

Language Learning Strategies – Communication Strategies

In this article we will be thinking about communication strategies, i.e. those learning strategies which help make conversation easier and more profitable in terms of gaining in fluency. Here are some useful ideas:

Create Your Own Personalized Dialogues: re-writing the textbook dialogues and substituting your own personal details will help vocabulary stick quicker. When you've done this, go out and find people with whom you can practice.

Making a Trial Run: Rehearsing for a conversation will help your language flow more smoothly and give you greater confidence. In my early days in China, before setting off to buy something, I would first go through in my mind the likely conversation I was going to have with the shopkeeper, e.g. size, color, make, price, etc. Several years later when working in an office in China, before making a telephone call, I would first run through in my mind the likely drift of the conversation I was about to have, looking up any word I didn't know or asking my Chinese secretary before calling the other person.

When exchanging English for Chinese or hiring someone for Chinese conversation practice, having chosen your topic, first run through the main talking points before meeting with your friend. This builds confidence which helps the conversation go more smoothly. Another way of practicing is to hold an imaginary telephone conversation – let the 'actor' in you come out!

Memorize Commonly-used Phrases: in our early days in China, when chatting with Chinese people whom we meet casually on the street, we spend most of our time answering the same few questions, e.g. "How long have you lived in China?", "Why have you come to China?", "Which country have you come from?", "Where do you study Chinese?". It is helpful, therefore, if we spend a little time memorizing the answers to these commonly-asked questions as this will build confidence. At the same time, memorize some useful 'friendly

phrases', such as "I like living in China", "Chinese people are very friendly", as well as common greetings and leave-takings.

Try Interpreting: translating from Chinese into English will help check whether or not you have remembered the vocabulary as well as understood the meaning. For instance, play back the recording of the dialogue in your textbook with your hand on the 'pause' button and see how fast you can translate the dialogue into English. When your Chinese has reached a higher level, translate out loud a children's story on the radio or the weather forecast on the television. At an even higher level, act as 'interpreter' to taped lectures or translate the television news into English (- although it is best first to read the English-language newspaper or listen to the English-language news so that you have some idea of the day's main news items).

Repeat Aloud: when meeting a new word in conversation, repeat it to yourself several times. One good language learner I know immediately says the new word aloud three times, and then tries to use it in his conversation in the next few minutes.

Send & Receive Text Messages in Chinese: this will help your Chinese reading ability improve.

Summarize the Grammar: summarizing grammar patterns will help you know whether or not you have fully understood the pattern. When summarizing, compare and contrast the new grammar pattern with the grammar of English or any other language you know, noting the similarities and differences. Then decide to bring the new grammar pattern into your conversation at least once a day for the next week. Because we naturally tend to avoid using new grammar patterns, instead sticking to what is already familiar to us, we need to make ourselves use the new grammar as soon as we meet it, even if we use it incorrectly the first few times.

Compensate for a Lack: One final type of strategy that good language learners employ is called 'compensation strategies'. These enable learners to use the language despite their limitations of grammar and vocabulary. For example, one common strategy is using

mime or gesture. For instance, you want to buy a cup, so you say to the shopkeeper (in Chinese), "I want to buy a ..." (while miming the action of drinking from a cup). By deliberately hesitating, you can normally elicit the missing word, e.g. "I want to buy a ... a... a..." (while doing the action). Hopefully, the shopkeeper will supply the Chinese word for 'cup'.

Using circumlocution will enable you to communicate your meaning even though you can't recall the exact word. For example, "Do you have a thing you dry your hands on?", when you can't recall the word for 'towel'. Then if your Chinese acquaintance doesn't supply the word – only the article – don't forget to ask them, "How do you say this in Chinese?".

The good language learner is constantly thinking up creative ways to use the language. So ask other students which strategies they employ; then try them out to see if they work for you. The good language learner uses everything around them to help them reach their goal!

A helpful book on learning strategies is Rebecca Oxford's *Language Learning Strategies* published by Newbury House