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Communication Strategy Use in English Conversational Discourse

Tóthné Herbst Zsuzsanna: Kommunikációs stratégiák az angol társalgási nyelvhasználatban

Összefoglaló

A nyelvtanulók végső célja hatékonyan és folyékonyan kommunikálni a tanult idegen nyelven, ami nem könnyű feladat elé állítja őket. Hosszú évekig tanulják a nyelvet, és megtörténhet, hogy bár minden nyelvtani szerkezettel tisztában vannak, valós szituációban még egy pohár vizet sem sikerül kérni. A kérdés, amire szeretnék választ kapni, vajon a kommunikációs stratégiák használata célirányos tanítással segítene-e a nehézségek leküzdésében? Néhány évvel ezelőtt végeztem egy kutatást azzal kapcsolatban, hogy milyen mértékben használnak bizonyos stratégiákat a nyelvtanulók. Az akkori kiadványok még nem foglalkoztak külön funkciók szerint besorolt kifejezésekkel a tananyagban, akkor saját listát használtunk. Az újabb tankönyvek viszont kiemelik a hasznos kifejezéseket. A kérdés tehát, hogy ez a figyelemfelkeltés meghozza-e a változást a tanulók kommunikációjában.

Kulcsszavak: kommunikációs stratégiák, tanult idegen nyelv, hatékony kommunikálás, stratégiák taníthatósága

ABSTRACT

The ultimate goal of language learners is to communicate efficiently and fluently in the given second language, which is hard work to reach. They are learning the language for long years, and it may happen that theoretically they are familiar with all the grammar intricacies, but practically they are not able to ask for even a glass of water in real situations. The question is whether the use of communication strategies could help to cope with the difficulties by their direct teaching. A few years ago I conducted a research to find out what kind of interactive strategies the learners are using and to provide a full list of them. The publications at that time did not deal with strategies specifically in the teaching material. I used my own list. The latest books, however, put a stress on useful phrases. So the question is whether the fact that they draw attention to strategies in separate sections, will bring significant changes in the learners' communication.

Key words: communication strategies, second language, effective communication, teachability of strategies

1. INTRODUCTION

It can often happen that communication fails for this or that reason, especially in a foreign language, in which we are not as good as at our mother tongue. The sources of communication problems are extremely varied. Besides the most common one – the lack of vocabulary – there can be other language problems, like the lack of fluency, the different proficiency levels of the speakers, grammatical, accent and pronunciation problems, or psychological problems, like different noises (you cannot hear your partner), simultaneous talk, the lack of a common topic, the lack of interest or the partner is simply unwilling to talk. My view is that strategy use can overcome many problems.

2. THE TERM 'STRATEGY'

As communication is getting more and more in the centre of language teaching pushing out grammar-centred education, we can read more and more studies on different types of strategies, which facilitate communication and learning, and also modern books put a higher attention on teaching them. The term 'strategy' is explained in Collins Cobuild's English Language Dictionary in the meaning 2.2 as "the art of planning the best way to achieve something or to be successful in a particular field". Most researchers differentiate between three major kinds of strategies in a broad sense: learning strategies, social strategies, and communication strategies.

3. PROBLEMS CONCERNING COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Numerous dubious points surround the notion of communication strategy itself. Dörnyei and Scott [1994] identify three major problem areas: "(a) the lack of a universally acceptable definition for communication strategies; (b) the existence of several competing taxonomies of communication strategies that include different ranges of strategies; (c) the lack of reliable methods for identifying communication strategies". (p.1)

4. RESEARCH WORK

Some years ago I did some research work. The aim of the research was to observe learners' behaviour in challenging situations, to find out what kind of interactive strategies they are using, and to construct a comprehensive list of them. The subjects were English learner participants, native speakers were excluded. The level of their English was post intermediate. The participants were asked to perform two oral tasks, namely to act out two guided role-play situations, which were recorded. One of them was a shop scene in England. The customer enters a technical shop, and he/she needs something the name of which he/she does not know in English. He/she

has to try to explain what he/she wants without giving up, till the shop assistant can understand it and serves him/her. The shop assistant must be helpful, and do his/her best to understand what the customer wants to buy. When they already know what they are talking about, they have to discuss how many of them the customer needs, in what colour, size and type. At the end of the dialogue they settle the bill and say good bye.

The other situation was a telephone conversation. A man or a woman in his/her thirties from the middle class, who lives in London, is doing the washing up after breakfast on a Saturday morning, when he/she notices that the outflow pipe of the sink has got clogged up. Moreover, when he/she tries to unscrew it in order to clean it, the elbow pipe gets broken. He/she phones for a plumber. They discuss the problem in detail – what the elbow pipe is made of, what its diameter is, where it has broken etc. They have to make an appointment when the plumber can repair it, but it is not so easy, because the repair is very urgent for the client as he/she is expecting guests for dinner, while the plumber is very busy, he is booked up till four o'clock. They have to agree on a time and say good bye.

The instructions were given in their mother tongue so that they should cope with the problems in the target language on their own and not to influence them with any possible solutions. Difficult words – words that were likely to be unfamiliar to the learners, like "elbow pipe" and the thing the customer needs (a "raw plug") were deliberately put in the situations, as we needed challenging parts to make learners use as many strategies as they could.

The students' reaction after doing the task was interesting for me. Although they were confident students, they admitted that this experiment helped them to realize that there are several gaps in their English knowledge, and there are still much to learn and improve it. This reassured me that it is worth carrying on with experimenting to find the right methods for teaching learners how to communicate better.

When analysing, traditionally, we can talk about two basic types of methods: quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative methodology is more objective, controlled and product-oriented, while the qualitative one is more subjective, uncontrolled and process-oriented but they are mutually dependent.

5. DEFINITIONS OF THE STRATEGIES USED BY OUR STUDENTS (OWN LIST)

Name of the Strategy	Definition
1. Asking for clarification	The speaker asks a question making the interlocutor clarify the point
2. Asking for repetition	The speaker asks a question making the interlocutor repeat the trigger
3. Carrying on as if understanding	The interlocutor carries on the conversation in spite of non-understanding
4. Checking if the other can follow you	The speaker asks a question to make sure the interlocutor knows what he/she is speaking about
5. Checking what you said was correct	The speaker is not sure he/she is saying the right word, and says it with rising intonation
6. Collaborating	The interlocutor helps out the speaker by finishing his/her sentence to make the conversation easy-flowing
7. Confirmation request	The speaker wants to be sure whether he/she could get the point properly
8. Confirmation request with zero response	The speaker wants to be sure whether he/she could get the point properly, but there is no answer for different reasons: he/she does not expect an answer, the interlocutor carries on the conversation without answering, or because of simultaneous speech
9. Expressing non-understanding non-verbally	When the speaker does not say a word, we can conclude he/she does not understand something. It is usually accompanied by gestures.
10. Expressing non-understanding verbally	The speaker expresses that he/she does not understand the point explicitly usually with a statement
11. Guessing	The speaker does not know what his/her partner wants to say, but has an idea and asks a direct question about it.
12. Interpretive summary	The interlocutor summarizes the speaker's message to check if he/she could understand it correctly
13. Other repair	The interlocutor corrects what the speaker has said
14. Other repetition	The interlocutor repeats the trigger in order to gain some time
15. Other repetition: encouraging	The interlocutor repeats the trigger to encourage the speaker to continue his/her speech
16. Other repetition: OK	The interlocutor repeats the trigger to let the speaker know that he/she can understand the message

17. Question persistence	The speaker asks a question again
18. Response confirmation	The speaker confirms what has been said after the interlocutor's reaction to the problem
19. Response expansion	The speaker explains the problem, or adds some more information for a better understanding
20. Response rejection	A negative response giving no alternative solution
21. Response repair	The speaker corrects what he/she has said after the reaction of the interlocutor
22. Response repetition	The speaker repeats the trigger after the interlocutor's reaction to the problem usually with "pardon-meaning"
23. Response rephrasing	The speaker rephrases the message by saying it in another way

Table 1.

6. STRATEGY USE IN MODERN COURSE BOOKS

As the trend is the communicative teaching method, modern course books deal more and more with direct teaching of strategies focusing on separate sections in each unit. I examined 4 books more thoroughly: Keith Harding and Alastair Lane: International Express [2014], Business Result [2009], Intelligent Business [2008] and Sue Robins: First Insights into Business [2004]. The strategies in these books appear in a rather functional categorization, and they concentrate on useful phrases, expressions which can often be used by learners in different situations.

Let's see their categorization system.

Name of the Book	Categorization	Some Examples
International Express [2014]	*Functions*	Networking
		Checking progress; delegating tasks
		Making arrangements
		Giving opinions
		Giving advice and suggestions
		Describing problems
		Discussing and reaching agreement
		Checking understanding and clarifying
Business Result [2009]	*Business Communication*	Socializing
		Telephoning
		Presenting
		Meetings
		Exchanging information

Intelligent Business [2008]	Career skills	Checking information
		Being polite
		Making predictions
		Making an appointment
		Making suggestions
		Expressing arguments
		Dealing with problems
		Managing time
First Insights into Business [2004]	Business communication	There was no concrete coincidence

Table 2.

7. COMPARISON

Since there are two different approaches, it is difficult to find strategies that coincide exactly with the functions. I could mention only a few examples.

In International Express on p.101 the function of Checking understanding and clarifying coincide with the strategy of Asking for clarification. (E.g. Are you with me?; Is everything clear?)

In Business Result on p. 52 Making and responding to suggestions coincide with Response conformation. (E.g. OK. Let's...; Fine.; That's a great idea!;Yes, I think we should)

In Intelligent Business on p.21 Checking information coincide with Asking for clarification. (E.g. Do you mean?)

On p. 65 Making an appointment-negative responses coincide with Response rejection (E.g. I'm afraid...)

On p.99 Expressing arguments coincide with Interpretive summary (E.g. Surely the main point is...; The fact is...) and Expressing non-understanding verbally (e.g. I understand your point, but...)

On p.107 Dealing with problems coincide with Response expansion (E.g. I've got a problem...)

On p.118 in the useful expressions of Dilemma and Decision we can find an example for Confirmation request (E.g. So can we agree to...?)

On p. 133 Giving reasons coincide with Interpretive summary (E.g. So that means that...)

In First Insights into Business comparison was even more complicated because expressions are built in the communication strategies through functions or rather situations. Still we can say that e.g. when the function is telephoning (p.65) and there is misunderstanding or non-understanding there's a big chance of using communication strategies like Asking for repetition; Checking if the other can follow you; Asking for clarification; Confirmation request; Expressing non-understanding verbally.

8. TEACHING IMPLICATIONS

I have been teaching English for many years, and my experience is exactly the same as Barnes', who is referred to in Couldhard's book (1981) saying that in classroom interaction "the pupils' participation is too law; They ask too few questions and when they are willing to contribute, their contribution is not built upon" (p.93). I can add that the problem for them is not confined to not questioning enough, but it is also very difficult to make them open their lips to manifest their own opinions in L2. I teach them the adequate amount of vocabulary and grammar, and they are not willing to speak, to communicate. I was wondering whether it is because of the lack of opinions of today's

young people. But this potential reason could be excluded because if I switch into their mother tongue, they start to chatter like a magpie. Could the reason then be because of the lack of using communication strategies?

There are also some arguments against teaching communication strategies. As we can learn from Dörnyei's summary (1995) on this problem, it seems to be logical that as we already speak one language, our mother tongue, and we know the cognitive processes, why should not we be able to transfer our strategic competence from L1 to L2? Dörnyei refers to Kellerman's conclusion: "there is no justification for providing training in compensatory strategies in the classroom,... Teach the learners more language and the strategies look after themselves" (p.3).

Dörnyei goes on with his overview and we can learn the other side representing by Savignon, Faerch and Kasper and many others, who support the possibility and desirability of strategy training. We can see that finding the only solution is not easy. Dörnyei believes that there are three sources of the "seeming contradiction": firstly, "Most of the arguments on both sides are based on indirect evidence"; secondly, "there is variation within communication strategies with regard to their teachability", and thirdly, "The notion of "teaching" allows for a variety of interpretations" (p.4)

It is a fact that we cannot speak about strategies in general. The range of them is so wide that we must distinguish between teachable ones and ones that cannot or should not be taught, but must be called attention to. The strategies that consist of prefabricated structures or set expressions offer themselves for instruction. Teaching them is important to encourage learners to dare to communicate and not back out when encountering a problem. Some others do not contain any set phrases, yet advisable to call the attention to them trying to make learners practise fluent discourse.

By teaching I do not mean the traditional narrow sense of 'passing on new information', but I identify myself with the broader interpretation, which involves six procedures collected by Dörnyei [1995]:
- "Raising learner awareness about the nature and communicative potential of CSs."
- "Encouraging students to be willing to take risks and use CSs."
- "Providing L2 models of the use of certain CSs."
- "Highlighting cross cultural differences in CS use."
- "Teaching CSs directly by presenting linguistic devices to verbalize them."
- "Providing opportunities for practice in strategy use." (pp. 13-14)

Since we have been talking about communicative language teaching, a new type of language lesson has appeared, called the conversation class. However, there is uncertainty among teachers about what these classes should involve, and these lessons are often not systematic enough and usually characterized by a "random, intuition-based selection of general communicative activities" (Dörnyei and Thurrell, 1994, p.40).

The literature distinguishes between two major approaches to teaching communicative skills. The indirect approach, following Dörnyei and Thurrell, includes situational role plays, problem-solving tasks and information-gap exercises. The direct approach, according to Richards, cited by Dörnyei and Thurrell, "involves planning a conversation programme around the specific micro skills, strategies, and processes that are involved in fluent conversation" (p.41). I would argue that the ideal way would be the integration of the two approaches in a new, systematic methodology.

The point is not in that we should make the learners swot up more and more complicated expressions they have never heard, but rather make them use and activate the potential phrases, and teach them not only routines, but also how to recognize when to use them in correct situations. This can be reached by a lot of demonstration and practice which should be giving opportunities to observe native speakers' speech, and stimulate the learners to speak as much as possible. The next big question is how to stimulate them? The right motivation could

be including interesting material to make learning enjoyable. Students really enjoy funny ice-breakers, warmers and games, which make them relaxed and speak.

9. Summary

I would like to finish my work with Faerch and Kasper's words, which speak for themselves why to teach communication strategies: "...communication strategies can be seen as devices which enable learners to bridge the inevitable gap between classroom interaction and various communicative situations outside the classroom, hereby increasing their communicative competence... . In other words, by learning how to use communication strategies appropriately, learners will be more able to bridge the gap between formal and informal learning situations, between pedagogic and non-pedagogic communicative situations." [Faerch and Kasper, 1983, p.56]

And after all, we would like to teach them for life, would not we?

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