

7 Developing Young Learners' Communication Strategies

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1 INTRODUCTION

Nunan (1998: 39) sees “mastering the art of speaking” as the most important aspect of learning a language. However, it is not easy to communicate in a second language when the speaker has limited words. For this reason learners need techniques to cope with communication breakdowns that may occur. These techniques are called communication strategies and they provide the focus for this study. In particular I want to explore the extent to which communication strategies are teachable and, if they are, how learning them would be of benefit to learners.

2 COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

2.1 Definition

“Communication strategies refer to techniques learners use when there is a gap between their knowledge of the language and their communicative intent” (Wenden, 1986:10). They are tactics adopted by L2 learners to solve difficulties by using the language in the most effective way to encode a message (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). Communicative strategies allows learners to get their meaning across using the language resources available to them.

2.2 Types of Communication Strategies

Færch & Kasper (1983), cited in Bygate (1987), divide communication strategies into two kinds: achievement strategies, which are ways of communicating an idea when the speaker lacks the normal words or structures, and reduction strategies which are ways in which the speaker maintains communication by reducing his or her message when lacking the necessary language. I am interested in achievement strategies in this study given their potential to maximize learners' ability to communicate. There are a number of achievement communication strategies; here I will focus on four in particular: paraphrasing, using fillers, interrupting, and asking for clarification.

Lam (2006: 145) defines paraphrasing as “the use of alternative expressions with similar meanings to replace those that the speaker does not know or cannot think of”. Fillers are devices to fill pauses, stall and gain time to think (Dörnyei & Thurrell, 1994). They are also called “time-stalling devices” (Graham, 1997:78) and they are often preferable to silence as they allow the conversation to continue at times of difficulty. Interruption is a strategy for taking a turn in conversation. An example of an expression which signals an interruption is ‘excuse me, but’. This strategy could be “a definite conversational blunder in many cultures” (Dörnyei & Thurrell, 1994: 42) but when the purpose is to sort out communication problems it becomes important. Finally, asking for clarification is a useful strategy when a message is not clear and the listener needs to intervene and to ask for clarification. Not intervening in this way could lead to more serious communication breakdowns further down the line.

2.3 Value of Communication Strategies

A number of benefits of communication strategies have been identified in the literature.

2.3.1 Achievement

People who employ communication strategies “achieve a lot more with their limited language than those who don’t employ (them) at all” (Bress, 2004: 30). They can help to bridge the gap in communication in L2 learners’ speech, which will command respect and attention from native speakers. In addition, they will provide the learners with a “sense of security by allowing room to maneuver in times of difficulty” (Dörnyei & Thurrell, 1994: 22).

2.3.2 Natural Conversation

Repairing communication breakdowns is a natural part of conversations between native speakers of a language. Encouraging learners to use communication strategies can thus help their own use of the L2 sound more native-like. Conversations are full of starts and stops and by developing in learners the ability to use the strategies to keep the conversation going teachers can prepare learners to take part in natural conversations with other speakers of the L2.

2.3.3 Creativity

Moreover, the use of communication strategies “facilitates spontaneous improvisation skills and linguistic creativity” (Dörnyei & Thurrell, 1994: 22). This is because these strategies help learners appreciate how much they can do with the limited language that they possess.

2.4 Learning and Teaching Communication Strategies

Although not all scholars agree that communication strategies can be taught, there is ample support for the view that they can. Dörnyei & Thurrell (1994), Lam (2006), Nakatani (2005) and Richards (1990), for example, believe that teaching learners the expressions they need to use particular communication strategies is a valuable exercise.

In terms of how these strategies can be taught, we can distinguish between indirect and direct approaches. The indirect approach engages the learners in tasks which require interaction, hoping that repeated opportunities to use communication strategies will develop in learners the ability to use them. This approach assumes that the learners already know these strategies in their L1, so they will be able to use them in the L2 when they are forced to do so (Mumford, 2004; Heathfield, 2004). However, Ellis (1984: 40) argues that the kinds of strategies used by L1 learners differ from L2 strategies and that “L2 learners will employ communication strategies more frequently than L1 speakers”.

A second approach to teaching communication strategies is direct and explicit (Dörnyei & Thurrell, 1994). The main idea of this approach is that not all learners will be able to acquire or use the strategies without having their attention directed to notice them.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Questions

The main research question for this study was: In what ways does teaching oral communication strategies help Omani pupils in Grade 4 to improve their interaction in information gap activities?

Three sub-questions were addressed:

1. What communication strategies are already used by the learners?
2. Does teaching some other strategies help learners interact more?
3. Will teaching these strategies increase the quality and the quantity of their speech?

3.2 Participants

The participants in this study were four Grade 4 learners (two boys and two girls). To select these participants, I observed my classes in pair-work and group-work and chose ten pupils who seemed to have the desire to communicate in English. Then I interviewed these learners in small groups, asking them questions like “what do you do after school?” and “which TV programmes do you like and why?”. I observed them during these discussions to identify learners who were trying to communicate using the language resources they had. From these pupils I chose four: two girls (F and Z) and two boys (A and S). They all showed a natural enthusiasm towards learning new things but had limited English to express themselves.

3.3 Data Collection

I followed an action research approach here as this is a powerful tool for change which allowed me to explore and evaluate changes in my teaching. I followed a number of stages: first I examined the communication strategies that my learners already used; then I taught them new strategies; the next stage was to examine what effect this instruction had on learners’ interaction during speaking activities. I discuss each stage in turn below.

3.3.1 Baseline Information-Gap

I decided to assess my learners' use of the communication strategies through information gap activities because, as Cook (1996: 90) suggests, such activities "force the students to use ... communication strategies whether they want to or not". Information gap activities involve the learners in sharing the information that they have in order to solve a problem, gather information or make decisions (Rees, 2005). For my research, I designed an activity in which learners had to describe their individual pictures then to put them in order to make a story. I made a video recording of the four learners as they worked on this task. I analyzed the transcript of the video to identify the communication strategies the learners were using.

3.3.2 Teaching Communication Strategies

I designed eight activities to teach four strategies: paraphrasing, using fillers, interrupting and asking for clarification. I planned to teach each strategy with the same procedure: informing the pupils in Arabic about it and when to use it, giving them some phrases to use with it and asking them to apply it in an activity. The first activity aimed to introduce paraphrasing and train the pupils to use it in a bingo game. The second activity practised paraphrasing by getting them to describe some words in a guessing game. The third, introduced fillers and the pupils were asked to practise a dialogue with some fillers in it. The fourth activity also practised the use of fillers by asking the learners referential questions and encouraging them to use these fillers in their answers. The fifth activity introduced clarification and how to ask for help using some linguistic expressions. The sixth activity introduced interruption through a discussion activity where the learners were asked to agree on 15 items they needed for a trip. The seventh and the eighth activities gave extra practice for all four communication strategies.

For all eight activities I observed the learners at work and made anecdotal records. The activities were taught over a period of three months..

3.3.3 Post-Test Information Gap

I designed another information gap activity which had the same features and the same procedure as the one I used at the baseline stage. In this activity the learners had to arrange pictures to make a story of Biff and Salem (characters from their coursebook). I once again video recorded the learners during this activity, transcribed the recording and analyzed learners' turn-taking and interaction skills.

3.3.4 Interviews

I also conducted follow-up interviews with the learners. I showed them the videos that I made before and after teaching them communication strategies. Then, I asked them the following questions in Arabic:

- What did you learn from the activities that I taught?
- What difficulties did you face?
- Comparing the two videos, how do you see yourself in speaking?

I tape recorded the interviews. Their main aim was to find out learners' reactions to the work we did on communication strategies and to see if they were conscious of any improvement in their speech. I translated the interviews into English and had these checked against the originals by a colleague.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 Qualitative Data

This section draws on data from the observation of the pre- and post- information gap activities and of the strategy training lessons, as well as from the interview data. I organize the presentation of findings under three headings: strategy use, strategy training, and strategy awareness.

4.1.1 Strategy Use

The analysis of the baseline information gap activity showed that the learners made frequent use of self-repetition and self-correction strategies. For example, F said : "A girl is, is men, aaa.. speaking, is speaking, a girl is speaking to the men". Another strategy they used was miming, as when Z moved her hand to show the verb 'walk' which she did not know. They also made use of the strategy of borrowing words from the L1, as when A said "hormaa" as he didn't know the word woman in English. Thus there was evidence at the start of the study that the learners were already using certain communication strategies.

In the post-test information gap, there was also evidence of new strategies the children had learned. For example, Z used paraphrasing and said "Salim no sleeping" instead of saying Salim woke up. They also made use of fillers, as when F said "Biff climb the tree, and, mm... you know...mm". In addition, they made use of the strategy of interruption to correct and add something else; for example, Z said: "No, no, excuse me, it's hot, ...". They also asked for clarification; in one example Z said: "I'm sorry? What's future?" The learners' performance on the second information gap activity thus suggested that the strategy training work had had some impact on them.

4.1.2 Strategy Training

I made anecdotal records during the strategy training sessions. In general, the learners treated many of the training activities as games. Several activities did in fact include game-like elements, such as guessing, and learners responded well to this. The activities generally enabled the learners to practise the target communication strategies, except for activity 6. This was supposed to promote the use of interruption but it did not elicit examples of this strategy. This may have been because in our culture we teach children not to interrupt.

4.1.3 Strategy Awareness

The first question in the interview was: What did you learn from the activities that I taught? All the participants said that they learnt something new. They

mentioned different examples of the expressions that I taught but they mostly mentioned fillers like 'well' and 'you know'; pupil S said that these fillers are "like tricks".

The second question I asked the learners was: What difficulties did you face? Most of the learners said that they did not face any difficulty in doing these activities. However, F felt that paraphrasing was a little difficult as she pointed out that "some words were difficult to describe".

In the third question I asked the learners to compare their speaking performance on the video recordings of the pre and post information gap activities. The majority of the participants noticed some improvement in their speech. They mentioned that they learnt new words, how to say unknown words using English and how to ask for clarification. Only one child said he did not see any improvement in his speech.

Overall, then learners' responses to the strategy training were positive. They were mostly aware of some changes in their speaking after the strategy training.

4.2 Quantitative Data

The quantitative data came from an analysis of the learner language used in the pre- and post- information gap activities. The results below focus on turn-taking, number of words, and fluency.

4.2.1 Turn-taking

Figure 1 compares the number of turns taken by each learner in the first and second information gap activities. This figure shows that following the strategy training all learners contributed more turns than they had in the original information gap.

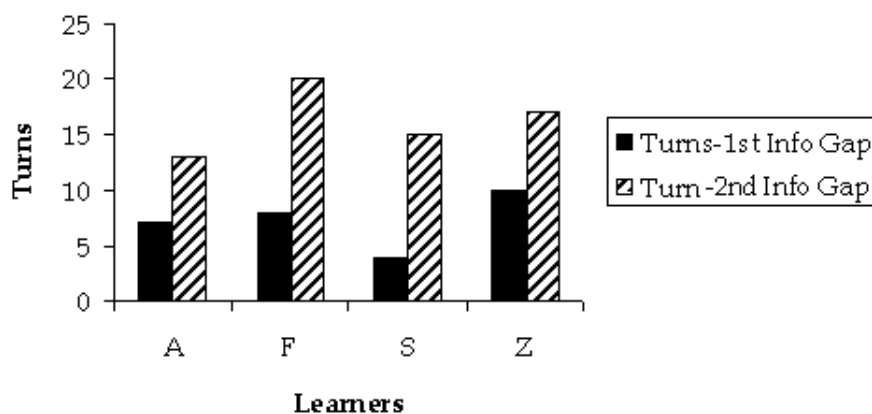


Figure 1: Comparison of turns before and after strategy training

4.2.2 Number of Words

Figure 2 compares the number of words spoken by each learner in the first and second information gap activities. This figure shows that following the strategy training all learners spoke more words than they had in the original information gap.

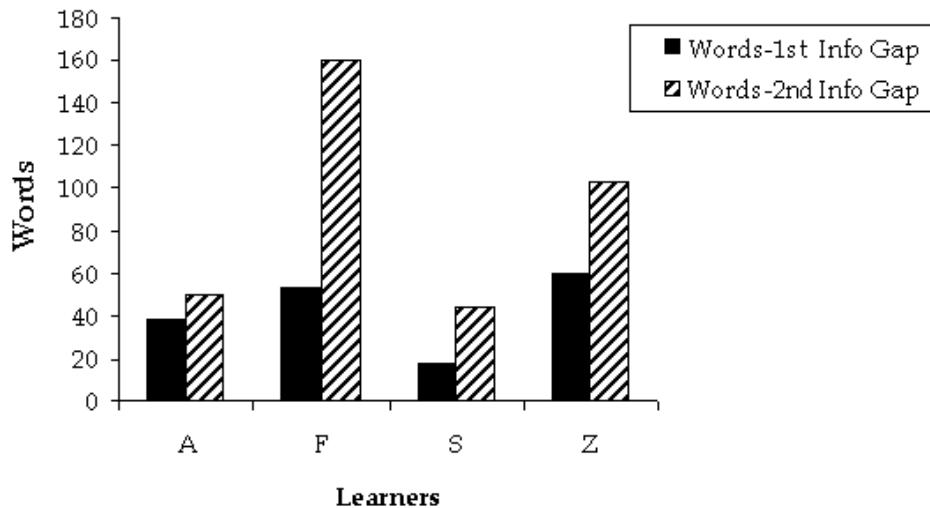


Figure 2: Comparison of number of words produced before and after strategy training

4.2.3 Fluency

To assess the effect of the strategy training on fluency I compared the average number of runs in learners' utterances before and after the training. The results are presented in Table 1. According to this table, there were no increases in the number of runs in any of the learners' utterances. In two cases the figures were lower while in the other two they stayed the same. There is no evidence here then that the strategy training supported the development of more fluent speech, as measured by length of run, in these learners.

Table 1: Length of runs before and after strategy training

Learners	Average runs in pre-activity	Average runs in post-activity
A	4.4	3.0
Z	3.1	3.1
F	3.4	3.4
S	3.0	2.6

5 DISCUSSION

This study has shown that prior to the strategy training the learners were able to use certain communication strategies - self-repetition, self-correction, miming and borrowing from the L1. Nevertheless, in the initial information gap activity, their conversations were limited to a few words and their interaction was simple.

There was also evidence here that explicitly teaching communication strategies can have some impact on learners' interactive speech in English. There was more turn-taking among the focal learners here after the strategy training than before. Learners also spoke more. These findings support the belief that it is possible to teach communication strategies (Dörnyei & Thurrell, 1994). However, on the measure of fluency used here (average length of runs), there was no evidence of improvement following the strategy training. So, following the strategy training learners interacted more and spoke more; there is no precise evidence here, though, that strategy training improved the quality of the speech the learners' produced.

5.1 Limitations

This study highlights the challenges of studying learners' oral productions and especially of identifying qualitative improvements in it following an intervention. Despite the strategy training sessions, I did not find evidence that the learners were able to manage communication breakdowns more effectively, and the lack of a specific focus on such breakdowns is a limitation here. I could also have used a wider range of criteria in examining the fluency of learners' speech; run length is one criterion but others, such as rate of speech, could have also been considered. Finally, it must be acknowledged that I focused on a small number of able learners here; the results may be different with learners of other abilities in different contexts.

6 CONCLUSION

Conducting this study has deepened my understanding of communication strategies and of the contribution they can make in enabling learners to interact more effectively in spoken English. In addition, analyzing the data I collected and trying to interpret their meaning was an enjoyable experience from which I learned much about conducting systematic classroom research. I will be able to use this experience to continue examining my own teaching and in particular to continue thinking about how I can support the development in my learners of oral communication strategies.

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