Foreign Language Learning Strategy Training on Circumlocution
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Abstract
Circumlocution, a component of strategic competence, is a very important strategy for second/foreign language learners when expressing themselves but lacking the exact vocabulary, especially when they are in the target culture. The training of this particular strategy will help students build up their confidence, develop their language fluency, obtain more comprehensible input, and reach the goal of communication, i.e. the negotiation of meaning.

This paper reports the detailed steps employed in developing students’ circumlocution strategy in an intermediate Chinese language class. The training starts with a fun classroom activity, and then is integrated in each unit test with various degrees of challenge and learner autonomy. Samples of the test section are also included and discussed.

Keywords: Communicative Competence, Strategic Competence, Circumlocution, Second Language Acquisition, Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language, Foreign Language Pedagogy

Introduction
As defined by Canale and Swain (1980), circumlocution is one component of strategic competence, which along with grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and discourse competence consists of communicative competence. Strategic competence refers to the individual’s ability to use communication strategies to compensate for a limited or imperfect linguistic knowledge and still get their message across. Circumlocution has been identified as a communication strategy or a lexical repair strategy (Liskin-Gasparro, 1996; Paribakht, 1985; Tarone, 1983), and also defined in Savignon (1983) as “the effective use of coping strategies to sustain or enhance communication” (Savignon, p. 310).

Circumlocution is included in the ACTFL speaking proficiency guidelines as a measure of pragmatic competence (Buck, Byrnes, and Thompson 1989). However, it is rarely taught and even more rarely mastered in the foreign language classroom (Berry-Bravo 1993).

Training of circumlocution and other communication strategies is important for the following reasons. First, communication strategies can lead to learning by eliciting unknown or forgotten language items from the conversation. Second, communication strategies are part of actual language use. Finally, the use of a communication strategy should not be considered as an indication of communication failure; on the country, it can be very successful in compensating for the lack of linguistic knowledge and prevent a communication breakdown (Rababah 2002).

Native speakers employ communication strategies all the time. When native speakers encounter a situation in which he/she lacks the lexical items, they will try different means to get their meaning across. However, “avoidance” is a common strategy used by many foreign language learners when they face unfamiliar communication challenges. They may avoid communicating at all in such situations. This avoidance strategy will neither get their meaning across nor help them develop the resources needed to deal with future communication problems (Tarone, 1996). Therefore, the main goal for training students on circumlocution is to develop their confidence, build up their comfort level, and improve their linguistic ability to handle the communication tasks/problems, so they will be able to try different means to communicate the intended meaning.

Literature Review
As stated before, grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competences have been proposed as components of communicative competence (Canale and Swain 1980, Tarone 1983, Yule and Tarone 1990). Each of the three components of communicative competence is extremely important as a goal in a foreign language classroom. Yet it is only recently that second/foreign language textbooks and curricula have begun to include sociolinguistic and strategic competence as goals of instruction in the classroom (Tarone 1996).

The teachability of communication strategies has been a controversial issue and investigated by many researchers (Rababah 2002). Although some researchers have opposed teaching communication strategies (e.g. Bialystok 1990, Cook 1991, Kellerman 1991, and Labarca & Khanji 1986), many researchers have been enthusiastic about teaching communication strategies (e.g. Chen 1990, Dornyei & Thurrell 1991, Faerch & Kasper 1983, Haastrup & Phillipson 1987, Oxford 1990, Tarone & Yule 1989, Savignon 1983, Yule & Tarone, 1990).

Rababah (2002) synthesizes previous studies supporting training on communicative strategies and reaches the following points when conducting the training:
1. Raising the learners’ awareness of the nature of communicative strategies.
2. Encouraging learners to be risk takers and use communicative strategies.
3. Providing L2 models of the use of certain communicative strategies through various means and getting learners to categorize and evaluate strategies used by native speakers or other L2 speakers.
4. Providing learners with core vocabulary and basic sentence structure for carrying out the communication strategies.
5. Providing opportunities for learners to practice strategy use rather than direct teaching.

There also have been studies on explicit training on circumlocution and comparison of the circumlocution ability of native speakers and non-native speakers. The general conclusion is students’ ability in circumlocution improved after training (see Schullen & Jourdain 2000). Results from research on circumlocution show that native speakers are more likely than non-native speakers to use the strategies of circumlocution and approximation since these strategies require certain basic or ‘core’ vocabulary (as proposed by Carter 1983), and sentence structures useful for describing such things as shape, size, color, texture, function, analogy, and so on. Studies on circumlocution also indicate that the higher the student’ language proficiency, the closer his/her ability to do circumlocution to the native speakers (Tarone 1996).

Schullen & Jourdain (2000) conduct explicit training on circumlocution techniques and concluded with positive results and sound pedagogical implications. Most of the participants in the study found the training useful and reported using them very often. The researchers stress the importance of teaching circumlocution as “a crucial skill and one that we should make every effort to foster in the foreign language classroom” (p. 250).

Salomone & Masal (1997) also maintain that training on circumlocution is possible and desirable. They suggest teachers use circumlocution games to promote both linguistic knowledge and cognitive flexibility, including examples. However, all the studies and explicit training only deal with European languages and involve only the listening and speaking skills.

**Teaching/Training/Testing Circumlocution in An Intermediate Chinese Language Class**

Understanding the importance of the circumlocution strategy, the author of this paper always included the circumlocution game as a fun activity for the intermediate students at the end of each lesson to help students review vocabulary items in the lesson. In spring 2003 she then started to take it a step further and incorporated this activity as part of a unit test, since she believes that tests should reflect what is going on in the classroom, not being far from what is carried out there. What was different about the activity from the previous studies conducted by various researchers is it not only involves speaking, listening, but also reading. Taking the special features of Chinese language into consideration, it aims to improve both students’ aural-oral and character recognition skills.

The reason why the activity is not conducted in a beginning level class is because it requires certain level of language proficiency, especially certain basic vocabulary and sentence structures, in order to be able to carry out circumlocution.

The step by step procedure is listed below and followed by detailed explanation:

1. teacher explains, students match (classroom activity)
2. teacher explains, students match (test)
3. teacher chooses one to explain, students take turn to do so afterwards and match
4. students explain, students match (each student takes turn to explain)
5. students explain in pinyin or Chinese characters on their own: not test writing, but speaking, and train students to think in Chinese

It begins with training and testing on the receptive skills: listening and character recognition, and gradually involves speaking. The two criteria for selecting the vocabulary items: its usefulness in daily conversation and students’ ability to understand and explain the items.

**First step: Classroom activity 1**
As one of the review activities, the teacher selected some vocabulary items from the lesson of study and explain or describe them by using the words that students have learned. Students take turns to respond or guess what the vocabulary item is. In addition to reviewing the vocabulary items, the activity serves the purpose of modeling for students to follow.

**Second step: Test section stage 1**
The teacher selects a few items from the pool of vocabulary items to be the first part of the lesson test. The items are explained randomly by the teacher. It tests students listening comprehension skills and character recognition ability. Testing receptive skills first may help reduce students’ anxiety.

**Example 1: Lessons 2 & 3 Test (A New China)**

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A. Listen carefully and write the number of the word which you think fits the description:

1. 商店  2. 習慣  3. 遲到  4. 藉口  5. 健康  6. 以為

a. (     )  b. (     )  c. (     )  d. (     )  e. (     )

Third step: Classroom activity 2
The teacher selects the vocabulary items, give each student a few cards with vocabulary items on them, and asks students to explain the items in Chinese without using any words in that particular item.

Fourth step: Test section stage 2
Each student takes turns explaining an item, and students write down the answer accordingly. It tests students’ reading, speaking, and listening skills. An additional item is listed to reduce the success chance of pure guessing. At the first few times, the teacher may have to be the one who starts because students may just say things in the order of the vocabulary items provided. So, she should pick up one item randomly and circumlocute. Then, a volunteer is asked to explain an item of his/her choice.

Sample: Lesson 3 & 4 Test (A New China)

A. Take turns to explain/describe the following items. Listen carefully and write the number of the word which you think fits the description:

1. 挂號  2. 膠捲  3. 郵票  4. 櫃檯  5. 發燒  6. 地址  7. 醫院

a. (     )  b. (     )  c. (     )  d. (     )  e. (     )  f. (     )

Fifth step: Test section stage 3
In addition to still doing the first part, the second part is added where students are asked to explain the vocabulary items in pinyin or Chinese characters. It tests character recognition and “speaking” skills.

Example: Lesson 6 Test (A New China)

A. Listen carefully and write the number of the word which you think fits the description. Please don’t use the words in the items.

1. 增加  2. 司機  3. 職員  4. 發票  5. 簽字  6. 護照

a. (     )  b. (     )  c. (     )  d. (     )  e. (     )

B. Explain the following vocabulary items in pinyin or Chinese characters.

1. 人民幣
2. 交通堵塞
3. 銀行

Although students are not allowed to use any words in the items they try to explain in the Section A, they are allowed to do so in Section B to be more realistic.

Tutorial:
One of the challenges that intermediate high or advanced level students face is the huge amount of vocabulary items in each lesson. By this time the nature of the vocabulary items have been shifted from those for daily situations to more abstract ones. The circumlocution exercise is done during the tutorial hours, and lasts 15 minutes per student. It forces students to
review the vocabulary items, helps them understand the different meanings of some similar items, and pushes them to think in Chinese. Example: 貢獻 versus 捐獻; 歇後語 versus 成語; 祕語; 大鍋飯 versus 鐵飯碗.

**Students’ feedback**

An informal survey was conducted this semester to obtain students’ feedback on the effectiveness of the circumlocution exercise. All of them responded positively and some indicated that more time should be spent on carrying out this exercise. Most of them were not aware of the intention of this tutorial exercise. Below are well-articulated comments by one of the students:

Circumlocution is very useful, even in English. Some people use it all the time. Some who use it all the time don't know anything; others just don't remember the right word or phrase; others still, don't want to disclose private information.

Until you explicitly mentioned it in a recent tutorial, I really wasn't aware that you were encouraging circumlocution, even though I was automatically using it.

I think I started using circumlocution immediately at the beginning of 4th semester (if not before) when doing the translation exercises in "A New China" in order to avoid using the dictionary excessively. Why look up a NEW word that's not taught in the lesson or any previous lesson? Why not find a way to use a FAMILIAR word or phrase or pattern that conveys the idea reasonably well, if not the exact meaning?

**Pedagogical Implications:**

The author feels that classroom activities must provide instruction and practice in all the components of communicative interaction. Because of the important role that strategic competence plays in successful communication, we have to provide students with training on this essential component of communicative.

The use of this type of classroom activity advocated here has three valuable effects for the language classroom. First, the task forces the learners to think in the target language (Chinese). Second, the task elicits language produce when the speaker is put in a position of concentrating on getting the message across rather than on getting the linguistic form correct. Third, it also provides the learners with opportunities to produce extended spoken discourse in the target language.

When conducting circumlocution training, it is necessary to provide students with certain basic vocabulary and sentence structures to describe the properties and function of objects, such as the structure “it’s a kind of/sort of... the thing you use for... it’s what/when you... it’s something you do/say when...” (see Dornyei & Thurrell 1991). As long as we prepare our students and equip them with the necessary framework, this kind of exercise probably can be carried out in the second semester class.

As for the more advanced classes, the students can be asked to role play in the possible scenarios that they will encounter in the target culture but they don’t have the exact words. The exercise should be done twice. Once before the students learn the vocabulary items for the particular scenario, and then once more after they learn and practice the vocabulary needed for the scenario. Circumlocution is a strategy used to repair their lexical insufficiency, but the goal for our instruction is also to help them learn the exact words. As foreign language teachers and learners, reaching both accuracy and fluency is our main concern (Rababah, 2002).

It is also important to raising students’ awareness of the nature of circumlocution strategies and how to employ them when necessary. As clearly indicated in the students’ feedback, it never occurred to them that they have been receiving training on circumlocution strategies.

The author would also like to stress to all the language instructors the importance of and the usefulness of circumlocution in their role as foreign language teachers, for example when presenting new vocabulary items or trying to explain a word (in the target language) to students. It is also an ability that good language teachers should have so they can provide as much comprehensible input to students without switching to student’s first language.
References: