

Examining The Use Of Oral Communication Strategies For Enhancing Oral Communication Skills Of Students Of Engineering

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Abstract

Considering how essential oral communication skills are to students of engineering for sitting interviews, making presentations, taking part in seminars and conferences, and communicating with peers and superiors in office, the emphasis on improving oral communication skills has never been felt now as at any point in time since English became the de facto official language of India.

Keeping in mind the necessity of reaching out to every stratum of society, the socio economically deprived sections in particular, there have been moves to teach English in school at an early stage and degree colleges offering undergraduate courses in arts, social sciences and the sciences , have English on the curriculum to enable students to hone their spoken English.

In view of the importance attaching to spoken English, an attempt was made to identify certain strategies used by students to establish what distinguished fluent speakers from mediocre or below average ones and based on the study, an inventory of communication strategies employed by students and various coping mechanism used by the not so fluent speakers was arrived at. The study has implications for teaching strategy use formally in the ESL classroom.

Key Words: *Communication Strategies, ESL, Multilingual, EFL*

Introduction

Though communication strategies and strategy-training are concepts based on the theoretical framework and hence not amenable to easy interpretation, empirical evidence has emerged in strength from recent research in foreign and second language classrooms to establish rather conclusively that strategy-training is indeed beneficial to learners of a second language.

The present study is an attempt to examine the pattern and frequency of use of strategies of communication by learners in a formal context such as the second language classroom and based on the findings; explore the possibility of strategy-training. The study has attempted to identify and analyse strategies used by second language learners in terms of their usefulness to language learning and teaching.

The term *strategies of communication* was used for the first time by Selinker in his seminal paper on interlanguage (1972) to account for certain classes of errors that were obtained when learners tried to communicate using a greatly reduced linguistic system, where the errors in evidence appeared to conform to a specific pattern and share many features so much so that they were identifiable as belonging to a particular category. *Communication strategies* gained in popularity and empirical research was beginning to be carried out to ascertain their nature and scope.

Pit Corder (1981) arrived at a very pithy definition when he defined Communication strategies as follows: “systematic technique employed by a speaker to express his (or her) meaning when faced with some difficulty.” It is apparent that these strategies are used as much by native speakers as non-native speakers when coping with breakdown or near breakdown in communication.

The study

Though the notion of communication strategies and studies related to the use of strategies have been in existence for a long time, serious research on strategy use in a *multilingual context*, particularly in an ESL classroom, does not seem to have been carried out on a large scale. There have not been enough studies that examined the possibility of strategy training to learners, despite evidence emerging in favour of strategy-training. Most studies have been carried out in an EFL context while it is only now that research has begun looking at the use of oral communication strategies in an ESL context.

it was decided to conduct the study in an under graduate college under private management affiliated to Osmania University of Hyderabad. The study was conducted to know the kind strategies that students use when reading and interpreting a text or poetry piece.

A preliminary study was undertaken in the college which involved classroom observation. This was followed by a main study where classroom observation, interviews, questionnaires, informal discussions and recordings of speeches were carried out for the purpose of data collection. About 15 sessions were recorded. A total of (100)students took part in the study.

The interactions were recorded using Transcend ipod. Notes were taken supplement the recordings and classroom observations. Informal talk with the teacher and the students, administration of questionnaires to students etc completed the study.

Data was then transcribed and analysed for identification of the pattern and frequency of strategy use, which carry significant implications for pedagogy and strategy training. The data was also examined for teacher talk, teacher questions and their significance in promoting strategy use.

To elaborate the categories communication strategies fall into , it needs to be said that they may be divided into two broad categories based on whether strategy use leads to communication and subsequently fluency or retards it. Thus, reduction strategies lead to *fossilization* and poor communication while achievement strategies encourage communication and therefore fluency. *Reduction strategies* include message abandonment, message modification altogether, topic avoidance, etc.

Achievement strategies are further classified as paraphrasing strategies, word coinage, circumlocution, code switching, interlingual transfer, intralingual transfer, restructuring, cooperative strategies, retrieval strategies, etc.

Methods of data collection

The preliminary study involved the following: (a) Classroom Observation (b) Teacher Interviews

The main study which followed the preliminary study comprised the following stages

(I) Classroom Observations (II) Informal Talk with Student

(III) Teacher Interviews (IV) Student interviews (V) Questionnaires

Analysis of Data

The main study was carried out in the college affiliated to Osmania University, a state university in Telangana state. While the preliminary study helped the researcher decide on the research tools for the study, the main study led to recording of data for analysis.

As part of the *preliminary study*, lessons – *The Conjurer's Revenge*, *The Best Investment Iever made* and *Song 36 from Gitanjali* were read and interpreted to the class by 5 participants out of total 33. It was evident that the learners used or seemed to use many strategies to get their message across to fellow-learners. For instance, a learner explained that the “he was translate his collection of poem.....” to say “he translated his collection of poems.....”, “once when he was in training as a as a doctor.....he comes with.....” for “once he was under training as a doctor.....he came with.....”, another learner explained that “the show was ended” for “the show has come to an end”. These and many examples of this kind led the researcher to conduct the main study to explore classroom interaction in greater detail. Interestingly, teacher-talk in the college motivates students to perform well in any activity, be it reading or speaking. The researcher did not have to use a highly simplified version of the target language to make himself understood to the students. Apart from the use of ‘paraphrase’ to help the students with understanding the text, the teacher hardly sought recourse to other ways or strategies of making students comprehend as it was not necessary at all.

Teaching methods used

In the college the teacher tried to engage the learners in the learning process from the very beginning and there was target language all the time.. The teacher asked many questions to obtain responses from learners.

Some attempts was made to use CLT and classes were learner-centred where the teacher tried his best to make it learner-centred though the proficiency level of the learners made it teacher-centred after a point.

Learners appeared enthusiastic, highly motivated and had a positive attitude to learning in general. They seemed aware of the importance of learning English and appeared willing to

learn it. The preliminary study conducted in the college necessitated detailed and more extensive study, which took the shape of main study in the college.

Main study

Learners were asked to perform the same activity that they performed at the time of preliminary study. The teacher, at the researcher's request, selected students on a random basis and assigned each learner a prose piece or a stanza from poetry section of the first year English text book to read out and explain to their classmates. The learner chosen for the task stood in front of his classmates and addressed them. This activity seemed necessary because in the normal course of events, it was observed that students may not have had opportunity to use as many strategies as they would in an activity where the emphasis is more on communication.

The teacher observed the proceedings and encouraged learners to interact with their classmates. The teacher clarified and occasionally modified what the learners said and contributed her bit to the discussion. It was observed that the learners participated in the activity willingly and it looked as if the learners had taken part in such activities quite often in the past.

The sessions were recorded using Transcend i-pod with head phones. Notes were also taken by the researcher to record various aspects such as the ambience of classroom, the strength of the class, general ideas about learner attitude, learner motivation, teacher attitude, etc.

Classroom observation was followed by an informal talk with learners and an interview with teachers. Informal talk with students revealed that they were all keen to master spoken English and many of them were attending classes where spoken English was taught. The only drawback was that they were unable to practise what they had been taught and spoken English classes often involved teaching only grammar predominantly.

The main study, as explained earlier, involved the interpretation of a prose or poetry piece by learners and that was recorded for transcription and analysis. Strategy use was then identified based on analysis.

Identification of strategies

The audio recordings were then transcribed and communication strategies identified on the basis of the inventory given by *Faerch and Kasper* and other researchers who had carried out extensive studies on the use of communication strategies.

The following strategies were identified based on data analysis. More strategies than one were used by learners and therefore the number of strategies used exceeded the number of participants.

Strategy type	Number of students who used it	Text prose	Text Poetry
Circumlocution	25	✓	
Paraphrasing	20	✓	

Word coinage	3		✓
Literal translation	14		✓
Message abandonment	33		✓
Topic avoidance	30	✓	✓
Topic modification	12		✓
Code switching	15	✓	
Approximation	15	✓	
Pausing	33	✓	
Repetition	33	✓	
Message modification	23	✓	

It is apparent from the table that most of the learners chose to interpret prose lesson as they found the figurative meaning of poetry difficult. It is also apparent that those who chose a poem to explain the meaning to their classmates used Word coinage, literal translation, message abandonment, topic avoidance, topic modification

It is also noteworthy that more strategies than one were used by all learners who took part in the study.

Conclusions

The study has very crucial implications for strategy training. The following recommendations hold good based on the study.

1. Consciousness/Awareness Raising about the Communicative Potential of Communication Strategies

Teachers were not aware of strategies and their importance to second language learning. It is imperative that both teachers and learners be made aware of the potential benefits that communication strategies promise learners. For a long time now, speaking as a skill was considered secondary to reading and writing. Now that increasing attention is being paid to speaking as well, the potential learning effect strategies are meant to create can also be introduced when training learners to speak, to participate in discussions.

2. Encouraging Communication Strategy use through risk-taking

Familiarizing the learners with strategies is not sufficient to motivate the learners to use them. The teacher must see to it that the learners are rid of shyness before using them. In the college the lecturer was appreciative of the language that learners used and she never attempted to force on them target language norms when they spoke. Naturally therefore most of the learners were able to speak with little or no exhibition of shyness or fear.

The learner's personality, attitude to language learning, socio-economic background, the roles accorded to learners and teachers in a traditional language classroom and so on.

The tendency to *risk-taking* is therefore dependent on several other factors that operate in a particular environment. The teacher should take steps therefore to encourage learners to use communication strategies, no matter how error-prone the speech of the learners be, or how poor the learner's initial attempts at communication

Highlighting Strategies that are frequently used

It is common for the learners to choose to learn strategies that are quite frequent used. Learners for instance frequently use of "approximation" was witnessed. This in effect signifies that learners are most likely to choose "approximation" over other strategies and so, they need to be taught the nuances of "approximating", be it in terms of words, phrases or sentences. Similarly, 'literal-translation', 'syntactic blend', 'circumlocution', and 'paraphrasing' were used frequently, though not as frequently as 'approximation'.

In a multi-lingual country the use of 'literal-translation' is not only inevitable but rather frequent. The learner should be initially encouraged to attempt literal-translation that will lead eventually to increased fluency in the target language. The correct equivalent of the literal translation can then be supplied.

Similarly, interaction in the language classroom is expected to throw up frequent use of circumlocution, paraphrasing etc. grammar and vocabulary are learnt, unlearnt, modified etc. through the use of words and phrases that describe round about manner an idea or a concept or whatever the learners have understood from reading their textbook. As Zoltan Dornyei (1995:66) observes "circumlocution is often seen as the most important achievement strategy and most of the existing strategy-training activities focus on it. The ability to use fillers and hesitation devices plays an important role in helping a person to remain in the conversation and gain time to think....."

3. Highlighting Strategies that are Never Used

Students did not resort to the use of word-coinage, appeal for assistance, message replacement, borrowing etc. If some strategies are over-used and some under-used or never-used, the reasons are not far seen. The most plausible reason is of course that the learners are not aware of it. But it is equally possible that certain strategies are frowned upon as not the best way to learn language, code-switching, word-coinage and appeal for assistance being the cases in point. In many colleges the use of mother-tongue/L1 is banned in the second language classroom. This deprives the student of an opportunity to use L1 even judiciously in the classroom. Thus, 'code-switching' becomes the first casualty in training learners in the use of strategies. To pre-empt this, the teachers should be made aware of the usefulness of 'code-switching' as a strategy.

The same goes for 'word-coinage'. The learners are expected, at times forced, to know the right/correct word and use it appropriately. Approximation or the 'invention' of words is not acknowledged, let alone approved. This can eventually stilt the learner's ability to explore the language and use it in a variety of contexts. 'word-coinage' accelerates the process of language-learning as the learner comes to know that eventually, the words coined will have to

be replaced with the actual word. This is definitely better than avoiding interaction in the target language because of one's inability to summon the right word at the right time.

"Time-stalling devices" is another strategy that can come in useful for the learners. Students in the college paused a long time or attempted to communicate discontinuously. But there was little or no attempt to inject "common fillers and hesitation devices which come in handy when learners wish consciously to buy time (e.g. well, actually, as a matter of fact, the thing is how shall I put), as well as a set of ways to appeal for help (e.g. what do you call it/someone who...., what's the word for..)" (Z.Dornyei, 1995:64). This implies that the learners have not been taught the use of "time-stalling devices". Yet, this strategy proves useful to sustain conversation and keep it going even when one is lost for words. But the assumption going in each of the cases that has been described is that the learners are willing and eager 'conversationalists'/ shyness and a tendency to reticence, coupled with "limited linguistic resources" does not welcome strategy use or training. "Turn-giving", "turn-taking" and "topic manipulation" are all possible only with the learners' attitude to the business of communicating, a positive attitude being conducive to language learning.

There is enough potential to encourage strategy use and learners need to be exposed to various methods by which they may gradually and surely acquire fluency in a language that is widely and rightly regarded the lingua franca of the globe.

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