

## **THE TEACHING OF COMMUNICATIVE STRATEGIES AND INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS - CORE COMPONENTS FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Language plays a crucial role in development and in the global economy. As language and communication are integral to developmental success of a nation it is imperative that language teaching, especially at tertiary levels include in language syllabi:

- (a) Notions of communicative strategies and
- (b) Models of intercultural processes.

These are essential for effective communication both within and across cultures. Many a developmental project has floundered due to ineffective communication and listening skills, on the part of the interlocutors involved. Communicative strategies serve to compensate for inadequacies in the target language. The paper will discuss the concept of communicative strategies and functional strategies, means by which a speaker, who is not very proficient in the target language, can communicate intent effectively. Knowledge of the wide gamut of resources, speakers and listeners can fall back on, can give a communicator confidence in disseminating or understanding messages. Effective communication is essential for the success of developmental projects.

### **Introduction**

This paper argues that language and communication are integral to developmental success of a nation. It is imperative that language teaching, especially at tertiary levels, include in language syllabi -

- (a) Notions of communicative strategies and
- (b) Models of intercultural processes

as they are essential for effective communication both within and across cultures. The first section will define the notion of communicative strategies and make a case for its inclusion in communicative syllabi, especially at tertiary level.

## **Rationale For The Inclusion Of Communicative Strategies In A Language Syllabus**

Communication needs are numerous and unpredictable. Therefore, a practical and economical way to develop learners' communicative competence is to increase their strategic competence i.e. their ability to use communicative strategies to cope with various communication problems they may encounter.

Selinker (1972) first used the term communicative strategy to refer to one of the processes that is responsible for producing interlanguage errors. Selinker defined communicative strategy as "an identifiable approach by the learner to communicate with native speakers". In this paper communicative strategies are viewed as attempts made by inventive language learners to circumvent their linguistic difficulties or inadequacies in order to transmit messages or communicate with the listener or interlocutor. Such strategies are generally used when the limited knowledge of learners makes it difficult for them to express their intended message. Tarone (1981) describes communicative strategies as:

"... a systematic attempt by the learner to express and decode meanings in the target language in situations where the appropriate systematic target language used have not been formed.

Communicative strategies therefore serve to compensate for the inadequacies of speakers and listeners in the target language, which is being used."

Lim and David (1995) made a case for the inclusion of communicative strategies as a teaching tool for ESL teacher trainees. However, research on communicative strategies has generally focused on language learners. David (1992) investigated the possibility of consciousness-raising of communicative strategies as a tool to improve language proficiency of L2 learners.

If by teaching through example and practice we can make learners more aware of the communicative problems they might encounter in communication and the importance and advantage of using different types of communicative strategies to cope with different problems, they might be able to choose more appropriate communicative strategies and use them more consciously. In this light, Canale and Swain's 1980 model of communicative competence, which includes strategic competence, i.e. the knowledge of verbal and non-verbal communicative strategies makes sense.

Using a group of language learners in the University of Malaya, David argues for the inclusion of consciousness-raising of communicative strategies (the deliberate attempt to draw the learner's attention to the entire range of communicative strategies available to them) in the syllabus. Sharwood Smith (1981) argues that 'there is no reason to assume that consciousness raising by the teacher and conscious learning by the learner cannot be investigated in a systematic way.'

### **Range Of Communicative Strategies**

Learners can benefit from strategies to overcome both grammatical and lexical difficulties. Achievement strategies, both formal reduction and functional strategies, are means by which the learner can make use of, not only to communicate intent but also to communicate it accurately.

### **Formal Reduction Strategies**

There are two reasons for using formal reduction strategies. They are to avoid making errors and to increase fluency. Faerch and Kasper (1983) explain:-

"In order to avoid producing non-fluent or incorrect utterances by using insufficiently automatised or hypothetical rules/items, learners may decide to communicate by means of a reduced system focusing on stable rules and items which have become reasonably well-automatised."

Elimination of certain formal elements of the target language does not always interfere with the transmission of meaning. In fact, it may facilitate communication making it more efficient, for instance, the use of the simple present tense instead of other tense forms if and when meaning is not affected or radically altered. Another example of a formal reduction strategy is the use of simpler correct structures i.e. the use of the active voice in place of the passive.

### **Functional Reduction Strategies**

At the lexical level L2 users can make use of a wide range of functional strategies to get meaning across i.e. such communicative strategies which are achievement oriented. It is the aim of the speaker to transmit his message making use of alternative linguistic and non-linguistic resources at hand. Such strategies include inter alia:

- circumlocution
- simplification
- paraphrase
- translation
- the use of formulaic expressions
- repetition
- rephrasing
- language shift
- appeal for assistance
- codeswitching and
- gestures

Knowledge of the wide gamut of resources they can fall back on should give the L2 user confidence in using and understanding a language in which he is not very proficient.

Bayllis (1984) conducted a study and found that L2 learners employ communicative strategies more frequently than Li speakers. Language teaching should therefore involve the awareness of such resources, which a communicator has at hand. As effective communication is essential for the success of developmental projects, knowledge of such resources which he can fall back on, when facing a problem in communicating his intended message, can help the message giver in persisting in the transmission of his original message. It also helps the listener to make use of strategies to ensure that he has understood the intended message.

It is therefore vital in my view, that language learners be made aware of the wide gamut of communicative resources they have at hand so that they do not become discouraged and use instead only avoidance strategies i.e. give up and not transmit their intended message. Alternatively, they might instead provide a watered down version of the original message due to limited linguistic proficiency.

To conclude the first section of this paper I would reiterate that it is essential that language learners be made aware of the range of communicative strategies available to them and such knowledge should be included in language syllabi, especially at the tertiary level.

### **Rationale For The Inclusion Of Intercultural Aspects In A Language Syllabus**

Although English is used as the medium of international communication it is important to realize that its use is based on cultural presuppositions about the kinds of language performance that are appropriate for specific situations. Ignorance of such strategies can lead to misunderstanding and communication breakdown. Focusing on structural rules and the mechanics of language, the norm in many an English syllabus, is simply not sufficient for effective communication, especially in the corporate sector.

David and Taib (1994) state "Today, there is a growing importance of the study of communicative discourse - a domain that places language in the context of dialogue and interpersonal communication." The writers argue that English practitioners must focus on intercultural aspects and discuss such variables. For effective communication across cultures such variables must be included in English syllabi at the tertiary level.

### **Range Of Intercultural Aspects**

Language, tone of voice, gesture, body movements, physical proximity, eye contact, are all woven together in an interaction. Learners must be made aware of the pragmatics of the total interaction. This is vital if communication is to flow smoothly and not break down.

David and Taib (1994b) show how they have incorporated knowledge of intercultural aspects in the final year syllabus of English for Professional Communication targeted at undergraduates in the Faculty of Economy and Public Administration, University of Malaya.

The writers argue that they are shortchanging the students if discourse and pragmatic features of communication are not included in a language syllabus. Students are eventually going to communicate with significant others, both Asians and Caucasians who use English as an international language. The students must be made aware that knowing merely the grammar and vocabulary of the target language does not necessarily make for effective communication.

Intercultural differences in communication and the sociolinguistic variables of who, when, where and what is involved in the speech interaction and other discourse and pragmatic variables should be included in a syllabus especially at tertiary levels. These pragmatic features include inter alia:

- Nonverbal cues including eye contact
- Turn taking
- Proxemics
- Degree of directness/indirectness
- Choice of topic (topics which are considered personal or inappropriate to discuss at a first encounter may vary from culture to culture)

Culture is invariably attached and intertwined with the way a language is used and students must be made aware of the cultural norms and non-verbal language that accompany spoken and written language. Students must be made conscious of the different discourse and pragmatic styles of different cultures and the importance of such features in intercultural communication.

Reading materials can be used to make learners aware of the differences in certain speech acts albeit in English, when used by native speaker/s and non-native speaker/s of English. (See David, 1994a) Speech acts differ cross-culturally in their distribution, function and frequency of occurrence. (See also Jariah and David, 1996 for cultural awareness in the speech act of disagreement, and David, 1995 for the speech act of soliciting opinions). Culture-specific speech acts necessitate a familiarity with the value systems of the interlocutors in the interaction. David (1994a) shows how differences in the pragmatic and sociolinguistic behaviour of native and non-native speakers vis-à-vis compliment giving and receiving can be used by the language teacher as a basis for raising consciousness of the culturally different ways of giving and receiving compliments.

I would like to conclude with a caveat. Not every aspect of discourse and pragmatics can be included in a language syllabi but as language practitioners, we owe it to our students to at least make them consciously aware of the importance of these variables for effective communication to take place.

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