Including Conversation Strategies in an English Communication Course

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Communicative language teaching is aimed at improving the learner's communicative competence. Strategic competence is an important component of communicative competence, and it is believed that communication strategies play an important role in the development of strategic competence, and therefore the development of a learner's overall communicative competence. Because this skill was not at that time a part of the first-year English Communication curriculum at Sojo University, strategies for English conversation were introduced as a new component of the curriculum. As students move through the course, they build towards speaking assessments where their ability to participate in a conversation with their peers is evaluated. Conversation strategies were chosen and taught in order to facilitate students' success in these assessments. This report introduces the rationale behind the inclusion of conversation strategies, which strategies were taught, what students thought about them, and finally, how this component of the curriculum fared during remote learning conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic. To better understand which strategies were the most helpful to our students and whether students felt strategies impacted their performance in the speaking assessments are the aims of this report.

コミュニカティブ・ランゲージ・ティーチングは、学習者のコミュニケーション能力の向上を目的としています。方略的能力はコミュニケーション能力の重要な構成要素で、コミュニケーションストラテジーは方略的能力の発達、ひいては学習者の総合的なコミュニケーション能力の発達に重要な役割を果たすと考えられています。崇城大学の１年生の英語コミュニケーションのカリキュラムには、このスキルは含まれていなかったため、英会話ストラテジーを新たに導入しました。学生は授業が進むにつれて、学生間での会話に参加する能力評価の英会話力テストに挑んでいきます。これらのテストにおける学生の成功を促進するための英会話ストラテジーを選択、指導しました。本報告書では、英会話ストラテジーを導入した理由、どのようなストラテジーを指導したか、それに対する学生の反応、そして最後に、コロナ渦における遠隔学習環境で、このカリキュラムの一要素がどのように機能したのかを紹介すると共に、学生にとって最も有効であったストラテジーは何であったか、そして学生自身が会話テストにおいて英会話ストラテジーが会話力に影響を与えたと感じているかについて理解を深めることを目的としています。

Introduction

The first-year English Communication curriculum at Sojo University focuses on natural and effective communication in English and employs the following objectives for the course:

- I can engage in simple conversations on topics that are familiar, of personal interest or pertinent to everyday life;
- I can initiate, maintain and close simple face-to-face conversations;
- I can select suitable words and phrases to sustain longer conversations on a range of topics; and,
- I can elicit details, ask for clarification and change topics in face-to-face conversations.

In order to address these goals, and to give students the best opportunity to meet them, the decision was made to incorporate conversation strategies as part of the curriculum. This

incorporation was done experimentally in some English Communication 1 and 2 classes. The following is a report on the reasoning behind the utilization of conversation strategies as part of the course, which strategies were chosen and how they were taught, how students responded to these materials, how these materials evolved over the course of two years and how they've been adjusted to remote learning amidst the COVID-19 restrictions, and finally, what the future plans are for these materials as part of the first-year English Communication curriculum.

Why conversation strategies?

Communicative language teaching is aimed at improving the learner's communicative competence. According to the theory presented by Canale and Swain (1980), strategic competence is an important component of communicative competence. So, how do conversation strategies fit into this paradigm? It is believed that communication strategies play an important role in the development of strategic competence (e.g., Faucette, 2001), and therefore the development of a learner's overall communicative competence. A communication, or conversation strategy is defined as "verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient competence" (Canale & Swain 1980, p. 30). Essentially, these strategies function as tools speakers can employ in order to get their meaning across as an interlocutor, especially when problems occur during communication. Strategic competence applies to first languages as well as second or foreign languages, but is especially helpful for the latter due to its problem-solving nature.

The teachability of these strategies is well documented by researchers such as Dornyei (1995), Dornyei and Thurrell (1991), Gorjian, B., & Habibi, P. (2015), Littlemore (2001), O'Malley (1987), Oxford (2001), Tarone (1984), all affirming the positives of utilizing conversation strategies in learning and teaching a second language. This research also suggests students enjoy the inclusion of conversation strategies as part of their second language learning and practice.

Despite its established importance in theory, strategic competence is often neglected by language course books and teachers (Dornyei & Thurell, 1991). This skill was also lacking in the first-year English Communication course curriculum at Sojo University. Therefore, a decision was made to make strategic competence a part of English Communication 1 and 2 by making conversation strategies lessons and materials available to teachers to use in their classes. Teachers were not required to include strategies as part of their courses, so not every first-year English Communication class used these materials. For the classes that did use these materials, conversation strategies were selected and taught alongside established course materials as a means of addressing this strategic competence gap. Students learned and practiced conversation strategies that they could then apply as needed during their speaking assessments. These assessments were comprised of a 10-minute conversation between three people that could cover any topic the students chose. The reasoning behind the inclusion of conversation strategies in English Communication 1 and 2 also includes that the spoken interaction component of both courses as specified in the syllabus where students are asked to "focus on communicating naturally and effectively in English" is addressed. Additionally, the conversation strategies address the fourth goal of the English Communication 2 syllabus which reads, "I can elicit details, ask for clarification and change topics in face-to-face conversations." Since teaching conversation strategies in the first-year curriculum was deemed both feasible and appropriate, they became an option for teachers to include amongst the tools given to students to improve their communicative competence.

What was taught and how

The following conversation strategies were chosen and taught in some first-year classes at Sojo University in 2019 in both semesters, or English Communication 1 and English Communication 2. The strategies themselves and the activities developed for students to practice them were inspired primarily by Conversations in Class (Azra, et al, 2015), amongst other resources. The following discussion presents the order that the strategies were taught in

the first and second semester classes. Students were encouraged to practice these strategies for the purpose of using them during their speaking assessments as well as during any English conversations they might have in class or with English teachers on campus.

The first of these strategies was "Reacting." This strategy consists of a series of expressions that help a speaker show interest in what their partner is saying. They were divided into three categories: reactions to positive information, such as "Wow!" "Great!" "Cool"; reactions to negative information, such as "Too bad" and "I'm sorry to hear that"; and finally, reactions to neutral information such as "I see", "Oh, really?", and "Oh yeah?". Students were encouraged to employ these phrases in order to be more active participants in their conversations.

The next strategy introduced was "Echo Questions." An echo question is when someone repeats a part of their partners last utterance in the form of a question. Echo Questions are a kind of reaction that can be used to show interest, actively listen, and to give yourself time to think before giving a response. This strategy was taught in tandem with "Reactions".

After "Reactions" and "Echo Questions" came "Follow-up Questions." Follow-up questions are questions asked in response to a short answer in an effort to elicit more details from the other speaker. Students were taught to construct follow-up questions using WH-questions. Students developed their own follow-up questions for the topic of discussion and practiced using them in pairs.

The idea of eliciting more details from your speaking partner was explored further with the strategy "Getting More Details." This strategy involves follow-up questions as well as other phrases, such as "For example?" and "Like what?" in order to give students tools to respond to a short or vague answer. The justification for the use of this strategy, aside from simply being able to speak more which served the purpose of aiding them in their assessments, was to introduce the idea that asking your speaking partner for more information shows that you are interested in what they are saying and that you therefore come across as generally more friendly and engaging.

The next strategy introduced phrases one can use when time is needed to think of a response. This strategy was referred to as "Giving yourself time to think." In order to fill the silence between when being asked a question and when giving an answer, students were encouraged to use sounds and phrases such as "Um...", "Well...", "Let me see...", and "Let me think...". Students were alerted to the idea that they often employ this strategy in their native language without even thinking and that doing so in English would not only help them navigate silence more effectively, but also sound more natural.

What followed next was the strategy "Talking about Yourself." Students were encouraged to lengthen their responses by adding one or two extra pieces of information to their answers. In order to practice this, students would think of implicit questions to answer and include that information in response to a given question without being asked for the information directly.

Students were also introduced to a strategy to use when they did not have an answer or opinion yet about a question they were asked. This was referred to as "When you don't know, say so". Students were given phrases to use such as "I'm not sure," "I don't (really) know," and "It depends on...," so that they wouldn't be stuck if they didn't have anything pertinent to say on the matter.

Finally, students learned about "Transitions/Changing Topics." During a semester, the topics students would practice discussing were determined by the teacher. For this reason, individual students weren't always personally interested in the conversation topics. Therefore, students were taught some words and phrases that could help them transition into a new topic of conversation smoothly without sounding too harsh and abrupt. Some of these phrases included "Speaking of...," "By the way," "How about...?", and "Oh, that reminds me...".

Students were not required to use any of these strategies during their assessed speaking tasks. These strategies were presented to students as tools they would have in their arsenal to navigate their English conversations more fluently and effectively.

Student Reflections

But what did students actually think about these strategies they were introduced to? At the end of the 2019-2020 academic year, the first-year students who were taught conversation strategies as part of their courses were given a survey to gather their thoughts and opinions regarding the strategies themselves and the impact it had on their speaking abilities. 87 students from various departments responded to this survey.

Students were asked to rate each individual strategy's usefulness on a scale from 1 (not useful at all) to 5 (very useful). Among the eight strategies covered during the year, "Follow-up Questions" and "When you don't know, say so" received the highest rating of 5 from the most students. 35.2% of respondents rated "Follow-up Questions" a 5, with another 35.2% giving a rating of 4. Similarly, for "When you don't know, says so," 34.1% of respondents rated the strategy a 5 while the same percentage rated it a 4. The rest of the strategies were not far behind with high percentages in between 3 and 4 and slightly smaller percentages rating them a 5.

In addition to rating each individual strategy for usefulness, students were also asked to rate and respond to the following three prompts from 1 (disagree) to 5 (agree):

- Learning different strategies has helped me improve my conversation ability
- I think conversation strategies for other languages are interesting to learn
- I think learning conversation strategies is useful

For the first prompt, 84 reported a rating of between 3 and 5. That is 96.5% of respondents. 22 respondents, or 25.3%, reported a 5 specifically indicating strong agreement. This tells us that a majority of students agreed to some extent that learning different conversation strategies helped improve their English conversation abilities.

The responses to the second prompt were similar to the first. 86 respondents, or 97.8%, gave a response of between 3 and 5 to this prompt. 21, or 23.9%, reported a 5 specifically. Students were less confident in their complete agreement to the statement that conversation strategies from other languages are interesting to learn, but the general agreement indicates that there's not a complete lack of interest from students on the matter. Some comments elucidating their reasoning behind their rating included that learning conversation strategies was interesting because they became aware of some cultural differences between speech in Japanese and speech in English. Also, students reported that they were interested in strategies because it increased the amount of speech they could produce.

Finally, 87 respondents, or 98.5%, gave a rating of between 3 and 5 for level of agreement to the prompt that learning conversation strategies is useful. 22 students, or 25%, reported a rating of 5 specifically. Students were generally in agreement that learning conversation strategies is useful for improving their speaking abilities. When given the opportunity to explain why they gave their rating, many comments centered around two main ideas: that English is important for me/my future and these (strategies) will help, and they (strategies) helped improve my communication skills.

Conversation strategies & Remote Learning

The first-year curriculum situation changed quite dramatically following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Classes were adapted to online only. Students had very little experience interacting with class content online without the physical presence of a teacher to help troubleshoot issues and problems as they arose. The content of the curriculum moved temporarily from a communicative focus to a skills-based focus. For that academic year, 2020-2021, conversation strategies were included in the curriculum only as theoretical activities that students could access independently and remotely. In point of view of the teachers, there was little opportunity and motivation to pursue spoken practice with the strategies as students did not do speaking assessments at that time. This was due to the changed nature of assessment from spoken to written.

After a year of experience conducting classes fully online in the first semester and then partially online in the second, first-year teachers of English Communication at Sojo University felt confident in moving back to a communicative curriculum in a half face-to-face, half online learning environment. During the 2021-2022 academic year, conversation strategies have fully returned to the curriculum as they were originally intended, as a component of the course content that students learn, practice, and then implement in their speaking assessments.

Future Applications

As conversation strategies continue to be implemented as part of the first-year curriculum, exploratory research is currently being conducted to feed into more in-depth research in the 2022-2023 academic year. Materials collected and analysed from 2021-2022 will serve to provide insight into the content and design of current conversation strategies materials used in first-year English Communication courses. Results from data collected at this time, including another student-response survey, an analysis of strategy usage in speaking assessments, and collecting of materials produced by students using the conversation strategies taught, will also contribute to the design of more complex and in-depth research to be conducted in English Communication 1 and 2 in 2022-23. Currently proposed research questions to pursue at that time include: Does producing material using a conversation strategy help students use that strategy in a speaking assessment?

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