Justyna KAROŃ

Akademia im. Jana Długosza w Częstochowie

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES
USED BY ADVANCED POLISH USERS OF ENGLISH – THE PILOT STUDY RESULTS

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present the results of the pilot study that was performed so as to check what communication strategies are used by Polish speakers of English in larger study groups. The research group consisted of five advanced speakers who were asked to perform a communication activity based on solving a dilemma. The analysis of the results was based on the taxonomy presented by Celce-Murcia, Dornyei & Thurrell (1995) and showed that the scope of the communication strategies used by the participants was in fact quite limited. It was also discovered that despite the speakers' level of proficiency, they frequently opted for code switching as a time-saving and efficient method of transmitting the message without the necessity of referring to other more advanced communication strategies.

Introduction

Communicative situations frequently witness the moments of doubts or hesitation during which the interlocutors suddenly seem to lack their confidence and the communication faces the danger of communication breakdown. In such cases the majority of speakers undertake the difficult task to transmit their message at all costs, sometimes even at the expense of extreme modifications or simplifications. Other speakers decide to gain some extra time to reconsider their utterance and thus they opt for the excessive use of hesitation marks, fillers or pauses. Another situation can be connected with the speakers' experimenting with their language in a creative way in order to abide by their intended message. Whichever of the above-mentioned solutions is chosen, all of them can be classified under the heading of communication strategies, which can be briefly described as the way in which learn-

ers "manipulate language in order to meet communicative goals" (Brown 2001: 220). Another definition stresses the fact that communication strategies are problem-oriented and that they emerge in the moments when speakers face communication problems and thus they appear "to compensate for some deficiency in the linguistic system, and focus on exploring alternate ways of using what one does know for the transmission of a message without necessarily considering situational appropriateness" (Tarone 1981: 287). Due to the fact that communication strategies have been identified to recur at all levels of proficiency, an impressive number of research has been devoted to their identification and description. Consequently, a great quantity of taxonomies has been presented, such as those suggested by Varadi (1973), Tarone (1980), Canale (1983), Faerch & Kasper (1984), Bialystok (1990), or Poulisse (1990), to name only the ones which are still considered to be the foundations for any analysis of communication strategies. The confusing diversity of such terminologies and categories arousing from those publications was finally regulated by Dornyei & Scott (1997), who succeeded in organizing the taxonomies of communication strategies by identifying and grouping their shared features and differences.

As some research has indicated, irrespective of the labels connected with particular communication strategies, the occurrence of all of them can be conditioned by interlocutors' levels of proficiency, as well as the type of communicative tasks. Obviously, certain speaking activities are more likely to generate a greater variety of communication strategies (Poulisse & Schils 1989; Nakatani 2010; Huang 2010). It is also claimed that the level of proficiency corresponds to the occurrence of communication strategies, as more advanced speakers more willingly, skillfully and effortlessly incorporate communication strategies in their utterances (Ellis 1984; Bialystok 1981).

The Pilot Study

The aim of the pilot study

Basing on the above research material and findings it was decided that the aspects of communication strategies connected with their application by advanced speakers of English are particularly thought provoking, especially in the part concerning code switching and referring to speakers' L1 repertoire. The purpose of the study was also to investigate in a general way what communication strategies are used by some Polish users of English if the number of the participants was increased from a dyad to a group consisting of five speakers. So far, the previous parts of this pilot study scheme have concentrated mainly on observing the communication exchanges of pairs of speakers and it has been discovered that sometimes speakers assume the role of an expert and therefore tend to dominate the conversation. Additionally, it has been discovered that some communication strategies, such as circumlocution

and self-rephrasing, are particularly favoured by the speakers and that the level of proficiency does not in fact determine whether L1 or L2-based strategies are more likely to be used. Irrespective of their knowledge of the English language, the speakers sooner or later decide to apply their native language as a way to express their intended message. Consequently, the idea for the introduction of a bigger group of speakers stemmed from the need to research whether the number of participants influenced in any way the selection of particular strategies and how they were distributed in the course of speaking. Additionally, the aim of the study was to discover whether particular speakers presented a comparable tendency to opt for communication strategies.

Participants

Due to the fact that the use of communication strategies is the most extensive among more proficient speakers, as "the best strategy users are those who have adequate formal proficiency in the target language and are able to modify their strategy selection to account for the nature of the specific concept to be conveyed" (Bialystok 1983: 116), it was decided that the study group should consist of the participants whose knowledge of English was quite advanced. The speakers who were selected to take part in the study are employed in the same international company and because of their everyday professional activities they are required to use English non-stop. Additionally, as their boss is a foreigner and English is the language of communication within the company, their scope of the English usage ranges from strictly business matters to casual conversations during coffee breaks.

The study group consisted of five members – three of whom were female and two male. Before the beginning of the study they were asked to complete a placement test, the results of which indicated that all of them were on the upper-intermediate level of English. The participants also completed the language background questionnaires, where they were asked to provide the information concerning how long they had been learning English and what areas of difficulty they can notice in that aspect. The speakers assessed that their average length of contact with English had lasted for at least 15 years and because of that fact they claimed that they did not observe any particular problems they could face in their use of English. Two of them mentioned some slight problems resulting from insufficient resources only of everyday, colloquial vocabulary, as apart from that they felt quite confident with their knowledge concerning technical vocabulary. The speakers were employed in different departments and for that reason they did not have a frequent opportunity to talk to one another in English, as their main interlocutors were their customers and their director.

Communication tasks

One of the problematic aspects was the choice of the communication activity that would stimulate the speakers to use English in the most extensive and unrestricted way. It was decided that prompting a group discussion in the form of a dilemma to solve would meet that requirement. Consequently, the speakers were presented with a problematic situation, to which they were supposed to create a solution. The situation was based in an international company and concerned mobbing, namely one employee was mobbed by her senior manager. It was believed that such a location of the problem is likely to provoke a lively discussion. The participants were given a short summary of the problem and they were provided with some time to read it carefully. Then, each of them was asked to present their opinion about the given aspect and finally they were expected to indicate a possible resolution or a way of conduct. The speakers were encouraged to exchange and question their ideas in order to find the best option.

The pilot study was planned as a series of recording sessions that were extended over the period of three months. The sessions took place regularly every Monday and lasted 90 minutes. Various speaking tasks were performed during that time in order to discover which of them provoked the use of communication strategies to the greatest extent. Obviously, due to the enormous amount of recording material, the article presents only a selection of the speaking parts. The discussions themselves took place in a small conference room situated in the company premises. So as not to disturb the professional activities, it was planned after the work hours and all the speakers volunteered to participate in the study. The conversation was digitally recorded, to which none of the speakers objected. After the initial analysis, the recordings were transcribed and analyzed to find the communication strategies that were applied by the speakers.

Data analysis

The analysis of the communication strategies was based on the typology suggested by Celce-Murcia, Dornyei & Thurrell (1995) due to the fact that this taxonomy combined the most acclaimed classifications and presented the communication strategies in clear sub-groups. Accordingly, the model divided communication strategies into *avoidance or reduction strategies*, where speakers decide to abandon or noticeably limit their intended message, *achievement or compensatory strategies* which are the key to communicating the ideas successfully, *stalling and time gaining strategies* that allow speakers to obtain some extra time for structuring the utterance, *self–monitoring strategies* that are used in the cases when speakers decide to restructure the utterance, usually as a result of noticing some mistakes and finally *interactional strategies* that involve the element of interaction and can be subdivided into appeals for help and meaning negotiation strategies. The whole classification of communication strategies is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Communication Strategies by Celce-Murcia, Dornyei & Thurrell (1995)

AVOIDANCE OR REDUCTION STRATEGIES
message replacement
topic avoidance
message abandonment

ACHIEVEMENT OR COMPENSATORY STRATEGIES
circumlocution
approximation
all-purpose words
non-linguistic means
restructuring
word coinage
literal translation from L1
foreignizing
code switching to L1 or L3
retrieval

STALLING OR TIME-GAINING STRATEGIES
fillers, hesitation devices and gambits
self and other-repetition

SELF MONITORING STRATEGIES
self-initiated repair
self-rephrasing

INTERACTIONAL STRATEGIES
appeals for help
– direct
– indirect
– meaning negotiation strategies
Indicators of non/mis-understanding
– requests (repetition requests, clarification requests, confirmation requests)
– expressions of non-understanding (verbal, non-verbal)
– interpretive summary
Responses
– repetition, rephrasing, expansion, reduction, confirmation, rejection, repair
Confirmation checks
– whether the interlocutor can follow you
– whether what you said was correct or grammatical
– whether the interlocutor is listening
– whether the interlocutor can hear you

Results

The discussion of the results closely follows the above-presented taxonomy, and for the sake of clarity it presents the application of individual strategies depending on their main groups.

AVOIDANCE /REDUCTION STRATEGIES

This group of strategies refers to the situation when the speakers decided to withdraw from their intended message or limit it to a considerable extent. Such a type of behavior is stimulated by some serious problems concerning the available linguistic resources that cannot be accessed at the moment of speaking, as a result of which speakers lose their confidence and refrain from the continuation of their interaction. The analysis of the tapescript showed no cases of any types of avoidance strategies. Apparently, due to their level of proficiency the speakers abstained from the use of message replacement, topic avoidance or message abandonment.

ACHIEVEMENT/ COMPENSATORY STRATEGIES

Surprisingly, the analysis presented the fact that the speakers did not apply some very commonly used strategies; for example, there were no cases of circumlocution or approximation. The speakers felt comfortable and confident enough with their linguistic repertoire and thus they expressed no need to create the description of a word or find synonymous expressions, because all the lexical items were apparently in their places. The participants refrained as well from the use of non-linguistic means, such as miming or pointing. Naturally, some of the participants accompanied their speaking with the excessive use of gestures, but the gestures themselves did not serve the purpose of explaining the missing words, they were just manifestations of idiosyncratic body language. Additionally, it was discovered that the speakers could actually use highly specific vocabulary, since they presented their ideas with precise words and did not have to replace particular items with all-purpose words. The speakers' level of proficiency also undoubtedly influenced the fact that there were no occurrences of word coinage, literal translation or foreignizing – the speakers neither created new words, nor translated some phrases literally from Polish, nor applied the rules of English pronunciation to make L1 lexical items sound more English. In fact, from the group of achievement strategies the speakers incorporated only restructuring, code switching and retrieval.

Restructuring

Due to the fact that the speakers were expressing their ideas in quite long speaking turns, they were provided with numerous opportunities to restructure their utterances. Restructuring stemmed from the fact that during the course of speaking the participants decide to express their ideas in a different way, or simply follow the thought that has just appeared in their minds. It must be however stated that the cases of restructuring were quite rare, and the analyzed utterances demonstrated careful internal organization and coherence

> B: I in my previous job I had this kind of situation that I …one of the supervisor treat his workers not really not good.

Code switching

A surprising finding concerned the use of L1. Despite the level of proficiency, the speakers found that strategy to be a helpful communication tool. They applied it in the situations when they lacked one lexical item and, as they did not want to interrupt their utterance, the insertion of a Polish word seemed to be a perfect solution. In some cases code switching was combined with direct appeals for help, because rising intonation suggested some uncertainty or hesitation. It is important to notice that in such situations the interlocutors immediately provided the English equivalent of the Polish word.

> B: of course Elizabeth said that … the … her supervisor … krytykuje?
> C: criticizes
> A: yes … but in this situation I think nobody can't go to court and give … ehhhhmmm … would like to nie będzie chciał zeznawać …
> D: testify
> A: testify

Retrieval

Retrieval is another strategy supporting the assumption concerning the speakers' high level of proficiency and the extent of their independence. In this case the interlocutors were searching their linguistic resources trying to recall the missing word. This was done by repeating the initial syllable or the letters of the word so as to stimulate the memory processes. As it was observed, each retrieval ended successfully.

> C: good idea because Elizabeth is fre … fresh workers … worker
> B: firstly you have to speak to … you have to speak to your … your … your billy … bu … bully … you have to speak with your bully.

STALLING / TIME-GAINING STRATEGIES

The observation of the conversation proved that it progressed quite smoothly and fluently. The speakers did not find it necessary to introduce a great number of fillers or hesitation marks. The appearance of self-repetitions is believed to be the method of gaining some more time to organize the thoughts. The repetitions did not display any negative effect on the organization of the sentence structure and they did not lead to the introduction of new syntactical arrangements.

> E: … she should … I don't know … maybe … talk firstly with her and if it … if it doesn't … if it will not … help … she should … report bullying … bullying … to a senior manager in the company … yeah, … that's all …

> D: so if the organization in company and culture in company is … on … not … not … not good … and you want to solve this problem.

SELF-MONITORING STRATEGIES

The occurrence of self-monitoring strategies is the evidence of the speakers' awareness of the language and their desire to retain its correctness. The participants proved to be extremely cautious about the vocabulary and the syntactic structures they used, as they carefully monitored their utterances and opted for corrections whenever a mistake was noticed.

Self-initiated repair

A: because it's not … doesn't solution … any doesn't … solve anything.
B: if the senior manager ... not help … doesn't help … leave the job …

INTERACTIONAL STRATEGIES

It was assumed that since the pilot study was performed in the group consisting of five participants, there would be the abundance of interactional strategies. In fact, the speakers did not resort to them as often as it had been expected. First of all, indirect appeals for help occurred only occasionally, and they were always linked with code switching and the request concerning the translation of a given item. What is more, there were no examples of expressing non-understanding or comprehension checks. The only type of interactional strategies that was noticed concerned the use of clarification requests. One of the participants was not quite able to follow the conversation due to a more limited range of vocabulary. Every time the meaning appeared to be incomprehensible too him, he immediately signaled his problem with the use of a clarification request. Then, the word was usually repeated by one of the speakers and for the sake of clarity the English-Polish translation was provided.

D: but for me and this company mobbing is … according to law … is strictly forbidden …
this situation.
E: strictly what?
D: strictly forbidden … surowo wzbroniony
E: aaaa. I understand

Conclusion

The analysis of the pilot study has led to the conclusion that the speakers were not particularly willing to apply a wide range of communication strategies. That situation might have been conditioned by their high level of language proficiency and the fact that thanks to their professional situation they are used to expressing their messages in a precise and confident manner. The lack of avoidance strategies supports the claim that the participants are determined to communicate successfully and that they do not wish to simplify their message in any way. The impressive range of vocabulary was manifested in the absence of all-purpose words, circumlo-

cutions or approximations. The speakers excelled themselves by being able to apply the exact word that was required in a given speaking context. Additionally, the interlocutors were monitoring their own utterances in a very careful way, which is noticeable in the appearance of self-initiated repair. Apparently, the speakers were concentrated both on the content and the correctness of their messages. Taking those findings into consideration, it is quite startling to notice the participants' preference to opt for code-switching, which is traditionally considered to be the strategy more widespread among lower-proficiency speakers. The occurrence of code switching in the pilot study can be explained by the speakers' conviction that it is an effortless way of accessing the required vocabulary item as quickly as possible. It can be assumed that at a given moment the speakers were mostly focused on their general utterance and an occasional incorporation of a Polish word was not perceived as a mistake. What is more, it was observed that the switch to the native language was a conscious and deliberate action.

Another interesting observation concerned interactional strategies. Despite the democratic nature of the speaking activity, not all the speakers participated to the same extent. Although each of them was provided with the opportunity to express their own opinion, the discussion itself was in fact dominated by the female speakers, who interacted mainly with one another. Even though they occasionally tried to motivate and involve the remaining participants, the male speakers continued to present a reserved and more passive attitude and as a result the distribution of the speaking turns proved to be unequal.

As for the communication activity itself, it proved to be partially successful. Whereas the female speakers found the task motivating and challenging and eagerly discussed various aspects connected with it, the male speakers' participation was far more restricted. Mostly, they assumed the roles of passive listeners and did not make sufficient efforts to become involved in the discussion. Therefore, it can be stated that the analysis of the results showed that the increase of the number of participants does not necessarily influence the amount and the quality of interaction. Despite the encouragement to cooperate with one another, the individual speakers appeared to be more self-oriented than group-focused. That situation might constitute another factor responsible for the limited occurrence of communication strategies.

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