

## STRATEGIC COMPETENCES IN COMMUNICATION

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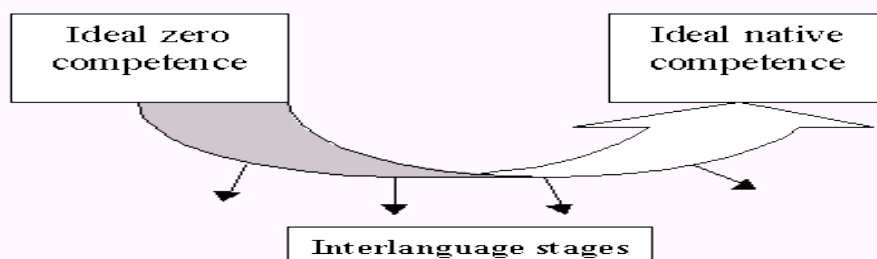
**Annotation:** The purpose of this paper is to examine how strategic competence - the ability to solve communication problems despite an inadequate command of the linguistic and sociocultural code - can contribute to the development of an overall communicative competence. I will start by placing the concept of strategic competence within the more general framework of interlanguage development. Then I will describe two basic types of communication strategies (reduction and achievement strategies) and give examples of both, concentrating particularly on the use of achievement strategies at the discourse level. Next, I will discuss some problems in the development of strategic competence in the classroom, and finally I will describe a possible approach to strategy training through an examination of sample activities and materials.

**KEY WORDS:** English language, world language, global language, new englishes, examples, observations, Received Pronunciation, multiple English, second language, technological advances

**ANOTAÇÃO:** O objetivo deste artigo é examinar como a competência estratégica - a capacidade de resolver problemas de comunicação, apesar de um domínio inadequado do código linguístico e sociocultural - pode contribuir para o desenvolvimento de uma competência comunicativa global. Começarei colocando o conceito de competência estratégica dentro da estrutura mais geral do desenvolvimento da interlíngua. Em seguida, descreverei dois tipos básicos de estratégias de comunicação (estratégias de redução e conquista) e darei exemplos de ambos, concentrando-me particularmente no uso de estratégias de conquista no nível do discurso. A seguir, discutirei alguns problemas no desenvolvimento da competência estratégica em sala de aula e, finalmente, descreverei uma possível abordagem ao treinamento em estratégia por meio de um exame de exemplos de atividades e materiais.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Língua inglesa, língua mundial, língua global, novos ingleses, exemplos, observações, pronúncia recebida, inglês múltiplo, segunda língua, avanços tecnológicos

Any person who is not a mother-tongue speaker or a true bilingual must necessarily rely on some incomplete and imperfect competence - this corresponds to the present stage in his or her interlanguage system

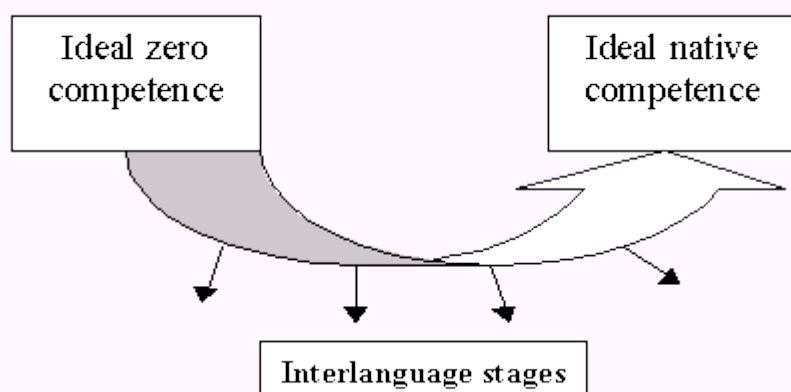


Each of us, and each of our students, could be placed somewhere along a line between the two extremes of an ideal zero competence and an ideal native speaker competence. If we are still in the process of learning a language, we are moving along this line, we are gradually approaching a native speaker competence by successive approximations. Why do I say ideal competence? Because I think that in practice there is no absolute zero competence — you can at least rely on some form of non-verbal communication and, more importantly, there is no absolute native speaker competence — just think of how often, in L1 communication, we cannot find the words to say something and have to adjust our message, or to ask our interlocutor to help us, or to use synonyms or general words to make ourselves understood. I think that one of the most extraordinary paradoxes in language teaching is the fact that we rarely teach, or even allow, our students to use the kind of strategic devices (or communication strategies) that even native speakers are often forced to use. We are still very much concerned with exact communication - something which perhaps does not even exist.

1. In the **psycholinguistic perspective**. In other words, in order to achieve the purpose of communication, the speaker must prepare what to say by identifying the aspects in the speech that may pose difficulties to the listener's comprehension of the message. For instance, the speaker may choose not to discuss certain topics he or she couldn't explain well or use another word to replace an unfamiliar vocabulary.

2. The **interactional perspective**. The speaker may ask for help in looking for the correct term for an object by describing it or using other similar terms. While the first perspective views strategies as plans to avoid communication breakdown, this perspective sees strategies as ways to repair the communication breakdown once it has occurred during the communicative event and with the help of one's interlocutor.

3. Finally, the **communication continuity or maintenance perspective** despite one's lack of linguistic competence or problems such as hesitations or refusal to answer a question. Any person who is not a mother-tongue speaker or a true bilingual must necessarily rely on some incomplete and imperfect competence - this corresponds to the present stage in his or her interlanguage system

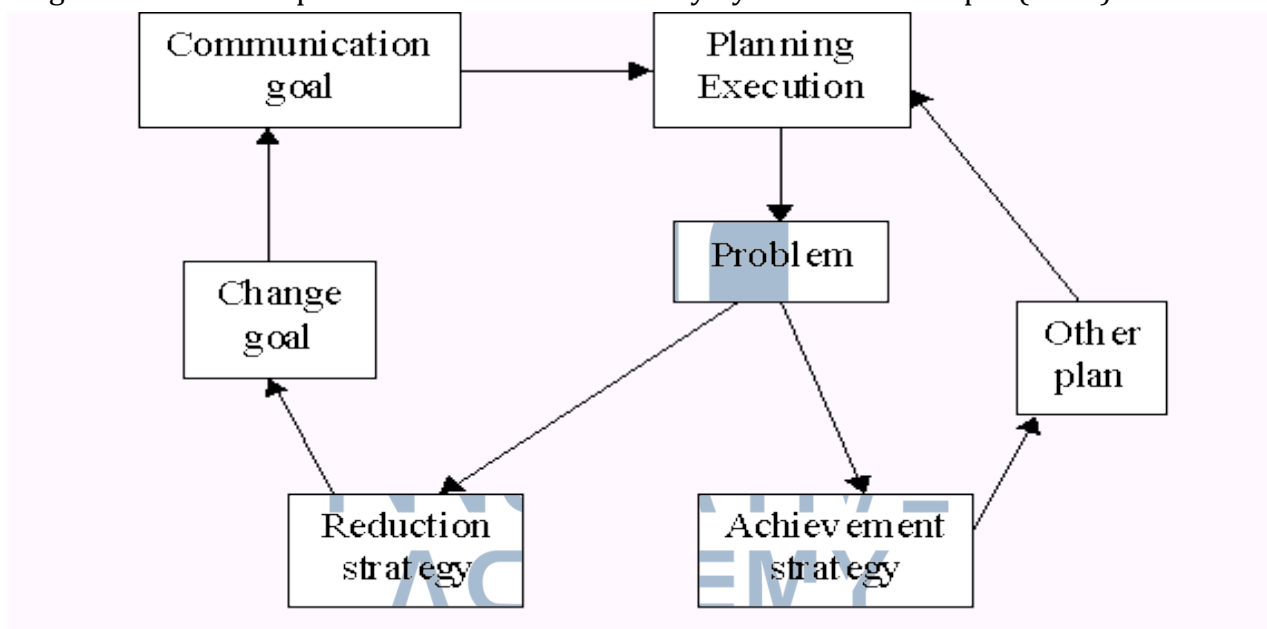


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### **A typology of communication strategies**

We said that strategic competence is the ability to cope with unexpected problems, when no ready-made solutions are available. What kind of problems can a speaker meet? Fig. 2 shows a diagram which is adapted from a well-known study by Faerch and Kasper (1983).



Basically, we could say that in oral interaction we have some kind of communicative goal and we set out to make a plan and execute it. If we meet a problem, that is, if our command of the linguistic and sociocultural code is not adequate, we have two basic choices. On one hand, we can avoid the problem by adopting a reduction strategy: in other words, we keep our message within our communicative resources, we avoid the risk, we adjust our ends to our means — in this way we change our goal. On the other hand, we can decide to keep our goal but develop an alternative plan, we adopt an achievement strategy, we take the risk and expand our communicative resources, we adjust our means to our ends.

### **Reduction strategies can affect**

- **content:**
- **topic avoidance**
- **message abandonment**
- **meaning replacement**
- **modality (e.g. politeness makers)**
- **speech acts**

Reduction strategies can affect the content of our communicative goal: we are all familiar with the essential strategy of avoiding a topic we do not feel confident to talk about. Sometimes, for instance, when I am abroad and have the choice between buying a ticket at a ticket office or

from an automatic vending machine, I often choose the machine, I avoid taking the risk of not understanding figures, times or names of places. Also, I think we have all had the experience of abandoning our message, or rounding it off quickly, because we felt it was going to involve us in all sorts of problems with grammar or vocabulary. And the reason why a non-native speaker can sometimes sound vague is possibly the fact that he or she is replacing the original meaning, the original goal, with a simpler message. Suppose I wished to say that I've been made redundant, I get dole money, but that's barely enough to carry on, let alone going on holiday. I may find this too difficult to explain and therefore may come up with something like *I can't go on holiday because I haven't got enough money*. I still manage to get some meaning across, but a lot of my original plan is lost and I may sound vague.

Reduction strategies can also affect modality (for example I may miss out markers of politeness and fail to observe the rules of social distance) or whole speech acts: for instance, if I cannot use pre-topics in opening a telephone conversation, I may do without such starters as *Are you busy?* or *Am I ringing at a bad time?* which are sometimes useful and necessary. Of course such failures are not always serious, but they may lead to false perceptions on the listener's part.

Reduction or avoidance strategies are difficult to spot, and are an obvious and essential part of a learner's instinctive repertoire. However, we want our students to widen their resources, to take risks, to actively expand their competence, so we shall probably be more interested in achievement or expansion strategies.

One useful first distinction I would like to make here is between strategies at the *word* or *sentence* level, and strategies at the *discourse* level. It is important to make this distinction because when considering achievement strategies, one almost automatically thinks of, for example, ways of expressing the meaning of a word when the exact term is not available. In fact, as we shall see, some of the most interesting things happen in the actual interaction that goes on between people.

#### ***Achievement strategies at word / sentence level***

- **borrowing (code switching)**
- **"foreignizing"**
- **literal translation**
- **interlanguage-based**
- **generalization**
- **paraphrase**
- **restructuring (self-repair)**

One of the simplest things one can do when faced with a problem in a foreign language is, of course, to borrow words from the L1: we know that monolingual classes, such as the ones that we teach in, often use this easy way out. Also, some of our students are very good at "foreignizing" Italian words, pronouncing a word as if it belonged to English, or even adjusting its form to take account of typical morphological features of English. And we could all quote examples of literal translation, when "case popolari" become "popular houses" and false friends lead to all sorts of unusual and often funny utterances.

However, achievement strategies become much more interesting when they are based on the learner's actual interlanguage, that is, when learners try to use their present knowledge and skills and stretch them, so to say, to their limits. It is this active use of one's limited resources

that I think we should be particularly concerned with. The first area of strategies has to do with generalization and approximation: if you don't know a word, you can fall back on general words, like *thing* or *stuff*; you can use superordinates, like *flower* instead of *daffodil*; you can use synonyms and antonyms, like *not deep* to mean *shallow*. Of course, generalizing implies a disregard for restrictions on word meaning and word usage, and can therefore be dangerous: this is a problem we shall soon get back to.

In conclusion, it is impossible to predict change in the English language. All we can do is analyse the past changes and base our speculations on that. However, I personally think that we find ourselves living in an environment that is encouraging language change, for the better, or the worse.

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