

Developing Pragmatic Competence in Iranian EFL Classrooms

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Abstract

The study sought to discern how the explicit teaching of the speech acts of opening and closing conversations facilitated by teacher influences the performances of Iranian EFL learners. Four activities were incorporated into the set program: translating a conversation from Persian into English, developing the conversation and in the end doing the role play. Participants were divided into a treatment and a control group (32 and 13) respectively and their performances were measured by a pre- and a post-test requiring the students to perform a dialog with their peers to score the presence and appropriateness of opening and closing and elaborating them according to situations in their tasks. The findings yielded that treatment group utilized more elaborate opening and closing elements. The results support and extend prior research on the effectiveness of classroom-based instruction for EFL learners' pragmatic development.

Keywords: Pragmatic competence, dialog, speech acts, classroom-based instruction

1. Introduction

Classroom is one of the least available milieu for foreign language learners, where they can try out what using the second language feels like, and how more or less comfortable they are with different aspects of L2 pragmatics.

Comprehension and production are two aspects of learning of any language. To Tarone (1983), comprehension and production are two slippery terms, neither parallel nor complementary, which can occur almost simultaneously but are liable to being differentiated in terms of strategy employment and conceptual definition. Competency in comprehension and production is accrued by employing strategies. Strategic competence is subdivided into learning (cognitive, socio-affective and metacognitive) and communicative strategies which comprises compensatory and avoidance, etc. Varadi, T. (1973) identifies compensatory strategies as the sole construct of communication strategies which fall under the rubric of strategic competence, however failing to engulf all facets of strategic competence for communication.

Communication strategies sprout from one's strategic competence through manipulation of language to meet communicative goals (Brown, D, H., 2000). There are variant models and assumptions for communication strategies. However, communication strategies are evidently mobilized for language production.

In Bachman's model, language competence is subdivided into two strands: organizational and pragmatic competence for which there are also more subsections. Organizational competence includes organizational and textual competence and pragmatic competence comprises illocutionary and sociolinguistic competence. Strategic competence is subpart of language competence in Bachman's model of communication used for achieving a communication act.

Pragmatic competence is a noticeably known facet of communicative competence. Edwards and Csizér (2001) give a definition for pragmatic competence as the knowing of defined social, cultural, and discourse rules of situations set by a community desired to being abided in communication.

However violations of pragmatic competenc hazard the empathetic nature of communication and cause miscommunication and confusion. Kasper (1997) identifies pragmatic competence as not holding knowledge in addition to that of grammatical instruction but as a vital factor of communicative competence.

2. Review of the related literature

Researches in communication strategies have inaugurated myriad strategies and skills needed for surpassing communication. Kasper, G. (1997) propounds that pragmatic competence cannot be taught but it can be developed through providing adequate tasks and activities.

Kaburise, Phyllis (2014) evidenced the utility of two sorts of pragmatic competence instruction, that of explicit under the rubric of e-learning, imparting a variety of dozen strategies, and that of implicit under the guise of role play, to South African students in rural district. Role plays and implicit language functions instruction outweighed computer program usage. Findings were consistent with prior global research apropos of computer-mediated language learning.

Eslami-Rasekh, Z., Eslami-Rasekh, A. and Fatahi. A. (2004) investigated the impacts of explicit teaching of metapragmatic on 66 senior Iranian EFL students' cognizance of requesting, apologizing, and complaining speech acts at Isfahan University. A multiple choice comprehension pragmatic test was constructed based on a discourse completion test around the familial, social, and academic affairs

administered to baseline American counterparts. Pretest showed that two groups were the same before the treatment in respect of pragmatic awareness based on the discourse completion test (DCT) taken. To enhance pragmatic awareness of learners, teacher implemented discussions, cooperative grouping, role plays, and other pragmatically oriented activities. Findings showed that comprehension of speech act enhanced significantly. To appraise the effectiveness of metapragmatic instruction on the pragmatic awareness of advanced EFL learners a posttest was executed. Significant differences were reported in t-test. Means scores for control and treatment groups were 35.50 and 46.00 respectively.

Bulut, T., Bilgin, S., and Uysal, H. (2014) investigated the degree of augmentation of speaking competency by dint of pragmatic skills or conversational strategies apropos of conversation opening and shutting down. As part of the activists, conversational strategies in the form of role-play comprising statement, taking turns, monitoring, negotiation of meaning, politeness and shutting down expressions were practiced. Sorting Closings and cocktail party were incorporated into the activities to raise awareness on pragmatic knowledge. Repairs and practice activity, to ingeminate, elucidate and remold, were introduced to students likewise. Students were asked about the kinds of closing and were assisted if needed. Results revealed that more instruction is needed to invigorate learners' inter-language transfer and *explicit* teaching of speaking skills along with awareness-raising of pragmatic skills. Conversational strategies felt to be taught with the help of first language of the learners and conforming tasks according to mother tongue. Teaching explicitly, doing exercise and comparison of two languages at end successively were found to be necessary in the study.

Mohammed, M (2012) examined forty first year EFL students studying at Basreh University in an explicit teaching program of bi-activities in a course of three weeks for the learning of request and refusal speech acts. Twenty students were assigned randomly to an experimental group and another twenty to a control group receiving no instruction. Instruction was made upon awareness-raising and discussing appropriateness of refusal and request acts by execution of role play and simulation. Both groups were assessed in a pretest for generating any of these two speech acts but they were incapable of creating any constructions as native English speakers could do. After administering a post-test in a written form of discourse completion, results indicated that the experimental group reported significantly stronger than the control group in elaborateness and insertion of requests and refusals approximate to near-natives.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

A total number of 45 non-proficient novice EFL learners taking a general course in English at Islamic Azad university of Qom in Iran were randomly assigned to a treatment and a control group. No test of proficiency was taken as students themselves informed teachers on their incompetency in English language and not having any contact to English language studies in recent years.

3.2. The procedure

The study pursued to fathom how the explicit teaching of some aspects of pragmatic competence would affect students' performance. In doing so, a four-week program

was designed to scrutinize any effect on students' performances. The program involved introduction of four activities, with the aid of regular English teachers, supplying students with information on the goal of the tasks, explain of the activities in detail and discussion on each activity. The researcher dispensed an instruction by designing a pragmatic program outside the textbook contents involving four activities which provided students with explicit teaching on two speech acts, openings and closings. Each dry-run elapsed between 35 to 45 minutes and contained follow-up discussions during which students and teachers discussed the new structures and phrases as well as any problems that arose while completing the activities.

Students were randomly split into a treatment group and another as control group (32 and 13 students, respectively), and their performances were gauged by a pre- and a post-test requiring the students to perform a dialog with their peers. Pre- and post-tests were arranged through role plays in which the students along with their pairs did role play.

Schegloff and Sacks' speech acts model (1973) was adopted in this research study to unveil whether instruction would have any effect on student s' performances of the speech acts of opening and closing conversations. In this model, *adjacency pair*, like *Hello–Hi*, is seen in the openings usually. *Post-opening*, viz. “*How are you?*” often comes after this pairing. According to Edwards and Csizér (2001), post-opening falls between greeting and main body of conversation. Study done by Bardovi-Harlig, K., Hartford, B. A. S., Mahan-Taylor, R., Morgan, M. J., & Reynolds, D. W. (1996) documented that English closings often end with an adjacency pair called *terminal pair/exchange* such as “*bye–good bye*”.

As part of the program, researcher invested 10 minutes teaching the speech acts of closings and openings. About twenty minutes were specialized to pre-activities and post-activities.

Some instances of the activities on the part of treatment group participants are in the following.

Informal situation post-test: An instance of encounter with an old friend in the street

Hi my friend.

hi

How are you?

Tanks

see you later.

by

Formal situation post-test: An instance of meeting a former teacher at university

Hello teacher

Hi

How are you my teacher?

Thanks. I am good.

Where are you?

I'm waiting to colleague

I have for you dream succesfully

Have a nice day

3.3. Data Analysis

Performances of the learners were elicited by requiring students both to transcribe their scenarios for doing the role play with their peers and to perform orally to find use of appropriate opening and closings.

Simultaneous auditing and observation of the students' role plays and transcriptions by the researcher were the sources of data collection and analysis. Use of appropriate openings and closings in each formal and informal situation were evaluated. Elaborateness of two speech acts in respect of greetings and follow-up openings and pre-closing and closing of the topic were also assessed.

4. Results

Students in treatment group reported a satisfactory mastery of learning activities. The treatment group utilized a greater variety of greetings and valedictions and appropriate use of registers desired by different situations. However, they produced culturally different forms of greetings in their pretests. Experimental group also appeared more competent than control group and were more proficient than control group in post-tests. Treatment groups out-weighted control group in elaborateness of openings. Furthermore, control group students used a low variety of opening and closing and were feeble at distinguishing formal and informal registers and using apposite phrases. They applied same adjacency-pairs in their greetings and valedictions for both formal and informal occasions and couldn't extend openings and closings. There were a dearth of post-openings in the transcriptions of control groups

and most of the closings were constricted to only saying of *bye*. Most of them also failed to complete adjacency pairs and left the response undone.

Tenor was observed to be a lost issue for those novice language users, linguistically incognizant of situational hierarchy for choosing language appropriate to the situations. However, misspelling and grammatical mistakes still continued to be existent in the transcriptions of students of both groups. Furthermore, intercultural miscommunication errors were noticed in the post-test performances mostly in the elaborateness of speech act of post-opening. Students failed to conform accordingly to what they were taught on appropriate use of register rules. They also made efforts in remembering what to say in different situation and created ad lib if occasions were aroused.

Control group couldn't elaborate post-opening of the greetings and used a low variety of construction. Even in their performances they restate the opening phrases used by their peers.

5. Discussion

The fact that learners who received explicit instruction did significantly better on the post-test suggests that explicit instruction was constructive in promoting speech acts of the side of learners.

However students were unable to concoct new constructions unheard before. Post-puberty language learners were short of inventing new constructs never met before. The age of learners may be the reason for not adroitness in elaborating speech acts. Learner s' acquaintances with language exchanges were much of aid to successful performance of speech acts of opening and closing. Control groups were

incapable of developing conversation but treatment groups showed the sign of any improvement in elaborateness of speech acts after being introduced to some exchanges of both informal and formal register.

Grammatical mistakes found in pre- and post-tests unveiled that students neglect doing sufficient practice like consulting dictionary by themselves which is the sign of knowing less of learning strategies and small extent of the activities put into the program likewise. It is also a reminder that explicit teaching is short of helping if adequate exercises are neglected on the side of learners.

Cultural misapplication and politeness issues occurred which maybe the results of lack of any acquaintance with target culture. Students still confuse the situations for appropriate use of registers. The participants of the study showed that they have difficulty distinguishing between registers even after being introduced to discrepancy between each. Perhaps longer term of instruction and incorporating more activities are needed to automatically apply and differentiate each construct to its designated register. The students were even incapable of considering social distance conventions and conveyed that they need to be taught on them. The learners lack adroitness in respecting formalities between interlocutors. This maybe goes back to familial background and the ways in which they got being upbringing to be adept in realizing discourse rules in their own language shared among others.

Pitfalls remained in the performances of learners even after instruction and practice reminds that more works and attention need to be invested on the side of learners in and after classroom.

Retention problems and low proficiency of the learners in skills and strategies may also be the major reasons why some pre-fabricated phrases and structures taught were not seen in their performances, which it seeks for more control in future studies.

6. Conclusion

Teaching of pragmatic competence can be very constructive and beneficial to students for developing communicative competence in the target language. The literature enlightened that pragmatic knowledge does not seem to come along naturally in EFL classrooms, so teachers need to try to contribute to the developing of learners' pragmatic competencies through instruction.

The findings of the present study endorse the facilitative impacts of instruction on foreign language learning on the whole and the benefits of instruction on the development of learners' pragmatic competence in particular. Pragmatic competence can be worked out in the classroom through a range and radius of situations and activities. Many believe that pragmatic rules that are different from or nonexistent in the students' first language need to be stressed.

At large, as results of this four-week program proved to be promising, a more thorough and long-term program would be needed to produce even more reliable results. It is also felt to carry on dissecting what works and what does not work in the FL classroom, to keep on designing more teaching activities that focus on raising learners' awareness of pragmatics, and more tasks which target the grammatical and pragmatic features that are important for learners' communicative competence. Intervention studies for comparing adult and teenagers for their competency development in conversation are recommended in future. Furthermore, larger data collection than this, and a thorough and an extensive period of instruction may yield very different results. Teaching methods, motivational prompts, materials used or type of activities carried out could also make a difference.

However, a variety of openings and closings were introduced for different situations, students still used to apply same construction to different registers in their

performances. This can be attributed to non-automatic use of language in need of more invitation of time and maybe pre- judgment about the in-competencies of learners.

7. Implications

Contextual and social variables are also liable to covariate the influence of instruction on learning. Iranian EFL course-books suffer from a paucity of resources for teaching pragmatic competence. Culture is a cinderella term in the syllabus introduced to students. Even proficient learners in Iranian setting lack the adequate knowledge about pragmatic differences in two languages.

Comprehensive demographic information of subjects of study like socio-economic background, ethnicity, gender and sociolinguistics differences should be taken into consideration. Non-native discourse in conveying the message could be compared with native discourse. Contrastive analysis of performances of learners will pave the way for further improvements of learners' speaking skills in interventional studies regarding intercultural discrepancies.

Mounting intercultural awareness adds meat to materials brought to language classrooms asunder from enhancing communicative proficiency of learners, which commands the attention of Iranian EFL curriculum developers. Teaching and development of pragmatics studies on cross-culturally differences are advised in Iranian EFL contexts. Teaching program could also be expanded and equipped with introduction of communication strategies to learners and incorporation of more activities in and after class.

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