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## EXAMINING COMMUNICATION STRATEGY USE IN THE ELCS LAB: A STUDY

JAIPAL<sup>1</sup>, M. R. VISHWANATHAN<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research scholar, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences  
National Institute of Technology, Warangal

<sup>2</sup>Assistant professor of English, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences  
National Institute of Technology, Warangal



JAIPAL



Dr. M. R. VISHWANATHAN

### ABSTRACT

In the context of the growing popularity of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and the attendant emphasis on speaking skills, this study focussed on the use of communication strategies – a sub category of learner strategies- in the English Language Communication Skills (ELCS) lab. The study identified the use of communication strategies by students in the undergraduate English language lab, where students of engineering are provided with a platform to hone their spoken English skills. The study looked at the frequency and kind of communication strategy use.

Data for the study was collected from three engineering colleges in Warangal district, Telangana state including National Institute of Technology, Warangal. Recordings, classroom observations, interviews with teachers, student questionnaires and informal interaction with students comprised mode(s) of data collection.

The findings of the study confirmed that communication strategies are used both by fluent speakers and “poor” speakers. The study shows that strategy use by students poor in communication is severely restricted on account of their limited use of the target language. Further, it emerged that users who were keen to improve their fluency were using achievement strategies while those who did not evince keen interest or were diffident used reduction strategies.

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### INTRODUCTION

The present study is concerned with examining communication strategy use in ELCS lab. The emphasis on spoken English in recent times following the arrival of CLT to the Indian language curriculum and the subsequent importance accorded to communication strategies, informed the study.

In a multilingual country like India, where English is learnt and used as a second language and where the necessity of developing communicative competence in English is gaining ground,

communication strategies play a vital role as promoters of communication.

Following NASSCOM's repeated observations on and complaints about the low levels of employability of engineering graduates because of poor communication skills in English, the erstwhile government of united AP decided to introduce English language lab in engineering curriculum. Speaking, which until then was either ignored or only paid scant attention, suddenly shot into the limelight and Group Discussions (GD), debates, self-introduction, Just a Minute (JAM) became the rage in language lab, with teachers

trying hard to get students to speak some English, in the belief that this would help them clear interviews and exonerate their role as committed teachers!

It was in such a context that the idea of exploring the use of strategies was contemplated. Communication strategies which form a sub category of learner strategies are invoked in the context of oral communication. The term '*communication strategy*' was coined for the first time by Larry Selinker in his seminal paper in 1972 on *Interlanguage*. He described the structured system that an L2 learner possesses at any given point of time, which partakes of some of the characteristics of the linguistic system of his L1 and the target language but is different from both.

*Interlanguage theory* posits that:

1. At any given point of time the approximate system is distinct from both L1 and L2.
2. The approximative systems form an evolving series.
3. That in any given contact situation, the approximative systems of learners at the same stage of proficiency roughly coincide (Nemser, 1971; as cited in Rod Ellis, 1987, p.47).

The errors obtained in a learner's repertoire have a specific pattern and appeared to belong to a particular category, lending strength to Selinker's hypothesis that such stages could be detected in a learner's route to acquiring proficiency.

These strategies have been classified further into *achievement* and *reduction* strategies depending on their contribution or non-contribution, respectively to achieving fluency in the spoken language; *topic avoidance*, *message abandonment* and *meaning replacement* figure in the latter category while *code switching*, *paraphrasing*, *word coinage*, *literal translation*, *restructuring* and *cooperating with peers* are labelled as *achievement strategies*.

#### The study

In particular, the study looked at the strategies of communication engineering students use when communicating. Three engineering colleges were chosen for the study – colleges which reported active speaking sessions in ELCS lab. The

idea was to record what had been observed and to recommend strategy training.

Data for the study was generated through classroom observation, informal talk with learners, teacher interviews, student questionnaires, and recordings. Informal talk with learners centred on student awareness of the importance of English and their attitude to learning English.

The questionnaire focussed on the following aspects:

1. The sources that a student used to improve their spoken English;
2. The persons they used English to communicate with;
3. The ways and means they used to achieve fluency in the target language.

A pilot study was conducted followed by the main study. The pilot study having supplied enough hints about strategy use by learners, the main study was undertaken. Students were asked to choose any topic they wished to speak on or choose from the topics- APJ Kalam, Mother Teresa, Shah Rukh Khan, Mahendrasingh Dhoni or Sachin Tendulkar - the researcher had with him. Students could thus choose to speak on eminent men and women or choose their own topic. The time limit was 5 minutes though students were encouraged to go beyond the stipulated time if they were enthusiastic enough to continue. The learners chosen for the activity spoke into a recorder brought for the purpose and 112 students chose topics supplied by the researcher while only 8 spoke on a topic of their choice.

Questionnaires were distributed to students after explaining the purpose of administering it and assurances were given to students that the data will not be used for purposes other than research and that the identity of participants will not be revealed.

Classroom observation was supplemented by informal talk with teacher and learners. The answers were not recorded following a request that it not be done. Notes were taken. The informal talk with the teacher centred on teacher awareness of communication strategies, the methods teachers employed to test students on speaking skills, while students were asked questions pertaining to the

importance of English for them, their attitude to learning English, time spent in improving their spoken English etc.

The recorded data was transcribed for detailed analysis and interpretation. Analysis involved identifying the strategies used, type and frequency of strategies used, absence of certain strategies and reasons for their absence etc.

Data analysis revealed that there was extensive strategy use where there were attempts to speak by the learners while very few strategies were on display when the learners did little to speak or never spoke. In all three colleges, students spoke though their speech was halting, too brief and often a medley of incoherent sentences. The analysis further revealed that they used the following strategies:

- Approximation
- Over generalisation of target language rules
- Literal translation
- Message abandonment
- Paraphrase
- Topic avoidance
- Hesitation devices
- Pauses
- Fillers

The strategies in use were in line with the typology identified by Faerch & Kasper (1984). Strategy use tells us that there is bound to be some strategy use whenever attempts are made to communicate and the nature, frequency and type of strategy use is governed by the proficiency levels of the learner in English. While achievement strategies where a learner tries to cope with communication breakdowns by trying to keep the channels of communication going lead to fluency, reduction strategies, such as topic avoidance and pauses stint any attempts at acquiring language. The more proficient a learner, the better his /her use of *achievement strategies* and vice versa.

Based on the analysis of strategy use by the students, the following recommendations are made to help learners cope with spoken language and enhance their ability to speak the language with ease.

The following suggestions are offered to help learners cope with communication breakdowns in the target language:

**1. Raise awareness about the usefulness of communication strategies:** Raising both teachers' and learners' awareness to the potential benefits of strategy use will help them achieve communicative competence. For a long time, speaking as a skill played second fiddle to other skills and thus little importance was devoted to enhancing the oral communication skills of students. The best way to start out is to bring about awareness of the strategies already in learners' system and alert them to their use and usefulness.

For instance, the learner who used *approximation* to arrive at meaning could then be made aware of how he/she can move from *approximation* to *paraphrasing* and *appeal for assistance*, etc. Learners would be keen to use strategies they have a predilection for but didn't know they were strategies. Sufficient motivation and practice are necessary to enable learners to make use of these strategies from time to time (Vishwanathan, 2003).

**2. Encourage risk-taking among learners :** Familiarising learners with strategies is not enough to motivate them. The teacher must see to it that the learners are rid of diffidence or fear of loss of face before they are encouraged to open up.

Factors such as attitude, aptitude, personality, motivation, socio-economic background, etc. play a pivotal role in training. Learners must realise that mistakes are a part of the learning process and that mistakes are inevitable when acquiring language. Teachers must therefore encourage risk taking among learners (Vishwanathan, 2003).

**3. Bring to light frequently used strategies:** One sure way to get learners to use strategies as frequently as they can is to highlight those strategies that they had often used. In all three engineering colleges, for instance, learners used *pauses* and *repetition devices* all too often. This signifies that learners are most likely to use this strategy if and when they can. To offset this tendency, the teacher can teach several ways of dispensing with *pauses* and using *code switching* or *approximation* instead.

Another strategy that can be taught to learners is *literal translation* since in a multilingual country like India, this is inevitable. To start with, learners can be taught this strategy while its use can be gradually abandoned once fluency is attained.

Other strategies like *over generalisation* can also come into play as long as they don't interfere seriously with meaning making (Vishwanathan, 2003).

#### 4. Provide opportunities for practice in strategy use

Opportunities must be made available to learners to practise strategies in the classroom. Grenfell and Harris (1999) identify six stages in the cycle of strategy training which figure below:

1. Awareness raising
2. Modelling
3. General practice
4. Action planning
5. Focussed practice and fading out the reminders
6. Evaluating strategy (1999, p.98)

Tasks/activities may be designed by the teacher to facilitate communication among learners. These could range from 'topic description' where learners are given a simple topic to speak on, or role play where one learner initiates and the other responds, keeping interaction alive thus. This can be recorded on a webcam and played back to them as feedback. Based on the frequency of strategies observed, those strategies can be taught that are not often used while frequently used strategies can be modified or refined to enable learners to move from proficiency to still more proficiency.

#### 5. Teach communication strategies directly:

Learners should be taught certain "basic core vocabulary and sentence structure" (Dornyei, 1995, p.64) which will greatly help them cope well with any temporary difficulties in communication. It is along the lines of survival phrases and words that tourists use to get by in a foreign land. For example, they need to memorise certain basic structures such as: "it is a kind of/sort of ..., the thing you use for... , it's what you .... it's something you do/say... etc." (Dornyei and Thurell, 1992) to indulge in circumlocution and keep the conversation going. Pauses, fillers and hesitation devices such as "well...I am not sure.... but... , You know, this is what I am

trying to say....., let me explain....., What I meant was...", "like..... Can you explain this again? - are some of the means learners can adopt to appeal for help, assistance, seeking or giving clarification, etc.

#### Conclusion

This study attempted to explore some of the avenues that may be made available to researchers and teachers in the area of communication strategies and strategy training.

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