Speaking Strategically

Mohammed Arroub demonstrates the benefits of using achievement strategies to increase oral fluency in a second language

According to Skehan (1996), fluency "concerns the learner's capacity to produce language in the real time without undue pausing or hesitation" (p.22). As a dictionary entry, "fluent" is defined by Chambers Concise Dictionary as "able to speak and write a particular language competently and with ease." In that view, one way of developing fluency is the appropriate use of communication strategies or, as Canale and Swain (1980) outline it, the strategic competence which is one of the four components of communicative competence. The following section will examine how this strategic competence plays a vital role in developing fluency.

Strategic Competence

To speak or not to speak, I should use a strategy!

"The learner must develop skills and strategies for using language to communicate meanings as effectively as in concrete situations" (Nunan 1989, 13). Adopting and using some strategies by language learners in conversation can increase the efficacy of their communication and enhance their conversational competence. By teaching and training learners how to

use these strategies, we make them aware of how to use the language strategically in order to bridge their linguistic gaps, repair their communication breakdowns, and prepare them to be successful communicators. Once learners know how to deploy these strategies in their communication, they develop strategic competence which helps them to conduct a conversation successfully in and beyond the classroom without undue hesitation or communication breakdowns, as strategic competence is "how to cope in an authentic communicative situation and how to keep the communicative channel open" (Canale and Swain 1980, 25).

Canale and Swain (ibid) define strategic competence as "verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient competence" (p.30). In other words, learners who develop strategic competence through the appropriate use of communication strategies can manage to work through the linguistic difficulties that arise in the process of communication and develop fluency or conversational skills; whereas learners who fail to make use of these communication strategies,

and, as a consequence, fail to overcome their communication breakdowns, usually suffer from a lack of fluency that can be ascribed to the underdevelopment of strategic competence.

A lack of strategic competence, as Dörnyei and Thurrell (1994) state, explains why students with a wide vocabulary and good knowledge of grammar fail to get their message across and express themselves adequately. Whereas students who depend almost entirely on their strategic competence succeed in conveying their message without getting stuck even though their vocabulary may be limited and their knowledge of grammar is often basic. In short, strategic competence can solve communication problems, hence its crucial importance for foreign language learners' development of fluency.

Classification of Communication Strategies

Communication strategies are tools which can be used when the learner confronts a problem in communication due to insufficient linguistic resources — "they are a systematic technique employed by a speaker to express

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his meaning when faced with some difficulty" (Corder 1977 in Faerch and Kasper 1983, 16).

Communication strategies can be sub-categorized into two main types, achievement strategies and reduction strategies, or, as termed and divided by Corder (1981), into message adjustment strategies and resource expansion strategies. Achievement strategies involve communicating the whole message without abandoning any part of it, and speakers adopting these strategies do not avoid conveying their intended message when there is a communication problem. Instead, they get their message across and express it successfully without altering or modifying their intended message, thus they manage to communicate their message and reach their communicative intentions.

By using achievement strategies, the learner attempts to solve the problems that arise in communication by expanding their communicative resources, rather than by reducing their communicative goal. Achievement strategies are aimed at compensating for deficiencies in the learner's communicative ability, so they are often referred to as compensatory strategies.

Reduction strategies, however, involve reducing the intended message to the scope that the learner's linguistic capability can convey. Speakers adopting reduction strategies limit themselves in their message delivery to what their language knowledge permits them; consequently, an imperfect message is communicated or even one other than that initially intended. Unlike achievement strategies, reduction strategies involve avoiding exposing the speaker's linguistic deficiencies by leaving out part of the message to be conveyed or as Ellis (1985) puts it " [they] are attempts to do away with a problem. They involve the learner giving up part of his original communicative goal" (P. 184).

Achievement strategies can be further sub-divided into: a) Borrowing lexical items from L1, as in the example cited from Oxford (1990) when an English-speaking student of French inserted a L2 vocabulary item into a French sentence to carry on conveying his message, "Je suis dans la wrong maison (I'm in the wrong house)" (P. 95). The student's lack of the word "wrong" in his French has not hindered him to deliver his message to the listener; instead, he resorted to his native language to use the appropriate lexical item he lacked, and

that can be done only when the interlocutor knows the speaker's native tongue. So this strategy that branches off from the achievement strategies could help learners to communicate their need or message successfully without choosing to omit part of it which is essential to the whole message as the word "wrong" is in this example. This strategy which is used to switch between L1 and L2 depends on the interactants sharing the same L1 as is often the case with learners and their teacher;

b) Word coinage, which involves inventing a word in the L2 in an attempt to compensate for a lack of vocabulary and which is necessary for getting the whole message across. An example of word coinage strategy is "haircutter" as made up by one learner when their linguistic resources lacked the word "hairdresser" (Bongaert & Poullisse, 1989). Another instance of word coinage is using "airball" referring to a "balloon" (Tarone1981, 286). In both examples, we can see that the invented words carry the meaning or the function of the thing or person referred to;

c) mime - another strategy under the umbrella of achievement strategies where a learner expresses meaning without using