ENHANCING THE USE OF SPEAKING STRATEGIES THROUGH CONVIVIAL FEEDBACK DISCUSSIONS
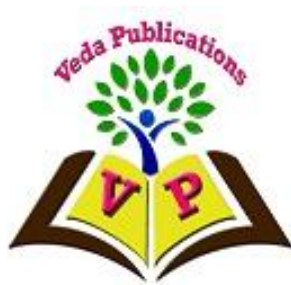
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ABSTRACT

Tertiary level regional language medium learners, even after learning English for more than ten years, do not have the expected level of speaking proficiency in English. However, these learners are able to speak fluently, use speaking strategies and achieve task demands in academic speaking contexts if an opportunity is given to them to speak in their L1, in this context Malayalam. Therefore, the reason for the learners' underperformance in formal speaking tasks in English can be attributed to their inability to use appropriate speaking strategies. It can be assumed that if these learners are made aware of their use of speaking strategies in their L1, they may be able to use such strategies in their English as well. However, raising awareness of strategies must be carried out through individualized feedback discussions on their speaking tasks as well as their use of strategies. As this demands the learners to be metacognitively aware of their own language use, such feedback sessions must be convivial in nature and must make use of the learners' first language. An attempt has been made in this paper to present the evidence of the ways in which the feedback varied from person to person and how associations, anecdotes and examples were used to identify strategies and to raise the learners' awareness of strategy use.

Keywords: *Speaking Strategies, Convivial, Feedback, Metacognitive, First Language, Second Language.*

INTRODUCTION

Undergraduate learners in India, who have had their education in regional medium schools, even after learning English for more than ten years, encounter difficulties in communicating in English. Even though these learners recognize the importance of English in their academic and career prospects, the extant syllabus-driven, examination-oriented, lecture-based teaching has not enhanced their speaking proficiency. They struggle when they are asked to make a presentation or a speech in English during functions organised in their colleges. However, given an opportunity to use their first language, many of these learners are able to communicate effectively.

Formal speech belongs to the category of "talk as performance" (Richards, 2006) and whether in the first language (L1) or second language (L2), it is difficult as it is a cognitively demanding and context-reduced task (Cummins, 1984). In the case of English, particularly with the regional medium learners, it becomes all the more challenging, owing to their under-developed language skills. Since, these learners are able to do better in formal speeches in their first language, it can be assumed that they must be using some strategies which help them plan and monitor their speech (Bygate, 1987).

There has been a large amount of research in the area of speaking strategies. Some researchers have explored the range of strategies that learners use in their speaking (O'Malley, Chamot, Stewener, Manzares, Russo and Kupper, 1985a; Cabaysa &Baetiong, 2010). Some other studies have investigated the effect of strategy instruction on the speaking proficiency of their learners (O'Malley, Chamot, Stewener ,Manzares, Russo and Kupper, 1985b; Cohen, Weaver &Li, 1996; Nakatani, 2005, 2010; Dornyei, 1995), while a few other studies have probed the different variables that affect strategy choice and use, such as motivation (Hashim and Sahil, 1994), anxiety (Sioson, 2011), learning beliefs (Zare-ee, 2010), learning achievement (Cabaysa & Baetiong, 2010), tasks (Khan, 2010) and gender (Zhou, 2010). One common factor that links the studies is that they were all carried out in ESL or EFL contexts. However, the learners' L1 has not been considered as an enabling factor in such studies, probably because they have been carried out with immigrants in educationally assimilationist (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1981/2007) contexts.

In the specific multilingual context of India, the learners' existing capabilities in their first language must not be neglected. Although the studies that documented the impact of strategy-based instruction used questionnaires, strategy inventories, interviews, verbal protocols and learner interviews to profile the strategy use of the learners, the learners' first language as an enabler was not focused in these studies. In the specific context of Kerala, especially in the case of regional medium learners, familiarizing them with strategy taxonomy would be a tedious task as the learners already perceive learning English as a cumbersome practice. My teaching and research experiences with undergraduate learners reiterated the need to adopt a different methodology to raise the awareness of speaking strategies, without emphasizing the strategy nomenclature.

The learners need to be made aware of their language flaws as well as strengths. To make them understand and perceive their capabilities and their mistakes the teacher can make use of feedback discussions. The evaluation of the learners' performance must be convivial in nature (Durairajan, 2003). The care and tolerance the teacher extends to the learner to provide support and enable learning determines the conviviality of the teacher feedback. Such feedback a teacher gives to a learner, whose aim is to help the learner to learn results in "individualized learning" (Durairajan, 2012). The present study adopts this concept of convivial nature of evaluation/feedback and examines its effectiveness in raising the learners' awareness of speaking strategy use.

THE STUDY

Through this qualitative study I investigated the use of convivial feedback discussions in developing the learners' use of strategy in their English and Malayalam speeches. I attempted to answer the following questions:

- How effective one-on-one feedback discussions are in identifying and enabling speaking strategy use?

- What are the feedback strategies to be adopted to maintain the conviviality of the feedback discussions?

Seven tertiary level learners from regional medium background were the participants of the study. They are given pseudonyms like Cressida, David, Dianne, Jane, Jim, Maggie and Milo. They had been given a topic in English and a parallel topic in Malayalam to speak for three minutes. The speeches were followed by a detailed one-on-one feedback discussion which focused on the strategic moves they showed in their speeches. Both the speeches and the feedback sessions were video recorded and transcribed later for analysis. A post study discussion was also carried out to corroborate the results.

PROCEDURE

From the learners' speeches, I could clearly understand certain specific strategic moves they made in order to manage communication difficulties. To understand why they exhibited such language behavior, I conducted one to one feedback sessions after each round of the speeches. These feedback discussions adopted an informal tone and a comfortable mixing of different registers that enabled and fostered learner participation and interaction.

During the feedback sessions, I asked each learner to watch his/her speech and I paused at places where I found the use of a specific strategy. As a teacher-researcher, I asked them questions such as "what made you …?" and "why did you…?" to obtain accurate information about why they used particular strategies and for what purposes. Such questions helped the learners to think about their use of specific strategies at specific points in their speech. They could explain the strategies because they were able to use Malayalam, English or a mixture of both to talk about them. They code-switched whenever they found it comfortable to express their intent accurately. This non-threatening learning space helped them express their ideas clearly. By playing the video, pausing it, prompting questions, responding to their reflections and metacognitive comments the feedback sessions helped me in identifying strategies they used and in obtaining credible data regarding the rationale for specific strategy use.

DATA ANALYSIS

I was able to identify strategies like monitoring, substantiating, restating, critical thinking, digressing, visualizing, using fillers and the mixing of colloquial and formal language. To make them aware of the potentials of certain strategies and to caution them regarding the use of some strategies such as excessive use of fillers(both in English and Malayalam) and the mixing of colloquial and formal language styles (in English) I used some teaching strategies. I relied on the use of our common first language Malayalam. I provided simple explanations, used familiar associations, and raised their awareness of certain strategies by using some stories and examples. All these teaching strategies helped the learners not only to identify their strategies and purposes but also provided them with an opportunity to reflect and talk about their own strategy behaviour.

❖ **Abundant use of L1**

In this study, the learners were encouraged to speak in Malayalam about their thoughts and feelings during the time of data collection. Except the actual task performances in English and Malayalam, they were encouraged to speak in Malayalam, English, or in a mixture of both, depending on their comfort level. There were many instances of code-switching in order to make the meaning clear. The abundant use of Malayalam was central to the obtaining of valid insights into the learners' use of strategies. It was their language of self-refection. Unless the learners feel comfortable to speak about their strategy use, and reveal the purposes for which they employed them, it would be difficult to trace the internal processes that are involved in strategy use.

❖ **Associating everyday incidents with strategy terms**

It was not always possible to make the learners understand the use of strategies and their benefits by merely explaining to them the terms in Malayalam, owing to the complexity involved in strategies. To explain terms like 'monitoring', 'substantiating' and 'restating', familiar contexts and simpler words were used. For example, to explain the term 'monitoring', I asked my learners to think about how they would watch a small baby to make sure that the child does not crawl into a bathroom. I

then told them that, in a similar way, they should learn to keep track of their own speech. My learners were also encouraged to ask questions and clarify their doubts about these terms. Such use of everyday language and associations made them feel comfortable, and they were able to talk about their own abilities and inadequacies.

❖ **Explaining strategies through anecdotes**

All my feedback sessions were one-on-one sessions. I, therefore, used a range of stories to teach different strategies to different learners. The stories were pitched at the level of their understanding, and they varied from one learner to another, depending on their individual interests and the sex of the learner.

Three different anecdotes were used to teach critical thinking to these learners. Dianne was told a story about a son, who in his childhood had watched his father observing a religious ceremony at home. There was a cat in the house disturbing this process, and the father asked his brother to put the cat under a basket. When the child grew up, he had to perform the same ritual, and at that time there was no cat in his house. However, he asked his son to bring a cat, and keep it under a basket. The son obeyed his father without questioning the logic. I used this story to explain to her that it would be difficult to think differently opposing popular conventions or notions. Once I had narrated this story, I asked Dianne what she understood from the story, and she clearly stated: "*we should think… using our own skill…we should not say or do things because all others do so…we should use our own ability*"[1].

Milo and David were told the story of a father, also a businessman, who gave the same amount of money to his three sons, and asked them to fill a room with a thing of their choice. This was done in order to decide who should take over his business. Two of his sons purchased tons of cotton and salt respectively to fill their rooms. The third son simply bought a lamp, and filled the dark room with light. The father chose the third son. Milo, after listening to the story commented: "…oh so the person who think differently got the money and everything. So you

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[1] Italicised statements are the direct translations of the statements made by the learners in Malayalam.

telled (sic) this story to understand that when I think differently I get more points?" In a similar way, David said, "That is right. Whenever we think differently we are getting a lot of things to say. *I mean, we can talk about our original thinking and at the same time about the different points of view. This is helpful in speaking*".

To explain the concept of digressing I told Jim the story of a student who was supposed to write an essay on "the cow" but having no idea of the topic, he wrote about the topic he memorized, which was "the coconut tree". He wrote in detail about it and concluded that "on such kind of coconut tree we usually tie the cow". This was to explain how Jim digressed from one topic and moved to a topic with which he was more familiar. Jim stated: "*I did something like that. But I managed to come back to the point. Some bluffing is needed because speaking in English is always very difficult. So going round and round and then coming back to the main point is not a serious issue*".

❖ **Explaining strategies through examples**

The usefulness of examples to create awareness about strategies was something I had learnt during the very first feedback session of this study. Cressida explained her rationale for using the visualisation strategy through an example taken from a popular Malayalam film, *Drishyam* (Antony and Joseph, 2013). I later adapted this as an effective way to explain strategies to the learners. The use of simplified Malayalam, and with an example, helped learners understand this strategy better.

In order to raise their awareness of the formal language they need to use in their speeches, I made use of an example from a Malayalam film, *I.G.* (Mahi & Unnikrishnan, 2009). In this film, there was a humorous sequence, where one of the actors was speaking in Malayalam but mixing two different dialects, one of northern Kerala and the other from southern Kerala, to answer his superior police officer's questions. When I gave them this example, and then played back to the learners their video-recorded speech, they were immediately able to perceive that they were mixing registers. They became conscious of their use of formal language. As Cressida stated during the feedback session after round 4, "after that *IG* experience, I am very careful

about mixing different you know styles." Maggie also expressed something similar to what Cressida said: "Oh… after watching that movie clip, I am always checking my Malayalam. *I don't want that mixing in my speeches.* So I am very caring about it".

Critical thinking was also explained through examples to Cressida and Maggie. I used a statement that is often used in teacher education courses to teach the importance of punctuation. In it students are asked to punctuate the following sentence: a woman without her man is nothing. All the male students in the classroom punctuated it as "A woman, without her man, is nothing!" while the female students punctuated it as "A woman: without her, man is nothing!" I used this example to explain to them that, just as how punctuation affects written language, sense groups can be indicated by pausing in speech. However, I taught this concept without using the term 'sense group,' which would have made no sense to them.

To sensitise them towards the positive use of visualisation, and to make them aware of the negative impact of fillers, I provided them with some examples from some Malayalam films. One film was all about trips made, and trips visualised but not made. I used this to explain visualisation. In another film, a character uses the Malayalam equivalent of the word 'this' excessively in his speech for comic effect. Since my learners were familiar with these films, they could understand the negative impact that excessive use of fillers had on their speeches. Such references to films, or even books, however, will always be specific to the context, the learners and the teacher concerned.

DISCUSSION

It was not only to avoid the use of the strategy nomenclature that I used the associations, anecdotes and examples but also to make them understand the logic of using each of the strategies which were explained. It was found that the students were using the same strategies for different purposes. While Jim used digressing in Round 2 in Malayalam to lengthen his speech, he used it in his third round English speech because he did not have many ideas to talk about the main point. Therefore he relied on a nearly unrelated topic. Dianne used this strategy largely to buy time to think about the

vocabulary that she needed. She relied on digressing using a familiar and simple idea while she was "searching for the actual words I needed for conveying my main ideas".

The data analysis shows that the learners were able to talk comfortably about their thinking process while they were actually using the language. In other words, they were able to successfully communicate their metacognitive awareness of their own strategy use through Malayalam. The amiable tone of the discussion provided them with a non-threatening learning environment. Therefore, the convivial nature of the one-on-one discussions on their language use with a particular focus on their strategy use helped me to identify not only the different strategies they used in both English and Malayalam speeches but also to understand the various purposes for which they employ the same strategies. To sustain the conviviality of the feedback discussions the abundant use of Malayalam, establishing associations, giving examples and the use of anecdotes helped me.

CONCLUSIONS

This study shows that multilingual abilities of teachers and learners can be used while raising the learners' consciousness about their strategy use. In such contexts, the first language can be the medium through which the learners identify, understand and reflect on their strategy use. Such a profiling is highly recommended because each individual learner may have some idiosyncratic notions about the same strategies. They may employ them in their speeches for different purposes. Strategy-based instructions cannot bring to light the rationale behind strategy implementation. Therefore, if multilinguality is valued and used, there are possibilities of enhancing the learners' use of speaking strategies without putting them through complex terminology. Such multilingual approaches to strategy training will also enhance the learners' metacognitive ability to plan, monitor and self-evaluate their spoken performance. In the actual classrooms, it is difficult for a teacher to provide individual feedback. However, if a convivial manner is adopted, the teacher can utilize both classroom space and outside, as it then becomes an academic discussion in an amiable tone which is not bound by classroom walls. Different teachers are

likely to use different strategies, depending on the nature and background of their students. An investigation that not only profiles the strategies used by students but also documents the strategy profiles as used by varied teachers would be able to feed into the possibility of strategy instruction in multilingual contexts.

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