



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Strategic Competence and its implication in language teaching

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### Abstract

*Strategic competence is one type of communicative competence among others which have been postulated by Canale and Swain in 1980 as ‘verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient competence’. It refers to the ability to get one’s meaning across successfully to communicative partners, especially when problems arise in the communication process, and the ability to convey information to a listener and correctly interpret information received. It has great implications in language teaching by determining the main ability of learners’ communicative competence.*

Keywords: Strategic competence, implication, language teaching

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In language proficiency competence and performance is the basic thing. Underlining this communicative competence is important to perform well the target language. Communicative competence is a combination of language knowledge and other aspects of language use with skill essential for communication (Canale & Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983 cited in Altun, 2015:16). The aim of communicative language teaching is to improve the communicative competence of students (Meenakshi, 2015).

So, in communicative competence there are four components which are grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence. Canale and Swain (1980) cited in Tarone (1983:122) have shown that communicative competence incorporates at least three: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. A fourth component, discourse competence, was later added.

This paper mainly focused on strategic competence including its components which are reduction or avoidance strategies and achievement or compensatory strategies have been also discussed.

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## 2 | STRATEGIC COMPETENCE

### 2.1 | Basic Concept of Strategic Competence

Strategic competence is one type of communicative competence among others which have been postulated by Canale and Swain in 1980. Strategic competence defined by Canale and Swain (1980: 30) cited in Thurrell, (1991) as ‘verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient competence’. Moreover, Canale and Swain (1980) cited in Tarone (1983:122) have shown that communicative competence incorporates at least three: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence.

Although different scholars have explained strategic competence in different ways, there is no big difference among their explanation. Some of their explanations are as follow:

*“Strategic competence refers to the ability to get one’s meaning across successfully to communicative partners, especially when problems arise in the communication process” (Thurrell, 1991:17).*

According to Tarone (1983):

*“Strategic competence is the ability to convey information to a listener and correctly interpret information received; it includes the use of communication strategies to solve problems that arise in the process of conveying this information” (p.123).*

*“Strategic competence is as a speaker’s ability to use strategies to compensate for gaps in their knowledge of the target language” (Littlemore and Low, 2006:177).*

*“Strategic competence is the knowledge of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies which enhance the efficiency of communication and, where necessary, enable the learner to overcome difficulties when communication breakdowns occur.” (Celce-Murcia, et al, 1995:7).*

Form the above scholars we can summarize that, strategic competence refers to the ability to get one’s meaning across successfully to communicative partners, especially when problems arise in the communication process. Strategic competence is relevant to

both L1 and L2, since communication breakdowns occur and must be overcome not only in a foreign language but in one’s mother tongue as well. However, since strategic competence involves strategies to be used when communication is difficult, it is of crucial importance for foreign language learners. A lack of strategic competence may account for situations when students with a firm knowledge of grammar and a wide range of vocabulary get stuck and are unable to carry out their communicative intent. At oral language exams such students may even fail, and their teachers often cannot comprehend how that could happen to their ‘best students’. On the other hand, there are learners who can communicate successfully with only one hundred words-they rely almost entirely on their strategic competence.

In the last decade, the study of communication strategies has attracted increasing attention (see, for example, Varadi, 1980; Corder, 1981; Faerch and Kasper, 1983; Scholfield, 1987; Rubin, 1987; Tarone and Yule, 1989). But, as Ellis (1985: 183) cited in Dörnyei and Thurrell (1991) remarks, ‘Theoretical discussion of communication strategies has predominated over empirical research into their use.’ Available empirical results confirm anecdotal evidence and theoretical assumptions that strategic competence exists fairly independently of the other components of communicative competence. Paribakht (1985) cited in Dörnyei and Thurrell (1991), for example, found that strategic competence in L1 is transferable to L2 learning situations, and thus adult learners often enter the L2 learning situation with a fairly developed strategic competence.

If strategic competence is not directly dependent on the other components of language proficiency, then it should be possible to cultivate it separately. In fact, O’Malley’s (1987) research provides some evidence for the teachability of strategic competence. He concludes that:

*“Teachers should be confident that there exist a number of strategies which can be embedded into their existing curricula, that can be taught to students with only modest extra effort, and that can improve the overall class performance” (p. 143).*

As we have realized the above scholars’ point of view towards strategic competence, it can be con-

cluded that strategic competence means being systematic at unwanted communicative interruption that is used to prevent a breakdown in conversation. It is a crucial component of communicative competence mainly determining the learner's fluency and conversational skills.

## 2.2 | Models or Components of Strategic Competence

Strategic competence is knowledge of communication strategies and how to use them. Bachman and Palmer's (1996); Canal and Swain's (1980), work on communication strategies has typically highlighted three functions of strategy use from three different perspectives:

**Psycholinguistic perspective:** Communication strategies are verbal plans used by speakers to overcome problems in the planning and execution stages of reaching a communicative goal.

**Interactional perspective:** Communication strategies involve appeals for help as well as other cooperative problem-solving behaviors which occur after some problem has surfaced during the course of communication, that is, various types of negotiation of meaning and repair mechanisms.

**Communication continuity/maintenance perspective:** Communication strategies are means of keeping the communication channel open in the face of communication difficulties, and playing for time to think and to make (alternative) speech plans.

Canal and Swain's, and Bachman and Palmer's models of strategic competence in communicative competence. First, Canal and Swain's (1980), since the main concern of this paper is strategic competence, we shall examine the ideas of other researchers concerning this component of communicative competence. According to Canale and Swain (1980), strategic competence consists of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies. While, Bachman (1990) stated that strategic competence is regarded as one of the fundamental components of communicative language ability.

According to Bachman (1990) strategic competence embraces all aspects of the assessment, planning and execution of communicative tasks. He sees strategic

competence not only as a component of communicative competence, but also as a more general cognitive capacity. Bachman and Palmer (1996:70) find that these components together comprise "a set of meta-cognitive processes, or strategies," which can be thought of as higher order executive processes that provide a cognitive management function in language use, as well as in other cognitive activities". Those other cognitive activities include language learning and all its ramifications.

Strategic competence emphasizes the importance of compensating for linguistic deficits in language:

*This component will be made up of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient competence. Such strategies will be one of two main types: those that relate primarily to grammatical competence (e.g. how to paraphrase grammatical forms that one has not mastered or cannot recall momentarily) and those that relate more to sociolinguistic competence (various role playing strategies, how to address strangers when unsure of their social status. (Canale and Swain, 1979:28 -29).*

As has been mentioned above, strategic competence is activated when communication learners wish to convey messages which their linguistic resources do not strategies allow them to express successfully. The strategies they can use at such times were divided by Corder (1981) into two main types, **message adjustment strategies** and **resource expansion strategies**. Other researchers have used different terms for the two types: **reduction or avoidance strategies** for the first and **achievement strategies** for the second.

## 2.3 | Avoidance or Reduction Strategies

Avoidance or reduction strategies mean ignoring or excluding the topic or the part of the message that cause difficulty in our communication. To support this idea, Celce-Murcia, et al (1995:27) explained that avoidance or reduction strategies involve tailoring one's message to one's resources by either replacing messages, avoiding topics, or, as an extreme case, abandoning one's message altogether. In this

strategy the following basic things are crucial:

The first strategy, **Topic avoidance** refers to the strategy of avoiding topic which is not clear for the speaker or the learner does not want to talk about the topics that present difficulties or are not known conceptually by him. This type of reduction may result in having no communication or changing the conversation topic from the troublesome one. As an example, a learner who describes a picture including two squirrels can see them, but he cannot produce the exact word describing them. He can choose to ignore or omit them from his description.

The second strategy, **message abandonment or semantic avoidance**, is used in cases where the learner starts talking about a concept but cannot complete his/her message because of his/her incomplete and insufficient knowledge about the concept. It is also starting a communication on a topic and then cutting short or stops in the mid-sentence because the speaker runs into difficulty with topic ambiguousness's. Stopping in mid-sentence, he/she shifts the topic and passes new messages. For example, in connection with the previous picture example, the learner may construct the following sentence parts: "Around a tree the man saw two little a ... er... he walked by the tree..." One common point between topic avoidance and message abandonment is concerned with dropping the problematic topic (Corder, 1981; Canale and Swain, 1980).

The last strategy, **meaning replacement**, is different from the former strategies, because the topic is preserved but instead of being specific and giving details, the learner produces a general expression such as "The man saw two little ... animals around a tree." (Tarone, 1977 and Corder, 1978 cited in Elyildirim, 2017:234). In meaning replacement the speaker goes within the intended propositional content and preserves the 'topic' but refers to by means of a more general expression.

Avoidance or reduction strategy is also similar to Corder's (1981) strategies message adjustment strategies involve the tailoring of one's message to one's resources, along the lines of the old slogan, 'Language learners should say what they can, and not what they want to.' These strategies involve either a slight alteration or a reduction of the message.

Using these strategies often leads learners to feel that what they say sounds simplistic or vague. Message adjustment is, in fact, a kind of risk avoidance, which is clearly expressed in the following typical learner statement. It involves the learner's appeal for help to his/her interlocutor.

As we have understood from the above discussion, topic avoidance refers to the strategy of avoiding topic which is not clear for the speaker. In message abandonment, starting a communication on a topic and then cutting short or stops in the mid-sentence because the speaker runs into difficulty with topic ambiguousness's. In meaning replacement, the speaker goes within the intended propositional content and preserves the 'topic' but refers to by means of a more general expression.

#### 2.4 | Achievement or Compensatory Strategies

Compensation strategy is one components of strategic competence which is used to compensate interruption of expression in a communication. It has been expressed by different scholars as follow. It is a catch-all term designed to cover the range of attempts that learners make to communicate their ideas when faced with gaps in their knowledge of the target language (Littlemore and Low, 2006:178). In other words, Meenakshi (2015:71) stated that achievement strategies are risk taking strategies which help the learners to continue conversation.

As Dörnyei and Thurrell (1991) compensation strategies is directly related to resource expansion or achievement strategies, the learners risk failure and attempt to remain in the conversation, conveying their messages by compensating somehow for their deficiencies. Such strategies are either co-operative or non-co-operative. This can take a direct form (e.g. questions like 'What do you call . . . ?'), or can be indirect (e.g. by means of a pause, eye gaze, etc.). The latter do not call for the communication partner's assistance - the learner tries to overcome the problem drawing on his/her own resources. Moreover, Resource expansion strategies are not, of course, restricted to L2 use. Tarone and Yule (1989) found, for example, that circumlocution and approximation occurred more often in the speech of native speakers than in that of non-native speakers.

There are different types of compensation strategies. Some of compensation strategies are word coinage, circumlocution, foregnizing, literal translation, non-linguistic means, restructuring, approximation, etc.

1. **Word coinage** involves making up an entirely new word out of existing words, for example, if a learner did not know the word scissors, he or she might refer to ‘cutters’.
2. **paraphrase or circumlocution:** involves giving extensive descriptions as a substitute for unknown vocabulary items or describing or exemplifying the target object or action, for instance, if a learner did not know the word for calculator, he or she might say something like ‘a small machine that is used for mathematical calculations’ and ‘the thing you open wine bottles with’ for ‘corkscrew’, or ‘small fast military plane’ for ‘fighter’);\
3. **Approximation** : using a word which expresses the meaning of the intended lexical item as closely as possible, for example ....a big boat...for ‘ship’, ‘ship’ for ‘sailing boat’, or ‘fish’ for ‘carp’).
4. **Non-linguistic means:** (e.g. we use pointing, gestures, drawing pictures, mime, gesture, or imitation);
5. **Borrowed or invented words:** ( e.g. ‘auto’ for ‘car’, or ‘house controller’ for ‘caretaker’).

To remain in the conversation and to gain time to think, learners may also use certain conversational formulae or ‘prefabricated conversational patterns’, such as fillers or hesitation devices (e.g. I see; Well, as a matter of fact). In written communication, a very common resource expansion strategy is using a dictionary.

## 2.5 | Bachman and Palmer's Components of Strategic Competence

Bachman says that the discussions of Strategic Competence provided by Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983) do not describe the mechanisms by

which it operates. Therefore, he accepts the psychological view of Strategic Competence which visualizes its operation. Bachman (1990:100) **introduces three components in strategic competence**. These components are assessment, planning and execution.

**I. Assessment Component:** it is referred to by Bachman (1990:5) as taking stock of what is needed, what one has to work with, and how well one has done. It provides a means by which the individual relates their topical knowledge and language knowledge to the language use setting and tasks or to the testing situation and tasks. Assessment also takes into consideration the individual’s affective responses in the application of assessment. Bachman (1990:100-101) describes the assessment component as the one which is concerned with the information relevant to achieving a communicative goal in a given context, determining what language competencies are available for use in achieving this goal, and further evaluating whether it has been achieved. Assessment component enables language users to:

- Identify information needed for realizing a communicative goal in a particular context.
- Decide which language competences we have to achieve the goal.
- Decide which abilities and knowledge we share with our interlocutor.
- Evaluate the extent to which communication is successful.

Bachman (1990:6) claims that the assessment component operates in three ways. The first of them is referred to as assessment of the characteristics of the language use or test task, which identifies the characteristics of the language use task or test task, in order to determine:

- the desirability and feasibility of successfully completing the task and,
- what elements of topical knowledge and language knowledge this is likely to require.

The next one is assessment of the individual's own topical and language knowledge, which involves determining the extent to which relevant topical knowledge and areas of language knowledge are available, and if available, which of them might be utilized for successfully completing the task. This aspect of assessment also considers the individual's available affective schemata for coping with the demands of the task. The final one is referred to as assessment of the correctness or appropriateness of the response to the test task, and involves evaluating the individual's response to the task with respect to the perceived criteria for correctness or appropriateness. The relevant criteria pertain to the grammatical, textual, functional, and sociolinguistic characteristics of the response, as well as its topical content.

**II. Planning Component:** it enables language users to use their abilities to manage the communicative situations successfully. As Bachman (1990:102) puts it, the function of strategic competence is to process the new information with relevant information available and thus achieve the most efficient use of language abilities. Bachman and Palmer (1996:101) describe the planning component as retrieving relevant items (grammatical, textual, illocutionary, sociolinguistic) from language competence and formulating a plan whose realization is expected to achieve the communicative goal. Planning involves deciding how to utilize language knowledge, topical knowledge, and affective schemata to complete the test task successfully. The planning component according to Bachman (1990: 101) "retrieves relevant items from language competence and formulates a plan whose realization is expected to achieve the communicative goal. In addition, the retrieval of the relevant items from linguistic and topical knowledge, (for example, concepts, words, structures, functions) that will be used in a plan, formulation of one or more plans for responding to the task, and the selection of one plan for initial implementation in a response (Bachman & Palmer 1996:71-73)

Formulating a plan may involve an internal prioritization among the various elements that have been selected, as well as the consideration of how these can be most effectively combined to form a response. The plan thus specifies how the various elements will be combined and ordered when realized as a

response. The product of the planning strategy, then, is a plan whose realization is a response to the task. Anderson (1983) cited that in Bachman & Palmer (1996:71-73) suggests that individuals may also plan opportunistically and alternate between top-down and bottom-up processing, depending on the task demands.

**III. Execution Component:** the execution component together with relevant psycho physiological mechanisms implements the utterance (Bachman 1990:103). Execution component "draws on the relevant psycho physiological mechanisms to implement the in the modality and channel appropriate to the communicative goal and the context" (Bachman, 1990:103). The last component of CLA comprises psycho physiological mechanisms, which include the auditory/visual channel and the receptive/productive mode which are employed in language use (Bachman 1990:107). Bachman's (1990) limits the psycho physiological mechanism to auditory/visual channels which is contradictory to the first components he enumerates, namely: assessment. The inconsistency will be amended in the model Bachman presents with Palmer (1996).

The division between planning and execution is not a clear one because at any moment speakers are usually doing a little of both so it is impossible to say where planning leaves off and execution begins (Clark and Clark, 1977:224). Moreover, Faerch and Kasper's (1983) model identifies two phases: a planning phase and an execution phase. **The planning phase** is the learner's preparation for communication and results in formulation of a plan to achieve communicative goal. In this phase language user "selects rules and items which he considers most appropriate for establishing a plan, the execution of which will lead to verbal behavior which is expressed to satisfy the original goal". **The execution phase** refers to the actual communication and the result is the execution of the plan, i.e. observable speech. This phase is controlled by the plan and consists of less observable neurological and physiological processes resulting in the articulation of speech organs, miming and gestures.

### 3 | CONCLUSIONS

Strategic competence means being systematic at unwanted communicative interruption that is used to prevent a breakdown in conversation. It is a crucial component of communicative competence mainly determining the learner's fluency and conversational skills. Strategic competence is the ability to organize a message effectively and to compensate, via strategies, for any difficulties. In L2 use, learners inevitably experience moments when there is a gap between communicative intent and their ability to express that intent.

In essence, strategic competence is the ability to overcome potential communication problems in interaction. Strategic competence: the ability to use language to organize effective messages and to overcome potential communication problems as part of communicative competence.

Besides developing confidence, strategy training also facilitates spontaneous improvisation skills and linguistic creativity. Finally, not only do such exercises improve the learners' performance skills, but students enjoy them very much - so they can also be used as ice-breakers, warmers or games.

It has two main components which are reduction or avoidance strategies and achievement or compensatory strategies. Reduction or avoidance strategies involve either a slight alteration or a reduction of the message and using these strategies often leads learners to feel that what they say sounds simplistic or vague. The other strategic competence component is compensation strategy. Some of compensation strategies are word coinage, circumlocution, organizing, literal translation, non-linguistic means, restructuring, approximation, etc. But Bachman and Palmer stated that language use takes place and it is defined as consisting of three components: assessment, planning and execution.

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