Combining Communication Strategies and Vocabulary Development

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This article examines how English language learners can make use of communication strategies to overcome limitations in language reception and production. It also will present steps for carrying out effective in-class training and practice for strategies. Finally, it will suggest classroom activities to combine strategy practice with vocabulary development.

Introduction

In many spoken encounters, such as in-class activities or everyday situations, English language learners often encounter unfamiliar words and phrases that inhibit their language comprehension. Likewise, learners also experience situations where limits to their English prevent them from expressing themselves effectively. Electronic dictionaries, with their ubiquity, ease and speed of use, have become an easy remedy to this problem. However, by relying on electronic dictionaries are learners really improving their communicative competence? Or, are they denying themselves opportunities to put their language to use? How can they be taught to rely less on dictionaries and more on their own language ability?

Communication Strategies

Strategies for learning second and foreign languages are one of the largest and most well researched areas of language education. Accordingly, several scholars have defined the term "language learning strategies," developed typologies and identified over 100 individual strategies (e.g., Rubin, 1987; Oxford, 1990; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Stern, 1992; Cohen, 1998). Language learning strategies can best be summed up as particular actions, behaviors or thought processes that learners consciously make use of to enhance their own language learning.

Within most language learning strategy taxonomies one of the most common categories is that of communication strategies. Communication strategies are strategies that learners employ when their communicative competence in the language being learned (L2) is insufficient. This includes making themselves understood in the L2 and having others help them understand. Learners use communication strategies to offset any inadequacies they may have in grammatical ability and, particularly, vocabulary. Communication strategies aid learners with participating in and maintaining conversations and in improving the quality of communication. This, in turn, enables them to have increased exposure to and opportunities to use the L2, leading to more chances to test their assumptions about the L2 and to receive feedback. Without such strategies, learners are likely to avoid L2 risk-taking as well as specific conversation topics or situations.

Strategy Training

As Oxford and Nyikos (1989) state, "Unlike most other characteristics of the learner, such as aptitude, attitude, motivation, personality and general cognitive style, learning strategies are readily teachable" (p. 291). Many researchers describe processes for effective language learning strategy instruction (e.g., Oxford, 1990; Chamot, et al.,1999; Wenden, 1991). Steps include raising student awareness, explicitly teaching strategies, providing opportunities for practice, and evaluation. Raising awareness includes generally explaining what strategies are and why learners should use them. Explicitly teaching strategies entails naming and defining specific strategies and explaining when and how to use them. Opportunities to practice strategies should be provided as separate class activities as well as integrated with regular classroom language training and activities.

Learners should also be given opportunities to reflect on and evaluate the effectiveness of the practice and strategies.

Combining Strategy Training with Vocabulary Development

There are three general situations that occur in and out of class where students need to be able to employ communication strategies:

1. Explaining words and phrases they wish to say when they do not know the appropriate English.
2. Reacting appropriately when they encounter a word or phrase in English that they are not familiar with.
3. Recognizing and rectifying instances when they either use an English word incorrectly or use one that their partner is not familiar with.

Among the most common and easiest communication strategies to teach students to use should they encounter any of these situations are: using mime and gestures, making use of synonyms and antonyms, using circumlocution--saying what they want to in a different or roundabout way--and, coining original words.

The following describes a process and activities that I use to train students in communication strategies. I developed them in response to my students excessively relying on their electronic dictionaries during in-class communicative activities. My initial action was to not allow students to use their dictionaries. However, I soon noticed that the amount and length of student discourse decreased. I also noticed that students began to only talk about familiar topics (e.g. family, sports, travel) and avoided new or more complicated topics. They were more reluctant to speak out of fear of not understanding or being understood without their dictionaries. I needed to find a way to help them realize that they did not have to have their dictionaries or avoid certain topics in order to effectively communicate.

Raising Awareness

On the board list each of the three situations mentioned previously and ask students if they have experienced any of them. Have a class discussion and brainstorm about what students usually, should and should not do in each situation. Explain to students what communication strategies are, their uses and benefits.

Explicitly Teaching and Practicing Strategies

List and describe each of the communication strategies: mime and gesture, synonyms and antonyms, circumlocution and coining words. Have a class discussion about which of the three situations students think each strategy would be useful in. After this discussion it is best to work on each situation individually so that specific activities can be used and useful phrases can be taught.

Situation 1

Ask students to think of ways to signal during a conversation that they do not know a particular word.

- *What's the word? / What do you say…?*

Then, ask what they can say to buy time when they think of what to say.

- *Just a moment, please. / Give me a moment.*

It is after buying time that students should be taught to employ the strategies. Next, ask for ways to check if their partner understood what they wanted to say via the strategy.

- *Do you understand? / Do you know what I mean?*

Finally, just in case, ask what they should say if they cannot explain.

- *I'm sorry, I can't think of the word. / Never mind.*

Practice One - For English words

Have students write down eight words that have already been studied in class. Model the following with a student. Select one of the words from the list and say a sentence using it. Stop before you say the word and signal that you do not know the word, and ask for time from the student. Select an appropriate strategy to explain the word. After explaining, check if the student understands. Have students repeat this activity in pairs. Ask students to use each strategy at least once during this practice.

Practice Two - For Words in Students' Native Language (L1)

Have students write down eight words in their L1 and write English explanations or check the definitions in bilingual dictionaries. Repeat the same activity, but this time saying the L1 word before signaling that you do not know the English. Ask students to use each strategy at least once during this practice.

Situation 2

Ask students to think of ways to signal during a conversation that they do not understand a particular word and to ask for an explanation.

- *I'm sorry, what does...mean? / Excuse me, what is...?*

Point out that it is after this that most speakers will attempt to explain the word that was not understood. Next, ask for ways to signal that they do or do not understand the explanation.

- *I see. / I understand. / I'm sorry, I don't understand.*

Finally, ask them for ways to confirm they understand.

- *Do you mean...? / ...? Is that what you mean?*

Practice

Provide students with word cards that have the following: an unfamiliar English word or expression, its definition (for reference) and a model sentence. Model the following with a student. Select one card and read the sentence written on it, stressing the target word. Encourage the student to signal that she does not understand. Explain the word on the card using any communication strategy but without using the definition on the card. Encourage the student to then signal whether or not she understood and then to confirm her understanding. Have the students repeat the activity in pairs. Ask students to use each strategy at least once during this practice.

Situation Three

Ask students what kind of signals people make during a conversation when they do not understand what was said. These include making facial expressions and asking questions. Ask what they should say if their partner uses any of the signals.

- *Do you know what I mean? / Can you understand me?*

Depending on their partners' response, students should be taught to employ the strategies. Finally, ask students how to confirm their partners' understanding.

- *Do you know what I mean? / Can you understand me?*

Practice

The same procedure can be used for this situation that was used for situation two. Only this time, the speaker should check if the listener understands instead of the listener signaling that she does not.

Evaluation

When the practice has been completed, give students time to share their ideas and opinions about the strategy practice including which ones they found the most and least useful, and the easiest and the most difficult to use .

Continuation and Incorporating Vocabulary Acquisition

One time strategy training is not enough to ensure students are comfortable with or proficient in using the strategies. It should be followed up with practice as often as the schedule allows. Also, urge students to use the strategies during communicative activities in class and limit how much they can use their dictionaries. However, using communication strategy practice in class for its own sake would be missing a golden opportunity. Strategy practice can also be used as an effective way to continue strategy practice by combining it with student vocabulary development.

- Have students use strategies to pre-teach vocabulary for lessons. Assign each student a certain number of words to look up and teach to classmates using the strategies.
- Use practice as a way of reviewing vocabulary from previous lessons or before examinations.
- Use practice as a way to activate schema prior to teaching a new topic or unit. Make a list of vocabulary and ask students who know any items on the list to teach it to class using communication strategies.
- Have students create word lists and teach new vocabulary to classmates. Provide students with the following type of word lists. One for new English words with columns labeled "New English Word," "English Dictionary Definition," "Original Explanation and Example Sentence." The other for L1 with columns labeled "(L1) Word," "Original English Explanation," and "English Word and Dictionary Definition." Assign a certain number of words, for example two English words and two L1 words, for students to write in their word lists each week. Regularly set aside class time for students to teach each other the words on their word lists using strategies.
- The word lists can be used for more than strategy practice. Students can work in groups to combine their lists and practice grouping strategies; for example, group all nouns together or words that are useful at the workplace. Another activity is to have students select and justify the twenty most useful words. Finally, the class can make a comprehensive word list and use it for exams or to make a collaborative class dictionary.

Conclusion

Teaching communication strategies is an effective way to improve students' communicative competence. It is also a practical way of preventing them from over relying on dictionaries during in-class communicative activities. Strategy practice can readily be combined with activities to aid the development of student vocabulary. Students are then provided with not only with tools to communicate effectively, but also with opportunities to expand their vocabulary while at the same becoming proficient in using communication strategies.

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