

Approaches to language in the classroom context. Communication Strategies

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Abstract

In this article we point out that students of English as a second language might use several communication strategies in order to express themselves and being understood by the teacher and other learners when they are in a classroom context. Each student learns differently from the rest. We are going to have an overview of the main approaches to language and some communication strategies according to several authors: Bialstok, Tarone, Skehan, Richards, Swain, Selinker or Schmidt among others.

Keywords: Communication Strategies, English, Language

Título: Diferentes enfoques de aprendizaje de la lengua en el aula. Estrategias de comunicación.

Resumen

En este artículo resaltamos que los estudiantes de inglés como segunda lengua o como lengua extranjera pueden utilizar varias estrategias de comunicación para expresarse y ser comprendidos por el profesor y por los otros estudiantes cuando están en un contexto de aula. Cada estudiante aprende de manera diferente del resto. Vamos a tener una visión general de los principales enfoques del lenguaje y algunas estrategias de comunicación según varios autores: Bialstok, Tarone, Skehan, Richards, Swain, Selinker o Schmidt entre otros.

Palabras clave: Estrategias de comunicación, Inglés, Lenguaje.

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1.- INTRODUCTION

Students of English as a second language might use several communication strategies in order to express themselves and being understood by the teacher and other learners when they are in a classroom context. Each student learns differently from the rest. We are going to have an overview of the main approaches to language and some communication strategies according to several authors.

2.- DIFFERENT AUTHORS' IDEAS

2.1.- Bialstok

The main features of these communication strategies for Bialstok (1990) are those of problemacy, consciousness and intentionality.

The idea behind problemacy is that communication strategies are used when the speaker perceives that there is a problem that may cause a breakdown in communication.

These strategies are conscious events of language use, and the speaker controls several of them which deliberately uses in some determined situations, in order to get communication fluent.

2.2.- Tarone

Following the classification of *Tarone* (Tarone's taxonomy 1980) we can highlight the following communication strategies to be used by students:

- The use of “*prefabricated patterns*” with survival purposes, just to start talking when the student does not know how to do it, to break the ice. The student possibly does not know the morphological components of the expressions he uses.
- The student sometimes resorts to the first language L1, especially when he does not know what to say or when he is not sure if he is doing it correctly. Sometimes there is a language or code switch and the student uses Spanish instead of English. He is consciously transferring a feature of the first language L1 to the second language L2.
- Students sometimes use non linguistic signals as mime or gesturing when they do not know how to continue with the speech.
- Another possibility is the “topic avoidance”, when students talk about something different than what they are expected to talk, because they consider it is easier than the official topic.
- Students might appeal for the assistance or help of the interviewer, when they do not know how to continue.
- Paraphrasing is another option, sometimes when they do not know how to pronounce correctly a word or they do not know the specific word for something.
- Sometimes a word coinage appears, when students invent new words that do not exist.
- Another communication strategy used is the literal translation from L1, although most of the times is not correct.
- Finally, students might use time-gaining strategies, talking around a subject using repetition of some words and also hesitating and pausing too much.

2.3.-Skehan and the interlanguage phenomena

Following **Skehan** ideas (1998), we can make a differentiation between two types of language, existing when a student is learning English as a second language:

- *Creative language* is a rule-based type of language. (Chomsky 1965; Brown 1973; Burt; Dulay and Krashen 1982, Larsen-Freeman and Long 1991).

The “*rule based language*” is more analytic and creativity plays an important role, as much as linguistic rules, in which it is based

- *Formulaic language*, lexicalised language or *routines*. This language is not creative, but rather repetitive; it is not original and is not based on rules, but on memory processes. It is based on chunks of ready-made language, memorised as a whole and produced as single units, prefabricated language.

The formulaic language is based in *prefabricated patterns*, and is used as a *compensatory strategy* with communicative purposes (Byalistok 1992).

When learners lack grammatical competence these patterns may compensate and give time to think and plan later language. They might fill up embarrassing silences and also facilitate fluency and give confidence to the learner.

This formulaic language also acts as a learning strategy giving learners a sample of language which can later be analysed, contributing to produce creative language.

It may constitute a starting point for further analysis, giving learners the option of formulating and becoming aware of the rules behind the formulae.

The role of memory is important, until it becomes an automatic process through lexical knowledge.

As Skehan admitted: “*Language is much more lexical than is usually accepted, particularly when real-time processing is involved.*”

The use of this kind of language gives time for rule generation when needed.

There are two types of formulae:

- The routines or *close formulae*, which remains always the same without changing.
- The *open formulae*, that has open blanks to be filled by learners with different words of the same category.

The learner's language is based in both the *rule based language* and the *exemplar, formulaic or memorized based language*.

According to Skehan (1998) learners produce memorised chunks in order to have time to think about, process and produce more creative language.

2.4.- Richards

There are even more kinds of language strategies that students use in their learning. One of them is "*transfer*". According to **Richards** (1974), transfer is "*the use of elements from one language while speaking another.*" It might be positive or negative.

- The *Positive transfer* is the kind of transfer that facilitates learning and happens when there is a coincidence of elements between the first language L1 and the second language L2
- The *Negative transfer* refers to the use of a structure or element of the L1 that is not appropriate in the L2, thereby producing an error. Teachers should warn students of possible areas of negative transfer, to be aware of the gap between the target language and the learner's interlanguage. Students and teachers should consciously try to improve these specific errors while trying to acquire the second language L2. Negative transfer has to be seen as an occasion to improve, not only as a mistake. This is why it is important for students to be aware of the similarities and differences between the second language L2 and their mother tongue.

2.5.- Swain

The output hypothesis of **Swain** states that the most important element in the learning process is *comprehensible output*, and so *producing* is essential for acquisition. This view is opposite to Krashen, who states that producing the language is not necessary for acquisition.

- Output promotes *noticing*, being aware of the existing gap between what students want to say and what they actually can say. Producing the target language may prompt learners to consciously recognize some of their linguistic problems
- A second way in which producing language may serve the language learning process is through hypothesis testing. Producing output is one way of testing a hypothesis about comprehensibility or linguistic well-formedness.
- Thirdly, as learners reflect upon their own target language use, their output serves as metalinguistic function, enabling them to control and internalize linguistic knowledge. Feedback is really important. If students do not receive it they would not be aware of the mistakes and thus they would not try to correct them and they internalize some knowledge in a wrong way.

2.6.- Selinker

Selinker asserts that there is a process of rule formation and hypothesis testing, by which learners do not correct themselves if they do not see the errors, even if they exist, or if they receive positive feedback and are not aware of them.

This process has four stages:

- 1st stage: *Lexical stage* by which learners do not know systematic aspects of L2 and commit random errors.
- 2nd stage: *Emergence stage* by which there exist some rules different from L2 rules and overgeneralizations might occur.
- 3rd stage: *Systematic stage* by which rules are similar to L2 rules and learner is able to self correct.
- 4th stage: *Stabilization stage* by which the learner has no communication problem and he commits few errors.

2.7.- Schmidt

There has been a gradual move away from Second Language Acquisition theories that emphasized the subconscious nature of language learning towards theories in which consciousness plays a part.

Schmidt (1990) suggested that the role of consciousness in second Language Acquisition had traditionally been overlooked because of the influence of behaviorists who rejected it as an unreliable term, and because Freud and Chomsky were responsible for supporting the subconscious under any circumstances. Consciousness is problematic in SLA as it raises the issue of explicit and implicit knowledge, an area about which there is considerable disagreement.

- **Explicit knowledge** has been defined as “knowledge of rules and items that exist in an analysed form so that learners are able to report what they know”. (Ellis 1994: 702)
- **Implicit knowledge** is knowledge that is intuitive and tacit. It cannot be directly reported. Refers to unanalyzed chunks of language the learner may be able to produce and “generalized and abstract structures which have been internalized”

Krashen believed that learning is the result of a conscious process (explicit), and acquisition the result of a subconscious (implicit) one. There is no transfer from the learned system to the acquired one and he asserted that error correction and explicit teaching are not relevant to language acquisition.

Finally, Bialstok (1978) and Ellis (1994) claimed that these two different types of knowledge have access to and affect each other. This idea has also being explained in detail by Skehan in his Analysis-Control Model.

3.- CONCLUSIONS

In second language learning students learn differently and use diverse communication strategies. Each author has a different point of view about how this acquisition is made. We have considered several researchers and their specific theories to analyze how this learning process is being developed according to each one.

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