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Strategic Competence in Language Teaching and ELT Syllabus

Communication strategies (CSs) are important in helping second/foreign language learners to communicate successfully when they are faced with a production problem due to their lack of linguistic knowledge. This paper aims to support the importance of developing second language learners' strategic competence and making communication strategies part of an ELT syllabus. This paper first discusses the various definitions of strategic competence and communication strategies. Then it briefly presents various communication strategies used by second language learners to solve their communication problems. The major portion of this paper is devoted to strategy training and its advantages in language learning. Finally, the paper concludes with the importance of introducing tasks and activities on communication strategies in EFL syllabi, and suggests ways of improving teaching methodology to develop strategic competence.

1. Strategic Competence

The ultimate goal of English language teaching is to develop the learners' communicative competence which enables them to communicate successfully in the real world. According to Canale (1983) communicative competence comprises grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence. Since the main concern of this paper is strategic competence, we shall examine only this component of communicative competence. *Strategic competence* refers to the learners' use of strategies during the course of communication to bridge the gap in their linguistic knowledge. Many writers stress the importance of the *strategic competence* as an essential component in the communicative competence and they suggest that it plays a major role in communicating successfully to develop second language learners' communicative competence (Canale 1983; Canale/Swain 1980; Wannaruk 2002).

Canale/Swain (1980) describe strategic competence as providing a *compensatory* function when the linguistic competence of the language user is inadequate. According to Canale/Swain (ibid.), strategic competence consists of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies, and it is called into action to "compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient competence". For Little (1999), two problems arise from this definition: (i) there are many communicative situations in which strategic processes play an "offensive" rather than a "defensive" role; (ii) a definition of strategic competence that concentrates exclusively on language use may encourage the assump-

tion that there is a psychological disjunction at the strategic level between language use and language learning.

Tarone/Yule (1989) believe that strategic competence includes "the ability to select an effective means of performing a communicative act ... strategic competence is gauged, not by degree of correctness ... but rather by degree of success, or effectiveness" (1989: 105). They proposed two areas related to strategic competence: the learners' skill in transmitting messages successfully and comprehensibly to the listener or understanding the information received, and the use of communication strategies by both speakers and listeners to solve their problems when they arise during the course of communication.

One of the most recent, well-structured and fully comprehensive models of communicative competence which solves the problems that arise in Canale/Swain's (1980) definition, is that of Bachman (1990), who defines strategic competence as "the capacity that relates language competence, or knowledge of language, to the language user's knowledge of structures and the features of the context in which communication takes place" (Bachman 1990: 107). Early reference to strategic competence (Canale/Swain 1980; Canale 1983), gave emphasis to compensatory strategies, that is, strategies used to compensate for a lack of linguistic knowledge, whereas Bachman provided a broader model that included many more strategies which do not fall under this category.

According to Bachman (1990), strategic competence embraces all aspects of the *assessment*, *planning* and *execution* of communicative tasks. In his model, there is an assessment component where the speakers set their communicative goals and assess the language needed to perform the needed task (*metacognitive strategies*). In the planning component, they retrieve and select appropriate language items from their competence (*cognitive strategies*) and plan how to use them. In the execution component, they implement the plan (*execution strategies*). Finally, speakers may assess their performance to evaluate the extent to which the communicative goals have been achieved (*post-task assessment strategies*). He sees strategic competence not only as a component of communicative competence, but also as a more general cognitive capacity.

2. Communication Strategies (CSs)

Both native and non-native speakers use communication strategies, but non-native speakers use them more frequently, and they struggle to find the appropriate language item or structure when attempting to communicate a particular meaning. For example, in our native language, Arabic, we sometimes find it difficult to retrieve a certain vocabulary item, so we resort to CSs. Faucette (2001: 1) supports this view "It seems evident that no individual's linguistic repertoire or control of language is perfect".

Non-native speakers attempt to solve their communication problems when they lack adequate resources in the target language by resorting to CSs. Most researchers agree that CSs are used to bridge the gap that exists between the non-native speakers' linguistic competence in the target language and their communicative needs. When faced with such problems, they may try to avoid a certain language or grammatical item, abandon the message, paraphrase when they do not have the appropriate form, describe the object or its properties, use self-correction, repeat a language item to gain time, mumble, translate literally from their native language, use similarly sounding words, ask the interlocutor for the correct form or item, use gestures to convey meaning, insert a word or a phrase from their native language, apply L2 morphology and/or phonology to L1 lexical items, or use word coinage which produces items that do not exist in the target language.

It seems very difficult to find a rigorous definition of *communication strategies* on which communication strategy researchers have had an agreement. There have been many definitions proposed for communication strategies of second language learners. Poulisse/ Bongaerts/Kellerman (1984: 72) defined CSs as "Strategies which a language user employs in order to achieve his intended meaning on becoming aware of problems arising during the planning phase of an utterance due to his own linguistic shortcoming". On the other hand, Faerch/Kasper (1983: 36) define CSs as "potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal".

Faerch/Kasper's (1983) defintion is the most appropriate for this paper as it associates communication strategies with the solutions to the problems language users encounter. In their defintion, Faerch/Kasper (ibid.) neither restrict communication strategies to the interaction that takes place between the speaker and the listener, nor do they restrict their use to non-native speakers as Harding (1983) does.

To illustrate the different types of 'communication strategies', the following exerpt is taken from the author's data collected from Arab English majors' performance on the picture story telling task at Yarmouk University in Jordan (Rabab'ah, 2001). This is a transcription of one of the subjects' oral audio-recorded production. The CS cases are underlined and lebelled as to which strategy.

> e:r, …, yesterday there was a child ride his *bass(kaleit)* (tr: bicycle) ((the subject didn't complete the Arabic word for bicycle)) his bicycle and e:r ,…,…, he wa(lk) wa(lk) he ride his bicycle on a street e:m ,…, after him or beside him there is car a car ,…, riding ,…, or dri:ving by an a:ngry man. this man er do
>
> *SELF-CORRECTION STRATEGY*
>
> not notice the ,…, child er so he: e:m ,…,…, e:r ,…, so the man ,…,…,…,…, kick the child and ,.., e:r I think the child will wa:s I think the child was er ,…, em injured, and his bicycle was broken, ,…,…, e:r ,…, ((sigh)) but he: ,…,…,.,.,., fix it. fix ,.., it.

the child fix his bicycle. and he ,...,..., continue ,..., his riding ,...,on the street. while he: er while he, while he e:r the boy riding his bicycle, he ,..., by the accident

REPETITION STRATEGY

he find the man who kicked him, e:m may be the man I I think ,...,or

APPROXIMATION STRATEGY (*Intended meaning*: hit/knocked him down)

I notice that the ma:n that the the man ca:r ,...,...,...,..,I think ((sigh)) the man with er with too(l) ,...,fix his car ,...,..., his car is er is,...,..., it's unmove and er ,...,this is ca:lled ...

WORD COINAGE (*Int. meaning*: It broke down.)

kama todeen todan in Arabic Barafsh ahkeha bilingilizi

LANGUAGE SWITCH STRATEGY/ARABIC (*tr*: Tit for tat. I can't say it in English)

but the little bo:y e:m ...,continue his er his em way

APPROXIMATION (*Intended meaning*: continued his journey/trip)

without pay attention to: e:r the driver.

CIRCUMLOCUTION STRATEGY (*Intended meaning*: He did not stop to help the man.)

A word, sometimes, has multiple meanings; it might not be the one intended, and we may have misheard it in the first place. The question now is how we know what the speaker meant? The answer is the use of communication strategies, which I may call *negotiation strategies*. These strategies are very helpful to get the intended meaning, and they may lead to learning. To illustrate, once I was explaining to an interlocutor the laws of Islam regarding adultery.

AUTHOR: The muslim ruler orders to dig a big hole in the ground and to put the adulterer in it. Muslims are also gathered and they start throwing him/her with stones till he/she dies.

INTERLOCUTOR: You mean they stone him?

AUTHOR: Yeah, he is stoned.

It was the first time for me to know that 'stone' can be used as a verb. *Confirmation request* used by the interlocutor "You mean they stone him" helped me in using the passive structure in the second place "Yeah, he is stoned". Since then, this word or structure has become part of my linguistic repertoire. This is an example of how communication strategies lead to learning. Other strategies are illustrated below with examples of prefabicated patterns.

1. *Appeal for help*: Trying to elicit help from your partner by asking an explicit question to fill the information gap.

   EXAMPLES:

   What do you call it?

   What is it called?

   How do you spell it?

2. *Asking for repetition*: Requesting repetition when not hearing or misunderstanding something properly.
   EXAMPLES:
   Pardon?
   Beg your pardon?
   What?
   Can you say it again, please?
3. *Asking for clarification*: Requesting explanation of an unfamiliar meaning structure.
   EXAMPLES:
   What do you mean?
   You saw what?
4. *Asking for confirmation/Confirmation request:* Requesting confirmation whether one heard or understood something correctly. It might be by asking full questions.
   EXAMPLES:
   You mean....?
   You said...?
   Do you mean that...?
5. *Comprehension check*: Asking questions to check that the interlocutor or partner is following you.
   EXAMPLES:
   Are you following me?
   You know what I mean?
   Have you got my point?
6. *Guessing*: It involves real indecision and uncertainty.
   EXAMPLE:
   Is it a sink?
   Is it Newcastle club?

The question now is: Should we teach communication strategies? The answer to this question will be in the following section.

3. COMMUNICATION STRATEGY TEACHING

Experimental research on teaching communication strategies has been in favour of teaching them to develop the learners' strategic competence, which enables them to communicate more effectively and successfully (e. g. Dornyei/Thurrell 1991; Faerch/Kasper 1983; Tarone/Yule, 1989).

Many writers were in support of strategy training and they suggested that teaching CSs has got many advantages which lead to successful communication and learning (e. g. Faerch/Kasper 1983, 1986; Dornyei 1995). Mariani (1994: 18) summarizes these advantages as follows:

1. Indirect learning strategies help to remain in conversation and this will lead to more successful performance and much positive impact on learning. He considers CS as part of language learning strategies.
2. By remaining in conversation, CSs help them on the productive side to get some useful feedback on their performance and on the receptive side, to execute control over their intake, for example, by making their interlocutor modify his/her utterances.
3. CSs train learners to be flexible to cope with the unexpected and the unpredictable. They help students to get used to non-exact communication which is perhaps the real nature of all communication.
4. CSs encourage risk-taking and individual initiative, and this is a step towards linguistic and cognitive autonomy.

Rabab'ah (2003: 139) also supports the idea of raising the learners' awareness of the nature and communicative potential of CSs by making them conscious of the CSs existing in their repertoire, and sensitising them to the appropriate situation. He recommends strategy conscious raising for the following reasons:

1. CSs can lead to learning by eleciting unknown language items from the interlocuters, especially in appeal for help strategy.
2. CSs are part of language use. Even native speakers use CSs in their speech, especially time-gaining devices in order to keep the conversation going such as 'You know', 'what do you call it?' and other strategies.
3. CSs use is not an indication of communication failure. On the contrary, it is an indication of communication success as shown in Rabab'ah's study (2001) where most of the students' performance was comprehensible and was measured as successful.

In Cohen et al.'s study (1998), 55 intermediate foreign language learners at the University of Minnesota were either participants in a strategies-based instructional treatment or were comparison students receiving the regular ten-week language course. Both groups performed a series of three speaking tasks on a pre-post basis. In Task 1, students provided a self-description in order that a visitor would recognise them at the airport. In task 2, the subjects were asked to retell a short folklore passage. In task 3, the subjects described their favourite city.

The findings of the study suggest that "explicitly describing, discussing, and reinforcing strategies in the classroom and raising them to the level of conscious awareness, can have a

direct pay off on student outcomes" (Cohen et al. 1998: 151). If instructors systematically introduce and reinforce strategies that help students speak the target language more effectively, their students may well improve their performance on language taks. Explicit and overt strategy training better enables students to consciously transfer specific strategies to new contexts. The study also seems to endorse the notion of integrating strategy training directly into the calssroom instructional plan and embedding strategies into daily language tasks. According to Cohen (1996: 16), in this case "students get accustomed to having the teacher teach both the language content and the language learning and use strategy at the same time".

The question now is: Which strategies should we teach? Not all CSs may be worth bringing to students' attention. L2-based strategies, such as approximation, word-coinage and circumlocution should be encouraged the most, because they are most likely to lead to successful communication. Based on his class observation, Brooks (1992) recommends CS instruction, especially circumlocution and appeals for help, through the use of jigsaw tasks. The results of the empirical study conducted by Dornyei (1995) suggest that learners' use of CSs should be developed through focused instruction. He advocates a 'direct approach' to teaching and includes awareness-raising in his approach.

The findings of the pilot study which was conducted on three-year college graduates at Etisalat Academy in the United Arab Emirates support the importance of CS consciousness-raising and teaching .

3.1. Pilot study

3.1.1. Purpose

To find out if communication strategy training may result in effective communication and transmission of comprehensible messages, I conducted an experiment on 22 female three-year college graduates. I was asked to teach English for one day in the induction programme for the Graduate Trainees at Etisalat Academy in Dubai. The experiment aimed to encourage the graduate trainees to be risk-takers in their daily conversations in the Emirates Telecommunications Corporation (Etisalat) because English is the language of communication, and to find if CS training has a positive effect on their communicative performance.

3.1.2. Task used

Pictures of real objects, for example birds (eagle, bat), technical items (spanner, saw, scissors, hammer, pincers, and cutters), and geometrical shapes (triangle, rectangle, diamond) were used to elicit the subjects' oral performance. The subjects were asked to identify the objects in each picture.

3.1.3. Methodology

In the first session, I showed the pictures one by one using OHP and I tried to get the subjects identify the objects in the pictures. I noticed that the majority of the subjects could not name these objects because they needed vocabulary which were beyond their linguistic resources.

In the second session, I taught the subjects some strategies, such as circumlocution, description, repetition, self-correction, approximation and non-linguistic strategies, such as mime and gestures by providing them with their definitions, examples and showing them a video of non-native speakers' performance in telling a story to be acquainted with how they can solve their communication problems. I encouraged them to be risk-takers, and to try their best not to abandon the conversation using all their available linguistic resources. I provided them also with some vocabulary items and structures that might be needed, following Dornyei and Thurrell (1992), such as *'It is something that .....', 'It is an animal that....', 'It is a kind of a bird.....', 'It is used for ...', 'It is like .....', 'It has ....sides', 'It is like .....', 'It has .....'.*

In the last session, I asked the subjects to identify the same objects. Each subject was asked to identify two objects out of 44 in front of the class. Their oral performance on the tasks was audio-recorded and then transcribed.

3.1.4. Findings

The difference between pre-teaching and post-teaching performance was amazing. The subjects produced unpredictable utterances, which were comprehensible, and one can guess what is referred to. Even very weak subjects, who could not utter a single word in the first session, were able in some cases to describe the objects and they were sometimes successful in transmitting comprehensible utterances which may help listeners grasp the intended meaning. This might be due to raising their consciousness of CS use and being risk takers. The findings of this experiment suggest that teaching CSs may lead to successful communication. The following examples are taken from the subjects' performance on the task in the last session. The *intended meaning* refers to the actual word that represents the real object/picture.

1. It is something we er draw and er er it has three sides.
   Intended meaning: triangle
2. It has four sides...,...,...,we studied in math, but I forgot it.
   Intended meaning: square
3. It is a kind of a bird er, ...,er dangerous,..., it er er fly in the sky er,..., er it has strong eyes.
   Intended meaning: eagle

4. It is used for er er hitting er em nails, and er put it in the wood.
   Intended meaning: hammer
5. It is used for cutting er paper, and it has two sides.
   Intended meaning: scissors

Since CS training is important and useful to enhance communication in the target language as the results of the previous research has shown, we will discuss in the next section how CSs can be integrated into ELT syllabi and what the role of the teacher should be.

4. Integrating Strategic competence and CSs into language teaching and ELT syllabi

4.1 Syllabus design and Strategic Competence Development

The findings of CS research conducted so far are in favour of teaching CSs and including activities and exercises to use them in ELT syllabi. Therefore, strategic competence should be included in the goals of foreign language syllabi because it is one of the important components of communicative competence, which helps language users to communicate more effectively as shown in previous research (Cohen et. al. 1998; Dornyei 1995; Russell/ Loschky 1998).

According to Chen (1990), most EFL syllabi are designed to prevent learners from running into problems. They remove problems in advance by providing meanings of difficult words and grammatical knowledge. Such syllabi will not support the development of communicative competence. The syllabus should create conditions, which help to promote the development of learners' strategic competence, i. e., the ability to use communicative strategies to deal with different communication problems. For example, story-telling, role-playing and picture description tasks can be used in the practice of CSs as part of the syllabus because they provide the learners with the opportunity to become dominant in conversation and to make use of CSs to overcome their lack of L2 knowledge. Mariani (1994: 17) believes that role-play exercises after a series of activities will equip language learners with ways of coping with problems.

> "This will give our students the feeling that they can in some way increase their control over language use, the feeling that they can play an active role, that they can make choices, and be a bit more responsible for what they say and how they say it." (Mariani 1994: 17)

To design a syllabus that develops strategic competence and communication strategies, various guidelines have been proposed by CS researchers. For example, Kasper (1999) stresses the importance of the assessment of learners' needs, whereas Bialystok (1985) put emphasis on activities that lead to genuine communication. On the other hand, Dornyei (1995: 80) suggests other guidelines for teaching communication strategies:

- Raising learner awareness about the nature and communicative potential of CS
- Providing L2 models of the use of certain CS
- Teaching directly by presenting linguistic devices to verbalize CS
- Providing opportunities for practice in strategy use and feedback
- Encouraging students to be willing to take risks and use CS
- Highlighting cross-cultural differences in CS use

According to Faucette (2001), tasks which tend to agree with these guidelines for a direct approach to teaching communication strategies, can be found in some academic research articles on CS (e. g. Willems 1987; Yule 1997), materials designed to promote learner autonomy, learning strategies or communication strategies (e. g. Learning to Learn, Conversations and Dialogiues in Action), or selected activities found in some teachers' resource books if implemented appropriately (e. g. Conversation and Keep Talking).

Faucette (2001) studied 8 textbooks and teachers' resource books whose aim is to develop strategic competence and communication strategies. Faucette found out that these books "appear to offer few effective practice activities to develop communication strategy competence. The teachers' resource books have a bit more for us to draw on, yet are by no means ideal".

Faucette also found out that the activities in these books seem to follow a few of the suggested guidelines to a small degree. Faucette (2001: 26) made the following observations based on his analysis of 8 textbooks. There is little or no mention of learners' needs or matching the strategy to the situation. Target models are seldom provided, and there are a limited number of useful linguistic devices. There are few practice opportunities, as indicated by the fact that the language and strategies are seldom recycled through the texts. Occasionally, the usefulness of communication strategies is directly mentioned , and you can find tasks that lead to 'genuine' and 'natural' conversation.

4.1.1. Tasks needed

Second language learners need a variety of tasks and activities integrated into ELT syllabus to enhance their communicative ability. For example, using lexical chunks or prefabricated language in the syllabus can serve as a successful means of communication. Most researchers agree that learners use a large number of them because they satisfy a real social need. They allow learners to convey expressions which they are not yet able to construct from rules. These prefabricated patterns can be stored in memory as wholes and then used where situations demand (Nattinger/DeCarrico 1992: 26f.). Learners not only develop fluency in this way but achieve pragmatic competence and accuracy since lexical chunks are, by definition, grammatically correct (Nyssonen 1995: 166).

Schematic and contextual knowledge are also advantageous in the case of language production. Skehan (1998: 26) notes that access to contextual knowledge (clues in the environment that help in identifying the intended meaning) and schematic knowledge (the language user's previous knowledge, experience and memories) is equally advantageous. The speaker usually plans what is said with the contextual and schematic knowledge of the listener in mind. In the 'Scalpel! Swab! Clamp!' example given by Widdowson (1990: 82) in mid-operation, the shared schematic and contextual knowledge of the surgical team informs the surgeon that certain one-word utterances will be clearly understood. Seedhouse (1999: 153) confirms this finding. In the interactions of task-based classrooms, he notes that contextual clues inherent in the task make it unnecessary for learners to grammaticalise or say much to achieve meaning.

For second language learners not to give up, they also need to be equipped with 'procedural vocabulary', i. e., core vocabulary of great value to help them overcome breakdowns in communication. These vocabulary or structural items can be embedded in an ELT syllabus. Dornyei/Thurrell (1992) suggested providing learners with certain basic vocabulary and sentence structures to describe the properties and functions of objects like: *top-side, triangular, square* (Tarone/Yule 1989). They also suggested using structures such as*: "it's a kind of /sort of..., the thing you use for..., it's what /when you....., it's something you do/say when...".* They also provided a set of fillers and hesitation devices which come in handy when learners feel that they are encountering a communication problem (e. g., *well, actually, you know, as a matter of fact, how shall I put it....* etc.), as well as a set of ways to appeal for help (e. g., *What do you call it? What is the word for...?*).

4.2. Teaching Methodology

Teachers, on the other hand, should be conscious of communication strategies, and they should have a variety of techniques to design and implement activities and tasks that are relevant to teaching CSs to enhance their students' strategic competence and their overall communicative competence so that they would communicate effectively and successfully. Role-playing, story-telling and picture description tasks can be good examples of such activities.

Schmidt (1994) proposes four senses of "consciousness" in second language learning: intentionality, attention, awareness, and control. Consciousness in all these senses is required for the explicit (as opposed to automatic) deployment of strategies in second language use. (Note that implicit and incidental processes also play a significant role in second language learning, but they lie by definition outside the intentionality and control of the learner (P. 2).

Every learner is able to employ CSs, but they might not always be able to use them effectively and spontaneously. According to Wannaruk (2002: 13), if teachers can make

learners more aware of the communication problems they might encounter and the advantages of using different CSs to solve them, they might be able to choose more appropriate CSs and use them in a more creative and efficient way. Teachers should introduce every type of CS and their uses to the learners because each might be useful in different situations. For example, avoidance strategies might be helpful if the learner does not want to talk about something. Therefore, he/she needs to know a polite way to leave the topic.

Using videos of natural conversation might be a useful method to introduce the use of backchannels and requests for clarification (Wannaruk 2002). On the other hand, teachers may ask students to perform CLT tasks, and they can be audio or video recorded. After that, the students can watch their performance to observe and analyze their use of communication strategies.

Mariani (1994: 7) wonders if it is possible to devise specific materials and activities to develop strategic competence in the classroom rather than leaving it to take care of itself? He also supports the idea of training which, according to him, means "focusing the students' attention on specific strategies, making them aware of why they are important, how they work and when they may come in useful, and also asking the students to practise the strategies in guided activities" (Mariani 1994 : 8). It is, therefore, suggested that teachers should first raise their students' awareness towards communication strategies by introducing these strategies.Then students' performance on some tasks can be recorded, and then played back to them so that they can identify their strategic behaviour. They can also be asked to play games by describing some objects which are not shown to all the class and asking them to identify the object being described. According to his experience, Mariani thinks that "if we become more aware of certain language features, we may become more receptive to them, and can therefore hope to acquire them in an implicit way, and to gradually make them part of our own active repertoire" (Mariani 1994: 8).

Conclusion

This paper has considered strategic competence and CSs in an ELT syllabus by first presenting various definitions of strategic competence and CSs by providing examples of strategic behaviour taken from the author's data (Rabab'ah 2001). Then, it has highlighted the importance of CS training. It has also demonstrated embedding tasks and activities on communication strategies that help develop language learners' strategic competence and their overall communicative competence. Finally, it has suggested that teachers should design a variety of activities and tasks, and implement them in an ELT classroom to encourage their learners to be risk-takers and successful communicators.

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