Issues in Second Language Acquisition: Can strategic competence be taught in the language classroom?

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1. Introduction

A friend of mine living in Japan was cooking a dish that required a gas canister. The Japanese word for it gasu bombe was not part of his linguistic repertoire, so at the supermarket he roughly described the object to the clerk as 'a round metal can, not so big, and used for cooking.” Round-a-bout descriptions like this are commonplace among speakers trying to communicate in a second language (L2). What are normally smooth transitions from one word and idea to the next are interrupted by gaps in L2 knowledge. When we attempt to repair these gaps, we are using communication strategies (CS).

As language teachers, we have all come across students with extraordinary standardized test scores, though when it comes to oral communication, they can barely string two sentences together. The converse is also true: a student with sub-average test scores is somehow wonderfully communicative. Even learners of similar learning backgrounds with approximately equal amounts of linguistic knowledge often display widely disparate L2 performance. Why is this so? This paper is an attempt to shed some light on this mystery of how CS contribute to overall communicative competence.

2. Communicative Competence versus Performance

It is essential to understand the influence of communicative competence accurately in order to fully grasp the notion of CS. However, it might be useful to distinguish the terms competence and performance, as they have been used quite often in discussions of communicative competence. Chomsky (1965) used the terms and focused on the abstract notion of language rather than how it is actually used. Thus, grammatical knowledge is the focus of competence, while usage is related to performance, and that “performance could not directly reflect competence” (p. 4). Although the idea of communicative competence is closely allied with the work of Canale and Swain (1979), its creation is attributed to Hymes (1972) who
coined the term as a reaction against Chomsky’s strong claim of separating competence from performance. His broader notion included not only grammatical knowledge of the structural rules of language, but also sociolinguistic knowledge. The diversity of opinion as to whether communicative competence should include performance continued until Canale and Swain attempted to unify various language disciplines into a theory of communicative competence. Canale and Swain contributed three fundamental components of communicative competence: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence. Grammatical competence is the knowledge of semantic rules, and rules of grammar, and phonology. For example, learners of French need to learn to understand the different time references of sets of words such as *je pariais, je parte, je parterai*, and to be able to make appropriate time reference when speaking or writing. Sociolinguistic competence is the knowledge of the rules of the appropriateness of language in different contexts. It is our sociolinguistic competence that allows us to be polite according to the situation we are in and to be able to infer the intentions of others. In everyday life we vary the kind of language we use according to levels of formality and familiarity. We express solidarity in groups to which we belong or wish to belong, for example in classroom chat with other students, or at a party. Strategic competence emphasizes the importance of compensating for linguistic deficits in language:

This component will be made up of 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. Such strategies will be one of two main types: those that relate primarily to grammatical competence (e.g. how to paraphrase grammatical forms that one has not mastered or cannot recall momentarily) and those that relate more to sociolinguistic competence (various role playing strategies, how to address strangers when unsure of their social status) (Canale and Swain 1979:28–29).

It should be noted that a fourth competency was added later by Canale (1983): discourse competence, which is the ability to construct longer sentences in discourse to form a meaningful whole. Discourse competence asks: how are words, phrases and sentences put together to create conversations, speeches, email messages or newspaper articles? Discourse competence also includes understanding how texts relate to the context or situation in which they are used. For example, what is the meaning of the word "in" in the following sentence: *The car is in the driveway. The pencil is in the cup.* Because we have practical knowledge that completes our understanding of language use, we know that the pencil is surrounded by the cup, but that the car is (probably) not embedded in the driveway. Although their model is primarily theoretical,
Canale and Swain were in favor of strategic instruction in language programs, even before there was any empirical evidence that such instruction had any overt communicative benefit.

Several years later, Celce-Murcia, Dornyei and Thurrel (1995) outlined their version of a more pedagogical rather than theoretical model of communicative competence. Their model addressed criticisms of the isolated nature of discourse competence and sociolinguistic competence, as well as insufficient descriptions of these components. Their solution was to come up with the ‘actional competence’ model of communicative competence. They modified sociolinguistic competence, changing it to sociocultural competence, meaning the cultural background needed to interpret and use language effectively, resulting in a model consisting of five components. As seen in Figure 1, they relabeled grammatical competence to linguistic competence. They then placed discourse competence at the center, activated by the surrounding competencies, with strategic competence circling the other main components. The figure shows that the various components of communicative competence are interrelated. They also itemized exhaustive lists of subcategories and examples of each component. It should be clear that CS, which grow out of strategic competence, figure prominently in L2 performance. However, what are strategies, exactly?
3. What is meant by strategies?

Much has been written on language learning strategies (LLS) in addition to CS, although they refer to contrasting mental processes and pedagogical activities. The common term strategy comes from the ancient Greek term strategia meaning generalship or the art of war. In non adversarial settings, strategy has come to mean a plan towards achieving an objective. Both LLS and CS aim toward linguistic objectives, but they differ in terms of the specificity of the language goal.

4. Language Learning Strategies

Studies on LLS basically describe what good language learners do and what poor language learners do not. According to Oxford (2001), strategies for language learning are “specific behaviors or thought processes that students use to enhance their own learning” (p. 362). Cohen (2011) sees these LLS as tactics for learning language material for the first time. These may be verbal or non-verbal, and can include “…identifying the material that needs to be learned, distinguishing it from other material if need be, grouping it for easier learning…” (p. 12). Three language learning strategies are outlined by Oxford:

- Cognitive: these are strategies making use of logic and analysis to help oneself learn a new language through outlining, summarizing, notetaking, organizing and reviewing material, etc.
- Metacognitive: these strategies involve planning one’s learning by making time for homework or for preparation, and engaging in self-evaluation of one’s success on a given task or on one’s overall progress. This is achieved in part by monitoring and noting one’s errors, learning from teacher and peer feedback, etc. Compensating for missing or partial knowledge by guessing the meanings of words from context or the grammatical function of words from formal clues are also an aspect of metacognition.
- Memory-related: these are strategies that help learners recall or retrieve words through the use of acronyms, images, sounds (rhymes), or other clues.

5. Communication strategies

In contrast to LLS, CS are concerned with using language material which has already been learned to some degree. As mentioned earlier, CS arise in the face of some linguistic deficit between two interlocutors. Tarone (1977) is in line with what has been referred to as a traditionalist view when she defines CS as “conscious communication strategies … used by an individual to overcome the crisis which occurs when language structures are inadequate to convey the individual’s thought” (p. 195). It would appear that this conceptualization of CS
deals with oral production problems of one interlocutor that surface at the planning stage. Later on, Tarone (1981) seemingly broadened her definition of CS to include a perspective which was more interactional. Tarone states that CS: “relate to a mutual attempt of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in situations where requisite meaning structures do not seem to be shared” (p. 288). Negotiation of meaning includes confirmation checks, clarification, requests and comprehension checks. Confirmation checks are utterances by which one speaker seeks confirmation of the other’s preceding speech act through repetition, with rising intonation, of what was perceived to be all or part of the preceding utterance. Clarification requests are moves by which one speaker seeks assistance in understanding the other speaker’s utterance through questions, statements such as “I don’t understand,” or imperatives such as “Please repeat.” With comprehension checks, one speaker attempts to determine whether the interlocutor has understood a previous message. This joint negotiation of meaning would appear to include repair mechanisms, meaning-negotiation and requesting and providing clarification, although Tarone did not specifically list any of these mechanisms in her CS taxonomy.

Another way to conceptualize CS is to view them as arising out of insufficient processing time. Dornyei (1995) argued that utilizing stalling strategies (lexicalized pause fillers and hesitation gambits) are problem solving strategies in that they give speakers time to think and maintain open communication channels.

The broadest conceptualization of CS comes from Canale (1983) in which he proposes that CS function to enhance communication. His plan of action to achieve a communicative goal can mean anything from holding the floor during a discussion, to fielding questions after a speech, or interrupting someone.

6. **CS and psychological approaches**

The above conceptualizations of Tarone, Dornyei and Canale primarily follow a linguistic or product oriented approach to defining CS. Another perspective emerged from researchers more concerned with the mental processes or cognitive “deep structure” of strategic language behavior. This psycholinguistic line of research coming out of a group of Dutch researchers, as well as Bialystok (1990) was well reviewed in Dornyei and Scott (1997) and claimed that “not understanding the cognitive psychological and psycholinguistic dimensions of CS use, and focusing only on the surface verbalizations of underlying psychological processes, would lead to taxonomies of doubtful validity” (p. 180). There are 2 main strategies that respond to the cognitive processes of communication. Their cognitive CS include conceptual analysis which encompasses approximation, description and mime, and code control which is borrowing, foreignizing, requesting help, and code switching. This research focus seems less concerned
with applied linguistics and pedagogy of CS, than with the deeper and less visible mental processes that result in CS use. Therefore, the remainder of this paper will address product-oriented CS, focusing on inventories of relevant CS, the teachability of CS and finally some classroom applications of CS.

7. A taxonomy of CS

The goal thus far has been to explain how CS fit into an overall construct of communicative competence, as well as to illustrate differing concepts of CS. We have seen previously that language use can assume a hierarchical structure with language use divided into processes and strategies, with the primary division of strategies being between learning strategies and strategies of communication. This section will focus on the use of strategies for communication. In order to further clarify how strategies function in the speech of L2 learners, identifying CS is necessary. We have seen above that a conceptual divide exists among CS researchers. Although there is also a divide among researchers with regard to taxonomies, there is actually more agreement than differences in opinion. Dornyei’s (1995) traditional taxonomy shown in Figure 2 consolidates the most common strategies of Tarone and Bialystock, and these have

Avoidance or Reduction Strategies
1. Message Abandonment—leaving a message unfinished because of language difficulties.
2. Topic Avoidance—avoiding topic areas or concepts which pose language difficulties

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

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

FIGURE 2 CS Adhering to Traditional Conceptualizations (Adapted from Dornyei, 1995)
the greatest salience in the L2 classroom.

Known as reduction or avoidance strategies, strategies 1 and 2 see the speaker altering, reducing or completely abandoning the message. Sometimes learners make a deliberate decision not to speak when they come across a linguistic obstacle. This strategy can arise in the forms of either topic avoidance or message abandonment. Specific topics or lexical items are avoided in the former, while in the latter, the learner may find himself discussing a topic that is too hard, and simply give up and move on to another topic. Avoidance is a way to maintain communication.

The achievement/compensatory strategies of 3-11 are used to complete the speaker’s intended message by manipulating the acquired language, and in the end compensating for a lack of language. They are circumlocution, approximation, all-purpose words, word coinage, miming, translation, foreignizing a word, code switching and appealing for help.

Strategy 12 exemplifies stalling and time-gaining strategies. These strategies fall into a different category since they do not manipulate language per se to make up for a linguistic deficit, but instead keep the lines of communication open through the use of linguistic fillers to compensate for inordinately long pauses.

8. Teachability of CS

It is clear that the taxonomic classifications include verbal behavior. Therefore, how can this behavior be addressed in the L2 classroom. The effectiveness of teaching CS in the classroom has created substantial disagreement among English language researchers. There are generally two approaches to the promise of strategy instruction: the strong view and the moderate view. Bialystock (1990) describes the strong view as literal instruction of the taxonomies. The students are taught the strategic solutions for communication problems, such as paraphrasing, approximation, circumlocution, word coinage and the like, and the specific language required to carry out the speech act. The curriculum may include, It’s kind of a , It looks like, and It’s used for. The strong view of instruction also includes teaching the students the proper circumstances in which carrying out the strategies would be appropriate. For example, there may be situations in which it is prudent to use approximation, and students would be taught how to recognize such situations.

The moderate view of strategy instruction stems from CS use in the larger context of language processing: the different uses of language, for example literate, conversational and metalinguistic. The moderate view of instruction, then, attempts to teach the students how to control their linguistic systems. Studies on first language acquisition by Kahan and Richards (1986) described strategy recognition and production by both older and younger children.
O’Malley et al. (1985b) extend the process model of strategy instruction to adult L2 learners, and found some benefit to training students in the use of cognitive strategies, such as note taking and meta cognitive strategies like selective attention. In other words, learners are made aware of strategies already in their linguistic repertoire. Thus, Bialystock rejects the efficacy of explicit strategy instruction in the L2 classroom, arguing that since psychological processes underlie the production of strategies, focusing on surface structures will not enhance communicative ability. She concludes that “… the more language the learner knows, the more possibilities exist for the system to be flexible and to adjust itself to meet the demands of the learner. What one must teach students of a language is not strategies, but language” (147).

My own experience with students exemplified at the outset of the article, as well as empirical studies have led me to believe that strategy training exercises can have real measurable benefit for L2 students. For example, Paribakht (1986) found in a study of 40 L2 learners and 20 native speakers that early introduction of a curriculum based on explicit instruction of lexical, syntactic and idiomatic strategies showed improvements in L2 students’ ability to negotiate meaning, overcome lexical gaps and cope with problematic communicative situations. A study by Iwai (2006) involved two sets of 15 Japanese students in a one-week session and a two-week session and one group of students as a control. In investigating both the pedagogical benefit of training L2 students in the CS of approximation and paraphrasing, Iwai found that teaching communicative strategies changed students declarative knowledge of the language to procedural knowledge - in other words, an evolution from knowing about the language to knowing how to use it.

Another study looked at the efficacy of metacognitive instruction of strategies, and its effect on oral production. Nakatan (2005) divided 65 students from an oral communication class into two groups: a strategy instruction group and a control group. The results showed that the strategy instruction group significantly improved their oral proficiency test scores; the control group did not show such significant results. The specific interaction strategies examined were meta-cognitive in nature. In other words, they utilized specific interaction strategies, such as maintenance of fluency and negotiation of meaning.

Finally, a study by Dornyei (1995) looked at three types of strategies: topic avoidance and replacement, circumlocution and using fillers and hesitation gambits among Hungarian high school students divided into 4 control groups and 4 treatment groups. Pre- and post-tests indicated an increase in quantity of circumlocutions, frequency of fillers and speech rate. Furthermore, the students in the study showed positive attitudes towards their instructions.

Although these studies are far from conclusive, they point towards strategy training as being a worthy objective in communicative language instruction.
9. **Strategy training activities**

The number of published materials which take advantage of the wide inventory of CS available has increased in recent years. Graham-Marr (2006) presents activities which attempt to enhance various aspects of message adjustment which have worked with my learners, including hesitation, circumlocution and paraphrasing.

**Hesitating**

The ability to use hesitation gambits and fillers are essential for carrying on conversations during difficulties. Examples of fillers include very short “non-words” (um; er; ah; mmm) to almost complete phrases (well now; let me see; now let me think; actually; you know).

A good real life activity to present fillers is to have students solve simple math problems, or figure out how to convert currency into Euros or Japanese yen. An example of the former is shown below. In pairs, the students solve a simple math problem using fillers and hesitation devices:

A: You have ¥500 yen. You want to buy a coffee at the store. How much money do you have after you pay for the coffee?

B: Well now, let me see, um ... 390 yen.

An example of the latter which trains students in the use of phrasal fillers is outlined by Dornyei and Thurrell (1991). It first requires the students to write one-word dialogues with a logical flow:

A: Tired?

B: Cold.

A: Medicine?

B: Doctor ...

The conversations are first spoken in their short forms, and then are expanded using fillers while maintaining the original meaning:

A: Are you tired?

B: Well, as a matter of fact, I have a cold.

A: Oh, I see. Too bad. Did you take some medicine?

B: Well, actually, I went to see a doctor this morning. You know ...

The knowledge and confident use of the above fillers prevent a conversation from grinding to a halt in times of communicative difficulty, which happens all too often with L2 learners. Students can be made aware of fillers right from the beginner stage of L2 learning, and encouraged to use them.

**Circumlocution and paraphrasing**
Circumlocution is a kind of paraphrasing skill in which students have to talk around a word (it’s a kind of, it’s made of; it looks like; it’s used to/for). As exemplified at the outset of this article, it is predominantly utilized in circumstances of lexical deficit. Once the surface structures of the utterances have been presented and practiced in a controlled environment, half of the class faces the back of the classroom, while the teacher puts a picture of an object (Figure 3) on the OHP. The students have to ‘explain’ the object to a partner without saying what it is. The activity is then repeated for the other students with a different picture.

\begin{itemize}
  \item[A] OK, it’s, um, a kind of kitchen tool.
  \item[B] A frying pan?
  \item[A] No. it’s made of metal and plastic. It looks like a ladle with small holes, and it’s used for making tempura ...
\end{itemize}

A similar, yet more involved activity requires the students to read a job description while their partners take notes. Key lexical items are replaced with pictures in which the students have to paraphrase (Figure 4).

\begin{enumerate}
  \item This person usually doesn’t wear a uniform. This person works outside. This person uses tools. For example, this person uses a \includegraphics{image1} and a \includegraphics{image2}. This person also uses \includegraphics{image3}. And these people usually wear a \includegraphics{image4} when they are working.
  \item This person wears a uniform. This person works outside and also inside. This person often carries a \includegraphics{image5}. This person sometimes uses \includegraphics{image6} and \includegraphics{image7}. Sometimes this person wears a \includegraphics{image8} to put their gun away.
\end{enumerate}
A ... Oh, it's a carpenter's tool. It's used for hitting nails, and it's made of ...

Another activity which practices the strategy of circumlocution, while also giving the students practice in the grammatical surface structure of relative clauses is “Definitions.” In pairs, the students are given a vocabulary item, and they must define using a relative clause. For example, “a boat is a vehicle which travels on water.” Each pair reads out their definition while another pair checks if the definition is sufficiently precise.

10. Conclusion

Since a large part of L2 communication is problematic, language classes should prepare students to cope with performance problems as exemplified at the outset of the article. I have attempted to call attention to how strategic competence is part of a general model of communicative competence, and share some useful ideas for integrating its training into the L2 classroom. The article began with how strategic competence is integrated within a framework of communicative competence, and how such strategy training should be part of a language syllabus encompassing all four aspects of communicative competence. The second part of the article illustrated some of the divergent and wide-ranging opinions in attempting to classify communicative strategies, and whether they have a place in the language classroom. The practical ideas in the final part of the article involved strategy training. Although some of the activities may seem unusual, for example, the use of fillers, these activities provide the learners with a sense of security, build confidence and improvisation skills, and last but not least, are something that the students enjoy. Areas for further investigation regarding CS should involve continuing to identify the relevant strategies through examination of L1 strategy use, and the cognitive processes of speech production. In addition, since CS is obviously an “applied” area, the practical implications of clarifying problem management L2 communication are large.

Bibliography