UABDIVULGA
BARCELONA RECERCA I INNOVACIÓ

01/2011

What do English language learners do in task-based oral communication?

This doctoral thesis deals with oral communication in the EFL (English as a foreign language) classroom in the university context. A task-based approach was taken and oral communication was analysed, on the one hand, in terms of language learning strategies and communication strategies, and on the other, in terms of spoken production. The study analizes variations in the oral production and the strategies employed by students according to specific circumstances.

In this study Catalan and Spanish university undergraduates participated with either low or high oral proficiency in English. Participants performed three tasks (a Picture Story, an Art Description and an Information Gap) in pairs and were recorded on video. Immediately after each task learners reported their perceived strategy use (PSU) on a questionnaire consisting of 44 rating scale items.

Strategies were analysed according to five categories: Interactional, Compensation, Conversation flow maintenance, Planning and Evaluating strategies, which had been obtained from factor analysis. Across tasks for the high proficiency learners most differences were in Interactional and Compensation strategy use, which was higher on the Information Gap. For the

low proficiency learners very few differences were found. There were also few (18% max.) significant differences between low and high proficiency groups on any one task. These differences consisted of more Compensation strategy use by the low group.

Spoken production was analysed according to several measures. Across tasks differences were found for both proficiency groups, except for speech rate, and self repair for the high group. Structural complexity was highest on the Picture Story, lexical complexity was highest on the Art Description and accuracy and fluency were highest on the Information Gap. Between low and high proficiency groups there were significant differences in accuracy, lexical complexity, structural complexity and speech rate, which, as expected, were consistently higher for the high group on every task. However, there were few differences in other fluency measures (long pauses, repetition, reformulation and self-repair).

By comparing learners reports on the strategy questionnaire with their actual strategy use, it was found that the high group were consistent in reporting 63% strategies compared to 48% for the low group. Furthermore, the high group was able to gauge differences in strategy use across the three tasks more accurately. Nevertheless, more differences across tasks were found in actual strategy use than revealed by reports from both proficiency groups.

Finally, multiple regression analysis with the five strategy categories and spoken production measures revealed that the strategy questionnaire was a weak predictor of accuracy (23%), lexical complexity (36%) and speech rate (31%). More specifically, the more Compensation strategies learners reported using, the lower their accuracy, lexical complexity and speech rate.

This study supports evidence in the strategy research literature that the task influences the strategies learners use and so needs to be considered when investigating strategies. It also confirms that dimensions of spoken production can be predicted from task characteristics, giving further support to the use of tasks as a unit of study in oral communication. Furthermore, the study supports claims that task is a stronger influence on strategy use than proficiency. Also, the study provides evidence from different sources which suggests that differences in strategy use are not observed between proficiency groups because they may use the same strategies but in different ways. In terms of the validity of strategy questionnaires and contrary to criticisms in strategy research, this study indicates that questionnaires are moderate indicators of actual strategy use. Finally, current strategy research is extended by findings in the present study that the relationship between strategies and particular spoken production measures is non-linear.

*Dr. Mia Victori (Department of English and German Philology of UAB) passed away on 29th November 2010. I'm eternally grateful for her support in writing this thesis and, along with many others, will miss her very much.

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