Developing Fluency in Circumlocution

Circumlocationを活用した指導法

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ABSTRACT

Circumlocution is an essential strategy for developing and aiding oral communication. This paper aims to provide guidance on the benefits and pedagogy of circumlocution as well as to present some materials designed to build fluency in circumlocution. The concept of circumlocution will be explained and its role in developing communication ability and fostering second language acquisition will be explored. Following this, the issue of fluency will be discussed with an emphasis on how it relates to functional communication and circumlocution. The importance of circumlocution training in ELF-aware teaching contexts will then be argued for. In the final section of the paper, methods for teaching circumlocution will be introduced along with activities that can be used to develop fluency in this very important communication strategy.

KEYWORDS: Circumlocution, Communicative Competence, Strategic Competence, Fluency, Communication Strategy

1. INTRODUCTION

Circumlocution is a communication strategy (CS) that allows language learners to express themselves even when there is a gap in their linguistic knowledge. This is achieved through using descriptions, explanations and definitions instead of the unknown target structure. This paper will explore the role of circumlocution in language learning, outlining its benefits and how it can be developed through training. Fluency will then be discussed with special attention being paid to the part it plays in the development of strategic competence, and circumlocution in particular. Then, the relevance and benefits of circumlocution training in ELF-aware syllabi will be presented. Finally, the issue of how to teach circumlocution will be addressed accompanied by some example exercises that aim to promote fluency in its use as a communication strategy.

2. CIRCUMLOCUTION

2.1. What is circumlocution?

Circumlocution is a communication strategy that can be simply defined as using a description of an object, concept, place or action in place of the target vocabulary when the target vocabulary is not known. An example would be a situation where a learner says, "It's a long, yellow fruit. Monkeys like it" when the word 'banana' is not known. The ability to employ communication strategies such as circumlocution is essential in developing strategic competence, defined by Hedge (2000) as "Knowing how to use different kinds of strategies… to express something when language resources are lacking". As circumlocution allows language learners to communicate semantic content that is beyond their current linguistic knowledge, its value as a tool for functional communication is undeniable.

2.2. Why is circumlocution important?

Circumlocution has been found to be effective in enhancing communication ability and aiding second language acquisition (SLA). As these factors are crucial in second language learning, it stands to reason that circumlocution be granted a certain level of importance. The ways in which communication ability and SLA can be boosted through the use of circumlocution will be outlined below.

2.2.1. Communication ability

Communication strategies are a key component in developing strategic competence as one of the core facets of Canale and Swain's (1980) communicative competence. These strategies can be divided into two broad categories: reduction strategies (Ellis, 1994), also called risk-avoiding strategies (Corder, 1981), and achievement strategies (Ellis, 1994) also called risk-taking strategies (Corder, 1981). When we think of communication as the primary goal of language use it is clear which type of CSs are preferable. Put simply, the use of reduction strategies equates to failure or, even worse, giving up. This breakdown in communication also means that further chances to develop communication ability are lost. Furthermore, avoidance strategies will neither allow learners to express themselves in their current situation or help them to develop their ability to communicate when faced with future communicative obstacles. In contrast, the successful use of achievement strategies means achievement of the communicative goal.

Moreover, Faucette (2001) points out that effective use of CSs leads to extended interaction which means that "learners can receive more input, can stay in the conversation, and develop their ability" (p. 6). This may be linked to other issues she raises when stating, "effective learners tend to use appropriate strategies to reach their learning goals, whereas ineffective language learners are less expert in their strategy choice and use" (p. 3). It seems that a learner's ability to employ strategies correlates with their success in learning a language.

Finally, in considering the points highlighted above, it seems natural that language teachers ought to equip learners with the skills, knowledge and confidence to take risks, negotiate meaning, and reap the rewards of these processes. Training in circumlocution is an excellent way to achieve this.

2.2.2. Second language acquisition

Second language acquisition is another area that can be aided by CSs such as circumlocution. The main way CSs foster acquisition is through the negotiation of meaning that takes place (Ellis, 1994). Ellis (p. 511) cited Kasper and Kellerman (1997) who identified seven ways in which CSs may aid second language acquisition.

- help to keep the flow of the conversation going and thus increase learners' exposure to input
- trigger negotiation of meaning which aids acquisition
- increase their control over their existing linguistic structures
- enable learners to obtain access to new linguistic resources when they incorporate strategic solutions into their interlanguage.
- fill gaps in the learner's lexicon through positive feedback following requests for assistance
- produced pushed output
- increase overall processing control.

In addition, Hedge (2000) states that SLA research suggests being exposed to unknown language when it is needed and in a meaningful, self-constructed context creates a situation that promotes acquisition. Furthermore, when eliciting unknown or forgotten vocabulary, circumlocution can lead to vocabulary acquisition or reinforcement.

3. FLUENCY

Over the years, many definitions have been attached to the term 'fluency'. Because of the complexity of defining this term, and because it is beyond the scope of this paper, this section will be limited to the definition that best serves the goals and activities I will explain later on.

In common discourse, a fluent speaker is usually seen as one who has attained native speaker-like proficiency. However, for the purposes of this paper, fluency will be defined as the ability to produce comprehensible output in real-time. This is a more learner-centred definition that considers individuals' relative communicative functionality. This definition was reached after considering others put forward by Brumfit (2000) and Nation (1991). Brumfit (2000) states that fluency "can be seen as the maximally effective operation of the language system so far acquired by the student" (p. 69) while Nation (1991) simply calls it "having ready access to what you already know" (p. 1). This perspective of fluency sees it as relative to the learner's current level of proficiency, noting that, even among learners of a similar level, some are able to access known lexical structures more easily and quickly than others.

4. CIRCUMLOCUTION IN AN ELF-AWARE SYLLABUS

Circumlocution training would be a worthwhile addition to any ELF-aware syllabus. According to Barbara Seidlhofer (2011, p. 197), ELF pedagogy is concerned not with "learning *a language* but learning *to language*". Furthermore, with this important distinction in mind, she states that: "the purpose of teaching becomes the development of a capability for effective use which involves the process of exploiting whatever linguistic resources are available, no matter how formally 'defective'" (p. 197)

Clearly, a learner's ability to effectively use circumlocution to express meaning beyond their current linguistic capability is an example of this. A learner using expressions such as 'car doctor' in place of 'mechanic' or 'a place where we can buy flowers" in place of "florist" may appear to lack linguistic knowledge but, in fact, by using these "defective" terms they are displaying their ability to exploit their linguistic resources to achieve their communicative goals. This is the essence of what Seidlhofer means when she speaks of learning *to language*. Circumlocution is a skill that a learner can, and will often be forced through necessity to draw on again and again throughout their language learning journey. Whether they have the confidence and ability to employ it effectively will depend of the training they have had which is why circumlocution should be included in ELF-aware syllabi.

5. TEACHING CIRCUMLOCUTION

5.1. How can we develop learners' circumlocution ability?

The first question to ask in teaching circumlocution is: Is it actually something that can be taught? The teachability of CSs has been debated for a long time. Some researchers (Bialystok & Kellerman, 1987; Bongaerts & Poulisse, 1989) have claimed that L1 CSs are transferable to the L2, and therefore there is no reason to spend time training students to develop these skills. On the other hand, researchers (Rost & Ross, 1991; Dörnyei, 1995; Faucette, 2001; Maleki, 2007; Savignon, 1972, 1983, 1997; Scullen & Jourdain, 2000; Willems, 1987) have also argued that training in CS use is possible and even necessary in order to develop strategic competence in the L2. In addition, Brooks (1992) and Salamone and Marsal (1997) identify circumlocution as the CS on which training has the biggest effect. Based on my own class observations, in which I have witnessed learners become more effective, fluent and confident in circumlocution, I believe that circumlocution is most certainly a skill that benefits from in-class instruction and training.

Dornyei (1995) highlights two essential components of teaching circumlocution. These are: 1) providing learners with the basic lexical and grammatical structures needed to describe properties and functions, and: 2) providing chances to practice circumlocution to the point that the necessary structures become available for fluent production. In the first step, phrases such as "It's a thing for…", "It's a place

where…", "It's an animal that is…", "It's the opposite of…", "It's similar to…" and "It's a person who…", should be presented so that even low-level learners are able to use circumlocution to elicit the names of common objects, activities and so on by completing the given structures with their own vocabulary. Once shown how, such learners are usually capable of producing descriptions such as "It's an animal that comes from Africa. It's an animal that has a long nose and big ears", to elicit 'elephant'. Of course, for more advanced learners, ways to describe more difficult themes such as emotions, concepts and abstract objects can be introduced. On the second component of teaching circumlocution, gaining fluency in using these structures, Dornyei (1915) states that "Providing opportunities for practice in strategy use appears to be necessary because CSs can only fulfill their function as immediate first aid devices if their use has reached an automatic stage" (p. 64). Repetition of similar but slightly altered tasks is the key to achieving this (Ahmadian, 2012). Ahmadian claims that through repetition:

> Learners might be able to build upon what they have already
> done in order to 'buy time' not only to do mental work on what
> they are about to communicate but also to access and (re)
> formulate words and grammatical structures more efficiently,
> effectively, and accurately. (p. 1)

To add further support to this claim, many studies (Bygate, 1996 & 2001; Gass, Mackey, Alvarez-Torres & Fernández-García, 1999; Lynch & Maclean, 2000) have found that task repetition has positive effects on both fluency and accuracy.

To sum up, this simple process of presenting learners with language models and then providing them with ample training opportunities in order to gain fluency and confidence is what is required for successful circumlocution instruction.

5.2. Activities for developing fluency in circumlocution

Nation (2013) lists four distinguishing features of fluency activities. The first and most important is that they should be easy, allowing students to use known grammatical and lexical structures. This is because learners cannot become fluent by working with difficult material. The second most important features of fluency activities is that they should encourage learners to perform faster than their usual speed, noting that an ideal speed for speaking is around 150 words per minute. The third feature of fluency activities is that they focus on meaning. That is, learners should be giving and receiving information and not only practicing grammatical forms. Finally, fluency activities should provide a significant amount of regular, repeated practice for learners.

Below I will outline activities that fit Nation's criteria. Note that before using

these as fluency-developing activities, learners should first have a good knowledge of the language needed to successfully complete the tasks.

5.2.1. Guess the word

In this very simple activity, each learner in a pair has a worksheet (see Appendix) with a different set of words. First, Student A has two minutes to use circumlocution to help Student B guess the word. The order of words is up to the student. They are free to choose words that seem easy. They should keep track of how many words they successfully elicit and how many (if any) they are forced to give up on. After two minutes the teacher can ask students to count how many words their partner was able to guess. This gives the activity a competitive aspect that encourages students to perform faster than their usual speed, fulfilling the criterion given by Nation (2013). The teacher can also ask which words were difficult, providing an opportunity to focus on form, with the teacher introducing or reinforcing language structures to the class as required. The same process is then repeated for Student B's turn. After Student B has finished, students can then rotate and make new pairs, giving them a chance to communicate with a different person, encounter different input and refine and improve on their previous performance.

A variation on this activity that makes it slightly more difficult and simulates real-world situations is having a predetermined order in which each word should be attempted. For example, having students start at the top left corner and work across the page. This mimics reality in that learners have no control over what unknown words, or gaps in knowledge, they will have to negotiate.

5.2.2. Crossword puzzles

In this activity each student in a pair has a partially completed crossword puzzle. For example, Student A's puzzle might have the answers for the 'across' words while Student B's has the answers for the 'down' words. Students take turns asking questions such as "What is 2 across?" or "What is 5 down?". In response, students give hints to help their partner guess the word. To encourage students to work quickly a reward could be put on offer for the pair that finishes first. This activity can also be used for reviewing vocabulary. Crosswords can be made online or with special software.

5.2.3 Observed outcomes

I have personally witnessed repeated positive outcomes from in-class circumlocution training.

Over the past several years I have used circumlocution training activities in a variety of teaching contexts. In these various contexts, including high school, university and business English classes containing learners with different ability levels and motivations, there was one constant: the enthusiasm, engagement and excitement learners displayed during training activities was significant. This

observation alone has encouraged me to included circumlocution training in lessons whenever possible.

   Aside from its affective benefits, I have also witnessed marked improvements in learners' ability to utilise circumlocution during in-class activities and tests. In a recently completed course, learners took part in ten weeks of circumlocution training culminating in a test. The test required them to use circumlocution strategies to complete a task similar to the 'Guess the word' activity outlined earlier in this paper. Despite none of the test words having been used in prior in-class training activities, the large majority of learners were able to complete the task to a high standard. Also encouraging, were instances of learners using circumlocution in other in-class speaking activities.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper has presented circumlocution as a valuable communication strategy that requires and even warrants explicit teaching and a significant amount of in-class time dedicated to its development. As mentioned, numerous studies have found it to be a valuable tool for communication and development of strategic competence. It also has the potential to promote second language acquisition with its strong reliance on negotiation of meaning, pushed output and eliciting. These indicators all point strongly in favour of including circumlocution training in the syllabus of any course with an oral communication component. However, the enthusiasm, motivation, and confidence that activities such as 'Guess the word' create in classrooms, even in those of low-level students with little interest in English study, is perhaps the most significant benefit of circumlocution. It goes without saying that when learners are using their own self-constructed language to communicate things beyond their linguistic limits, that is a great achievement.

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Guess the Word

- You have 2 minutes to describe as many of these words to your partner as you can.
- Your partner must guess the words without looking at their handout.
- You cannot say the words or use Japanese.
- When time is up, count how many words your partner could guess.

dog	China	book	car	Coca Cola	tissue
clock	baseball	Shibuya	Lady Gaga	kendo	Sushi
duck	Kagawa Shinji	kangaroo	radio	chair	history
Bic Camera	finger	skirt	Kyoto	cat	France
cycling	Johnny Depp	Pokemon	lunch	Google	iPhone
AKB48	London	Abe Shinzo	piano	nose	pizza
Tokyo University	Tokyo Sky Tree	One Piece	Los Angeles	udon	Hokkaido