

Teaching communication strategies to beginners

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This article describes an eight-week project in which communication strategies were taught to beginners in German. Learners were instructed in a variety of: turn-taking phrases; requests for help, clarification and repetition; greetings and pause fillers. Information was gathered from questionnaires and audio recordings of pairs of learners collaborating on speaking tasks during classwork activities and during an oral test. The data analysis focused on the use of taught strategies in learners' speech and also on a number of other performance features which could have been indicative of strategic behaviour. The role of communication strategies outlined in the National Curriculum for modern foreign languages was also examined.

At the end of the project, it was concluded that a range of strategic phrases could be successfully taught to most learners, although their use might be dependent on task and context. It was also concluded that beginners employ various problem-solving skills to maintain spoken communication in a foreign language. Finally, it is suggested that a number of difficulties exist in reconciling the use of communication strategies with the existing National Curriculum model for progression in speaking.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper describes a project in which communication strategies (CS) were taught to a Year 7 German class in a comprehensive school and examines the range of beginners' responses to these strategies. The teaching of CS to beginners in secondary schools has not been widely researched, and attention has tended to focus more on proficient learners and, in particular, proficient learners of English as a foreign language. I believe that the use of strategies for communication in order to overcome difficulties in speaking could be significant for beginners. This study is therefore based on an exploration of the following questions:

- Can beginners be taught strategies for communication within the confines of the National Curriculum for modern foreign languages?
- Which strategies could be effectively employed by beginners?
- Are there any strategic tactics already inherent in the speech of beginners?

2. COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

It has long been argued in second language acquisition research that the 'good language learner' uses strategies, which could be of benefit to all learners if they were made accessible to them (see, for example, Rubin, 1975: 41-51). Strategies have subsequently been divided into 'learning strategies' and 'communication strategies'. Learning strategies are defined by O'Malley and Chamot (1990:1) as the 'special thoughts or behaviours that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn or retain new information'. Communication strategies, on the other hand, are employed in order to repair breakdowns in spoken communication and to improve the effectiveness of communication (see, for example, Canale, 1983: 10). O'Malley and Chamot also argue that learning strategies are used in order to promote learning, whereas communication strategies are used to promote communication. This study concentrates on communication strategies.

There appears to be widespread disagreement in the research literature about the exact nature of communication strategies. Many different labels are consequently used to describe the same or similar entities. There are two main strands to the debate. In the first, communication strategies are believed by researchers like Tarone (1981: 283-295) to serve an interactional function. She has attempted to place CS into categories including avoidance, paraphrase, conscious transfer, appeal for assistance and mime. In the second approach, communication strategies are seen as evidence of underlying mental processes (see Bialystok, 1990; Kellerman, 1991). As such they are difficult to categorize.

There are also arguments about the value of teaching CS to foreign language learners. It is thought by Kellerman (1991: 156) that learners develop strategic competence in their first language which they can then transfer to second

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language use. This means that there is no need specifically to teach communication strategies. However, more recently, in the context of MFL in this country, it has been suggested by Macaro (1997: 117) that strategy training could bring about an improvement in the self-esteem of low achievers and greater learner autonomy. This view is also supported by the work of Grenfell and Harris (1999: 73), who suggest that strategy instruction could give learners more of a sense of control over their own learning.

The range of communication strategies which can be employed by beginners is obviously limited; for example, it is difficult for learners with a restricted knowledge of the language to paraphrase. The most effective strategies would therefore appear to be those that allow beginners to initiate and maintain conversation. Wong-Fillmore (1979) emphasizes the importance of a set of social and cognitive strategies for beginners and advises: 'get some expressions you understand and start talking; make the most of what you've got; join a group and act as if you know what's going on' (quoted in Skehan, 1989: 75). It is further suggested by Dörnyei (1995: 57) that time-gaining strategies, such as pause fillers, can keep communication channels open in times of difficulty. The teaching of pause fillers is recommended by Grenfell and Harris (1999: 93), who additionally suggest that learners could be taught turn-taking phrases to help them find a way into a conversation and to encourage participation from peers.

These strategies could be very effective in helping beginners to get going and to initiate a certain degree of interaction. However, the teaching of CS would need to be supported. Phrases would have to be broken down and analysed in order to construct more creative speech.

This project was therefore based on the view that strategy training could be beneficial. It involved teaching learners a selection of turn-taking phrases; requests for help, clarification and repetition and pause fillers, in line with the suggestions highlighted above. It was also hoped to include any additional strategic phrases identified as useful by pupils.

3. COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES AND THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM

At its outset the National Curriculum for modern foreign languages supported and to some extent promoted a role for CS within the classroom. In the original proposals (DES, 1990), the contribution made by MFL to the whole school curriculum in bringing out the 'need for strategies for communication' was emphasized (p. 3). A section on comprehension and communication strategies and their role in complementing other

skills was also included in the original Programme of Study. It was additionally stated that 'repair strategies' were among the factors considered in the structure of Attainment Target 2 Speaking (DES, 1990: 19).

These proposals were subsequently diluted and condensed in Modern Foreign Languages in the National Curriculum (DFE, 1995), which no longer provided the same detailed rationale. The strategic position of MFL in the overall curriculum was not stressed. Attention appeared to focus on the steps of progression, highlighted in the Levels of Attainment, and on the opportunities for pupils to learn and use the target language outlined in the 40 statements of the Programme of Study Part 1. There seemed to be a lesser role for CS here, as only one of these statements referred directly to strategies, (3i – 'develop strategies for dealing with the unpredictable', p. 3). The promotion of communication strategies might have been judged an implicit component in a number of other statements, (2c – 'ask about meanings, seek clarification or repetition'; 2g – 'initiate and develop conversations'), but this was not particularly clear. The potential for MFL to bring out the use of communication strategies was not mentioned.

The absence of specific detail in the 1995 Programme of Study was partly remedied in the subsequent exemplification of the 40 statements in 'MFL in the National Curriculum – Managing the Programme of Study Part 1' (DFE, QCA, 1997) and also in the revised orders for the National Curriculum (DFEE, QCA, 1999), which promoted the development of key skills through the study of a modern foreign language. In the 1997 document a more significant role for strategies was highlighted in the concrete examples of tasks considered likely to enable students to fulfil the requirements of each PoS statement. Similarly, it is currently suggested (DFEE, QCA 1999:8) that the study of a modern foreign language plays a part in improving pupils' learning and performance 'through developing learning strategies such as memorising, dealing with the unpredictable and using reference materials'. A requirement to deal with the unpredictable again provides some impetus for the teaching of communication strategies.

Despite the fact that the current version of the National Curriculum makes reference to the place of MFL in the overall curriculum and specifically mentions its strategic role, I believe that in practice difficulties arise from the fact that the focus of most attention for pupils' learning is on the Levels of Attainment, rather than on the skills, processes and competences referred to by the National Curriculum. The model of progression in speaking outlined by the Levels of Attainment proposes that learners begin to speak a foreign language by

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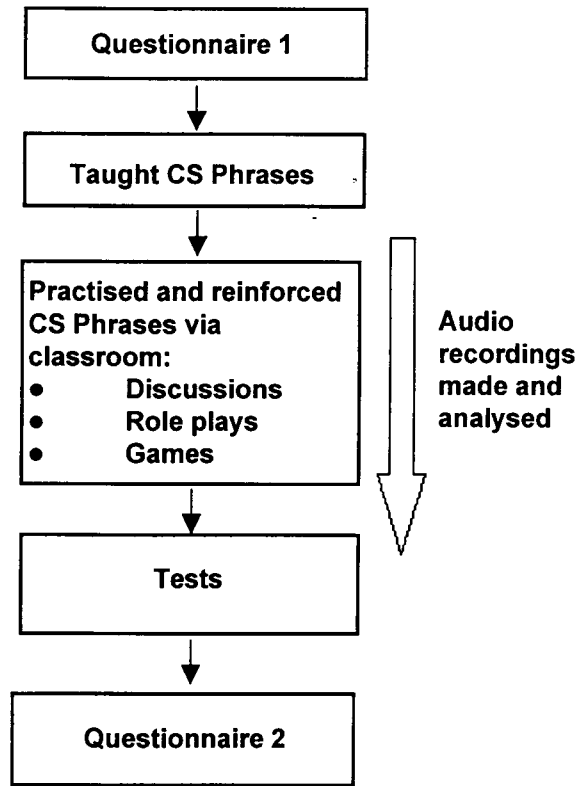
using the single words and short phrases referred to in Level 1, before moving on to the short simple responses and set phrases of Level 2. This framework makes it difficult to introduce CS to beginners in such a way as to allow them to be practised and applied. In fact, the ability to 'initiate and develop conversations; improvise and paraphrase' and 'deal with unprepared situations', is reserved for Levels 7 and 8 respectively (p. 41).

As previously stated, a certain amount of linguistic competence is required before learners can paraphrase, but the framework provided by the National Curriculum does not seem to acknowledge that an ability to cope with difficulty in communicating might be a relevant skill for beginners. Also, Levels 2, 3 and 4 with their 'set phrases, prepared tasks' and 'structured conversations' do not encourage spontaneous interaction, but concentrate rather on the regurgitation of memorized items. There is little emphasis in the level descriptions on developing interactive skills such as keeping talk going; moving from one topic to another; listening to the interlocutor and reacting to what they say. This model of progression has been questioned by Grenfell (1999:11) who states that the strands of progression remain embedded and that there is insufficient evidence to support the view that pupils learn languages in the manner suggested.

Concern has been expressed about the development of speaking skills in MFL inspection findings (Dobson, 1998: 6), where it is reported that pupils are unwilling to use the target language and that, despite a good start in Year 7, they make inadequate progress in both key stages. Examples of only modest progress in KS3 cited by Dobson are students' inability to answer questions with more than a single-word response, to deal with unexpected questions or to use classroom language spontaneously. I would suggest that at least part of the problem here is that pupils are not making use of strategic competence; that is, developing an ability to make use of a range of conversational tactics and planning to employ them in dialogues. In conclusion, rather than supporting and promoting the use of communication strategies, the focus of the National Curriculum seems to have discouraged the teaching of CS to beginners.

4. THE PROJECT

An eight-week project was undertaken to introduce learners to a selection of phrases in the hope that they would be utilized as communication strategies. The training took place in the autumn term of Year 7 with a mixed ability class of 29 pupils as outlined in the plan below:



In order to initiate this study, appropriate data collection procedures had to be identified. Questionnaires seemed likely to provide information that could be analysed and categorized reasonably effectively. Questionnaires have been used successfully in research on strategies before (see, for example, Dörnyei, 1995; Grenfell and Harris, 1999). A questionnaire was used at the start of the strategy instruction and another one at its completion so that the pupils had a chance to think about and comment on the tasks undertaken. It was also hoped to identify the strategies they were using. However, questionnaires alone seemed unlikely to provide sufficient detail on the strategies present in learners' speech. I therefore chose to make a series of audio recordings of learners interacting in pairs and to transcribe them, as this would provide an opportunity to examine their dialogues more closely.

Questionnaire 1 was given to pupils on completion of a pairwork speaking task with no prior discussion of strategies and it required them to reflect on the task in question:

Questionnaire 1

	1	2	3	4
1. Were you confident in tackling the game?	very unsure of myself	unsure of myself	confident	very confident
2. Did you take time to stop and think?	none at all	not enough	enough	a great deal
3. Did you know what to do?	only with difficulty	with a bit of difficulty	easily	very easily

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