ON THE USE OF LEXICAL AVOIDANCE STRATEGIES IN FOREIGN-LANGUAGE COMMUNICATION

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INTRODUCTION AND AIM

According to Pit Corder, a foreign-language learner facing language difficulty in a foreign-language communication situation may adopt either of two principal “macro-strategies” (Corder 1978). He may have a strong motivation or need to express meaning in the foreign language, and therefore use all the linguistic resources at his disposal, often at the risk of failing to reach his communicative goal, i.e. the successful passing on of precise information to his interlocutor. To these resources, which include paraphrasing, the invention of new words, guessing, and borrowing from the mother tongue, Corder gave the collective name “risk-taking” or “resource-expansion” strategies. Throughout this paper, however, they will be referred to as “achievement strategies” (so termed by Faerch and Kasper 1980).

In the opposite case, the learner ignores or abandons the target concepts for which he lacks the appropriate vocabulary. Due to inability to express meaning in the foreign language, he prefers to resort to one “escape route” (Ikenroth 1975) or another, at the cost of informative preciseness. These escape routes, commonly referred to as “avoidance strategies” in the recent literature, have also been termed “risk-avoiding strategies” (Corder 1978), “message-adjustment strategies” (Váradi 1980), and “reduction strategies” (Faerch and Kasper 1980).

The aim of the present paper is to present a typology of lexical avoidance strategies, to interpret the results as to the proportion of avoidance strategies and achievement strategies used by the learners in three different experiments conducted in the field of communication strategies, and to comment on some of the problems involved in the study of communication strategies in general and avoidance strategies in particular.
A TYPOLOGY OF AVOIDANCE STRATEGIES

Although there exists some terminological and classificatory disagreement in the typologies established for communication strategies, most of them derive from the typology originally presented by Váradi (1980) and enlarged upon by Tarone (1977). In these typologies it has been customary to distinguish between three different avoidance strategies:

(a) **Topic avoidance** (Tarone et al. 1976a, 1976b; Tarone 1977; Corder 1978) occurs when the learner does not talk about concepts (or “topics”) for which the vocabulary is not known. In extreme cases this may result in no communication at all. In less extreme cases the learner directs his conversation away from the troublesome topic, e.g. by omission.

(b) **Message abandonment** (Tarone et al. 1976a; Tarone 1977; Corder 1978) occurs when the learner starts expressing a target concept and suddenly realizes that he does not know how to go on. He then stops in mid-sentence, chooses another topic, and continues his conversation. In both topic avoidance and message abandonment, therefore, the troublesome topic is completely dropped by the learner.

(c) In **meaning replacement** (Váradi 1980), unlike in topic avoidance and message abandonment, the topic is, in fact, not dropped but preserved by the learner. However, instead of trying to expand his linguistic resources and overcome his communicative problem, he deliberately chooses to be less specific than he originally intended to be. This kind of “semantic avoidance” (so termed in Tarone et al. 1976b) always results in some degree of vagueness.

In an experiment designed to elicit the communication strategies that Finns and Swedish-speaking Finns adopt when communicating in English (Palmberg 1979), 103 learners were asked to describe a series of pictures, the first two of which depicted a cave in the mountains and a caveman coming out from the cave. The following examples are taken from the data collected, and illustrate how three learners chose to avoid the target item cave:

1. “I can see three mountains.” **TOPIC AVOIDANCE**
2. “A man is coming out from a... er...” **MESSAGE ABANDONMENT**
   it's a stone aged man...”
3. “A man comes out from his... home”. **MEANING REPLACEMENT**

Paerch and Kasper define strategies as “potentially conscious plans ... for solving what to the individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular goal” (1980: 60). The strategy of topic avoidance is adopted exclusively by learners perceiving problems in the planning phase of reaching their communicative goal. Message abandonment and meaning replacement, on the other hand, may also be adopted by learners confronted by a planning or retrieval problem at a later stage, i.e. in the realization phase. The three avoidance strategies, therefore, should be seen as a continuum rather than three separate categories, because, as Paerch and Kasper point out: “At the one end, the learner says ‘almost’ what she wants to say about a given topic (=meaning replacement), at the other end she says nothing at all about this (=topic avoidance)” (1980: 91).

ESTABLISHING THE LEARNERS’ OPTIMAL MEANING

A great problem in the study of avoidance strategies is to know when learners actually avoid. In other words: How do we know when learners say anything rather than what they wanted to say? This is a problem well-known to those studying learners’ errors (see e.g. Schachter 1974, 1979). In a critical paper on the uses of Error Analysis, Stig Johansson objects both to tests of free production (e.g. compositions) and to translations as reliable, error-elicitng devices. In the former, he points out, “the choice of words and constructions can be controlled by the learner” (1975: 331). In the latter, on the other hand, “an error is often avoided by an inexact translation or a translation which is correct from the viewpoint of the foreign language but is not a correct rendering of the original text” (p. 250).

In the study of communication strategies, the first attempt to systematically solve the problem of pinpointing learners’ avoidance behaviour was that of Váradi. In an experiment designed to find out how close foreign-language learners came to producing what they actually wanted to produce, Váradi asked Hungarian learners of English to describe in writing a series of pictures, first in English, then in Hungarian. The rationale behind this procedure was that the mother-tongue version, written immediately after the English version, would reveal exactly what each learner wanted to produce, i.e. his “optimal meaning” (Váradi 1980).

LEARNERS’ USE OF AVOIDANCE STRATEGIES IN THREE DIFFERENT EXPERIMENTS

Váradi’s methodology was soon adopted by other investigators in the field of communication strategies. There were often modifications in the elicitation techniques used, the most important of which was a shift of interest from written to oral communication strategies. Three different experiments are presented below, those conducted by Tarone et al. (1976b), Tarone (1977), and Ervin (1979). Throughout the presentation of the results, the main emphasis will be on learners’ use of avoidance strategies.
EXPERIMENT 1 (TARONE ET AL. 1976b)

In an attempt to show patterns of stability or instability in children's use of communication strategies in a foreign language over a period of time, Tarone et al. used a "native-language base-line" to establish the learners' optimal meaning. Their elicitation instrument was a cartoon, and in addition to asking the learners, who were English-speaking children in a French immersion school in Toronto, to tell the events of the cartoon in French, they asked a control group consisting of monolingual English-speaking children of the same age group (viz 7 1/2 years) to tell the story in English. Tape-recordings were made of the narratives.

Table 1 (interpreted and modified from p. 130) shows the frequency of avoidance strategies used by six children, as compared to their use of achievement strategies and their use of correct French for the target items. The specific target items were verbs as well as objects decided upon in the semantic content of the cartoon (as judged by the native-language versions provided by the control group).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number of occurrences</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance strategies</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement strategies</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correct French</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One year later, the same children were asked to perform the same task (with the same pictures) again, and their production was analysed as to their use of communication strategies.

For the 13 occurrences of avoidance strategies at Time I, the results are as follows: There were 11 shifts to correct French at Time II, one shift to an achievement strategy, and one occurrence of stabilized avoidance. Furthermore, there was a shift from correct French at Time I to avoidance at Time II.

EXPERIMENT 2 (TARONE 1977)

In Tarone's study of the use of communication strategies by adult foreign-language learners, the frequency of avoidance strategies was fairly small. Following Váradi, Tarone set out to isolate the learners' optimal meaning with the aid of a story-telling task in both the native and the foreign language. The stories performed by the nine learners (who spoke Spanish, Turkish, and Mandarin as their mother tongue) were recorded on tape.

Table 2 (modified from p. 201) shows the strategy preferences for seven semantic target concepts by each learner (identified by their initials).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learner &amp; L1</th>
<th>Spanish</th>
<th>Turkish</th>
<th>Mandarin</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>UT</td>
<td>RD</td>
<td>CT</td>
<td>DR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

EXPERIMENT 3 (ERWIN 1979)

Somewhat different results were obtained by Erwin in his study of communication strategies used by 14 intermediate-level American students learning Russian as a foreign language. He elicited his data through oral narratives in English and in Russian, and each student provided his version of three different picture stories, containing in all 32 specific semantic target items.

In Erwin's study, the total number of occurrences of avoidance strategies and achievement strategies used in the task were 108 and 150 respectively. Moreover, assuming that the non-use of a communication strategy (as reported by Erwin) presupposed the knowledge of the correct Russian word, we get the results shown in Table 3 (interpreted and modified from p. 331).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learner &amp; L1</th>
<th>Number of occurrences</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>UT</td>
<td>RD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correct Russian</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>448</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DISCUSSION

As the three studies show, it is obvious that foreign-language learners make use of avoidance strategies to different extents, irrespective of age, mother tongue, or target language. It is equally obvious that these studies can only give very general directions as to the overall use of avoidance strategies by foreign learners at different levels of language proficiency. Great caution should be shown when interpreting such results, for several reasons.

First of all, reliable divisions of communication strategies even into either of the two macro-strategies suggested by Corder are very difficult to make. This has been demonstrated in Palmberg (1981/82), and was also pointed out by Erwin, who used a panel of four judges to classify and to decide on the communicative efficiency of the learners' productions (1979).
learners who are tired of being constantly misunderstood when trying to pronounce an English word containing an /l/ or /r/ sound, may therefore deliberately avoid that word and instead use a synonym which causes them less difficulty in pronunciation. Although this phenomenon is claimed to be extremely rare (Schachter 1974), examples are provided in the literature. Cohen, for example, reports that Celeo-Maucro's 2 1/2 year-old daughter would at times borrow a word from her second language rather than using a mother-tongue word with a sound that she had not yet mastered (Cohen 1975: 121-122). Avoidance of this type presupposes a choice, and has therefore been referred to as "true avoidance" (Levenson and Blum 1977). In addition to second- or foreign-language learners, true avoidance in the lexical field is frequently adopted by e.g. teachers, translators and editors of Simplified Readers intended for foreign-language learners.

REFERENCES


