

Developing oral strategic competences in English as a foreign language

Bachman's (1990) framework of a communicative language ability is, just like the ones presented by Hymes (1972) and Canale & Swain (1980), made up of different language competences. The dynamic nature and internal relationships between these competences (and their underlying functions and components) are stressed. Bachman uses three competences: language competence, strategic competence and psychophysiological mechanisms. The language competence includes organisational and pragmatic competence where the first is grammatical and textual competence and the latter illocutionary and sociolinguistic competence. What differs strategic competence from the language competence is that strategic competence adds the ability to relate language competence to the context and discourse that the language is used in. This is an example of the inclusive nature of Bachman's framework; strategic competence include language competence and it adds something more. Interestingly enough sociolinguistic competence is then seen as a language competence and not a strategic competence. This means that for Bachman strategic competence includes knowing what to say in a specific situation, and also relating that to knowledge of the interlocutor and actually communicating.

The aim of this study is to describe aspects of relations between interlocutor and situation context that are crucial for pupils to discern to increase their strategic competence. The study will be done in a classroom setting and the pupils will be interacting on familiar topics. The pupils will to some extent take on roles (e.g. visualising themselves older, younger and/or in other surroundings) in the lessons.

Research questions

My research questions are (1) In what ways are relations between the content of the communication, the context and the participants discerned by the pupils? (2) What patterns of variation in the teachers' treatment of the content increase the pupils' discourse and pragmatic (strategic?) competence to a higher degree? (3) In what ways do minor adjustments of the teachers' treatment of aspects of the content affect the pupils' possibilities to discern the object of learning? (4) What critical aspects are decisive for pupils to discern to adjust their communication of the content to context and person?

Research design

The empirical data for this dissertation will come from two learning studies informed by variation theory. Variation theory is used to analyse the object of learning and also to analyse the pupils' learning (the enacted and the lived object of learning). The two learning studies, one from school year 8 and one from the first year of secondary school, have the same indirect object of learning (the ability that the pupils should develop). That is the ability to adapt language to suit interlocutor and situation while interacting orally in English as a foreign language. There are different direct objects of learning, what the pupils actually study, though. It could be vocabulary, fluency or formulaic sequences. The main interest is to do research on the relation in between teaching strategic competence and learning strategic competence.

Expected knowledge complement

One of the reasons that pupils find the subject English and its use in class hard and embarrassing might be that they have a view of it that does not really reflect what it actually is. Many pupils seem to have a view of speaking English in school that is very formal, or at least their idea of what you are good at when you are good at speaking

English comprise formal qualities such as fluency and native-like pronunciation. I think that my research and the outcomes of it may help to shed some new lights on what it means to interact well when speaking English.

When reading about foreign and second language research, you can see that so-called classroom based research (as opposed to research done either in isolated laboratory like settings, or on curricula, text books and such) is asked for. I think that my research will be very much in line with this description and, hopefully, develop the foreign language research as well as the learning study approach.

I know from own experience, and from discussions with colleagues too, that the teaching of oral interaction is considered tricky. You do not really know how to do it and it becomes awkward at times. This issue might also be addressed in this research. It is my utmost hope that the research presented here will lead to positive outcomes for both pupils and teachers. If it also leads to a further methodological discussion concerning the learning study approach and its use it is even for the better.

References

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