# Fostering the autonomous use of communication strategies in the foreign language classroom

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on one criterial aspect of learner autonomy generally referred to as 'learner training'. More specifically, the aim of the paper is to review both the proposals suggesting a beneficial effect of training learners in the use of one specific group of language-use strategies known as Communication Strategies (CS), and the suggestions concerning how to implement such training. As a broader aim, the paper presents an assessment of the proposals previously reviewed in the light of the research on learner training in second language acquisition contexts.

**Key words:** Autonomy; Communication Strategy; Learner Training; Strategy.

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## 1. Introduction: strategy training and the use of communication strategies

The notion of learner autonomy is a direct consequence of the increasing preoccupation with learner-centredness in educational policies and practices, a preoccupation that has had its corresponding formulation in second language acquisition (SLA) research and teaching over the last two and a half decades. Following Johnson & Johnson (1998), learner autonomy

is one of a number of closely related concepts within the general paradigm of learner-centred education. It underpins the individualization of instruction, the development of patterns of self-directed learning and of methodology of self-access, as well as implying some degree of *learner training*. (Johnson & Johnson, 1998: 306-7. Emphasis added)

By *learner training* is understood a type of instructional intervention whose basic aim is to help learners become better language learners/users. As such, learner training involves developing the student´s awareness of him/herself as a learner, of the process of language learning and use, and of the nature of the target language (Dickinson, 1988, 1992; Holec, 1987). It also involves instructing learners in the use of language learning and language use strategies (see Chamot & O´Malley, 1994; Cohen, 1998; Oxford, 1990; Wenden, 1991; Wenden & Rubin, 1987; Willing, 1989). The rationale for this second component of learner training —known as 'strategy training' or 'strategy instruction'— is succintly summarized by Cohen as follows:

> The strategy training movement is predicated on the assumption that if learners are conscious about and become responsible for the selection, use, and evaluation of their learning strategies, they will become more successful language learners by [...] taking more responsibility for their own language learning, and enhacing their use of the target language out of class. In other words, the ultimate goal of strategy training is to empower students by allowing them to take control of the language learning process. (Cohen, 1998: 70)

The ensuing discussion centers on the issue of strategy training in relation to a group of language-use strategies known as Communication Strategies (CS) with a long and solid tradition in SLA research. This scholarly attention has given rise to a whole range of positions regarding, *inter alia*, (i) the definition and scope of the construct (Kasper & Kellerman, 1997b; Manchón, 1998; Yule & Tarone, 1997); (ii) the paradigms that should guide classification of CS (see Dornyei & Scott, 1997; Kellerman & Bialystok, 1997; Poulisse, 1993, for a review); and (iii) the theoretical frameworks that could or should inform CS research (see the collection of papers in Kasper & Kellerman, 1997a for an illustration). It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide an in-depth treatment of these issues. What will be done instead is to offer a conceptualization of CS that, apart from being the view underlying pedagogical discussions on the topic, will serve us as a guide for the analysis of the strategy training issue to be presented in Sections 3 and 4 below.

Seen from a psycholinguistic perspective, and in line with a view of strategies where problem-solving is criterial to their definition, CS have been conceptualized as problem-solving devices whose (potentially) conscious implementation is directed towards counteracting the imbalance between ends

and means typical of L2 learners´(productive) uses of language (Faerch & Kasper, 1983a, 1984; Khanji, 1996; Poulisse, 1990, 1993; Poulisse Bongaerts & Kellerman, 1984, 1987). These problems may derive from one or a combination of the following (Bou, 1993; Dörnyei, 1995; Dörnyei & Scott, 1997): (i) interlanguage deficits; (ii) low accessibility to acquired knowledge due to either lack of automatization or to processing time problems; (iii) insecurity on the part of the learner as to the appropriacy or efficacy of the retrieved language material. In any of these performance situations, the L2 learner´s attempt to compensate for missing/inaccessible knowledge results in CS-implementation.

The bulk of theoretical and empirical studies in the field have centred on the CS deployed by L2 users in oral production tasks, with a marked emphasis on the solution of lexical problems. Such restriction has resulted in an oversimplification of the debate at the theoretical level (see Alcón, 1997; Manchón, 1998 for a discussion) which, in turn, has had its impact on pedagogical discussions. Examples of these lexical problem-solving CS (Bou, 1993, 1994; Chen, 1990; Faerch & Kasper, 1983a; Kumaravidelu, 1988; Manchón Ruiz, 1989a, 1989b; Paribakht, 1985; Poulisse, 1990) are those that make use of the learner´s existing linguistic knowledge (such as literal translations, code-switching or foreignizing - adapting an L1 lexical item to the morphology of the L2), L2 knowledge (e.g. paraphrasing, use of terms semantically related or word coinage), or those that involve the use of non-linguistic means, such as the use of mime, gestures or drawings to convey the problematic lexical item.

In contrast to the theoretical and empirical interest in the definition and classification of CS, pedagogical matters do not stand out as a major research issue in the CS literature as a whole. One also notices with interest that researchers within the strategy training movement have not included CS in their research agenda. This is by no means an ideal state of affairs. If it is accepted that, in contrast to first language acquisition where complete mastery is the norm, some degree of failure or incomplete achievement is what characterizes SLA processes (Bley-Vroman, 1989; Cook, 1997), L2 users are likely to frequently run into communication problems, and to do it more often than their L1 counterparts. On the face of it, it sounds reasonable to speculate that the efficient and controlled use of CS should in principle be an integral part of the strategic behaviour that characterizes autonomous learners, in line with the arguments to be presented in later sections. It is the aim of this paper to assess the positions concerning the why and how of training L2 users in the use of CS in the light of the research on learner training in second language acquisition contexts.

In order to achieve this general aim, in Section 2 the notion of strategy training is elaborated upon. Against this background, in Sections 3 and 4, the proposals suggesting a beneficial effect of training learners in the use of CS, and the suggestions concerning how to implement such training will be reviewed and assessed.

It must be clarified at this point that the perspective adopted here in the assessment of CS training is not to be taken as the only possible one. In fact, a crucial research question in the field is to ascertain whether training learners in the use of CS is beneficial or detrimental in their attempts to learn the L2, i.e. whether or not CS-use contributes to interlanguage development (for a recent account of this issue see Skehan, 1998). An analysis of the debate in the area is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, and as stated earlier, I adopt a language-use perspective in relation to the general topic of this monograph, i.e. learner autonomy.

## 2. Strategy training and the goals of a language learning/teaching programme

As posited by Chamot & O´Malley (1994: 387-8), the goal of instructing L2 learners in the use of strategies is "to develop self-regulated learners who can approach new learning tasks with confidence and select the most appropriate strategies for completing the task". This means (Ellis & Sinclair, 1989; Manchón, 1998) that the focus of strategy training is on *how* to learn rather than on *what* to learn, a point elaborated at length by Manchón (1998), whose ideas will serve as a guide for the discussion that follows.

Following Weinstein & Mayer (1986), any learning/teaching situation encompasses two types of goals: *goals concerning the product of learning* and *goals concerning the process of learning*. The former focus on what to learn, that is, on «what students should know or be able to do as a result of learning», whereas the latter focus on how to learn, i.e. on «techniques and strategies students can use to accomplish learning» (p. 315). In its application to the L2 situation, Manchón (1998) interprets the what-to-learn goals as the double task faced by the L2 learner (Gass, 1990): to come up with knowledge of the L2 and to develop the ability to put acquired knowledge to use when attempting to produce or interpret messages in the L2. Drawing on the literature on the topic, Manchón posits that three macro-processes are involved in the establishment of L2 knowledge: integration of new knowledge into existing knowledge structures, discovering any mismatch between L2 and interlanguage (IL) rules, and automatization of L2 knowledge so that it is available for later automatic and efficient retrieval and use.

Together with these what-to-learn goals, the language learning/teaching situation also encompasses corresponding how-to-learn goals.These relate to the acquisition of the relevant knowledge to achieve the what-to-learn goals. The notion of 'strategies' is a cover term for this special type of knowledge that L2 learners must acquire. It is customary to distinguish two macro-groups of strategies. *Learning strategies* are related to the first component of what-to-learn goals, i.e. the expansion of L2 knowledge and the increasing of its accessibility (Faerch & Kasper, 1986). In contrast, the implementation of *language-use strategies* is aimed at the acquisition of the ability to put

acquired knowledge to use, this being the second dimension of what-to-learn goals[1]. To this it should be added that when putting acquired knowledge to use, L2 learners must also learn how to make full and efficient use of their available knowledge resources, while at the same time L2 users must become skillful at solving communication problems caused by lack of knowledge or low accessibility to such knowledge which, as previously mentioned, is precisely the situation that triggers the use of CS.

It is against this framework that both the issue of strategy instruction and its relationship with learner autonomy finds its rationale. Strategy instruction is justified on the grounds that language teaching must help learners learn how to learn, an educational aim which is in turn based on the partially tested assumption that the L2 learner´s how-to-learn procedures are amenable to modification and change through instruction (Chamot, 1994; Chamot & O´Malley, 1994; Cohen, 1998; Wenden, 1991). It is further postulated that an off-shoot of strategy instruction would be the development of the learner´s autonomy. In fact, three out of the five features that according to Dickinson (1992, 1993) characterize autonomous learners are related to strategy use. Dickinson contends that autonomous learners (i) can identify what has been taught; (ii) are able to set their own learning objectives; (iii) select and implement appropriate strategies; (iv) monitor the use of strategies by themselves; and (v) can take decisions as to continue or give up the use of strategies depending on whether or not they are working for them. In short, autonomous learners have developed knowledge about strategies and control over their use (see also Chamot, 1994; Chamot & O´Malley, 1994; Cohen, 1998; Wenden, 1991).

Strategy instruction must, therefore, include these two components of knowledge (both declarative and procedural) of strategies and control of their use (Jones et al., 1987). In the literature on the topic (see Cohen, 1998; O´Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford et al., 1990; Wenden, 1991, and references within) it is suggested that strategy instruction must include different stages. First, the strategy training programme should start with an assessment of the strategies that learners currently use and how well they use them because as Wenden (1991: 108) states "the intervention should match the need". The next stage involves either deductive or inductive awareness of the strategy/ies learners are going to be trained in. The main objective here is to raise the student´s awareness of the value and benefits of strategy use. To this end, the instructor helps the learner develop (Jones et al. 1987) *declarative* knowledge about the strategy (what strategy/ies they are learning to implement), *procedural* knowledge (how the strategy should be used and why) and *conditional* knowledge (in which contexts should the strategy be used). This explicit strategy instruction is predicated on the grounds that the metacognitive awareness that learners gain will help the retention and transferability

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1.   For recent and comprehensive accounts of the concept of strategies in language learning and language use the reader is referred to Cohen, 1998; Chamot, 1994; Chamot & O´Malley, 1994; Ellis, 1994; Manchón, 1998; McDonough, 1995, 1999; Skehan, 1998; Willing, 1989.

of strategy use. The third stage is the practice stage, where learners are given practice in using the strategy in question in contextualized tasks. The final stages include the evaluation of strategy use and the demonstration of how the strategy can be transferred to other contexts and tasks.

## 3. The purported benefits of training L2 learners in the use of communication strategies

Two distinct positions can be discerned in the dozen of studies dealing with CS-instruction. On the one hand, some researchers (Bialystok, 1990; Bialystok & Kellerman, 1987; Kellerman, 1991) have questioned the validity and usefulness of such training on the grounds that L2 users have already developed the ability to solve communication problems as part of their L1 communicative competence, and thus there is no point in training students in the use of these strategies. Rather, what L2 teachers should do is to teach these students language and, as Kellerman posits (1991:158), "let the strategies look after themselves". Alternatively, it is also suggested, students should be given practice in real-life communication tasks as a way of fostering the use of their already developed L1 CS repertoire (Bialystok & Kellerman, 1987; Canale & Swain, 1980).

In contrast to this position, other researchers have explicitly argued in favour of CS training, their arguments also being for the most part untested assumptions. These scholars have put forward arguments for the why and how of training students in the use of CS. A review of their ideas follows.

Four main arguments support the view that classroom practice should include training students in the use of CS.

### 3.1. Strategic competence is part of the learner´s communicative competence

According to Canale & Swain´s well-known framework (Canale & Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983; Swain, 1985), communicative competence is composed of four sub-competencies: linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competence. The first three involve knowledge of the language code, of the sociocultural constraints and rules guiding the use of the language code, and of the rules of discourse necessary to produce coherent and cohesive messages, respectively. In contrast, strategic competence involves the ability to use problem-solving devices in an effort to overcome communication problems derived from lack of knowledge in any of the other subcompetencies. These problem-solving devices are CS.

Dörnyei & Thurrell (1991), Manchón (1988) Tarone (1984) and Willems (1987) explicitly argue that one of the aims of L2 teaching should be the development of the student´s use of CS as a way of enhancing their communicative competence. In Tarone´s view, each component of communicative competence ought to have a place in the foreign language classroom

because "a student who has failed to develop competence in any of these components cannot truly be said to be proficient in the foreign language" (Tarone, 1984: 129).

The underlying assumption is that neither the awareness of strategies nor their successful implementation is a necessary off-shoot of language teaching, unless an effort is made to draw the learner´s attention to this particular component of his/her communicative competence. Both Tarone (1984) and Willems (1987) stress that, in contrast to naturalistic learners, classroom learners cannot simply learn by "doing" given that the foreign language classroom is not by its very nature the ideal scenario for learners to engage "naturally" in a variety of communicative situations that would allow the implicit development of their strategic competence. Learners must therefore be trained in the use of CS. These suggestions are compatible with what was mentioned in the previous section about the benefits of explicit strategy instruction. It was noted then that explicitly teaching learners the use of strategies results in an enhanced metacognitive awareness on the part of the learner that in turn favours the retention of strategy over time and the transferability of its use to new learning tasks.

## 3.2. Transfer of L1 skills

This argument partially follows from the previous one and is based on the belief that despite the obvious similarities between communication in L1 and L2, important differences also exist. First, L2 users may face a wider range of problems in L2 communication and thus they may need to develop additional strategies for solving them. For instance, L1 and L2 speakers differ not only in the amount of knowledge of language they possess, but also in how efficiently they can access and use that knowledge (Wiese, 1984). There is also plenty of evidence to suggest that L2 learners, owing to either lack of knowledge (i.e. IL deficits) or lack of automatization of resources, need more time than their L1 counterparts in planning or executing their utterances (see Dechert, 1984). Thus, L2 users may face more processing time problems whose solution also involves CS-implementation (Dörnyei, 1995).

Second, as pointed out by Faerch & Kasper (1986), L2 users have at their disposal additional problem-solving devices because in their problem-solving attempts they can draw from two knowledge sources: their L1 and their L2 (but see Bialystok & Kellerman, 1987 and Cook, 1991 for a view that there are no strategies unique to second language learners).

In addition, Willems (1987), while accepting that L2 users have a repertoire of CS already developed in their L1 and thus an "innate" strategic competence (p. 351), still supports CS training on the grounds that important individual differences may exist in the range of strategies that students command and in how adept different learners are at using them. Willems argues that it is reasonable to expect age-related differences in this domain.

In the same line, Faerch & Kasper (1986) affirm that the availability of an already developed repertoire of CS should not be taken to mean that L2 users "necessarily know in advance what strategy types are most adequate under various communicative conditions" (p. 187). They advocate instruction in CS-use as a way of raising the student´s metacommunicative awareness of the factors that determine appropriate strategy selection, an argument perfectly compatible with the main tenets of strategy instruction presented earlier in the paper. Recall that the goal of strategy instruction is to help learners (i) regulate their own learning; (ii) approach new learning tasks with confidence; and (iii) develop their knowledge about strategies in order for them to select the most appropriate strategies for completing a given task and monitor such strategy use. Accordingly, the argument in support of the need to train students in the use of CS which they may or may not possess as part of their strategic repertoire is perfectly justified.

### 3.3. Bridging the gap between classroom and real-life communication

Contrary to the view that teachers should concentrate on teaching language and that the strategies will take care of themselves, it has been suggested that there will always exist "an inevitable gap between what learners are taught and what they need in present and future non-educational situations" (Faerch & Kasper, 1986: 179) and that this justifies CS instruction as a way of bridging the gap between classroom and real-life communication (Faerch & Kasper, 1983b; Manchón, 1987) or, as Faerch & Kasper (1986: 180) put it, "bridging the gap between learners' linguistic and pragmatic knowledge in the L2 and the specific communicative means needed to cope with unforeseen situations". These arguments could be interpreted to mean that training students in the use of CS will make them more autonomous in line with the discussion presented in the introduction of this paper and in Section 3. It was noted then (Cohen, 1998) that one of the outcomes of strategy training programmes should be to help learners enhance their use of the target language out of class.

### 3.4. Contributing to the student´s security, self-confidence and motivation to communicate.

A different position in support of CS instruction claims that such training may contribute to enhancing the student´s sense of security and self-confidence when attempting to communicate with his/her IL resources, and thus feel more motivated to learn the L2 (Willems, 1987) or to attempt to communicate in the L2 (Manchón, 1988; Dörnyei & Thurrell, 1991; Kebir, 1994). As Manchón has it:

> Having the possibility of using CS can facilitate the task of using the L2 for some learners, especially those who lack confidence in their own resources or those less capable, linguistically speaking. For instance, being aware of the fact that one does not always have to use the exact word in order to be communicatively effective, can push the student into the search for alternative means to convey his / her intended meaning. This search, in turn, can contribute to the creative use of the learner's linguistic resources, which is another reason to foster the learner's strategic competence. (Manchón, 1988: 24-5, translated into English)

These ideas have found some empirical support. In a study carried out with secondary school students in Denmark (Brodersen et al., 1982; Brodersen & Gibson, 1982, quoted in Faerch & Kasper, 1986), a pedagogic experiment was implemented where students were instructed in the use of CS. The experiment consisted of (i) playback of a video recording (where the learners themselves had carried out a communicative game and had conversed with a native speaker in English) in order to discuss the effectiveness of the strategies used; (ii) direct teaching about CS (such as achievement and reduction CS, L1-based CS, L2-based CS and non-linguistic CS) and about the interplay between CS-use and interlanguage development; and (iii) role-play activities that forced the learners to use CS. After the 3-month teaching programme, a change in the student´s attitude towards communication was documented. Students were reported to have developed a more tolerant attitude toward errors, with most students accepting the need to take risks in communication even at the expense of accuracy.

Similar results were obtained in a small-scale study (Kebir, 1994) with adult migrants in Australia. It was found that after the experiment, learners were more aware of what it means to be communicatively competent, were more confident and willing to participate and take risks in communication, while at the same time they became more adept at solving communication breakdowns also at the expense of accuracy[2].

## 4. The how of CS instruction

Those who advocate the inclusion of CS instruction in L2 teaching (see Dörnyei, 1995; Faerch & Kasper, 1986; Manchón, 1988; Tarone, 1984; Willems, 1989) explicitly and/or implicitly suggest a two-phase training scheme that would include both an instruction and a practice stage.

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2.   It must be mentioned in passing that in these two CS training experiments students became more communicatively efficient, although the accuracy of their utterances suffered. Acknowledging this issue would be crucial in a discussion of the possible learning potential of CS-use, as previously mentioned in Section 1.

### 4.1. The instruction phase

This stage of the training scheme involves raising the student´s awareness of (i) the existence of CS; (ii) their crucial role in communication as problem-solving devices; and (iii) the communicative efficacy of different CS.

This awareness raising can be done either deductively or inductively. In the former case the instruction includes direct explanations and/or modelling of CS in the classroom (Dörnyei, 1995). Inductive awareness raising is involved in classroom activities where students are asked either to perform themselves or observe others performing (for instance in a video recording) certain communication tasks that involve problem solving, and are then asked to (i) identify the problems experienced by the interactants and the problem-solving mechanisms used to overcome such problems, and (ii) to assess the efficacy of the solutions adopted (Faerch & Kasper, 1986; Tarone, 1984).

The instruction phase can thus be seen as a form of metacognitive training where the learner´s attention is directed towards detecting specific aspects of problem-solving behaviour in communicative situations. As such, the proposals are compatible with what is advocated in theoretical and empirical studies on strategy training, in the sense that strategy instruction programmes must include the metacognitive stage where learners are informed about the strategy to be used, how to use and when to use it.

### 4.2. The practice phase

After the metacognitive phase, the training program would include actual practice in the use of CS. Here the proposals vary from those advocating practice in solving specific problems that would trigger the use of CS, or more general accounts. Among the former we could mention Dörnyei & Thurrell´s (1991) suggestions for activities designed to help learners overcome processing time problems, or the proposed activities designed to give students practice in tasks where they need to overcome problems derived from lack of vocabulary (Clennell, 1994; Dörnyei & Thurrell, 1991; Paribakht, 1986; Tarone, 1984; Willems, 1987). These activities include object description tasks (in which one interlocutor must identify the object being described by his/her partner), activities where the speaker must explain how to perform a given action, or two-way communication tasks that require exchange of information.

In more general terms, other scholars (i.e. Faerch & Kasper, 1986; Manchón, 1987) suggest that the practice stage should give students the chance of participating in communication activities where (i) a clear communicative goal has to be achieved; (ii) reaching such goal involves problem solving; and (iii) learners themselves realise or set the goals to be achieved and accept the challenge that its realization entails.

In short, the purported two-stage training scheme is justified on the grounds that it would in principle allow the learner to develop knowledge of CS and control over their use, these being the two components of strategy-use that characterize autonomous learners as repeatedly mentioned in previous pages.

## 5. Conclusion and open questions

This paper has centered on one criterial component of instructional programmes aimed at developing learners´s autonomy, generally referred to as strategy training. The rational behind, and the main tenets of, the strategy training movement were reviewed and it was against this background that the proposals for the why and how of training L2 learners in the use of Communication Strategies were reviewed and assessed. The main arguments put forward in the preceding pages can be summarized in the following points:

1) Some of the features that characterize autonomous learners are their knowledge of strategies and the efficient control over their use. If it is accepted that L2 users are likely to frequently run into communication problems due to a variety of reasons, and to do it more often than their L1 counterparts, it seems reasonable to speculate that the efficient and controlled use of CS should in principle be an integral part of the strategic behaviour that characterizes autonomous learners. As a consequence, the positions advocating the inclusion of CS-training in L2 classrooms seem justified.
2) According to the proponents of the strategy instruction movement, the strategy training must be carried out in such a way that learners develop declarative, procedural and conditional knowledge of strategies. The instruction and practice stage defended in the CS literature would in principle allow the acquisition of such knowledge.

A final note of caution is pertinent. The different arguments presented in the paper, and just summarized, are for the most part untested assumptions. Accordingly, if we want to move forward there is a need to carry out empirical studies at least to (i) test whether in fact training students in the use of CS does make a difference; and (ii) isolate the learner-internal or learner-external variables that favour or hinder the purported benefits of CS-instruction. In the meantime, the advice to include CS-training in our teaching practice (which, incidentally, is repeatedly stressed in the Spanish Official Curriculum for Foreign Languages in Secondary Education) can only be supported on the intuitive, but nevertheless sound, assumption that it makes sense to help L2 learners become better problem solvers, more efficient users of their strategic repertoire and more adept at coping with unforseen communicative situations outside the classroom.

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