Communication Strategies in Use: The Implementation of Predetermined Vocabulary in the Classroom

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Abstract

The goal of the research was to examine the usefulness of formal strategy teaching in the classroom, that is, to explore to what extent the strategy of teaching predetermined L2 vocabulary enhances students' oral communication skills. Two groups of participants were compared, the students of Electrical Engineering and Information Technology, and students of Mechanical Engineering. The former attended the course Communication Skills and were already familiar with certain communication models and means of making and maintaining conversation, and delivering presentations. The latter group, the Mechanical Engineering students did not attend such classes, so they represented the comparison class in this research. The results showed that the students who attended the communication skills course showed better presentations skills and the usage of predetermined phrases. Moreover, predetermined vocabulary helps less successful students with the deficit of L2 competencies. This communication strategy helps students with poorer English knowledge acquire the language competences as well as improve their confidence.

Keywords

communication strategy, communication and presentation skills, predetermined vocabulary

1. Introduction

Communication strategies can be defined as verbal and non-verbal aids in solving problems in L2 competence. This can be observed in the following definitions by Tarone and Førch and Kasper. Tarone (1977, p. 195) explains that an individual uses conscious communication strategies in order to solve problems due to using inappropriate language structure in conveying his/her thoughts. Førch and Kasper (1983, p. 36) claim that communication strategies are potentially conscious plans for solving problems in achieving a communication goal. Dörnyei (1995) explained the definition further. He considers that the main cause for problems in L2 communication can be found in insufficient processing time. Strategies of hesitation, which include using of lexicalized pauses and other forms of

hesitation, help speakers gain time for thinking as well as enable them to continue communication.

Dörnyei and Scott (1995a, 1995b) consider communication strategies as key items in general description of solving problems in L2 communication.

Willems (1987) thinks that teachers should train students to communicate in a foreign language neglecting perfect performance. The conveying of the communicative intention is the basic criterion and communication strategies are an effective means of solving problems. Cohen (1990) claims that the greatest feature of effective speakers is that they use strategies in order to keep conversation going.

Savignon (2002) emphasizes the importance of every single subcomponent which together contribute to stronger communication competence, and describes strategic competence as an effective use of facing strategies in different contexts.

Ellis (2008) suggests the definition of communication strategies where the goal is to solve problems in the individual performance and allow other aspects of problematic production in L2 to be considered according to other potentially more robust theoretical frames.

All the above mentioned definitions share a common opinion according to which the main function of communication strategies is to help speakers bridge the gaps in L2 knowledge and prevent interruption in conversation. By using them, the speaker can again estimate the situation and strategically overcome problems caused by time pressure.

Although the term communication strategies appeared in 1972, it started to be of real interest only in the 80s. The research during the last forty years has enlightened many aspects, but one of the most important conclusions is that communication strategies develop gradually and it takes lot of time for them to become automatized. Willems (1987) developed the theory about the sequential development process, so called communication strategy typology. According to this theory, students firstly develop strategies of reduction and lastly strategies of goal achieving which can be divided into paralinguistic, interlanguage and intralanguage strategies. The student becomes gradually more competent and strategies become more sophisticated. The research directed to possibilities of formal teaching of communication strategies remains in the focus of many researchers (e.g., Dörnyei, 1995; Dörnyei & Thurrell, 1991, 1992, 1994; Kebir, 1994; Rost, 1994; Wongsawang, 2001; Wannaruk, 2002; Lam, 2010). By teaching how to use communication strategies properly, students will be more competent to bridge the gap between formal and informal situations in teaching, i.e., between pedagogical and non-pedagogical situations (Førch & Kasper, 1983).

In their research, Brodersen, Gibson and Svendsen (Brodersen & Gibson, 1982) marked an improvement in communication capabilities of students after explicit teaching of communication strategies. The students of average knowledge in their class showed improvement in the field of using risk taking strategies. The general attitude of students regarding mistakes and risk in the class was changed, they showed more effort, even though they could not find an adequate term/word. The advantages of teaching communication strategies can be seen in changing the attitudes, i.e., after formal teaching of communication strategies, students show less fear of making mistakes and more confidence

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in general. This has a positive and motivating impact on the communication. Encouraging students to use communication strategies proved to be useful from both the communication and the learning point of view.

One of the researchers who strongly advocate the teaching of communication strategies is Dörnyei (1995). The results of his survey conducted in Hungary showed that teaching strategies was extremely efficient resulting in improved overall oral fluency of speakers. Dörnyei speaks of several reasons why communication strategies should be involved in school curricula: they improve oral fluidity, speakers remain active in communication, i.e., they speak more. Also, the production of more words, phrases and sentences helps language acquisition because it stimulates forming of creative solutions of particular problems, widening at the same time existing speakers' resources. On the other hand, he explains three possible reasons why some researchers consider formal teaching of communication strategies unnecessary: most positive and negative arguments about the necessity of formal strategy teaching come from indirect and incomplete conclusions; there are also variations within strategies regarding possibility of their teaching; the term *teaching* itself can be interpreted differently. Dörnyei thinks that speaker's using of strategies should be improved by targeted teaching. He suggests a direct approach to teaching and includes the aspect of consciousness within his approach.

Manchon (2000) also supports the idea that teaching of strategies contributes to students' feeling of security and confidence when trying to communicate in foreign language with the help of their L1 resources. For example, when a student is aware that he/she lacks a word required for successful communication, he/she will reach for alternative means to convey the message. Teaching can also contribute to creative use of students' language resources. A great number of scientists support formal strategy teaching in the classroom. In that way students become aware of their speech performances as well as of limitations. Besides, practicing active use of strategies can improve spoken competence and overall fluency.

In her research Kongsom (2009) offers arguments for teaching strategies, pointing out that they help students compensate their lack of knowledge of English during the communication process. In this way communication strategies help students improve their confidence and take risk during communication in English. Anderson and Bachman (2004) claim that speaking a foreign language is a rather demanding task and it takes more time to develop competence. Kongsom (2009) points out that Thai students need strategic competences or communication strategies in order to remove obstacles in communication in English. She mentions that students do not have many opportunities for active use of strategies in the classroom or outside. She concludes that formal teaching and active use of communication strategies are very useful for Thai students in more demanding communication situations in English.

On the other hand, researchers like Paribakht (1985), Bongaerts and Poulisse (1990) and Kellerman (1991) are not in favour of formal communication strategy teaching. They claim that strategic competence is developed in speaker's L1 system and can simply be transferred into targeted use in L2.

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Kellerman concludes there is no justification for exercising the communication strategies in the classroom. If students use strategies in L2 badly (much worse than in L1), this is because of their lack of linguistic means for appropriate use of strategies. Researchers who share Kellerman's opinion focus on cognitive processes and conclusions that refer to similarities between use of strategies in L1 and L2 and they basically do not support formal teaching.

Research was done with the goal of establishing a possible positive effect of direct teaching of communication strategies in mastering problems in oral performance. Teng (2012) conducted research on communication strategy teaching in the classroom. Test results showed that after 15 weeks of direct teaching there was a statistically large improvement in use of communication strategies and overall communicative effectiveness in English as a foreign language.

Russel and Loschky (2007) also concluded that Japanese students showed a considerable improvement in the oral performance after direct teaching of communication strategies.

Although formal teaching of communication strategies has been considered in numerous research, undoubted conclusions cannot be made. Obviously, insufficient attention is devoted to speaker's use of lexical compensational strategies. Further research is necessary, especially in the field of different types of strategies, which would help speakers in communication.

2. Research Methodology: Implementing Predetermined Vocabulary in the Classroom

Modern trends in information technologies and business in general contribute to real situations in which speakers face a series of communication problems that they have to overcome. In that way speakers are forced to produce more words, phrases and sentences and consequently widen their vocabulary, i.e., their oral resources. Such real contexts provide opportunities for speakers to use the whole range of communication strategies in order to achieve their communication goals.

The research done with the students at the Faculty of Electrical Engineering, Mechanical Engineering and Naval Architecture in Split was aimed to examine the usefulness of formal strategy teaching in the classroom, i.e., to explore to what extent the strategy of teaching predetermined L2 vocabulary helps students improve their oral skills. The goal was to assess the efficacy of this strategy after they had learnt targeted vocabulary.

Many textbooks for teaching English, especially ESP, offer numerous phrases and expressions which constantly occur in certain situations and serve to bridge the lack of L2 competencies. These expressions usually make a part of the unit and appear under the subtitles like *Language Box*, *Focus on Language*, *Business Skills*, etc. Very often at the end of the textbook there is a separate part under the title *Useful Language and Expressions*. All these exercises serve to improve language competencies of speakers.

The research at the Faculty of Electrical Engineering, Mechanical Engineering and Naval Architecture was conducted between two classes of 24 first year undergraduate students of Electrical Engineering and Information Technology and of Mechanical Engineering during the period of four weeks of regular

English classes. Students of both classes had B1 level of English knowledge. The class of students of Electrical Engineering and Information Technology had previously attended classes in the course *Communication Skills* where they become familiar with certain communication models and means of making and maintaining conversation and making presentations. By the end of the course they mastered some oral skills. Mechanical Engineering students did not attend such classes, so they represent the comparison class in this research. Students of Electrical Engineering represent the treatment class because they already had some knowledge about the task (C-class and T-class, division according to Lam, 2010).

At the beginning of the second term both groups of students had four lessons from the course *English Language 2* in which they were taught how to prepare and deliver a presentation in English. Each presentation lasted 15 minutes and was related to students' professional topics according to their choice (e.g., *Nanotechnology*, *Power Plants*, *Gears*). The presentation was prepared by two students who presented it together in PP in front of the class. The T-class received and exercised predetermined formal vocabulary for presenting, whereas the C-class did not have any previous knowledge about useful expressions and phrases.

The research monitored to what extent the acquisition of targeted vocabulary contributed to presentation efficiency, i.e., how much the T-class used the strategy of predetermined vocabulary and whether they were more successful than the C-class.

The suggested vocabulary was related to the following presentation parts:

1) Introduction-Greeting and Audience Adressing

On behalf of … may I welcome you to…

For those of you who don't know me already, my name is…

Hello, my name is … and this is my colleague…

2) Clarification of Presentation Structure

I'm here today to talk about…

Our presentation is divided into … parts.

We've divided our talk into three parts. First, I'll look at … then my colleague will tell … and finally I'll say a little about…

In the introductory part we will talk about … then in the main body of presentation we intend to…

Finally…

3) Transition from One Part to Another and Slide Interpretation

Let's start with the first point.

Let's turn now to…

Moving on now to my next point…

Before going on, I'd like to say a little about…

As you can see from the next slide…

4) Conclusion and Greeting

So, just before I finish, let me summarize the main points again…

First … second … and third…

So, to sum up, I have talked about three main areas.

Right, let's stop here. Thank you very much for your attention (Kovač & Sirković, 2015).

After all the students from both the C-class and the T-class had finished with their presentation, the gathered results were compared and analysed. The task was divided into four sections and each section was separately assessed.

3. Results

Delivering a presentation in L2 in front of the class with confidence is a difficult and demanding task. The function of the introductory part is to intrigue the audience, state the main goals and provide basic information. The research analysis of the first task segment showed that most students from the T-class successfully started their presentation using different introductory phrases, whereas the students from the C-class showed deficit of required linguistic resources in L2. They mostly used only *Hello, my name is …* Almost 30% of the students from that class started their presentations without any introductory greetings or presenting themselves.

The second part of the task was dealing with the organisation of the presentation. The students had to announce the contents of the presentation and give a logical overview of their speech sliding from one item to another. 75% of the students from the T-class successfully elaborated the presentation contents. The C-class was less successful with the rate of 58,33%. This group mostly read notes from the slides, without making any connections between them, either in the contextual or linguistic sense.

The third task section, transition from one part to another and slide interpretation proved to be the least successful for both groups: only 66,66% of the students of the T-class and 54,16% of the C-class managed to move smoothly from one presentation part to another, i.e., from one slide to another by using appropriate phrases and vocabulary. The slide interpretation was mostly reduced to reading, leaving an impression of the deficit of linguistic resources in the sense of contextual connection of slides. It can be concluded that students themselves are aware of their linguistic deficits because they tried to fill in the "gaps" in their oral performance with Croatian fillers or with mimics, mostly pointing with their hands towards the slide.

In the last section of the task, concluding and final greetings, the students from the T-class were more successful again. They used previously learned and mastered phrases to summarize the most important information and to finish their presentations. On the other hand, this part was the least successful for the C-class: only 50% of the students ended their presentations in a proper way. The common expression was *That is all*, usually followed by pointing the hand towards the *Thank-you* slide.

Table 1 contrasts the T-class and the C-class results in terms of the frequency of using the strategy of predetermined vocabulary. It presents individual values for every task section and the final result as the sum of all four task segments.

Table 1. Results of Implementing Predetermined Vocabulary in the Classroom during Presentations

Task Section	T-Class		C-Class	
	Student number	%	Student number	%
1. Introduction-Greeting and Audience Addressing	22	*91,66*	17	*70,83*
2. Clarification of Presentation Structure	18	*75,00*	14	*58,33*
3. Transition from One Part to Another and Slide Interpretation	16	*66,66*	13	*54,16*
4. Conclusion and Greeting	21	*87,50*	12	*50,00*
Total	**77**	*80,20*	**56**	*59,57*

The obtained results speak in favour of teaching the predetermined vocabulary strategy. Students from the T-class showed better results in all four task parts compared to the C-class students.

The best results are achieved in the first and last parts of the task, i.e., in using suggested introductory and closing phrases. The total percentage of implementing the predetermined vocabulary by the T-class was 89,20%, and 56,57% by the C-class.

The findings from this study indicate that using the communication strategy of predetermined vocabulary contributes to overall speech fluency. The treatment class had almost 20% better results from the comparison class and students from the treatment class showed much more confidence in front of the audience. Students with better L2 knowledge also used a wider range of communication strategies, which they used almost unconsciously. Paraphrasing was the most frequently used strategy. When students noticed problems in ending the sentence, they tended to use familiar communication strategies to improve their language fluidity.

It can be concluded that learning the predetermined vocabulary helps less successful students with the deficit of L2 competencies. Exercising this strategy helps students with poorer English knowledge: they acquire better language competences as well as improve their confidence and self-esteem. These two facts lead to the conclusion that strategies involving exercising predetermined vocabulary are rather important and useful for more fluent communication in foreign language.

4. Conclusion

The findings of the study conducted at the Faculty of Electrical Engineering, Mechanical Engineering and Naval Architecture proved that the strategy of predetermined and learnt vocabulary helped students in more efficient oral task completion, especially those with the deficit of L2 competences. By learning the predetermined vocabulary students gained more confidence and self-esteem. On the other hand, students with better L2 knowledge improved the quality and flexibility of using the mentioned

communication strategy.

The studies of numerous researchers of communication strategies have confirmed that formal teaching of strategies in foreign language contributes to speaker's general fluidity and that longer period should be devoted to the learning process itself in order to develop self-confidence. One of the important conclusions of conducted experiments is that strategies develop gradually and it takes a lot of time for them to become used automatically. Teachers should teach students through various tasks and exercises about the communication potential of a particular strategy. The choice of particular strategy depends on various factors, e.g., the amount of disposable time. The speaker decides about the communication strategy according to the time he/she has at disposal for a certain type of conversation.

When teaching communication strategies, it is important to define to what extent strategies are efficient and bring results. Communication strategies are efficient if the collocutor has correctly interpreted the speaker's intention. They are also useful and fruitful if they demand minimum of effort invested in processing by both, the speaker who produces an utterance and the collocutor who interprets the meaning.

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