Integrating Learning Strategies for Oral Communication in EFL Classrooms in China

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Abstract
Learners’ speaking strategies, as part of language learning strategies, are usually referred to as communication strategies (CS). With the purpose of improving learners’ oral communication skills, raising learners’ awareness of using CS and facilitating their use of specific CS in oral communication, this paper integrates learning strategies for oral communication in EFL classrooms in China. In this paper, a one-hour oral English lesson is designed by incorporating a top-down model of strategy-based instruction, and the principles and procedures of this lesson is also clarified.

Key words: Learning strategies; Communication strategies; Oral communication; Lesson design

INTRODUCTION
The term “language learning strategies” (LLS) is a broad concept with different definitions. Cohen (2003, p. 280) defines LLS as “the conscious or semi-concious thoughts and behaviours adopted by language learners with an explicit goal of improving their knowledge and understanding of the target language”. Oxford (1990, p. 8) describes it as “the specific actions taken by language learners to make learning faster, easier, more effective, more self-directed, more transferable and more enjoyable to new situations”. Chamot (1987, p. 71) regards learning strategies as “the approaches, techniques or deliberate actions that language learners employ in order to facilitate the learning, recall of both linguistic and content area information”. Apart from various definitions, there are also different classifications of LLS. O’Malley and Chamot (1990) put forward a classification of three types of LLS: metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies and social-affective strategies. This schema is based on the functional aspect of learning strategies and has been the most widely used for LLS classification. Oxford (2011) developed a Strategic Self-Regulation Model of language learning including three strategies (i.e. cognitive strategies, affective strategies and sociocultural-interactive strategies) and three meta-strategies which help learners to control and manage the use of strategies in sociocultural context.

Learners’ speaking strategies, as part of LLS, are usually referred to as communication strategies (CS). CS research has drawn scholars’ attention in different fields since 1970s. From the interactional perspective, Faerch and Kasper (1983, p. 81) give a broad definition of CS as “the potentially conscious plans for learners to solve a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal”. They insist that with the purpose of settling a communicative problem, learners are not only able to cooperate with their interlocutors but also figure out a solution without cooperative assistance. Based on their description, CS can be categorised into achievement strategies and reduction strategies. Achievement strategies comprise compensatory strategies and retrieval strategies, while reduction strategies consist of formal reduction strategies and function reduction strategies. Some scholars did research on learners’ use of CS for negotiating of meaning in L2 classroom interaction. Foster (1998) investigated the learning effects of CS for negotiation...
of meaning in four classroom tasks. He concluded that dyad task requiring information exchange was the most effective for promoting negotiation of meaning and modifying output between interlocutors. William, Inscoe and Tasker (1997) studied the strategic behavior for enhancing mutual comprehension and maintaining discourse in actual classroom. They found that the nature of tasks and roles that participants play in tasks could affect the frequency of interlocutors’ negotiation of meaning. The studies showed that CS for negotiation of meaning had a positive effect on language learning and L2 development. Other researchers carried out research on strategy instruction in CS. Nakatani (2005) discussed metacognitive instruction for CS between a strategy-based instruction group and a comparison group. The result showed that participants in the former group enhanced their oral proficiency significantly while the latter group didn’t make obvious improvement. It indicated that successful learners usually have an increased awareness of CS and know how to use them effectively. Yang and Gai (2010) conducted a study on 89 Chinese learners’ CS in a Chinese university and investigated their attitudes towards CS and the frequency of using CS in the EFL classroom. The results showed that CS had direct effects on learners’ communicative competence. Among different CS, reduction strategies are the most frequently used by Chinese students while achievement strategies are the least frequently used, and they also put forward some suggestions for strategy instruction in CS. Recent studies of strategy instruction indicated that instruction in CS use, especially the use of metacognitive strategies and awareness-raising could produce positive outcomes. It was helpful to teach learners how to plan, monitor and evaluate their use of CS since many of them might not be equipped with the extensive knowledge about how to control their use of CS (Nakatani & Goh, 2007).

1. STUDY OBJECTIVE

This paper focuses on the integration of learning strategies for oral communication in EFL classrooms in China. This paper aims to design a one-hour lesson for a class of Chinese English learners with intermediate level of English speaking skills. With the further progress of globalisation, educational cooperation and intercultural exchanges between China and the West are getting increasingly closer. When students are studying abroad or travelling overseas, they might encounter problems about how to seek help and enquire information effectively in various situations like participating in a group discussion, asking people for directions, making an appointment with others, etc. Thus, the language aim for this lesson is to improve learners’ oral communication skills while seeking help and information. Sometimes, when students come across oral communication difficulties, they have no idea about how to negotiate meaning with interlocutors by using certain CS. In this case, the learning strategy aim in this lesson is to raise learners’ awareness of using CS for negotiation of meaning and facilitate their use of specific CS in intercultural communication in sociocultural contexts. With the purpose of integrating both the language aim and learner strategy aim into lesson, a series of classroom activities are designed for this one-hour oral English lesson.

2. LESSON DESIGN

In this lesson, a top-down model of strategy-based instruction developed by Chamot et al. (1990) is adopted to instruct CS for negotiation of meaning in five stages including preparation, presentation, practice, evaluation and expansion.

2.1 The First Stage of Preparation

In the first part of preparation (10 minutes), the teacher will help students to raise awareness of the CS they are already using in seeking help or information and lead them to think about their strategy learning process. Therefore, a class discussion will be initiated about what kind of CS students use for negotiation of meaning in different conversational contexts. Students are required to describe their learning and use of CS for negotiation of meaning in authentic situations combining their background knowledge and previous experience. The teacher will make a list of students’ contributions and identify each of the CS. In this preparation phase, students engaged in class discussion are prone to realise the variety of CS employed by other classmates and are motivated to try out new CS (Rubin et al., 2007).

2.2 The Second Stage of Presentation

The second part is presentation (15 minutes). In this step, the teacher will present and model how CS for negotiation of meaning are used in conversational tasks between native speakers and non-native speakers of English. Learners’ strategies for negotiation of meaning can be divided into comprehension checks, confirmation checks and clarification requests (Long, 1983). Comprehension checks are used when the interlocutor attempts to make sure whether the partner comprehends the preceding utterance or not. Confirmation checks are adopted by the interlocutor to confirm whether the heard or understood utterance is correct or not. Clarification requests are employed when the interlocutor requests for further explanation, clarification or repetition to solve some comprehension problems. Learners can receive comprehensible input and modify their output by applying these CS for negotiation of meaning. In order to help students understand how to use these CS in oral communication accurately, the think-aloud technique for modelling will be employed by the teacher to share the thinking process of using CS. By this means, students can figure out what CS it is and why, when and how to use
it (Chamot, 2009). After the teacher’s presentation and modelling of specific CS, students are asked to articulate the CS the teacher employed in strategy learning tasks for different communicative goals. In order to help students become more conscious of their own thinking and learning process of using CS, the teacher will ask students to think of an example or imagine a scenario in which these CS have been or can be used to promote oral communication while seeking help and information.

2.3 The Third Stage of Practice

The third part of practice is the core of the lesson (20 minutes). In this phase, multiple opportunities should be given to practice students’ learning strategies for negotiation of meaning in oral communication. Therefore, role-playing in pair based on scenario cards is designed as an effective activity to achieve both the language aim and learning strategy aim. In classroom strategy instruction, role-playing provides students with an imagined community to facilitate their oral communication skills in English conversational discourse. In role-playing, students are exposed to a specific situation they might encounter when studying and travelling in NZ, and they are supposed to employ some new CS the teacher has presented and modelled before to negotiate meaning in a given conversational task. Hiller (2010) considers that role-playing is a useful and promising tool for the development of students’ intercultural communicative competence. Donato and McCormick (1994) also believe that interaction with peers like role-playing can offer an additional source of scaffolding and help learners practice their new learning strategies. The use of scenario cards is also an effective way to practice CS. Donaldson (1978) indicates that the learner’s mind is capable of skilled performance in thoughts and language so long as the performance is embedded in the context of realistic situations. In this way, the exercise of scenario cards supports students to imagine an authentic situation where help-seeking or information-inquiring conversation occurs in oral communication.

In this 20-minute period, the teacher will display three pre-prepared scenario cards of three conversational topics (i.e. asking a NS for directions on campus, making an appointment with the teacher, ordering a meal in a restaurant). These 12 students will voluntarily form three small groups of four and have role-playing in pair. Each conversational task requires interlocutors to negotiate and coordinate the topic so as to avoid communication breakdown and achieve mutual understanding when seeking help or inquiring information with each other. In each small group, four students are divided in two pairs to make up a five-minute dialogue on the same topic. In this process, students ought to have a general awareness of the presented and modelled CS and put them into practice. Meanwhile, students need to pay attention to their partner’s reaction and observe the CS used for negotiation of meaning in role-playing. Communicating in pair can provide learners with more chances to ‘think aloud’ about what CS they use for seeking help or asking information and how to use them in negotiation of meaning. For this group of Chinese senior high school students, pair work is a comfortable starting point to practice their oral communication skills. After that, one pair needs to perform their dialogue in front of another pair in each small group. For every pair, they need to not only articulate their own personalized CS in the conversational task, but also observe and identify the CS used by another pair. Sometimes, it is necessary for the teacher to give feedback to each group since the initial practice with new learning strategies require extensive support and scaffolding from the teacher (Rubin et al., 2007).

2.4 The Fourth Stage of Evaluation

After students try out some new CS with guidance in the practice phase, it is helpful to employ the metacognitive strategy of evaluation to assess the CS. In the fourth part of evaluation (10 minutes), students are required to have self-evaluation of the effectiveness of the CS used in their role-playing activity. Learners attempt to reflect on what CS were used, how they were applied into practice and how effective they were in facilitating the conversational task. This step is essential in promoting learners’ ability to think deeply on their strategy learning process and develop their procedural knowledge (Rubin et al., 2007). Then the teacher will carry out a group discussion. Students are guided to compare and assess the CS used in role-playing in their group and discuss which are the effective and useful ones for reaching communicative goals. In this evaluating process, feedback is gathered from peer review. Liu and Carless (2006) point out that students develop their language skills through critical reflection, listening to and acting on feedback, as well as assessing and providing feedback. That is to say, students can revise their personalised CS from peer feedback and find out which strategies can work for achieving different communicative goals in target language conversations.

2.5 The Fifth Stage of Expansion

In the last five minutes, the teacher will help students to recall the CS they have learnt for negotiation of meaning in this lesson. Some questions such as what have we learned in this lesson? What kinds of CS do we know for negotiation of meaning? What is the most effective strategy you use to settle a comprehension problem in your conversational task? Furthermore, in order to help students transfer these CS to fresh tasks and authentic EFL conversations, homework will be assigned as an essential task for students to practice and internalise the CS they have learnt for negotiation of meaning. The homework in this lesson is to make up a situational dialogue in pair by incorporating the new CS they learned in class. The conversational topic should be set in the context of studying abroad or travelling overseas, and students will do role-playing about their homework in the next lesson.
CONCLUSION

This paper integrates learning strategies for oral communication in EFL classrooms in China. In order to achieve the language aim of improving learners’ oral communication skills while seeking help and information, and reach the learning strategy aim of raising learners’ awareness of using CS for negotiation of meaning and facilitating their use of specific CS in oral communication, this paper incorporates a top-down model of strategy-based instruction into a one-hour oral English lesson. After clarifying the principles and procedures of this designed lesson, this group of Chinese English learners are supposed to benefit from this lesson.

REFERENCES


