

DEVELOPING STRATEGIC COMPETENCE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING FOR UPPER SECONDARY STUDENTS (GRADES 10–11)

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Abstract. Strategic competence, a crucial component of communicative language competence, plays a pivotal role in enabling advanced learners to overcome communication breakdowns and enhance the effectiveness of their interaction. This article explores the theoretical frameworks and practical applications of developing strategic competence specifically for students in grades 10 and 11 (upper secondary education). At this critical stage of language acquisition, students transition from intermediate to advanced proficiency, making the ability to manage discourse and compensate for linguistic gaps essential. The study examines various communication strategies, pedagogical approaches for their instruction, and the specific needs of adolescent learners preparing for higher education or professional environments.

Keywords: Strategic competence, communicative competence, foreign language teaching (FLT), communication strategies, upper secondary education, Canale and Swain

Introduction

In the landscape of modern Foreign Language Teaching (FLT), the ultimate goal has shifted from mere linguistic accuracy to comprehensive communicative competence. As students reach the upper secondary level (grades 10 and 11), the demands on their language abilities increase significantly. They are expected to handle complex texts, engage in abstract discussions, and maintain fluency even when their linguistic resources are stretched. In this context, **strategic competence** emerges as a vital skill set.

Strategic competence refers to the ability to use verbal and non-verbal communication strategies to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or insufficient competence (Canale & Swain, 1980). For 16-18-year-old students, who are often preparing for university entrance exams (such as IELTS, TOEFL, or CEFR-based national exams), the ability to "keep the conversation going" despite vocabulary gaps is as important as grammatical precision.

This article aims to analyze the nature of strategic competence in the context of upper secondary education, identify key strategies relevant to this age group, and propose methodological frameworks for integrating these strategies into the 10th and 11th-grade curriculum.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of strategic competence was first formalized by Canale and Swain (1980) in their seminal model of communicative competence. They defined it as the mastery of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action for two main reasons:

1. **Compensatory:** To compensate for breakdowns in communication due to limiting conditions in actual communication (e.g., momentary forgetting) or insufficient competence in one or more of the other areas of communicative competence.

2. **Enhancement:** To enhance the effectiveness of communication (e.g., using rhetorical devices).

Later, Bachman (1990) expanded this view, placing strategic competence at the center of language use. In his model, strategic competence acts as an executive function that manages the interaction between language knowledge, the user's background knowledge, and the context of the situation.

For the purpose of teaching upper secondary students, it is useful to categorize communication strategies (CS) based on the taxonomy proposed by Dörnyei and Scott (1997). Key strategies include:

- **Avoidance Strategies:** Message abandonment or topic avoidance (often seen in lower-level learners, but refined in advanced learners).

- **Compensatory Strategies:**

- *Circumlocution:* Describing the properties of the target object or action (e.g., "the thing you use to open a bottle" instead of "corkscrew").

- *Approximation:* Using a single alternative lexical item (e.g., "ship" for "sailboat").

- *Use of all-purpose words:* Using general words like "thing," "stuff," "make," "do."

- *Word coinage:* Creating a non-existing L2 word based on a supposed rule.

- **Interactional Strategies:**

- *Appeals for help:* Asking the interlocutor for the correct term.

- *Asking for clarification/Confirmation checks:* Ensuring understanding.

- *Time-gaining mechanisms:* Using fillers (e.g., "well," "let me see," "actually") to maintain the floor while processing.

Students in grades 10 and 11 possess a level of cognitive maturity that allows for explicit reflection on their own learning processes (metacognition). Unlike younger learners who may acquire language implicitly, adolescents can analyze *how* they communicate. This makes direct instruction in strategic competence highly effective.

Furthermore, the academic curriculum at this level involves complex themes—global issues, literature analysis, scientific discussions—where gaps in specific vocabulary are inevitable. Without strategic competence, students often fall silent or switch to their native language (L1) when they encounter these gaps.

Most standardized language exams assess the candidate's ability to maintain interaction. For instance, in an oral interview, a student who forgets a word but successfully paraphrases it using circumlocution will score higher than a student who simply stops speaking. Therefore, teaching strategic competence is directly linked to exam success and academic readiness.

Methodology: Teaching Strategies in the Classroom

Developing strategic competence requires a shift from a teacher-centered correction mode to a learner-centered interaction mode. The following methodological approaches are recommended for grades 10–11.

Research suggests a combination of explicit and implicit instruction is most effective.

- **Awareness Raising:** Teachers should explicitly introduce strategies. For example, a lesson can be dedicated to "What to do when you don't know a word." Students can analyze transcripts or recordings of native speakers using fillers or self-correction techniques.

- **Modeling:** The teacher should demonstrate the use of strategies ("I've forgotten the word, let me describe it...").

To practice circumlocution, games like *Taboo* or *Alias* are highly effective.

- **Activity:** Students must describe a concept (e.g., "democracy," "photosynthesis," "ambition") without using the word itself or its direct translation.

- **Goal:** This forces the brain to access semantic networks and find alternative pathways to meaning, a core skill for advanced fluency.

Information-gap activities are essential for practicing interactional strategies.

- **Activity:** Students work in pairs with different sets of information (e.g., two different maps or two halves of a story). They must communicate to complete the task.

- **Constraint:** They are not allowed to show their papers. They must use clarification requests ("Did you say left or right?"), confirmation checks ("So, you mean the building next to the bank?"), and paraphrasing to ensure accuracy.

Fluency is often perceived as a lack of silence. Upper secondary students should be taught specific "filler" phrases appropriate for formal and informal contexts.

- *Formal:* "That is an interesting question...", "Let me consider this for a moment..."

- *Informal:* "You know...", "I mean...", "Sort of..."

- **Drill:** Students answer impromptu questions but must use at least two fillers before giving the main answer to "buy time" for grammatical planning.

A potential risk is that students may rely too heavily on avoidance strategies (simplifying the message) rather than risk-taking strategies (circumlocution). Teachers must encourage students to "stretch" their language rather than shrink their message to fit their current vocabulary.

Strategies vary across cultures. In some cultures, silence is acceptable, while in English-speaking cultures, long pauses can be awkward. Students need to understand the sociolinguistic aspect of strategies—for example, how to interrupt politely or how to signal that they have finished speaking.

Strategic competence is difficult to grade using traditional tests. It requires performance-based assessment (oral exams, role-plays). Teachers need to develop rubrics that specifically award points for the *successful negotiation of meaning* and *maintenance of communication*, not just grammatical accuracy.

Digital tools can provide unique opportunities for developing strategic competence:

- or rephrasing without the fear of **Voice Recording/Messaging:** Students can record themselves answering complex prompts. Listening to the playback allows them to notice their own pauses and lack of fluency, encouraging self-correction.
- **Chatbots and AI:** Interacting with AI (like ChatGPT or language learning bots) in voice mode can provide a safe space to practice asking for clarification judgment from a human peer.

Conclusion

Strategic competence is not merely a "survival skill" for beginners; it is a hallmark of advanced proficiency. For students in grades 10 and 11, who are on the threshold of adulthood and higher education, the ability to manage communication breakdowns, negotiate meaning, and maintain the flow of discourse is indispensable.

By integrating explicit strategy training into the curriculum—focusing on circumlocution, time-gaining mechanisms, and interactional checks—educators can empower students to become autonomous, confident communicators. This shift prepares them not only for exams but for real-world interactions where linguistic perfection is less important than successful communication. Future curriculum development for upper secondary levels must prioritize strategic competence alongside grammatical and lexical competence to produce truly proficient language users.

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