1. Teaching Communication Strategies for Oral Interaction

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1. Introduction

One of the areas of communicative competence which has so far received relatively little attention by both teachers and EFL materials is strategic competence, the ability to cope with unexpected problems in communication by using the limited amount of language that one knows. The aim of this paper is to discuss how communication strategies, through which strategic competence can be developed, can inform language teaching and learning. The emphasis will be on oral interaction at the intermediate level.

2. Problems and strategies in interlanguage use

By its very nature, communicative competence is a competence "in progress"; at any one time, a language learner can be placed somewhere along a continuum between an absolute zero competence and an absolute native speaker competence; learning implies moving along this continuum towards more advanced stages of one's personal interlanguage. However, we can hardly talk about absolute degrees of competence: even native speakers sometimes find it difficult to express meanings and intentions, and have to find alternative ways of conveying their messages.

Conveying a message implies setting a communicative goal, forming a suitable plan and carrying it out. Either during the planning or during the execution phase, speakers may find that the requirements of their plan do not match the present state of their interlanguage system, i.e. the command of their linguistic and sociocultural code is not adequate. At this point, two alternative routes are open to them: they can either change their goal, avoiding risks and adopting a reduction strategy, or form a different plan, taking the risk and adopting what we may call an achievement strategy. (For a detailed description of this process, see Faerch & Kasper (1983); for an up-to-date review of the area, see Bialystok (1990.)

Reduction strategies can affect the content of a message: for example, we may decide to avoid a topic, to abandon a message or to replace our original meaning with a simpler version of the message. Reduction strategies can also affect modality (e.g. we may miss out politeness markers) and even whole speech acts: for instance, if we cannot use pre-topics in opening a conversation (e.g. "Are you busy?" as a way to introduce a request or an invitation) we may sound abrupt to our interlocutor.

As teachers, who naturally want to expand their linguistic resources, we shall probably be more interested in describing and promoting achievement strategies rather than reduction strategies. Achievement strategies can work at the word and sentence level or at the discourse level. We are all familiar with students using strategies at the word level, borrowing words from the L1, "foreignising" L1 words by adopting morphological and pronunciation patterns which are typical of the L2, or literally translating words and expressions from the L1 into the L2.

However, achievement strategies become much more creative when they are based on the

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actual learners' interlanguage, i.e. when learners make the additional effort of "stretching" their present resources to the limit. Such interlanguage-based strategies include, for example, generalisation (using "general words" like person or thing, "superordinates" like animal instead of mammal, synonyms and antonyms) and ways of paraphrasing meanings through the use of definitions, descriptikons, circumlocutions and examples. This is how an Italian speaker (NNS) tried to get the Italian equivalent of the concept of "unemployment benefit" across to a native English speaker (NS):

NNS: My father has recently been made redundant and...but in Italy we have er...I don't know how you would call that...I mean, he was made somehow redundant, but he gets some of his salary, and this salary is paid by...is paid by the State, somehow.

NS: Right. So your father is getting a pension.

NNS: No, it's not really a pension because it is temporary, you know, so he was made redundant, let's say for six months, just because the factory closes up for...I mean, diminishes the, the workload...

NS: He gets unemployment benefit?

NNS: Maybe, yes, maybe that.

Notice that the non-native speaker first established the context ("My father has been made redundant...") and described the situation by paraphrasing the basic meaning of unemployment benefit ("he gets some of...of his salary, and this salary is paid by...the State, somehow"). Also notice that agreement on meanings is reached through a process of negotiation: the Italian speaker soon appealed to her interlocutor for help ("I don't know how you would call that..."); the native speaker tried to put forward a hypothesis ("Right. So your father is getting a pension."), but was immediately corrected ("No, it's not really a pension..."). Thus achievement strategies often work at the discourse level, since they imply the negotiation of meanings through mutual effort.

These co-operative strategies can help to solve problems that learners often meet at the discourse level, in such areas as opening and closing interaction, keeping a conversation going, handling a topic in a discussion and expressing feelings and attitudes.

3. Issues in teaching strategic competence

Developing strategic competence in the classroom implies a consideration of several problematic issues. First, can we draw up a "syllabus" of communication strategies? I think that if we do, we must give up the idea of describing strategies just as we describe, say, morphological and syntactical areas, that is, by giving "rules". We cannot be prescriptive, but only adopt a descriptive approach in which we try to discover patterns or frequent behaviours in actual stretches of discourse.

Second, should we explicitly teach strategies, or should we just let students experience them in free language use? My opinion is that becoming aware of certain language features can at least help learners to notice them in the input they receive in the classroom, and thuis promotes a gradual, albeit slow, process of assimilation.

. Third, if we teach "teach" strategies, are we not impoising a limit on creativity and origin-

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ality in individual language use? In other words, can we engage students in spontaneous interactions while at the same time encouraging them to widen the range of their strategies? I think we can, provided we do not impose (or even propose) fixed and rigid interaction patterns, but rather lead learners to discover, develop and evaluate their own use of strategic competence.

4. Classroom applications

These considerations point to an approach to strategic competence which would alternate experience and reflection, language awareness being the catalyst for changes in learners' knowledge and skills. Students could first be exposed to examples of authentic language use, in which communication strategies play a definite role (exposure). Then they could be invited to discover and discuss the strategies as these appear to work in the recorded materials (exploration). Next, learners could practice the use of strategies in guided and free tasks (practice). And finally, they could be asked to assess their performance, possibly comparing it with other authentic examples of strategic use (evaluation).

When applied to a strategic area such as adjusting the message by using approximations, this approach might be implemented through the following example tasks (see Mariani, 1993):

1. students listen to a recording in which a native speaker is trying to define and/or describe a number of people and things. Students have to identify these people and things from among those listed or illustrated on a worksheet;

2. students listen again and/or read the tapescript and find out the strategies used by the native speaker to give definitions and descriptions; then they are led through a guided discussion to identify and classify the criteria that can be used to define and describe items (e.g. general class, shape, size, colour, texture, material, structure, function, context....) and provide more examples for each criterion;

3. students try their hand at using approximations by defining and describing items shown in pictures of increasing complexity. This can be done as pair or group work or as a game; some of the learners' interactions can be recorded for use in the next stage;

4. students compare their "products" with dictionary definitions and, if possible, with additional recorded material. During this evaluation stage, co-operative strategies can be highlighted to stress the importance of negotiating meanings. (For specific cross-cultural communication activities, see Levine et al., 1987.)

5. Conclusion

I believe that a more explicit and systematic training in communication strategies would benefit learners in several different ways. By enabling them to keep the interaction going and by facilitating negotiation procedures, strategies help learners exercise more control both on the input they receive and on the output they produce. This may lead to better performance

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and offer learners more opportunities for checking and validating their hypotheses on how language works, thus indirectly promoting the development of interlanguage and the acquisition process as a whole. Learning to cope with the unexpected and the unpredictable, moreover, can help students develop positive risk-taking attitudes and enhance creativity and flexibility in language use.

References

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