

# A Critical Review on the Meaning, Types and Importance of Strategic Competence in the Foreign Language Context: Focus on Communicative English Lessons

Muluken Gebre Lanka\*

Department of English Language and Literature, Wolaita Sodo University

Wondimu Tegegne Bidu

Department of English Language and Literature, Wolaita Sodo University

## Abstract

Communicative language teaching (herein after CLT) is the current demanding theory and practice of English language teaching (Richards, 2006). It is demanding because it targets on communicative competence of the learner (Savignon, 1970). Therefore, the huge aim of CLT is making the learner communicatively competent and today language needs to have communicational value. Communicative competence has four major components: discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence, grammar competence and strategic competence (Savignon, 1970). According to Bachman (1990) strategic competence (herein after SC) is the most neglected from the components of communicative competence. SC is a competence of fixing communication breakdowns and it is used when someone is failed to communicate due to shortage of language competence. Thus, it is important to deal in detail about this ungleaming competence and this paper deals about it.

**Keywords:** strategic competence, communication strategies.

## 1. Background of the Study

CLT is modern theory of language teaching that encapsulate or aimed at achieving communicative competence (Dornyei and Thurrell, 1990; Hung, 2010). Communicative Competence is defined as functional language proficiency; the expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning involving interaction between two or more persons belonging to the same (or different) speech community (Savignon, 1997: 272). According to Savignon (1997:272) the followings are some of characters of communicative competence:

- *Communicative competence is a dynamic rather than a static concept. It depends on the negotiation of meaning between two or more people who share to some degree the same symbolic system.*
- *Communicative competence is applied to both written and spoken language, as well as to many other symbolic systems.*
- *Communicative competence is context specific. Communication takes place in infinite diversity of circumstances, and success in a particular role depends on ones understanding of the context and on prior experience of a similar kind.*

Savignon (1997) asserts that communicative competence consists of four indispensable components: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. These are basic for one's communication ability.

### 1.1 Grammatical Competence

Canale (1983) explains that grammatical competence which focuses directly on the knowledge and skill required understanding and expressing accurately the literal meaning of utterances. (p.7). Grammatical competence refers to sentence-level grammatical forms, the ability to recognize the lexical, morphological, syntactical and phonological features of a language and to make use of those features to interpret and form words and sentences. Grammatical competence is not linked to any single theory of grammar and does not include the ability to state rules of usage. One demonstrates grammatical competence not by stating a rule but by using a rule in the interpretation, expression, or negotiation of meaning.

### 1.2 Sociolinguistic Competence

Savignon (1997) explains that sociolinguistic competence represents the learners' ability to use the language appropriately in social contexts. Therefore sociolinguistic competence shows the learners' ability to go beyond the literal meaning of utterances and recognize what is the intent of such utterances in particular social situations. Sociolinguistic competence is crucial in interpreting utterances for their social meaning (Canale 1983: 8).

### 1.3 Discourse Competence

Savignon (1997) defines discourse competence relates to the learners' ability to combine grammatical forms and meaning in an appropriate order for different genres of requirements. Discourse competence brings to our

attention that learners must also be aware of the discourse patterns of the language they are learning.

#### **1.4 Strategic Competence**

Dornyei and Thurrell (1990) and Hung (2010) stated that strategic competence relates to the learners' ability to master verbal and non-verbal communication strategies. Canale explains that such strategies may be needed for two main reasons: to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to limiting conditions in actual communication or to insufficient competence in one or more of the other areas of communicative competence, and to enhance the effectiveness of communication (Canale, 1983:10).

It also helps the learner to continue conversation flow. Learners in beginning stages may find that strategic competence can help them communicate even with their limited vocabulary. This review paper tries to provide a critical analysis on the meaning, types and importance of strategic competence in the foreign language context focusing on communicative English lessons

### **2. Classroom Communication and the Teaching of Communicative English**

#### **2.1. Communication; Definition and Features**

Communication is a flow of information which goes from encoder to decoder in the form of oral or written media aimed to get convinced. It has certain characteristics that have been mentioned in the works of Breen and Candlin (1980), Widdowson (1978) and Harmer (1982). Canale and Swain (1980:11) recap the characteristics of communication that represent their model of communication as:

- Communication is a form of social interaction and can therefore be acquired and used in social interaction.
- It involves a high degree of unpredictability and creativity in form and message.
- It takes place in discourse and socio-cultural contexts which provide constraints on appropriate language use and also clues as to correct interpretations of utterances.
- It always has a purpose; e. g., to establish social relations, to persuade or to promise, etc.
- It is carried out under limiting psychological and other conditions such as memory constraints, fatigue and distractions.
- It involves authentic language.
- It is judged successful or not on the basis of actual outcomes; i. e. whether the speaker has been understood.

According to Poulisse (1989) there are two principles of communication which are relevant to the study of compensatory strategies. These are the principle of clarity and the principle of economy. The principle of clarity requires language users to produce clear, intelligible messages; whereas the principle of economy requires them to do this with the least effort. Speakers must capitalize on a balance between these two principles in order to transmit a comprehensible message.

#### **2.2. Classroom Communication and Genuine Communication**

According to Ellis (1994) the discourse that results from trying to learn is different from that which results from trying to communicate. Genuine communication is called real life communication. In real life, people want to converse, whereas in the classroom students want to learn in order to be able to communicate in the real world. In both types of discourse people use communication strategies to make their ideas comprehensible and achieve their communicative goals.

Nunan (1987) defines that genuine communication is characterized by the uneven distribution of information, the negotiation of meaning (through, for example, clarification requests and confirmation checks), topic nomination and negotiation by more than one speaker and the right of interlocutors to decide whether to contribute an interaction or not. In other words, in genuine communication decisions about who says what to whom and when are up for grasp.

Seedhouse (1996) also believes that communication in the classroom is a variety of communication that should be differentiated from real-life communication. He states that in the classroom, communication takes place whatever the teacher does, but there are different types of interaction provided depending on the pedagogical purpose of the communicative task. Swan (1990) the same spot states that it is a serious mistake to condemn types of discourse typically found in the classroom because they do not share all the communicative features of other kinds of language use. Communication in the classroom is no longer genuine as long as the teacher instructs students what to do.

#### **2.3. The Teaching Communicative English**

It is believed that teaching communicative English is teaching speaking skill. Many language learners regard speaking ability as the measure of knowing a language. The students define fluency as the ability to converse with others, much more than the ability to read, write, or comprehend oral language.

According to Amato (1996:17), there are four strategies for students to learn spoken English:

- I. Think of what you are going to say.
- II. Think about the structures you are using but do not let them interfere with what you want to say.
- III. Do not be afraid to make mistakes (mistakes are normal as you are learning a language).
- IV. When you are not understood, use repetition, gestures, synonyms, definitions, acting out, whatever comes naturally as you begin to feel more proficient in the language.

In the communicative model of language teaching, instructors are expected to help their students develop knowledge by providing authentic practice that prepares students for real-life communication situations. They help their students to develop the ability to produce grammatically correct, logically connected sentences that are appropriate to specific contexts, and to do so using acceptable (that is, comprehensible) pronunciation.

#### 2.4. Communicative Courses

Communicative courses are courses which are designed to develop speaking skill of the learner. In communicative language teaching approach the learner expected to be communicatively competent, (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). Courses are also organized in country level for all levels of education for enhancing communicative skill. These communicative courses are Spoken English, Communicative English Skill, and Advanced Speech. In some universities currently communicative courses are given as block course form for example in Wolaita Sodo University English Language and Literature Department communicative courses are also given in block form. These communicative courses are expected to be given in practical form.

#### 3. What does Strategic Competence Mean?

According to Rababah (2002:189) strategic competence refers to individuals' ability to use different types of strategy such as: paraphrase, circumlocution, literal translation, lexical approximation, mime, to get his or her message across and to compensate for a limited imperfect knowledge of rules or interference of such factors such as fatigue, distraction, or inattention.

No.	Strategies	Exemplary Sentences
1.	Circumlocution strategy	It is something like a chair used to put the child on and push it. (Pushchair)
2.	Word Coinage Strategy	The car is unmove (The car broke down)
3.	Literal Translation Strategy	Number telephone (Telephone number), electrical stairs (escalator)
4.	Appeal for help	What is this called in English?
5.	Foreignizing strategy	Ascenseur (lift)
6.	Approximation strategy	The car was damaged (The car broke down)
7.	Correction strategy	He just completed his road.....,his way

Dornyei and Scott (1997), Tarone (1977) and Faerch and Kasper's (1983) defined Strategic Competence as verbal or nonverbal first-aid devices which are used to make up for gaps in the speaker's EFL proficiency. Tarone (1980, p. 420) states that CSs are seen as tools used in a joint negotiation of meaning where both interlocutors are attempting to agree as to a communicative goal.

On the other hands, Dornyei and Scott (1997) give their own extended views which include every potentially intentional attempt to cope with any language-related problem which the speaker is aware of during the time of communication. However, the broadest extension of the concept of CS was offered by Canale (1983). Canale (1983) proposed that communication strategies involve any activities to that happen to enhance the effectiveness of communication.

As tried to define above by different scholars a communication strategy in the most general sense as a plan of action to accomplish a communication goal. Operating on Faerch and Kaspers's (1983) framework, Bialystok (1990) suggested a tripartite division of CSs based on the linguistic source of the strategy, He included: L1-based strategies (drawing upon the learner's mother tongue), L2-based strategies (drawing upon learner's L1) and Non-verbal based strategies (the use of gestures and mime.) In spite of the fact that the above overview of the most quoted definitions of CSs suggested that, researchers resemble to agree on the fact that CSs are employed to learners' when linguistic means are not enough to convey their intended meaning.

#### 4. Development of Strategic Competence

According to Dornyei and Scott (1997) Selinker is the first to coin strategic competence but he did not develop the detail about the nature of strategies. In the same year, Savignon (1997) published a research paper which she calls coping strategies. However, the first one to provide a definition of CS (communication strategies) and offer a taxonomy which is still seen as one of the most influential in the field were Tarone (1977) and Dell Hymes (1972) laid bases for communicative competence.

The genuine profession of communication strategies (hence forth CSs) as Dornyei and Scott state began in

the early 1980s. First, they were included in Canale and Swain's influential model of communicative competence. Then, Faerch and Kasper (1983) pulled together the most significant published paper: strategies in Interlanguage Communication. These works were followed by increased research interest in the 1980s which focused on the identification, classification and teachability of CSs. Nowadays, according to Bachman (1990) communication strategy is used as strategic competence which is strategy of communication.

### **5. Types of Strategic Competence**

There are a lot of literature that dealt with similar and overlapping taxonomies of SC, which may be divided into avoidance or reduction strategies and achievement or compensatory ones (e.g. Tarone, 1980; Faerch & Kasper, 1983; Dornyei and Scott, 1997).

As to Faerch & Kasper (1983), practicing the avoidance or reduction strategies (e.g. topic avoidance, message abandonment, meaning replacement), learners deviate away from unfamiliar topics, avoid solving communication problems, and reduce or abandon the messages they intended to deliver. These behaviors can negatively affect the content of the interaction and are common among low-proficiency learners.

Using the achievement or compensatory strategies, learners tackle communication problems by an alternative plan for attainment their novel goals. The achievement or compensatory strategies contain cooperative strategies (e.g. appeal for help) and non-cooperative ones (e.g. L1-bases strategies, such as code switching, foreignizing, and literal translation; interlanguage-based strategies, such as substitution, generalization, exemplification, word-coinage, and restructuring; non-verbal strategies, such as mime and imitation (Dornyei & Scott, 1997).

Other strategies, such as time-gaining strategies (using fillers to gain time to think), prefabricated patterns (using memorized stock phrases, usually for survival purposes) also belong to the category of achievement or compensatory strategies. Using these strategies helps learners complete or continue spoken communication and is regarded as good learners' behavior (Dornyei, 1995).

Nakatani (2005) defines achievement strategies as 'learners' active behavior in repairing and maintaining interaction' while reduction strategies according to him, "reflect learners' negative behavior as they try to avoid solving communication difficulties. He also provides further sub categorization: achievement strategies include: help-seeking, modified interaction, modified output, time-gaining, maintenance, and self-solving strategies. Reduction strategies, on the other hand, include: message abandonment strategies, first-language-based strategies, inter language-based reduction strategies and false starts.

### **6. Ways of Teaching Strategic Competence**

Can we teach communication strategies in an EFL speaking classroom? This question should clearly be answered. Yes, we can teach communication strategies. The effectiveness of teaching CS in the classroom has twisted significant disagreement among English language researchers. There are generally two approaches to the instruction of communication strategies: the strong view and the moderate view.

Bialystock (1990) describes the strong view as literal instruction of the taxonomies. The students are taught the strategic solutions for communication problems, such as paraphrasing, approximation, circumlocution, word coinage and the like, and the specific language required to carry out the speech act.

The strong view of instruction also includes teaching the students the proper circumstances in which carrying out the strategies would be suitable. For example, there may be situations in which it is practical to use approximation, and students would be taught how to recognize such situations. The moderate view of strategy instruction stems from CS use in the larger context of language processing: the different uses of language, for example literate, conversational and metalinguistic. The moderate view of instruction, then, attempts to teach the students how to control their linguistic systems.

Thus, they view CSs as potentially cognizant plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a communicative goal, Faerch and Kasper (1983). This definition conceives CSs as mental plans used by learners when they have problems to reach a communicative goal with no request for assistance from the interlocutor. As for Faerch and Kasper, there are two opportunities open to the speaker to overcome his communication problems: enact some kind of avoidance by changing or reducing the original communicative goal or adopt what linguistic means he has to achieve the goal.

Therefore, the two major categories of CSs devised by Faerch and Kasper are reduction strategies where fearing to produce mistaken language items, the learner may employ a reduced system and achievement strategies where the learner expands his linguistic resources (drawing upon his mother tongue, his Interlanguage (lingua franca) or any other language he might know. Accordingly, in this study, CSs are defined as learners' verbal and non-verbal means to resolve interactional problems, to negotiate meaning, to stay in the conversation.

As procedures for teaching strategic competence for instance Maleki (2010) in his paper: techniques to teach communication strategies are techniques to teach paraphrase, transfer, appeal for assistance, and mime. The Bottom-Up Approach is the framework within which the techniques are put to use. Any ELT can use his

approach to SC in his/her communicative classroom.

### **7. Strategic Competence in the Foreign Language Classroom**

Foreign language students may develop competence in each of those three areas: grammar, sociolinguistic and discourse competence at different rates, but all are important in developing communicative competence. Communicative classroom materials and exercises should address both the student's overall skill in successfully conveying information and his/her ability to use communication strategies when the process of conveying information encounters a problem. (Faerch and Kasper's 1983)

Most materials address only overall skills. Different researches (Nakatani (2005)) have yielded some information about communication strategies that can be applied in foreign language teaching. Teachers can encourage students to use these strategies by providing both opportunities for practice and actual instruction in their use. Instruction can be direct or indirect, based on classroom exercises. The exercises providing practice build resources that allow the students to be flexible in real-world interactions. It is most common in foreign language: the issue of interlanguage. (Nakatani: 2005)

According to Tereshchuk (2009) Strategic competency in EFL speaking classroom is demonstrated in diverse ways and is dominant by various types of strategies contingent on the form of speech. Whether it's a monologue, a dialogue or a polylogue – students manifest their strategic ability differently. Thus the peculiarities of these speech forms must be taken into account. A few valuable features of a monologue are: topic or idea defining composition; structural completeness; specific language means of linking sentences; logical structure; little dependence on extra linguistic situation; partial or total preparedness. Primary characteristics of a dialogue are: high activity of interlocutors; utterance production motivated by a topic, a problem or collocutor's utterance; tendency for spontaneity; broad usage of clichés and etiquette formulas; possible change of topics.

Distinctive peculiarities of a polylogue include: high activity of communicators; spontaneity; structural complexity conditioned by participants' inserted" monologues; broad usage of clichés and etiquette formulas; concentration on one particular topic; complexity of turn-taking process; a speaker not necessarily reacts to the previous speaker's words; logical connection of each speaker's utterances with the general context of a conversation; tendency for unpreparedness; possibility of shorter duration of speakers' utterances due to greater number of conversation participants.

According to the criteria used in Spoken English Examination by Trinity College in London cited by Tereshchuk (2009:21) students' oral language production can be evaluated on strategic level on the basis of the following:

- A. Descriptor of fulfillment includes such measures as control of the organization of the content of utterances during communication, communicative goal achievement, aim-oriented conversation;
- B. Descriptor of readiness signifies the connection and interdependence of utterance production from listening comprehension and therefore on strategic level incorporates understanding main content, confident and appropriate cues in the context of conversation, understanding conclusions and changes in style, support off language fluency, taking initiative;
- C. Pronunciation descriptor on strategic level describes correlation of stresses and intonation with the context of conversation and their understandability;
- D. Descriptor of usage includes correspondence of language usage to the context of communicative situation, to the function or functional role of a speaker, and to the communicative intention of a speaker.

In this study, the researcher attempted to evaluate students and teachers' oral language production by these criteria.

### **8. The Importance of Teaching Strategic Competence in the Communicative English Lessons**

As Strategic Competence is one of the major components of communicative competence, the development of this component, principally decides the fluency and conversational skills of the learner (Dornyei and Thurrell, 1991). They also state that teachers are usually unaware of the importance of this component and the activities that lead to training this strategy have hardly been developed. This results in a lack of fluency and conversational skills, which students usually complain about.

Training this type of competence, in particular, helps in developing the learner's confidence when getting into a conversation. Dornyei and Thurrell (1991) believe strategy training facilitates spontaneous improvisation skills and linguistic creativity. So the major point is that the significance of these strategies lies in its effect on improving the learners' performance skills, which is the ultimate aim of teaching a foreign language.

The reason why researchers showed a lot of concern in teaching Strategic Competence is that most textbooks and curriculum are concerned not with communication but with language forms. McGillick, (1993) states that teachers are obliged to lift up the learners' consciousness concerning CSs. This way, he says, we encourage learners to focus on communication itself rather than on language forms. The conversations which

students engage into in the class are part of the bigger activity of communication in general. Hence, we need to develop the strategies that help to keep the conversation channel open.

The study done by Nakatani (2005), 62 females taking an EFL course were divided into two groups: a control group and a strategy training group. The first group received only the normal communicative course, whereas the strategy training group received metacognitive training, with focus on oral or spoken communication strategy use.

Nakatani found that students in the strategy training group improved their proficiency in the oral communication tests significantly more than those in the control group. This result indicates that simply offering students' communication practice was not enough to develop their speaking ability. Another result of this study was that students in the strategy training group learned to make longer utterances which enriched their abilities to negotiate meaning and maintain the conversation flow.

Concerning definitions, students are given the names of objects which they are asked to define using the relative clause. Paraphrasing is considered as an interpretive strategy which involves the interpretation of the interlocutor's (speaker's) whole message. Such strategies, as Dornyei and Thurrell (1990) state, are not usually encouraged in the learners' mother tongue.

They are important in a language course because they provide the learner with a sense of security in the language by allowing him/her room to flexible in times of difficulty. Reasonably, in line with these activities mentioned above the researcher assessed the common SC activities of English language teachers of the department. And also to what extent do the instructors employ these upper mentioned activities in their communicative courses are in focus.

### **9. Factors Affecting the Choice of Communication Strategies for Strategic Competence**

Knowing Communication Strategies that student employ helps a teacher to understand their strategic competence so that appropriate strategies could be chosen for pedagogical purposes. However, in guiding students to become competent speakers of English, EFL teachers may need to explore further influence of other learner variables on the use of SCs by students. According to Huang (2010) there are five effects: gender, language proficiency, self-perceived oral proficiency, the frequency of speaking English outside the classroom, and motivation in speaking English, on students' OCS(oral/spoken communication strategies) use. Hence, are these factors clearly happening in English Language and Literature department students? was also the focus of this study.

According to Huang (2010) females are more affected and discouraged (shyness) to speak because of the culture, custom and traditions of the country. This means that if the girls are not flexible to use different communication strategies, they are incapable of strategic competence. Therefore, the researcher is too concerned with the issue of gender as it is similar with this study area.

When we come to another factor affecting the use strategic competence: low level of language proficiency level, one is influenced to use strategic competence when he/she is below standards of expected level, Huang (2010).

Motivation is examined based on its types: the intrinsic and extrinsic motives of the learners (Brown, 2000). Intrinsic motivation refers to the willingness to engage in an activity because it is enjoyable and fulfilling. Extrinsic motivation refers to the desire to do it so as to receive an external reward or avoid punishment. Nevertheless, in both cases, the degree of motivation that an individual learner possesses is the decisive factor for successful learning, (Gardner, 1985).

### **10. Students' Communication Barriers and the Effectiveness of Strategic Competence Teaching**

Different scholars attributed the deficiency of students' limited communication in language classroom to different factors. Huang (2010) attributed students' limited speaking to lack of time for oral/speaking practice in classroom and limited conversational opportunities outside the classroom is the main factor for communication barriers.

According to Huang (2010) students' speaking deficiency may, in fact, stem from their misconception of communication in a foreign language, such as necessity of having a perfect pronunciation, a good accent, a large vocabulary size, and comprehensive knowledge of grammar.

Broner (2000) noted that increased exposure to the first language, an increase in the first language at the curricular level, and the type of tasks children carry out in class might be regarded as reasons for limited amount of L2 talk in the classroom. He noted that special interactional needs of learners that may not be met by the use of L2 might be one of the factors that cause learners to resort to first language use. Williams (2006) believed that, students' limited speaking is due to the learners' fear of speaking about new and complicated topics. Students are reluctant to speak due to the fear of encountering unfamiliar words and phrases that hinder their comprehension and language production. He further mentioned that insufficiency and limits of learners' communicative competence in EFL prevent them from expressing themselves.

According to Dornyei (1995), the gap of limited speaking in content-based programs can be bridged by

introducing and teaching some strategies that help students to improve their speaking proficiency, increase interaction in the target language, and cope with their oral communication breakdowns during communication.

The findings of available research suggest that less proficient learners use more communication strategies (Poulisse 1989) also reported that although the use of communication strategies might depend on task and context, a range of strategic phrases could be successfully instructed to most learners.

## 12. Summary

Strategic competence by itself can have equal share with other communicative competences and it should be practiced not only in the classrooms but also outside classroom where English language communication is taken place (Savignon, 1997). Though every speaker has his or her communication strategy it has to be in the way to help communication barriers or message reduction and totally pausing communication (Tereshchuk, 2009). It has to be dealt in great extent to be practiced and taught elsewhere.

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