Strategic Competence in a Three-Pronged Approach to Communication

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Abstract

Most students in English Language courses in professional colleges can perform well on tests of comprehension and grammatical knowledge. However they fall short in their ability to communicate effectively and interact meaningfully in real life situations. Effective communication can be seen as a multipronged fork. This paper aims to describe and draw attention to the importance of those skills of communication such as strategic competence, sociolinguistic competence and discourse competence. Second language learners face difficulties in expressing themselves due to limited language knowledge. This problem can to a considerable extent be remedied by improving their strategic competence. Strategic competence is very necessary in communication as it will help learners remain in real-life conversations which in turn increases their confidence. The paper concludes by presenting sample exercises used by the researcher in classroom to enable teachers increase students' development of strategic competence.

Keywords: Students in professional courses, Strategic Competence, Effective communication.

Introduction

While the last couple of decades has brought much awareness in teachers about the communicative approach, and methods based on this approach are professedly being followed in classrooms, the actual communicative language practices in classrooms seems to leave much to be desired. Most models of classroom teaching in professional colleges focus on teaching and testing reading and writing with very less or no practice on oral language proficiency. English is taught as a subject and not as a language. As a result most students perform well on tests of comprehension and grammar. However awareness and teaching of the other three communicative competencies, namely pragmatic, strategic and discourse competencies are not focused on. Research has proven that it is proficiency in these that can ensure effective communication and meaningful interaction for students, which can help in reducing the large scale unemployment of college graduates. This article aims to draw attention tothe importance of those skills of communication such as discourse competence and strategic competence. It concludes by presenting sample exercises to enable teachers to develop these skills in the classroom.

Communicative competence: The aim of communicative language teaching is to improve the communicative competence of students. The concept of Communicative competence was first introduced in the year 1966.1. Ever since then several authors have discussed and redefined it in many ways. The main idea was that to speak language fluently knowledge of grammar and structure alone was insufficient. To accomplish their communicative purposes second language speakers must be aware of several other aspects pertaining to appropriacy and formality besides accuracy and the communication strategies that can be used.

Communication can be seen as a three-pronged fork. According to the widely accepted theory, communicative competence as a whole can be explained in terms of three component competencies: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence 2.

Grammatical competence also known as linguistic competence involves knowledge of the language in terms of grammar, rules, vocabulary, pronunciation, spelling, etc. Traditional language teaching has aimed at developing the linguistic or grammatical competence of students.

The ability to use language appropriately in various social situations is termed as sociolinguistic competence. It is also referred to as pragmatic competence. While observing pragmatic competence several parameters are used. The purpose of communication or the function, the role relationship of the communicators including hierarchy, the topic being discussed and the situation, which includes the location of the communication are some aspects which need to be considered. The degree of formality or informality of the communication also has to be observed.

Sociolinguistic competence can be said to be governed by two sets of rules – socio cultural rules and rules of discourse. Socio cultural rules pertain to ways of using language appropriately in a given situation, formal or

informal: they are concerned with style, register, degree of politeness, and so on. Following the rules of discourse help in combining language structures to produce unified texts in different modes - for example: a political speech, an academic paper, a cookery recipe, etc. They provide guidance on the use of cohesion devices and coherence rules which help in the appropriate combination of communicative functions to organize the forms and meanings.

Second language learners face difficulties in expressing themselves due to limited language knowledge. This problem can to a considerable extent be remedied by improving their 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 or due to insufficient competence'.2. In other words, strategic competence refers to the ability to get one's meaning across successfully to communicative partners, especially when problems arise in the communication process. It is seen to be a major component of effective communication.

Functions of language: Function can be defined as the purpose for which language is used. However this is not based solely on the grammatical structure of a sentence. For example, let us examine the following sentences.
Get out! (order from a principal)
Could you lend me your car for a day. (request)
Submit your laboratory records by Monday. (instruction, recommendation)
Try the dumplings at Haiking. (suggestion)
Come home tomorrow evening. (invitation)

However, a function can be expressed using different linguistic structures. For example to request someone to leave the room we can say 'Please go away'. Other ways to perform the same function could be: 'Will you please leave the room' 'I'd appreciate it if you would leave the room' or 'Get out'. Thus based on the situation and the role relationship, the appropriate linguistic structure is used.

Register relates to the language specific to certain circumstances. For every communication event the level of formality has to be considered. Register also refers to the language and lexicon specific to a group of people like legal register, medical register and so on.

Review of Literature: Research studies confirm that strategic competence does not necessarily depend on the other components of communicative competence.

In a 1985 study it was concluded that strategic competence can be transferred from L1 to L2, which suggests that adult L2 learners enter the language learning situation with

already developed strategic competence.3.A 1987 research suggests that strategic competence can be taught.4. It is concluded that a number of strategies can be embedded in the curriculum to improve the performance of learners.

A 2005 study examined 62 females in an EFL course who were divided into a control group and a strategy training group. 5. The first group received traditional communication training and the second group received metacognitive training which included communication strategy use. It was found that the strategy training group did significantly better in oral communication tests than those in the control group. This proves thatmere communication practice was not enough for students to develop oral skills. Strategy training helped learners to negotiate meaning and maintain conversation flow.

Types of **communication strategies:** The development of Communication Strategies started with 6.7. To put it briefly Communication strategies were seen by these researchers as verbal or nonverbal first-aid devices usedto repair breakdowns or fill in gaps in a speaker's L2 proficiency.

When learners with limited linguistic resources wish to communicate messages their strategic competence is activated. They resort to certain strategies that can be divided into two kinds, they are message adjustment strategies and resource expansion strategies.8. These strategies are also referred to as avoidance or reduction strategies and achievement strategies. 9.

Message adjustment strategies help learners to utilize available linguistic resources to convey their intended message. This might alter or reduce the message to a small extent. In other words the learner wants to avoid risk. Resource expansion or achievement strategies are risk taking strategies which help the learners to continue conversation. They could involve learners' either direct or indirect appeal for help from their communication partners. It could include a direct question like 'What do you call…..?' or an indirect gesture like a pause or a raising of the eyebrow.

Other strategies may include: i. paraphrase or circumlocution - rephrasing or using a phrase to describe a word, for example 'My son often goes to… er…the place where you go and have drinks and dance…. -because of not knowing the word 'pub'. ii. approximation - using a word which expresses the meaning of the intended lexical item as closely as possible, for example ….a big boat…for 'ship'. iii. non-linguistic means - mime or gestures. iv. borrowed or invented words- 'cooker' for 'cook'(noun). v. formulaic expressions or fillers – 'I see' , 'Of course' 'Actually' 'Hmmm' and more recently 'like'

Method

Teachers should challenge learners to take risks which will develop their proficiency. Learners should be motivated to go beyond their existing knowledge. Not only will this increase their fluency, it will also improve their confidence in speaking.

Training on the use of hesitation filler words could help learners when they have a pause mid-sentence. Another benefit of using such filler words would be in binding words together in a sentence. For example:

A seemingly simple word like 'well' if added before a sentence like 'I don't know' could soften the sentence and make it sound much more polite.It can also be used to fill in a pause when you don't know what to say yet or while you are just beginning to say something but don't know how to start.

The filler phrase 'You see…' can be used when you are thinking of how to explain something.

'All right..' also can be used when you are thinking of the best way to put something across.

'I see…' and 'You know..' are filler phrases that can be used to fill a void or to add on to the end of a sentence.

Some other phrases like, It's like, Ok, Actually, Basically, So, Well, I mean, By all means, Of course, Surely, can be used to sound casual and confident.

Some sample strategic training activities used by the researcher in her classroom practice included the following. i. An authentic recording of some conversations were played and students were asked to note down all the fillers that they heard in the conversation. Later they were asked to use some of them in the role play they enacted. ii. For students to practice the strategy of paraphrasing, they were given chits of paper wherein the name of an object was written. They were then asked to explain what that object was without actually using that word. This kind of an interpretive strategy gives practice in paraphrasing which can avoid breakdowns in conversation. iii. Students were given an exercise in which there were a list of questions on the left and a list of responses, in scrambled order, on the right. Students had to match each question with an appropriate response.

Match each question on the left side with appropriate responses on the right.		
1	Do you still live in Hyderabad?	I don't think so, are you?
2	Are you going to the Lal's reception tonight	Hmmm..What about a play? 'Hamlet' is playing in Imax.
3	Where shall we go this evening?	I'm afraid I can't. I have an exam the day after.
4	How did you like the movie?	Actually no. This year we went to the sea shore.
5	Would you like to go to the exhibition tomorrow?	As a matter of fact, I was thinking of going on a picnic.
6	Are you in touch with ur old schoolmates?	Well. I mail them often and they are on facebook.
7	Did you spend your summer in a hill station as usual?	Well, depends. I do live in Hyderabad for at least 8 months in a year.
8	Do you play any games?	Much as I'd like to, there is no time at all.
9	What are you doing tomorrow?	Not my kind, I'm afraid.

Conclusion

Strategic competence is very necessary in communication as it will help learners remain in the conversation thereby increasing their confidence. It also gives learners some control over their performance besides helping them get feedback on their performance from their listeners. In other words it helps in self-monitoring. This could be one more way in which teachers can provide a scaffolding to help learners by linking challenging content to cultural resources.10.Communication strategies can be used as good learning strategies for learners. They provide learners with more input, give more opportunities for learners to validate and check if their utterances are right by giving them feedback in the form of response from listeners.

However it may be necessary to point out at this time that filler phrases can be uttered with a communicative intent, in addition to being used as a consequence of delays in speech plans. It can be concluded that they are effective in preventing a breakdown in conversation. Students also get exposed to real-life natural conversation which is different from formal classroom conversation.

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