Using communication strategies in class

Joseph Wood

Nagoya University of Foreign Studies

Communication strategies (CSs) have been proven to strengthen speaking skills and are an important tool for language learners regardless of the language they are learning. Corder (1981, p. 103) defines a CS as "a systematic technique employed by a speaker to express his (or her) meaning when faced with some difficulty." Cohen (1990, p. 56) writes that "a major trait of successful speakers is that they use strategies to keep the conversation going." Many university students are taught CSs in class, but how often do they actually utilize them and when do they decide to use them? Are they able to monitor their own usage? This paper looks to answer these questions by way of audio recordings, video recordings, student self-evaluations, and surveys regarding the usage of 44 first-year university students over the period of one school year.

　日本の大学生はコミュニケーション・ストラテジーを習っているが、実際どのくらい使っているのだろうか。学習している言語が何であれ、コミュニケーション・ストラテジーは、言語学習者にとって重要な道具であり、スピーキング・スキルに役立つことが明らかになっている。Corder (1981, p. 103)は、コミュニケーション・ストラテジーを「コミュニケーションをする中で何らかの問題に遭遇した場合に、話し手が駆使する系統的なスキル」と定義している。また、Cohen (1990, p. 56)は、「優れた話し手の重要な特性は、コミュニケーション・ストラテジーを使って、会話を継続させることができることである」と述べている。それでは、学習者はいつ、どのようにしてコミュニケーション・ストラテジーの使用を決定するのだろうか。自分たちのストラテジー使用をコントロールできるのだろうか。これらの質問に答えるため、この論文は、オーディオ録音、ビデオ録画、自己評価、質問調査に基づいて、４４名の大学生のコミュニケーション・ストラテジー使用を1年間に渡って分析した結果を報告する。

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES (CSs) are becoming more and more visible in university level English language textbooks in Japan, but what are they exactly and how can students benefit from learning them? CSs help students to fill gaps in their L2 and express meaning when language skills are limited. CSs also allow students to overcome challenges they face while communicating and help them negotiate meaning with their partners. In other words, CSs are options related to output that speakers can use to effectively deliver messages (Brown, 2007). Examples of useful CSs include asking for clarification, asking for repetition, interjecting (that's nice, really?, wow!), getting time to think, interrupting, commenting, and many more.

There are many definitions of what CSs are and what they do, but researchers continue to debate the effectiveness of explicitly teaching them to students in class. The majority of the

controversy revolves around the teachability of CSs and how, or if, students will use them during communication. There may be concern that structured output may put pressure on learners to use specific CSs when they may not be needed and thus cause the conversation to be less natural. Also, some researchers contend that CSs do not need much in-class attention since students already use CSs in their L1 and have the ability to transfer them to an L2 (Willems, 1987) . However, Dornyei (1995, p. 60) concludes that "whereas strong theoretical arguments reject the validity and usefulness of specific CS training, practical considerations and experience appear to support the idea." Also in support of this, Willems (1987) believes a teacher should teach students to use the skills that they already possess naturally in their L1. Native speakers of every language use CSs, but may not realize it nor take the time to notice the benefits CSs bring to overall communication. CS usage among native speakers is often taken for granted. It is important to highlight this to L2 learners. Students should be aware that native speakers use many CSs when talking to other native speakers and that using CSs is not specifically for L2 learners.

Willems (1987) has done a lot of work in this area and his developmental sequence theory argues that CSs are learned gradually over long periods of time, which means that "teachability" can perhaps not be reliably measured over short time spans. He devised a chart called the "Typology of Communication Strategies" based on his research that outlines his theory of the developmental sequencing process. The chart begins with reduction strategies and ends with achievement strategies, which are then broken down into paralinguistic strategies, interlingual strategies, and intralingual strategies. The beginning strategy learner first learns reduction strategies, which are broken into formal and functional strategies. Formal strategies are strategies such as avoiding difficult language structures that the speaker doesn't have the full ability to use. Functional strategies are strategies that help the learner change the topic to something

easier if they are having trouble talking about a current topic, and they help with meaning replacement and meaning abandonment. The more advanced the learner's language ability, the more advanced the strategies used become. Eventually, students can use strategies that they normally use in their L1, such as paraphrasing, describing, asking for assistance, checking questions for understanding, interrupting, and many more advanced strategies.

Another researcher, Sato (2005), found that students were able to become aware of CSs through explicit teaching, but that "learners need continuous opportunities to actually use English and to evaluate their use of CSs" (p. 5). He found that "only a few" learners could use the strategies immediately after explicit teaching, though. At the early stage of his research, Sato wrote that the students "had difficulty" keeping their four minute conversations going… and could not "afford" to try to use the newly learned CSs. However, students in the class revealed that they began to use new strategies in class because their classmates did so. They were influenced by the usage of others. Sato's study found that "explicit teaching of CSs was useful to raise learners' awareness but not sufficient for them to be able to use those CSs in their conversations" (Sato, 2005, p. 5). The study also found that short stock phrases or formulated phrases were easier for students to use from the early stages. As the year went on, students were able to add more advanced CSs to their repertoire. However, it is important to remember that when teaching CSs, structured output and time to practice with the newly learned strategies remains vital for the learners' retention because, as Sato and Willems' studies show, CSs are learned gradually over a length of time and students have trouble learning them when they are not given enough time to experiment and actively use them in class.

Research issues and teaching context

From a practical standpoint, there are many issues teachers face when teaching CSs. For example how do students learn to use CSs? How and when do students use CSs? Does learning CSs promote L2 learning? In an attempt to answer these questions, I designed a study that followed the development of 44 first-year university students' strategy use over the span of a school year. The study looked at what CSs students began to use more easily and frequently and also at the CSs that students struggled with during in-class conversations. Research was conducted among four university classes at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies. The classes were relatively small, with an average of 11 students in each class, and met once a week for 90 minutes. All of the students were English majors in the school of Contemporary English Studies where they took many other oral communication classes besides mine and were exposed to CSs in those classes as well. For example, students used the book *Nice Talking with You* (Kenny & Woo, 2004) in another class and it contains many CSs that are taught weekly. Also, some of the specific CSs taught in other classes overlapped with CSs taught in my class with the result that these certain strategies were given more focus in-class and students were given more chances to practice using them.

In my classes, students were explicitly taught a few specific CSs each week. During the first semester, from April to July, students learned such CSs as: asking for clarification, asking for examples, asking for meaning, asking follow-up questions, asking for repetition, interjecting, and shadowing. During the second semester, from September to November, students were taught: asking for/giving advice, getting time to think, clarification, agreeing/disagreeing, interrupting, summarizing, and commenting.

Each class began with explicit teaching of the featured CSs from their textbook *Tools for Increasing Proficiency in Speaking* (Kindt & Barnard, 2009). I explained the function and aim of each strategy, while also highlighting their benefits and giving examples of how to use them. Students then completed a short 10-15 minute activity based on the textbook topic. These included activities such as: follow-up question games, interjecting practice, agreeing/disagreeing activities, and class debates. Finally, in groups of three, students had three 15 minute conversations based on the week's topic in which they were encouraged to use the target strategies. After each conversation, students changed groups and were given the chance to talk to new partners. As students practiced and began to understand the function of the strategies in question, they had a chance to see the usefulness of them and began to use them more in their conversations.

Data collection

Data was collected over the span of the year through several mediums. First, students were given the same survey three times, in May, July, and November, in order to follow the progression of students' use of 20 specific CSs. The survey was developed by Sato (2002) and asked students to rate how well they knew and how often they used the target CSs by circling one of the following responses: 1. (I don't know it); 2. (I know it, but have never used it); 3. (I know it and sometimes use it); 4. (I know it and often use it). The mean was collected by having students write down how well they understood each CS and how often they used them. The data from the surveys was then looked at closely and changes in answers were recorded and studied. These results allowed me to monitor which CSs were actually being used by students over the year. (See appendix)

In addition to the surveys, students also recorded their in-class conversations four times and self-evaluations were done after each recording. Students began recording conversations with a partner in semester one for 5 minutes and every record-

ing there after became gradually longer. The final recording was 9-10 minutes long. The self-evaluations were not connected to the survey data, but did ask students to evaluate their conversations, answer questions regarding their strategy usage, and describe how they thought their conversations could have been improved. Student comments from the self-evaluations were used to create newsletters for each class. The newsletters gave students a chance to learn what CSs other students were using and shed light on what classmates thought about the class and the recordings.

Results and noticeable changes between the three surveys

While the majority of the data shows increases in the usage of CSs by the students, some of the data also shows a decline. Noticeable jumps in a positive direction (based on the overall mean of the three surveys) included strategies such as: "Nice talking to you," "Oh really?," "Shadowing," "For example?," and "Do you know what I mean?" I believe some possible reasons for these increases are that:

- Students may have been influenced by their classmates. Many students commented on this fact in their self-evaluations.

- Students may have decided that certain strategies were simply more useful than others and, therefore, began to use those more while focusing less on ones they deemed not as useful.

- Strategies such as "How about you?" and "For example?" became easy ways for students to keep the conversations going while encouraging their partners to say more.

- More time was given in class focusing on the importance and usefulness of interjecting (Really? Sounds nice/good/ fun, that's great, etc).

Some strategy usage that went down over the course of the year included strategies such as, "Me too/Me neither" and "I agree with you/I'm afraid I disagree." Some possible reasons why the use of these strategies went down may be that:

- Students were not able to use certain CSs for each weekly topic. Some are specific or are best used when talking about more difficult topics. Some topics do not require students to agree or disagree, or to use more advanced CSs.

- Cultural differences may have hindered certain strategy usage (Sato, 2005).

- More advanced strategies do not transfer as easily from an L1 to and L2. (Summarizing, paraphrasing, giving opinions, etc.)

- Students may have known the strategy, but chose not to use it often. Many students changed their answers on the last survey from *#4- I know it and use it often* to *#3- I know it and use it sometimes.*

Many of the CSs peaked during the second survey and then dropped for the 3rd one. The following CSs hit their highest usage in the July survey: "Let me see…," "Oh really?," "Sounds nice/great/good," "Me too/Me neither," and "Asking follow up questions." The reason for this may have been simply that students forgot the CSs after the long summer break. (See tables 1 and 2)

According to the data, students learned short, set phrases quickly from April- July. In most cases, after summer break, from September-November students began to use the set phrases more while also using the more difficult CSs. Through the self-evaluations, students had a chance to see which CSs they used most and which they did not use so often, thus giving them an idea of which strategies they found to be helpful while communicating. Interestingly, interjecting ("That's nice!," "Oh no!," "Wow!," etc) seemed to be one of the most popular CS.

From the self-evaluations, I also found that students showed enthusiasm for CSs and many of them wanted to use more CSs while communicating in English. For example, in the first semester one student commented, "I want to ask many original questions and use conversation strategies more and more." In the second semester, some relevant comments were "I want to speak more naturally. I should use more conversation strategies" and "I want to use a lot of conversations strategies."

Table 1. CS usage that went up
(based on students who answered #4 with "I know it and use it often" on the survey)

Communication Strategy	May	July	Nov
Nice talking to you.	40%	95.4%	92.6%
How about you?	67%	86%	100%
Oh really? Oh, yeah?	47%	88.4%	73.2%
Shadowing (Repeating)	12.5%	60.5%	51.3%
That's great! Wow!	42.5%	74.4%	68.3%
For example? Like what/who?	27.5%	49%	56%
Sounds nice/great/good	40%	48.8%	56%
Do you know what I mean?	2.5%	0%	12%

Table 2. CS usage that went down
(based on students who answered #4 with "I know it and use it often" on the survey)

Communication Strategy	May	July	Nov
Pardon me? Could you say that again?	25%	6.9%	19.5%
That's a difficult/good question.	12.5%	23.4%	7.3%
Me, too/Me, neither.	75%	88.5%	58.5%
I agree/I'm afraid I disagree.	10%	11.6%	7.3%
What does that mean?	17.5%	18.6%	14.6%
I mean…	15%	13.9%	9.8%

Implications

I predicted that the usage of CSs would gradually increase over the course of the year, reinforcing the belief that strategy learning is developmental (Willems, 1987) and, for the most part, that is exactly what happened. Certain strategies were easier for beginning level students to use, such as stock phrases or short answers, while other CSs required a higher skill in the L2 in order for students to execute them successfully. However, in order for this learning to take place, students need extra activities and extra practice in order to learn the CSs and they need to be taught weekly over the span of the semester or year in order to really begin to be competent in using them.

After reviewing the three surveys that were given over the school year, I have come to the conclusion that my students benefitted greatly from being taught to use CSs and that they did learn to use CSs successfully when given time to develop their

strategic competence. I also realized that explicit teaching of CSs is important, but time and practice are just as vital for students' developmental process and confidence levels when using them. At the beginning of the year, many students struggled when talking with their partners and often, when faced with a communication problem, immediately stopped talking and went straight to their electronic dictionaries. Over the span of the year, however, students began to rely on their dictionaries less and less and I believe that their usage of CSs can be attributed to this change. The more CSs the students learned, the stronger their strategic competence became. Over the year, my students learned how to make the most of their language abilities with the help of CSs and hopefully they have realized just how important CSs are.

While being important to contributing to a stronger strategic competence among students, CSs also promote L2 learning by strengthening students' overall communicative competence. As students gain competence in grammar, discourse, and sociocultural adaptability, the "relative importance of strategic competence thus decreases; however, the effective use of coping strategies is important for communicative competence in all contexts and distinguishes highly effective communicators from those who are less so" (Savignon, 2002, p. 10). Having a strong strategic competence can help students to avoid breakdowns in communication when they do not have the appropriate L2 skills concerning the target language (Canale & Swain, 1980). Building a strong communicative competence is a vital foundation for L2 learners and strengthens acquisition. The last decade has shown substantial evidence towards the usefulness of L2 learners incorporating strategies into their acquisition process (Brown, 2007). So, since CSs are an important part of communicative competence, it is important to focus on teaching them to students.

Pertaining to future issues, I would like to use more video in my class. Students recorded their conversations four times over the year, but only once with video. It is important for students to be able to monitor not only verbal CSs, but also non-verbal ones such as body language, gesturing, head nodding, eye contact, etc. Video is a great way to promote self-monitoring and I would like to include at least two videotaped conversations over the next year. After the conversations are filmed, I would like to include a more detailed self-evaluation for the students to fill out. Audio and video recordings are important for a student's development; they promote noticing and, without noticing, learning cannot happen.

Researchers may not have come up with a concrete definition of CSs (Dornyei, 1995), but research such as that done by Dornyei (1995), Nakatani (2005) and Sato (2005) has concluded the usefulness of explicit CS teaching. Students can benefit greatly from learning to take advantage of CSs during conversations and, by learning to self-monitor their own CS usage, they may be able to recognize the significance and benefits of strategy use. As students' communicative and strategic competences grow, they will be able to increase their in-class performances and extend their communication times. As Savignon (1983) believes, strategic competence building is especially important for beginning learners. Overall, CSs and strategy training are important parts of learning an L2 and should be taught to all L2 learners.

Bio data

Joseph Wood teaches at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies. He started at the university as a graduate student and earned his M.A. in TESOL there. His research interests include communication strategy training and communicative language teaching. He is a native of California. <dearjoewood@hotmail.com>

References

Brown, H. D. (2007). *Teaching by principles*. New York: Addison Wesley Longman Inc.

Canale, M., & Swain, M. (1980). Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing. *Applied Linguistics*, *1*, 1-47.

Cohen, A. (1990). *Language learning*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle Publishers.

Cohen, A., & Macaro, E. (2007). *Language learner strategies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Corder, S. P. (1981). *Error analysis and interlanguage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dornyei, Z. (1995). On the teachability of communication strategies. *TESOL Quarterly*, *1*, 55-85.

Kenny, T., & Woo, L. (2004). *Nice talking with you*. Tokyo: Macmillan Language House.

Kindt, D., & Barnard, C. (2009). *Tools for increasing proficiency in speaking*. Nagoya: Well On Co. Ltd.

Nakatani, Y. (2005). The effects of awareness-raising training on oral communication strategy use. *The Modern Language Journal*, *89*, 76- 87.

Sato, K. (2005, October). Dynamics of teaching and learning communication strategies. Paper presented at The Second Language Forum at Columbia University, New York, New York.

Savignon, S. (1983). *Communicative competence: Theory and classroom practice*. Reading, MA: Addyson-Wesley.

Savignon, S. (1997). *Communicative competence: Theory and classroom practice*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Savignon, S. (2002). *Interpreting communicative language teaching*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Tarone, E. (1977). Conscious communication strategies in interlanguage: A progress report. *On TESOL '77*, 194-203.

Willems, G. (1987). Communication strategies and their significance in foreign language teaching. *System, 15*, 351-364.

Appendix

Table 3. Comparison of the mean score for each communication strategy (based on 44 student answers)

Communication strategies	May 2009	July 2009	November 2009
1. How are you?	3.2	3.4	3.3
2. Nice talking to you!	2.9	4	3.9
3. How about you?	3.7	3.8	4
4. Pardon me? Could you say that again?	2.9	2.7	3
5. Let me see….	2.4	2.8	2.6
6. That's a difficult/good question.	2.6	2.9	2.6
7. Oh really? Oh yeah?	3.3	3.9	3.7
8. Shadowing (Repeating)	2.3	3.5	3.7
9. That's great! Wow!	3.3	3.7	3.6
10. That's too bad! Oh no!	2.8	3.3	3.4
11. For example? Like what/who?	3	3.3	3.7
12. Sounds nice/great/good!	3.1	3.9	3.4
13. Me, too. Me, neither.	3.7	3.8	3.5
14. Asking follow up questions	2.5	3	2.7
15. I agree with you. I'm afraid I disagree.	2.6	2.6	2.4
16. Summarizing	1.8	2.2	2.2
17. What does that mean?	2.8	2.9	2.8
18. Do you know what I mean?	2.1	2.4	2.6
19. What do you mean?	2.8	3.1	3
20. I mean….	2.4	2.6	2.6