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إستراتيجيات التواصل: آلية لتعلم اللغات

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الملخّص

يلجأ كل من متحدثي اللغة الإنجليزية ومتعلميها إلى استخدام إستراتيجيات التواصل الشفوي عند مواجهتهم لأية صعوبة في التعبير أو في إيصال رسالة ما. ويعد استخدام إستراتيجيات التواصل الشفوي أمراً مهماً لمتعلمي اللغة الأجنبية؛ إذ إنه لا يلعب دورًا مهمًا في التواصل فحسب، بل يسهم أيضا في تعلم اللغة. لقد أجرى العديد من الباحثين في هذا المجال عددًا من الدراسات حول فاعلية استخدام إستراتيجيات التواصل الشفوي منذ بداية السبعينات، كما قدموا تصنيفات مختلفة لهذه الإستراتيجيات. يهدف هذا البحث بشكل أساسي إلى إظهار أهمية إستراتيجيات التواصل الشفوي في مجال تعليم اللغة. يستهل البحث بعرض موجز لنشأة إستراتيجيات التواصل الشفوي. ومن ثم يناقش المقاربات المختلفة التي درس الباحثون بوساطتها هذه الإستراتيجيات. يتناول البحث بعدها عددًا من التصنيفات المختلفة لإستراتيجيات التواصل الشفوي والطرائق المختلفة التي استخدمت لاستنباطها، ويختم بالحديث عن الجدل القائم في مسألة إمكانية تعليم إستراتيجيات التواصل الشفوي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: إستراتيجيات التواصل، الهدف التواصلي، تعليم اللغة.

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Communication strategies: A Mechanism for Language Learning

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Abstract

Both native and non-native speakers resort to communication strategies (CSs) when they face difficulties expressing their intended messages and achieving their communicative goals. The use of communication strategies is of crucial importance for language learners. Not only do they play an essential role in communication, but they also contribute to language learning. Many studies have been conducted on the effectiveness of communication strategies since the early 1970s, and different taxonomies have been proposed by different researchers (e.g. Tarone, 1977; Faerch and Kasper, 1980). The main aim of this paper is to present the importance of communication strategies in the field of language teaching. It starts with a brief review of the history of communication strategies. Then it discusses the approaches from which the communication strategies have been investigated. It also deals with the various taxonomies of communication strategies and the different elicitation methods used in literature. Finally, it discusses the arguments concerning the teaching of communication strategies.

Key words: communication strategies, communicative goal, language teaching.

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Introduction

It seems nowadays that one of the ultimate goals of English Language Teaching (ELT) is to develop learners' communicative competence and help them to be effective communicators in the target language. One of the ways to improve their communicative competence is improving their strategic competence, a main component of communicative competence, which refers to using communication strategies that help learners compensate for communication breakdowns caused by the lack of linguistic knowledge (Canale and Swain, 1980).

The notion of communication strategies was first introduced by Selinker (1972)'s paper entitled 'Interlanguage' (Mariani, 2010) in which Selinker referred to CSs as an important process to second language learning. "I consider the following to be processes and strategies important to SLA: first, language transfer; second, transfer of training; third, (strategies of second language learning; fourth, strategies of second language communication; and fifth, overgeneralization of TL linguistic material" (Selinker, 1972, P. 215). In the same year, Savignon studied the effect of using communication strategies in the process of language teaching. The study conducted on two groups of learners showed that the communicative competence of the learners who were involved in the CS training program was improved significantly and surpassed that of the learners who had had no communication practice (Savignon, 1991). Then came Varadi (1973) who was the first to study learners' strategic behaviour and proposed the first typology of CSs (Poulisse, 1996). However, the interest in studying CSs among researchers started in the 1980s when Canale and Swain included communication strategies in their model of communicative competence (Rabab'ah, 2003).

Early CS studies primarily focused on defining CSs and developing typologies (e.g. Faerch and Kasper, 1980; Paribakht, 1984). Later, CS research started to discuss the teachability of CSs (e.g. Dornyei, 1995; Nakatani, 2005).

1. The importance of communication strategies

Using CSs is one of the core assumptions of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Richards, 2006). Research has shown that using CSs contributes to language learning through the use of interactional and meaning negotiation strategies (Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991; Rabab'ah, 2003). In addition, using CSs can play an important role in improving learners' confidence towards using the target language (L2) and thus improving their fluency (Richards, 2006; Rabab'ah, 2016). This is because using these strategies while orally communicating helps provide learners with "a sense of security in the L2 by allowing them room to maneuver in times of difficulty" (Dornyei, 1995, P. 80). It also helps them maintain their communication and not give up, especially low-level learners as Faucette (2001) noted. By keeping the flow of conversation, learners will have the opportunity to "receive more language input and improve their language ability" (Faucette, 2001, P. 6).

2. Approaches of communication strategies

Although the main goal of using CSs is to compensate for language breakdowns and overcome communication difficulties to achieve a communicative goal, there is no agreement on one definition of communication strategies among researchers in the field. CS researchers have taken different approaches to defining these strategies. There are two perspectives from which CSs have been investigated: the interactional perspective and the psycholinguistic one.

2. 1. The Interactional Perspective:

The interactional perspective views communication strategies as "a mutual attempt of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in situations where requisite meaning structures do not seem to be shared" (Tarone, 1983, P. 65 as cited in Kasper & Kellerman, 1997, P. 2). According to this perspective, CSs are "co-operative in nature"; conversing participants contribute to solving communication problems together (Buhlmann, 2005, 114).

2. 2. The Psycholinguistic Perspective:

The psycholinguistic perspective, on the other hand, views communication strategies as "potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal" (Faerch & Kasper, 1980, 81). According to this perspective, the use of strategies is problem-oriented (Faerch & Kasper, 1980), and problems are addressed from a cognitive viewpoint as it is

concerned with the "mental processes" underlying the learner's observable behaviour; how they perceive, understand and produce language (Faerch & Kasper, 1980, 50).

Thus, the difference between the two perspectives is the point of 'mutuality'. However, communication problems are not always solved mutually. When facing a problem, the interlocutor decides whether to solve the problem himself or herself or ask for. If he/she decides to solve them alone, then the interlocutors "clearly do not reach a state of mutually attempting.... to agree on a meaning" (Faerch & Kasper, 1980, P. 97).

No single perspective is better. When teaching communication strategies, teachers should mix both. Communication strategies are mainly used to solve problems arising while communicating to achieve a communicative goal. Both psycholinguistic and interactional strategies contribute to this aim. The psycholinguistic view is mainly associated with strategies used to cope with lexical gaps. Thus, these strategies are also called "vocabulary communication strategies" or "compensatory strategies" (Llach and Alonso, 2020, P. 25). In addition, using interactional strategies also contribute to solving problems through asking for help. Moreover, communication strategies should not only be taught as problem-solving strategies, but also as mechanisms for communication, discourse functions and meaning negotiation.

3. Data Elicitation Methods

Different methods have been used to elicit data needed to study the strategic behaviour for different purposes; defining CSs, proposing CS taxonomies, and investigating the effect of using CSs on improving the subject's oral performance, strategic competence and strategy use. These methods include different tasks, some of which are: picture story tasks (Varadi, 1973; Tarone, 1977 as cited by poulisse, 1996), concept-identification tasks (Paribakht, 1984; Rabab'ah, 2001; Kongsom, 2009), describing abstract shapes (Bongaerts and Poulisse 1989), role play tasks (Rabab'ah, 2001), conversation and oral interview tasks (Kongsom, 2009).

The picture story task has been used by different researchers in different ways. For example, it was used by both Varadi and Tarone. Varadi (1973) asked learners to write a description of a picture story, while Tarone 1977) used the spoken version of Varadi's task. This method was criticized by Paribakht who argued that "the experimental conditions lacked the interactional aspects of normal communication" (P. 13).

On her part, Paribakht used concept-identification task in her study to clarify the relationship between the use of CSs and language proficiency level. She used three groups of subjects (low-level learners, high- level learners and native speakers of the target language). The subjects were asked to communicate both abstract and concrete nouns without saying the exact words until the concepts were identified or either of the parties gave up. For the concrete nouns, the subjects were given pictures of the items, and for the abstract nouns, they were given cards on which the concepts were written in the subjects' native language. The premise of choosing this task, according to Paribakht, is that lexicon is of vital importance for communication and it is continuously subject to development. "While an individual may master the syntactic rules of a language (either in L1 or L2) at some point, he/she usually continues to learn more vocabulary throughout life" (PP. 13-14). The concrete nouns were sufficiently difficult to communicate (e.g. palanquin, ruff, pillory). The reason of difficulty was to "constitute a genuine communicative problem which is the motivation for the use of CS" (P. 14). As for the abstract nouns, they were "relatively common items which were not semantically ambiguous to the subjects" (P. 15) (e.g. fate, success, honesty, and justice).

Another method that was used to elicit CSs is abstract shape description. It was used by Bongaerts and Poulisse in their study conducted to investigate the differences in CS use between L1 and L2. The subjects were asked to describe 12 unconventional abstract shapes that have no names (as shown in Figure 1) both in their native language first and then in English (the target one). Their description were recorded for a native speaker to listen to later and try to arrange the shapes in the order they were described in. Rabab'ah has some reservations on this method in which one learner describes and a native speaker arranges the shapes. He argued that no speaking or asking for clarification among learners occurs. In addition, such task is far from real-life language.

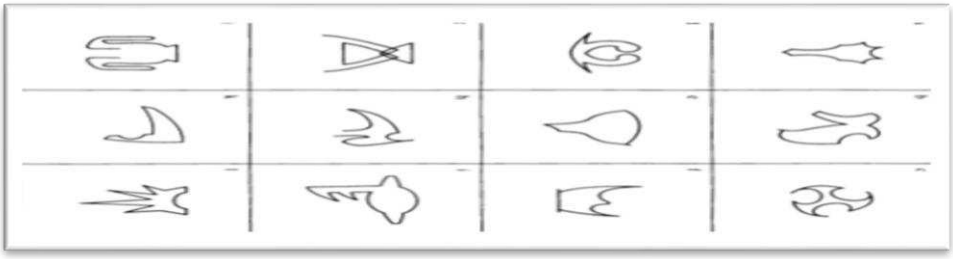


Figure 1: Bongaerts and Poulisse's picture description task (1989, P. 259).

Therefore, in his 2001 study, he did not design tasks to elicit CSs. He rather used CLT tasks that are related to real life, such as object-identification/ naming, picture story-telling, and role-play tasks. In object-identification task, unlike Paribakht who used "items which are highly infrequent in daily language use, but are conceptually familiar" (P. 14), Rabab'ah used a number of pictures containing different objects used ineveryday life and that learners encounter in different places, e.g. broom, pushchair, vending machine and other real-life objects. The subjects were asked to name the objects. When they could not name, they were asked to describe them and convey their message. In picture story-telling, the learners were given a series of pictures that tell a story and were asked to tell the story. According to Rabab'ah (2001), using this task helps "restrict the content of the learners' production without affecting the language used to tell the story" (P. 195). The role-play task took place between every two learners, one took the role of a foreigner having some problems, and the other took the role of a resident whom the foreigner had to ask for some information. The content of the conversation was controlled; the learners were given a chart to follow. Similarly, Kongsom (2009) chose tasks which he found useful to elicit different types of communication strategies and reflect real-life communication. For example, he used cartoon description (similar to picture story-telling used in Rabab'ah's 2001 study), oral interview (involving questions about real-life topics such as university, family and free time), and conversation tasks where two learners talk about particular situations (e.g. a day spent at the beach with friends). The major criterion for choosing these tasks, according to Kongsom, is "how authentic they were in providing a situation for the learners to use different CSs to convey meaning and solve their oral communication problems" (P. 77).

4. Taxonomies of communication strategies

This section reviews some communication strategy taxonomies proposed by CS researchers. One of the earliest taxonomies is that of Tarone (1977). Analyzing subjects' performance, she classified the elicited strategies into five main categories:

1. Avoidance strategies. The speaker avoids talking about concepts for which they do not know the target language structure.
2. Paraphrase strategies. This kind includes:

a. Approximation. The speaker uses a language that is not correct but shares semantic features with the target one. E.g., pipe for waterpipe.

b. Word coinage. The speaker makes up a new language to communicate a message. E.g., airball for balloon.

c. Circumlocution. The speaker describes or defines an object or action instead of using the exact target language.

3. Conscious transfer. This strategy includes:

a. Literal translation. The speaker translates from their native language (word for word).

b. Language switch. The speaker uses their native language without translating.

4. Appeal for assistance. The speaker asks their interlocutor for help.
5. Mime. The speaker uses nonverbal language (e.g. the use of body language, gestures, etc.)

However, Faerch and Kasper (1980) classified CSs into two major types based on the language user's choice when encountering a problem during communication. They suggested that learners either avoid the problem "by changing the communication goal", using reduction strategies, or face it "by developing an alternative plan" using achievement strategies (P. 83). The strategies include:

1. Reduction strategies. This kind is similar to avoidance strategies where the speaker reduces their communicative goal to avoid incorrect language and other communication problems like forgetting the exact language or not knowing it.

2. Achievement strategies. The speaker uses these strategies to attempt to solve communication problems. They include:
A. Compensatory strategies. This kind includes:
a. Code switching. The speaker switches from L2 to L1.
b. Inter/intra-lingual transfer. The speaker considers the L2 similar to L1 and generalizes its rules. E.g., generalizing the regular (-ed) to irregular verbs.
c. IL-based strategies. The speaker may generalize (e.g. using a superordinate terms), paraphrase, make new words or restructure.
d. Co-operative strategies. The speaker asks their interlocutor for help.
e. Non-linguistic strategies. The speakers uses nonverbal strategies. E.g., mine, gesture and sound imitation.
B. Retrieval strategies. Strategies that aim at solving retrieval problems are like "waiting for the term to appear, searching via other languages and retrieval from learning situations" (P. 99).
A different classification of CSs is found in Rabab'ah (2001)'s taxonomy. He conducted a study on Arab English majors at Yarmouk University in Jordan to determine which CSs they use to solve their communication problems while communicating in both their native language (Arabic) and the target one (English). Analyzing the participants' strategic behaviour, Rabab'ah classified CSs into two main categories (L1-based strategies and L2-based strategies as follows:
1. L1-based strategies. This kind includes:
a. literal translation. E.g., electrical stairs for escalator.
b. language switch. The speaker uses L1. This category is divided into sub-categories according to the reason of switching:
i. L1 slips and immediate insertion. The speaker uses it unintentionally (a slip of the tongue)
ii. L1 appeal for help. E.g., ... the guy? Ghalat? (tr: wrong?)
iii. L1 optimal meaning strategy. The speaker uses "L1-intended meaning ... to refer to the object" (P. 214) (e.g. ascenseur (tr: lift))
iv. L1-retrieval strategies. The speaker waits the language to appear and in the meantime, they use their native language trying to recall it. E.g., "Hathi bisamouha (tr: this is called) (20 sec) to light the room..." (P. 215)
v. L1 ignorance acknowledgement strategies. The speaker says, I don't know in their native language.
2. L2-Based strategies. They include:
a. Avoidance strategies
b. Word coinage
c. Circumlocution
d. Self-correction
e. Approximation
f. Mumbling
g. L2 appeal for help
h. Self-repetition
i. Use of similar-sounding words. E.g., this is 'ekstenture' for 'fire extinguisher'
j. Use of all-purpose words. E.g., stuff, thing, do, make, etc.
k. Ignorance acknowledgement. The speakers says, I don't know.
It can be seen that there is "no consensus among researchers over a taxonomy of communication strategies" (Rabab'ah, 2001, P. 140). CS researchers have produced different taxonomies. They differ in categories, and some strategies can be found under different labels. In addition, the way according to which CS researchers investigated CSs also played a role in producing different taxonomies. For example, Faerch and Kasper (1980) investigated CSs according to what learners do when they face problems in communication, while Rabab'ah (2001) proposed a taxonomy according to what strategies learners use when communicating in both the target language and their native one. However, "the underlying structure of these taxonomies is often the same" (Rabab'ah, 2001, P. 137). For example, in Tarone (1977)'s taxonomy, topic avoidance and message abandonment strategies are classified under avoidance strategies, while they are classified under reduction strategies in Faerch and Kasper (1980)'s taxonomy. Similarly, circumlocution, approximation and word coinage strategies are classified under paraphrase strategies in Tarone (1977)'s taxonomy, while it is referred to as L2-based strategies in Rabab'ah (2001)'s taxonomy.

5. The Teachability of communication strategies

Teaching communication strategies is a matter of controversy. Many researchers have investigated whether CSs can be taught or not (Kongsom, 2009). Some scholars were against the idea of teaching CSs (e.g. Bialystok, 1990; Poulisse, 1990), while others argued that teaching CSs is possible and useful. For example, Rabab'ah (2003) argued that teaching CSs is possible and can improve their oral communication skills. Lam (2006) also investigated the effectiveness of teaching CSs to improve learners' strategy use and oral performance. The findings of his study showed that CS instruction helped learners to improve their discussion skills. Another study was conducted by Kongsom (2009) who concluded that CS instruction contributed to raising learners' awareness of strategy use and promoted a greater use of CSs when facing difficulties in communication.

According to the first view, the use of CSs could be transferable from L1 to L2; learners might recall the CSs that they already use while communicating in their native language (Bialystok, 1990; Poulisse, 1990).

In addition, the advocates of this view consider CSs as reflections of the psychological processes (the mental processes that a learner uses in producing and understanding language), and thus teachers should focus on teaching the language and "let the strategies look after themselves" (Kellerman, 1991, P. 158 as cited in Kasper & Kellerman, 1997, P. 280). This idea is emphasized by Bialystok (1990) who added that "What one must teach students of a language is not strategy, but language" (p. 147) as the more language the learners have, the less problems they will face.

The empirical evidence of the argument against teaching CSs, however, has not been proved. Based on many studies, conducted to investigate the effect of teaching CSs on the learner's communication skills development (e.g. Dornyei, 1995; Nakatani, 2005; Lam, 2006; Kongsom, 2009), the second view proves the usefulness of CS instruction in the field of language learning.

Conclusion and Implications

To conclude, it is of vital importance to find a way to improve learners' oral performance and help them be effective communicators in L2 nowadays. One of the ways that can help in this respect is the use of CSs as its effectiveness in improving the oral skills has been investigated for the last three decades. Foreign language teachers are recommended to raise learner's awareness of the use of CSs and teach them how to use these strategies effectively to compensate for communication problems and be able to express themselves successfully in the target language during communication. Knowing what to do to overcome difficulties can make learners, especially low-level learners, feel that oral communication is easy. It, thus, can contribute to enhancing their confidence and being risk takers, which can be positively reflected on their fluency.

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