

*** Gilmore, A. (2005). Developing Students' Strategic Competence. *OnCUE*: 13/1: 27-30***

Developing Students' Strategic Competence

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Do Japanese students lack strategic competence?

A number of years ago, shortly after my arrival in Japan, I went into a Subway sandwich shop for lunch. At that time I was studying Japanese twice weekly at a language school and approached the challenge of negotiating my sandwich in Japanese with great enthusiasm. Initially, I was successful, "Veggies ando cheezu onegai shimasu, zenbun irete mou ii" but then the young girl behind the counter asked if I wanted *salt*, a word I hadn't yet encountered on my basic Japanese course. I looked confused and said "Sumimasen?" at which point the girl panicked and dashed off to get her supervisor who strolled over with a very fluent "Yes sir, how can I help you?" I had failed in my attempts to resolve the communication problem but the failure was due not to me, but rather to my speaking partner who had avoided the process of 'negotiation of meaning' by running away. It would have been very easy for her, at the point of the breakdown in our communication, to hold up the salt shaker, point at it and say "kore wa shio des, hoshii desu ka?" thus allowing me to develop my vocabulary and exploit this learning opportunity, but she didn't.

This type of scenario must be all too familiar to teachers in Japan. It has already been well documented in the literature (e.g., Brown, 1979) and clearly indicates a lack of strategic competence. Strategic competence refers to a speaker's ability to exploit verbal or non-verbal communication strategies when communication problems arise, compensating for deficiencies in other areas of competence (Canale and Swain 1980; Celce-Murcia, Dornyei & Thurrell, 1995). Why is it that Japanese students seem to lack strategic competence, even in their own language? The answer may stem from the fact that Japan is not a multi-cultural society so instances of communication breakdown between interlocutors are limited. In a homogeneous community, speaker styles converge so that the possibility of misunderstandings (which trigger the deployment of communication strategies) are minimised. It may also be due to the fact that Japanese is more ritualised than many other languages; for many communicative events, there are often a very limited number of preferred responses. This has also been remarked on in the literature, for example Loveday (1982: 7) gave Japanese and English native speaker informants a questionnaire asking: 1) What would you say to someone who saved you from drowning? And; 2) What would you say to someone who gave you a present? The majority of the Japanese used the same formula to respond to both cues while the English-speaking informants showed a preference for more individualised and varied responses. This, of course, is not meant to be judgemental in any way. Both interaction styles achieve their own aims in the context in which they are produced; the Japanese stressing group harmony and the English speakers stressing differences.

How can we develop students' strategic competence in the classroom?

Developing strategic competence is something which can, and should, be done very early on in students' English language learning careers since the 'linguistic tools' needed are fairly basic and the skill of being able to negotiate meaning when communication breakdown occurs will increase their confidence and aid their L2 acquisition. Below, I outline one way for teachers to begin developing this type of competence in their learners in the hope that it may be of some use to other teachers. The activities are based loosely around a listening activity from *Learning to Learn English* (Ellis & Sinclair, 1989) – a book which comes highly recommended as a useful source for learner training – but teachers can easily adapt the procedure by recording native speakers role-playing a similar scenario. I usually introduce these communication strategies over two lessons and then try to recycle the language throughout the course where instances of communication breakdown occur in class.

Day 1

1. Hold up an unusual object (for example, a bottle opener/ corkscrew) and tell students that you want to buy one of these in a shop but don't know the name in English. Ask students to brainstorm ideas in pairs then conduct a feedback session, summarising their ideas on the whiteboard and adding any strategies that they miss. You should end up with the following list:

- a) Using a foreign word: *I'd like to buy a "wain oupunaa".*
- b) Describing what an object is for: *It's used **for opening** wine bottles/ It's used **to open** wine bottles.*
- c) Describing what an object looks like or is made of: *It looks (a bit) like a screw with handles/It's silver (brainstorm other colours)/ It's about – cm long/wide/tall/ It's about this big (demonstrate with gestures)/ It's made of metal or plastic (brainstorm other types of material).*
- d) Using a word close in meaning (e.g. a hyponym or superordinate): *It's like a big screw/ It's a kind of kitchen equipment.*
- e) Inventing a new word or expression: *I'd like a cork puller.*
- f) Using a substitute word: *It's a thingy / thingummyjig / thingummybob / watchamacallit for opening wine bottles.*
- g) Other strategies: *mime / drawing / noises*

2. Learners next listen to three native speakers trying to buy an unknown object in a hardware store and have to try to guess what it is. In *Learning to Learn English*, the object sought is a rawl plug, an item, which is unfamiliar to most Japanese, but this is not of major importance since the focus of the activity is on how the native speakers use communication strategies to negotiate meaning. Teachers might like to re-record similar interactions using an object more familiar in Japan; if this is the case, make sure that the full range of strategies are employed in the listening activity.

After this gist listening task, learners listen to the tape again and note down which strategies are used by each speaker. At the post-listening stage, students can be given the tape script to check their answers and asked to underline all examples of strategies used by the native speakers.

3. Highlight the target language and focus on pronunciation problems with some quick choral/individual drilling. Areas to focus on might include the pronunciation of the substitute words, the use of the weak form (schwa) and linking in, *It's a kind of... or It's used to... etc.*

4. Hand out a couple of other unusual objects (or pictures of objects) and ask pairs to work together describing them using all of the seven strategies focused on above and summarise their ideas on the whiteboard.

Day 2

1. Review the communication strategies taught in the previous lesson and hand out sheets with around 10 pictures of unfamiliar objects on them. I use pictures of nutcrackers, tweezers, razor blades, hinges, hot water bottles, jack plugs, hampers, wallets, dummies (pacifiers), clothes racks and so on. Ask pairs to work together to describe each of the objects using as many of the strategies as possible. They should be able to come up with descriptions such as: *It's a thingummyjig used for opening nuts/ It looks like the letter 'V' and it has teeth in the bottom part/ It's made of metal/ It's about 20 cm long/It's a kind of kitchen*

equipment/It's a nut-breaker. The teacher should monitor carefully during this writing stage, helping individuals and correcting any mistakes.

2. Students then form new pairs and describe objects at random to their partner who tries to guess what is being talked about. Again, the teacher monitors and notes down examples of particularly successful or unsuccessful strategies for feedback at the post-speaking stage.

3. The final stage is to see how well students can use these communication strategies *without* preparation. Prepare some more pictures of unusual objects and tape one picture onto each student's back. Allow students to stand up and mingle, describing the objects on other people's backs. After 10 minutes or so, the students should have a good idea what object they have on their back.

Conclusion

Communication strategies are extremely important for Japanese learners and, as shown above, can be taught quite simply even to fairly low-level students. As well as giving learners the linguistic tools to effectively use communication strategies it is also important to encourage a change in attitude in the classroom: to see breakdown in communication not as some insurmountable obstacle to be avoided but as a wonderful opportunity for learning. This message needs to be reinforced in each lesson through the teacher's own attitude to communication problems. If students don't know a word in English, they should be encouraged to

describe it rather than looking for an instantaneous translation in their bilingual dictionaries. If the students don't understand a word used by the teacher, he or she should use it as an opportunity to review the strategies taught earlier without supplying the meaning in Japanese. Most importantly, students should be encouraged to relax in the face of communication breakdown. In cosmopolitan Western cultures, people tend to be very familiar with this type of problem and are not at all embarrassed – learners need to develop a similar type of confidence.

References

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