Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and communication strategies (CSs):
Theory and practice
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Abstract
This paper will look closely at the concept of communication strategies (CSs) and their relationship to the communicative language classroom. CSs help L2 learners to overcome communication problems and breakdowns while communicating with their interlocutors and can contribute greatly to the communicative language classroom. One of the main goals of communicative language teaching (CLT) is to help teach students to actively use the language they are learning and to be able to keep communication from breaking down. CSs can serve as a great reinforcement to a CLT practitioner’s classroom.

Introduction
In recent years, university communicative language courses have often been including communication strategies (CSs) as part of their curriculum, but how much time is given for students to actively use these strategies? Tarone (1981) defines CSs as being “used to compensate for some lack in the linguistic system, and focus on exploring alternative ways of using what one does know for the transmission of a message, without necessarily considering situational appropriateness” (p. 287). CSs are also the key component to a student’s strategic competence and “may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication” (Canale & Swain, 1980, p. 30). Strategic competence is an essential part of overall communicative competence and is important for communicative language teaching (CLT) in general (Canale & Swain, 1980; Savignon, 1983). Implementation of CSs into a communicative language classroom can aide student productivity while continually building on the foundations of CLT.

CLT
There are many interpretations and definitions of CLT. According to Savignon (1984), CLT means different things to the different people who practice it. Savignon and other language teachers began to look for an alternative to the audiolingual method in the 1970s and gradually moved towards CLT after research (Savignon, 1972) showed that students who had some regular amount of CLT in addition to audio-lingual teaching learned better than students who had audio-lingual teaching only. The audio-lingual method posits that students learn from repetition and habit formation, but it includes very little, if any, chances for real communication. CLT has been a popular research area since the 1970s, but understanding is still limited among teachers (Sato and Kleinsasser, 1999, p. 494).

Brown (2007) gives his definition of CLT as “an approach to language teaching methodology that emphasizes authenticity, interaction, student-centered learning, task based activities, and communication for the real world, meaningful purposes” (Brown, p. 378).

Brown (2007) also offers four interconnected characteristics of CLT:

1. Classroom goals are focused on all of the components of CC (communicative competence) and not restricted to grammatical or linguistic competence.
2. Language techniques are designed to engage learners in the pragmatic, authentic, functional use of language for meaningful purposes. Organizational language forms are not the central focus but rather aspects of language that enable the learner to accomplish those purposes.

3. Fluency and accuracy are seen as complimentary principles underlying communicative techniques. At times fluency may have to take on more importance than accuracy in order to keep learners meaningfully engaged in language use.

4. In the communicative classroom, students ultimately have to use the language, productively and receptively, in unrehearsed contexts.

Savignon (2002) writes that “CLT refers to both processes and goals in classroom learning” and that “the central theoretical concept in communicative language teaching is communicative competence” (p. 1). One of the main goals of CLT is to develop a stronger communicative competence among L2 learners. Strategic competence (an important part of communicative competence) is defined by Canale and Swain (1980) as “The ability to use strategies to compensate for imperfect knowledge of rules or performance limitations” and by Bachman (1984) as “the ability to assess a communicative context and plan and execute production responses to accomplish intended purposes” (Brown, p. 390).

Communicative competence is comprised of four parts which were identified by Canale and Swain (1980). They are: sociocultural, strategic, discourse, and grammatical competence. Savignon (1983, 2002) explains that all four of the competences are equally essential and must work together in order to build a stronger communicative competence. Building a stronger strategic competence is also important for L2 learners. Savignon (1998) describes strategic competence as the ability of knowing how to make the most of the language that you already have, especially when it is “deficient.” Savignon (2002) also suggests “the effective use of coping strategies (communication strategies) is important for communicative competence in all contexts and distinguishes highly effective communicators from those who are less so” (Savignon, p. 10).

In regard to CLT, fluency is not stressed as much as successful communication. Willems (1987) believes that teachers need to train students to just communicate in the L2, not to be perfect in it. In a CLT classroom, students strive to get their meaning across and in order to perform this task CSs are a useful way to overcome communication difficulties. CSs supply students with the tools necessary to fill L2 gaps while they are communicating with partners, either native speakers or non-native speakers and allow them to continue speaking. Cohen (1990) says that “a major trait of successful speakers is that they use strategies to keep the conversation going” (p 56).

Further Definitions of CSs and Overall Goals
As with CLT, definitions of CSs are also varied. Researchers today still debate the definition of CSs along with their teachability and usefulness. Below are a few brief definitions of CSs:
“Conscious communication strategies are used by an individual to overcome the crisis which occurs when language structures are inadequate to convey the individual’s thought” (Tarone, 1977, p. 195).

“To solve own performance problems’ and allow the other aspects of problematic L2 production to be dealt with in terms of other, arguably more robust, theoretical frameworks” (Ellis, 2008, p. 504).

“Communication strategies compensate for deficits the speaker may have” (Cohen, 1990, p. 56).

From these brief definitions and expectations of communication strategies, it can be seen that there is general agreement that CSs will give students the power to overcome gaps in their L2 knowledge and allow them to keep conversations going. Students often meet gaps during in class conversations and do not have the tools to get around them. CSs help students to reassess the situation and to strategically overcome temporary difficulties. Communication strategies (sometimes referred to as “conversation strategies” or “coping strategies”) are ways for L2 learners to become more confident in their L2 communication and can be implemented in any CLT classroom. “Speakers use communication strategies to resolve difficulties that they encounter in expressing intended meaning; these may be either reduction strategies or compensatory strategies” (Boxer & Cohen, p. 176). According to Ellis (2008), the term ‘Communication Strategy’ was coined by Selinker in 1972, “but it wasn’t until the 1980s that interest in CSs really took off” (Ellis, p. 502).

Teachability of CSs in the Communicative Language Classroom: An Ongoing Debate

While researching the usage of CSs by students, it is important to realize that CSs are developmental. Students learn them gradually over time and need a lot of time to practice using them during conversations in class. It takes time to learn how to successfully use such CSs as summarizing and paraphrasing. Willems (1987) devised a chart that outlined his theory of the developmental sequencing process. Willems’ chart or as he calls it “Typology of communication strategies” begins with reduction strategies and ends with achievement strategies which are then broken down into paralinguistic strategies, interlingual strategies, and intralingual strategies. The beginning strategy learner first learns reduction strategies which are broken into formal and functional strategies. Formal strategies are strategies such as avoiding difficult language structures that the speaker does not have the full ability to use. Functional strategies can help the learner to change the topic to something easier if they are having trouble talking about it and also help with meaning replacement and meaning abandonment. The stronger the learner’s language ability becomes the more difficult the strategies become. Eventually students can use strategies that they normally use in their L1 such as paraphrasing, describing, asking for assistance, checking questions for understanding, interrupting, and many more advanced strategies. When it comes to teaching these CSs though, how effective is it?

According to Dornyei (1995), there has been controversy over the teachability of CSs from the 80s into the 90s. The debate and controversy surrounding CSs and their teachability continue still today. Dornyei points out that there are problems with the idea of spending time in class teaching CSs when students already use CSs in their L1 and should be able to transfer those CSs over to an L2 if needed. He writes that “Whereas strong theoretical arguments reject the validity and usefulness of specific
CSs training, practical considerations and experience appear to support the idea” (Dornyei, p. 60). Importantly, Dornyei mentions that most of the arguments concerning the teachability of CSs are based on “indirect” or “inconclusive” evidence.

Since it is generally believed that students have the capability of transferring CSs from their L1 knowledge over to their L2 knowledge, it is important to encourage them to do so. According to Willems (1987) a teacher should teach L2 students to use the skills that they already possess naturally in their L1. Although with younger learners this may be a problem since their L1 is still developing and they may not be able to transfer over to a second language grammar structure that they do not yet command in their native language. Willems stresses the importance in building a strategic competence in order to help L2 learners “get by” while communicating. He writes also that “A side effect of introducing a certain amount of CSs will be that weaker learners will derive some motivation for learning the L2 as they will develop a feeling of at least being able to do something with the language” (Willems, p. 352). By introducing CSs into your classroom weaker learners will be given helpful tools that can give them a chance to speak more in an L2 classroom setting.

Whether or not researchers believe they are teachable, CSs are not being focused on enough in L2 classes. Willems (1987) writes about “street learners” who acquire an L2 in a native speaker environment and how they become “extremely skillful strategy users” compared to students who learn an L2 in a classroom environment only. Students in immersion settings learn by way of mimicking what they hear from natives and what they may be hearing are a lot of CSs, thus strengthening their fluency and strategic competence. “If, therefore, traditional classroom learning does not produce skillful L2 strategy users and if we think it important that our learners should be able to get by in real communication with speakers of the L2, we shall have to pay some serious attention to CSs in our L2 lessons” (Willems, p. 354).

Dornyei (1995) brings up an important and interesting point in his study on the teachability of CSs. He writes that “Some people can communicate effectively in an L2 with only 100 words. How do they do it? They use their hands, they imitate the sound or movement of things, they mix languages, they create new words, they describe or circumlocute something they don’t know the word for…….in short, they use communication strategies” (Dornyei, p. 56). Donyei in his paper, goes on to write that “complete agreement” has still not been reached by researchers when it comes to defining CSs.

Dornyei’s study was based on the idea that “L2 learners might benefit from instruction on how to cope with performance problems” (Dornyei, p. 55). It also focused on the teacher’s role in the communicative classroom and the teachability of CSs. For the study 109 students (72 girls and 37 boys) participated from 5 different secondary schools in Hungary. The study consisted of a 6 week strategy training program. The CSs training was implemented 3 times a week for about 20-40 minutes. Of the 8 classes, 4 of them did not get strategy training, but instead had normal EFL classes. His results concluded that “The CSs treatment was successful in improving the quality of the definitions the students generated as confirmed by the difference between the treatment and the no-treatment conditions” (Dornyei, p. 73). He argued the reasons for and against teaching CSs and in the long run found that students do benefit from learning them. He also found that students could develop and improve their strategy use through focused instruction.
After finishing a study on the instructional effects of communication strategies, Iwai and Gobel (2003) determined that “It is not too late to determine the pros and cons of the CSs teachability issue and come up with a feasible strategy for strategies” (Iwai & Gobel, p. 173). The authors performed 2 studies involving 48 Japanese university students at two proficiency levels. Implicit instruction on CSs was given to the two experimental classes while the two controlled classes were not given implicit strategy instruction. Both classes were communicative based classes. The authors looked at students’ learning progressions of CSs and at the teachability of CSs. They also looked at the differences between the classes and found that “The results of the two studies provide no concrete solutions regarding the teachability of CSs” (Iwai & Gobel, p. 172). They add though that despite the lack of “concrete solutions,” the studies shine light on other areas of CSs involving pedagogical issues. Their study argued that it is “premature to determine the pros and cons” concerning the teachability of CSs.

Sato (2005) also performed a study on the instructional effects and dynamics of teaching CSs. It was a year long study which makes it an important study in regards to researching the developmental sequence of learning CSs. It is significant because many studies on CSs are based on short periods or a semester at most. The study looked at the teachability of CSs and how Japanese students learned to use CSs from a sociocultural perspective. In his study Sato revealed the dynamics of learning and teaching CSs to his students. He assessed his students’ usage of CSs by looking at multiple data sources, including a survey, diaries, video-taped conversations with self assessments, video-taped debates, progress reports, and interviews. He researched the details of how students learned CSs and how in turn they influenced their L2 learning. On the matter of teachability, he found that students mainly used CSs that they were familiar with over the first semester, but over time as they learned new CSs, students thought they were useful as well. He writes that “However, only a few learners could use them right after the explicit teaching” (Sato, 2005, p. 4). The fact that “only a few” learners could use them immediately is further proof that learning CSs is developmental and that it takes time to practice and to actually use them successfully. At the early stage of his research Sato reported that the students “had difficulty” in keeping their four minute conversations going though and could not “afford” trying to use the newly learned CSs. Students in the class revealed that many of them had begun to use new strategies in class because their classmates were doing so. They were influenced by the usage of others. His study found that “explicit teaching of CSs was useful to raise learners’ awareness but not sufficient for them to be able to use those CSs in their conversations” (Sato, 2005, p. 5). What is needed to reinforce strategy usage are more opportunities to speak in the L2 and encouragement to try and use CSs. When the study began he writes that students “were nervous, memorized what they wrote, and used only familiar CSs” (p. 3) such as using short or stock phrases. When the year was ending he found that students began to challenge difficult topics and used L2 based CSs such as paraphrasing and summarizing. Students also had begun using negotiation skills.

How do CSs Facilitate Interaction and Overall Communication in the Communicative Language Classroom?
In a study done by Nakatani (2005), the author researched the effects of awareness-raising among students while using CSs. The study promoted self-monitoring and proved that an “increased general awareness” of CSs usage can improve oral proficiency test scores for students. The study was based on a 12 week EFL course
where 62 female learners were placed into two different groups. One group became the strategy training group and focused on CSs usage while the other group received only a regular communication course with no extra CSs focus. “For the strategy training group, explicit strategy instruction was introduced to help the learners become aware of their own learning processes” (Nakatani, 2005, p. 79). Nakatani included specific CSs in order to enhance students’ skills communication management. Nakatani devised a system to assess CSs where the focus was on “how strategies were used for the purpose of communication and on how this use represented the extent of discourse in the oral proficiency test” (Nakatani, 2005, p. 81). The findings of the research showed that the students in the strategy training group significantly improved their oral test scores when compared to the students from the non-strategy focused class.

Another study done by Nakatani (2006) looked at the developing of an oral communication strategy inventory. The author defined a strategy inventory for language learning (SILL) as “an instrument for assessing the frequency of good strategy use by learners” and also went on to write that the SILL “is regarded as an effective tool for diagnostic purposes to find the weaknesses and strengths of an individual learner’s strategy use” (Nakatani, 2006, p. 152). The researcher looked closely at high oral proficiency groups and also at lower oral proficiency groups and found that the high oral proficiency speakers used more CSs. Nakatani also found that “The higher level learners also reported using strategies for maintaining conversational flow and controlling affective factors” (Nakatani, 2006, p. 162). In regards to high oral proficiency speakers and controlling affective factors, negotiation is important to prevent communication breakdowns.

Lightbown and Spada (2006) write that “Negotiation of meaning is accomplished through a variety of modifications that naturally arise in interaction, such as requests for clarification or confirmation, repetition with a questioning intonation, etc” (p. 150). According to Lee (2000), “Negotiation consists of interactions during which speakers come to terms, reach an agreement, make arrangements, resolve a problem, or settle an issue by conferring or discussing; the purpose of language use is to accomplish some task rather than to practice particular language forms” (Lee, p. 9). Lee recommends that L2 teachers “pause to consider the teaching and learning of negotiation devices such as clarification checks, indications of lack comprehension, and so on” (Lee, p. 66). In other words, negotiation of meaning is best accomplished by using CSs.

**Conclusion**

In summary, CSs became a research topic in the 1970s and continue to interest researchers still today. Based on the writings of researchers from around the world, it is fair to say that many agree that CSs are useful for students and worth being taught in the communicative language classroom. While some researchers may not agree on exactly how useful they are, they still acknowledge the benefits that come with learning CSs. Research has shown the benefits of CSs and how they help students cope with missing L2 knowledge as well as with their negotiation skills. Although the benefits have been proven, there is still an ongoing debate regarding the teachability of CSs in a classroom setting. Students use CSs in their L1, but can they transfer them over to an L2 without being encouraged to do so by a teacher? Is it a waste of time to teach students to use CSs? Many researchers disagree. Using CSs can lead to more negotiation among L2 learners during communication and help them to extend their conversation times. CSs are developmental and it takes
time for students to build a strong strategic competence. Students, if taught CSs explicitly, can overtime with practice, successfully use them to build their confidence in communicating in an L2.

**Bibliographic Statement**

**Joseph Wood** is a full-time lecturer at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies where he also earned his M.A. in English Education. He is a native of California and loves traveling. His research interests include communication strategy training, teaching American culture, and communicative language teaching. The research for this paper began as Mr. Wood was a graduate student and appeared in a small in-house publication at his university. It has since been updated, revised, and included in this journal with the hopes of promoting CSs in communicative language classrooms everywhere. He has been a THT member since 2010.

**References**


