (i.e. the fact that wedding cakes in Italy are usually made with fresh cream, while wedding cakes in Britain are often made with nuts, almonds, etc. and can be kept longer). One of the reasons we can mention to explain what made the misunderstanding worse (or, in other terms, what limited Marios's range of available *choices* and therefore his autonomy as a language user) is the almost total lack of flexibility in dealing with the unexpected and the unfamiliar. Notice that I am not suggesting that strategies can *solve* problems, but that they can help to *manage* problems in the best possible

way given the constraints of the situation. This is the point in asking learners (through questions 4 and 5 in the task above) to focus on the ways and means which could have been useful to deal with this ambiguous situation both *at the time* it took place and *later on*. Discussing and sharing insights, comments and suggestions within a group could help identify some possible strategies and a few examples of linguistic behaviour (or 'verbal strategy markers'), *both on Mario's and on Mrs Cross's parts*, e.g.

Monitoring the interaction during the incident

"gaining time to think"	Mm ... Aha .. A wedding cake ... Your daughter's wedding cake, did you say? ...	
checking understanding	You said she got married two months ago?... So it's her wedding cake, did I get it right?	Don't you like cakes? Really?
asking one's interlocutor to explain her/his culture	How are wedding cakes made here?	Do you use wedding cakes? Are they made like this one?
clarify one's culture	You see, we in Italy ... our wedding cakes usually ...	Look, this is made with nuts and almonds ...
apologizing: thanking, toning down and justifying a refusal, suggesting a compromise or an alternative	I'm really sorry ... You're really very kind, but ... Thank you very much, but just a tiny little bit, because I've just been to Mc Donald's ...	

Repairing the interaction after the incident

checking that one's interpretation was correct	Is it so? ... Did I get it right? ... So in Italy you ...
clarifying both cultures, repairing misunderstandings	I 'm afraid there's been a misunderstanding ... Can you tell me ... I think I didn't understand ...
apologizing: explaining and justifying one's reactions	I'm sorry ... I didn't know ... I hope you don't mind if I have ... I think I

	upset you, but I'm not sure why ...

The most important point to stress here is that through collecting and comparing *possible* ways of reacting to a critical incident we are not prescribing or teaching fixed formulae: the important part of this reflection and discussion process is not the focus on the linguistic exponents (although some expressions are worth noticing and adding to one's repertoire), but the increasing awareness that a breakdown in communication *can* be approached and managed by taking several options into consideration, i.e. by focussing on a variety of strategies (the items in the left column in the two tables above) which can improve the language learners'/users' flexibility through equipping them with more pragmatic choices. In other words, though you cannot predict the unpredictable, you can do something to prepare yourself for the unexpected and develop the ability to monitor, expand and adapt your *reactions to the unfamiliar*. By taking such a perspective, we are clearly relying not only on extending and refining cultural knowledge or intercultural skills, but are also setting out to promote a change in beliefs and attitudes – a crucial pedagogical consideration.

Reflecting on critical incidents, and, more generally speaking, on one's personal intercultural experiences, is a very useful tool to evaluate *past* experience with a view to expanding one's strategic repertoire for possible *future* use. In addition, monitoring one's affective reactions to ambiguous or unexpected situations and comparing the possible changes that can take place in the course of time in one's overall intercultural communicative competence can increase the learner's awareness of her/his path towards a greater degree of autonomy as a language user. Such metacognitive activities can greatly profit from appropriate documentation tools, which, like a language portfolio, help learners to 'keep track' of thoughts, feelings and insights which would otherwise be difficult to store and access on later occasions (see Task 5 below).

TASK 5

CRITICAL INCIDENTS

Complete this card, then share your thoughts and feelings with your partners.

1. Short description: ...
2. My reaction *at the moment*:
   - how I felt: ...
   - what I did/said: ...

3. What I did later:
   - I talked to people, and they said ...
   - I found out more in this way: ...
     and I discovered that ...
4. My thoughts and feelings have (not) changed: ...
5. If I had a similar experience *now*, I would do/say: ...

Pedagogical implications

Potential advantages of strategy use

Before I turn to the implications that intercultural communication strategies can have for teaching approaches, it is useful to summarize some of the most important potential advantages of strategy use. In many cases, such advantages are more *direct* and *local*, as when strategies allow language users to solve or manage an immediate communicative problem; in other cases, advantages are more *indirect* and *global*, extending their effect beyond a pressing need and into the ongoing language users' interlanguage development. Of course, in most cases the two kinds of advantages overlap, blurring this distinction: for example, the use of paraphrase can help solve the immediate problem of expressing meanings, while at the same time stretching learners' ability to make the most of their available resources and thus allowing them to enrich their communicative repertoire. We should also notice that the advantages of strategy use encompass both the *cognitive* and the *socio-affective* domains of autonomy in language learning.
Summarizing many of the concepts introduced in the previous sections of the present paper, we could say that intercultural communication strategies can potentially

- help learners to remain in conversation, thus allowing them to receive more *input*, which in turn increases their opportunities to build and validate hypotheses about their interlanguage system;
- help learners, on the receptive side, to *notice* new language forms and to exercise some kind of control over their *intake*, by allowing them to adjust what they hear to what they are actually ready to include in the present state of their developing system;
- help learners, on the productive side, to generate more *output*, and, through appropriate negotiation with their interlocutor, to obtain useful *feedback* on their performance;

- promote the flexibility learners need to cope with the *unexpected* and the *unpredictable*, which are inevitable features of personal and intercultural interaction;
- encourage learners' *risk-taking*, individual *initiative* and an active and *responsible role* in their learning process;
- boost learners' *self-confidence*, by giving them the feeling that they can in some way increase their *control* over language use, i.e. the perception that they have more *choices* both in what to say and in how to say it.

Should and can strategies be 'taught'?

Recognizing the potential advantages of communication strategies does not automatically imply that they *should* and/or *can* be 'taught'. 'What one must teach students of a language is not strategy, but language', wrote Bialystok as the *very last words* in her book *Communication Strategies* (1990: 147), and Kellerman soon echoed, 'Teach the learners more language and let the strategies look after themselves' (1991: 158). If problem-solving behaviour and strategy use are considered as standard features of oral interaction management, one is naturally tempted to say that, as one learns to function in everyday communication, one also develops the underlying strategic competence. This position is often combined with the view that L2 learners have already acquired at least some level of strategic competence in their L1, which then transfers to the L2. In this case, what one might wish to teach would be the different *linguistic forms* that strategies take on in the L2.

However, one could also argue that L2 competence results from L2 performance if and when learners can be engaged in *tasks* which maximize the *need* for (and therefore the *use* of) strategies: in other words, task-based learning, for example, by asking learners to face situations which require meaning expression, negotiation and interaction management, would provide the conditions for learners to develop appropriate strategies, which in turn could benefit interlanguage development. Learners could certainly have recourse to their L1 strategic competence, but this is subject to two crucial conditions: first, establishing *if* and *at what level* learners actually possess L1 strategic competence (which cannot be taken for granted), and second, *if* and *at what level* learners can be expected to automatically *transfer* knowledge and skills within their overall individual linguistic repertoire (which may include other L2s). This points to the importance of different *sets of variables* in judging the possibility and opportunity of pedagogical intervention, like *task design* and *individual*

differences (in terms of, e.g., age, language proficiency level, learning styles, motivation, beliefs and attitudes, and metacognitive abilities).

The arguments for and against the teachability of communication strategies are difficult to evaluate also because they are often based on research that reports indirect or inconclusive evidence, refers to different strategy conceptualizations and classifications, and, above all, seems to imply many different interpretations of the term 'teaching' (Dörnyei 1995, Nakatani and Goh 2007)[2]. For example, if by 'teaching' we mean the mere presentation and 'drilling' of linguistic forms (like conversational gambits or pre-fabricated chunks of language), or the training of learners in producing standardised responses, then there seems to be little scope for pedagogical intervention in a challenging field like strategic competence.

A new paradigm: strategy education

Looking for an alternative to such terms as strategy *instruction*, strategy *training* and even strategy *coaching* means refusing a view of strategies as simple techniques, tactics or gambits. Quoting Wenden's pioneering book (1991) at the beginning of this paper we noted that, since the early days of strategy research, *strategies for learner autonomy* have been closely associated with both declarative and procedural *knowledge*, on the one hand, and with *beliefs* and *attitudes* (including motivation and its related constructs), on the other. We have also described the development and use of strategies as a *competence* (strategic competence), which the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe 2001) describes as the interaction of a language user/learner's *skill* or *know-how (savoir faire)*, *knowledge (savoir)* and *existential competence (savoir-être)*.

Indeed, the successful implementation of strategies relies on some kind of *knowledge*: facts, concepts, rules and relationships, both linguistic and (inter)cultural. For example, to use circumlocution, approximation and paraphrasing strategies, we need to build up a set of 'verbal strategy markers', or language exponents in terms of words, phrases and morpho-syntactic structures (such as synonyms, antonyms, phrases like *in the shape of …, the size of …, a kind of …,* relative clauses as in *it's a person/thing* who/which …) and be able to know if, when and how to use them appropriately and effectively. In the same way, knowledge of cultural facts

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[2] Nevertheless, many researchers report at least partial success as the result of various forms of explicit strategy instruction (e.g. Dörnyei and Thurrell 1991, Gallagher Brett 2001, Ogane 1998, Manchón 2000, Williams 2006).

(like, in Task 4, the use of wedding cakes in different cultures!) is important, although we cannot obviously even think of covering every item of information that we may need in all possible circumstances (incidentally, it is this impossibility of predicting everything that makes strategies so valuable for learner autonomy, as the ways and means of 'knowing what to do when you don't know what to do').

This knowledge must be put to active and flexible use, i.e. it acts as the basis for developing actual *skills* or *know-how*. This necessarily entails some kind of practice, through which learners manipulate lexical, grammatical and semantic elements with a view to acquiring flexibility in the activation of knowledge and eventually going through stages of gradually higher proceduralization.

However, 'being or becoming competent' (rather than 'possessing a competence') is very much a personal enterprise, which implies relating and adapting knowledge and skills to one's own unique individual profile as a (gradually more autonomous) language learner, making the most of one's strengths while coming to terms with one's critical areas. For all this to take place, the role of *beliefs* and *attitudes* cannot be underestimated.

To be able to use strategies in a confident way ... one needs to *believe* that

- you can keep a conversation going even if you do not understand every single word;
- interaction is based on the interlocutors' cooperation;
- you can at least partially control the communicative 'flow' by using strategies.

In the same way, one needs to develop positive *attitudes* like

- be prepared to run reasonable risks both in comprehension and in production;
- tolerate ambiguity and anxiety, at least to a certain extent;
- be flexible enough to change strategies if and when needed (Mariani 2010: 46)

Developing strategic competence is thus a *whole-person engagement*, involving the activation of *affective* and *social*, in addition to just *cognitive*, factors. Changing the terminology to refer to pedagogical intervention and using a term like *strategy education across the (linguistic) curriculum* is not just a formal operation but involves a change of paradigm, with important implications for teaching approaches.

Approaches to strategy education

The tasks included in this paper can now serve as illustrations of some crucial features of possible approaches to communication strategy education – approaches that could basically be described as *descriptive*, *experiential* and *explicit*.

A descriptive approach. We have already considered that the linguistic and intercultural behaviours which are the visible implementation of strategies cannot be reduced to *formulaic language* to be applied in a mechanical way, whether it refers to expressing meanings, negotiating intentions or managing intercultural interactions. In other words, the verbal and non-verbal behaviours associated with the use of strategies cannot be the result of prescriptive rules, but only possible patterns observed in actual native and non-native speakers' performance. Tasks 1-3 above are examples of activities where learners (and teachers) work as *reflective observers* of the problems that people experience and the ways in which such problems are managed and possibly solved. The result of such activities is a *descriptive* database of strategies (together with possible linguistic and extra-linguistic exponents) which learners can be invited to add to their individual linguistic repertoire.

An experiential approach. Engaging learners as reflective observers (as well as *cross-cultural analysts*) implies the value of *experience* as a source of knowledge and learning. The starting point of communication strategy education is *exposure to experience*, whether this refers to learners' previous contacts with languages and cultures (inside and outside the classroom) or to other people's. This experience (e.g. transcripts of actual interactions as in Tasks 1-3 or narratives of critical incidents as in Task 4) is explored with a view to highlighting strategies, which learners can then be invited to experiment with, i.e. use and creatively adapt to the demands and constraints of different contexts, on the one hand, and to the communicative style associated with their own individual and cultural profile as language learners, on the other. This means asking learners to experience with strategy use and to evaluate to what extent their own implementation of strategies has been effective and appropriate. So what we are pointing at here is really a *cycle* in which experience alternates with observation and exploration.

An explicit approach. I am *not* suggesting an approach in which strategies are simply embedded in the teaching materials and activities, so that learners are left to infer their presence and function in interaction and to make the

most of such inference if and when they decide to do so. I am rather in favour of a more *explicit* approach, one in which learners are asked to become aware both of the linguistic and cultural *content* of their experience and of the *cognitive* and *affective procedures* they go through in processing that content (as in Task 5 above). In other words, *metacognition* is seen as essential both in terms of knowledge and in terms of skill. The overall aim is to raise learners' *awareness* of language/culture, of the learning process and of themselves as language learners and users, thus reinforcing the strong link between such kinds and levels of awareness and the development of learner autonomy.

Conclusion

Promoting learner autonomy necessarily qualifies as an ambitious, far-reaching and long-term process, which aims at educating learners to make learning an overall life experience, extending beyond the classroom and into a life-long commitment. Faerch and Kasper's words sound prophetic in this respect:

> By learning how to use communication strategies appropriately, learners will be more able to bridge the gap between formal and informal learning situations, between pedagogic and non-pedagogic communicative situations (1983: 56).

I believe that learner autonomy can be both the process and the product of bridging that gap.

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