Developing Students' Communicative Competence Through the Use of Communicative Strategies

大学生の英語伝達能力を育てる授業に向けて

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1. Background

Improving students' communicative competence is usually an aim of many, if not most, EFL teachers and EFL researchers and it has been recognized that students learning a second language need to develop communicative strategies to help them overcome or compensate for the inevitable breakdowns in communication occur.

With this in mind, this "Basic English Conversation Course" and a section of the General Education Speaking-Writing class at a university in Japan were designed to give students the tools to interrupt, ask questions, give verbal and non-verbal signs they understood or didn't understand, to ask questions for meaning, and to rephrase and describe vocabulary all in a manner taking into account the social situation in which the conversation was taking place. Learning to recognize social register was also an important part of the course.

1.1 What is Communicative Competence?

The concepts of competence and communicative competence were initially prompted and discussed by Chomsky and thereafter Hymes. In 1965, Chomsky suggested that linguistics deals with the language knowledge of an ideal speaker-hearer in a homogeneous community and is unaffected by performance variables (Chomsky, 1965: 3). However in 1971, Hymes suggested that the competence Chomsky had discussed was 'linguistic' competence. Hymes suggested that this was only part of a broader concept he called 'communicative' competence. This included not only linguistic competence but also other aspects, specifically socio-cultural dimensions. According to Hymes, a theory of language needs to deal with 'the constitutive roles of socio-cultural features ...' (Hymes, 1971: 277).

By the 1980s Canale and Swain (1980) recognized three competences which combine to produce communicative competence. First, grammatical competence; second, sociolinguistic competence; and finally, strategic competence. Strategic competence is related to the "verbal and non-verbal communicative

strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or insufficient competence" (Canale & Swain, 1980 : 29).

1.2 What are Communicative Strategies?

Research into communicative strategies (CS) during the 1970s sought to identify the characteristics of techniques good language learners used to reduce the demands of L2 interaction with the belief that these were a distinct set of techniques that could then be explicitly taught to less proficient language learners (Selinker, 1972; Vardi, 1973; Tarone, 1977). These early studies resulted in the identification, classification and description of CS and strategic techniques associated with effective language production.

Moreover, since both native and non-native language speakers at times struggle to find the appropriate word or grammatical construction, such instances do not entirely originate from a linguistic deficit but represent a linguistic retrieval or linguistic shortfall (Oxford, 1990: 18). The ways in which both native and non-native speakers bridge the gap in instances when there is a communication breakdown are known as CS (Bialystok, 1990: 23).

It is these strategies which deal specifically with language production problems and whose influence is recognized in improving learners' ability to communicate despite gaps in language proficiency are known as CS.

1.3 Classification of Communicative Strategies

CS can be classified according to the options used by the learner, and are a deliberate attempt to maintain communication. They can be broadly categorized into achievement and reduction strategies.

Achievement strategies allow a speaker to compensate for deficiencies by using a different method for communicating their original message. These techniques allow the speaker to use their limited linguistic system and represents active behaviour in overcoming a communication breakdown and maintaining interaction. Examples of achievement strategies include: code switching, L1 based strategies, cooperative strategies and non-linguistic strategies such as gestures.

Reduction strategies allow the speaker to avoid communication breakdown by abandoning, reducing or simplifying their intended message. They may also ask assistance from the listener through confirmation or clarification.

Table 1. Communicative Strategies: *Reduction* vs. *Achievement*

Reduction Strategies	Achievement Strategies
Topic avoidance	Code switching
Message abandonment	L1-based strategies
Semantic avoidance	Cooperative strategies
Message reduction	Non-linguistic strategies

(Corder,1983: 17; Farech and Kasper, 1983: 36-56; Burrows, 2009: 2)

2. Class description and methodology

2.1 Class description

The classes consisted of 25 to 30 second-year university students. The students in the Basic English Conversation course were all English or International Studies majors from the Faculty of Education. The students in the General Education SW (Speaking and Writing) class were all second year Economics majors. Each class met once a week for ninety minutes and CS were taught in the second part of the course for approximately eight weeks. The main textbook used was "Tell me More" by Matthew Reesor (2004). This is a skills-based speaking and listening textbook aimed specifically at Japanese students who possess basic to intermediate English language abilities. It is designed to help them acquire essential skills and strategies for effective communication in a variety of situations. Students spent approximately two weeks on each of the four chapters covering some basic communication strategies.

Pair work and group work played a crucial role in the classroom. The textbook was designed with pair and group work in mind and students spent a large proportion of each class working with their partners, practicing the skills learned or in small groups reviewing all the skills learned to that point. Each week the students were asked (as homework) to find a short news or magazine article which they would then read to their group members. The students reading the articles also prepared explanations of any difficult words and at the end, asked their group members ten questions to check comprehension. During this stage of the lesson, students were encouraged to use any of the CS learned to date. As the weeks progressed, the number of skills learned increased and this section of the class took up more and more of the class time.

This provided students with practice for the final exam in which the whole class listened to the teacher read a passage which was above the comprehension/vocabulary level of the students.

The criteria and methodology for the final test are described in Batten (2002). In order to answer the questions that followed, students had to ask questions on meaning, check that they understood and ask for spelling.

2.2 Description of CS taught

a. **Approximating**: to substitute one word for another with a similar meaning (synonym) to overcome a communication or language gap. An example would be to substitute to substitute "match" for "light" in the phrase "Do you have a light?" if the listener were not familiar with the word "light" in this context.

b. **Word coinage**: to invent a word to overcome a communication gap. For example, if the speaker or listener did not know the word "zebra", they could use "stripped-horse" instead.

c. **Circumlocution**: to use a phrase to describe an unknown word or using a phrase to communicate what could also be described by a word. With circumlocution, students often had to use several phrases to explain what they meant. By explaining what type of word (animal, person, place), what it looked like, where it is commonly found or used and finally what it was used for, students were able to communicate their idea without the knowledge of the word.

d. **Rephrasing**: to say an utterance a different way, using different sentences or phrases with the same meaning. For example "I don't live in the city" has a similar meaning as the phrase "I live in the countryside".

3. Survey Results and Discussion

In general, studies into the teaching of CS in the classroom have been shown to be beneficial. Improvements have been noted not only in the use of these strategies themselves but also in developing communicative competence (Dörnyei, 1995). Nakano (1996) noted that the proficiency of the language learner determines the number and variety of strategies used, how the strategies are applied to the communication problem, and the actual appropriateness of the strategies themselves.

Prior to starting the CS part of the course, students were asked to answer questions on how to check for meaning, clarify the meaning, check spelling, and control their interlocutor's speech speed and/or volume. Many of the students complained that it was "too difficult" and that they did not know how to politely ask these kinds of questions and sometimes they were unable to ask anything.

On the last day before the final exam, students were again asked to complete a similar questionnaire

and in addition were asked to rate their own confidence in these areas.

The students were asked to rate their own confidence in five areas:

1. asking questions about meaning
2. asking for more information
3. asking the speaker to speak more loudly or slowly
4. checking that they had understood
5. asking for the spelling

Questions, 1, 3 and 5 showed the greatest increase in confidence. 21% of the total number of students (33% Education, 8% Economics) reported that they felt *very confident* asking questions in these areas, with another 29% (20% Education, 40% Economics) saying that they felt *more confident*. A further 12% said they felt *a little more confident*. Therefore, in total for the two classes, 62% of students felt their confidence had increased.

Table 2. Survey results for Questions 1, 3, and 5:

Questions 1, 3, 5	very confident	more confident	a little more confident	total number of students 5
Education	10 (33%)	6 (20%)	3 (10%)	19 (63%)
Economics	2 (8%)	16 (40%)	4 (16%)	22 (88%)

The results were more varied for Questions 2 and 4. For question 2 (asking for more information) 15 students (50%) from the Faculty of Education answered that they felt very confident or more confident. A further 12 (40%) felt that they were a little more confident and only 3 students felt that their confidence was the same as at the beginning. No students felt that they were less confident.

The students from the Faculty of Economics were less confident in this area than the students from the Faculty of Education. Only 4 students (16%) felt very or more confident, a further 15 (60%) felt a little more confident and 6 students (24%) felt their confidence was unchanged.

Table 3. Survey results for Question 2 – Asking for more information (for example, "What do you mean by ....?"

	very or more confident	*a little more confident*	*the same as at the start of the course*	*less confident*
Education	15 (50%)	12 (40%)	3 (10%)	0
Economics	4 (16%)	15 (60%)	6 (24%)	0

Question 4 (checking that you have understood) showed a similar pattern to Question 2. Overall, students were less confident with this area than any other, and as with Question 2, the students from the Faculty of Education showed a greater degree of confidence than those from the Faculty of Economics. In the Faculty of Education, 13 students (43%) answered that they felt very or more confident, 9 students (30%) were a little more confident but 8 (26%) believed that their confidence level was unchanged from the start of the course. Overall, 22 students (73) thought that their confidence had increased.

The students from the Faculty of Economics were less confident than the students from the Faculty of Education and this was the area that they felt least confident in. Only 3 students (12%) thought that they were more confident (no student felt that they were very confident), 12 (48%) students were a little more confident, but 10 students (40%) felt that their confidence was unchanged. However, even though many students did not see an increase in their confidence level, 60% of the students did feel more confident. This percent is lower than that of the Faculty of Education students but still shows an improvement.

Table 4. Question 4 – Students checking that they understood what they heard

	very, or more, confident	*a little more confident*	*the same as at the start of the course*	*less confident*
Education	13 (43%)	9 (30%)	8 (26%)	0
Economics	3 (12%)	12 (48%)	10 (40%)	0

This would suggest that skills such as asking for spelling, for someone to speak louder or more slowly, and asking questions about meaning were easier for the students to acquire and feel confident using than more complex skills such as asking for more information or checking that they had understood. Additional explicit practice in these areas would be beneficial to the students in developing their self-confidence in these areas.

4. Conclusion

In the course described above, there was an implicit and sustained focus on the acquisition, demonstration, practice and evaluation (both amongst students and from the teacher) of communicative strategies. From the authors' experience, we can say that while many classes do contain sections that partially address instruction in various categories of communicative strategies, it is generally not the norm for an entire course to maintain a constant focus on them.

This was the impetus for the students' questionnaire: What would be the students' perceptions of such instruction?

As can be seen from the results above, across the board there was a perceived increase in confidence in students' own use of the assigned strategies. In the final testing for this class, evidence was also obtained suggesting that students' confidence in such abilities was not misplaced. Of course, whether these strategies, practiced in the classroom, would actually be transferred to any productive use outside in the 'real world' of L2 use remains to be seen and is beyond the scope of this paper.

Anecdotally, we observed that in courses taught following this one, some of the students had incorporated the strategies persistently into their 'menu of things to do' when using English in the classroom. However, many students, once the focus of classes had changed, did not use the strategies. As with any new skill, constant reinforcement and success will strengthen a student's commitment to using it.

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Appendix 1.

Final Class "Self-confidence" Questionnaire

Compared with the beginning of this course how as your confidence changed in:

Rate from 1-5. 1 = less confident, 2 = same as at the beginning, 3 = a little more confident, 4 = more confident, 5 = very confident

1. Asking questions for meaning	1	2	3	4	5
2. Asking for more information	1	2	3	4	5
3. Asking the speaker to slow down, speak louder etc.	1	2	3	4	5
4. Checking that you have understood	1	2	3	4	5
5. Asking for spelling	1	2	3	4	5

In class behaviour:

Did you ask the teacher questions in class?

Yes, how often – every class, sometimes etc _____

If no, why not? _____

Did you ask questions during the exam?

Yes. About how many? _____

No, because _____

When working in small groups or with a partner, did you ask any questions?

_____

Any further comments? You can write in English or Japanese.