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著者	Kirkwold, Lorne O.
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A REVIEW OF SEMINAL CANADIAN RESEARCH IN COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Lorne O. Kirkwold

Abstract

The article critically reviews "Can we teach our students how to learn?" a survey of the Interview Study, the Picture Reconstruction Study, and the Concept-identification Study. The collection is important work conducted by late twentieth-century Canadian researchers in the area of communication strategies. The studies' implications for the foreign-language teacher are discussed particularly in terms of their relevance to the classroom.

Keywords: *communication strategies, good language learner, foreign language*

LITERATURE REVIEW

This is a review of the survey "Can we teach our students how to learn?" (Fröhlich & Paribakht, 1984). I have chosen this article since I believe it to be seminal to the Canadian work conducted about the Good Language Learner (GLL), actually a collection of research addressing the efficient learning of second language, during the late twentieth century. The Interview Study, I believe, remains an important standard. Fröhlich originally completed the Interview Study for her master's thesis. The accessible version of this study is included as part

of *The Good Language Learner*, which itself has been published twice.[1] In the introduction of the new edition of *The Good Language Learner* (Naiman, Fröhlich, Stern & Todesco, 1996), Christopher Brumfit endorses the work as "a modest study that does not attempt to over-sell its results" (p. viii) unlike Krashen's claims, among others, Brumfit would have us infer. His endorsement is particularly apt with regard to the Interview Study.

"Can we teach our students how to learn?" reviews three GLL studies: (1) the Interview Study (Naiman, Fröhlich, Stern & Todesco, 1996); (2) the Picture Reconstruction Study (Bialystok and Fröhlich, 1980); and (3) the Concept-identification Study. For ease of identification, I will refer to (2) and (3) as the information-gap studies.

The first study, the Interview Study, relates the salient points of the adult interviews included in *The Good Language Learner*. During the Interview Study, Fröhlich conducted, as the title suggests, semi-structured interviews with 32 GLL's — adults who were "highly proficient" (Fröhlich and Paribakht, 1984, p. 66) in at least one foreign or second language. The interviewees introspectively identified the strategies and techniques which they had used to become proficient. From this data, Fröhlich discerned five major covering strategies to be described later in this paper.

Concluding their discussion of the Interview Study, Fröhlich and Paribakht (1984) make four points which I paraphrase below:

(1) Even if common experience and major covering strategies can

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[1] This work was originally published in 1978 in Toronto by the University of Toronto's Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (Research in Education Series No. 7). I refer, however, to the 1996 version, more readily accessible at the time of writing.

be identified, learners go about the task essentially in their own individual ways. The researchers seem to suggest that preference for learning style, among other factors, contributes significantly to individual variation;

(2) Learning another language is a complicated time-consuming undertaking;

(3) Various factors contribute to the success: "age, aptitude, motivation, the learning situation and the social context, and the learning processes,..." (Fröhlich & Paribakht, 1984, p. 71);

(4) GLL's develop "learning strategies and techniques" (p. 71). Other learners may not do this automatically. The classroom should therefore ensure that students develop effective strategies and techniques.

This fourth observation is the thrust of the remaining discussion. Fröhlich and Paribakht then describe the two remaining investigations (the information-gap studies) in light of the need to assist learners develop effective communication strategies (CS's) which will permit them to express their intent when specific words or terms are missing in their vocabulary.

The first information-gap study discussed is the Picture Reconstruction Task, originally conducted by Bialystok and Fröhlich in 1980. Fourteen adults and 16 high school students learning French were each asked to describe a scene to a native speaker (NS) who could not see it. Following the subject's directions, the NS interlocutor reconstructed the scene at a felt board without speaking.

From this data, Bialystok and Fröhlich identified and categorized CS's which were either first language (L_1)-based or second-language (L_2)-based. Those which were L_2-based were reported more effective and exploited significantly more often by the adult learners, who were

more proficient than the high school students.

The final investigation, the Concept-identification Study, conducted for Paribakht's doctoral dissertation, is reminiscent of a game called "Password." Each subject was assigned a noun. The task was to make an NS-interlocutor guess the word. Paribakht used the data elicited from this task to classify the nature of the CS's exploited by the subjects. Four were identified: (1) "linguistic approach;" (2) "contextual approach;" (3) "conceptual approach;" and (4) "mime" (Fröhlich & Paribakht, 1984, p. 76). Linguistic and contextual approaches include strategies which are related to the nature of the language itself. The conceptual approach includes strategies which reflect the subject's knowledge about non-linguistic information. For example, saying "a fish lives in it" as a clue for "water" would be a CS falling under this approach.

Concluding their discussion of the Concept-identification Study, Fröhlich and Paribakht make three generalizations (again, paraphrased):

(1) Speakers draw on two sources for CS's: their knowledge about the language and their knowledge about everything else.

(2) Irrespective of proficiency, each subject exploited the various approaches to some extent. Proportions of each, however, seemed to be determined by proficiency.

(3) "Strategic competence" (See Canale & Swain, 1980) is developed in the mother tongue. Adults are able to transfer this competence to the target language.

FRÖHLICH AND PARIBAKHT ON SECOND-LANGUAGE LEARNING

In their description of the Interview Study, the researchers review significant strategies identified introspectively by the GLL's. Fröhlich, who first conducted the interviews as a master's thesis, has categorized these strategies under the five following covering headings: (1) active task approach; (2) awareness of language as a system; (3) awareness of language as a means of communication; (4) management of affective demands; and (5) monitoring L_2 performance (Fröhlich and Paribakht, 1984, pp. 68-70.[2]) Below are briefly summarized the major claims made under each category.

1. Active task approach

This approach is reminiscent of opportunity, one of the success variables originally named by Rubin (1975). She maintained that opportunity was a significant factor contributing to the language learner's success. This claim was reiterated in the GLL interviews.

Fröhlich found that GLL's were prepared to make opportunity for themselves. Instead of depending exclusively on teachers, they worked actively at making their situation compatible with their personal learning styles. When learners found they needed to isolate a specific aspect of language for additional practice, they used their own innovation to develop a technique to improve their weakness. For some, this meant making additional contacts with the target community to improve their spoken fluency; for others, this meant repeating problem-

[2] 'Awareness' in the 1984 survey is 'realization' in the 1996 version of *The Good Language Learner*.

atic sounds on their own. For those who required systematic analytical presentations of the code, they found appropriate language courses.

On the whole, interviewees claimed that combination of both formal and informal learning was required to achieve proficiency. The proportion of each depended on the individual's learning style. Consequently, the learners would take the responsibility of tailoring a program according to their own needs.

2. Awareness of language as a system

Strategies identified under this category included analytic approaches to target language phonology and structure. Vocabulary common to the two languages was also identified as a useful resource for comprehension and production.

Although vocabulary is not the focus of the Interview Study, it can be inferred from the information-gap studies that the researchers accord significance to its development to lexicon, particularly as proficiency increases.

3. Awareness of language as a means of communication

Sociolinguistic considerations are useful describing the interaction between the interlocutors. Knowledge about appropriate behaviors for non-native speakers (NNS's) in target-language discourse is a common need articulated in the GLL interviews, and later, by the researchers themselves. For example, one interviewee claimed to have prepared for the foreign country by memorizing polite target-language formulae. Politeness was in fact a concern shared by many other interviewees. Awareness of target-language interlocutor sensitivity to usual sociolinguistic conventions was a concern expressed in the interviews.

Later, in the conclusion, Fröhlich and Paribakht underscore the necessity for further research about communication strategies to address the question of "sociolinguistic appropriateness" (Fröhlich & Paribakht, 1984, p. 79). In other words, how does a NNS keep up the discourse, given that many cues could inadvertently disrupt the flow or break it down? How does the NNS learner most effectively find out unknown words, given that not all NS's will share the same threshold for unintelligibility? Thus, in our consideration of sociolinguistics, it is helpful to return to the significance of strategic competence in the researchers' conclusion. Stern, a prominent scholar of the University of Toronto's prestigious Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, interprets strategic competence as knowing "how to be a 'foreigner'" (1983, p. 229), which succinctly resonates with the view expressed by the interviewees.

Additionally, a case can be made that interviewees made use of the target language's "referential function" (Stern, 1983, p. 225) as a medium of news to increase proficiency. For example, the knowledge of current affairs through the first language permitted the GLL's to exploit target language media for improving comprehension. Their awareness of the probable message of the language in particular contexts allowed them to focus on the code.

4. Management of affective demands

More significant for the GLL's than an elusive aptitude for language learning were motivation, positive attitude, and persistence. Implicit in the description is that the latter three characteristics can compensate to a large extent for deficits in aptitude. The GLL's had realistic expectations about the difficulty of their task. They realized what could be accomplished and did not expect instant success.

Dealing with the affective demands, the GLL's claimed that a sense of humor was important. They also came to terms with their anxiety through their active task approach. For instance, one interviewee, who claimed to be shy, made opportunity for learning by getting into situations that required communication in the target language. Others sought sympathetic interlocutors including children and friends, who were expected to be accepting of the NNS's inability.

5. Monitoring of L_2 performance

Metalinguistic awareness permitted the GLL's to improve their proficiency. In order to attain higher levels of accuracy in production, the GLL's claimed to have constantly compared their production with the input, and even solicited negative input.

Language Learning Implications based on the Information-Gap Studies

Whereas the GLL Interviews consist of generalizations made by successful learners, the two information-gap studies contain speculation about language learning which may be attributed to the researchers. Returning to the original Picture Reconstruction Study (Bialystok and Fröhlich, 1980), we find implications about when strategic competence can be developed. Bialystok and Fröhlich found in their investigation that there was a statistical correlation between proficiency and the use of communicative strategies identified in the study as L_2 based. Although the correlation does not necessarily reflect a causal relationship, they argue that a minimum L_2 competence must likely be attained before the learner can use L_2-based communicative strategies.

Another important consideration, based on the Concept-identification Study, is Fröhlich and Paribakht's supposition that strategic competence develops first in L_1 and can be transferred to L_2 by

adult learners. At the same time, Bialystok and Fröhlich (1980) found that adults used more effective communication strategies than did the younger learners. If strategic competence is a skill common to adults, but not children, we could attribute these differing abilities to cognitive maturity.

In light of the findings of both the Concept-Identification Study and the original Picture Reconstruction Study, perhaps it would be reasonable to expect that strategic competence can be attained only after the learner reaches a certain level of both proficiency and cognitive maturity. This modification may enhance their hypothesis that "certain benefits of L_2 knowledge are accessible only with the attainment of minimally acceptable levels of linguistic competence," put forth by Bialystok and Fröhlich (1980, p. 27) in their discussion of the development of communicative strategies. To make this hypothesis consistent with the findings of Paribakht's study, "minimally acceptable levels of linguistic competence and cognitive maturity" could be specified.

IMPLICATIONS FROM FRÖHLICH AND PARIBAKHT FOR SECOND-LANGAUGE TEACHING

Fröhlich and Paribakht's discussion is well suited to Clarke's (1983) analysis of frames and images. At a macro-level, Fröhlich selects the characteristics of the GLL as a frame. The corresponding image is the collection of interviews. At a micro-level, Fröhlich and Paribakht select techniques for developing semantically related communication strategies as a frame. The corresponding images here are the discussions of the information-gap studies: the Picture Reconstruction Study and the Concept-identification Study.

Although the researchers make few overt claims about what to teach based on the GLL interviews, the five major covering strategies each hold pedagogical implications. Consequently, the covering strategies identified will be listed again below with inferences about their significance for the teacher.

1. Active task approach

If proficiency can be effected only partially in the classroom, teachers should make learners aware of the multiplicity of readily available resources appropriate to this end at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Most conventional in our times would include pen pals, radio/television programming, magazines, newspapers, libraries, films and videos. This is useful information, which the teacher can share particularly in foreign-language learning contexts. In addition, the immediate accessibility of the internet provides unlimited opportunities given the diversity of various web sites. Proficient learners will eagerly seek out authentic sites that match their interests. Learners seeking linguistically sheltered sites will also find these on the web. E-mail naturally lends itself spontaneously to exchanges with foreign correspondents, just as we have come to use it for leaving messages regularly in our daily lives. Foreign radio programing is available via the internet from countries all over the world.

Fröhlich's adult GLL interviews evidence certain levels of contact with the target-language communities. The "active task approach" implies finding speakers of the language with whom to practice. As preparation for this step, various forms of the media will provide resources. Given that the classroom is a sheltered environment, language teachers can make opportunity for critical thinking. This is part and parcel of holding one's own in conversation with a NS.

Expressing opinions will be required when conversing. At the same time, the media of a language vehicle certain topics of conversation with which the learner will want to be familiar to some extent. Multicultural topics for the countries where English is spoken offer some perspective on the nature of contemporary life in other places, especially given that our students' own culture is a very homogeneous one. Historical and geographical information, as it arises in context, can also be useful for actively understanding the culture of a country where the language is spoken.

Critical thinking is acquired when reading. It can also be the product of problem solving. Videos presenting episodes with a story line therefore fosters this skill. Some begin with a prediction question. Watching the story with a question in mind from the outset is a sheltered activity in critical thought. Problem solving tasks can complement many reading assignments or video presentations. Asking students to describe authentic video presentations, such as Mr. Bean, is an exercise in describing and developing vocabulary as well as appreciating culture.

2. Awareness of language as a system

As our students' level of cognition is advanced enough for abstract thinking, an appropriate amount of class time should focus on the language as a formal system. Input à la Krashen (1978) by itself cannot effect awareness of language as a system. There are many activities indeed suitable for the language classroom, but I believe a consistent requirement of the language teacher is to explain points of vocabulary and grammar as they arise. This requires the ability to think quickly while teachers are on their feet especially when language is being taught communicatively since problematic grammatical points

will arise spontaneously. There are various nouns of English requiring lexicalization for plurality in usual speech. For example, Greenbaum and Quirk (1990) use the term "binary nouns" (p. 98) to refer to those nouns of the language which come in pairs. A student wanted to tell me about a number of shoes. I reminded her that speaking of pairs of shoes was usual. These binary nouns of English occur frequently enough, but seem to require a reminder about the usual convention to say so many pairs of shoes, (eye) glasses, and pants. A certain number of nouns fit into this group, which the astute teacher should be able to revise as the need arises. There are rarer forms of this kind of lexicalization such as "heads of lettuce" and "stalks of celery." Teaching or revising these rare plurals incidentally puts problematic grammar in a context for students of a certain level who cannot yet monitor for themselves, so it is therefore up to the teacher to "step in" at times which do not disrupt the natural flow of the classroom discourse. Furthermore, the teacher must monitor for feedback reflecting lack of comprehension. At critical moments, the right explanation requires the exacting judgement of good timing.

3. Awareness of language as a means of communication

This claim made by the GLL's is further evidence in favor of communicative language teaching. To the extent that the classroom can be made a venue for the exploitation of interaction through pen pals, radio/television programming, magazines, newspapers, libraries, films and videos, students will come to reflect on the opportunities afforded them in contemporary life through use of various media to acquire English actively. This naturally includes the internet. Students requiring a sheltered language experience on the internet could be directed during class time to a site such as www.pacificnet.net/

~sperling/eslcafe.html. The links that such a site offers provide instruction not only about the language but even information about where to study English as a second language (ESL) abroad.

4. Management of affective demands

Fröhlich and Paribakht would encourage students and teachers to discuss how difficult learning another language is. Perhaps learners will feel re-assured just to know that frustration is experienced by everyone who learns a second language. Teachers can then describe techniques for dealing with language-learning anxiety. It is also important for learners to know that they can manage the stress.

There are also the affective demands intimately related to the culture. Students should, as consumers of the language, develop some sociolinguistic sensitivity related to what is permissible to ask in English-speaking countries. Since Japanese people may readily divulge their ages as they would expect others to do, I operate, in such a situation, according to the caveat, "when in Rome." Therefore, I answer the question, but helpfully add afterwards that the question may be sensitive in certain situations in English-speaking countries.

The teacher should also be prepared as a sociolinguistic guide. A listening book used for first-year students in our institution includes an adaptation of advice from Judith Martin, writing under her usual pseudonym of "Miss Manners." When presenting this material, I hope I am dealing as much with the altruistic values that this popular columnist conveys as with the issues of the conventions of etiquette in certain social strata of North American society.

5. Monitoring of L_2 performance

To monitor second and foreign language implies metalinguisitic

awareness. This is normally achieved through studying the language analytically. For this reason, students can benefit from a formal presentation about language structure and vocabulary, especially given the level of development in their cognitive maturity. Indeed, there are times appropriate for the revision of persistent grammatical errors in students' writing. Consider subordination of a 'because'-clause. Students may well have been learning to write in English for a number of years, yet for many, the most spontaneous production using 'because' often produces a sentence fragment. Similarly, the use of "for example" may result in fragmentation as well. The conjunctions "and," "but," and especially "so" can be found without coordination at the beginning of students' sentences. Use of the comparative form may produce sentences like "John is taller than me." Prescriptive grammar rules require a subject pronoun instead. When these typical mistakes occur, a helpful teacher may refer these students to the explanation in their usual reference. Native writers may bypass in certain contexts what they would otherwise acknowledge to be standard rules. That it is done, however, is not license for the language learner to disregard the usual standard. Indeed, it is inadvisable to mimic "inside talk," especially in formal writing. Therefore, a language teacher should not hesitate to direct students to revise pertinent points which they have already studied in their texts. This kind of revision is intimately tied to the monitoring of the group's progress.

Further Teaching Implications based on the Information-Gap Studies

At the micro-level, Fröhlich and Paribakht's discussion of the two information-gap studies contains implications for second-language teaching stated more explicitly than those which we have drawn from the macro-level generalizations. First, the researchers endorse tech-

niques which develop skills elaborated in current communicative language teaching literature. More specifically, they underscore the importance of techniques which develop strategic competence. In particular, they stress the necessity to develop communication strategies, such as circumlocution, which permit the learner to express the intent of a specific term missing in his/her vocabulary. There is a pragmatic rationale for this: learners often find themselves explaining ideas for which their lexical resources are insufficient. Other times, their interlocutors will lack the experience required to understand what the learner is talking about.

As for effecting communicative competence in the classroom, Fröhlich and Paribakht underscore the desirability of real exchanges of information in order to promote the use of communication strategies. In order to motivate students, the researchers advocate information-gap activities such as the tasks in the Picture Reconstruction Study and the Concept-identification Study. I suspect this may be done at a variety of levels, and have found some opportunity in my day-to-day teaching. For example, I am interested in various kinds of Japanese foods, but occasions arise when my students volunteer names of food which I have not yet tried, or which I cannot yet identify. Consequently when students volunteer that they like *shabu-shabu*, I ask them first for a name in English, and then an explanation of how it is made. I feel this is a fair exchange of information. I hopefully am providing information useful to students who will have encounters with foreigners who have not been in the country as long as I have. In my own mind, I can confirm the ingredients of what I believe to have been eating, and learn something more about Japanese culture. This is an equitable exchange given usual classroom sizes, and I feel there is genuine interest when this kind of exchange arises.

CONCLUSION

Fröhlich and Paribakht's contribution to GLL research may provide direction for language teachers who spend many hours in the classroom. Although it appears at first glance that the good language learner is well motivated enough to be self-directed, there are various classroom activities which, when applied judiciously, may provide impetus for the group to aspire to autonomous learning after class. Joining GLL ranks will become increasingly appealing as students come to discover the opportunities of various sources to develop their foreign-language skills, particularly through the accessibility of today's internet. Where sociolinguistic or cultural issues require an insider's insight, the teacher will be a natural resource person. As for explanations about grammar and vocabulary, language teachers should applaud themselves for keeping up the good work!

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