

Are strategies teachable?
Developing strategies in Foreign Language Education for more autonomy

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Abstract: There is an open discussion about strategies in foreign language education and more specifically whether or not they can be taught and be included in Foreign Language Instruction. The purpose of this paper is to trace teachable strategies among commonly used ones, and reinforce their use in order to facilitate autonomy in foreign language use. Accordingly, communication is divided in three categories:

- a) oral face-to-face interaction
- b) creative production of writing and
- c) synchronous text-based computer mediated communication.

These are the results of three separate research projects and the aim of this paper is to combine them and provide a synthesis of strategies used in the three domains mentioned above.

Key words: autonomy, computer mediated communication, oral interaction, teachable strategies, writing

1. Introduction

The question is not only whether strategies can be taught, but also to what extent they can be taught, what we mean by saying “teachable” and which is the starting point of strategy use instruction. Is the language learner an empty vessel, where we can put all knowledge of strategy use? Certainly not. Strategy suggestions should take into consideration the strategies already used by a learner as strategy awareness and their further use may, to some extent, be affected by strategies already used. Strategy suggestions are explicitly linked to the learners’ existing behaviour.

2. Background of the Study

The main variables to be examined in the present paper and around which the theoretical background will be formulated are the following: Strategies, Teaching Strategies and Teaching Strategies for Autonomy.

2.1 Strategies

In order to fulfil a communicative aim the language users adopt strategies. These strategies are “a means the language user exploits to mobilise and balance his or her resources, to activate skills and procedures, in order to fulfil the demands of communication in context and successfully complete the task in question in the most comprehensive or most economical way feasible depending on his or her precise purpose” (CEFR 2001: 57). According to Tarone (2005: 488), speakers use Communication Strategies to resolve difficulties they encounter in expressing an intended meaning.

Communication Strategies – together with learning strategies – are considered important for the development of strategic competence. Strategic Competence is defined as “verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action to

compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables” (Canale & Swain 1980: 30).

According to the Common European Framework of Reference (2001: 57) the use of communication strategies can be seen as the application of metacognitive principles: Planning, Execution, Monitoring and Repair Action to the different kinds of communicative activity: Reception, Interaction, Production and Mediation. We will examine the application of communication strategies specifically to Interaction -which encompasses both receptive and productive activity as well as activity unique to the construction of joint discourse (CEFR 2001: 84), and Written Production. We will also deal with the Execution phase which includes what is actually happening during the communication process itself.

The CEFR proposes some interaction (2001: 84) and production (2001: 63) strategies for the Execution Phase. In the present paper, the given CEFR’s categorization was further enriched and more detailed inventories were used to observe and analyze the learners’ current strategy use.

2.2 Teaching Strategies

There is a serious controversy concerning teaching strategies which consists of two opposing views. The first one is opposed to strategies instruction and can be briefly summarized in Bialystok’s words (1990: 147) who claims that what one must teach students of a language is not strategy but language. Both of them support the argument that strategies are an integral part of learning that will certainly come out and there is no need for them to be taught. Another argument is based on the transferability of L1. Communication strategy use is evident in L1, implying strategic transfer and therefore strategy instruction is not considered necessary.

The second point of view stands in favour of strategy instruction. The main argument is the simple statement, “the learner should be taught not to give up”. Not giving up means knowing how to react, develop strategic competence, choose the adequate one, know how to use it and practice it.

Another argument has to do with transferability from L1. Often people use certain helpful strategies in their first language but they fail to transfer them to L2. If learners have communication strategies in L1 or the target language, they may not use them often enough, appropriately, efficiently and spontaneously in the L2 (Faucette, 2001:4). Learners’ attention should be brought to strategies they may already make use of in the L1. They should become aware of this strategy use and they should be encouraged to also use them in the L2.

The last and most important argument has to do with metacognitive awareness. We should make learners conscious of their existing strategy behaviour and teach them how to use it most appropriately. Strategy instruction should contain both strategy practice and strategy use awareness techniques. This can be implemented through task-based techniques and consciousness raising on strategy use.

2.3 Teaching Strategies for Autonomy

Autonomous learning seeks to equip learners with tools that will best serve them once they are on their own and to facilitate their self-directed learning outside the classroom. In autonomous learning, the teacher acts as a facilitator who provides the student with the tools to become autonomous through opportunities to learn and strategy instruction.

Faerch & Casper (1983: 56) argue that “by learning how to use communication strategies appropriately, learners will be more able to bridge that gap between pedagogic and non-pedagogic communicative situations. Learner autonomy can be

thought of as the ability to bridge that gap. We cannot ignore communication strategies in our L2 lessons if we want to develop independent, strategically competent language learners who will be able to participate in real communication outside the classroom. We stand in favour of strategy instruction especially in terms of learners becoming aware of the strategies already used and the ones they could possibly use”.

3. The study

The present study will first focus exactly on the first step towards effective strategy instruction that is the identification of the subjects’ current strategy use. Three studies were conducted tracing the strategies used in three categories:

- a) oral face-to-face interaction
- b) writing
- c) synchronous text-based Computer Mediated Communication

The strategies traced will be analyzed in a common frame, in terms of consciousness, teaching, autonomy.

3.1 Oral face-to-face interaction

3.1.1 Research methodology

The first piece of research involves oral face to face interaction, which took place in multilingual and multicultural settings. This research involved observation and recording of interactions. Thirteen hours of conversation were recorded, transcribed, separated into communicative events and studied in detail, using an observation questionnaire based on Hymes’ SPEAKING, (Hymes 1972: 35-71) with the aim to arrive at some concrete results.

Research was carried out in four different settings where people of different nationalities communicate, which included: trade transaction places such as open markets, workplaces such as the Erasmus office at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. In addition, educational environments were also studied, such as the International School of Thessaloniki. Finally it was considered important to include places where people develop social relations, like a coffee bar and a schoolyard. The study was carried out in 2004-2005 for about 1 year and a half.

3.1.2 Research results

Having completed the research, the material was separated into 128 events, whose analysis produced some interesting results. The techniques people develop, that is every organized attempt they make to transfer the linguistic meaning (Conseil de l’Europe 2001: 15) are the following: First of all considerable use of elliptical discourse in the non-native language has been noted (Κοψίδου 2007: 417). Secondly, code switching is used with a very high percentage of frequency. Usually speakers combine languages to form one message, the interpretation of which depends on understanding both languages.

Moreover, interlocutors turn to FR that is when native speakers adjust their speech by simplifying their language (Arthur, 1980; Jakovidou 1993). The results have also showed that another solution to succeed in communication is mediation with the participation of an external-third speaker between two or more participants, while, as a last resort, they turn to mixed language. This is based on the use of individual words grammatically incorrect (no plural, gender, or tense marking) and with no syntax at all (Κοψίδου 2007: 416).

Specifically, elliptical discourse in a non-native language comes up to 46, 2%, code-switching rises to 35,7%, FR comes third with 13,8%, mediation follows with 3,3% and

mixed language reaches just 1%. At this point it should be emphasized that elliptical discourse in a non-native language and the mixed language option are strategies traced in the present study.

3.1.3 Implications for teaching

Concluding, it can be said that Strategy use was not a result of strategy instruction/teaching because learning was not the result of any course or syllabus design. In addition, strategy use was the result of a conscious process since participants were trying to find possible solutions in order to avoid misunderstandings.

Therefore, the introduction of those phenomena examined is proposed to become part of second/foreign language teaching as part of competence. Competence in communication refers to the ability to use the language effectively for communication. Gaining such competence involves acquiring both sociolinguistic and linguistic knowledge or, in other words, developing the ability to use the language accurately, appropriately, and effectively. Specifically, the introduction of different activities that can be based on teaching the use of elliptical discourse and simplified forms of the target language instead of the standard language is proposed. Moreover, the student can be trained to act like a mediator between the mother tongue and the target language and to switch codes when misunderstandings occur. In addition, the curriculum can include paralinguistic teaching, phenomena that accompany or replace speech acts in a culture-specific manner. Assuming use of these strategies can lead to successful communication between participants, their conscious integration in the learning process could develop autonomous learners able to participate in real life communication settings and to avoid communication breakdowns. Also, it is important to emphasize that further research needs to be done in order to confirm these findings so that new syllabi and curricula can be reformulated according to the variables examined in the present research.

3.2 Writing

3.2.1 Research methodology

The second part of the research involves the study of writing and particularly word formation in writing. The purpose was to trace strategies used by candidates in written exams successfully in order to facilitate communication and then register the strategies mainly adopted by them. For this reason, this part of the research is connected with the examination for the certificate of attainment in Greek.

The research was held in the Centre for the Greek language, in Thessaloniki and past papers of candidates of the year 2003 from all over the world were examined and analyzed. Altogether 200 past papers were examined, 68 of which were from candidates for level B, 67 for level C and 69 for level D. The study was carried out from July 2005 till February 2006.

3.2.2 Research results

The research showed that a number of achievement strategies (Council of Europe 2001: 63) had been fostered by the candidates. Consequently, the material was grouped according to communication problems associated with word formation. Moreover, strategies that candidates used to overcome problems in writing were identified. All research data were divided into two big categories: achievement strategies used in word compounding and in word derivation.

a. Word Compounding

According to the research results, candidates prefer to use mainly simple and derived words rather than compounds. This kind of strategy they adopt could be characterized as

avoidance of compound words. However, they misuse simple or derived words, particularly those of ancient Greek origin. Thus communication is blocked.

Another strategy used by a great number of candidates in order to overcome problems with word compounding is *paraphrasing*. A *paraphrase* is a statement or remark explained in other words or another way, so as to simplify or clarify its meaning.

(1a) λέει άσχημα λόγια για μένα *instead of* με κακολογεί

He-says bad things about me *instead of* he-speaks-ill-of-me (a compound in Greek)

Another strategy adopted is the use of *simpler language*. In this way in order to write down their thoughts language users do not hesitate to separate the two different words from which a compound word is built using a *simpler language*.

(1b) όλο καινούργιο *instead of* ολοκαίνουργιο

all new *instead of* brand-new

Finally, many times they conjoin words without using the existing compound. They write two words next to each other without actually forming a compound.

(1c) πόνοςκεφάλι *instead of* πονοκέφαλος

achehead *instead of* headache

b. Word derivation

As far as derivation is concerned, one of the strategies used by candidates is *overgeneralization*. We can talk about overgeneralization only in those cases that a candidate applies a grammatical rule across all members of a grammatical class (e.g. verbs or adjectives) without making the appropriate exceptions. Although overgeneralization usually shows misuse of language, it can be accepted as a strategy when used by candidates in order to avoid communication problems having to do with word derivation; for instance, the use of the *-ed* suffix to indicate past tense for verbs like "go" or in the Greek language the use of the ending *-ικός* for almost every adjective deriving from a verb.

(2a) θαυμαστική διαφήμιση *instead of* θαυμαστή διαφήμιση

In addition, each time candidates face problems in choosing the proper word to communicate, they consciously prefer to use simpler words, semantically transparent instead of opaque words¹, using the *simpler language* strategy.

(2b) για την κατοίκηση των ξένων αθλητών *instead of* για την εγκατάσταση των ξένων αθλητών

Finally, *describing aspects of what they want to say*, language users manage not only to communicate but also to overcome almost every problem with vocabulary in the foreign language.

(2c)...μιλάει πίσω από την πλάτη μου και λέει πράγματα για μένα που δεν είναι αληθινά... *instead of* ...με συκοφαντεί.

¹ A word with obscure meaning, even though analyseable in morphological terms.

3.2.3 Implications for teaching

To sum up this research, all metacognitive² strategies fostered by candidates were not the result of any teaching. However they had made a conscious effort to use them in order to overcome problems in communication and achieve better results in the exams for the certificate of attainment in Greek.

It should be noted that none of these achievement strategies is integrated in any syllabus for the teaching of Greek as second or foreign language. The use of *simpler language*, *avoidance of compound words*, when necessary, *paraphrasing*, *overgeneralization* and *describing aspects of what someone wants to say* can lead to autonomous learning and fill the gap in language competence connected with vocabulary (Rasekh & Ranjbary 2003: A-5). Finally, it should be emphasized that the avoidance of compound words in the foreign language is a strategy attested for the first time in the present study.

In conclusion, as production of writing remains the most difficult part of language communication, it would be interesting to find out if the above strategies can be taught according to cognitive and metacognitive skills that students use during their effort to write in order to gain autonomy in foreign language learning. Only in this way will students become conscious writers and be able to develop their communicative competence (Scardamalia & Bereiter 1987).

3.3 Research on Strategies in Synchronous text-based Computer Mediated Communication

3.3.1 Research methodology

In this part of the research it was our aim to examine Interaction and trace *Interaction Strategies* in a specific communication channel, i.e. in *synchronous text-based Computer Mediated Communication* (CMC), the so called *chat*. Communication in this medium is based on the exchange of written messages, without time-delay (synchronously), via computers that are either connected through a local network (LAN) or through the World Wide Web (WWW). Thus it resembles both written and oral speech but has "*a modability of its own right*" (Abrams 2003: 158).

The advantage of this communication channel in studying interaction strategies is "its purported interactive capability" (Chun 1998: 58). Fitze (2006: 79), who compared face-to-face and written electronic conferences reports that "students in written electronic conferences expressed more interactive language functions". These facts provide a fruitful environment for the investigation of interaction strategies.

The research was conducted in Greek Secondary Education and more specifically at the first year of High School. German was the target foreign language. The language level of the interlocutors was B1 according to CEFR scales. Discussions were conducted in pairs or small groups (3-4 participants). The discussions through CMC were task-based and the task-type was information gap filling: A picture was given to each participant and the task was to describe it to the other/others and discuss the common topic. Participants had no former experience on CMC in foreign language, and no former instruction on strategies was conducted.

² Metacognition involves "active monitoring and consequent regulation and orchestration of cognitive process to achieve cognitive goals" (Flavell, 1976: 252). Flavell and Wellman (1977: 3-33), and Flavell (1979: 906-911) included interpretation of ongoing experience, or simply making judgments about what one knows or does not know to accomplish a task, as other features of metacognition. Along with the notions of active and conscious monitoring, regulation, and orchestration of thought process, Flavell believed that through repeated use of metacognition, it might at the end become automatized.

The study corpus consisted of 18 discussions. Written transcripts from the discussions were later analyzed using a detailed Interaction Strategies Inventory-developed for analysing the execution process based on CEFR's categorization (Markou & Mouti, 2006).

3.3.2 Research results

The corpus reveals the use of *turn taking and cooperating strategies*. No use of *asking for help* and *dealing with the unexpected* strategies was recorded. For the explicit representation of strategies found in the corpus with their frequencies in percentages see Appendix Table 1.

Turntaking strategies involve the highest percentage since their use is inevitable in the discussion. Participants showed poor linguistic level concerning their use, e.g.

(1a) Backs: Bild 1

The interlocutor with the nickname Backs *initiates topic* by numbering the picture he is about to describe.

The possibility to *maintain turn* in CMC is fulfilled by sending multiple messages, e.g.

(2a) Loukos: In meinem Bild gibt es einem Mann!!!

Loukos: Seine Klamotten sind altmodisch und komisch und er ist in einem Park!!!

Loukos sends the first message with a general description and with her second message, which come before the other participant reacts, adds information.

In order to fulfill the task participants had to employ *cooperating strategies*, e.g.

(3a) Loukos: Es ist ein Party!

Backs: Gibt es keine Eltern

Loukos: Es gibt keine Erwachsene!!

By *asking for clarification* (Backs asks whether there are parents in the picture) interaction is created.

(3b) Sandra girl: das thema ist die freundschaft. Ist das richtig?

Sandra girl states the topic that she thinks is in common with her peer and then *asks for confirmation of mutual comprehension*.

Further research is suggested to trace more interaction strategies since the existence of a task and the task type controlled the interaction mode in part.

3.3.3 Implications for teaching

Following the frame (appendix) here are some facts about strategy use and teaching. As far as turn taking strategies are concerned there are texts in dialogue form integrated in language teaching which resemble CMC. We could suggest the integration of electronic discussions in foreign language corpora. As for interaction skills, focusing on specific linguistic and social rituals could enhance language awareness. It was reported that language learners used cooperating strategies in order to fulfil the given task. Emphasis

on interaction skills and integration of negotiation tasks (e.g. cases of misunderstanding and communication failure) could further help develop cooperating strategies.

Asking for help was not recorded in CMC transcripts though there exists such a strategy in bibliography. It is probable that learners were not able to make use of it, though there was occasionally oral request for help from their teacher. CMC provides various ways of asking for help such as the use of on-line resources (e.g. dictionaries). Practice could foster *autonomous* learning.

Strategy use was not the result of strategy instruction: The subjects had received no teaching of strategies prior to the research. The impact of this lack of explicit instruction on strategy use on language performance needs further investigation, since our findings show a drop in language performance (participants holding B1 level performing A2).

4. Conclusion

This paper is the result of an attempt to trace and register strategies from various contexts and multiple environments in order to examine the possibility of including instruction on their use in language learning. The common basis of the analysis is the framework created for the purpose of this study and filled in by the researchers, linking strategies to the educational sphere.

The study reports low integration of strategies in language learning syllabi, though such integration should be possible. The use of strategies by language learners makes them autonomous language users, thus we suggest raising strategic awareness through teaching and practice. Based on O'Malley & Chamot (1990: 1-58) and Nae-Dong Yang (2003: 296) for learning strategy instruction, we could propose four steps to follow in the implementation of this framework: Diagnosis: diagnose language users' current strategy use. Preparation: develop awareness and knowledge about strategies. Practice: develop use of strategies through communicative language tasks. Self-Evaluation: develop ability to evaluate strategy use.

Further research on strategies use for specific communication settings and linguistic levels is suggested for formatting appropriate language curricula and syllabi.

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Appendices

Table 1
Turntaking and cooperative strategies

TURNTAKING STRATEGIES	COOPERATING STRATEGIES
Initiate topic (18%)	Asks peer for clarification (6%)
Maintain turn (16%)	Asks for confirmation of mutual comprehension (10%)
Close topic (23%)	Gives clarification (6%)
	Gives confirmation of mutual comprehension (5%)
	Summarizes the point reached and helps focus the talk (10%)
	Repeats back part of someone has said to confirm mutual understanding (3)
	Expresses feelings towards peer and interaction (3%)

Table 2
Interaction Strategies traced in the synchronous text-based Computer Mediated Communication

		Yes	No	No evidence /I don't know
Link to consciousness	Strategy use was a result of strategy instruction			
	Indications:			
	Strategy use was a result of a conscious process			
	Indications:			
Link to teaching	Strategy is integrated in syllabus			
	Suggestions			
Link to autonomy	Strategy use could foster autonomous learning			
	Reasons			