

The Effect of Explicit Teaching of Communicative Strategies on the Conversation Ability of Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract : *An increasing emphasis has been placed on students' interaction or oral participation in the classroom due to the fact that oral participation is the most observable linguistic behavior. This study aimed at investigating the effect of explicit teaching of communicative strategies on Iranian EFL learners' speaking. The Participants of the study included 60 Iranian intermediate EFL learners. The study adopted one control group and a pretest posttest design and students' speaking was measured through interview tasks. One group of students received explicit instruction of communication strategies and another group served as control group receiving regular instruction. Statistical analyses revealed the positive effect of communication strategies on speaking proficiency of Iranian EFL learners. It was concluded that explicit teaching of communication strategy instruction can be beneficial for Iranian EFL learners to improve their speaking.*

Keywords: *language learning strategies, communication strategies, speaking, conversation, explicit teaching, strategy instruction*

1. Introduction

The use of learning strategies has been considered to be one of the crucial factors for successful language learning. The early studies of language learning strategies such as those by Rubin (1975), Stern (1975) and Naiman (1978) have alleged that good language learners are strategic ones. Rubin (1975) states that good language learners involve themselves actively in all aspects of language learning such as affective, linguistic, and environmental. In general, good language learners employ strategies more consciously, more purposefully, more appropriately, and more frequently than do poor learners (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989).

According to Oxford (1990), language learning strategies are especially important because they

contribute to self-directed involvement which is essential for developing communicative competence, improving proficiency, and gaining greater self-confidence. Language learning strategies help learners participate actively in such authentic communication. Nunan (1989) looks at the importance of language learning strategies from awareness angle. He believes that being aware of what one is doing as well as the process involved in learning will lead to more effective learning.

O'Malley and Chamot's (1990) contribution to language learning strategy research was particularly important as their classification of strategies was within a general framework of cognitive theory. One class of language learning strategies which needs special treatment in this study is communicative strategies. There are subsequently two types of strategies; learning and communication. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) define learning strategies as conscious thoughts or behaviors used by individuals to enable their comprehension, learning or retaining new information. Communication strategies, on the other hand, as Maleki (2007) points out are referred to as individuals' attempts to find some techniques to close the gap between their communication objectives and the current linguistic resources.

Concerning language learning strategies and their importance, Oxford (1990) states that one of the necessities of communicative competence development is the interaction among learners and using meaningful, contextualized language, hence, giving rise to the significance of communication strategies. Along the same lines, the present study aimed at investigating the impact of explicit teaching of communication strategies on the conversation ability of Iranian EFL learners.

2. Literature review

Since the idea of communication strategies was first advanced by Selinker in 1972, it has been examined by different researchers (Mei & Nathalang, 2010). However, as Huang (2010) points out, there has been no general agreement on its correct definition. Researchers appear to have

widespread disagreement on the precise nature of communication strategies and the problem of teachableness of these strategies. Generally speaking, literature (Chamot, 2005; Lam, 2006; McDonough, 1999, 2006) has identified the following two main approaches to the argument: 1- intra-individual approach and 2- inter-individual approach (Kasper & Kellerman, 1997).

Supporters of the intra-individual view, such as Bongaerts & Poullisse (1989), consider Communication Strategies (CSs) as learners' issue solving behavior and indication of their underlying mental processes. They point out that since underlying mental processes are not affected by teaching, it is not necessary to teach communication strategies. In Faerch and Kasper's view (1984), skilled learners are able to plan longer units and anticipate a communication difficulty in advance and try to solve it beforehand. The proponents of the psycholinguistic problem solving school of thought on communication strategies believe that each learner chooses one or another strategy based on his or her specific underlying cognitive processes. Kellerman (1991) as a proponent of this approach, further noted that communication strategies have already been developed in L1 and because the strategic competence is transferable from first language, therefore, teaching communication strategies is not needed.

Various researchers attributed the deficiency of students' limited speaking in the language classroom to a number of factors. Huang (2010) attributed students' limited speaking to shortage of time for oral practice in the classroom and inadequate conversational opportunities outside the classroom.

According to Huang (2010), learners' failure to speak can emanate from their wrong perception of communication in an L2 (e.g. the necessity of having a flawless pronunciation, an extensive vocabulary repertoire, a native accent, and a mastery in knowledge of grammar). Lavan (2001, p. 2) attributes the reduced use of the target language to the following factors:

- sociolinguistic factors
- the lack of instruction in L2 vernacular
- colloquial structures

Broner (2000) pointed out that increased exposure to the first language, an increase in the first language at the curricular level, and the kind of tasks children perform in class may be viewed as reasons for insufficient amount of L2 talk in the classroom. In the same vein, Broner (2000) maintains that specific interactional needs of L2

learners that may not be satisfied by the use of L2 may be one of the contributors to learners' tendency to use their L1. Williams (2006) notes that learners' limited speaking is due to the learners' anxiety regarding speaking about unfamiliar and complicated topics.

Students are unwilling to speak because of the fear of encountering strange words and phrases that deter their comprehension and language production. Furthermore, Williams (2006) noted that insufficiency and limits of learners' communicative competence in L2 stop them from expressing themselves.

In the view of Richards and Schmidt (2002), explicit teaching refers to an approach whereby information regarding a language is transferred to L2 learners directly by the instructor or textbook. In other word, as Richards and Schmidt (2002) say, learners are instructed on the rules and are provided with specific information about a language, related to conscious procedures as hypothesis formation and testing. The concept of "Implicit Teaching" is characterized in relation to implicit learning. It is described as sub-conscious learning whereby the learners do not know what is being taught and learned at the same time (Richards & Schmidt, 2002).

Kasper (1997) notes that explicit teaching is concerned with describing, explaining, and discussing the pragmatic characteristics along with input and practice. In contrast, implicit teaching involves input and practice without the metapragmatic component.

Stern (1992) asserts that explicit-implicit aspect has to do with whether the individual needs to be taught to approach the learning task consciously as an intellectual exercise, or alternatively, he/she must be encouraged to avoid thinking of the language and deal with it intuitively.

Norris and Ortega (2000) have argued that explicit instruction is mainly rule explanation through which the learners are assisted in arriving at rules; whereas implicit instruction is not involved in rule explanation. As Doughty (2003, p.265) puts it "explicit instruction includes all types in which rules are explained to learners, or when learners are directed to find rules by attending to forms. Conversely, implicit instruction makes no overt reference to rules or forms".

The present study has two main objectives. First, the study aims at investigating the effect of explicit teaching of communication strategies on the conversational ability of Iranian EFL learners. Secondly, the study is an attempt in exploring the attitudes of Iranian EFL learners towards the

effectiveness of explicit teaching of communication strategies in terms of improving their conversational ability.

In line with the objectives of the present study, the following research questions were formulated:

Q1: Does explicit teaching of communication strategies have any significant impact on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' conversational ability?

Q2: What are the attitudes of Iranian EFL learners towards the effectiveness of explicit teaching of communication strategies in terms of improving their conversational ability?

3. Method

3.1. Research Design

In the present study a mixed methods design was adopted to address the research problem. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2007), the mixed methods design utilizes both qualitative and quantitative research methods to investigate a research problem. Along the same lines, in the current study, the researcher drew on both quantitative and qualitative data and methods to address the research problem raised.

3.2. Participants

At the outset, 90 adult EFL intermediate learners at a private Language Institute in Tehran were selected from among 15 such classes through convenient sampling due to availability and manageability reasons. They were mainly students from different universities including both public and private universities who studied at the intermediate level for the purposes of finding better jobs or achieving higher degrees in their related fields. They were within the age range of 18 to 30. Persian was the native language of these students who studied in different fields at university. Initially, a general proficiency test (PET) was administered to the participants and drawing on the mean and standard deviation of the scores, the participants whose scores fell within the range of one standard deviation above and below the mean were selected as the legitimate participants of the current study. Sixty participants were chosen out of ninety, using this method. The participants were further divided into two groups of 30 language learners randomly.

3.3. Instrumentation

3.3.1. Preliminary English test: PET

A proficiency PET was administered to make sure that the learners were homogenous with respect to their language proficiency. The Preliminary English Test (PET), the Cambridge Preliminary English Test, or PET for short, is a qualification in English as a Foreign Language offered by Cambridge ESOL.

3.3.2. Interview tasks

The interview tasks of this study were randomly chosen from the available pool of interview tasks of PET (See Appendix A for a sample). In other words, the interview tasks were those tasks included in the speaking section of the PET. The speaking test consisted of four sections. In section 1, which lasted 3-4 minutes, the candidates answered general questions about themselves, their homes/families, their jobs/studies, their interests, and a range of similar familiar topic areas. In section two the examiner explained a situation. Then, she gave the students a picture to describe the situation in more details. In section 3 (2-3 minutes) the candidate was asked to speak for one to two minutes on a particular topic. The topic was written on a card, and the candidate had one minute to prepare for the talk. (S)he was asked one or two follow-up questions. In phase 4 (3-4 minutes) the examiner and the candidate discussed issues and concepts thematically linked to section 2. The test lasted 11-15 minutes and candidates were assessed for their performance on a 0-5 scale which should have been converted into a score of 15 based on the speaking scoring scheme used.

3.3.3. Semi-structured Interview

A set of semi-structured interview questions (Appendix B) were prepared regarding the participants' attitudes towards explicit teaching of communication strategies. To address the main concern of this instrument namely content validity, expert opinion in line with Brown (2003) was sought. To the end, the list of interview questions were given to two PhD holders in the field of TEFL and due revisions were made to the questions to assure the validity required.

3.4. Data Collection

Initially, 90 EFL learners at the intermediate level were given PET and those learners whose scores were within the range of +/-one standard deviation were chosen for this study. To this end, 60 learners were selected and randomly divided into a control and experimental group each consisting of 30 learners. Prior to the treatment it also deemed necessary to homogenize the participants in terms of speaking performance. To this end, all the participants were given interview tasks of PET. In the first part of the interview based on PET administration guidelines, the examiner introduced him and asked the participants' name and personal information and asked them to spell their names. In part two, the examiner gave the participants a picture and asked them to talk about it together. In part three, each participant was given the chance to speak alone, the examiner provided the participant with a colored photograph taken from the PET booklet and asked him to talk about it. In part four, the examiner asked the participants to talk more

about the photograph in part 3; for instance they were asked to state their opinion or to talk about something that had happened to them.

The explicit teaching of communication strategies including circumlocution, approximation, word coinage and appeal for help in this study was based on Stern's (1992) guidelines associated with explicit teaching. According to him explicit instruction should include: explanation, observation, rational thinking, trial-and-error, and monitoring. Based on these guidelines, the communication strategies chosen for the purpose of this study were taught in an explicit way as follows:

During the first three sessions of the treatment the explanation phase of the explicit teaching was carried out. To this end, the strategy types were elaborated on by the teacher extensively. In this regard, efforts were made to thoroughly talk about the strategy types and ample examples were provided. The steps taken in line with Stern's (1992) guidelines for the explanation phase were as follows:

- The name of the strategy type was written on the board
- The learners were invited to guess what the strategy type meant to them
- The learners were put into pairs to compare their ideas
- The learners ideas were put on the board
- The teacher talked about the strategy type and gave details on what it was
- The learners were asked to make a list of possible examples that they could think of related to the strategy type under focus
- The teacher asked learners how often they used this strategy type before
- The teacher asked them how often they will now use it since they now have an idea of this strategy type

The second three sessions of the treatment were devoted to observation and monitoring. To this end, in these three sessions the learners were asked to act out the strategy type under instruction in hypothetical situations. The other learners were required to watch those acting them out and later invited to give comments on how effectively their classmates used the strategy types in those situations. To do so, the researcher followed these steps:

- She asked learners to come up with a hypothetical situation in which they could use the strategy type under focus.
- Two learners were asked to act out their roles in front of the class

- The other learners were invited to give comments on how well the participants in front of the class used the strategy type.

During sessions 7, 8 and 9, relational thinking phase was carried out. To this end, the learners in the experimental group were encouraged to try to relate the strategy types and their use to their language learning and efforts were made to make a list of these possible connections through pair works and group works in the class. To do so, in a stepwise manner the teacher helped them relate the strategy types to their language learning. All learners participated at this stage. To this aim, the following steps were taken:

- The teacher put a list of questions on the board as follows:
 - A) How often do you use these strategy types?
 - B) Do you think they are helpful for speaking?
 - C) Do you have any problems in using them?
 - D) How can you encourage yourself to use them more?
 - E) Do you think communication strategies and their use are useful in general?
- The learners were put into pairs to discuss the questions.
- The teacher invited the learners to give their ideas and put them on the board
- The teacher asked for comments on the learners' ideas from the whole class and fully discussed how learners could use the strategy types

During sessions 10, 11 and 12 trial and error phase of explicit teaching were undertaken. All learners in experimental group were requested to keep a diary and write down their experience of using the strategy types in the course of the treatment. They were also requested to write their reflections based on their use of the strategy types. To this end, these steps were followed:

- The Learners were required to keep a note book specifically for the purpose of this study
- They were asked to try to use strategy types both inside and outside of the class every day if possible
- The learners were required to write a report on how often they used the strategy types and whether they had any problems in using them
- The learners were asked to write a short report for the teacher as homework and take it to class

- Some of the learners were asked to read out their reports to the whole class
- The Learners were asked to give comments on the reflections of those who had read their reports to the class

More specifically, during these last three sessions the learners read their reports and reflection regarding strategy types and their experiences. To this end, each learner was invited to talk and give their comments on the way s/he thought about strategy types and their possible contribution to speaking.

As for the control group, no explicit teaching of strategy types was given to the learners. The participants in this group followed the regular conventional syllabus of the institute. The whole course of the treatment lasted 12 sessions.

At the end of the treatment both groups sat for another speaking interview from PET. The speaking performance of the participants was assessed again the results of which were used to investigate the possible effect of the treatment.

A set of interview questions were also prepared by the researcher and addressed to 5 participants in the experimental group to examine their attitudes towards the efficacy of explicit teaching of communication strategies in improving the conversational ability of the participants.

4. Results

The first research question was about the impact of teaching communication strategies on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' conversational ability. To address this question, the progress of students was evaluated by comparing the speaking posttest performance of experimental group with that of control group. Table 1 shows the mean scores and standard deviation of experimental group and control group on posttest. (See table 1)

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Speaking Posttest Performances between the Groups

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
Posttest experimental group	36	11.5333	2.44573	.44653
Control	36	9.9333	2.93532	.53591

On the posttest, experimental group had better performance than control group i.e. experimental group had a mean score of 11.53 (2.44) while control group had a mean score of 9.93 (SD=2.93). Again, this difference in mean score on posttest needed to be tested for significance which was

tested through employing statistical test of independent samples t-test.

According to results of Levene's test of equality of variances (see Table 2), experimental and control groups had equal variances in posttest scores ($p > 0.05$) and accordingly researcher assumed equal variances for the two groups. T-test indicated that significant difference existed between experimental and control group ($T = 2.29$, $P \leq 0.05$). In other words, experimental group had better performance on speaking posttest after being instructed on communication strategies.

The second research question asked about the participants' attitudes towards the effectiveness of explicit teaching of communication strategies in terms of improving their conversational ability. Students from experimental group were asked to participate in interviews about the way they viewed teaching of communication strategies and their efficacy. Students answered the interview questions and where necessary were asked about clarification and more explanation. All the dialogues were analyzed through content analysis approach proposed by Auerback and Silverstein (2003). On the whole students were happy with teaching of communication strategies and evaluated it positive in enhancing their speaking skill. There were five questions addressed to the participants as follows:

- 1) Was communication strategy instruction interesting for you?
- 2) Did you feel more motivated to speak when you were taught communication strategies?
- 3) Do you think communication strategy instruction was effective for your speaking?
- 4) Do you prefer to receive the instruction of communication strategies in an explicit or indirect way?
- 5) Do you think the use of real examples to show the use of strategies was useful in teaching communication strategies?

In response to the question: *Was communication strategy instruction interesting for you?* One of the participants commented that: *Yes, it was fun and me and my friends laughed a lot when trying to the use them.*

Another participant maintained that: *yes, it was interesting. I learned interesting points about the ways to start and continue communication.*

A third interviewee stated that: *communication strategies really helped me to increase my courage to speak and learn some techniques of starting conversations.*

The second question of the interview was: *Did you feel more motivated to speak when you were taught communication strategies?* Overall, most of the participants believed that they felt more motivated

when practicing conversations through communication strategies.

One of the interviewees commented that: *the very fact that I could practice continuous conversations and the teaching method was somehow new to me. I really was more motivated to speak more. Also, communication strategy instruction is more fun and interesting than the traditional method.*

Another interviewee held that: *I felt more motivated since it was obvious that I was learning more and therefore I really wanted to learn more and more about speaking. This made me really motivated.* She also added that: *communication strategy instruction is more exciting and you get interested in finding ways to express yourself.*

The third question of the interview was: *Do you think communication strategy instruction was effective for your speaking?* The responses to this question were also mostly positive.

One of the interviewees was of the opinion that: *because you can communicate more and have more chance to interact and also that communication is real you can better be involved and learn more deeply.*

Another participant commented that: *I really think that this method was helpful because I could practice real speaking..*

A third participant was of the opinion that: *real conversation was very good because I had the feeling that I was speaking more naturally.*

The fourth question of the interview was: *Do you prefer to receive the instruction of communication strategies in an explicit or indirect way?* The responses to this question were also mostly affirmative.

One of the interviewees said: *I really prefer this method and in the future I would like to have more chances to talk.*

Another participant believed that: *I think I like this method more and most of the time after the class I talked with other students. I prefer this method to the old method because it helps us learn better.*

The fifth question of the interview was: *Do you think the use of real examples to show the use of strategies was useful in teaching communication strategies?* Most participants' responses were positive in this regard as well.

One interviewee believed that: *at first I was a little nervous when starting conversation but after a while I got used to it and I even felt safer and more secure and real examples were more practical.*

Another interviewee commented that: *of course communication strategies were helpful. Because I easily could see how those strategies. This was because the examples were real and practical.*

As noticed in the examples from students' responses to interview questions, student were positive with communication strategy instruction. In spite of the nervousness related to use the

strategies at first, they were happy with the method of instruction and use of authentic examples. Moreover, the procedure seemed enjoyable and motivating for them.

5. Discussion

The present study aimed at exploring the effect of communication strategy on speaking of the Iranian EFL students. Students were pretested on speaking and language proficiency, and it was found that all students were homogenized in terms of English language and speaking proficiency. One group of students received communication strategy instruction and the other one regular instruction. After the instruction period, students took speaking posttest and it was found that experimental group outperformed the control group. In this section, the results of the study are discussed in light of theories and empirical studies.

The first explanation for the positive effect of communication strategy on the speaking of the EFL learners is the mere positive effect of language learning strategies on language proficiency of learners. Communication strategies are the subcategory of language learning strategies specifically designed to help the language learners to solve their language learning problems. Research has shown that language learning contains indirect strategies like strategies to manage communication challenges. Therefore, it can be put forward that communication strategies are ways to help EFL learners directly or indirectly. With respect to positive effect of language learning strategy instruction, the finding of this study is in line with findings of Yang (2009), Green and Oxford (1995), Dreyer and Oxford (1996), Park (1997), Griffiths (2003), and Kyungsim and Leavell (2006). With respect to explicit teaching of language learning strategies many scholar advocated this position which have led to some successful strategy training programs, such as the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach or CALLA (Chamot & O'Malley, 1986), the Learning to Learn course (Ellis & Sinclair, 1994), and the Strategies-Based Instruction or SBI program (Cohen, Weaver, & Li, 1998) and a later iteration known as Styles-and-Strategies-Based Instruction or SSBI (explained by Cohen, 2011).

Maleki (2007) examined the problem of teaching and teachability of communication strategies. His finding showed that materials containing communication strategies had more impact than materials without them. Furthermore, he mentioned that communication strategies are pedagogically effective and conducive to language learning.

Another reason for the positive effect of communication strategies on speaking of the students is the mode of instruction used in the current study. In other words, it can be argued that since communication strategies were instructed explicitly, they caused more positive effect on the speaking of the language learners. Oxford (1990) noted a shift in strategy training which encouraged more direct and explicit teaching of language learning strategies than the indirect, implicit training strategy training. Wenden (1987) cited in O'Malley and Chamot (1990, p.154) maintains that "students who are not aware of the strategies they are using do not develop independent learning strategies and have little opportunity of becoming autonomous learners". Many researchers in second language contexts believe that strategy instruction should be explicit (Chamot et al., 1999; Cohen, 1998; Nunan, 1997; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford & Leaver, 1996; Shen, 2003). Salemi, Rabiee and Ketabi (2012) found that explicit instruction had advantage over implicit instruction. Salemi et al. concluded that participants in the explicit groups outperformed the implicit groups, by saying that it was due to the fact that the students' attention was directed to specific features during explicit instruction. One other factor that influenced the results was the learners' learning preference and habits: students from certain cultures prefer to receive explicit feedback in regards to their performance.

6. Conclusion

It can be argued that explicit teaching of communication strategy instruction can be beneficial for Iranian EFL learners to improve their speaking. In addition, based on the finding of the study and also the fact that previous literature approve the benefits of explicit teaching of language learning strategy it was concluded that explicit mode of instruction is helpful for teaching communication strategies.

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