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Communication strategies in the classroom: Increasing efficiency through explicit training

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Abstract

Studies have shown that circumlocution is the most applicable communication strategy to explicitly teach in the language classroom. As learners already utilize this strategy in their L1 and can be freely transferrable, time needed to train learners may be shortened. To date however, very little studies have been conducted in the foreign language classroom. This paper reports on a study to measure the improvement of efficiency after only four hours of explicit training in the classroom. Two native and non-native speakers rated two freshmen classes at an international university in Japan for the effectiveness to use circumlocution. Participants described five concrete and two abstract nouns in a pre and post-test. The results indicate that although there were no significant improvement in their efficiency to circumlocate both the concrete and abstract nouns through the explicit training, there was a significant difference between the native and non-native speaker raters' guessability of the descriptions.

Introduction

A sufficient level of communication in the L2 is the goal for any foreign language learner. However, why are some people able to communicate with ease while others struggle to convey their message? Seeing people communicate effectively with little vocabulary by mixing languages, using gestures, describing words they do not know and even making up new words may seem strange at first but if they are successful then it is applicable to communication. What separates them from other learners is the "ability to communicate within restrictions" (Savignon, 1983, p.43), meaning that they are using strategies.

Previous studies have shown that "good language learners" (Rubin, 1975, p.42) are

motivated in their desire to communicate with L1 speakers. In order to achieve this, they use a wide range of communication strategies, such as circumlocution (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989). Communication strategies (CSs), as defined by Færch and Kasper (1983) as “conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal” (p. 36), are an important set of skills for the learner to use effectively. Y. Chen (2006), explains that CSs can lead to learning by eliciting unknown or foreign words, are part of actual language use, are successful in compensating for the lack of linguistic knowledge and help develop the learners confidence (p. 261). With studies indicating the importance of CSs for learners, the next step is to explicitly train learners in the classroom.

Teachability controversy

The explicit training of CSs however has been a controversial topic with a number of researchers suggesting that time in class should be spent on the language, rather than strategy learning (Kellerman, 1991). The development of these strategies occurs originally in the learners L1 and is freely transferable to the target language (Bongaerts & Poulisse, 1989; Kellerman, Ammerlaan, Bongaerts, & Poulisse, 1990; Paribakht, 1985). By being able to use the strategies in their L1, Kellerman (1991) concludes “there is no justification for providing training in compensatory strategies in the classroom. Teach the learners more language and let the strategies look after themselves” (p. 158). Another opinion for not explicitly teaching CSs in the classroom is that learners are most likely to acquire these strategies in real life communication rather than through direct training (Canale & Swain, 1980).

Although the arguments above are well founded, many researchers still maintain that explicit teaching of CSs in the classroom is not only possible but also desirable (Brooks,

1992; S. Q. Chen, 1990; Rost & Ross, 1991; Savignon, 1983). One reason as Dörnyei (1995) explains is the variation within CSs (p. 62) When previous studies looked at their teachability, they often investigated a range of CSs at a time. This is not ideal to fully gather valuable results. One strategy however that is commonly referred to as the most teachable CS is Circumlocution (Dörnyei, 1995). This article will use the term *circumlocution* “to describe the linguistic means by which speakers describe objects for which they lack precise terminology (Jourdain, 2000).

Explicit teaching of Circumlocution

Currently there is little research that looks at the explicit training of circumlocution in the classroom. However, the results from these studies indicate that the learners’ ability to circumlocute improved after training (Y. Chen, 2006; Salomone & Marsal, 1997; Schullen & Jourdain, 2000). In a study conducted by Salomone and Marsal (1997), they explicitly trained 21 of American-born French learners over a spring quarter. The pre and post-test consisted of the learners explaining 20 items; 11 concrete nouns, five abstract nouns, and four shapes in a written test (Salomone & Marsal, 1997, p. 475). The results of their study indicated that the learners ability to circumlocute improved. Finally, Salomone and Masal suggest teachers use circumlocution games and activities to promote both linguistic knowledge and cognitive flexibility.

Schullen and Jourdain (2000) propose. similar to Dörnyei (1995), that ‘core’ vocabulary and sentence structures are required for learners to improve in their ability to circumlocute. This study focuses on the explicit training of these structures.

To see to what extent CSs are available to teachers, Faucette (2001) analysed the content of 40 books. The initial screening showed that only 17, nine textbooks and eight teachers’ resource books included CS activities. For circumlocution, the results were positive, with

seven of the nine textbooks and seven of the eight teachers' resource books containing such activities.

Time and Raters

The amount of time previous studies have spent on the explicit training of CSs is varied. Dörnyei (1995) trained learners in three CSs for a total of six to twelve hours over six weeks in three lessons a week. Rossiter (2003) also conducted a study with a similar timeframe. Learners received 12 hours of direct training, but again, were trained in three CSs. Salomone and Marsal (1997) only focused on circumlocution but were vague on the total amount of hours spent, only commenting that it was conducted over one term (p. 475).

As previous studies have stated that learners are already capable of using circumlocution in their L1 and is freely transferable, it may be the case that by explicitly training learners in 'core' vocabulary and structures and using a number of activities, the amount of time needed in the classroom can be reduced with learners still improving in their ability to circumlocute.

To rate the accuracy of circumlocution from pre to post-test, studies have used either other participants (non-native speakers), or native speakers (Dörnyei, 1995; Jourdain, 2000; Salomone & Marsal, 1997; Schullen & Jourdain, 2000). Schullen and Jourdain (2000) point out that both the speaker and the listener can influence successful circumlocution (p. 236). They go on to explain that even when a participant in their study seems to present clearly and with appropriate structures, the listener (NNS), was unable to guess the correct answer (p.237). Could this be because the listener did not have a grasp of the structures necessary in order to understand? The present study will evaluate whether there is a difference between if the listener is either a native or non-native speaker.

Methodology

Participants

The participants in this study were 42 first year students in two sections of an International Communication course at a private university in Japan. 36 were native speakers of Japanese and 6 were Chinese exchange students. The participants' age ranged from 18-20, and all had studied English as a foreign language for a minimum of six years prior to the study. The course in which the study was conducted, consisted of four 90-minute classes a week over 15 weeks a semester. The study was conducted in 12 lessons over three weeks in the first semester. Explicit training of circumlocution was held ten times with a pre and post-test in the subsequent two for a total of four hours of explicit training. In each of the 10 training lessons, one circumlocution activity was used, lasting for 20-25 minutes. Time was not deemed a factor as stopping the activity before it was completed due to any restriction would have negated the effectiveness of the explicit training.

Teaching procedure

Immediately prior to the study, the Vocabulary Size test was administered to ascertain the vocabulary level of the participants and in turn, design tests and activities suitable for them (Nation & Beglar, 2007). The results indicated that the average size was 2700.

Prior to the first treatment, a list of phrases derived from Berry-Bravo (1993) were handed out and explained. Before each activity, the students were reminded to refer to the list if necessary. Seven activities, which focused on the use of circumlocution, were used in this study. They were taken from previous studies and adapted for this context. By utilizing such activities, it was deemed they would be an effective tool for explicitly training participants in circumlocution. The activities *comparing dictionary definitions* (Dörnyei, 1995, p. 85), *Explanations* (Dörnyei & Thurrell, 1991, p. 21), and *what are my words*

(Benson, 2014) were used more than once, as during the pilot study they were deemed the most popular activities among the participants.

Table 1: Activities used in the study and original studies

Activity	Study
What are my words	(Benson, 2014)
Explanations	(Dörnyei & Thurrell, 1991)
Compare dictionary definitions	(Dörnyei, 1995)
CIRCO	(Salomone & Marsal, 1997)
Call my bluff	(Dörnyei, 1995)
Twenty questions	(Salomone & Marsal, 1997)
Team circumlocution game	(Berry-Bravo, 1993)

To train participants in circumlocating abstract nouns, three activities were administered (team circumlocution game and compare dictionary definitions). The ten activities utilized nouns from the first three 1000 word lists, as this would allow participants to not only circumlocate known words but also unknown, but applicable words to their vocabulary level (West, 1953).

Throughout the ten activities, participants were encouraged to refrain from using gestures. Although gestures would have been more natural to help in the circumlocution process, the pre and post-test was audio only and therefore, having participants focusing only on the linguistic aspect of circumlocution was deemed best for this study.

Tests

A pre and post test was administered immediately before the first and after the last explicit training session. Each test consisted of seven nouns, 5 concrete and 2 abstract. All fourteen nouns were selected from the 3000 word list (West, 1953). Having participant's circumlocute words that are of a higher level to their vocabulary size was thought to be both educational and applicable to the authentic use of circumlocution. Jourdain, (2000) describes circumlocution as "the linguistic means by which speakers describe objects for which they lack precise terminology" (p.185). With this in mind, nouns one level above that of the participants was deemed appropriate.

Each word was translated into Japanese as so the students would understand the meaning even if they could not read the English word. The participants received the seven nouns and were instructed to use circumlocution without the use of a dictionary. They recorded their answers using their smart phone and E-mailed the audio file. They were given as much time as necessary to complete the test.

Rating

The audio files were transcribed and randomized for rating. By transcribing the files, the raters were not able to distinguish the participant's voices. It also helped in the rating process, as with audio files, it would have been difficult to compile them together for the raters.

Four raters, two non-native speakers and two native speakers of English were used in this study and were explicitly trained in the likert scale. The two non-native speakers were graduate students from the same university with a TOEIC score of 870 and 850 and a vocabulary size score of 5500 and 6000 respectively. They were given as much time as necessary to rate the transcriptions.

To rate the data, a three point likert scale was designed. Dörnyei, (1995) measures the success of circumlocution as not by its length or speech rate, but by “whether the listener can identify the target word described” (p. 70). With this in mind, The likert scale measured the ‘guessability’ of the circumlocated word. With the use of circumlocution, if the speaker has not given enough clues while circumlocuting, the listener would not be able to ‘guess’ the word. The likert scale ranges were: 1 – Unguessable, 2 – Somewhat guessable, 3 – Guessable. The raters compared the transcriptions to the answers provided and rated them on the guessability.

Results and discussion

A paired sample t-test was conducted to compare the fair average values of the pre and post-test scores. There was not a significant difference in the scores for the pre (M=74.79, SD= 9.53) and the post (M=80.23, SD=18.76) conditions; $t(6)=1.94$, $p = 0.271$. These results suggest that the learners did not improve in circumlocating through the explicit training.

Table 2: paired t-test score for pre/post-test

	N	Mean	S.D.	T	Df
Pre	42	74.794	9.532	1.94	6
Post	42	80.234	18.762		

With the results indicating that there was little difference between the pre and post-test scores, future research will hold the key to indicating as to how much time is necessary for learners to effectively improve in circumlocating. With only a maximum of four hours of explicit training on circumlocution and little difference between the pre and post-test scores

($p=0.271$), this indicates that more time is necessary for learners to effectively improve in circumlocution. The level of the learner may also be a factor as previous studies have indicated that the higher the proficiency level of the learners, the faster the retention of the strategy (Jourdain, 2000). If this study was conducted with learners of a higher vocabulary level compared to the first-year university learners with a vocabulary score of 2700, the explicit training may have been effective and had differing results.

To compare the NNS and NS scores, a paired t-test was also conducted. The results show there was a significant difference between the NNS rating ($M=304.14$, $SD=38.64$) and the NS rating ($M=320$, $SD=41.82$) conditions; $t(6)=2.07$, $p=0.041$. These results indicate that the NS were able to 'guess' the circumlocution of the learners and thus gave them a higher score in the tests.

Table 3: Paired t-test score for NS and NS scores.

	N	Mean	S.D.	T	Df
NNS	42	304.14	38.641	2.0741	6
NS	42	320	41.821		

With the results showing that there is a significant difference ($p=0.041$), it reiterates the notion that the listener is just as influential on the success of the circumlocution (Schullen & Jourdain, 2000). Researchers have indicated that circumlocution is rarely mastered in the foreign language classroom (Berry-Bravo, 1993). With these results however, it poses the question, is this because the interaction between the learners is fragmented by the lack of knowledge from the listener and therefore not effectively completed? The emphasis of previous studies has been on the explicit training of circumlocution and ability to use the strategy. Future studies may be necessary to ascertain if explicit training can increase the

understanding of circumlocution as a listener.

Finally, there was not a significant difference between the abstract nouns pre ($M=277$, $S=46.66$) and post ($M=295.5$, $S=23.33$) conditions; $t(1) = 1.121$, $p=0.231$. These results indicate that the explicit training during the study did not significantly improve the ability to circumlocate abstract nouns. Similar to that of Salomone and Marsal's (1997) study, Learners found circumlocating abstract nouns difficult. The list of frequent phrases provided prior to conducting the activities may have affected this. The list does not provide appropriate phrases that can help in describing abstract nouns. This is understandable however as unlike concrete nouns which have similar qualities that can be utilized to describe them such as the shape, colour, size, material, and so on, abstract nouns are varied with no similar qualities. This proves difficult for the teacher to effectively train the learner in abstract nouns. Future studies looking at the design of materials and training of circumlocating abstract nouns are necessary in order to further examine if circumlocution is an applicable strategy to teach in the foreign language classroom.

Conclusion

The results indicate that the explicit training did not significantly affect their effectiveness to circumlocate. Further studies are needed to conclude as to how much time is appropriate for learners to improve. This study has also brought up more questions as to what materials are most effective to train learners.

The difference between NS's and NNS's scores was statistically significant ($p=0.041$). With the notion that NS's are able to guess the circumlocution more than NNS's, it is important to rethink the process of training this strategy in a foreign language context as previous studies have been conducted mostly with intermediate to advanced ESL learners.

As with previous studies, there was no significant difference between the pre and post-

test abstract noun scores ($p=0.231$). Although three of the ten activities explicitly trained abstract nouns, the list of phrases provided did not equip the learners for circumlocating effectively.

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