

Benefits of Using Short Fiction to Foster Communicative Strategy Development among Undergraduate English Literature Majors

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how undergraduate students of English literature at Sultan Qaboos University transfer a combined set of compensatory and cooperative strategies from controlled and guided language activities to more communicative group discussions of short fiction. The purpose of this research is to find the best possible combination of strategies that will aid students of English literature with Arabic as their first language to improve their communication skills by using short fiction. The data was collected from a randomly selected sample of English literature students enrolled in an oral skills course that is a departmental requirement. The findings reveal that the use of short stories as prompts for group discussions greatly facilitated students' use of communicative strategies that improved their overall oral skills development.

Keywords: Communication skills; Communicative strategies; Literature; Short fiction; Speaking; Sultan Qaboos University; Tertiary Education.

Introduction

While all learning environments have their own individualistic nature, classes in English departments in the Arab world, where most students speak Arabic as their first language (L1), seem to share a number of characteristics. A majority of students are silent, hesitant, or unwilling to participate, and quickly frustrated. What initially appears to be a lack of commitment to learning and inhibits significant progress in courses is mainly rooted in students' weak foreign language competence. Silence and apparent apathy during class discussions are two hurdles instructors repeatedly face while teaching English language and literature courses in the Arab context. This situation frustrates not only teachers, but also students themselves as they fail to earn the scores they desire. Other challenges faced by a majority of English language and literature undergraduates with an Arabic background may include inattentiveness, a short memory span, lack of engagement in class, lack of background knowledge, and quick frustration. Many of these problems are associated with students' fear of speaking.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

English is taught as a foreign language at Omani schools from the first elementary grade through grade twelve. Many students are taught English even before they enter school while in kindergarten. By the time these students start university education, they have had a minimum of twelve years of exposure to the English language. One would expect that university applicants be at least at an intermediate level of English proficiency when they apply to universities. However, it is a well-established fact that this is unfortunately not the case (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012a). A majority of students applying to Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), the only governmental university in Oman where a highly competitive admission system is followed, are only at the novice high or intermediate low level at the time of their application (see ACTFL oral proficiency scale). This situation poses a variety of challenges for teachers and students alike at the English department.

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The effectiveness of strategy instruction in listening and speaking classes has been researched for decades now, with researchers and practitioners alike noting the value of explicit strategy instruction. However, in the Gulf and more specifically in Oman, such research is currently scarce, although not absent entirely (Al Alawi, 2016). While some researchers such as Al-Mahrooqi (2012a) note that one problem with the Omani graduate today is their lack of communication skills stressing the need to foster better oral communication skills in students, the link between strategy instruction using short fiction and the development of oral communication skills has not been researched. This paper attempts to address this existing gap.

1.2. Purpose of the Study

Gaining sufficient oral competency in English is vital for English graduates in Oman where the job market has become very competitive. Well-paid jobs in the private sector list English speaking competence as a priority. Therefore, students need to reach an advanced level of oral proficiency before they finish their undergraduate studies. This fact encouraged the researchers to find the best blend of approaches to teach oral communication in the literature program in an attempt to alleviate the communication problems students struggle with and help them with their speaking endeavors.

Specifically, this study investigates how to successfully incorporate strategy instruction and application in an intermediate-level oral skills class that is a departmental requirement for the English literature program at SQU. The researchers hypothesize that using short stories as a starting point for group discussions would aid students in the use of certain strategies. Further, it aims to determine which combination of strategies is best suited to meet the needs of students in this setting.

1.3. Significance of the Study

This study is beneficial to students and instructors of English in higher education institutions in the Arab world and elsewhere. By understanding the needs of students and the inhibitors of oral communication progress, instructors and students can seek to create a more effective teaching and learning environment with better learning outcomes.

While there is a relative wealth of literature identifying problems with English education in Oman (Al-Jardani, 2017; Al-Mahrooqi, 2012b; Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2012 among others), no research, to our knowledge, focuses specifically on ways to improve students' oral communicative abilities using short fiction in the tertiary English literature program classrooms in Oman. No research to date explores the possible benefits of using short fiction as a means by which to teach the much-needed communicative strategies to Arabic students who are studying English language and literature.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1. Literature in the Speaking Classroom

The use of literature in teaching English language skills had lessened significantly with the application of the Grammar-Translation Method and the Audio-Lingual Method in the 1970s and the 1980s (Ramadan Shunnaq & Balasubramanian, 2018). Only more recently has literature found its way back into the foreign language classroom to reinforce certain skills or complement language teaching (Erkaya, 2005). Despite the increasing attention that is given to communicative approaches in foreign language instruction, the majority of language classrooms in Oman are limited to teaching communicative skills in a culturally decontextualized fashion by using various practice texts. As the use of literary texts in the speaking classroom has proven to have educational potential (Dodson, 2002; Donato & Brooks, 2004; Hess, 2006), the idea of integrating short fiction in a speaking classroom sounds attractive. A more recent study found that incorporating authentic materials such as short stories may help English students "effectively internalize the language at a higher level" (Thiyagarajan, 2014). Reading short stories not only motivates students to speak about various topics that can be tailored to their interests, but it can also help English language educators in teaching essential

skills. If chosen carefully and exploited properly, these texts can enhance students' communicative competence significantly. A combination of different strategies can be used when including selections of short fiction in the communicative classroom to facilitate oral skill development.

It is noteworthy to mention that while research on strategy instruction in writing and reading classes in the Arab world abounds, it is lacking in the area of oral communication strategies. Research on communication strategy instruction to enhance oral communication skills has been done in other parts of the world such as Thailand and Indonesia. In a study in Thailand, for example, Puripunyanich and Soontornwipast (2018) show that communication strategy instruction was very helpful in enhancing undergraduate students' oral communication skills. Similarly, although with an audience of young learners, Sutopo and Mega Mahardhika's study in Indonesia in 2016 showed clearly that direct instruction and practice in communication strategies significantly helped young Indonesian students in developing their abilities to communicate orally.

With respect to language instruction in Oman, Al-Mahrooqi, Abrar-ul-Hassan, & Asante (2012) specifically list the importance of strategy instruction. However, their study does not focus specifically on strategy instruction in an oral skills class.

2.2. Strategies in Oral Communication

Speaking is essential in the communication process. Outside the classrooms, delivering the information effectively is of critical significance. A number of studies prove how invaluable communication skills are in a global world with a highly competitive job market, especially for interpersonal communication and career advancement (Cañado & García, 2007; Riemer, 2007; Conrad, 2014).

In order to attain the goals of efficient communication, a number of learner strategies directly related to oral communication and its problems have been extensively studied. These strategies are important in any setting that focuses on speaking and listening. Past studies on language learner research divided these communication strategies into two main categories: Intralingual and interlingual strategies (Cohen, 2014, p. 15). These are used by language learners to compensate for certain language skill deficiencies to assure the continuation of an utterance. Canale (2013) points out that among the components of communicative competence is what he refers to as strategic competence. He explains that this component includes verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that are used by language learners for two main reasons:

- a) to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to limiting conditions in actual communication (e.g., momentary inability to recall an idea or grammatical form) or to insufficient competence in one or more of the other areas of communicative competence
- b) and to enhance the effectiveness of communication (e.g., deliberately slow and soft speech for rhetorical effect) (pp. 10-11)

In speaking and listening, coping strategies are also important. Cohen (2014) explains that there are two kinds of coping strategies which foreign language learners quite frequently resort to: compensatory strategies and cover strategies. The former includes lexical avoidance, simplification, and approximation when the exact word cannot be remembered. The latter incorporates using memorized phrases or circumlocution to avoid "finely tuned vocabulary" or specific grammatical usages (p. 14).

Communication strategies, as Cohen (2014) elucidates, have principally been regarded as "the verbal (or nonverbal) first aid devices" which learners may use to cope with problems or breakdowns in communication (p. 15). Hence, these strategies can become powerful tools in the foreign language classrooms that are expected to aid the language learners in their communication efforts and will also help building their confidence when communicating with others.

2.3. Strategy identification for the current study

Based on the needs of the students in this setting, six communication strategies were chosen to focus on for this

class. These six strategies include a combination of compensatory or coping strategies and cooperative strategies. Compensation strategies are those that would help students make up for a lack of knowledge on their part, while cooperative strategies are those that would enable students to successfully engage in conversations. Further, it is important to note that there is overlap even between these two categories; often, one strategy could function as a compensation strategy in one context, and a communication strategy in another. It was hoped that this combination of strategies would provide students in this setting with the necessary skills to be able to overcome typical problems faced by Arab students such as nervousness and speaking anxiety, in addition to providing them with the necessary skills to make them more socio-linguistically and strategically competent. The six strategies included for this study are paraphrase, code switching, using fillers and self-repetition, using self-correction or repair, asking for confirmation or clarification, and providing confirmation or clarification. These strategies will be explored in more detail below.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants

Participants for this study were students registered for an intermediate level Oral Skills class offered by the English Department at Sultan Qaboos University as a specialty requirement. The English Department offers six sections of this particular Oral Skills class every semester, and for this study, two sections were selected, one a control group, and the other, the experimental group. Strategies were taught explicitly in the experimental group, while they were not taught in the control group.

There were 16 female students and 3 male students in the experimental group, and 12 female and 4 males in the control group. This uneven distribution of males to females is typical of most courses in the English Department since more female students get admitted to the English literature program than male students. All the students were Omani, students in the English literature program and were at the same academic level. Omani students differ from other students in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in that their official and primary language is Arabic, but some students could be bilingual as many have ancestral roots in Iran and Zanzibar. They may speak Jibbali, Swahili, Balochi, Kumzari and other languages or dialects. Participants differed in their proficiency of English, but no language level test or pre-and post-test was administered to the participants. It was assumed that students' proficiency in English would be somewhat similar, given that all of them had studied the language for the same number of years. It is important to note, however, that homogeneity among participants is difficult to find.

3.2. Materials and Procedures

Since the oral communication class is required of all English majors, students need to register it in their second year. It is considered one of the early classes students take in the department. Strategy training was an important component of the experimental group, and a new strategy was introduced every two or three weeks for the first ten weeks of the semester. During this time, each strategy was directly introduced, students were told about the usefulness of the strategy, and then were provided various controlled activities during which they could practice the strategy. Students were also informed that each strategy had multiple functions. For example, paraphrasing could be used as a clarifying strategy on the part of a speaker, or a cooperative strategy on the part of a listener. For the control group, no explicit strategy instruction was included.

Being aware that students also need to gain certain linguistic, psychological, social, and pragmatic insights as to the nature of language, the researchers opted to include a selection of short stories in the second part of the course in both sections. It was hoped that the short stories would present learners in the experimental group with authentic situations and provide them with a platform for using the strategies they had been taught. It was hoped that the use of the short stories would tempt students to use the language strategies they had learned and to emerge from the protective shell of silence and be encouraged to engage in group conversations about and discussions of these texts. Thus, the first part of the course would focus on teaching selected strategies and providing students with a variety of controlled activities in

which they practiced the strategies. The second part of the course would open an opportunity for students to use the strategies they had learned and integrate them into their conversations as they engaged in the discussion of selected literary texts. Students in the control group were presented with the same short stories to discuss in the second part of the class; however, for this group, the first part of the course entailed a greater focus on accuracy, with class periods devoted to pronunciation of vowels and consonants, and on stress and intonation patterns. For this group, then, the focus of evaluation during the group discussions was on students' accuracy, rather than on strategy use.

During the last month of the semester, students in both groups were given two kinds of short stories that would provide them with an opportunity for group discussions. It was hoped that students in the experimental group would use the strategies they had been taught. For students in the control group, the short stories simply provided them with material to talk about. The short stories included a selection of online microfiction, specifically 55 fiction, in addition to two slightly longer short stories. The microfiction selections were "The Attack," "Love Gone Wrong" (two stories which are no longer available online), "A Lost Chance," and an untitled short-short piece about an Indian social setting (on Anna John's blogsite). The longer stories were the well-known O. Henry's "The Gift of the Magi" and Guy de Maupassant's "The Necklace." The short stories were chosen for their universal and therefore, easily discussable themes, while the aims for selecting microfiction or flash fiction were for students to discuss how these very short pieces satisfied the elements of a short story. A conversation task was used to collect oral data that could be considered an adequate example of normal everyday communication. The aim of this task was to encourage participants to engage in a group discussion of a short story where they could exchange ideas and opinions freely on a topic of interest. Students were very collaborative and provided interesting data for language strategy analysis while discussing the short stories.

Students were grouped (in groups of three or four students), and asked to discuss the stories. For the short stories, students were first provided with a list of basic comprehension questions, followed by a list of higher-order critical thinking skills questions. The comprehension questions were discussed by the entire class, to ensure that students had a basic understanding of the plot of the stories which would enable them to carry on discussions about the open-ended questions. Examples of comprehension questions included questions such as "Who are the characters in the short story XXX?" or "Does the short story have the main elements?", while higher-order critical thinking skills questions included "What are some themes in the story?" "What makes this story particularly interesting?" "How effective is the story written?"

For the shorter pieces of prose, students were simply asked to discuss what made them short stories. The stories were not explained; it was hoped that students' discussions would provide them with sufficient fodder for authentic conversations. Suffice it to say, they did.

The students were asked to record themselves in their groups. Thanks to modern technology, this was easy: most students had smart phones with sophisticated recording devices. They recorded themselves, saved the files, and emailed them to one of the researchers. Each discussion lasted about twenty minutes. The recordings were then transcribed and studied for students' use of language strategies. The researchers obtained twelve 20-minute recordings from the students in each of the two sections.

For this paper, four 20-minute recordings were chosen from each section, mostly for clarity of recording. The recordings chosen were made by four different groups on three different occasions. For both the control and experimental groups, each of the recorded conversations had different participants, with three of the conversations having had three participants each, and the fourth, with four participants.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Presentation of data from transcripts

Results are presented below for the experimental group first, followed by the control group. For the experimental group, excerpts from sample oral productions are classified below based on six communication strategies used by participants in this study. For each communication strategy example excerpts from the transcripts are provided,

followed by a discussion of the students' use of the communication strategy. Examples will be provided from different transcripts, with as many students participating as possible, to ensure that all participation is not coming from one or two students. There is considerable overlap between the different strategies with each strategy able to provide more than one function in conversation. This overlap will also be discussed below where appropriate.

For the control group, excerpts are provided and discussed in terms of how strategy use would have better facilitated communication between the students.

4.1.1. Data from Experimental Group

Strategy 1: Paraphrasing

With this strategy, the speaker utilizes available resources in the target language to find an alternate way to deliver a message.

Excerpt 1: From Transcript 1 (students are discussing "A Lost Chance"). The "S" stands for "student."

S1: And I think there is...

S2: Irony!

S1: At the end!

S4: He thinks he will know his boy instantly, but he doesn't know!

S1: Yeah!

This example shows that S4 understands the meaning of the word 'irony' that S2 used. S4's participation with the paraphrase, could, however, also be viewed as a social strategy of providing confirmation to the previous turns of S1 and S2. In this way, the single strategy of paraphrasing serves two very different functions, one coping, and the other, cooperative.

Another example of paraphrasing is taken from transcript 2, where, as the excerpt below demonstrates, the strategy is used to clarify the meaning of an idea, not just a single word.

Excerpt 2: From Transcript 2 (students are discussing "The Necklace")

S2: She was married ... er ...to a ...er ...clerk, she was not happy, not totally happy with her life, because she was not rich, she ... er ...is very ... er ...

S3: She thinks that she deserves a better life.

It is clear from the excerpt that S2 is struggling a bit with the idea she wants to express; she uses several fillers to buy herself time to think (as a coping mechanism, or one of Oxford's metacognitive strategies (1990)). S3 then comes to her rescue, beautifully paraphrasing the idea she is trying to convey.

Strategy 2: Code-Switching

In all the transcripts analyzed, there was only one instance of the use of this strategy. In general, speakers use this strategy to communicate their intended meaning by transferring lexical items from their primary language to the target language and this can be done in two different ways: Literal translation and code switching.

The example below illustrates code switching in combination with paraphrasing from Arabic to English:

Excerpt 3: From Transcript 1 (students were discussing "A Lost Chance")

S2: Is it like "wasta?"

S4: "Wasta?" why?

S2: I am sorry to say it in Arabic, but I mean by this word, the people, when they are related, they help each other more.

S4: Yeahhhhh!!

In this example, Student 2 uses the Arabic word 'wasta' to explain what she means when she cannot come up with an appropriate paraphrase in English. The term, she explains, is culture specific, and therefore, in order to make sure her peers know exactly what she means, she chooses to use their L1. This judicious use of the L1 in class, rather than

being frowned upon, is encouraged. Used this way, this strategy is definitely a direct compensation strategy.

Strategy 3: Using Fillers and Self-repetition to buy time

This coping strategy is used mostly as a means to buy oneself time while collecting one's thoughts, or composing a response. Fillers can be either actual words, or 'ers' and 'ums.' If it was for the former, self-repetition would often serve as a filler. The analysis of the four student recordings showed that students frequently used both kinds of fillers. The following excerpt from Transcript 3 shows both kinds of fillers being employed:

Excerpt 4: From Transcript 3 (students were discussing "The Attack")

S1: But what happened? What happened at the end? Er...he said...ok. What happened? I don't know.

Excerpt 4 above shows the student using self-repetition ("what happened") as a coping strategy to buy himself time. Then he also uses the filler "er" for the same reason.

Transcript 4 below shows good examples of the use of fillers by one student in particular. Her use of fillers is particularly noteworthy because she spoke considerably more slowly than her classmates. This led to a need on her part to use a strategy to hold the floor. Her use of strategies demonstrated clearly the effectiveness of strategy use to overcome shyness or anxiety. In the following excerpt, we see two good examples of her use of fillers.

Excerpt 5: From Transcript 4 (students were discussing the micro-story with no title)

S3: I think some Indian society ...er ...you know ...er ... care about these traditions, marriage traditions.

S1: Yes.

S3: They care about the woman that ... er ...their son is going to marry her ... marry her...er ... is this appropriate ...er

This excerpt also shows her use of paraphrasing; she doesn't immediately access the word "bride" and paraphrases with "woman that her son is going to marry." It is important to note that the student doesn't give up after this turn. She uses the word "bride" and then asks for help (cooperative communication strategy) as to whether she used it correctly.

Similar to Transcript 4, Transcript 3 also shows many examples of the use of fillers. As illustrated in the excerpt below, S2 uses many fillers to buy herself time to construct a summary of the story.

Excerpt 6: From Transcript 3 (students are discussing "The Necklace")

S2: She was married ... er...to a ... er....clerk; she was not happy, totally happy with her life, because she was not rich, she ...er...is very er....

S3: She thinks that she deserves a better life.

S2: Yeah, she thinks that she deserves a better life, and ... er....one day, her husband came to her and say... er...he was invited to a

S1: A party

S2: A party yeah so ...

S3: He was kind ...

S1: He was so excited ...

S2: Yeah because he will ...er....make he...make her...er...make his wife happy

In the excerpt above, S2 uses "er" many times as a filler to buy herself time to construct her message, and also uses self-repetition for the same reason. Used in this way, this strategy is used for the student to cope with her lack of knowledge, in addition to Oxford's metacognitive strategy of managing her time.

Strategy 4: Using self-correction

The fourth communication strategy that was focused on was self-correction. This strategy allows the speaker to correct him/herself and is often used by L2 learners to correct their sentence structure while constructing their thoughts. It also allows speakers the opportunity to hold the floor, much like self-repetition. Once again, using literature proved

an effective way for the students to practice using this strategy, as the excerpts below will illustrate. The first example comes from Transcript 2. This excerpt illustrates a common problem Arab students have, one of confusing the masculine and feminine third person singular pronouns. In this excerpt, the student self-corrects when she realizes she has made a mistake, thereby using it a direct strategy allowing her to access the correct grammatical structure. This self-correction also allows her to continue holding the floor (and therefore the strategy performs the function of communication strategy) and prevent another student from interrupting her.

Excerpt 7: From Transcript 2 (students are discussing "The Necklace")

S3: Because he show her husband, that he has feelings, that he care about her wife, ... er ... his wife, he ... he is happy, he is satisfying her ...

Another very common grammatical problem Arab students have is subject-verb agreement, and this is another reason they self-correct. It is noteworthy that during the structured activity section of the class, students were asked to focus on just this particular grammatical structure in their self-correction exercises. Students' use of this strategy to self-correct in more natural conversation (as illustrated in these excerpts) shows their ability to transfer the strategy from a structured to a more communicative activity. This is illustrated in excerpt 7 below from

Excerpt 8: From Transcript 3 (students are discussing "Love Gone Wrong")

S3: But she says "more than you would have liked" so we can say that she do ... er ... she does that because she wants to make him angry, more angry from what she did, or she wants to attract attention.

The four strategies discussed thus far have to do with speaker roles. The following two strategies have to do more with listener roles, with students playing the roles of active and interested listeners. In other words, they are more receptive strategies as opposed to productive strategies (Cohen, 2014, pp. 17, 22).

Strategy 5: Asking for confirmation or clarification

Students were taught that an important speaker role is to constantly be evaluating whether their interlocutors understood what they were saying. In other words, students were taught to directly ask for clarification and confirmation during their turns. This strategy definitely transferred to their natural use of language as illustrated by the number of times it was used. The most common way of asking for clarification was to directly ask a question like "could you please repeat that?" This was done on numerous occasions by all the students. In addition to this, however, since group discussions involved actively negotiating the meaning of various texts, students frequently said that they just didn't understand something, thereby prompting other students to step in and explain. This is illustrated in the following excerpts:

Excerpt 9: From Transcript 1 (students are discussing "The Necklace")

S1: She is not feeling ... er ...what that word is ... like she is ... er...she is not expect ... not accepting what she has.

In Excerpt 9 above, S1 asks for help (a cooperative strategy) while trying hard to paraphrase (a learning strategy) what she is saying at the same time. In excerpt 10 below, S2 simply asks for help (a learning strategy). This is also the case with S2 in Excerpt 10 below.

Excerpt 10: From Transcript 2 (students are discussing "The Necklace"):

S1: And what about judgmental?

S2: Do you know what means judgmental?

Excerpt 11: From Transcript 3 (students are discussing "The Attack")

S1: So there is a man who is selling this bear, right?

S3: Selling stuffed animals.

S2: Stuffed animals ...what does that mean? I didn't get it.

Students also asked for confirmation in several ways, the most frequent of which was asking their peers what they thought. Asking for confirmation here could, once again, serve two purposes: firstly, it could serve as a learning strategy where S1 wants to confirm that his understanding is accurate. It could also serve as a cooperative communication strategy where S1 is encouraging his fellow students to participate. This is illustrated by the following excerpt below:

Excerpt 12: From Transcript 3 (students are discussing "The Attack")

S1: I think the setting of the story is seems like in a zoo ... don't you think?
What do you think about it?

Excerpt 13: From Transcript 4 (students are discussing an untitled short story):

S3: Yes. They are focusing on the bride and see if this bride is good enough to be there, you know, in their family or not.

S1: So you think it's a wedding?

S3: No, they are preparing for the wedding

S2: So you think they are preparing for a wedding.

In excerpt 13 above, we see the use of several strategies. First, a direct request for clarification (a learning strategy) comes from S1. Then, after S3 clarifies that it is not a wedding, but the wedding preparation, S2 repeats what S3 says to confirm (a cooperative strategy). It is also noteworthy that S3 tries hard to paraphrase what she is trying to express because of a lack of knowledge of the term "daughter-in-law."

Strategy 6: Providing Confirmation/Clarification

By providing confirmation or clarification, students show that they are listening to what the speaker is saying. The current analysis shows that the students frequently provide confirmation in various ways, the most common of which was echoing what their interlocutors were saying. There were many instances of this strategy in the four conversations analyzed; one example is illustrated in excerpt 14 below which comes from Transcript 4. In this excerpt, the word "setting" is repeated by three of the participants. S1 begins by talking about the setting without using the actual word. This is followed by S3 using the word "setting" to paraphrase what S1 said – and by doing so, S3 shows that she is listening to S1, and thereby using a cooperative communication strategy. A few lines later, S2 uses the word again to expand on their understanding of the word, and thereby, once again confirms that she is on the same page as S1.

Excerpt 14: From Transcript 4 (students are discussing "The Necklace")

S1: Ok, it is obviously that it is an Indian story.

S3: The setting.

S1: The setting, yeah. Because of the word "sari." OK, what about the characters? There are characters.

S2: But what about the time first?

S1: Yes.

S2: Because setting has time and place.

The three students in this discussion show several times that they are supportive of each other by using the repetition strategy. The transcript also shows another reason for the use of the repetition strategy. One can also repeat what someone has said to show support before advancing another point, and thereby use it as a cooperative communication strategy. This is illustrated again in the following excerpt:

Excerpt 15: From Transcript 4 (students are discussing the untitled short story)

S1: Yes. Even if they are in another country, America or something, they still ... er ...

S2: Have the same traditions.

S1: Yes. The same clothes. They do not change their ...

S2: Well yes, of course, the same clothes, but I think it's inside their house.

In this excerpt, S2 shows that she agrees with what S1 is saying and repeats to confirm what her interlocutor said. However, she wants to make another, and to her, more important point. So rather than just interrupting S1 to make her point, she stresses that she essentially agrees with S1 (well yes, of course), and then goes on to further her own argument. Once again, this was a strategy students were given plenty of opportunities to practice in more structured exercises, and it is heartening to see them be able to transfer its use to a less structured, more communicative setting.

The last example of repetition as the cooperative strategy of providing confirmation is illustrated in the next excerpt:

Excerpt 16: From Transcript 2 (students are discussing "The Necklace")

S1: It was hard, to anyone to have that ...

S2: To get that invitation.

S1: Yeah, to get that invitation, and they have it ...

Students provided confirmation by simply directly expressing agreement with another student. Agreement was expressed in many ways in their discussions ranging from "I agree with you" to a series of "yeahs." Yet another way was by paraphrasing what someone else had already said is illustrated in the following excerpt:

Excerpt 17: From Transcript 2 (students are discussing "The Necklace")

S2: She asked her friend for a necklace, and she gave it to her. After that, after the party, she didn't find her necklace.

S1: She lost it.

4.1.2. Excerpts from the Control Group

Excerpt 18: From Transcript 3 (students are discussing "The Attack" from the group of short stories; this is a group of 4 male students)

S1: Well maybe we can assume that it is a girl buying a stuffed bear. Because commonly girls buy stuffed bears.

S2: Aah, yes.

S1: But we can't say for sure it's a girl, it could be a boy or girl also.

S3: It's most likely. But it can be a small boy also. Or a child.

S1: Yeah, yeah, it can.

S2: At the start of the story it seems interesting and it seems ...

S1: Yeah, yeah.

S2: And you think oh, she is buying a stuffed bear.

S1: Yeah, it's like the child is imagining that ... er ... he or she is fighting with a bear, a real bear. And the vocabulary is ... that the author uses also helps to deceive the reader. At the beginning of the story. Er ... words like "pouncing on my back;" "arms wrapped around my body;" "there was no escape;" "I wrestled;" "submission;" and all that. And there's one thing I want to add to this...

This transcript is representative of the kind of communication in this control group, where typically, one student dominates. The dominant student does not use cooperative strategies to encourage the participants of his classmates, and the other students do not use strategies to in any way enhance their own participation. The result is that the dominant student does most of the talking. In this transcript, even when S2 tries to participate, instead of encouraging him, the dominant S1 continues his monologue. Another example of this comes from another transcript from the control group, this time, a group of 3 girls.

Excerpt 19: From Transcript 3 (students are discussing "A Lost Chance")

S1: It isn't like he got out of his house to look for him. No, He just got out of his house to have his shoes shined. He went to the shoe shine boy, you know, the one who

S2: Cleans.

S1: Cleans shoes. And um...we see that he looks at this boy with a um...er (5 second pause)...distasteful look. Ok?

S2: So they ...

S1: It's like he's disgusted with that boy and then the last sentence tells us you know, reveals a big fact, which is, "Arun threw a few coins at his son." Which means when he paid the shoeshine boy, they refer to his as his son here, which means that his son is the same person.

Once again, with this transcript, we see that one student dominates, even when another student in the group tries to get a turn in. There is even a chance for S2 to contribute more when S1 clearly struggles to find a word (there is a 5 second pause before the word "distasteful"), but neither does S2 take a turn, nor does S1 give the other students a chance to contribute. In this turn, then, despite the fact that there is a temporary breakdown in S1's knowledge, she simply waits until she remembers the word she needs instead of either paraphrasing or turning to a classmate for help. In fact, when S2 does try to take a turn, S1 simply interrupts and continues her monologue. S2 clearly does not try to hold the floor and keep S1 from interrupting her.

While both these examples illustrate how strategy use would have facilitated greater participation on the part of the less vocal students, other examples from the control group illustrate how paraphrasing would have greatly facilitated greater fluency on the part of the students talking. Students' inability to paraphrase adequately led to a breakdown in communication with students either not talking anymore or completely misunderstanding a text. An example of this is as follows:

Excerpt 20 from Transcript 3 (Students are discussing "The Attack")

S1: Ok, a person was in the shop, and was excited with that bear and ... er ... like they said here ... er ... he forced it into submission. So he put it down and he did it into submission, but he has a wild he or she...

S2: I don't understand the first one but maybe...he is trying to,... he imagine that ... er ...

S3: The bear is attacking him.

S1: Yeah yeah,.. But it's not really ...

S4: It's not real a bear ...

S3: So when he realized that, that it was a stuffed bear at the end ... is it a funny one? We are supposed to laugh now.

In this excerpt, the students are trying to figure out the meaning of the story. S1 tries to explain the story, but gets caught up with her lack of knowledge of the meanings of the words "stuffed" and "submission." If the student had simply paraphrased the words, or the group had realized that those two words were key to understanding the story, and all tried to paraphrase them, they might have found the humor in the story. However, this did not happen.

5. DISCUSSION

Omani students of English literature who were taught the strategies were able to use them effectively to improve their ability both to maintain a reasonable degree of fluency in their discussions and to avoid language breakdown, and to be successful in negotiating conversation with interlocutors. The successful application of strategies led learners to engage actively in group discussions where they expressed opinions freely without fear of embarrassment, exposure, or loss of face. Students also combined a variety of strategies and put them to use as needed.

In this study, it was noticed that with knowledge of a group of strategies, students became more independent and ready to speak English within groups. One must not forget that the greatest difficulty that foreign language learners have is with the collaborative nature of most communication. While communicating, participants are engaged in a complex process of self-expression, identity assertion, and finding and negotiating meaning. To negotiate meaning in a face-to-face conversation is more challenging for most learners than speaking on the telephone or even answering

questions in class primarily because of the interactive nature of the task. Many psychological and social factors come into play while engaging in such communication tasks. Female or male students' refusal to participate in mixed gender groups is a clear example of such.

The numerous examples of student communication provided in this study show clearly that literature "paves the way for language teaching through a communicative approach" (Babae & Yahya, 2014). Through discussions of literary texts, students were able to use the communication strategies they had been taught in authentic, meaningful discussions. Khatib, Rezaei, & Derakhshan (2011) asserted that using literature in the language classroom was effective because it served to motivate students, provide them with cultural and intercultural awareness in addition to sociolinguistic knowledge. The excerpts provided in this study show that this is true; the use of short fiction helped students' overall fluency by increasing their strategic competence.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The use of the most appropriate learning strategies for speaking English can help learners overcome the hurdle of their personal, social, psychological, and skill-based problems. In the oral skills classes that were the bases for this research, it was decided that a combination of compensatory strategies and communication strategies would best aid students in their goal toward competence. With this in mind, six strategies were chosen for the oral communication course and were introduced to the experimental group one at a time. It was noticed that students were able to transfer the strategies they had learned from controlled exercises to group discussions.

Based on the current analysis of student strategy use, what is particularly noteworthy is the fact that in several instances, the use of strategies by shy students was very effective in providing them with the time necessary to construct their thoughts without being interrupted, or worse, losing face by simply not talking.

Another factor worthy of attention is motivation and its effect on student success. It was hoped that the selected short fiction, which contained social critique and discussed universal human issues, would be of interest to students and would motivate them to participate in class or group discussions. The results clearly indicate that literature is a great motivator for participation. It was noticed that while the students used the questions that were provided as a starting point for their discussions, they rarely stopped with just responding to these questions. Students' discussions went far beyond the plot and setting of the selected fiction; students talked about issues ranging from gender differences and love to differences in how humor is used in different cultures. In other words, the literature provided the students with a platform for the kind of discussion that otherwise might not have been possible. Thus, the teaching of selected strategies to students using short fiction has proven to be highly effective in improving their speaking readiness. Based on the findings, teachers of English language and literature programs in the Arab world are encouraged to use literature, especially short fiction, for oral communication strategy development, as students are more ready to interact when discussing short fiction than when decontextualized passages are used.

7. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Limitations for the study include a relatively small sample size taken during one semester at a large governmental university in Oman. No comparison of pre- and post-discussion analysis was done to determine the existing inventory of strategies students had brought with them to the course. Concerning the discussion groups, due to gender barriers that are culturally based, no mixed gender groups were formed. However, male and female students did occasionally engage in lively class cross-gender discussions.

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فوائد استخدام القصص القصيرة لتعزيز تنمية إستراتيجيات التواصل بين طلاب الأدب الإنجليزي في المرحلة الجامعية الأولى

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ملخص

تبين هذه الدراسة كيف يقوم طلاب الأدب الإنجليزي في جامعة السلطان قابوس بنقل مجموعة متكاملة من الإستراتيجيات التعويضية والتعاونية من الأنشطة اللغوية المضبوطة، والموجهة إلى حوارات جماعية للقصص الخيالية القصيرة، والغاية من هذا البحث هو إيجاد أفضل تركيب ممكن من الإستراتيجيات التي من شأنها أن تُساعد طلبة الأدب الإنجليزي ممن لغتهم الأولى هي اللغة العربية لتحسين مهارات التواصل الخاصة بهم، وجمعت البيانات من عينة مختارة عشوائياً من طلاب برنامج الأدب الإنجليزي المسجلين في مساق المهارات الشفوية وهو من متطلبات القسم الإلجبارية، وكشفت نتائج الدراسة عن فوائد استخدام قصص الخيال القصيرة في المناقشات الجماعية الصفية، ولوحظ أنها سهلت كثيراً استخدام الطلاب لبعض الإستراتيجيات التي حسنت تطوير مهاراتهم الشفوية الشاملة.

الكلمات الدالة: مهارات التواصل؛ إستراتيجيات التواصل؛ الأدب؛ القصص القصيرة؛ محادثه؛ جامعة السلطان قابوس؛ التعليم العالي.

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