

# Enhancing Learner Autonomy through Communication Strategy Training: A Focus on Monitoring and Reflection

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, oral communication skills are considered to be very important. According to the course of study issued by the Japanese Ministry of Education, the overall objectives are to develop students' practical communication abilities—skills such as understanding information and the speaker's or writer's intentions, expressing their own ideas, deepening understanding of language and culture, and fostering a positive attitude toward communication through foreign language study. Communication ability is a key concept, but what is communicative competence and strategic competence?

Strategic competence has been acknowledged by Canale (1983) as one component of communicative competence with two main roles. One role is to compensate for breakdown in communication and the other is to enhance the effectiveness of communication. Backman & Palmer (1996) regarded strategic competence as the essential ability to use metacognitive strategies in order to solve language-related difficulties in communication. Suitable and specific approaches to communicative language learning must therefore be developed and put into practice in order to help students advance their skills in oral communication. Students often suffer from communication breakdown when talking with native, and even non-native, speakers of English because of such language-based, conceptual, strategic or operational difficulties or deficiencies.

This study explores how learners can enhance their autonomy in communication strategy (CS) training utilizing monitoring and reflection. The teachability of CS has been studied by many researchers (Dörnyei, 1995; Nakatani, 2005; Izumi, 2006, 2008), and they have concluded that CS training is important and necessary. Therefore, a new, holistic and effective syllabus model and guidelines of CS-based instruction—including evaluation—should be designed and implemented for Japanese learners of English in order to improve their strategic competence, especially in speaking. This pilot study, using various kinds of data, proposes a concrete syllabus in the EFL context of Japan and examines its feasibility and effectiveness qualitatively and quantitatively.

## 2. Study Background

According to the semantic representation of communicative competence illustrated by Celce-Murcia, et al. (1995 : 10), strategic competence outlined as a peripheral

element is the most important element supporting four other components (grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and actional competencies). Iwai (2000 : 113), in his integrative model of dimensions and structures that underlie CS use, also places strategic competence in the center of the components.

In terms of the use of strategy and its practical application, Macaro (2006) states that strategy appears to correlate with various aspects of language learning success. Some studies show correlations between generally high strategy use and learning success (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995), or between generally high strategy use and motivation (Nunan, 1997; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989). Some studies have shown a link between success and combinations of strategies; these in turn being allied to metacognition and flexibility of deployment (Chamot & El-Dinary, 1999; Macaro, 2001). In particular, we should keep in mind that strategies are mental operations and focus on metacognition.

Regarding the framework of strategies proposed, a strategy occurs in the brain, and its description comprises a goal, a situation, and a mental action. Further, in relation to language tasks strategies become L2 processes. Successful learning is also linked to a learner's orchestration of the strategies available to him or her, which should be enhanced by strategic training.

In order to validate Macaro's framework, the research here, through small-scaled study, aims to explore and provide the following evidence: (a) that conscious cognitive activity can be described in terms of plan, goal, action and reflection; (b) that strategy clusters can be systematically mapped against L2 tasks; (c) that automatised strategies can be brought back to selective attention and evaluated by learners; (d) that language learning and skills development result from repeated, successful activation of L2 processes—meaning processes of relatively successful application of strategy clusters to L2 communicative tasks. In this research, the author focused on not only teaching CS, but also enhancing metacognitive strategies. For that purpose, a syllabus was developed and verified using the evaluation method proposed by Graves (2000).

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1 Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine the feasibility and effectiveness of a CS curriculum designed to develop strategic competence by implementing CS instruction and evaluation, focusing in particular on monitoring and reflection. The results may provide some pedagogical implications for better CS training. The research hypothesis is that learners can develop their strategic competence by raising their awareness of and focusing their attention on CS use while tackling appropriately level-arranged communicative tasks and in the end enhance their autonomy.

The key concepts in designing the course were to raise learner's awareness of CS use and to develop successful communicators through integration of CS and oral communication skills. For these, the following are important:

- (1) Make the goal of CS training clear so that every student understands what they

- are going to do and what is expected;
- (2) Give explicit instruction on CS use as well as provide general knowledge of CS and task implementation;
  - (3) Motivate learners to pursue the L2 task through their planning of how to do the task and utilize CS, through the monitoring of performance and through pair, as well as individual reflection;
  - (4) Raise learner's awareness of CS use and actually have them use it;
  - (5) Implement various learner-centered communicative tasks as materials for communication skill development, the aim being to develop, complementarily, both communicative skills and metacognitive CS in the process of instruction;
  - (6) Standardize evaluation and verify effects.

### 3.2 Participants

Ten Japanese undergraduate students and 2 foreign exchange students of a national university (5 males and 7 females) participated in an intensive CS training course made up of 12 lessons for 2 weeks (see Table 2). The English levels of the Japanese students were relatively high, from intermediate to advanced. The scores of their vocabulary size test (Mochizuki, et. al., 2003) showed more than 4000 (see Table 1).

Table 1 The English levels of Japanese students<sup>1)</sup>

	vocabulary size test	TOEIC score	STEP test score		vocabulary size test	TOEIC score	STEP test score
A	5933	-	2nd grade	F	5933	785	3rd grade
B	5933	715	Pre-1st grade	G	4067	-	Pre-2nd grade
C	6433	670	Pre-2nd grade	H	5433	-	Pre-2nd grade
D	5633	590	2nd grade	I	4933	675	2nd grade
E	5433	785	3rd grade	J	4011	-	3rd grade

### 3.3 Procedure

Following the curriculum that the author designed, the CS training course was carried out in October, 2007 (see Table 2). The participants were given guidelines in each session, recorded their conversations and transcribed the problematic and successful areas at home in order to identify possible measures for the next lesson. At the same time, participants reflected on their performances individually and in pairs and kept journals. Results were analyzed using 2 strategic competence tests, the Strategic Competence Test for English Learners developed by Tatsukawa et al. (2006), and the Oral Communication Strategy Inventory made by Nakatani (2006). Further analysis was based on conversations before and after the course, questionnaires, a vocabulary size test, the learners' journals, interviews with the instructor, and the transcriptions of the recorded conversations. The topic for pre- and post-tests was the role of the Japanese in an international society.

In each lesson various CS tasks were implemented, organized from 3-minute novice level to advanced level chats, role-plays, simulations, interviews, telephone conversations, picture describing, story-making, discussion, debate, and presentations, all employing the target CS. The key concepts in the course were task-based learning, authentic communicative tasking, learner-centeredness, collaborative learning and integration of speaking activities.

The learners' journals (self-reflection sheets) consisted of three major parts—before, during and after-training tasks—and included goal setting, preparation, task planning and brainstorming, peer reflection and feedback, evaluation (assessment task), peer reflection and evaluation, transcription of the recorded conversation, self reflection and journal writing, and teacher's feedback. The main purposes were to foster students' critical self-awareness while monitoring, reflecting and evaluating their performances both in and outside the class and to enable them to develop their own communication strategies in a consistent manner.

Another aim of the course was to enhance learner autonomy. Participants were asked to record their conversations and transcribe them, focusing on parts where communication breakdown and repairs had occurred. Afterward, they wrote reflective journals to raise their awareness of the CS use. In the process of analyzing, they became aware of their own CS and language use.

Table 2 Syllabus of Strategy-based Training

Les.	Types of CS	Contents of Activities
1	[Introduction, Pretest, Questionnaire]	Conversation in pairs
2	Fillers, Appeal for help (Novice Low-Middle Level)	5 minute chat: "The best memory I have." "Unforgettable events" (personal information / informal / open-ended)
3	Asking for repetition, Confirmation checks (Novice High Level), Repetition, Rephrasing	Description task: "My house/My ideal room" (transactional, information transfer/ closed task)
4	Comprehension checks (Intermediate Low Level) Repetition, Rephrasing	Story-making: "Camping" Narrative, Jigsaw task (information-gap / creative story)
5	Clarification requests, Self-repair, (Intermediate Mid Level) / Time-gaining, Reformulation, Self-correction	Role playing: "Conversation at a mobile phone shop", Simulation: "Complaining to neighbors"
6	Rephrasing, Paraphrasing (Intermediate High - Advanced Low Level), Code-switching, Literal translation	Interview, Debate: "Elementary school children should not have mobile phones."
7	Circumlocution (Advanced Low Level)	Speech
8	Presentation strategies (Advanced Low Level) Rephrasing, Circumlocution	Presentation & answering session (in groups of three): "My hometown", etc. (narration, description)

9	Politeness Strategies, Other-repair (Advanced Mid Level)/ Circumlocution, Formal / Informal, Rephrasing	Skit, Discussion, Problem-solving task (familiar topics)
10	Conversation strategies (Topic shift, Breaking in) (Advanced High Level) Paraphrasing, Circumlocution, Illustration	Discussion, Conversation: "Japanese culture and Canadian culture", "Sightseeing spots in Japan"
11	Turn-taking, Elaboration, Interactive & Discourse Strategies, Feedback (Superior Level)	Picture description: "Inc block" Telephone conversation: "Emergency"
12	[Posttest, Questionnaire, Interview, Vocabulary Size Test]	"What we can contribute to make our world better." "Strengths and weakness of Japanese people"

#### 4. Results and Discussion

Results showed that the self-reflection sheet was useful in increasing and deepening learners' awareness of their strategies and was an encouragement for them to use more CS spontaneously in order to achieve their goals, in turn leading to the development of learner autonomy for successful learning. Other salient features, as well as expected results, were observed.

##### 4.1 Results of pretest and posttest

Analysis by Wilcoxon showed a significant difference between the pretest and posttest, at a level of 5% ( $Z=0.028^*$ ). Significant development was observed between pre- and post-test conversations. During pretest, participants could barely say what they were thinking. They seemed unaccustomed to thinking or speaking in English. There was much hesitation and silence, and much laughter. Further, the duration of each person's speaking was short and conversations were of word-level rather than sentence-level. In posttests of the same participants however, we confirmed that in a short time their conversation had developed in terms of fluency and CS use. They hadn't prepared the conversation beforehand, yet they spoke at natural speed. The flow of the conversation was smooth and they conversed without long pauses or silences, utilizing clarification requests, paraphrasing and confirmation checks. Their thinking and use of words was sometimes elaborate, for example they used proverbs effectively. The level of communication had been enhanced.

##### 4.2 Results of journal writing

The development of participants' autonomy was seen in students' journals as time progressed. One participant reflected on how she has changed her awareness and performance. She wrote, after the second lesson, "I couldn't have a difficult conversation, so I didn't use clarification requests and confirmation checks." Here we can see the interrelation between content, skill and CS use. She also reflected, "We actively talked and talked because the topic was unforgettable events, which was

interesting.” and “It is easy and comfortable to talk because a partner was my friend.” Her reflection shows that theme / topic and pair matching are very important in activating the task.

For lesson 3, she wrote, “When I felt my partner didn’t understand, anyway, I repeated the word and tried to think of another expression while gaining the time.” “At the second task, I made efforts to use fillers to gain time. Although I didn’t acquire the skill yet to the extent I could use the CS automatically and naturally, I attempted to ask for clarification of the words and use inference strategies.” She was able to reflect objectively on what she thought of CS use and was aware of and actually used CS preparation, implementation, monitoring, and observation. Still, difficult situations and troubles were observed in spite of her efforts. Code-switching into Japanese was often seen as well.

In lesson 5, she realized that she could say important things by paraphrasing. Role-playing tasks went smoothly as she had “set the stage” in planning before the task. She and her partner negotiated and proposed a better plan and reconciled it. Utilized CS, she gradually exploited advanced CS—paraphrasing or interrupting—and she became aware of a fixation on certain expressions. At the same time, she became able to use CS spontaneously and automatically although the variety of CS use was limited.

In lesson 7, as the tasks gradually became more difficult, expansion and combination of CS occurred and the responses toward silence and the use of gestures were paid attention to. She was thus able to use particular CS consciously—taking time for thinking, responding, and interrupting. By intentionally setting goals herself and using the CS she had selected beforehand, she easily acquired the targeted CS.

In lesson 10, she reflected on her attempts to use the CS that she had learned in a practical situation of free discussion among students, including Canadian students. She was conscious of her self-instigated improvement. Furthermore, she became aware of the CS use while in conversation, which means her metacognitive abilities were developing. As well, she was able to use various CS selectively for the situation. She wrote, “I could make myself understood and convey the message in some parts and understand my partner’s intention. I was able to use more strategies than before. Conversation went fairly well.”

At the final stage, more changes were observed. She said, “I was able to use CS very well and I thought my oral communication skill was promoted. I proceeded conversation smoothly and succeeded in the task. Especially, I used comprehension strategies like confirmation checks and fillers. I was able to confirm partner’s utterance and ask questions considering the other’s situation. I could support my interlocutor when I understood what she was going to tell, but she sometimes used ungrammatical sentences.” She appeared to have come to use CS consciously in a natural way, and noticed not only success, but also the other persons’ grammatical mistakes and was able to help by means of other-repair or collaborative repair. Her positive contribution can be seen as evidence of her improvement. In this sense, strategic competence should be developed in tandem with linguistic competences such as vocabulary, syntax and

grammatical rules. Although fluency was also enhanced, evidenced in a decrease of silence, in the thinking process, Japanese sometimes appeared. The strong binding between native language and thought cannot be neglected and will take more time to overcome.

### 4.3 Test results

Table 3 Results of Strategic Competence Test for English Learners

Sub-category Strategy groups	Pretest	Posttest
Avoidance or Reduction strategies	83.3%	94.4%
Achievement or Compensatory strategies	93.3%	91.1%
Stalling or Time-gaining strategies	72.2%	77.8%
Self-monitoring strategies	72.2%	72.2%
Interactional strategies	88.9%	95.3%
Appeals for help	100%	96.3%
Meaning negotiation strategies	86.8%	95.1%
Indicators of non/mis-understanding	86.7%	97.8%
Responses	92.1%	93.7%
Comprehension checks	77.8%	94.4%
<b>Average</b>	<b>87.0%</b>	<b>91.9%</b>

Table 3 shows the result of Strategic Competence Test for English Learners. Shown are the mean scores of the university students who participated in the study. The findings show that the avoidance, interactional and meaning negotiation strategies were very well understood. Those strategies are essential to interaction and negotiation with interlocutors; by using those strategies learners can acquire strategic competence in becoming successful communicators. Scores for time-gaining strategies, however, were not very high; self-monitoring strategies as well seemed to be difficult to understand. These are future problems.

Table 4 The Use of Oral Communication Strategy

Production Strategies	Mean	SD	Comprehension Strategies	Mean	SD
A. Social, affective strategies	3.29	0.33	I. Negotiation of meaning	3.53	0.51
B. Fluency	2.97	0.45	J. Fluency of conversation	3.10	0.57
C. Negotiation of meaning	3.23	0.57	K. Scanning	3.75	0.79
D. Accuracy	3.25	0.61	L. Grasping/ understanding of contents	3.75	0.33
E. Simplification of messages	3.75	0.32	M. Non-verbal	3.75	0.71
F. Non-verbal	3.50	0.71	N. Passive attitude	3.31	0.35
G. Avoidance	3.09	0.51	O. Paying attention to vocabulary	3.73	0.41
H. Thinking in English	2.75	0.61	<b>Total of comprehension strategies</b>	<b>3.56</b>	<b>0.52</b>
<b>Total of production strategies</b>	<b>3.23</b>	<b>0.51</b>	<b>Total of strategies</b>	<b>3.38</b>	<b>0.52</b>



Table 4 shows findings of the Oral Communication Strategy Inventory. The participants, using a 5-point Likert scale, answered whether 58 statements were true of their attitude or their way of learning—5 meaning very, 4 quite, 3 somewhat, 2 not very, 1 not at all. Results show that comprehension strategies were used more than production strategies and that the strategies of scanning and grasping contents and paying attention to vocabulary were particularly employed. Also, in production strategies, differences can be observed in fluency, negotiation of meaning, and accuracy. Problems lie especially in fluency. In the present study, participants were not required to pay attention to pronunciation, intonation or rhythm, so their awareness focused mainly on content and task completion. In CS training, both accuracy and fluency are important; however there are several stages in CS training. The aim of the first step is to enhance accuracy. At the second stage, fluency and automaticity should be emphasized.

In more detail, significant differences observed between both pre- and post-tests and OCSI were D19 ( $p < .05$ ) and O23 ( $p < .01$ ). After training, L18 newly appeared to be different ( $p < .05$ ). The differences seen in pretest disappeared in the posttest, C15, D20, E24 ( $p < .05$ )<sup>2</sup>.

Other interesting findings were observed between vocabulary size test and OCSI. The participants who had more vocabulary used the CS of repetition, confirmation checks and conversation and production strategies rather than comprehension strategies. If we accept that vocabulary size has correlations with language proficiency, it can be said that it is relatively easier to improve comprehension strategies over a short time regardless of language proficiency; however, cultivation of production strategies takes much longer and includes the various components of pronunciation, vocabulary, semantics, syntax, pragmatics, and so on. The best solution so far is to develop strategic competence inclusively in the process of developing overall oral communication skills.

#### 4.4 Questionnaire Results

Below are the findings from questionnaires concerning CS use. The number 4 means "I think so." 3 means "I somewhat think so." 2 means "I don't particularly think so." 1 means "I don't think so."

Were following matters effective in the training of the communication strategy?

- ① Learning key expressions (3.2)    ② Planning by myself (3.3)    ③ Task (3.4)
- ④ Pair-Reflection (3.6)    ⑤ Test and evaluation (3.2)    ⑥ Listening to my own  
conversation and performances (3.9)
- ⑦ Transcribing recorded conversation (3.7)
- ⑧ Self-Reflection (3.8)

Most of the participants recognized the importance of monitoring, transcription and self-reflection. Besides this, there are several other interesting findings. After CS training, regardless of individual differences learners came to talk cooperatively while monitoring interlocutors' responses, being conscious of subject and verb or



paraphrasing into more comprehensible expressions. On the other hand, monitoring strategies such as making repairs oneself when one notices grammatical mistakes while speaking, paying attention to emphasized words, tolerance of ambiguity and noticing were used by learners who were able to use strategies effectively. These findings verified previous research that proficient learners can use metacognitive strategies, noticing and tolerance of ambiguity.

#### **4.5 Syllabus evaluation**

This study showed the effectiveness and practicality of a designed syllabus for CS training, and a way of enhancing learner autonomy by cultivating metacognitive strategies. As for evaluation of the course design, the author designed the syllabus according to principles such as a learner-centered curriculum, task-based instruction and learning, preparation of authentic materials and satisfaction of the learner's needs. The results of questionnaires showed learners' satisfaction and the needs of each task, therefore the objectives of this research were mostly attained.

As for the assessment of students' learning, abilities improved qualitatively and quantitatively even from a two-week course. They clearly noticed their improvement and their self-confidence and sense of fulfillment increased. Especially in the areas of speaking, improvement was seen in speech rate, complexity of utterances, vocabulary, total number of T-units and CS use. Although the author did not, because of the small participant numbers, analyze results statistically, this study supports Dörnyei's study (1995) which showed that CS instruction helps improve the quality of learner's utterances.

Lastly, assessing the course, I can say it worked well on the whole. In the interview with the author participants answered that they had enjoyed the course and had wanted to continue the course longer; the tasks had been full of variety and fun to do. The hardest part had been transcribing the recorded conversation, but they nevertheless recognized that the method was effective for understanding their strengths and weaknesses; they were able to focus on problematic and successful areas of CS use. This research made use of key concepts of the so-called "AICRA plan"<sup>3</sup>. They are important components to consider when designing CS training.

### **5. Conclusion and Implications**

There were limitations and challenges in this study. Group size, lack of quantitative verification of CS use, and the veracity of the relationship between English basic proficiency (lexical and grammatical competence) and CS, and between L1 and L2 abilities were all problematic. I can, however, conclude that the CS instruction curriculum was effective in 5 areas: (1) It raised motivation for learning English and developed self-confidence in communicating in English. (2) The differences in strategy use according to language ability could be seen especially in the way of dealing with silences and conversation strategies. (3) It was easier to acquire production and comprehension strategies than to acquire conversation strategies through intensive

training. (4) The various task activities were effective in promoting EFL learners' oral communication skills. (5) In CS training, it is important to take small steps to raise a learner's consciousness of using strategies by encouraging them to use metacognitive strategies and reflective feedback.

Through the course, participants gradually developed their metacognitive strategies; skills such as planning, monitoring their conversation, reflecting on their performance in terms of grammar, vocabulary and discourse. In conclusion, a model of teaching CS in an EFL context was achieved and the next step will be its application to and implementation in language classrooms.

## Notes

1. In terms of the TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) and STEP (the Society for Testing English Proficiency) test, participants declared the scores on their own. Some hadn't taken the TOEIC yet and some had taken the STEP test while in high school.
2. D19: "When the grammatical mistake is noticed, I correct it by myself." O23: "I pay attention to the emphasized word and the word slowly said." L18: "I answer when I roughly understand." C15: "I talk while seeing the other persons' reaction." D20: "I say the subject and the verb firmly." E24: "When I cannot make myself understood, I paraphrase it in other easy words."
3. AICRA is an acronym for authenticity, interaction and integration, collaboration, reflection, awareness and autonomy.

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### **Appendix Task sample**

Discuss the following topics with your partner. Make sure to use the expressions for clarifying, paraphrasing, and restating.

1. Explain how you feel about telling a white lie.
2. Explain the advantages and disadvantages of living with someone before marriage.