# LEARNER STRATEGIES FOR COMMUNICATION IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE GENUINE SPEAKING CLASSROOMS

MILLY ANDREA MUÑOZ FANDIÑO UNIVERSIDAD DEL CAUCA E-Mail:mamunoz@ucauca.edu.co

<sup>™</sup>his paper aims to emphasize the importance of learner strategies for communication in foreign language genuine speaking classrooms. It summarizes some of the background of learner strategies; defines the concept of these strategies proposed by several researchers, and outlines the author's taxonomy of learner strategies for communication adapted from Faerch, C. & Kasper, G. (see Chart 1) It also discusses the Observation Scheme Form (OSF) designed by Muñoz (see Chart 2) that teachers may follow when using learner strategies for communication in their foreign language genuine speaking classes. Besides, this paper summarizes key reflections and poses questions for further research on this aspect of L2/FL education.

#### I. INTRODUCTION

There has been a prominent shift within the field of language learning and teaching over the last twenty years with greater emphasis being put on learners and learning rather than on teachers and teaching. Parallel with this new shift of interest, the way learners process new information and the kind of strategies they employ to understand, learn or remember the information have been the primary concern of many researchers dealing with the area of foreign language learning. Accordingly, the first section of this paper outlines

some of the background of communication strategies; it summarizes key points from the learner strategies literature and gives various definitions presented by several researchers. The second section shows the author's design of the taxonomy of learner strategies for communication. The third section considers some practical issues related to the use learner strategies for communication, outlining the Observation Scheme Form (OSF), which may be implemented in foreign language genuine speaking classrooms. Extensive investigation has shown the importance of learner strategies in making language learning more efficient and in producing a positive effect on learners' language use (Wenden and Rubin, 1987; O'Mallev and Chamot, 1990; Chamot and O'Malley, 1994; Oxford, 1996, Cohen, 1998). With that in mind, the development of effective means of accommodating learner strategies for communication in the actual language use is an increasingly important focus of research and inquiry, especially on the importance of how the use of these learner strategies for communication affects the oral communication in foreign language genuine speaking classrooms. In the last section, the paper briefly exhibits some final considerations and discusses some important issues and questions for further research on this topic.

## II.COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

By: Milly Andrea Muñoz FandiñoThere are numerous schools of thought and a range of methods and techniques for carrying out communication analysis. Research communication strategies began in the 1960s. In the 1970s, four studies prepared the ground for the study of communication strategies, a new area of research within applied linguistics. Selinker's (1972) classic article on interlanguage introduced the notion of strategies of L2 communication. Váradi (1973 but published in 1980), Tarone (1977), and Tarone, Cohen & Dumas (1976) elaborated on Selinker's notion by providing a systematic analysis of communication strategies. introducing many of the categories and terms used in subsequent communication strategies' research. Savignon (1972) reported on a pioneering language teaching experiment involving communicative approach, which, for the first time, included student training communication strategies.

## III. LEARNER STRATEGIES AT HAND

A. Historical view of Learner Strategies for Communication

In most of the research on communication strategies, the



primary concern has been on identifying what the good language learners report they do to learn a second or foreign language, or, in some cases, they are observed doing while learning a second or foreign language (Rubin and Wenden 1987). In 1966, Aaron Carton published his study entitled The Method of Inference in Foreign Language Study, which was the first attempt on learner strategies. After Carton, in 1971, Rubin started doing research focusing on the strategies of successful learners and stated that, once identified, such strategies could be made available to less successful learners. Rubin (1975) classified strategies in terms of processes contributing directly or indirectly to language learning. Wong-Fillmore (1976), Tarone (1977), Naiman et al. (1978), Bialystok (1979), Cohen and Aphek (1981), Wenden (1982), Chamot and O'Malley (1987), Politzer and McGroarty (1985), Conti and Kolsody (1997), and many others studied strategies used by language learners during their process of foreign language learning.

In a helpful survey article, Weinstein and Mayer (1986) defined learner strategies broadly as "behaviors and thoughts that a learner engages in during learning" which are "intended to influence the learner's encoding process." Later, Mayer (1988) more specifically defined learner strategies as "behaviors of a learner that are intended to influence how the learner processes information." These early definitions from the educational literature reflect the roots of learner strategies in cognitive science, with its essential assumptions that human beings process information and that learning involves such information processing. Clearly, learner strategies are involved in all learning, regardless of the content and context. Learner strategies are thus used in learning and teaching math, science, history, languages and other subjects, both in classroom settings and more informal learning environments. In the rest of this paper, the focus will specifically be on learner strategies for communication in foreign language genuine speaking classrooms.

Many researchers have defined the term learner strategies for communication. Wenden and Rubin (1987) define learner strategies as "... any sets of operations, steps, plans, routines used by the learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval, and use of information." Richards and Platt (1992) state that learner strategies are "intentional behavior and thoughts used by learners during learning so as to better help them understand, learn, or remember new information." Faerch & Kasper (1983) stress that a learner strategy is "an attempt to develop linguistic and sociolinguistic competence in the target language". According to Stern (1992), "the concept of learner strategies is dependent on the assumption that learners consciously engage in activities to achieve certain goals and learner strategies can be regarded as broadly conceived intentional directions and learning techniques". All language learners use learner strategies either consciously or unconsciously when processing new information and performing tasks in the language classroom. Since language classroom is like a problem-solving environment in which language learners are likely to face new input and difficult tasks given by their instructors, learners' attempts to find the quickest or easiest way to do what is required, that is, using learner strategies is inescapable. Learner strategies language learners use during the act of processing the new information and performing tasks have been identified and described by researchers. In the following section, how various researchers have categorized learner strategies will be shortly summarized.

Within L2/FL education, a number of definitions of learner strategies for communication have been used by key figures in the field. Early on, Tarone (1983) defined a learner strategy for communication as "an attempt to develop linguistic and sociolinguistic competence in the target language to incorporate

these into one's interlanguage competence." Rubin (1987) later wrote that learner strategies for communication "are strategies which contribute to the development of the language system which the learner constructs and affect learning directly." In their seminal study, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) defined learner strategies as "the special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information." Finally, building on work in her book for teachers (Oxford, 1990/1992/1993) provides specific examples of learner strategies for communication and this helpful definition: ...language learner strategies... specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques that students (often intentionally) use to improve their progress in developing L2 skilearner strategies. These strategies can facilitate the internalization, storage, retrieval, or use of the new language. Strategies are tools for the self-directed involvement necessary developing communicative ability (Oxford, 1992/1993). From these definitions, we should note that learner strategies are distinct from learner styles, which refer more broadly to a learner's "natural, habitual, and preferred way(s) of absorbing, processing, and retaining new information and skilearner strategies" (Reid, 1995), though there appears to be an obvious relationship between one's language learner style and his or her usual or preferred language learner strategies.

## 1. Characteristics of Learner Strategies for Communication

Although the terminology is not always uniform, with some writers using the terms "learner strategies" (Wendin & Rubin, 1987), others "learning strategies" (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Chamot & O'Malley, 1994), and still others "language learning strategies" (Oxford, 1990a, 1996), there are a number of basic characteristics in the generally accepted view of learner strategies. First, learner strategies are learner generated; they are steps taken by



language learners. Second, learner strategies enhance language learning and help develop language competence, as reflected in the learner's skilearner strategies in listening, speaking, reading, or writing the L2 or FL. Third, learner strategies may be visible (behaviors, steps, techniques, etc.) or unseen (thoughts, mental processes). Fourth, learner strategies involve information and memory (vocabulary knowledge, grammar rules, etc.). Reading the learner strategies literature, it is clear that a number of many other aspects of learner strategies are less accepted.

## 2. The importance of Learner Strategies for Communication in L2/FL learning and teaching

Within "communicative" approaches to language teaching a key goal is for the learner to develop communicative competence in the target L2/FL, and learner strategies for communication can help students in doing so. After Canale and Swain's (1980) influential article recognized the importance of communication strategies as a key aspect of strategic (and thus communicative) competence, a number of works appeared about communication strategies in L2/FL teaching. An important distinction exists, however, between learner strategies for communication and learner strategies. Learner strategies for communication are used by speakers, consciously or unconsciously in order to cope with difficulties in communicating in a L2/ FL (Bialystok, 1990). The term learner strategies is used more generally for all strategies that L2/ FL learners use in learning the target language, and learner strategies for communication are therefore just one type of learner strategies. For all L2 teachers who aim to help their students develop the communicative competence and language learning, then, an understanding of learner strategies for communication is crucial.

## B. Taxonomy of Learner Strategies for Communication

Learner Strategies for Communication, have been classified by many scholars (Wenden and Rubin 1987; O'Malley et al. 1985; Oxford 1990; Stern 1992; Ellis 1994, etc.). However, most of these attempts to classify learner strategies reflect more or less the same categorizations of language learner strategies without any radical changes. In what follows, the author's taxonomy of learner strategies communication adapted from Faerch & Kasper will be handled.

## Muñoz's (2001) Taxonomy of Learner Strategies for Communication

Muñoz sees the aim of learner strategies as being oriented towards the development of communicative competence. These strategies are less directly related to language learning since their focus is on the process of participating in a conversation and getting meaning across or clarifying what the speaker intended. Learner strategies for communication are used by speakers when faced with some difficulties due to the fact that their communication ends outrun their communication means or when confronted with misunderstanding by a co-speaker. She divides learner strategies for communication into two consciously and unconsciously main classes, Achievement Strategies and Reduction Strategies, which are further subdivided into four main subcategories: Guessina Strategies, Paraphrasing Strategies, Co-operating Strategies and Avoiding Strategies (see Graphic 1). In Muñoz's classification, learner strategies for communication help learners to regulate their learning; these strategies are also concerned with the learner's emotional requirements such as confidence, and they lead learners to increase interaction with the target language. Muñoz's (2001) taxonomy of learner strategies for communication is shown in the following chart.

#### Chart 1

Muñoz's Taxonomy of Learner Strategies for Communication

## 1. A C H I E V E M E N T STRATEGIES:

ways of communicating an idea when the speaker lacks the normal words or structures.

- a. GUESSING STRATEGIES: they refer to the steps or operations used in learning or problem solving that requires direct analysis, transformation, or synthesis of learning materials. They are also used to oversee, regulate or self-direct language learning.
- Literal Translation: the learner translates word by word from the native language. (To my mind was very confuse. I throw the house to the window. My friends hope by me. I have 11 years).
- Foreignizing: using a L1 word by adjusting it to L2 phonologically. (I conduited the car. When we arrived to the terminal. Computation).
- Language Switch: the learner employs his/her native language term without bothering to translate. (I think that the politicas actuales don't sirven).
- b. PARAPHRASING STRATEGIES: techniques used by learners so as to keep a conversation going. The purpose of using these techniques is to avoid interrupting the flow of communication
- Circumlocution: learner describes the qualities or elements of the object or action instead of using the appropriate target language item or structure. (When we are learning how to speak the language which is used in the country where were born. This was not a nice dream, it was a terrible dream, and it was scary. The thing you open bottles with).
- Word Coinage: creating a non-existing L2 word based on a supposed rule; learner makes up a new word in order to communicate a desired concept. (I could not



record my dream. Falsificate. Natation).

- Approximation: using a single target language vocabulary item or structure, which the learner knows is incorrect, but shares enough semantic features with the intended item to satisfy the speaker. (I didn't end to read the article).
- c.CO-OPERATING STRATEGIES: it can be stated that they are related with socialmediating activity and transacting with others.
- o Appeal for Assistance: It is used when all else fails. Learners ask for help (How can I pronounce requirement? How do you say partitura? What does it means?).
- Mime, Gestures, Facial Expressions: the learner employs nonverbal means instead of using appropriate lexical item or action.
- Sound Imitation: learner's attempt to develop linguistic and sociolinguistic competence in the target language and to decipher incoming utterances efficiently with the least effort (paying attention to word endings, stressed syllables, etc).

## 2. REDUCTION STRATEGIES:

ways in which the speaker can maintain communication by adapting or reducing his or her message when lacking the necessary language.

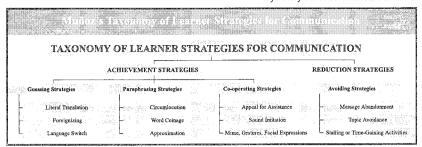
AVOIDING STRATEGIES: the learner tries not to talk about concepts for which the target language vocabulary or structure is not known.

- Message Abandonment: the learner starts to talk about an idea/ concept but is unable to continue and stops in mid-utterance. (I don't know ... what else?).
- Topic Avoidance: the learner starts talking about a topic but abandons it because he is unable to continue.
- Stalling or time-gaining activities: they are used by speakers

to gain time and help them to think about what they want to say. (ohm, ahh, well..., let me think...)

#### Graphic 1

By: Milly Andrea Muñoz Fandiño



It is important to underline that Muñoz's taxonomy defines learner strategies for communication as learner's patterns of using what they know as they try to communicate with speakers of the target language. Learner strategies for communication are used to bridge the gap between the linguistic knowledge of the second-language learner and the linguistic knowledge of the target language interlocutor in foreign language genuine speaking classrooms. The author believes that speakers, to bridge the gap, may use Guessing Strategies. Paraphrasing Strategies and Cooperating Strategies. Avoiding Strategies are used where the gap between the speakers is considered unbridgeable.

## IV. THE OBSERVATION SCHEME FORM (OSF)

The importance of being attentive about the use of learner strategies for communication in a foreign language genuine speaking classroom is analyzed in this section. In doing so, as language classrooms are specifically constituted to bring about learning, it is not unreasonable to collect data about what goes on there as a means of adding to our knowledge of language learning and use. For that reason, an Observation Scheme Form was specially designed to help teachers to collect information and enable the observer to describe as precisely as possible

some of the features of verbal communication, which occur in foreign language classrooms. This is the scheme, which after continual use will permit the teacher to determine how the use of learner strategies for communication affects the oral communication in foreign language genuine speaking classrooms.

In order to make Muñoz's model easier for teachers to understand and use, it is necessary to simplify the terminology and reduce and clarify the options. This is done by eliminating extraneous options, simplifying the terminology, and reorganizing the internal relational logic of the model's hierarchy. Such adjustments are necessary in order for teachers to be able to better understand the overall model, as well as to be able to orient themselves in the overall scheme of the strategy scheme and to select appropriate strategies. This model then becomes an integral part of the OSF. The material that teachers might use in this simplified scheme includes specific descriptions and explanations, instructions for and examples of use, and exercises for specific strategies. See the OSF below for a more holistic presentation of the simplified model.

See chart on top part of next page



## B. Analyzing the OSF

It is particularly relevant to note that the OSF can benefit foreign language classrooms in the sense that it gives beholders/teachers the opportunity to withdraw interpretations and to get into conclusions of the information collected during the process of observation, which allows beholders to establish the weaknesses and the strengths of learner strategies to manipulate classroom settings such as the methodology implemented in conversational situations, choosing of learner oriented topics. teachability of the strategies and so on.

## C. Importance of Language Learning Strategies in Foreign Language Genuine Speaking Classrooms

Since the amount of information to be processed by language learners is high in language classroom. learners use different language learning strategies in performing the tasks and processing the new input they face. Learner strategies are good indicators of how learners approach tasks or problems encountered during the process of language learning. In other words, learner strategies, while non observable unconsciously used in some cases, give language teachers valuable clues about how their students assess the situation, plan, select appropriate skills so as to understand, learn, or remember new input presented in the language classroom. According Fedderholdt (1997), the language learner capable of using a wide variety of learner strategies appropriately can improve his language skills in a better way. Lessard-Clouston (1997:3) states that learner strategies for communication contribute to the development of the communicative competence of the students. It follows from this that language teachers interested in helping students and language learning develop the communicative competence should be familiar with learner strategies for Besides communication.

#### **OBSERVATION SCHEME FORM (OSF)**

SPEAKER:	yach r	DATE:		LEVEL: _		
			SUCCESS		INFLUENCE	
STRATEGIES TO BE OBSERVED	USE	EXAMPLES		REASONS		HOW
LITERAL TRANSLATION	YES		YES		(+)	
	МО		NO		(-)	
	YES		YES TO THE T		: (+)	
FOREIGNIZING	NO		NO :		(-)	
	YES		YES		(+)	
CIRCOMLOCUTION	NO		NO ·		(-)	
WORD	YES		YES		(+)	
COINAGE	NO		NO		(-)	
APPEAL FOR	YES		YES		(+)	
ASSISTANCE	NO		NO		(-)	
MESSAGE	YES		YES		· (+)	
ABANDONMENT	NO		NO		(-)	

Design: Milly Andrea Muñoz Fandiño

## A. Making use of the Observation Scheme Form (OSF)

With the above background on Learner Strategies for Communication and some of the related literature, this section provides an overview of how the OSF may be used in foreign language genuine speaking classrooms and briefly describes a five-step instruction to observe and analyze learner strategies for communication.

## Instructions for filling out the OSF

1. Create the appropriate communicative environment. It seems convenient to underline the fact that before researchers/ beholders complete the OSF, it is necessary for them to create the appropriate environment without fears or anxieties; a good relationship based on confidence in

the class must be fostered as well, so that students can freely express themselves, communicate their ideas, opinions, wishes, etc., and gain confidence when they speak in the classroom.

- 2. Listen to what the learners/ speakers say and fill in by marking YES or NO in the corresponding box.
- 3. Transcribe what it is been said at the time of speaking and classify the information into the corresponding learner strategy.
- 4. Decide if the learner strategies used by the student/ speaker are successful or not. Write down the reasons of your response.
- 5. Tick/cross/mark either the positive (+) or negative (-) influence box to determine how the use of learner strategies for communication affects the oral communication.



developing the communicative competence of the students, teachers, who know which strategies students use at the time of speaking, can help them become better language learners.

# D. The Teacher's Role in Foreign Language Genuine Speaking Classrooms.

The language teacher who aims to improve oral communication in his classrooms should learn about the students, their interests, motivations, and learning styles. The teacher can learn what learner strategies for communication students appear to be using, observing their behavior in class. Do they ask for clarification, verification or correction? Do they cooperate with their peers or seem to have much contact outside the class with proficient foreign language users? Besides observing their behavior in class, the teacher can prepare a short questionnaire so that students can fill in at the beginning of a course to describe themselves and their language learning. Thus, the teacher can learn the students' purpose of learning a language, their favorite/least favorite kinds of class activities, and the reason why they learn a language. The teacher can have adequate knowledge about the students, their goals, motivations, learner strategies for communication. and understanding of the course to be taught. It is a fact that each learner within the same classroom may have different learning styles and varied awareness of the use of strategies. The teacher cannot attribute importance to only one group and support the analytical approach or only give input by using the auditory mode. Therefore, it can be stated that the most important teacher's role in foreign language genuine speaking classrooms is the provision of a range of tasks and activities to match varied learner strategies.

The language teacher should also study his own teaching method and overall classroom style. Analyzing his lesson plans, the language teacher can determine

whether his lesson plans give learners chance to use a variety of strategies learner communication or not. The teacher can see whether his teaching allows learners to approach the task at hand in different ways or not. It should be emphasized that questioning himself about what he plans to do before each lesson and evaluating his lesson plan after the lesson in terms of how the use of learner strategies communication affects oral communication in his classroom. the teacher can become better prepared to focus on learner strategies during the process of his teaching.

#### V. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Communicating in a foreign language involves a great deal more than acquiring some grammar and vocabulary and a reasonable pronunciation. It involves the competence to suit the language to the situation, the participant and the basic purpose; it involves the competence to interpret other speakers to the full, and to alter our behavior to suit the occasion. It implies also to use techniques, tactics, potentially conscious plans, cognitive abilities, problem solving procedures, etc., that can serve as effective tools in solving oral communication problems, which contribute to our success when speaking a foreign language. Learner strategies, being specific actions, behaviors, tactics, or techniques, facilitate the learning of the target language by the language learner. All language learners, needless to say, use learner strategies in the learning process. Since the factors like age, gender, personality, motivation, selfconcept, life-experience, learning style, excitement, anxiety, etc. affect the way in which language learners learn the target language, it is not reasonable to support the idea that all language learners use the same good learner strategies or should be oriented in using and developing the same strategies to become successful learners.

strategies Learner communication help students to talk and use the language spontaneously, their use allows students to find the words or expressions to meet their oral communication needs; this is a creative job, which contributes to express students' ideas in various improve and to ways communication. It is particularly relevant to note that learner strategies for communication are very important because they permit the learner to remain in the conversation by assisting students to face oral communication problems in foreign language genuine speaking classrooms.

Now then, the success in students' oral communication depends a lot in their desire of communicating in a foreign language and in their ability to use the knowledge previously acquired. If learners use the strategies for communication in response to different kinds of communication problems or needs, they can benefit effective learning communication strategies such as Paraphrasing, Circumlocution, Approximation, Using Gestures, and asking others to repeat or speak more slowly or asking for help. Learners must be encouraged to use communication strategies rather than remain silent. If they cannot produce grammatically accurate forms, they must be given the opportunity to use them. By continual exposure to natural conversation, learners may also learn through opportunities to hear more of the target language, and through opportunities to produce new utterances and test their knowledge.

Hence, learner strategies for communication affect positively the oral communication in foreign language genuine speaking classrooms, because they provide students with the opportunity of transmitting their messages and being an active part of oral communication in foreign language genuine speaking classrooms, strategies bring students the language they need to communicate freely in the target



language and create relaxed class environments, which encourages students to be willing to take risks, and thus improve the level of oral communication (Arenas et al. 2001).

Studies to be done on learner strategies for communication should move beyond descriptive taxonomies of learner strategies and attempt to seek for answers to a wide range of questions, such as: What types of learner strategies appear to work best with what learners in which contexts? Do

learner strategies for communication transfer easily between L2 and FL contexts? What is the role of language proficiency strategies learner in communication use? How long does it take to observe certain learner strategies in specific learners? How can one best assess and measure success in learner strategies use? Are certain learner strategies easier to use in classroom and nonclassroom contexts? What learner strategies for communication should be taught at different proficiency levels? It can be expected that answers for these questions and other ones from research in a variety of settings will pave the way for building the theory that seems necessary for more language learning strategies work to be relevant to current L2/FL teaching practice.

#### NOTES

- 1 Foreign language genuine speaking classrooms: these are classrooms that have been specifically constituted for oral communication teaching purposes and not for the purpose of collecting data for research.
- 2 Oral communication is considered to be positively affected if the use of learner strategies help

the speaker to remain in the conversation and solve his/her oral communication problems, and it is considered to be negatively affected if the use of these strategies interrupt communication or if the message does not reach the audience/listener.

3 SUGGESTION: Recording conversation classes gives researchers the opportunity to better complete and analyze the OSF.



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