

# ***Strategic competence and how to teach it***

***Zoltán Dörnyei and  
Sarah Thurrell***

*Applied linguists have for some time suggested that communicative competence includes a major component, usually termed strategic competence, the development of which largely determines the learner's fluency and conversational skills. Practising teachers, however, are usually unaware of the significance of this competence, and hardly any activities have been developed to include strategy training in actual language teaching. The aim of this article is to bridge the gap between theory and practice by first describing strategic competence and then presenting language exercises to facilitate its development.*

## ***Introduction***

The communicative approach to language teaching has been welcomed and adopted in many parts of the world. However, as Nunan (1987: 137) has pointed out, 'While a great deal has been written on the theory and practice of communicative language teaching, there have been comparatively few studies of actual communicative language practices'. He has argued that the language classroom should be made more 'communicative', and has called for research on how to foster communicative language use.

As one response to Nunan's comments, this article is intended to draw attention to a crucial, and yet rather neglected, aspect of communicative language skills *strategic competence*, which concerns the ability to express oneself in the face of difficulties or limited language knowledge. The lack of fluency or conversational skills that students often complain about is, to a considerable extent, due to the underdevelopment of strategic competence. Therefore, we believe that it is important to include strategy training in a communicative syllabus. The paper is divided into two parts: First, we provide an overview of what strategic competence involves. Then we present a series of teaching tasks which we have successfully used to facilitate the development of this competence in our students.

## ***Communicative competence***

Communicative language teaching is aimed at improving the learner's *communicative competence*. According to the widely accepted theory of Canale and Swain (1980), communicative competence as a whole can be explained in terms of three component competencies, grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. *Grammatical competence* involves knowledge of the language code (grammar rules, vocabulary, pronunciation, spelling, etc.). Language teaching has traditionally been aimed at developing this competence above all others.

*Sociolinguistic competence* is made up of two sets of rules—sociocultural rules and rules of discourse.<sup>1</sup> Sociocultural rules specify ways of using language appropriately in a given situation: they are concerned with style, register, degree of politeness, and so on. Rules of discourse concern the combining of language structures to produce unified texts in different modes—for example: a political speech, an academic paper, a cookery recipe, etc. The focus here is on certain cohesion devices (grammatical links) and coherence rules (appropriate combination of communicative functions) to organize the forms and meanings.

It can be noted that more and more material in modern course books is designed to develop sociolinguistic competence in the learner, and current language tests also often involve the measurement of this competence.

### **Strategic competence**

The component of communicative competence most neglected by language course books and teachers, however, is strategic competence. This was defined by Canale and Swain (1980: 30) as ‘verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient competence’. In other words, strategic competence refers to the ability to get one’s meaning across successfully to communicative partners, especially when problems arise in the communication process.

Strategic competence is relevant to both L1 and L2, since communication breakdowns occur and must be overcome not only in a foreign language but in one’s mother tongue as well. However, since strategic competence involves strategies to be used when communication is difficult, it is of crucial importance for foreign language learners. A lack of strategic competence may account for situations when students with a firm knowledge of grammar and a wide range of vocabulary get stuck and are unable to carry out their communicative intent. At oral language exams such students may even fail, and their teachers often cannot comprehend how that could happen to their ‘best students’. On the other hand, there are learners who can communicate successfully with only one hundred words—they rely almost entirely on their strategic competence.

In the last decade, the study of communication strategies has attracted increasing attention (see, for example, Varadi, 1980; Corder, 1981; Faerch and Kasper, 1983; Scholfield, 1987; Rubin, 1987; Tarone and Yule, 1989). But, as Ellis (1985: 183) remarks, ‘Theoretical discussion of communication strategies has predominated over empirical research into their use.’ Available empirical results confirm anecdotal evidence and theoretical assumptions that strategic competence exists fairly independently of the other components of communicative competence. Paribakht (1985), for example, found that strategic competence in L1 is transferable to L2 learning situations, and thus adult learners often enter the L2 learning situation with a fairly developed strategic competence.

If strategic competence is not directly dependent on the other components of language proficiency, then it should be possible to cultivate it

separately. In fact, O'Malley's (1987) research provides some evidence for the teachability of strategic competence. He concludes that:

Teachers should be confident that there exist a number of strategies which can be embedded into their existing curricula, that can be taught to students with only modest extra effort, and that can improve the overall class performance . . . Future research should be directed to refining the strategy training approaches, identifying effects associated with individual strategies, and determining procedures for strengthening the impact of the strategies on student outcomes. (p. 143).

### **Types of communication strategies**

As has been mentioned above, strategic competence is activated when learners wish to convey messages which their linguistic resources do not allow them to express successfully. The strategies they can use at such times were divided by Corder (1981) into two main types, *message adjustment strategies* and *resource expansion strategies*. Other researchers have used different terms for the two types: reduction or avoidance strategies for the first, and achievement strategies for the second (see Faerch and Kasper, 1983; Ellis, 1985).

Message adjustment strategies involve the tailoring of one's message to one's resources, along the lines of the old slogan, 'Language learners should say what they can, and not what they want to.' These strategies involve either a slight alteration or a reduction of the message. Using these strategies often leads learners to feel that what they say sounds simplistic or vague. Message adjustment is, in fact, a kind of risk avoidance, which is clearly expressed in the following typical learner statement: 'I know how far I can go and what I shouldn't even try'.

With resource expansion or achievement strategies, the learners risk failure and attempt to remain in the conversation, conveying their messages by compensating somehow for their deficiencies. Such strategies are either co-operative or non-co-operative. The former involve the learner's appeal for help to his/her interlocutor. This can take a direct form (e.g. questions like 'What do you call . . . ?'), or can be indirect (e.g. by means of a pause, eye gaze, etc.). The latter do not call for the communication partner's assistance—the learner tries to overcome the problem drawing on his/her own resources. He/she may use:

- 1 paraphrase or circumlocution—i.e. describing or exemplifying the target object or action (e.g. 'the thing you open wine bottles with' for 'corkscrew', or 'small fast military plane' for 'fighter');
- 2 approximation—i.e. using a term which expresses the meaning of the target lexical item as closely as possible (e.g. 'ship' for 'sailing boat', or 'fish' for 'carp');
- 3 non-linguistic means (e.g. mime, gesture, or imitation);
- 4 borrowed or invented words (e.g. 'auto' for 'car', or 'housecontroller' for 'caretaker').

To remain in the conversation and to gain time to think, learners may also

use certain conversational formulae or ‘prefabricated conversational patterns’ (Rubin, 1987), such as fillers or hesitation devices (e.g. I see; Well, as a matter of fact). In written communication, a very common resource expansion strategy is using a dictionary.

Resource expansion strategies are not, of course, restricted to L2 use. Tarone and Yule (1989) found, for example, that circumlocution and approximation occurred more often in the speech of native speakers than in that of non-native speakers.

### **Strategy training activities**

The training of strategic competence has been rather neglected. As Tarone and Yule (1989: 114–5) state, ‘There are few, if any, materials available at present which teach learners how to use communication strategies when problems are encountered in the process of transmitting information’.

In an attempt to fill the gap, the following practical ideas for strategy training are all aimed at enhancing some aspects of message adjustment and resource expansion skills. They have all worked with our learners. We hope that they will inspire teachers to include strategy training in their lessons, as well as to design further techniques along these lines.

### **Fillers**

The knowledge and confident use of fillers are a crucial part of learners’ strategic competence, since these invaluable delaying or hesitation devices can be used to carry on the conversation at times of difficulty, when language learners would otherwise end up feeling more and more desperate and would typically grind to a halt. Examples of fillers range from very short structures (well; I mean; actually; you know), to what are almost phrases (as a matter of fact; to be quite honest; now let me think; I’ll tell you what; I see what you mean; etc.).

A good way of presenting fillers is by playing unedited authentic recordings for students to note down all the variations of what they consider to be fillers. They may also write down the bare bones of the information they hear on tape without the fillers. With carefully chosen material, very often five or six spoken interchanges can be condensed to one or two lines of relevant information.

Once students are aware of the importance of fillers, they should be encouraged to use them (perhaps even over-use them at first) whenever possible—right from the beginner stage. Here are three examples of exercises involving fillers:

#### *Nonsense dialogues*

In pairs, students compose short nonsense dialogues that consist almost entirely of fillers; they may use names of cities, for example, as content words:

**A** You know, I thought maybe London.

**B** Well, I see what you mean, and don’t get me wrong—that’s very

Frankfurt—but actually, as a matter of fact, I was thinking more along the lines of Paris . . . if you see what I mean.

**A** Really? But that's Istanbul!

When performing their dialogues, students should speak naturally, using the appropriate expressiveness and intonation.

### *Adding fillers*

Take a short part (2–3 utterances) of a current dialogue from the course book you are using and put it on the board. Divide the students into groups of three; each group in turn must add one filler to the dialogue, which you then insert into the text on the board. You may want to specify that one filler can be used only once. If a group fails to provide an extra filler, they drop out.

### *'One-word' dialogues*

In pairs or threes, students construct a dialogue in which each utterance must be one word and yet there should be a logical flow to the whole, for example:

**A** Tomorrow?

**B** Trip!

**A** Where?

**B** Chicago . . .

(Naturally the students' examples will be longer.)

These skeleton dialogues are first performed as they are. After that, students extend each one-word utterance as much as they can without changing the meaning or logic of the whole, and without adding any extra information. Because of the nature of the task, many of the words they add will be fillers, for example, using the dialogue above:

**A** So, what are we going to do tomorrow then?

**B** Well, as a matter of fact, I was thinking of going on a trip.

**A** Oh, I see. Interesting. And where to?

**B** Well actually Chicago appeals to me, you know . . .

### *Going off the point*

Another important part of strategic competence is the ability to 'go off the point' smoothly when you don't want to, or simply cannot, answer a question. If students learn how to evade the answer, or to slant the conversation in a desired direction, that will give them a lot of confidence, because they will then know that they can remain in control of the conversation even if something unexpected occurs. These are the kinds of skills that a language examinee will find particularly useful at an oral exam, and the following two exercises were indeed very much welcomed by our students on examination preparation courses.

### *Avoiding giving information*

The teacher addresses a student with a question that asks for specific information, for example, 'How old are you?' The student must respond

in two or three sentences without actually giving that particular information. A possible answer might be, for example, 'Well, that's an interesting question. Isn't it strange how people always feel that they need to know the age of a person? I don't really think that age is important at all . . . .' The longer the answer, the better. It is possibly beneficial to allow the students some preparation time on the first occasion they attempt this exercise, after which it should be spontaneous.

### *'Judo'*

Tell the students that no matter what your question is, they must steer the conversation to a given topic, for instance, 'judo'. If the question is, for example, 'Does your grandmother own a pet?', the answer might be something like this:

Yes, my grandmother keeps an enormous Alsatian dog, because it makes her feel safer when she's at home alone. When she was younger, of course, she didn't need a dog because she was extremely fit and active, and right up to the age of sixty she attended judo classes. She believes that judo is very useful for women who live alone, as well as being an exciting sport. . . .

Students can stop when they get to the required topic. Again, it may be useful to leave them some preparation time on the first occasion.

### *Paraphrase and circumlocution*

#### *Explanations*

Hand out a slip of paper to each student with the name of an object on each slip. Everybody in turn must try to 'explain' their word to the others without actually saying what it is. Students jot down their guesses for all the words and the winner is the person whose word has been found out by the most students. Since some words are easier to 'explain' than others, a fair result will be obtained only after several rounds.

#### *Definitions*

In pairs, students are given the name of an object (e.g. car) which they must define by using a relative clause (e.g. 'A car is a vehicle in which you can travel'). Each pair in turn reads out their definition, while the other pairs check whether it is precise enough. If it is not—that is, if they can find another object that the definition suits (e.g. 'bus' in this case) they get a point, and for another point they must give a more specific definition (e.g. 'a car is a small vehicle in which you can travel'). Of course, this new definition is also open to debate.

#### *Paraphrasing*

An interpretive strategy (from Tarone and Yule, 1989), often taught to counsellors and psychotherapists, involves the paraphrase of the interlocutor's whole message. An example would be, 'So you are saying that . . .', or 'You mean . . .'. This is a very useful strategy for learners to clarify what they have heard and to invite the interlocutor to help if they have misunderstood something.

### **Appealing for help**     *Interruptions*

Student 1 (S1) reads out a text from the course book; Student 2 (S2) interrupts S1, asking him/her to repeat a word again, for example:

S1 London is the capital . . . .

S2 Sorry, can you repeat this last word again . . .

or Sorry, I couldn't hear the word after 'the' . . .

A variation on this involves S2 enquiring about the meaning of a word, for example:

S1 London is the capital of Great Britain.

S2 Sorry, what does 'capital' mean?

or What do you mean by 'capital'?

This task can be combined with a paraphrasing task: S1 must then explain what the word in question means.

*'I don't understand'*

S2 tells S1 that he/she did not understand the whole utterance or sentence, for example:

S2 I'm sorry but I don't think I understood you . . . .

or I'm sorry but I couldn't follow you . . . .

This time, S1 first repeats the sentence more slowly, but when that does not help, and S2 asks again, S1 must paraphrase the whole sentence.

### **Conclusion**

We have tried to draw attention to *strategic competence*, and to provide practical ideas on how to include its training in language classes. The first part of the article was centred around the idea that strategic competence is a crucial component of communicative competence, largely determining the learner's fluency and conversational skills. The practical ideas in the second part of the article involve strategy training. Some of the exercises may seem strange at first sight: teachers might wonder about encouraging learners to use (what's more: over-use!) fillers, or to go off the point and evade answers. After all, these are language behaviours normally not encouraged in one's mother tongue. The answer is that the activities and the phenomena they practice provide the learner with a sense of security in the language by allowing him/her room to manoeuvre in times of difficulty. Besides developing confidence, strategy training also facilitates spontaneous improvisation skills and linguistic creativity. Finally, not only do such exercises improve the learners' performance skills, but students *enjoy* them very much—so they can also be used as ice-breakers, warmers or games.

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### Note

- 1 The two sets of rules were later treated as two independent competencies by Canale (1984) and Swain (1985).

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### The authors

Zoltán Dörnyei is a Lecturer at the Department of English, Eötvös University, Budapest, where he is involved in teacher training and research in TEFL. He holds a PhD in psycholinguistics and has published several papers on the social psychological background of foreign language learning. He is also co-author of two vocabulary-building English course books.

Sarah Thurrell has a degree in Modern Languages from Oxford, and has taught EFL in France and Hungary. Currently, she is a Lecturer in English at the Teacher Training Institute of Eötvös University, Budapest. Her interests involve the designing of communicative classroom activities, and she has co-authored a vocabulary-building English course book.