The Comparative Analysis of using Direct vs. Indirect Instruction of Communication Strategies on the Naturalness of Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners' Oral Performance

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Abstract

Communicative strategies (CS) play a significant role in foreign language acquisition, and they have turned into a crucial topic for all foreign language learners and teachers to facilitate learners' oral performance in English. The present study aimed to consider the usefulness of either type of instruction (direct and indirect) of communication strategies on the naturalness of Iranian intermediate EFL learners' oral performance. In this study, 60 students of intermediate level were selected from a larger population and were divided into two groups based on their performances on an OPT, EX (Direct strategy instruction) and CONT (Indirect strategy instruction). The pretests of speaking were administered to both groups. Then, both groups were instructed EFL speaking through different methods of communicative strategy instruction, namely direct versus indirect communicative strategy instruction. After speaking instruction via different communicative strategy instruction methods for the groups was completed, two groups received posttest of speaking which was intended to measure learners' oral performance naturalness. The findings indicated that although both methods of communicative strategy instruction were highly effective for improving EFL learners' oral performance naturalness, a single communicative strategy instructional method could not be singled out as superior to the other one in improving EFL learners' oral performance naturalness, and both of them were almost equally effective for learners' oral performance naturalness enhancement. This research suggested some implications for language teachers, teacher trainers, material developers, and curriculum designers.

Keywords: Communicative strategies, Communicative language teaching, Conversational skills, Strategic-based Instruction, Speaking ability

Introduction

Communicative strategies (CS) play a significant role in foreign language acquisition (FLA). According to Corder (1978), reduction strategies can be regarded as "risk-avoiding" while achievement strategies may be seen as "risking-taking". He also suggests that achievement strategies (L2-based strategies, cooperative strategies, L1-based strategies and nonverbal strategies) will contribute to successful language learning. Furthermore, Færch and Kasper (1983) hold the same view. They argue that achievement strategies encourage hypothesis formation and risk is essential for automatization. Tarone (1980), however, expresses a different notion, namely that any kinds of communicative strategies can contribute to successful FLA.

Unfortunately, in foreign language contexts the fear of the oral performance is a serious problem.

English, nor do feel the need to do so. Also, the foreign language learners try to avoid or abandon a topic or a massage because of the poor linguistic competence or weak strategic competence. In fact, the most reflecting problem is that they are not able to use their knowledge in communicating their messages. The root of this problem can be traced to not knowing about the existence of CSs. Although most of Iranian learners are knowledgeable in grammar or vocabulary, they face a lot of difficulties in conveying their messages both in classroom and in real life contexts. The main reason is the fact that in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting, learners have few or even no opportunity to use English outside the classroom. With the gradual shift from traditional teacher-centered method in second and foreign language pedagogy to communicative learnercentered approaches, the study and application of communication strategies may be an effective way for learners to learn a foreign language. According to

Most students have no intention of communicating in

Bialystok (1990, p.1), "the familiar ease and fluency with which we sail from one idea to the next in our first language is constantly shattered by some gap in our knowledge of a second language". The forms of these gaps can be a word, a structure, a phrase, a tense marker or an idiom. The attempts to overcome these gaps are described as communication strategies. As a result, communication strategies have turned into a crucial topic for all foreign language learners and teachers to facilitate learners' oral performance in English.

Literature Review

Communication Strategies

The first to use the term CS for one of the processes affecting L2 learning was Selinker (1972; cited in Dörnyei and Scott, 1997). CSs were claimed to be essential for the process of learning L2, but were not discussed in detail. In her report, Savignon (1972) recognized the importance of CSs (she refers to CSs as 'coping strategies') as a component of language teaching and training. Researchers such as Dörnyei and Scott (1997), Færch and Kasper (1983a), Tarone (1980) and Nakatani (2010) argued that the use of communication strategies not only solves learners' communication problems, but also enhances the learner's interaction in TL, which in turn, improves their oral proficiency.

At a small European conference in 1973 in Romania, Váradi characterized adjustment' 'message phenomena or strategies which can be used by L2 Hungarian learners to solve their communication problems. However, Váradi's paper (1973), which was not published until 1980, showed a significant performance effect for high level learners, whereas low level learners still struggled to convey their message in the TL. Dörnyei and Scott (1997) considered Verdi's study as 'the first systematic analysis of strategic language behavior' of L2 learners. Another definition of CSs was provided by Tarone, Cohen, and Dumas in a paper published in 1976. Four types of CSs generally found in inter-language phenomena, which include phonology, morphology, syntax and lexicon, were identified in their taxonomy (Tarone et al., 1976).

This terminological framework gave Tarone the idea of conducting the first empirical study of CSs in 1977. Tarone's study investigated in more detail the use of CSs employed by English language learners in speech. Definitions and a typology consisting of five types of CSs (avoidance, paraphrase, conscious transfer, appeal for assistance and mime) were provided to adult English language learners. Dörnyei and Scott (1997) assert that Tarone's classification is considered to be the starting point in this field of research. In 1980s, some researchers such as Cohen and Swain (1980), Savignon (1983) and Færch and Kasper (1983), acknowledged the role of CSs in L2 learning research. For instance, in their framework of 'communicative competence', Cohen and

Swain (1980) recognized strategic competence as a component which entails devices that are used to solve problems in communication. These problem-solving devices are CSs. In the 1990s, Bialystok published a very influential book, *Communication strategies: A Psychological Analysis of Second Language Use.* In it, definitions and theories of CSs were defined, explored and discussed. Bialystok's 1990 work suggested two important issues: taking the psychological process of speech production as a basis for studying CSs and teaching language structure rather than strategies to language learners.

During this period, other researchers examined the relationship between CSs and proficiency level (e.g. Chen, 1990 and Kebir, 1994), and the teaching pedagogy of CSs (e.g. Rost and Ross, 1991; Yule and Tarone, 1991, Dörnyei and Thurrell, 1991 and Dörnyei, 1995). Since then, increasing attention has been given to the instruction of CSs. The current study is part of this continuing focus on this area of research.

Teaching of Communication Strategies

There is controversy over the value of teaching CSs to foreign language learners. Two diverging views are categorized by Yule and Tarone (1997) as 'the Pros' and 'the Cons'. According to Hinkel (2005) a significant number of researchers (the Pros) advocate the teaching of CSs to language learners (Rost & Ross, 1991; Dörnyei, 1995; Macaro, 1997; Yule and Tarone, 1997; Russell and Loschky, 1998; Dewaele, 2005; Nakatani, 2005; Lam, 2005; and Alibakhshi, 2011). Only a few empirical studies exist however, which investigate the benefits of providing L2/FL learners with training in the use of oral communication strategy (Maleki, 2007).

In the research of Nakatani (2005) and Lam (2005), learners who had experienced instructional input developed their strategic competence more than their peers who had not. In their study, Russell and Loschky (1998) found that EFL Japanese learners were inclined to use L1 or non-linguistic strategies, and concluded that these learners could benefit from CS training. In addition, Ellis, (2003) argues that learners could develop their capacity of using language in real life situations by being trained in CSs. Similarly, Yule and Tarone (1997) recommends the teaching of CS to language learners and states that 'improvement in effective CS use can result from training'.

In contrast, other researchers, 'the Cons', (Bialystok, 1990; Kellerman, 1991; Grenfell and Harris, 1999), are not in favor of teaching CSs to language learners. These researchers argue that learners usually develop a strategic competence in their first language, which they can then transfer to second/foreign language use. Kellerman (1991) argues that since L2/FL learners can transfer their L1 knowledge to the target language TL, there is no need to teach them CSs because transfer from L1 to TL is automatic. To date, the review of the literature

reveals that researchers who oppose the teaching of CSs do not base their claims on empirical studies. As can be seen however, there is insufficient evidence either for or against CS teaching. It appears that considerable debate has been grounded in subjective opinions, rather than empirical studies. This lacuna gave the researcher the idea of analyzing empirical data both quantitatively and qualitatively to answer the following research question: Can CSs be effectively taught to learners, i.e. does explicit training in a specific CS result in its increased usage by learners? This research question is suggested by review of Dörnyei's 1995 study. The present study aimed to compare the usefulness of direct versus indirect instruction of communication strategies on naturalness of Iranian intermediate EFL learners' oral performance.

Research Question

Is there any significant difference between the effects of direct vs. indirect instruction of communication strategies on the naturalness of Iranian intermediate EFL learners' oral performance?

Methodology

The current study was a quantitative and experimental research which adopted a Pre-test Post-test Equivalent-Groups Design to complement its objectives. To be more exact, this study used a True-experimental design to collect the needed data to answer the research question. In terms of the importance of this design Cresswell (2009) stated this design is the most reliable method of the quantitative approach in which the researcher intends to examine the impact of an intervention on another dependent variable due largely to the fact that it uses random assignment which neutralizes the effect of other extraneous factors which may mix the final results. In doing so, 60 participants were randomly selected, and they were divided into two groups, Experimental [EX] (Direct Instruction) and Control [CONT] (Indirect Instruction) based on a language proficiency test, Oxford Placement Test [OPT].

Participants

The population of the study consisted of intermediate EFL institute students who have been studying English at Safir Language Institute [Ramsar County, Mazandaran, Iran] for one year. The original population who had the chance to take part in the study consisted of 100 EFL learners at the intermediate level, 15-22 year-old (Age Mean= 18.90). To achieve the number of the participants for the current study, the students sat on a language proficiency test called Oxford Placement Test [OPT], and based on their performances on the test, sixty students were selected to participate in the current study, and they were assigned into two groups, EX (Direct Instruction) and CONT (Indirect Instruction).

Instruments

Oxford Placement Test (OPT)

To be sure of the homogeneity in two groups, proficiency test was administrated to establish of participants' homogeneity. Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was administered to make sure the participants were homogenous in terms of their language proficiency. This enables teachers to have a great understanding of what level their students are at. The test contains 50 multiple choice questions which assess student's knowledge of key grammar and vocabulary, a reading text with 10 graded comprehension questions, and a writing task for assessing student's ability to produce the language.

Speaking Test

The speaking test was used as a pre-test and post-test to measure students' English speaking performance. The test contains three tasks: talking about picture differences, reading a text aloud, and expressing one's opinion about a particular topic. The scoring rubric of the test provided a measure of quality of performance on the basis of five criteria: pronunciation, grammatical accuracy, vocabulary, fluency and interactive communication on a five-rating scale ranging from 90-100 meaning "excellent" to 0-49 meaning "fail".

Validity of a test is an important feature for a research instrument (Wiersma, 2000). An instrument is said to have validity if it measures exactly what it is supposed to measure. All the items in the speaking test were reviewed by the researchers as self-validation. Then the items were given to three experts to ensure the content validity of the test. The experts were asked to validate and evaluate the test by completing a checklist for validating the English speaking test. The results of the experts' evaluation of the test and the scoring rubric showed that all of the criteria used to assess the test on the five-scale indicating positive opinions of the experts.

Reliability of speaking test in this study was estimated by inter-rater method. It involved administering the same test twice to a group of students within the span of a few days (10 days) and calculating a correlation coefficient between the two sets of scores. The assumption was that the testees would get the same scores on the first and the second administrations of the same test. This statistical method was adopted in order to obtain the reliability of the speaking test. The estimated reliability of the speaking test in the current study was 0.85 measured through Cronbach's Alpha. Another essential component to test reliability is that of inter-rater reliability. As it relates to the current study, inter-rater reliability is the degree of agreement between two scorers. If the level of reliability between the two scorers reaches the level of significance, this may indicate that the two scorers are fair in their scoring. In the current study, the correlation coefficients obtained for the two scorers are 0.910 and 0.914, respectively, indicating quite high inter-rater reliabilities. Therefore, this test is reliable and valid for experimentation and could be considered as a research tool for measuring the sample's speaking test. A scoring rubric was used along with the scoring sheet for the purpose of grading. The grading of the speaking skills was based upon six criteria: (1) pronunciation, (2) grammatical accuracy (3) vocabulary, (4) fluency and naturalness, (5) interactive communication, and (6) naturalness. It is worth noting that the main purpose of the study was on participants' oral performance naturalness, therefore; the raters put more emphasis to measure the naturalness of participants' oral performance naturalness based on predesigned scales.

Data Analysis

To examine whether significant differences exist between the two groups of participants prior and after the instruction, descriptive statistical procedures, and a series of t-tests including paired and independent samples t-tests were conducted to examine the impact of using direct communicative strategy instruction versus indirect communicative strategy instruction on intermediate Iranian EFL learners' oral performance naturalness.

Data Analysis and Results

The descriptive analysis of the data for two groups of the study has been summarized below. Table 1 summarizes the descriptive analysis of the data of EX of the study.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for EX

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest	12.2667	30	1.74066	0.3178
Posttest	15.4167	30	1.20833	0.22061

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for CONT

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest	12.307	30	2.02115	0.21423
Posttest	15.017	30	1.93196	0.2415

Table 3. Independent-samples t-test for the pretest of both groups

	Levene's Equal Varia	ity of	t-test for Equality of Means						
	F Sig	Sig	g t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	15.51 3.27	2 27	2.11	58	0.124	0.3	0.767	4.06	2.4
Equal variances not assumed		3.27	2.11	48.67	0.123	0.3	0.767	4.06	2.39

As table 1 indicates, the mean value of oral performance naturalness for the first experimental group before the direct communicative strategy instruction is 12.2667 (SD=1.74066), while the mean for this group after speaking instruction is 15.4167 (SD=1.20833). It is obvious that the EX oral performance naturalness improved greatly after the direct communicative strategy treatment. It can be inferred that direct communicative strategy instruction was effective in enhancing learners' oral performance naturalness. Next table shows the descriptive statistics of the CONT of the study.

As table 2 indicates, the mean for the CONT before the instruction is 12.8667 (SD= 2.02115), while its mean value after the treatment is 15.01167 (SD=1.93196). With regard to its performance on the posttest, the CONT

which was instructed via indirect communicative strategy method, also showed improvement in its oral performance naturalness.

Since two groups of the study were of the same level based on OPT result; intermediate level, there could not exist any noticeable pre-existing differences between two groups on oral performance naturalness and general speaking ability. Therefore, an independent-samples t-test was conducted between the post-test oral performance naturalness scores of two groups to see whether there exist any significant differences between two groups in terms of oral performance naturalness after the communicative strategy instruction via direct and indirect method. Table 3 summarizes the results of the independent samples t-test of the post-test data of two groups.

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the means of two groups for the learners' oral performance naturalness. The Sig. value for Levene's test is larger than .05 (3.27), then the first raw in the table should be consulted, which refers to Equal variances assumed. There was not any significant difference between the EX and CONT (t (58) = 2.11, p = .124, two-tailed).

So, the result of this analysis revealed no statistically significant difference between the two groups on the oral performance naturalness test. All things considered, it can be concluded that the speaking instruction via both direct and indirect communicative strategy instructional methods significantly improved the oral performance naturalness of both EX and CONT; however, the results of the independent-samples t-test showed that no group outperformed the other on the oral performance naturalness measures.

Conclusion and Discussions

This study aimed to investigate the possible effects of speaking instruction through direct versus indirect instruction of communication strategies naturalness of Iranian intermediate EFL learners' oral performance. The results of the independent-samples ttest concerning oral performance naturalness of two groups revealed that no group significantly outperformed the other after the intervention indicating that both methods of communicative strategy instruction have helped learners improve their oral performance naturalness. Hence, it can be concluded that although both methods of communicative strategy instruction were highly effective for improving EFL learners' oral performance naturalness, a single communicative strategy instructional method cannot be singled out as superior to the other one in improving EFL learners' oral performance naturalness, and both of them were almost equally effective for learners' oral performance naturalness enhancement.

The results of the current study regarding the importance and effectiveness of teaching communicative strategies are in line with those of the following studies whose researchers advocate the teaching of CSs to language learners (Rost & Ross, 1991; Dörnyei, 1995; Macaro, 1997; Yule and Tarone, 1997; Russell and Loschky, 1998; Dewaele, 2005; Nakatani, 2005; Lam, 2005; and Alibakhshi, 2011).

Therefore, many researchers propose the inclusion of CS instruction in L2/FL teaching (Alibakhshi, 2011). Three types of activities of CS training are suggested by Færch and Kasper (1986). The first are communication games with visual support which allow full visual contact between the participants and full possibilities for immediate feedback. Willems (1987) argues that paraphrase strategy and approximation strategy are the most commonly used strategies and suggests instructing a number of CS activities for developing their usage. In his

study, crossword puzzles and describing a strange object are presented as activities for instructing CSs activities. He claims that learners should be encouraged to acquire communication strategy skills rather than to search for 'perfection'. He suggests also that learners should be allowed to act freely when they attempt to use the TL. This helps observers to understand learners' reactions when they encounter linguistic problems. He observes that making errors is inevitable, but learners can reasonably compensate for these by 'skilfulness in the use of CS in interaction' (p. 361).

Other practical ideas for strategy training are suggested by Dörnyei and Thurrell's (1991, pp. 19-20) study. They propose three activities, 'nonsense dialogues', 'one-word dialogues', and 'going off the point'. The first activity, which focuses on the use of fillers, is recommended at an early stage. In this activity, students are asked to work in pairs and compose nonsense dialogues which entail fillers e.g. to use names of cities 'You know, I thought maybe London' (ibid: 19). In the second activity 'one-word dialogues', students are asked to work again in pairs and create a dialogue where every utterance must represent one word and does not affect the logical flow of the whole dialogue e.g. 'A: Tomorrow? B: Trip! A: Where? B: Chicago. . . ' (ibid, p. 20). In the third activity, 'going off the point', students are instructed not to answer a particular question in a way to remain in control of the dialogue e.g. "How old are you? "Well, that's an interesting question" (ibid, pp. 20-21). Dörnyei and Thurrell believe that these activities help learners to build a sense of security in language, as a result of their maneuvers whenever they encounter a problem. The students not only develop their confidence, but also improve their performance and enjoy practicing such activities.

Also, in one study, Dörnyei (1995) examined the teachability of CSs. He supported an explicit approach to teaching CS. In a six week study in a Hungarian high school, using three types of reduction and achievement strategies, namely, 'avoidance and replacement', 'circumlocution', and 'fillers and hesitation devices', he found that learners in the strategy training group made a significant improvement in the quality and quantity of strategy used as well as their overall speech performance. In addition, learners' attitudes towards the training were found to be highly positive. The results showed that strategy training could contribute to L2 development.

Dörnyei (1995) recommends a 'direct approach' to teaching CSs which involves procedures such as 'raising learner awareness', 'increasing willingness to take risks and use CSs', and 'providing opportunities for practice in strategy use' (pp. 63-64). Awareness-raising makes the learners realize the importance of the strategies that they already use in their L1, and helps them to use these strategies appropriately in the L2. To promote a willingness to take risks and use CSs, he advocates encouraging learners' to manipulate their available language repertoire, without being concerned about

making mistakes. Repeated opportunities for practice are necessary because 'CSs can only fulfil their function as immediate first aid devices if their use has reached an automatic stage' (p. 64). According to him, effective strategy use cannot occur without explicit, focused instruction, and teaching CSs is the way to develop their usage.

In contrast to the results of the studied mentioned above in terms of efficacy of the communicative strategy instruction for language learning and communication, some researchers (Bialystok, 1990 Kellerman, 1991 and Grenfell and Harris, 1999) are not in favor of teaching CSs to language learners. These researchers argue that learners usually develop a strategic competence in their first language, which they can then transfer to second/foreign language use. Kellerman (1991 cited in Brett 2001) argues that since L2/FL learners can transfer their L1 knowledge to the target language TL, there is no need to teach them CSs because transfer from L1 to TL is automatic. To date, the review of the literature reveals that researchers who oppose the teaching of CSs do not base their claims on empirical studies. As can be seen however, there is insufficient evidence either for or against CS teaching. It appears that considerable debate has been grounded in subjective opinions, rather than empirical studies.

The findings in the current study indicate that the teaching of CSs has an effect on learners' perceived communicative strategy awareness leading to better performance in oral communication. It can be claimed that the intervention increased learners' enhancing communication naturalness in English. These findings are in line with Jamshidnejad's (2011) study, which showed that CS usage in L2 communications enables participants to improve the accuracy of their oral interaction.

Furthermore, the study indicated that an increase in learners' strategic awareness appeared to be correlated with both explicit and implicit teaching of CSs based on their final performances on the speaking tests. In addition, students recognized the usefulness and importance of these strategies when speaking English. This accorded with a number of recent studies (Dörnyei 1995, Nakatani 2010, Teng 2012 and Rabab'ah 2013), which showed that learners' strategic awareness was raised by strategy teaching. These results suggest that by giving guidance and direction, English language teachers can raise students' strategic awareness of CSs and enhance their ability to use CSs effectively in real-life situations. This result is in line with Faerch and Kasper's (2001, p. 56) study which stated "By learning how to use communication strategies appropriately, learners will be more able to bridge the gap between pedagogic and nonpedagogic communication situations". Thus, implication for teaching practice is that EFL teachers should familiarize their students with CSs and encourage them to use these strategies whenever possible.

In contradiction to the assertions of Bialystok (1983), who questioned the teachability of CSs, the findings of

this study suggest that they are indeed teachable. They identify which CSs are most likely to be adopted by students after instruction, and therefore which CSs can be most effectively taught within a time constraint.

Furthermore, there are some studies which offer an empirical foundation which can be used to answer questions about the types of CSs which are generally teachable. With the benefit of the existing literature, it seems that such strategies as reduction, circumlocution, fillers, repetition, repairing, paraphrasing, facilitating, seeking an opinion, clarification, and giving assistance can be of high value in second or foreign language communicative skills' development. The implication for teaching is teaching should start with the basic and easier strategies such as pause fillers and repetition or repairing. Then, the more advanced strategies such as circumlocution, clarification, seeking opinion should be taught.

The result of the current study also highlighted the impact which CS instruction can have on the modernization of teaching techniques and classroom culture. For countries modernizing their teaching methodologies, the teaching of CSs, with their associated awareness-raising activities, is an essential change to the curriculum. In introducing the teaching of CSs, the intervention of this study showed that new techniques and teaching methods can be adopted in practice in classrooms, without major ideological debate in the institution. These facts suggest that the teaching of CSs may have as much positive effect on the teaching culture of the institution as it has for the communication of students.

Further investigations of various modes of communicative strategy instruction for communicative skills' development with a larger number of participants at different levels of proficiency are required, because the current study was only attempted with a small number of students, and the results may not be generalizable well; so this would be an area to investigate more fully in future research. More conclusive findings might have been obtained if the study were replicated with a larger sample.

Also, some other studies should be conducted over a longer period of time, emphasizing qualitative research paradigm to shed more lights on the efficacy of communicative strategy instruction. As well, implementing mixes of approaches appropriate to student needs and styles and teacher preferences might be a more realistic approach to introducing new pedagogical ideas and would not be so subject to the "all or nothing" perspective typical of trialing new pedagogical enthusiasms.

This study showed that the teaching of CSs improves learners' oral communication naturalness, but future studies need to test their effect on overall speaking skills using a wider range of internationally accepted tests. This could be done at the same time as investigating their effect on IELTS scores by including IELTS testing formats among a range of testing formats.

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