CHAPTER SEVEN

Teaching Communication and Learning Strategies

Introduction

One of the most negotiable issues in strategic competence research is the teachability of communication for language learners. This particular phase of strategy studies has suffered from many shortcomings and misinterpretations that posited the study of strategic competence in a position that has no value in regard to its impact on the learner’s learning behavior and performance. There are three assumptions which have dominated the literature of strategic behavior: the strategic competence is like intelligence or aptitude that we just can recognize but cannot modify, the strategic competence can be learnt and taught, and the strategic competence can be taught and learnt but through task-based activities (not in an abstract manner. This diversity in assumptions was created in the literature due to some factors.

Firstly, it is because of the lack of consensus on the nature of communication strategies. As a matter of fact, the diversity in the views towards the learner’s language has enriched the study of strategic competence and the ensuing results have led to reveal some issues in regard to understanding the language learner’s behavior and the underlying cognitive processes that have been the core of the language acquisition studies. In studies of language acquisition, researchers have admitted that
strategic competence is a reason behind the surpassing of some learners in achieving good results in language learning and the failure of others who undergo the same program. Bialystok (1978)\(^1\) was aware of that and declared

“It is always the case that some individuals are more successful than others in mastering the language, even though the language experience has in all cases been ostensibly identical.”

Thus, strategies seem to be the main reason but researchers still have contradictory views in the issue of teaching strategic competence. This contradiction centers on whether strategies are part of the learners’ cognitive system and thus strategies maintain themselves according to the proficiency in language or they are distinct entities of communications and learning that learners’ need to have experience in communication and learning situations to get an acceptable control over deploying them in their communicative and learning activities.

The second reason arose as a result of the difficulty in depicting a clear picture for the relation between communication strategies to learning strategies. That, in fact, is due to the isolation of studying the phenomenon of communication strategies from its right developmental sides. As a result of that isolation, those who considered communication strategies pure problem-solving processes could not see any relation between communication strategies and learning strategies. They limited the use of communication strategies to the existence of a communicative failure or breakdown in conveying the intended meaning; speaker or learner resorts to

communication strategy by any means available to him to avoid the breakdown of communication. Furthermore, learning strategies are mere techniques used to have a further progress in language attainment. In fact every individual has only one cognitive system that organizes the processes of learning and communication. What needed is the activation of this cognitive system to work on the specific task (either on a learning task or a communicative one).

Thirdly, it is due to mystifying relation between communication strategies and errors. Selinker (1972)\(^2\) has claimed that the errors, which are committed by the language learners, result from an application of communication strategies. Also, most of the researchers consider errors of language learners a normal process in terms of language development. So, in language acquisition literature errors suggest a sign of language development. This entails the use of a deviant language by a child or a language learner that is highlighted in terms of active learning. Thus, communication strategies are not excluded. But some of the researchers do not differentiate between these strategies and errors. According to Selinker, deviant language that is produced as a result of a successful application of communication strategy is not much different from deviances produced as a result of a failure of using communication strategy. So, it is worthwhile to differentiate between communication strategy and communication failure. Otherwise, teaching communication strategies will not be more than the way of teaching learners how to use deviant language rather than using alternative means of expressing the same idea. Henceforth, A communication strategy is almost a

good language (target-like structure) not completely deviant one, in the sense that it gives almost a similar meaning with, sometimes, unconventional alternatives. In addition, it can be considered, a trial (hypothesis testing) from the learner to convey unknown term or structure, which he is not sure of, in the target language. It is used mainly to avoid committing errors or non-fluent communication. The negative aspect of communication strategy is when the learner avoids the whole topic or part of it. On the other hand errors, which can sometimes result from a failure of communication strategy, can be distinguished from communication strategy in that the used utterance besides violating the conventional rules of a language, does not convey the same meaning of the intended idea.

The learners who commit the fossilized errors often do not know that they produce a deviant language. Monitoring-related errors are common among learners who lack the experience in communication. The learners, who commit those errors, realize their errors as soon as they produce them or after sometime. Fossilized errors cannot, by any means, be considered communication strategies but the latter can be the result of a failure in applying the right communication strategies. This failure can be attributed to many factors either related to the learners or to the task.

The last and the most important reason, is whether strategic competence is transferable ability from the first language. The contradiction in views arose from the comparison between the strategies used in the first language and in the second language. The study that was conducted by Bongaerts and
Poulisse (1989)\(^3\) has showed that non-native speakers use the same strategies native speakers use. In fact this is not a convincing reason to abolish the need for teaching strategies due to the fact that not all students have the ability to transfer their experiences of learning and using their first language to learn and use the second language. Likewise, the ability to communicate in one’s mother tongue does not entail the ability to communicate in the foreign language where the strategies that are used to learn one’s first language relied mainly on a full and long term of exposure. Also producing and communicating in first language can be easier as it relies on concrete and wide resources rather than abstract and limited resources, as in the case of the foreign language communication. The type of feedback accompanying learning first language is different in quality and quantity from learning a foreign language. The most important difference is that the parents activate strategies that are used with learning the first language while in the situation of learning a foreign language teachers seem to just teach the language and they leave the matter of strategies to be tackled by the learners themselves.

However, there are still many issues which need to be explained in order to reach a clear perspective of the strategy phenomenon. These issues are summarized by McDonough (1999)

> “Many question remain unanswered. We do not have an adequate theory of strategic behavior to which all the results can be related. The relationship between strategy use and proficiency is very complicated: issues such as frequency and quality of strategy use do not bear a

simple linear relationship to achievement in a second language. The role of strategies as an explanation of learning contrasts with the conception of strategies as an aid to learning”\(^4\).

Also, in relation to the issue of strategy training, the conclusion, that has been arrived at by McDonough (1999) is that

“teaching strategies is not universally successful, but the latest research is showing that, in certain circumstances and modes, particularly when incorporated into teacher’s normal classroom behavior, and thus involving teacher training as well as learner training, success is demonstrable”\(^5\).

**Importance of teaching communication and learning strategies**

Teaching strategies is an essential activity and any language-learning program should equip the learners with all kinds of strategies that might enhance learning activities and language performance. The necessity of teaching strategies is based on the fact that language learners use different kinds of strategies in their language production and language learning. Those strategies are to some extent responsible for the progress in the language attainment and production. In her theoretical model of second language learning, Bialystok (1978)\(^6\) attributed the individual variations in achievement and differences in skill development to the extent to which various language learners use the learning strategies.

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5 McDonough, 13.
6 Bialystok, (1978) 82.
Chamot (1998) mentioned some of the reasons behind the importance of teaching learning strategies:

"the intent of learning strategies instruction is to help all students become better language learners. When students begin to understand their own learning processes and can exert some control over these processes, they tend to take more responsibility for their own learning. This self-knowledge and skill is regulating one's own learning is a characteristic of good learners."7

However, the matter of teaching strategy is still a controversial one. Here it is useful to have further information about the role of strategies in the educational system to identify the kind of intervention that is needed for the teaching of strategies.

**Continuity of learning and production**

A change in performance is not the only effect of using communication strategies or learning strategies. The other benefit that may surpass the quality of the performance is the continuity of production and learning. Learners who feel difficulty in comprehending the new knowledge may halt and reject the learning task. This is the expected behavior from the learners who have a poor strategic competence or do not activate it. This behavior is common among the beginner learners who keep silent for a long period and

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do not involve themselves in any kind of conversation since they are haunted with the feeling that they will produce erroneous language that will draw the attention of their instructors to their weaknesses. If they are stuck to such feelings those learners will never learn or at least learning will take a long time.

In this study the researcher faced a great difficulty in convincing the learners to participate in the study. They were afraid of speaking where each subject needed about five to ten minutes before speaking to be encouraged. Also the researcher explained to them how their speech would be necessary for this researcher to complete his study. In fact this fear is reasonable since the learners do not have any experience in speaking except casual talks with their teachers or fully planned ones in the classrooms. The greatest difficulty this researcher faced was with the subjects of the faculty of arts who were asked to speak spontaneously after writing the task in Arabic. It was very hard to convince the learners to tell the story in English and so that it could be recorded. They were asking questions about the research while they were seeking time for planning the task. That in fact frustrated the researcher and he had to cancel some of the sessions to avoid violating the conditions of the task.

**Success of oral production is the real motivation**

Although, planning and preparing a real topic task by the teacher seems very difficult, it is very important for language learner to do meaningful practice of language. In the same way, a learner who is involved in real communication has to address unexpected issues that he has never addressed
before or practised. So the use of communication strategies helps a lot in attaining a feeling of success that in turn can be a motivation for future learning. In addition, strategies will be a learning tool through which learners plan their learning and language use. Planning can be by recalling all the knowledge related to one’s communicative intention or needed by the learning activity.

**Strategic intervention and performance quality**

To highlight the importance of strategic competence it seems very important to show the effect of strategic competence on the quality of the learners’ performance i.e. whether the use of conscious strategies can yield a quality of language that surpasses the type of language produced without using any kind of strategies. It seems that the use of strategies is inevitable in normal language production. However, using some kinds of strategies consciously in producing a chunk of language may yield a better version of that chunk. This is always noticed in producing written language, where the writer plans, writes, revises, rewrites, revises again and produces the final draft. By no means, writing only one draft by the same person on the same topic will not result in better quality. Therefore, the use of strategies in producing language can improve its quality.

However the quality here is a relative feature, for example: language learners sometimes are liable to a linguistic deficiency or memory failure during the communication. So, they have two options: either to halt speaking or using other alternatives even if they are not conventional. This entails that the use of communication strategies to reveal the intended meanings in the
second language is by no means better than to keep silent or to produce fully erroneous and non-fluent language. The feeling of a complete failure will kill the self-confidence of the learner and may drive him to reject learning forever. On the contrary, the feeling of a success will call for a progress in learning process and will affect the quality of performance in future.

Types of strategies and good quality of performance

Accepting the idea that strategic intervention leads to improved performance from that of the non-strategic behavior, we have to explore what are the strategies that encourage the learners to produce a good quality of performance. In fact, it is not only a matter of ‘which’ but also a matter of ‘when’ and ‘how’ these strategies should be used. Therefore, the type of strategy and its proper use may assign whether the resulted performance is of a good quality or the opposite. If it fulfills the aim of its use then it will be considered a good quality performance, but if it does not then it will be a bad one. Only this may mark the difference between the two behaviors.

Reduction strategy may in some cases be considered necessary. The type of task necessitates the learner to resort to avoiding some details which learners cannot control. Taking a decision for that action requires the learner to take up in advance the main elements of the task that are needed to be available and the optional ones that will not affect the whole topic. This should be restricted to the situations where the fluency and correct language production is required or when misunderstanding is not tolerated. However, in some situations a learner finds himself tackling unnecessary details that are not required by the task. This is due to the learner’s active processing of
the semantic elements which can be guided by thinking in his mother tongue. In many cases, learners in this study indulged themselves in describing some details which did not add any new information “creative elements” to the story but (regardless of failure or success) generated more linguistic load on them which affected badly the fluency and the accuracy of their performance, such as in controlling the right tense and pronouns.

Therefore, teaching learners how to manage their tasks and how to maintain fluency of their speech we should focus on how to balance between the two types of strategies, achievement and reduction.

**Types of strategies that lead to learning**

Most of those strategies that are called achievement strategies are really hidden avoidance behaviors. Many educators do not recommend them if they do not lead to learning. My point here is that all strategies must have similar functions in terms of their role in maintaining language accuracy/fluency and language development. So, using any type of communication strategies by learners will not lead to learning unless they activate the use of learning strategies.

However, there are some types of communication strategies which are assumed to lead to upgrade the learners’ interlanguage. Faerch and Kasper (1983) explain when communication strategies can lead to learning and assign achievement strategies rather than reduction strategies which lead to language learning:
"A basic condition for communication strategies to have a potential learning effect is that they are governed by achievement rather than avoidance behavior. If learners avoid developing a plan and change the goal instead so that it can be reached by means of the communicative resources they already posses in their interlanguage, no hypothesis formation takes place and their interlanguage system remains unaffected (although the automatization of the system may hereby be increased in general due to practice similarly, if learners avoid using a particular interlanguage item because of uncertainty about its correctness (formal reduction), this clearly does not lead to automatization of the relevant item but again, possibly, to consolidation of some other aspect of the system"

Corder (1983) similarly suggests that learning can potentially occur when L2 learners use resource expansion strategies

"These are clearly success oriented though risk running strategies, if one wishes at this stage of the art to consider the pedagogical implications of studying communicative strategies, then clearly it is part of good language teaching to encourage resource expansion strategies and, as we have seen, successful strategies of communication may eventually lead to language learning"

If such hypothetical difference between achievement and avoidance strategies can be true then teaching language will maintain teaching the language learners how to deploy achievement strategies in their communication and discarding the use of avoidance strategies. As a matter of fact human behavior tends to avoid harmful and unpleasant situations and

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resort to a kind of strategy that gives him a secure feeling. It is right that learning process is not always pleasant and expects the learner to face the difficulties and overcome them; otherwise he will remain around the same point without attaining any kind of progress. However, in some situations learners need that secure and pleasant feeling for the purpose of maintaining high motivation level and self-confidence, which is essential for the learning process to keep going on. Avoidance strategies can afford those conditions. So all types of communication strategies, in my point of view, have their constructive role in the learning process.

**Principles of learning strategy training**

Based on strategy training research Oxford (1994)\(^\text{10}\) has suggested several principles on which any strategy training should be accounted for:

1. L2 strategy training should be based clearly on students' attitudes, beliefs, and stated needs.
2. Strategies should be chosen so that they mesh with and support each other and so that they fit the requirements of the language task, the learners' goals, and the learners' style of learning.
3. Training should, if possible, be integrated into regular L2 activities over a long period of time rather than taught as a separate, short intervention.
4. Students should have plenty of opportunities for strategy training during language classes.

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5. Strategy training should include explanations, handouts, activities, brainstorming, and materials for reference and home study.

6. Affective issues such as anxiety, motivation, beliefs, and interests -- all of which influence strategy choice -- should be directly addressed by L2 strategy training.

7. Strategy training should be explicit, overt, and relevant and should provide plenty of practice with varied L2 tasks involving authentic materials.

8. Strategy training should not be solely tied to the class at hand; it should provide strategies that are transferable to future language tasks beyond a given class.

9. Strategy training should be somewhat individualized, as different students prefer or need certain strategies for particular tasks.

10. Strategy training should provide students with a mechanism to evaluate their own progress and to evaluate the success of the training and the value of the strategies in multiple tasks.

Though these principles are subject to further investigation according to Oxford, they are very crucial to be deployed by any language learning training program, either in the area of communication or learning, to achieve the desired success.

**Teaching communication strategies**

Due to the fact that learners always deploy communication strategies whenever they realize that they cannot complete their tasks, teaching communication strategies does not entail only encouraging learners how to
maneuver to complete their task successfully but also to resort to a specific type of strategy. Taking into account when strategy use is harmful to the learning process, communication strategies should not be the shelter for not to learn but a shelter for protecting the learner from the feeling of failure. In other words, teaching the learners how to plan, how to carry out their communicative goals and providing them with wide resources are what any reasonable method should be based on.

In addition, teaching communication strategies should not be restricted to teach the learners only the type of strategies that are needed for using the various types of communicative situations as some scholars propose it. Teaching strategies need more than presenting specific types of strategies to be taught in an abstract manner but to be incorporated in the learners’ behavior by training them how and when to resort to a specific type of strategy.

So, any method of enhancing the learners’ strategic behavior should take into consideration all issues; otherwise we will find ourselves either teaching learners how to commit deviant language or to learn pieces of language that are required for using these strategies. Besides, we will not make a great deal of a change in the educational system and we will not have the great impact of strategic competence on teaching or learning practices. The success of any strategy instruction should be through supporting the learners with tools of planning, management and execution. Planning their learning, managing their ideas and verbalizing them without being afraid of committing errors, always having in mind that no learning can take place without trials and errors. Learners should be guided when they have to conceal some of their
intentions, when they have to declare them, and how to express them and by which means. They need to have opportunities for speaking in the classroom with their peers and in groups. They have to learn how to control their oral production in interactive and in non-interactive activities. So teaching methods should rely on both oral and written practice to fulfill these aims. Teaching methods need to exploit the use of communication strategies to respond to them either spontaneously by helping in shaping the messages of the learners or to assign the teaching materials that will be based on the real linguistic needs of the learner.

As a matter of fact teachers have the most important role in stimulating the learners to follow a specific type of learning or communication strategy. So the teaching strategy, which is employed by the teachers, should be compatible with the type of strategies we intend to develop in the learners. The learners always are very sensitive to their teachers’ behavior. They try to respond according to their expectations. Teachers who expect their learners to memorize make them rely on memory strategies. Then the balance that is needed in strategy use will be violated. The teacher should present different types of tasks that encourage them to implement balanced strategic activities.

**How the English majors can benefit from strategy training**

Building an acceptable strategic competence can be achieved by changing the role of the teacher from being a source of language to that of a guide. Learners of Taiz University, as in most of the Arab countries, consider the teacher the source of information. This, in fact, makes the learner passive in
their learning. A condition for leaning to occur depends mainly on the learners’ activities rather than on teachers’ activities. The role of teacher is to discover the needs of the learner and to respond to their urgent ones in the classroom and to direct them to the proper resources of the target language and to advice them how to work on them through using the suitable types of strategies.

Having trained the learners in the ways of mastering the rules of learning management we can direct them to the learning autonomy. Teacher cannot be the only source of knowledge; if so then learners will not learn anything because the time assigned to the teacher is limited by the lesson time and in the remaining time learners will be occupied by recalling “rote learning” the linguistic items which have been presented by the teacher. Learners should learn many other skills as a perquisite for managing the knowledge to be apprehended by them. For example, learning new words requires the learner to learn how to get their meanings by seeking help either from teachers or look them up in the monolingual as well as bilingual dictionaries, guessing their meaning from the context, etc. all these skills are needed to be taught. In this study, it was found that some students resorted to a literal translation strategy but failed to give a similar meaning of their intentions. It is because of they are not skilled in using the bilingual dictionary. For example, the word ‘even’ and ‘until’ have only one word in Arabic; the student who was supposed to use ‘until’ used “even” instead.

Also, what is the use of knowing a large number of words if learners do not know how to use them in their real communication? Learners of level four, for example, have been exposed in the various courses to a number of
vocabulary items but in this study, they failed to recall some of them to complete the story telling task. This is expected because learners are programmed by the teaching system to be stimulated by some question in literature or linguistics evaluative tasks to produce only the type of language required for answering that question. Learners of Taiz University have been learning for six years in schools and they are now in the English department but they remain at the same level. This is because they have not been taught how to manage their learning and how to make maximum gain from the prescribed syllabus. Making a progress in the quality of teaching in the English Departments of Yemen necessitates a change in the role of the teacher and to give the learners a chance to be responsible for their learning. Furthermore, a serious training in learning and communication strategies also should accompany this.

However, all English departments in Yemen lack a detailed syllabus for teaching, except some very broad guidelines for courses. Teachers in the English departments in the Yemeni universities teach the courses according to their intuition. They prepare the syllabus and assign the content of the syllabus guided by the global aim and they teach accordingly. Therefore, a deliberate and detailed syllabus is becoming a need in most of the English departments for the teachers to know what to teach. This syllabus should be built on a full knowledge of the reality of the level of the learners and the expectations that we have from them. It should be flexible to take into consideration the real needs of the learners in the classrooms and outside the classroom. It should be built to shape their behavior of learning performance by presenting the types of tasks that compel them to adopt various types of strategies of learning and communicating. In my opinion, strategic
competence should be the main element to account for in the syllabus due to its great impact on learning process.

Moreover, the number of the students in the English departments in Yemen is really a great challenge. The great number of the students necessitates an increase of the teaching staff and the teaching halls because teaching English is not like teaching any other theoretical subject. It is based on a lot of practical lessons that need suitable places for all the learners to get equal and enough chances of practice. A group should not exceed twenty students; otherwise the practice sessions will not be possible. Furthermore, we have to take into consideration that the students do not practice English outside the classroom (for the reasons mentioned in chapter one). Strategy use can have some effect on softening the problem to some extent, encouraging the learners to work on communicative task as a compulsory activity outside the classroom and then to be presented in a discussion group. The students should be encouraged to look for the material by themselves from a well-prepared library for such activities. These and many other activities can keep the learners in a good position to activate their strategic competence.