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OVERCOMING COMMUNICATION BREAKDOWNS THROUGH THE USE OF COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES: PERCEPTIONS, PRACTICES AND PERSPECTIVES

Abstract

Communication competence in foreign language learning has long been a major subject under discussion and investigation in order to trigger for the factors that lead to successful or unsuccessful communication in EFL contexts. In fact, studies have demonstrated that success relates to the use of adequate learning strategies and failure pertains to the wrong use of the adequate strategy (Oxford, 1990 & 2005). The present paper, then, is an attempt to shed light on a major issue that pertains to learners' awareness of the appropriate use of learning strategies to overcome communication breakdowns. The findings show that it is of paramount importance that foreign language learners should be acquainted and trained to regular use of the appropriate learning strategies that allow them achieve effective communication.

Keywords: communication breakdowns, communication competence, communication strategies, strategy instruction-training.

1. Introduction

With the advent of cognitive and humanistic approaches in foreign language learning, a changing approach has emerged, which focuses on the learner rather than the teacher; it is a learner-centred approach. In fact, a significant transition has taken place, resulting in less emphasis on the teacher and teaching and greater stress on the learner and learning. According to this approach, the learner determines the learning goals and the learning process, as well. This interest in the learner has led researchers to a quest towards what distinguishes successful and unsuccessful learners. In fact, this inquisitiveness has helped them identify that there are individual differences (IDs) in L2 acquisition. These differences imply that learners differ not only in their physical appearance but in their needs and competencies, as well. Personality, age, attitude, aptitude, and motivation are all features of those differences. Hence, differences in learners' achievement. Yet, those differences do not relate to cognitive abilities only but to affective ones, as well. Thus, researchers have been investigating how affective variables affect the quality of foreign language learning.

The present study, then unveils a common issue existing among our students which relates to wrong strategy use and unsuccessful communication. It is important, then to investigate the type of strategies the students use when they are confronted to a communication breakdown and introduce them to new strategies that may help them overcome those deficiencies in the speaking skill. In fact, a set of variables affect interaction and make the whole teaching /learning process a multidimensional phenomenon. The teacher and learners' behaviours, motivation and attitude all contribute in making interaction effective and constructive or vice versa. A cohesive behaviour where asking questions, answering them, sharing and exchanging information, not only make the language classroom a

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successful one but provide the learner with the appropriate tricks he/she may use when needed in real life situations. Accordingly, the questions which come to one's mind are as follows:

a. Are all our learners aware of the strategies they use when facing speaking difficulties?
b. Which compensation strategies do our students use in order to overcome those deficiencies?

After long debates concerning whether unsuccessful learners use strategies, or not, researches have demonstrated that both successful and unsuccessful learners use learning strategies but the unsuccessful ones use the wrong strategies in problem solving and successful language learners are those who are aware enough to use the appropriate strategy in the appropriate learning task. Therefore, we assume that strategy instruction would overcome the students' communication difficulties.

2. Review of Literature

Verbal communication constitutes a major goal of every foreign language learner since his/her mastery of the target language relies on his/her oral performance. Moreover, effective communication does not rely only on one's linguistic proficiency, but on his/her verbal one, as well. Unfortunately, communication breakdown remains the main obstacle faced by foreign language speakers. Indeed, foreign language learners have a complex set of attitudes, experiences and language learning strategies which typify each learner/speaker and may lead to successful or unsuccessful communication. In addition, learners' cognitive abilities, previous knowledge, learning styles and strategies differ according to their personalities and each learner has his own way in approaching the learning process, using his/her own procedures, tricks or plans in order to effectively achieve the learning task (Chamot, 2004).

These tricks and plans are called "strategies". These strategies, if employed correctly lead to the mastery of the target language. For such reasons, learning strategies have received much attention on the part of practitioners. The following diagram summarizes Oxford's typology (1990). It divides language learning strategies into direct and indirect ones which in turn are divided into sub strategies:
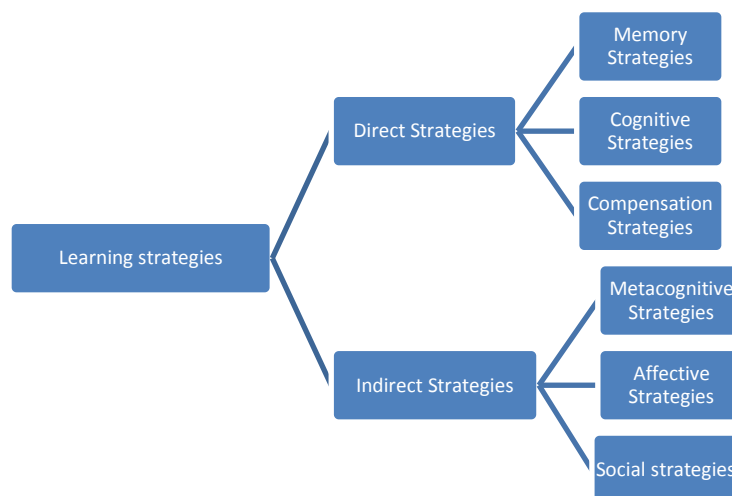

Figure 1:

Typology of Learning Strategies (Oxford, 2001, 2003)

It is obvious that learning strategies are involved in all learning, regardless of the content and context. Learning strategies are used in learning any subject both in a formal setting such as the classroom or informal one such as the street. Moreover, language learning strategies are good indicators of how learners approach tasks or problems encountered during the process of learning or when meeting real life difficulties. They also help the language teachers know how their learners understand, learn or remember new input or engage in problem-solving. Oxford's typology (1990 & 2005) classifies learning strategies into two main types: The direct strategies and the indirect ones which are divided into six sub-strategies:

2.1. ***The Direct Strategies*** are mentally-based strategies. That is, the task requires mental processing in order to be done. They include memory strategies, cognitive strategies, and compensation strategies.

➤ *The memory strategies* are used for remembering, storing or retrieving information. They include creating mental linkages, applying images and sounds, reviewing well and employing action.

➤ *The cognitive strategies* are used for understanding new information. They include practicing, receiving, sending messages, analysing, reasoning, creating structure for input or output.

➤ *The compensation strategies* help learners overcome shortages in using language. They include guessing intelligently and overcoming limitations in speaking and writing (the productive skills).Indeed, direct strategies, when properly used help learners achieve well in language learning

2.2. *The Indirect Strategies* are feeling-based. The environment and the learners' emotional state direct learning and problem solving. "An effective learning strategy enables learners to plan what they will do, and then monitor and modify their own thoughts and actions they proceed (Westwood, 2004, p.7).

The indirect strategies include metacognitive strategies, affective strategies and social strategies.

2.2.1. Metacognitive strategies

Metacognition is recognized as having a strong impact on our awareness and thoughts. Consequently, it plays a crucial role in making learning a foreign language effective. "It is the ability to reflect on what is known, and does not simply involve thinking back on an event, describing what happened, and the feelings associated with it (Anderson, 2008, p.15). Metacognition is the knowledge of one's or others' proper cognitive activity, which allows planning, then its regulation when communicating information. Metacognition, then relates to one's cognitive knowledge and the control over the cognitive, as well as the affective strategies. In order to obtain effective and methodological acquisition, the learner must be able to actively handle not only his previous knowledge with the new one but he also has to apply selective strategies through regular supervision and constant management to reach a thorough evaluation at the end of the task he undertakes. Moreover, one's awareness in using metacognitive strategies helps him/her to reach positive achievement. "Learning and metacognitive strategies enable students to acquire and master academic content"(Alderman, 2004, p. 148).Organizing, planning, monitoring, and evaluating are all metacognitive strategies that contribute in making learning successful and using the target language effective . In fact, various sources support the idea that learners who use metacognitive strategies are good learners. *"It is also believed that many learning difficulties are caused by students' lack of appropriate cognitive strategies and relative absence of metacognition"* (Westwood 2004, p. 7).

Accordingly, successful learning relates to the use of metacognitive strategies because these allow learners monitor and evaluate their own achievement. Thus, it is crucial that the teacher helps his learners be aware of their importance and integrate them in the activities and tasks. When learners become used to metacognitive strategies, they can assess themselves and react when learning is ineffective. Through organization, planning and self-evaluation, the English teacher plays a significant role in helping his learners be aware of the importance of the metacognitive strategies which are meant to facilitate problem solving and avoiding problematic situations.

2.2.2. Social/Affective strategies

The words social and affective imply that there is interaction with someone else. So, in order to interact positively and reach comprehension between the interlocutors, one has to take into account the affective dimensions which allow appropriate interaction and understanding. The classroom constitutes a social environment in which affective dimensions play a salient role in shaping positive interactions between the learner and the teacher or between the learners themselves. Learning strategies, such as, monitoring, organizing, elaborating or evaluating allay anxiety (O'Malley & Chamot, 1995).

Although direct strategies and indirect ones are completely different; the first, mentally-based, and the second emotionally-based, both are salient in foreign language learning and consequently they are complementary (Figure1).Moreover, one cannot deny that cognition and mental processing are congruent in foreign language learning. In fact, cognitive strategies, like reasoning, analyzing, note-taking, summarizing, and synthesizing are salient and certainly help learners achieve proficiency. But these would be ineffective without the use of metacognitive, affective and social strategies. Nevertheless, activities that encourage learners use such strategies should be well-structured and designed by the English teacher. In fact, direct strategies help the students develop cognitively and the indirect ones help them regulate their behaviour and motivation. Therefore, the English teacher has to be aware of the crucial role the learning strategies play in improving and regulating learners' achievement. Hence, teaching the students the suitable strategies whenever undertaking a task or activity.

2.3. Strategy Instruction

Research in strategy use has revealed that it is important to train learners to the use of language strategies. The teacher, through regular intervention, makes his learners aware of the appropriate and wrong strategy use. Through teachability, i.e., classroom practice and training, contemporary educators and researchers should be increasingly keen to harness the potential which LLS would seem to have for enhancing an individual's ability to learn language (Griffiths & Parr, 2001, p. 249). Learners become used to the identification of the good and bad strategies and consequently accomplish their tasks successfully. Nonetheless, it is worthy to mention that learning strategies depend on the learning activity itself. Seeking information in reading, listening to a passage, writing an essay, or speaking, all require different strategies. It is the role of the teacher to help learners use the right strategies with the appropriate tasks.

After being acquainted to a strategy and after experiencing success, the learner will certainly use it again and then, the strategy will become part and parcel of his learning process. For example, in teaching a reading passage, learners may have difficulties in comprehending new vocabulary, what makes comprehension of the whole text quite difficult for them. Therefore, vocabulary strategies, like guessing, using a dictionary, etc., facilitate this hard task and allow learners not only acquire new lexical items, but assimilate new ideas, as well. Moreover, assimilating new lexical knowledge enhances both learners' oral skill and

reading one. Consequently, enhancing the receptive skills (listening and reading) enhances the productive ones (speaking and writing).

3. Methodology
3.1. Participants

In an attempt to answer the research questions, forty-five (45) master 2 students in applied linguistics, in the University of Mostaganem, Algeria, participated in the present study. The respondents who regularly interact with English speaking people (native and non-native ones) were selected and asked to participate in a longitudinal study for a diagnostic assessment phase and an evaluation one. The major goal of the present investigation was the identification of the students' difficulties and weaknesses when interacting in English.

3.2. Data collection Tools and Data Analysis

Two tools were used for collecting data: a structured questionnaire and participant observation. The students, who were in the same group on Facebook, accepted to answer the questions virtually. Virtual questioning was meant to avoid any classroom subjectivity and leave the students free to participate or not in the investigation. First, a structured questionnaire was administered to the students in order to unveil their speaking difficulties and the strategies they generally use to overcome their speaking difficulties. The main goal of the questions was to identify the frequency of strategy use to overcome communication breakdowns and to train students in practising the strategies they practise less or they do not use at all. Hence, strategy instruction should be integrated as a major component within the teaching methodology (Chamot, 2005).

3.3. Discussion

The results obtained via Facebook revealed that the majority of the students had speaking difficulties when interacting with foreign people and the majority of them avoid interacting with native speakers because of those difficulties. After the speaking deficiencies were unveiled, some learning strategies were introduced as part of the teaching methodology. Emphasis was mainly on compensation strategies (Oxford, 2001) to overcome communication breakdown. Switching to the mother tongue, asking for help, using mimes and gestures, avoiding communication totally or partially, selecting the topic, adjusting the message, and using circumlocution (roundabout words) were all compensation strategies introduced to the students for practice. Yet, some of the strategies can only be used among the speakers of the two languages. For instance, switching to the mother tongue cannot be applied with foreigners. Using mimes and gestures is another compensation strategy that can be used only in face-to face communication or in virtual /visual communication. That is, the interlocutors can see each other while speaking. Table 1 demonstrates the frequency of communication strategy use among a Facebook community.

Table1:

The Students' Use of Communication Strategies

Types of Compensation Strategies	Often	sometimes	rarely	Never
1. Switch to mother tongue	03	02	30	10
2. Asking for help / clarification	00	05	35	05
3. Using mimes & gestures	30	10	05	00
4. Avoiding communication partially or totally	09	10	26	00
5. Selecting the topic to direct communication	00	00	10	35
6. Adjusting the message	05	40	00	00
7. Using circumlocution (roundabout words)	10	30	05	00

The findings reveal that though some of the students may use some compensation strategies, others may avoid them. In fact, (35%) of students does not ask for help or clarification, though this can be very helpful and facilitative. The big majority of them also does not select the topic to direct communication when facing misunderstanding and almost all of them avoid communication, either totally or partially when facing speaking difficulties. The students' incompetence to manage successful communication certainly pertains to their ignorance of the existence of some strategies that may be helpful to overcome communication difficulties. In fact, nineteen of the students (19) said they avoid communication partially or totally. There is evidence that the students' avoidance does not help them improve their speaking skill. When asked about adjusting the topic to direct communication, all the students (100%) answered negatively. This demonstrates that the students ignore how to adjust and direct a given topic for communication.

Because the best way to promote effective speaking is through practice, the students are given an opportunity to practise some speaking strategies within the classroom. For this purpose, they were introduced to the most common compensation strategies (table 1) they may use to overcome speaking difficulties. The students, those who rarely use a given strategy, like a circumlocution, or those who do not use it at all, practised the strategy in conversation with their mates through role-plays, discussions and debates in an atmosphere free from anxiety, stress and fear. This not only helped them overcome their speaking difficulties but gain self- confidence, as well.

4. Conclusion

The increasing advent in science affected our educational milieu and has led practitioners and researchers to look for the conditions that make learning effective and successful. Nevertheless, long decades of field investigation and empirical research have made it clear that individual differences are the main paradigms that shape learning and consequently, the achievement in learning. Moreover, the diversity among our learners has demonstrated that the cognitive differences are associated to affective ones, and they may positively or negatively affect their achievement. Indeed, the 1990s have demonstrated that learners use different strategies but do not necessarily imply successful learning. This latter, in fact is achieved only if, and only if our learners are aware of proper strategy use; which can be attained through regular practice within an appropriate teaching practice. Indeed, overcoming communication breakdown in EFL contexts may be the cause of some harmful consequences leading to the lack of self-confidence and self-esteem and to a negative attitude towards learning the target language. Thus, a sound teaching methodology that includes appropriate material, tasks and strategies can but be beneficial to the students for the betterment of their learning outcomes.

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