Anna BORKOWSKA
Podhale State College of Applied Sciences in Nowy Targ

anna.borkowska@ppuz.edu.pl

INTERACTION AND STRATEGIC COMPETENCE AMONG THIRD AGERS: RESULTS OF A STUDY

Abstract: The main aim set to this paper is to investigate the use of communication strategies by members of the Third Age University in Nowy Targ. The structure of a small-scale study, namely an information gap task performed in pair work, was primarily designed to promote cooperative behaviours and encourage real-life interaction. The results of a self-evaluation questionnaire indicate that, in a general sense, third agers appeared to be positive about their performance, and clearly admitted that speaking in pairs played an eminent role in second language communication. It has been demonstrated that third agers, despite a low proficiency level i.e. A1 and A2, were determined to complete the task, and achieve mutual goals. They tended to check their own accuracy, and seek for an interlocutor's confirmation during dyadic interaction. Also, some participants applied code switching to the third language, be it German as, apparently, it seemed to be more automatised in communicative contexts. In a similar vein, older adults used own-performance problem-related strategies, such as self-rephrasing, and self-repair in order to be more accurate and solve communication problems. Significantly, the strategy that helped the participants gain more time to process reactions was retrieval. Overall, it is worthwhile to mention that seniors appreciated interaction with their partners since pair cooperation encouraged them to communicate in English.

Key words: seniors, communication, interaction, pair work

Introduction

Interaction is by far a rudimental component of foreign language (e.g. Brown 2007; Gałajda 2017). Rather unsurprisingly, in the case of mature students, it is one of the most important driving factors that motivate them to attend English courses at an advancing age since their clearly defined pragmatic aims are primarily determined by the need of interaction with foreigners in real-life contexts (e.g. Jaroszewska 2013; Gabryś-Barker 2018; Niżegorodcew 2016).

The main goal of this paper is to investigate the agers' strategic competence in the course of dyadic interaction, as well as, to gain knowledge about the participants' cooperation with a partner.

The role of interaction in teaching seniors

Undoubtedly, seniors are considered to be intrinsically motivated "authentic consumers" who wish to communicate in English independently in order to integrate socially with others (e.g. Ramírez Gómez 2016; Jakubaszek 2014). For this reason, foreign language instructors ought to focus on a communicative approach where learners are taught to deal with problems in pursuit of achieving practical goals.

What should be mentioned at this juncture is Long's (1985, 1996) Interaction Hypothesis which, in principle, is based on the assumption that "interaction facilitates acquisition because of the conversational and linguistic modifications that occur in such discourse and that provide learners with the input they need" (Mackey 1999: 558). Also, negotiation of meaning is of utmost importance in the development of language since learners may notice a gap between input and output. Needless to say, negotiation ought to be promoted in classroom instruction, and language learners, even at a basic level of proficiency, need to be challenged with numerous opportunities to perform collaborative tasks. Consequently, active engagement in purposeful and cooperative learning is closely related to the application of communication strategies (CSs) (Tuan and Thi Kim Nhu 2010).

The use of CSs, also termed *strategic competence,* is a subsystem of communicative competence that, traditionally, is recognised as the knowledge how to use a linguistic system in certain pragmatic situations (Tarone 1980; Canale and Swain 1980; Canale 1983). It is certainly worth underlining that one of the most commonly used activities based on reaching a specific outcome is any information-gap task that is, as acknowledged by Nunan (1989: 10) "a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on meaning rather than form." Basically, such exercises involve collaboration and application of communication strategies (CSs) in the event of communication breakdowns.

Dörnyei and Scott's taxonomy of CSs

Crucial in this respect is careful consideration of Dörnyei and Scott's taxonomy (1995a, 1995b) and their extended approach to conceptualising CSs (Kormos 2006) as "language devices used to overcome communication problems related to interlanguage deficiencies" (Dörnyei and Scott 1997: 182). As a rule, this approach copes with "difficulties in one's production, mechanisms used for negotiation of

meaning when comprehension problem arises, and strategies employed to gain processing time and lessen the pressure on the interlocutor" (Pawlak 2015: 123).

Formally, Dörnyei and Scott (1995a, 1995b) divide CSs into three categories, namely direct, interactional and indirect strategies. Direct strategies "provide an alternative, manageable, and self-contained means of getting (sometimes modified) meaning across" as they are aimed to compensate any lacks of language knowledge (Dörnyei and Scott 1997: 198). Interactional strategies, on the other hand, are instruments that enable mutual understanding and lead to "the successful execution of both pair parts of the exchange" (Dörnyei and Scott 1997: 198). As indicated by Oxford (1990: 135), the third category referred to as indirect strategies, is considered to be "useful in virtually all language learning situations and generally they [indirect strategies] support direct strategies."

It is notable that Dörnyei and Scott (1995a, 1995b) focus on CSs in terms of communicative problems and they take problem-orientedness into account. The authors suggest that the gaps in one's knowledge ought to be identified since those resource deficits prevent learners from "verbalising messages" (Dörnyei and Scott 1997: 183). Clearly, three types of problems may be classified: *own-performance problems* (e.g. self-repair, own accuracy check), *other-performance problems* (e.g. asking for repetition, asking for confirmation) and *processing time pressure* (e.g. use of filters, hesitation devices) (Canale, 1983; Dörnyei and Scott 1997a, 1997b). With this in mind, Dörnyei and Scott's extended view (1997) to conceptualising CSs takes into consideration "any potentially intentional attempt to cope with any language-related problem of which the speaker is aware during the course of communication" (Dörnyei and Scott 1997: 179). In other words, CSs are "the steps taken by language learners in order to enhance the effectiveness of their communication" (Littlemore 2003: 331), and as aptly stated by Pawlak (2015: 121), they are destined to be applied when foreign learners "find themselves in a situation in which they will not know how to express the intended meaning or to attain the desired communicative goal due to their lacking linguistic resources."

Strategic competence among senior learners

As a matter of fact, senior learners' interaction has not gained much interest among researchers, and little is known about third-age students as active users of CSs. Generally, as pointed out by Pawlak *et al.* (2018: 76), there is a body of research based on comparison between younger and older learners whose results suggest that the former tended to use social strategies more frequently while the latter appeared to apply more complex strategies (Victori and Tragant 2003). Similarly, Peacock and Ho (2003) argue that strategies are, on the whole, more commonly used by older learners. What must be underlined here is that research

"has not specifically focused on the issue of how senior learners go about the task of learning additional languages, but rather, has in the main involved comparisons between children and adults" (Pawlak *et al*. 2018: 76). It is by all means certain that third agers ought not to be compared with other age groups in terms of learning awareness, prior experiences and wisdom, and it must be agreed that, typically, they attend language courses for various reasons, such as socialising with groupmates, preserving intellectual abilities, maintaining contacts with family and friends, as well as, travelling abroad (e.g Niżegorodcew 2016; Gabryś-Barker 2018; Jaroszewska 2013; Singleton 2018). Although one of the most essential objectives of learning at a senior age is communication, clearly very few researchers have attempted to identify the application of strategies by older adults (Pawlak *et al.* 2018: 79-80).

Pawlak *et all*., in their recent article, mention Ohly's study (2007) conducted among senior participants who attended a German course in England. It is claimed that the application of strategies was related to the type of task, as well as, individual differences (Pawlak *et al.* 2018: 80). What needs to be borne in mind is that senior learners are fully aware why they learn a foreign language in old age, and despite the fact that they may be faced with some difficulties, they are eager to continue the process of learning (Ohly 2007: 101). Overall, Ohly (2007: 101) manifests that the application of learning strategies seems not to be a "distinguishing factor between older and younger language learners."

Much in the same vein, Pawlak, Derenowski and Mystkowska-Wiertelak (2018) investigated the use of indirect strategies among third-age students. The data collected by means of a questionnaire showed a rather pessimistic image of seniors. To be more specific, the researchers elucidate that a senior age group is susceptible to "the negative ways of learning, such as anxiety, fear of loss of face and difficulty in cooperating with others" (Pawlak *et al.* 2018: 88). It gives rise to the view that third agers are primarily afraid of experimenting with the target language, and their attitude towards learning is surely associated with individual variables.

In this regard, it also seems vital to pay due attention to Piechurska-Kuciel and Szyszka's study (2018) where the application of compensatory strategies among seniors was investigated. The results showed that the participants declared applying expressions from different languages and linguistic competence of other languages. Also, only four compensatory strategies were deployed by third age learners, namely getting help, avoiding or abandoning communication, approximating the message and using circumlocution (Piechurska-Kuciel and Szyszka 2018: 120). The respondents mentioned switching to the mother tongue, using mime or gesture, coining words or selecting a topic which might be connected to the fact that "the participants appeared to rely on traditional teacher-fronted forms of language instruction" that did not allow the students to shape interaction independently. One needs to point out that Piechurska-Kuciel and Szyszka's (2018) findings are inconsistent

with Pawlak's *et al.'s* study (2018), as the authors proved that seniors are positive students who are willing to gain new linguistic experience, and "make a valuable group of learners who could benefit from explicit compensation instruction" (Piechurska-Kuciel and Szyszka 2018: 121).

As a concluding remark, it should be noted that third-agers are multidimensional language learners who are not only open to self-achievement and self-directed learning, but they also may be perceived as heterogeneous in terms of positive and negative attitudes towards language acquisition. It may be deduced that seniors primarily decide to attend language courses to gain knowledge of managing active and independent communication in real-life situations (Jaroszewska 2013; Gabryś-Barker 2018; Pawlak *et al.* 2018). For this reason, it is justifiable to learn more about mature students' strategic behaviour in second language interaction.

The study: Aims and research questions

The main objective set to the study was to investigate seniors' interaction in the course of an information-gap activity, as well as, to identify the application of CSs. This study was aimed to address the following research questions:

1. What is the participants' strategic competence in the course of a communicative task performed in pairs?
2. How do senior learners assess their participation in the study?

Participants

The informants were 16 female students of the Third Age University in Nowy Targ who had been attending English classes (1 didactic hour a week) organised by the English Philology Department in Podhale State College of Applied Sciences in Nowy Targ. The average age was 64 with a minimum of 57 and a maximum of 72. Taking the level of proficiency into consideration, the participants attended 2 level groups: A1 and A2 according to CEFR. What is worth underlining is that the majority of the students (75%) represented the A1 level. Knowledge of other languages among the participants may also be of interest, as stressed by Gabryś-Barker (2018: xiv), the most common language available at school about forty years ago was Russian. This fact is clearly indicated in this research since 6 informants admitted knowing Russian, 4 declared knowing both Russian, and German, and 2 seniors had learnt only German. Significantly, the informants asserted only a basic knowledge of those languages.

Research instruments and procedure

The instruments adopted to this study were a self-assessment questionnaire and an information-gap activity. Firstly, the participants were required to perform the information-gap activity in pairs. The appropriate desk configuration was arranged so that the students could easily perform the task, and the study was conducted only in the presence of the teacher/researcher and two senior students. The information gap-activity was based on a commonly known exercise referred to as "New Identity." The choice of the items was exclusively designed for this study, and included such data as:

- interlocutor A was supposed to ask about: *name, surname, age, address, nationality, telephone number, job, likes, favourite food, pets, drive a car*;
- interlocutor B was to obtain knowledge about: *name, surname, marital status, post code, city, country, e-mail address, hobby, dislikes, favourite drink, ride a bike*.

The partners were turn-taking, namely Student A was to ask questions and write down given data while student B answered the questions. Roles were then swapped. The performance in pairs was recorded by means of a video camera, and the files were later transcribed and codes based on Dörnyei and Scott's taxonomy (1995a, 1995b) were assigned. At this juncture, it is fundamental to note that processing time pressure-related strategies are not analysed in this paper as a separate article is needed to thoroughly investigate the amount of provided strategies. For the second stage of the study, the participants were given a self-assessment questionnaire with 20 statements to mark their viewpoints on a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from 6 – I totally agree to 1 – I totally disagree[1]. In a general sense, the statements were designed to assess interaction in terms of its form, and cooperation with the partner, as well as, to self-evaluate the seniors' own communicative performance.

Results

The findings of the study prove to be intriguing, particularly when one takes the participants' level of proficiency into account i.e. A1 and A2, and the rather controlled structure of the task. The teacher/researcher did her best to encourage interaction in English very cautiously as any form of anxiety would have caused demotivation and create a negative atmosphere. Notice that only 2 pairs represented

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[1] The self-assessment questionnaire was written in Polish, and therefore the data was collected in Polish as well. The statements were translated by the author.

level A2, and the results showed that the application of CSs was slightly more complex than in the case of the A1 students. The A2 participants[2] could communicate without code switching. This may be exemplified by Extract 1[3]:

Extract 1

Gabriela:	And can you give me your telephone number?	
Dorota:	0166 709 86 52.	
Gabriela:	I repeat you. I can?	*(own-accuracy check)*
Dorota:	Yes.	*(response: confirmation)*
Gabriela:	01667098652.	*(own-accuracy check)*
Dorota:	Ok.=	*(confirmation)*
Gabriela:	=it's good.	*(response: confirmation)*
Dorota:	Good. It's right=	*(confirmation)*
Gabriela:	=ok.	*(response: confirmation)*

Also, the A2 students used polite forms of questions as opposed to simply closed questions, for instance: *Could you give me your address?* or *Can you tell me what is your name?* Extract 1 clearly shows that the participants cooperated and paid due attention to the partner in order to achieve a mutual goal. Gabriela wished to check and confirm the telephone number as to write it correctly while Dorota used responses to confirm that it was indeed correct. Further, as presented in Extract 2A and 2B below, a very simple code switching to the third language was applied, and individual vocabulary items were changed and transferred from German:

Extract 2A

| Roksana: | How old are you? | |
| Waleria: | I'm … forty three (1.0) years alt. | *(code switching to L3)* |

Extract 2B

| Maria: | Und what is your nationality? | *(code switching to L3)* |
| Beata: | My nationality is English. | |

German was also deployed in the answers to such questions as *What's your post code?* or *What's your telephone number?* Numbers were given in German in three cases. It may be hypothesised that German words may have been more automatised in given contexts.

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[2] All participants' names were changed by the author.
[3] All the extracts in this paper were transcribed according to the Jefferson Transcription System (Jefferson 2004: 13-23).

As illustrated in Extract 3A, 3B and 3C, the next direct strategy applied during the "New Identity" task was retrieval:

Extract 3A

Hanna:	What is er your fa .. favour .. favourite food?	*(retrieval)*
Kazimiera:	My favourite food is chicken with rice.	

Extract 3B

Alina:	And What is (4.2) your (2.3) What is your surname?	*(retrieval)*
Kamila:	My …My surname is Wilson.	

Extract 3C

Renata:	What's your natio ... nationality?	*(retrieval)*
Edyta:	I am Canadian.	

It is worthwhile to mention that one of the most interesting observations in the course of the exercise was retrieval based on non-linguistic means when senior students were counting on their fingers while recalling numbers or letters. There were 2 students who used their fingers in order to retrieve number '8' while the alphabet was firstly recalled quietly in Polish and then once again in English. Likewise, the participants used direct strategies subcategorised as own-performance problem-related strategies.

	self-rephrasing		self-repair
Maria:	I'm forty three years old, I'm forty three	Maria:	I um … My job is policewoman. I work as a policewoman.
Dorota:	In (1.1) what is (2,8) what is (1.1) In which city do you live?	Maria:	Mein, I cannot (1.0) No, I cannot drive a car.
		Beata:	How are … How old are you?

Table 1. Own-performance problem-related strategies in direct strategies.

Furthermore, it could be noticed that seniors tried to solve communication problems by asking for confirmation in raising intonation, particularly when the partner was saying number or letters:

Extract 4A

Alina:	What… your… ad… adr… address?	
Kamila:	My address is 5790.	
Alina:	570?=	*(asking for confirmation)*
Kamila:	=5790.	

Extract 4B

Anna:	What's your post code?	
Rita:	My post code is M1.	
Anna:	M?	*(asking for confirmation)*
Rita:	M.	

What should be underscored is that although the teacher/researcher tried to be a passive participant, all the third agers appealed for help. In most cases, they simply needed the researcher's feedback expressed by non-linguistic means, such as gesture or mime, or they switched into Polish to ask about a meaning of words and question structures.

The second stage of the study, namely data collected by means of the self-assessment questionnaire, shed some light on the participants' opinions and standpoints of active involvement in dyadic interaction. It should be stated explicitly that 75 % of the learners of third age totally agreed that pair work encouraged their communication; 19% agreed and 6% quite agreed. The informants declared that the task was realistic (50% - I absolutely agree, 50% - I agree). 81% admitted knowing the purpose of the exercise, and the majority found the information gap activity clear and well-planned.

As indicated below (*Table 2*), interaction and cooperation between senior partners were positively evaluated.

5.	The cooperation with the partner was very good.	5.6
6.	I know my interlocutor.	5.4
7.	We are at the same proficiency level.	5.6
8.	My interlocutor helped me complete the task.	4.8

Table 2. The participants' assessment of cooperation.

The most likely reason for that may be the fact that the participants had been attending English classes for 3 years, and the researcher gave them the opportunity to create pairs on their own that, basically, meant performing the task with a person they got on well with. It is vital to note one substantial observation related to the evaluation of the partner's level of English, namely the answers to statement 7 were mutually negotiated between interlocutors since each one believed that the other's level was higher, although the researcher could declare that third-age students' abilities were, in general, closely comparable.

Notice that the participants found it slightly easier to answer the interlocutor's questions (5.1) than to ask them (4.9), and the majority of students (57%) totally agreed that the form of the task facilitated general willingness to communicate. They highly appreciated the privacy of the classroom environment (5.4), and the possibility of performing the task only in the presence of the teacher and the

partner. As a matter of fact, third agers acknowledged that the task helped them to communicate freely in English (5.3).

The concluding statements of the questionnaire evidently prove that students in the third age perceived second language acquisition as primarily learning communication.

18.	You ought to use English even if you make mistakes.	5.9
19.	Communication in pair is much more effective than discussion with the whole group.	5.9
20.	Language learning is learning communication.	5.9

Table 3. The seniors' viewpoints about communication.

As illustrated in *Table 3*, much prominence is given to enhancing speaking abilities in old age, in spite of making linguistic mistakes. In this respect, it seems fundamental to highlight that interaction in dyads was recognised as the most beneficial in the classroom environment.

Discussion

As shown by the results, senior learners are willing to interact and cooperate in dyads. It was found that older adults, despite various deficiencies, remained enthusiastic in the course of the study, and undoubtedly, they did their best to achieve communicative goals. It is well established that the use of CSs was very limited, and the mother tongue was a dominant language. Note that the major objective of the present study was to investigate pair interaction between senior learners, and hence the researcher decided that repetitions of words or questions after the teacher ought to be treated as passive CSs[4] that would not help them to solve interactional problems in real-to-life contexts. Obviously, as emphasised by Niżegorodcew (1991: 66-67) such an approach is characteristic for low proficiency learners who push responsibility of interaction to an interlocutor. In light of the evidence, some participants tended to use words in the third language intuitively as they attempted to maintain a flow of communication, and to answer the question in a full sentence. Basically, repetitions in the form of self-repair, self-rephrasing or retrieval play a pivotal role in gaining processing time to complete the task. From a geragogical point of view, it is of paramount relevance since "older learners conduct themselves more slowly" in learning (Ramírez Gómez 2016: 40). In addition, one needs to bear in mind that successful communication in second language acquisition boosts students' self-esteem as well as linguistic self-confidence (Gałajda 2017: 16-17), and as previously

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[4] The term "passive communication strategies" was analysed in Niżegorodcew's study (1991).

shown in *Table 3,* seniors are fully aware that communication is of unquestionable importance for foreign language learning.

As previously indicated in Ohly's study (2007), people in the third age seem not very prone to integrate, however, the current research findings prove that the participants found the task involving, and they appreciated cooperation with their partner. Due attention was paid to mutual appreciation of each other's communicative skills. Also, as brought up early (*Table 2.),* the participants reported a very positive evaluation of the interlocutor's cooperative and linguistic abilities. This might derive from the fact that the seniors had known each other for some time, and they frequently had a chance to work in pairs during regular classes. In consequence, it should be underlined that the findings are not in line with Pawlak *et al.'s* (2018) results of the study where third-age students had difficulties in cooperating with others, and they felt anxious about losing face. It may be concluded here that the respondents were accustomed to dyadic interaction and cooperative learning which led to establishing a good rapport in the classroom environment, and as a result, in the course of the study. The senior students were identified as a positive language group, and the results are consistent with Piechurska-Kuciel and Szyszka's study (2018) which provided sufficient insight into the positive model of learners in the golden age of life.

Conclusion

This small-scale study was intended to analyse senior learners' interaction as well as CSs applied in the course of an information-gap activity. Briefly, it may be deduced that third agers proved to be cooperative and supportive for their partners, and despite an elementary English level, they made a great effort to apply CSs to achieve desired objectives. What seems to be significant from a linguistic point of view is that they are fully conscious of the fact that spoken English is by all means functional as well as pragmatic, and cooperative skills may be used in real-life situations outside the classroom. In actual teaching practice, a positive and welcoming atmosphere during a foreign language course plays a crucial role in seniors' effective interaction and cooperation. It is the author's strong belief that, as an initial step, glottogeragogists ought to build an encouraging relationship not only between the teacher and older adults but, first and foremost, between students themselves. Foreign language courses designed for 'golden agers' are required to be learner-centred, and student talking time should be increased to a great extent in order to give seniors numerous opportunities to negotiate in the target language in different patterns of interaction.

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