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Teaching and Learning Communication Strategies: From a Sociocultural Perspective

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1. Introduction

Communication strategies (CSs) are what learners use "to overcome the inadequacies of their interlanguage resources" (Ellis, 1994, p. 396). Although the importance of communication strategies is widely recognized, "little has been discovered about the developmental nature of CSs in L2 production" (p. 402). This study reports the results of the yearlong classroom research on how Japanese university students have learned to use CSs from a sociocultural perspective. In essence, the study reveals the dynamics of learning and teaching CSs in a language classroom.

2. Definitions of CSs

- "a systematic technique employed by a speaker to express his [or her] meaning when faced with some difficulty"(Corder, 1981)
- "potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal"(Faerch and Kasper, 1983)
- "enhance the effectiveness of communication" (Canale, 1983)

3. Strategic Competence and CSs

Strategic competence (one of the components of communicative competence, together with grammatical, discourse, and sociolinguistic competences) comprises two types of strategies—communication strategies and learning strategies. Although communication strategies are concerned with productive skills and learning strategies deal with receptive skills, in general, these strategies are interrelated. Thus, the distinction is not clear (Brown, 2000; Faerch and Kasper, 1986; Dornyei, 1995).

4. Taxonomies of CSs

- Dornyei's (1995) list of CSs based on Varadi (1973), Tarone (1977), Faerch and Kasper (1983), and Bialystok (1990).
- Willems's (1987) list of CSs—a hierarchy

5. Research Issues

(1) Teachability

- Strategic competence develops in the speaker's L1 and is freely transferable to L2. Therefore, there is no reason for strategy training (Bialystok & Kellerman, 1987; Bongaerts & Poulisse, 1989).
- Strategy straining is possible and necessary (Rost & Ross, 1991; Dornyei, 1995; Savignon, 1972, 1983, 1997; Willems, 1987).

(2) Relationship between the use of CSs and L2 acquisition is not clear.

(3) Methods

- little systematic strategy training research
- focusing only on one or a few strategies.
- no longitudinal study
- use mainly quantitative data (focusing on individuals and ignoring the classroom context)

6. Method of This Study

(1) Participants

Subjects were 13 second-year university students (7 boys and 6 girls), who enrolled in "Active English" in the researcher's class in 2003. The class aimed at developing students' discussion skills. Students met once a week (90 minutes), for 13 weeks in the first semester and 12 weeks in the second semester. As for the level of students, seven students had taken the TOEFL test and the scores ranged from 400 to 470.

(2) Descriptions of "Active English" class

"Impact Topics"(Longman,1999) was chosen as a textbook. The researcher selected five topics in the first semester and four in the second semester. The fifth topic in the second semester was free (students' choice). Each topic was covered in two weeks. In the first week, a new topic was introduced, followed by the practice of new strategies. Writing homework was assigned to students so that they could participate in the discussion in the following week. In the next class, they had their conversations videotaped after having been engaged in timed-conversations several times. As an assignment, students watched their own videotapes at home, transcribed their conversations, evaluated their performance, and set up the goals for the next videotaped conversation. The same process was recycled over the two semesters.

(3) Date collection and analysis

Multiple data sources, including a survey, diaries, videotaped-conversations & self-assessment, videotaped-debates, progress reports, and interviews, were used to describe how these students learned to use CSs and how their use influenced their L2 learning. To elicit more comments, students were told to write their progress reports in Japanese

and were also interviewed in Japanese by the researcher at the end of each semester. The researcher transcribed Japanese into English. All the videotaped conversations and debates were transcribed by the research assistant. Both qualitative data and quantitative data were analyzed and integrated for this study.

- Survey (three times)—April, July , December
- Diaries (25 times)—after each class
- Videotaped-conversation & self-assessment (8 times)
- Videotaped-debates (twice)—November, December
- Progress reports (three times)—May, July, December
- Interviews (twice)—July, December (about 15 minutes per student)

7. Results

7-1: Stages

(1) From April to May: being nervous, memorized what they wrote, used only familiar CSs

- I was so nervous in front of the camera that I could not say what I wanted to say. (1)
- I did my best to keep my conversation going. Therefore, I could not afford to pay attention to new CSs and used only familiar ones. (1)
- I relied on my memorization. I mean what I said was exactly what I wrote on the paper. When I was asked other questions, I was at a loss. (1)

(2) From June to July: got used to video-taped conversation and maintained a four-minute conversation, started to use other CSs such as "shadowing" and "sounds good." (quick learners)

- I could use more English and maintain a four-minute conversation, compared to April. (1)
- I came to use some CSs naturally. (1)
- I tried to use other CSs consciously. (1)
- I came to use CSs in other classes, too. (1)
- I could afford to use new questions. (1)
- I think I made some progress and came to feel confident in speaking English. (1)
- I still rely on Japanese when I could not explain the meaning in English. (1)
- I could not use "What does that mean?" Instead, I asked in Japanese—"Etto?" (1)

(3) From September to October: forgot CSs after a long summer vacation, reviewed CSs, got used to a five-minute conversation and enjoyed it, started to use L2-based CSs (some students)

- I learned a new strategy—"What does that mean?" in today's class. I thought it would be useful. (2)
- I was able to use "What does that mean?" today, because many students started to use it.
- I came to use more CSs naturally. (2)
- I enjoyed listening to others' opinions. (2)
- I relied less on my memorization and was able to respond to my partner's new questions. (2)

(4) From November to December: Challenged difficult topics (two debates), used L2-based CSs (more students), started to use negotiating skills

- I started to ask clarification questions when I did not understand what my partner said. I did not ask those questions before. Also, my partners could explain the meaning in simple English words. (2)
- I came to feel that a six-minute conversation was not so long. (2)
- I did not want to lose in a debate. So I tried to get good information and practiced with my partner. (2)
- I tried to use "What does that mean?" in a debate, because I sometimes hear difficult words. (2)
- I enjoyed a debate though I thought it was difficult at first. (2)

7-2: Teachability

Students mainly used familiar CSs in the first semester. When they learned new CSs, they thought these CSs would be useful. However, only a few quick learners could use them right after the explicit teaching (ex. Shadowing). At this stage, students had difficulty keeping a four-minute conversation and could not afford to use new CSs. As they became accustomed to a video-taped conversation, they could maintain a longer conversation (5 to 6 minutes). They started to enjoy talking and started to use L2-based CSs in order to negotiate the meaning with the partner. Interestingly, quite a few students reported that they started to use new CSs because others used them in class. Yet, due to a cultural difference or lack of their communicative competence, there were a few CSs students used less throughout the study (ex. Let me see. That's a difficult question. Asking follow-up questions.)

- I am shy and could not speak out "Pardon me?" or "Oh! Really?" Instead, I used "Uhn?" in Japanese. (1)
- When I could not answer the question, I smiled and let it go instead of using "Let me see." (1)

- I could not use "Let me see" and "That's a difficult question." Instead, I used Uhnn or "Etto"in Japanese. So those CSs did not come out naturally. (2)
- I thought "Summarizing" still difficult, because I was not used to explaining what I wanted to say in my words. (2)

8. Summary & Implications

The study found that explicit teaching of CSs was useful to raise learners' awareness but not sufficient for them to be able to use those CSs in their conversations. Learners need continuous opportunities to actually use English and to evaluate their use of CSs. In particular, recycling the process seemed to be effective to improve not only their strategic competence but also their overall communicative competence. In other words, learning CSs affects their L2 acquisition. Moreover, the obtained data showed that learners were greatly influenced by others' use of CSs. It seems to be essential to create a learning community in a classroom to develop autonomous language learners for life. This study offers the following implications.

(1) Explicit CS teaching is effective to raise the learner's awareness.
(2) Students need to be encouraged to use CSs.
(3) Video-taped conversations and self-evaluation are effective and need to be recycled.
(4) Students learn set phrases or formulas easily at the beginning of the stage.
(5) Some CSs might be difficult for Japanese students to learn due to a cultural difference.
(6) It takes time for students to acquire L2-based CSs such as summarizing and paraphrasing.
(7) Choosing interesting and challenging topics are important so that students can share their opinions and enjoy meaningful conversations.
(8) Building a learning community is essential because students can learn from one another, which seems to be a driving force for students to acquire not only CSs but also L2 communicative competence.

In short, Savignon (1997) stresses the significance of "rapport" in the classroom, by saying that "Practice in communication, by definition, forces learners to come out from behind memorized dialogues and ready-made phrases, leaving them in a particularly vulnerable position. The rapport they feel with the teacher as well as with classmates may be crucial in determining the success or failure of the venture" (p. 81).

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FIGURE 1

CSs Following Traditional Conceptualizations

Avoidance or Reduction Strategies

1. Message abandonment—leaving a message unfinished because of language difficulties.
2. Topic avoidance—avoiding topic areas or concepts which pose language difficulties.

Achievement or Compensatory Strategies

3. Circumlocution—describing or exemplifying the target object or action (e.g., *the thing you open bottles with* for *corkscrew*).
4. Approximation—using an alternative term which expresses the meaning of the target lexical item as closely as possible (e.g., *ship* for *sail boat*).
5. Use of all-purpose words—extending a general, empty lexical item to contexts where specific words are lacking (e.g., the overuse of *thing, stuff, make, do,* as well as using words like *thingie, what-do-you-call-it*).
6. Word-coinage—creating a nonexisting L2 word based on a supposed rule (e.g., *vegetarianist* for *vegetarian*).
7. Use of nonlinguistic means—mime, gesture, facial expression, or sound imitation.
8. Literal translation—translating literally a lexical item, an idiom, a compound word or structure from L1 to L2.
9. Foreignizing—using a L1 word by adjusting it to L2 phonologically (i.e., with a L2 pronunciation) and/or morphologically (e.g., adding to it a L2 suffix).
10. Code switching—using a L1 word with L1 pronunciation or a L3 word with L3 pronunciation in L2.
11. Appeal for help—turning to the conversation partner for help either directly (e.g., *What do you call . . . ?*) or indirectly (e.g., rising intonation, pause, eye contact, puzzled expression).

Stalling or Time-gaining Strategies

12. Use of fillers/hesitation devices—using filling words or gambits to fill pauses and to gain time to think (e.g., *well, now let me see, as a matter of fact*).

Table 1. A typology of communication strategies

Reduction strategies (Often difficult to identify. Introspection of learner may be a guide here.)

- *Formal*
  - *Phonological:* Avoidance of words containing "difficult" segments or clusters of segments.
  - *Morphological:* Avoidance of talking about yesterday to avoid past tense forms.
  - *Syntactic:* Avoidance of speaking about what might happen for fear of using conditionals.
  - *Lexical:* Avoidance of certain topics because the necessary vocabulary is lacking.
- *Functional*
  - *Message abandonment:* "Oh I can't say this, let's talk about something else."
  - *Meaning replacement:* Saying almost what you want to say; saying something less politely than you would in your L1 ("Modality reduction").
  - *Topic avoidance:* Saying nothing at all.

  ["Meaning replacement" and "topic avoidance" form extremes of a continuum.]

  N.B. "Meaning replacement" resembles closely what is called: "approximation" or "generalisation" under *"Achievement strategies"*.

Achievement strategies (Classification depends on resources used.)

- *Paralinguistic strategies*
  - I. The use or mimetic gestures, facial expression etc. to replace speech.
- *Interlingual strategies* involving the interpolation of a L different from the one in which the conversation is taking place.
  - II. *Borrowing or "code switching":* a native language word or phrase is used with a native language pronunciation, e.g. "Please Sir, have you a 'krijtje'" (Du. for "piece of chalk").
  - III. *Literal translation:* a literal translation from L1 to L2 of lexical items, idioms or compound words; e.g. "make it a little" (Du. for "Come off it"); "nighttable" (for Ger. "Nachttisch" = "bedside table"); "greens" for "vegetables" (from Du. "groente"); "Je suis pardon" for "I am sorry"; "cool-box" for "refrigerator" (from Du. "koelkast").
  - IV. *"Foreignizing":* Using a word or phrase from the L1 with L2 pronunciation; e.g. "/'knælə/" from Da. "knallert" for "moped"; "/ˌsɑ:kjə'leiʃn/" from Fr. "/'siʁkylasiõ/" for "traffic" in: "There was a lot of circulation".
- *Intralingual strategies* exploit generally only the L in which the conversation is taking place. (Interlingual strategy may be embedded.)
  - V. *Approximation* (generalization): The use of an L2 word which shares essential semantic features with the target word: "birds" for "ducks", "animals" for "rabbits", "rose" for "flower" or "lorry" for "van".
  - VI. *"Word coinage":* An L2 word is made up on basis of supposed rule: "intonate" from "intonation", "inonded" for "flooded".
  - VII. *Paraphrase:*
    - a. *description:*
      1. *physical properties:* Colour, size, spatial dimensions;
    - b. *circumlocution:*
      2. *specific features:* "It has a motor . . .";
      3. *functional features:* "It is used in . . .";
      4. *locational features:* "You find it in a factory";
      5. *temporal features:* "It's between summer and autumn";
    - c. *exemplification:* subordinate terms used instead of unavailable superordinate terms like: trade names: "Puch" for "moped".
  - VIII. *"Smurfing":* The use of empty or meaningless words to fill gaps in vocabulary command like: "thing", "whatsit", "what-do-you-call-it".
  - IX. *Self repair* (restructuring): Setting up a new speech-plan when the original one fails.
  - X. *Appeals for assistance:*
    - a. *Explicit:* "What d'you call"; "Speak more slowly"; "I am foreign"; "Do you understand?";
    - b. *Implicit:* pauses, intonation, drawls, repetition or "I don't know what to call this" and the like;
    - c. *Checking questions:* To make sure something is correctly understood: *questions:* "Do I hear you say . . ."; "Are you saying that . . ."; "Do I hear you say . . .; "Are you saying that . . .";
  - XI. *Initiating repair:* "I am sorry, there must be some misunderstanding. Does . . . mean . . .? I took it to mean . . . I hope you don't mind my asking . . ."

Questionnaire about conversation strategies

Name ( ) Student No. ( )

How well do you know each strategy and how often do you use each one? Circle one of the following responses: 1 (I don't know it); 2 (I know it but have never used it); 3 (I know it and sometimes use it); 4 (I know it and often use it); 5 (I can use it naturally)

1. How are you doing?	1	2	3	4	5
2. Nice talking with you!	1	2	3	4	5
3. How about you?	1	2	3	4	5
4. Pardon me? Could you say that again?	1	2	3	4	5
5. Let me see.	1	2	3	4	5
6. That's a difficult / good question.	1	2	3	4	5
7. Oh really? Oh yeah?	1	2	3	4	5
8. Shadowing	1	2	3	4	5
9. That' great! Wow!	1	2	3	4	5
10. That's too bad! Oh, no!	1	2	3	4	5
11. For example? Like what / who?	1	2	3	4	5
12. Sounds nice/great/good!	1	2	3	4	5
13. Me, too. Me, neither.	1	2	3	4	5
14. Asking follow-up questions	1	2	3	4	5
15. I agree with you. I'm afraid I disagree.	1	2	3	4	5
16. Summarizing (So, you think…; You mean…)	1	2	3	4	5
17. What does that mean?	1	2	3	4	5
18. Do you know what I mean?	1	2	3	4	5
19. What do you mean?	1	2	3	4	5
20. I mean….	1	2	3	4	5

Table 1

Comparison of the mean score of each conversation strategy

Conversation Strategies	April, 03	July, 03	Dec. 03
1. How are you doing?	4.46	3.77	4.31
2. Nice talking with you!	4.85	3.62	4.77
3. How about you?	4.85	4.38	4.77
4. Pardon me? Could you say that again?	3.00	2,23	3.08
5. Let me see.	2.38	2.54	2.46
6. That's a difficult/good question.	2.85	2.92	2.46
7. Oh really? Oh yeah?	3.69	3.85	4.08
8. Shadowing	2.85	1.85	3.54
9. That's great! Wow!	3.15	3.46	3.38
10. That's too bad! Oh, no!	2.85	3.31	2.69
11. For example? Like what/who?	3.46	3.46	3,62
12. Sounds nice/great/good!	3.08	3.38	3.00
13. Me, too. Me, neither.	4.31	4.23	4.77
14. Asking follow-up questions	2.31	1.92	2.46
15. I agree with you. I'm afraid I disagree.	4.23	2,77	4.23
16. Summarizing (So, you think...;You mean...)	2.46	1.85	3.00
17. What does that mean?	2.69	2.85	3.69
18. Do you know what I mean?	2.46	2.38	3.31
19. What do you mean?	2.92	3.00	3.77
20. I mean...	2.31	2.46	3.07

Note: 13 students responded to the scale from 1 to 5: 1(I don't know it); 2(I know it but never used it); 3 (I know it and sometimes use it); 4 (I know it and often use it); 5 (I can use it naturally).