ARE COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES TEACHABLE?

Samantha Lewis
Teacher trainer

Resumen

Este artículo discute la posibilidad de enseñar las estrategias de comunicación en el aula de inglés como lengua extranjera. Tras una reflexión sobre las características de la producción del habla en la lengua materna, trata algunas de las dificultades de hablar en un idioma extranjero y las dificultades que conlleva la enseñanza de hablar como destreza. Examina diferentes tipos de estrategias de comunicación y los posibles enfoques que se puede implementar en el aula para conseguir una mayor concienciación de los alumnos sobre la existencia de éstas y desarrollar así su competencia a través de la implementación y práctica del lenguaje. Hay frecuentes referencias a actividades prácticas para el aula que permitirán a los alumnos desarrollar sus competencias de comunicación y tener más confianza en el momento de expresarse oralmente en inglés.

Palabras clave: competencia comunicativa, estrategias de comunicación, EFL, producción del habla materna, destreza del habla

Abstract

This article discusses the teachability of communication strategies in the EFL classroom. As well as reflecting on the nature of speech production in the mother tongue, it looks at some of the difficulties encountered when speaking in a foreign language and the inherent difficulties in 'teaching' speaking as a skill. It focuses on different types of communication strategies and possible approaches that can be used in the classroom to raise students' awareness of these strategies and develop their strategic competence through the implementation and practice of the language. Reference is made throughout to practical classroom activities which will enable students to develop their strategic competence and become more confident at communicating in English.

Key words: communicative competence, communication strategies, EFL, natural speech production, speaking skill

> "Communication strategies train learners in the flexibility they need to cope with the unexpected and the unpredictable. At the same time, they help students get used to the non-exact communication, which is perhaps the real nature of all communication. In this way, they help to bridge the gap between the classroom and the outside reality, between formal and informal learning...communication strategies encourage risk-taking and individual initiative and this is certainly a step towards linguistic and cognitive autonomy." [1]

As Mariani outlines in his article[1], developing strategic competence in speaking can encourage autonomy in oral interaction. We, as teachers, should be guiding our students towards developing their communicative competence and the introduction and implementation of communicative strategies in the EFL classroom plays an essential role in this process.

---

[1] Mariani. L 1994. "Developing strategic competence towards autonomy in oral interaction." *Perspectives* TESOL journal, Italy. Volume XX, No 1. http://www.learningpaths.org/papers/papercommunication.htm

1. Learning strategies in the EFL classroom

I am a firm believer that in the EFL classroom students benefit from learning strategies which enable them to listen, speak, read and write more effectively in English. Within each of the four macro skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) students need to become aware of the range of sub-skills that can be developed and how this will help them to improve their overall language proficiency. Certain strategies used naturally by native speakers can be transferred directly from the learner's L1, while others need to be formally introduced. Whereas some coursebooks will introduce learning strategies gradually throughout the duration of a course, others may need supplementing by the teacher and this is often the case with the speaking skill. One of the reasons why the speaking skill receives less attention in the EFL classroom than it deserves could be because of the very nature of speaking and the inherent difficulties and challenges of 'teaching' it.

2. The nature of speech

There are many reasons why oral communication in a foreign language can be unsuccessful. The speaker may fail to use the right vocabulary, grammar or functional language for the situation or may not have the right cultural or contextual knowledge of the topic of conversation. Pronunciation is one of the main causes of misunderstanding. For example, a non-native listener may have difficulties understanding the pronunciation of a native speaker or a non-native speaker's pronunciation may be incomprehensible to the listener. The pressures of communicating in real time and having relatively little time to think also contribute towards making speaking in a foreign language an extremely demanding skill. Furthermore, by reflecting on what is involved in natural speech production in our own language, we can see how this process, which is carried out automatically in the mother tongue, becomes much more complex in another language. The model of natural speech production proposed by Levelt (1989) and explained by Scott Thornbury in *How to Teach Speaking*[2] includes four main stages; conceptualisation, formulation, articulation and self-monitoring. During the conceptualisation stage we plan our message, using our background knowledge of the topic and discourse to do so. We then select appropriate words and discourse structures to formulate the message we wish to convey. Next, we use the speech organs to articulate our message, making it audible to the listener and finally we listen to ourselves, reformulating or correcting our message if necessary. What is important for us to consider as language teachers is that these stages happen automatically in our own language, but become a far more conscious process when carried out in another language. By helping our students with the various stages of the process, we can perhps move some way towards making their speech production in L2 more automatic.

Bygate talks about two main demands which can affect the nature of speech. The first are the processing conditions greatly affected by the pressure of time. The second are reciprocity conditions, or the main effects of the processing conditions on speech. In order to deal with these demands, Bygate explains that speakers use various devices to facilitate the production of speech and to compensate when communication is unsuccessful. He breaks these devices down as follows:

✓ Facilitation techniques:
- Simplification – avoiding complex structures

---

[2] Thornbury 2005: 3-6

- Ellipsis – omitting parts of a sentence
- Formulaic expressions – 'chunks' and set phrases that are often functional
- Fillers and hesitation devices – phrases and sounds that buy the speaker thinking time

✓ Compensation techniques:
- self-correction
- false starts
- repetition
- rephrasing

Such devices are naturally used by native speakers when they speak. By making students aware of this, they can be encouraged to consider how many of these devices can automatically be transferred when speaking in L2 in order to make their speech sound more natural. Many students are reluctant to speak in a foreign language because they worry about making mistakes. By pointing out the fact that even native speakers are constantly correcting and reformulating what they say, we can encourage our students to take more risks in L2 and realise that they don't need to speak in perfectly-formed, grammatically-correct, complex sentences.

3. Types of communicative strategies

As well as the automatic transfer of skills from L1 to L2, there are many communicative strategies that can be introduced to our learners. Bygate identifies two main groups of communicative strategies as follows:

✓ Achievement strategies:
- Guessing strategies, e.g. borrowing or foreignizing a mother-tongue word, literal translation and coining or inventing a word.
- Paraphrase strategies, e.g. circumlocuting around a word when we don't know the exact word.
- Cooperative strategies, e.g. when the speaker signals to the interlocuter for help.

✓ Reduction strategies:
- Avoidance strategies, e.g. changing one's message to avoid using certain language or to make it more manageable.
- Compensatory strategies, e.g. organising one's message in order to buy thinking time.

Generally speaking, we could say that reduction strategies tend to be used by communicators who are anxious about making mistakes, who value accuracy over fluency or who are reluctant to take risks with the language. There is certainly a time and a place for reduction strategies, sometimes we immediately detect the need to avoid a certain topic, but an over-reliance on these strategies, particularly avoidance strategies could lead to a learner's interlanguage becoming fossilised. On the other hand, achievement strategies tend to be favoured by learners who value fluency over accuracy and who are prepared to take risks with the language. Therefore, there is a strong argument for equipping our learners with achievement strategies in order to help them to become better communicators. The use of achievement strategies can compensate for gaps in a learner's interlanguage. As there are so many gaps in this interlanguage, particularly in the initial stages of language learning, I believe that we should be enabling our students to use appropriate achievement strategies right from the beginning of their language learning experience. By enabling our students to use

communication strategies we are helping them to take more risks with the language, become more autonomous with the language and deal more confidently with the unpredictable nature of speech.

4. How should we teach communicative strategies?

As teachers, we need to decide which strategies are appropriate for our students and how to introduce them in the classroom. I do not agree with the idea that this can be left up to chance, teaching random communicative strategies as they come up. Nor do I think that the teaching of communicative strategies should resemble some linguistic straightjacket which does not allow students to later adapt and apply the language to different situations. The key is to raise students' awareness of language and phrases that fulfil a certain communicative function and then provide students with opportunities to put this language into practice in a 'free' enough context that they can be responsible for selecting and implementing the most appropriate strategies for the situation i.e. they are involved in the application of this language and this involvement will make the process more meaningful and memorable. It can be useful for students to follow a structured speaking syllabus which will enable them to increase their confidence and autonomy little by little and thus gradually develop their communicative competence.

5. Communicative contexts

5.1. Classroom communicative strategies

It is useful to make a clear distinction between different types of communicative contexts in which learners need to speak English as they require different communicative strategies. One type of interaction that occurs on innumerable occasions during every lesson is that of routine student-student interaction within the learning context. Unfortunately, for many secondary students, the classroom is the only chance they get to speak English and in big classes there is rarely enough time for the teacher to talk to all the students individually. We should therefore exploit the amount of English students use in these repetitive student-student or student-teacher exchanges. Examples of general interaction in a typical EFL class include comparing answers to an exercise, discussing options in order to complete an exercise together, checking answers, borrowing a piece of paper or a pen, asking what something means or how something is spelled or pronounced, asking someone's opinion and agreeing or disagreeing.

When we stop and think about how much class time such exchanges take up, students who carry out this communication in the mother-tongue, and many do, are wasting an opportunity to develop their communication skills. If students are linguistically prepared and motivated to do so, there is no reason why all of this type of classroom interaction cannot take place in English. The more English learners speak in the classroom, the more confident and autonomous they will become and the more risks they will be prepared to take in L2. Students can be taught formulaic expressions that will help them cope with communication in the learning context. The teacher can begin by introducing such expressions on the first day of a course at any level, and gradually build up the number and complexity of the expressions.

However, creating a more 'English' environment in a monolingual classroom does not happen overnight and requires constant encouragement from the teacher and constant effort from the students. Teachers can build their students' confidence by not over-correcting, by giving praise when they use communicative

49

strategies appropriately and by allowing students to refer to a written version of the language to aid memory until they remember them and can use them spontaneously. This could be a record of the phrases at the back of their coursebook or language posters on the classroom walls. The Cambridge University Press secondary school course *Interactive*[3] includes an innovative fold-out cover with communication strategies that students can refer to and use quickly, easily and as often as they require. For students who are reluctant to use English in class, one way of encouraging them to try to use as much as possible and active participation in English is by assessing their general classroom communication skills and awarding a grade for their ongoing performance as part of their overall speaking assessment.

There are many examples of formulaic expressions that can be introduced to students. A few examples for low-level students could include:

Asking about language Can you repeat that please? What does...mean? What's...in English? How do you spell...? Can you write that on the board?	Matching things (e.g. words to pictures) Is picture 1 *a mobile phone*? Yes, it is / No, it's *an MP3 player*. I think it's a...
Asking for things Can I have *a piece of paper*, please? Can I borrow *a pen*, please? Yes, here you are. Can you turn it *up/down*? (audio) Can you make it *bigger/smaller*? (IWB focus) Can you move the page *up/down*? (IWB focus)	Comparing answers What have you got for number 1? I've got... Me too. I haven't. I've got...

When introducing the language to students, it is useful to carry out activities that appeal to all types of learners; visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learners. The teacher can use a range of activities to consolidate the language. Flashcards with each phrase written big enough for all students to read can be used in a variety of ways with the whole class. For example, the teacher divides the class into two teams and the team that shouts out the correct phrase the loudest wins a point. Visual activities could include flashing the cards quickly, pulling the cards slowly out of an envelope or mouthing the phrase silently while students lip read what the teacher is saying. Auditory activities could include humming the intonation of the phrase, tapping the stress pattern of the phrase or saying the phrase slowly word by word and students complete the phrase as soon as they know what it is. Kinaesthetic activities could include miming the phrase or writing the phrase in the air. Possible pair or small group activities to help students consolidate the language and commit it to memory could include 'Jumbled words' where students are given the phrases with the words in the wrong order and have to correct them or 'Look how many I've used!' where students write the expressions on individual slips of paper and put them down on the table every time they use one appropriately or tick the expressions on a list every time they use them during a speaking activity. The aim being to use as many as possible.

---

[3] Hadkins, Lewis, Budden (2011)

5.2. 'Real-life' communicative strategies

Many other communicative contexts arise when students engage in different speaking tasks. Unlike general classroom language, which relates specifically to the learning context, communication here is more similar to real-life communication outside the classroom in a variety of contexts. There are a huge number of examples of communicative strategies which are useful for students including facilitation techniques such as using fillers and hesitation devices in order to buy time and keep a conversation going, paraphrasing strategies, such as circumlocution or describing the function of something, cooperative strategies such as asking for clarification, indicating understanding, showing interest and a wide range of formulaic expressions like giving and following instructions, putting things into order, reacting to good or bad news, describing people, making suggestions or apologizing, etc. This type of language is sometimes covered in coursebooks as part of a speaking or functional speaking syllabus, which is often based on real-life contexts like giving directions or ordering food in a restaurant.

In terms of how to teach these communicative strategies, Mariani suggests different possible approaches to strategy education[4]. One of which consists of an inductive, experiential approach with four stages of exploration and observation during which students become aware of the use of certain communication strategies through receptive exposure to them and are later given opportunities to practise using the strategies before evaluating their own performance. Many teachers may find a structured procedure such as this one useful when planning how to teach their students communication strategies. First, students listen to a dialogue between two or three speakers using communicative strategies naturally in a certain context. As they listen to the model dialogue, students complete a task in order to draw their attention to the strategies. There are several ways of carrying out such a task. For example, by giving students a list of the communication strategies and asking them to tick the ones that are used, number them in the order as they occur in the conversation, label which are used by which speaker or listen and complete gaps in the phrases. This kind of focus is helping students with the 'formulation' stage of natural speech production. After pulling out the communicative strategies from the context, we should draw students' attention to the pronunciation, with special emphasis given to suprasegmental features such as where the main stress falls in the utterance and the intonation used. This stage helps students with the 'articulation' stage of natural speech production. As the language is recorded, students could be encouraged to listen and repeat so as to imitate the intonation used. If the dialogues are recorded in DVD format, attention can also be paid to the non-verbal, paralinguistic features that accompany the language. Then, we should provide an opportunity for students to put the strategies into practice in another context. We can do this by setting students a task in which the use of communication strategies will help them to complete it successfully and more easily. An information gap task with a problem to solve immediately creates a context where different communication strategies are necessary. Picture differences, roleplays, ranking activities or problem solving tasks all provide suitable contexts for developing communication strategies. It is also useful for students to record their performance during this production stage and subsequently compare it with the native speaker performance in the original recording. This is impractical to do in every class, but from time to time, may be motivating and interesting for students. If recording facilities are not available in certain teaching contexts, peer observation is an alternative way of assessing performance, although learners would find certain guidelines useful so as to know what to listen out for when listening to their peers. A very straightforward activity could involve

[4] Mariani (2010: 44-51)

giving students a list of possible communication strategies that could be used during the speaking activity and getting students to tick the ones used by their peers as they complete the task. Students could also reflect on parts of the task where communication wasn't successful and discuss any strategies that could have been used to help. Reflective activities such as these can help students with the 'self-monitoring' stage of natural speech production.

One technique suggested by Bygate in order to improve oral performance is that of task repetition.

"...task repetition has been shown to have effects on subsequent performance....Students who repeated two tasks, having first performed them ten weeks earlier, completed them more fluently and with greater complexity on the second occasion when compared with their performance of a new task of the same kind on the same day."[5]

As it is often the case that performance is improved the second time we do something, this idea could be exploited during the assessment of speaking skills. By using similar speaking activities to those that have been covered at an earlier stage of a language course as part of our assessment of speaking skills, students have an opportunity to improve their performance and perhaps think more about how they are using the language during the task rather than simply what they are going to say to carry out the task.

6. Activities to consolidate communicative strategies

The list of speaking activities that can be used in the classroom to put communicative strategies into practice is endless and can include anything from roleplays to discussions or ranking activities to problem solving tasks. Books such as *Discussions that work* by Penny Ur[6] offer a whole range of practical activities that can be used in the classroom.

There are other activities that require little or no preparation on the part of the teacher and are also very useful in consolidating communication strategies. One useful way of developing communication strategies for dealing with unknown language at word or sentence level is through the game 'Taboo'. A home-made version can be made in the classroom by students. Each group of five or six students rips up a sheet of paper into 20 small squares. On each square they write a word, preferably one that has come up in a previous lesson, thus exploiting the opportunity to recycle vocabulary. Once twenty words have been written, the teacher gives the pieces of paper face down to another group. Then, the students in each group take turns to look at a word and describe it to the rest of their group without saying the word written on the piece of paper or showing the word to the rest of the group, but using communication strategies to describe or explain the word. Once someone guesses the word correctly, another student takes the next word and this continues until all twenty words have been explained and guessed correctly. In order to complete this activity, students will need to use paraphrasing strategies such as describing the function of something, describing what something looks like or what it's made of or other techniques such as using a word that is close in meaning, a general word or simplification. Similar communicative strategies can be practised with picture difference activities. Students work in pairs and each one looks at a picture which is similar to their partner's picture but has some differences. Without looking at each other's pictures, students must describe their picture and ask about their partner's picture in order to find as many differences between the two as possible.

---

[5] Bygate, M. in *The Cambridge Guide to Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages* (2001: 17)

[6] Ur, P (1981)

One useful collection of learning strategies that can be taught in order to help learners develop their vocabulary, grammar and four macro skills can be found in the book *Learning to learn English*[7]. Ellis and Sinclair enable learners to build up their confidence when speaking English by introducing strategies that can be used when a word is unknown. Using a similar procedure to the one explained previously, students listen to different speakers communicating in a real-life context and they focus on the communication strategies used. In one particular example[8], students are introduced to several achievement strategies such as using a foreign word, describing the function of something, what it looks like and what it's made of, using a word that is close in meaning, inventing a new word or expression or using a substitute word e.g. 'thingy' as different speakers try to ask for something in a shop they don't know the word for (in this case it's a rawl plug). Afterwards, students put the strategies into practice in a shopping roleplay. Another activity in the same book exposes students to the communicative strategies we use to buy time, such as 'Ah, yes, now...', 'Well, actually...', 'You see...', 'How shall I put it?...', or 'Well as far as I can see...'. The strategies are then practised in a very simple 'Just a minute' activity in which students have to talk for a minute about a certain topic. This straightforward activity can be carried out in a spare five minutes at the end of any class and which requires minimal preparation, but helps to develop students' communicative competence.

7. The teacher's role and error correction

When developing communicative strategies in the EFL class, the teacher's role is extremely important. As well as introducing the communicative strategies in meaningful, memorable contexts and following up with appropriate opportunities to practise and consolidate the strategies, the teacher must consider his or her attitude to errors and error correction and how it relates to motivation and overall student performance. The very nature of speaking means that it can never be error free. Even native speakers constantly correct themselves or clarify what they are saying when the listener signals a need for clarification. False starts, repetition and clarification are natural in native-speaker speech and so should absolutely be tolerated in non-native speaker speech. If we are to help our learners to develop their spoken fluency, we must encourage them to take risks and experiment with the language and make it clear that mistakes are tolerated and form a natural part of the process.

However, that is not to say that mistakes should be ignored, simply that we should have clear aims about how to focus on error correction. Giving delayed feedback after the successful completion of tasks can be effective. In order to do this, we should monitor students while they are on task and make a note of mistakes. Once the students have completed a task successfully, and we have acknowledged that at the beginning of the feedback stage, we could then draw their attention to some of the errors that were committed during the task and involve the students in the error correction stage by writing anonymous mistakes on the board. Anonymous, as our aim is not to focus on mistakes made by certain individuals in the class, but to pick up and correct typical mistakes which occur most frequently or mistakes that more than one student make. Another important element of this stage is to give positive feedback too. In other words, we should make a point of telling students when they use communication strategies successfully in order to boost their

---

[7] Ellis and Sinclair (1989)

[8] Ellis and Sinclair (1989: 39)

confidence. If students are aware of when they have used snippets of language successfully, they are more likely to use these snippets again in another context.

8. Conclusion

If we are to help students develop their communicative competence, it is essential that we expose them to and draw their attention to a variety of communicative strategies, give them opportunities to apply the strategies in similar contexts and give them structured feedback on their performance. With careful planning, I do believe this is possible and indeed necessary from the initial stages of language learning. We introduce learning strategies to help students develop their reading, writing or listening skills, so teaching students how to develop their communicative competence should be no exception. In today's world where a high percentage of students need or will need to be able to speak English outside the classroom, there is an absolute necessity to develop communicative competence as an integral part of an effective EFL syllabus.

References

Bygate, M. 1987 *Speaking,* Oxford University Press

Bygate, M. 2001. *Speaking, The Cambridge Guide to Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages,* Cambridge University Press

Mariani, L. 2010. *Communication strategies. Learning and teaching how to manage oral interaction.* www.learningpaths.org

Thornbury, S. 2005 *How to Teach Speaking.* Pearson Longman.

Ellis and Sinclair. 1989. *Learning to learn English,* Cambridge University Press

Hadkins, Lewis, Budden. 2011. *Interactive*, Cambridge University Press

Ur, P. 1981 *Discussions that work* Cambridge University Press

Samantha Lewis has worked in ELT since 1994 as a teacher, teacher trainer and CELTA trainer. She has co-authored *Interactive*, a four-level course for secondary students, with Cambridge University Press. She is currently working for the British Council in Alcalá de Henares and studying for an MA at the University of Alcalá. She is particularly interested in teaching English to young learners and teenagers and developing speaking skills in the classroom.