Acquiring Communication Strategies through Conversational Training: The Case Study of 1st Year LMD Students at Djillali Liabès University Sidi Bel Abbès Algeria

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Abstract

Learning to speak a foreign language requires not only to know its grammatical and semantic rules but to acquire the knowledge of how native speakers use the language, i.e., using structured interpersonal exchanges in a certain context where various factors interact. To provide effective guidance to make competent speakers of English, it is necessary to examine the factors that affect learners' oral communication and specific strategies used in communication. Teachers are now conscious that students find problems to communicate in English. Although students know grammar rules, vocabulary, and some useful expressions for conversation, they lack to use communication strategies. Therefore, the aim of this study is to explore how to encourage students to acquire communication strategies.

Keywords: communication - communication strategies- -skills- speaking -tasks.

1. Introduction

Oral language is the basis of communication. Oral language development in school means to provide students with the skills and opportunities to communicate effectively; thus, speech involves thinking, knowledge and skills. Though oral language acquisition is a natural process this does not mean that all students will acquire effective communication skills. For ease of communication, it is necessary for the learners to find efficient means through which they can vehicle their ideas. This is due to the lack of strategic competence in a language.

The present study aims at undertaking a preliminary investigation of whether students' awareness in group work through conversation training may constitute a significant factor facilitating their ability to communicate effectively and to find a possible answer to their poor achievement in communication. In other words, do students' awareness of communication strategies correlate positively or not with their communication achievement? Hence, this paper seeks to address the following questions:

1- What is the nature of the students' communicative difficulties?
2- Do students actually possess any communication strategies? If so, what communication strategies do the students use?
3- Is awareness raising, through conversational training, likely to contribute to their progress in communication?

The above research questions are set to conduct the present study based on the following hypotheses:

1- Students' communicative difficulties may not be of linguistic nature, i.e, they lack appropriate awareness of communication strategies even though they are good at writing and/or reading.
2- Students are equipped with poor and inefficient communication strategies.
3- If students' awareness is raised, they may make progress in communication.

2. Related Literature

The efficient use of language to achieve successful communication in situations where there is some sort of communicative obstacles highlights one of the key issues of research in Second Language Acquisition known as

Communication Strategies.

Selinker (1972) was the first to identify the use of communication strategies as one of the processes affecting Second Language Acquisition. Since then, there have been many important researches that have widened the scope of this field. Two main approaches to the study of communication strategies may be highlighted. The first can be said to have a linguistic basis and is to be found in the works of Tarone (1977, 1980), Færch and Kasper (1980, 1983, 1984), or Harding (1983). The second confers a cognitive basis to the study and is to be found in the works of Bialystok (1990) and Poulisse (1990).

Within the linguistic approach, the most important works have been those of Tarone and Færch and Kasper. Although they differ in their conceptualisation of communication strategies, i.e., Tarone suggests the existence of interactional constraints while Færch and Kasper study communication strategies psycholinguistically, relating plans, behaviours and goals.

In the psycholinguistic framework proposed by Færch and Kasper's (1983; 1984), when speakers are short of linguistic resources, they resort to use communication strategies to solve their communicative problems. By restructuring the utterances, they manage to compensate for the lack of certain linguistic information. The strategies are classified into reduction strategies and achievement strategies.

When facing a problem, a learner has to choose between two alternatives. The first one is avoidance, message abandonment or meaning replacement which occurs when the learner changes his original communicative goals by means of reduction strategies, whereas the other solution is to maintain the original goal by developing an alternative plan through the use of an achievement strategy such as appeal for assistance, literal translation, code-switching, restructuring, word coinage, paraphrasing and nonlinguistic means.

According to Færch and Kasper (1983), reduction strategies are subdivided into 'formal', that is, avoidance of the Target Language rules of which the learner is not certain, and 'functional' that is , avoidance of speech acts , topics and modality markers. Achievement strategies are also divided into 'compensatory' (i.e. replacement of an initial plan with a strategic plan) and 'retrieval' (i.e. perseverance with the initial plan by looking for item(s) required).

To Faerch and Kasper (1983), communication strategies refer to the employed techniques when one fails to explicitly express oneself. It is worth mentioning that 1st year LMD students use some strategies at a higher frequency while others are hardly used. The following table will show Faerch and Kasper's taxonomy of communication strategies.

Table 1. A Typology of Communication Strategies (Færch and Kasper1983)

Strategies		Sub-Strategies		Examples
Achievement Strategies	Cooperative Strategies	Appeals		Because of the lack of Linguistic resources, The learner asks either teacher or mates for help.
	Non Cooperative Strategies	Interlanguage Strategies	Language switch	I have 16 years old
			Paraphrase	Some brushed-keeps their clothes-without dust for brushes clothes
		Non Linguistic Means	Word Coinage	'airball' for 'balloon'
		Mimes , gestures	Fillers	Well , he is…
Reduction		Avoidance		Because of the lack of vocabulary, the learner avoids communication and keeps silent.

3. Methodology

Triggered by the communicative strategies proposed by Færch and Kasper (1984), this study is designed to elicit and describe the Communication Strategies used by 1st year LMD students at Djillali Liabès University in Sidi Bel Abbès.

3.1 Participants

The participants who participated in this study were selected randomly and not on their level of proficiency in the English language. The study involved a sample of students from the whole promotion of the first year English LMD students. The main concern of this investigation is English instead of the other subject areas .Students contributed to highlight the problematics which are a matter of much considerable interest .The population under study included two groups of

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twenty students who have been learning English for seven years. 73% of the participants were female and the rest were male, ranging from 18 to 20 years old.

Algeria has recently witnessed a reform at the level of high education which is the LMD system instead of classical system .The classical system works differently from the new one. The LMD system was introduced in Algeria since the beginning of the year 2004, for some universities in the eastern of Algeria like the University of Algiers, Bejaia and Constantine. In 2007 the LMD system was widespread in all the universities in purpose of increasing the international mobility of the Algerian students and faculties. This was the introduction of unit and credit-the accumulation system .This new system composes of a certain number of academic credit hours which are transferable as a part of the overall module of study.

The LMD system was applied in the university of Djillali Liabès in Sidi Bel Abbes in 2005 – 2006 .The first experiment started with the scientific and the technical streams and in the following year, it touched the rest branches. The new reform gave birth to many problems in all the Algerian universities in general and in the University of Sidi Abbes in particular as far as the English LMD classes are concerned.

First, the serious problem that stumbles teaching – learning process is the lack of trained teachers .Then, the absence of language laboratories is an important barrier that hinders the progress of receptive skill (listening) and productive skill (speaking)

3.2 Instruments

To gather efficient data which can help the researcher unveil the kind of strategies that the learners are using and to be in touch with the problems they encounter, the researcher has elaborated some tools so that the study results could be reliable. The materials used in this study were composed of an audio tape-recorder, transcripts , interviews from both teachers and learners and observation which is a process enabling researchers to learn about the activities of the people under study in the natural setting through observing and participating in those activities.

3.3 Procedure

This study was conducted over the course of a couple of months, twice a week. To analyse the tasks performed by the 1st university students, eight activities have been chosen: four before the conversational training phase and four after the conversational training phase. The aim of the tasks consists of studying a set of pictures, arranging them into order and telling the story orally. Still, the purpose is the kind of strategies the students use.

4. Data Analysis

After the interviews were completed and the different tasks conducted, the data were analysed as follows:
- The communication strategies employed by students during the oral sessions were categorized according to the typology by Færch and Kasper (1983).
- The transcripts of the groups' oral work were analyzed by organizing the answers into categories according to the communication strategies .

5. Results and Discussion

In this study, the results and discussion are organized according to the three main research questions:
1- What is the nature of the students' communicative difficulties?

To examine the communication strategies that the students used in group work through the tasks assigned to them, the communication strategies typology proposed by Færch and Kasper (1983) was used for the analysis of the data.

The findings revealed that only some types of communication strategies were used in students' conversation. Students displayed ineffective communication strategies such as Avoidance, Hesitation Devices, Language Switch, paralinguistic features and calls for help. When asked about the use of these strategies, students gave different answers. Some learners did not want to speak and carry out a task because they felt that what they were starting to say was inappropriate and did not know how to convey the correct message in English. Others affirmed that they were afraid of making errors in the classroom because their secondary school teachers interrupted them most of the time and corrected

their mistakes. Therefore they were inhibited to speak. Two students got psychological problems, one was a shy person and got easily nervous and confused when she wanted to talk; the other declared that his vocabulary was limited and his pronunciation was poor.

Students also seemed to rely on Non Linguistic Means in order to maintain the communicative contact with their interlocutors. Indeed, the use of non verbal means of communication are used fairly frequently by most students. Moreover, students needed to be assisted by their teacher or classmates.

In fact, analysis of the results obtained suggests that students show a limited awareness of the communication strategies. This might be due to their language background and the drastic constraints imposed the secondary school teachers whose role was aimed at providing students with direct knowledge about the language they are learning (i.e., structures, lack of using conversation in the classroom, etc.).

Table 2. Students' use of strategies in the pre-conversational tasks

Kinds of Strategies	Both group students							
	Task 1		Task 2		Task 3		Task 4	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Language Switch	08	20	07	17.5	03	7.5	03	7.5
Literal Translation	05	12.5	03	7.5	03	7.5	05	12.5
Hesitation Devices	06	15	08	20	10	25	09	22.5
Non-Linguistic Means	03	7.5	05	12.5	09	22.5	07	17.5
Appeals for Assistance	09	22.5	10	25	08	20	08	20
Avoidance	09	22.5	07	17.5	07	17.5	08	20
Total	**40**	**100**	**40**	**100**	**40**	**100**	**40**	**100**

2- Do students actually possess any communication strategies? If so, what communication strategies do the students use?

3- Is awareness raising, through conversational training, likely to contribute to their progress in communication?

The findings concerning the second and third research questions research reveal that the students, when their awareness is raised, can improve their communication strategies.

Listening to their own conversations, students can notice the good points and bad points of their conversations. Sharing students' self-evaluation, they can raise the awareness of the important skills; in this case, communication strategies. Even if we teach the students communication strategies, students cannot acquire them without becoming aware of the necessity and effectiveness of these strategies

As illustrated in Figure 1, Literal Translation, Language Switch, and Avoidance have no significant effect on the learners.

Concerning Hesitation Devices, when a speaker is not confident that he has correctly conveyed the message, he will use 'heu' or will repeat the word to make sure he is understood by the listener. This is because it is hard to retrieve words from memory. Kraschen (1985) has called attention to the *'din – in – the- head'* phenomenon whereby the din or sense of having the language available for use may wear off after a few days.

Appeals for help, repetition requests, expressions of non-understanding, and so on are the efforts the student makes to receive the message correctly. Because of that, s/he can avoid communication breakdown and keep the conversation going.

As far as the paralinguistic features are concerned, students use gestures or mimes to maintain communication when they cannot express themselves satisfactorily.
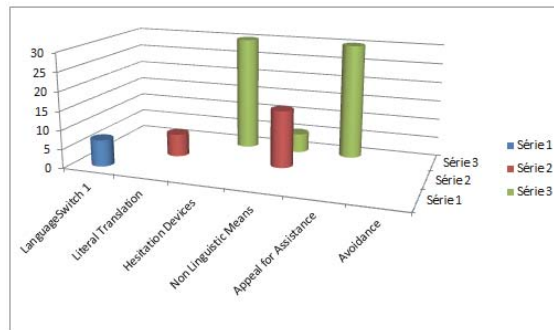
Figure 1. Students' use of strategies in the post-conversational tasks

In the pre-conversational phase, data has unveiled that students were equipped with a poor stock of communication strategies. On the other hand, in the post-conversational phase, students with awareness raising show more positive attitudes and improve some communication strategies.

LMD university students can enhance their communication strategies through awareness raising, i.e., making them hear their own performance and looking objectively at how students develop over a period of time.

6. Recommendations

The present investigation attempts to present some suggestions that can foster university students' communicative efficiency and autonomy to tackle the communicative problems encountered.

Students should know how to establish specific and realistic aims to be achieved; otherwise, they will not see their progress despite the efforts they will accomplish.

> *"Learners become more aware not only of their own preferred ways of learning but also of the fact that there are choices not only in what to learn but also in how to learn." (Nunan, 1991:181)*

Thus, raising student's awareness is something fundamental so as to improve learning. To help learners, teachers should consider their performances in order to establish their own aims and guide them as to what aims are . At the beginning when doing tasks, students can say what they think the aims of the tasks are; therefore, teachers may notice if they have changed their mind as to the aims when the tasks have been done. In doing so, the learners can improve their awareness of how much can be learnt in a given time. Consequently, as time goes on, teachers intervene fewer and fewer and the learners think for themselves.

Conversing, on the other hand involves conventions for interaction, the negotiation of meaning, the understanding of social relationships expressed in a foreign language and not just words and structures. Thus, it is an unplanned activity of which the main trait is spontaneity. Activities such as information-gap tasks, games, role-plays, and simulations, are usually done orally because they motivate learners, encourage interaction, and provide opportunities for purposeful communication. In doing so, they encourage active participation in learning and give students a better understanding of communicative choice and linguistic complexity.. In respect of each activity, success is measured by how specific information has been conveyed, or how well a problem has been solved. Therefore opportunities should be created for learners to engage in conversation. Conversations should not only be used only for relaying information, practising structures or communicative functions and developing fluency.

7. Conclusion

In the current study, findings revealed the communication problems encountered by the 1st year university students. Awareness raising seemed to be the significant factor that contributed to students' shortcomings.

Audio recordings may also be very effective in communicating the tasks and in reassuring the learners that they can succeed in meeting expectations. As they listen to these imperfect performances, it becomes clear that the teacher values the process which the students are engaged in: the questions, the repetitions, the fillers, and other behaviour

which the students use to communicate successfully. For most classroom teachers, developing activities which promote negotiated interaction between students is the most realistic and effective choice. In this way, students can use strategies for avoiding and repairing breakdowns and requires them to take initiative and accept responsibility for their success.

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