

## Selecting and Adapting Communication Strategies

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### *Abstract*

*Knowledge about a language does not make every language learner a fluent speaker of the target language. Teachers need to identify the ways that English speakers use language when interacting, and help their students experiment with a whole range of strategies that work. This workshop selects freely from the twelve communication strategies introduced in the course book *Communicate Now* (Palmer, R. & Todd, G., 2006, Pearson Longman). By practicing the strategies in the workshop, those attending should gain ideas on the kinds of strategies that are effective, as well as how to adapt them to their own teaching contexts.*

### **Introduction**

The aim of this slide presentation was to introduce the audience to a greater appreciation of communication strategies (CS), the role they play in conversation, and the kinds of CS that they as teachers feel their students might benefit from instruction in.

### *Communication Strategies: What They Are, and What They Are Not*

Everyone was asked to think about what CS were, before being provided with a definition: CS are ways speakers try to compensate for the gap between the message that they wish to communicate and the linguistic resources they possess at that precise moment. Unlike learning strategies (LS), CS are immediate responses to communication breakdown and are used under duress. The motivation of learners to employ CS is communication, not abstract notions of learning, and they are driven by that communicative imperative.

### **Relevant Theories**

Attention was drawn to the inclusion and explicit teaching and practice of the CS in each of the twelve units of the textbook *Communicate Now* (Palmer, R. & Todd, G., 2006).

Background in varieties of CS was provided by reference to the 11 types discussed by Faucette (2001, pp. 36-37). It was noted that the authors of *Communicate Now* made the decision not to emphasize the following three CS: codeswitching to the L1, since their Japanese students relied on L1 usage even when a speaker of the target language could not comprehend; foreignizing, at which their learners were adept and tended to over-rely on, to the exclusion of other linguistic resources at their disposal; and word coinage, which students were aware of and fairly proficient in already. Similarly, in reference to Asian cultures such as Vietnam where silence and lack of questions in class was prized in a way that would be unacceptable in English-speaking countries, the authors did not support the use of avoidance CS, such as avoiding topics, replacing messages, or simply giving up altogether.

### *Procedural Vocabulary*

Strategy 1 dealt with a minimal set of useful expressions or procedural vocabulary, without which learners could not maintain conversations. The recommended strategy – ‘Keep the classroom conversation in English’ – was focused on and taught directly. Clear principles and guidelines were highlighted at the end of each strategy. Learners are first encouraged to use the CS, and are then pushed or forced to use the CS in practice activities. Handouts were distributed and participants at the seminar worked in pairs as their students would in class. This was repeated later for Strategies 5 and 11, so that teachers could see the activity through the eyes of their students, and decide for themselves the effectiveness of the tasks.

### *Speaker and Listener Roles*

Communication involves a process of negotiating meaning between the speaker and listener. Strategy 3 considered listener feedback, especially clarification questions, building on research showing that prior training of learners in specific listening CS can affect their behaviour in interactions and influence their comprehension. Noticing is key: learners need to identify CS, when to use them, and why to use them. At the same time as the role of the listener in confirming acceptance of the message, in Strategy 9 the onus was on the speaker to check that the listener followed what they were saying, by such means as speaking slowly, loudly, and clearly.

### *Assumptions About Strategy Transfer*

The existence of a natural process of strategy transfer from L1 to L2 was questioned. Such transfer appeared to occur best with individual noticing and making use of similarities between problems (Strategy 7). Recommendations were to raise awareness of the CS, provide training in how to use them in the L2, and give practice in them. Likewise, the appeal for assistance in Strategy 4 (‘Ask if you don’t understand’) touched on cross-cultural differences in appropriateness and CS use. In Japan, students know how to ask questions, but would avoid them as they may signify an admission of ignorance or inattention to the teacher. For English speakers, unaccustomed to these particular roles of silence, not speaking up equates to message abandonment and communication breakdown. As Strategy 7 emphasised, failure to maintain conversations means learners do not receive language input, do not remain in the conversation as communicators, and do not develop their language ability or output: CS help to keep the channel open.

### *Approximation and Generalisation*

Strategy 8 looked in more depth at approximation and generalisation. Other words could be used when the learner either lacked knowledge of or was unable to retrieve the desired word. Indeed, it was noted that circumlocution, or talking around the subject, was one of the hallmarks of an accomplished communicator. Learners were urged to realize that speaking is an imperfect means of conveying messages at the best of times, and that repetition, pausing

and simplifying (Strategy 10) would help the process of giving a generalized idea of what we meant. Differences in written and spoken words and styles were given to illustrate the point.

### **Conclusion**

By way of wrapping up the presentation, those attending were asked to consider the notion of an ‘ideal book’ on teaching CS, which would need to include a focus on strategies for production, direct teaching of CS, numerous guidelines, and practice activities that not only pointed the way, but nudged learners towards experimenting with use of those strategies (Faucette, p.27). The use of CS within Communicate Now is no more than one step along the road towards such an ideal book, but it is hoped that the treatment of CS will stimulate readers to consider how they might fit into their own teaching and how their learners might make best use of the strategies.

### **References**

Faucette, Priscilla (2001). *A Pedagogical Perspective on Communication Strategies: Benefits of training and an Analysis of English Language Teaching Materials*. University of Hawai‘i at Manoa, Second Language Studies, 19(2), Spring 2001, pp. 1-40.

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