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A study on the teach ability of EFL communication strategies

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Abstract

The study aims to examine how communication strategy instruction actually works in the EFL classroom context. Participants were one senior class of 24 English majors at a university in northern Taiwan. The participants took the oral test and then received explicit strategy instruction to help them effectively employ communication strategies. After 15 weeks of strategy training, participants took the posttest. A paired t-test was conducted to analyze participants' scores on the oral test and the scale of communicative effectiveness. The research proposed that systematic strategy instruction result in the improvement of communication strategy use and communicative effectiveness for EFL learners.

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1. Introduction

Early CS studies aimed at defining and classifying strategies into taxonomies. Dörnyei and Scott (1997) indicated that although L2 speakers spend a lot of time and effort struggling with language difficulties, yet L2 courses do not generally prepare students to cope with performance problems. Recently, some empirical studies have been conducted and focused on the relationship between communication strategies and pedagogical issues. Two fundamentally different conceptualizations have been categorized by Yule and Tarone (1997) as 'the Pros' and the 'the Cons.' The Pros have proposed liberal expansion of CS strategies and advocated the teaching of communication strategies (e.g., Dörnyei, 1995; Dörnyei & Thurrell, 1991, 1994; Tarone, 1984). On the other hand, the Cons have found many similarities between L1 and L2 CS use, and have not favored teaching communication strategies (e.g., Bialystok, 1990; Kellerman, 1991). Whether to teach communication strategies remains a controversial issue. Thus, it is worth investigating the problem again using a Taiwanese experience by examining how EFL college students cope with their communication difficulties and how CS instruction actually works in the classroom context.

The purpose of the present study is to examine the effects of teaching communication strategies to EFL college students. The major research questions explored in the study were: (1) Does the instruction of communication strategies increase the frequency of strategy use? (2) Does the instruction of communication strategies improve the effectiveness of strategy use?

2. Literature review

For the past decades, there have been a number of studies conducted to examine the various aspects of communication strategies, including use of communication strategies and instruction of communication strategies. Recently, several researchers have examined the communication strategies employed by Chinese EFL learners. For instance, Huang and Naerssen (1987) and Chen (1990) investigated the communication strategies used by EFL

learners in China. Jackson (2002) investigated the reticence of EFL students in Hong Kong in their case discussions. Some studies have also been conducted with EFL students in Taiwan. For example, Liao and Bresnahan (1996) designed a contrastive study of refusal strategies between Mandarin Chinese and American English. Hsieh (1998) examined the relationship between anxiety and the use of communication strategies. Tuan (2001) studied the relationship between extroversion-introversion tendency and the choice of communication strategies. Zhang (2005) investigated the use of communication strategy in dyad talks and the function of proficiency level in strategy selection.

In addition, there have been some researches involved in teaching communication strategies to L2 learners. For example, Willems (1987) made suggestions for instruction about and practice in the use of L2 communication strategies. Dörnyei and Thurrell (1994) provided a list of conversational teaching points that can be practiced in the L2 classroom. According to Rost (1996), one of the main purposes of CS instruction is to help learners anticipate and deal with conversation management problems, not to prevent or avoid them. Moreover, Ogane (1998) proposed the guidelines for teaching five commonly-used communication strategies (paraphrasing, borrowing from L1, miming, asking for help, avoiding) along with classroom techniques and specific exercises. In terms of the empirical research on CS instruction, one classic study by Dörnyei (1995) indicated the possibility of developing the quality and quantity of Hungarian EFL learners' use of some communication strategies through focused instruction. As suggested by Yule and Tarone (1997), the definitive study on the value of CS teaching remains to be done. Moreover, Faucette (2001) concluded that very few studies have evaluated CS from a pedagogical perspective. The study aims to help fill this void by examining the effects of communication strategy instruction.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

Participants in the current study were one senior class of 24 English majors at a university in northern Taiwan. All of them have completed at least ten years of EFL study in school. Their TOEIC test scores were more than 750 and some of them even scored higher than 900. As a result, they could be designated as high-intermediate or advanced EFL learners.

3.2. Instruments

The main instrument was an oral test of role play which has been adopted by Nakatani (2005). By performing the role-play task, two students engaged in a simulated conversation derived from a situation described on a card. Each pair was given five minutes to prepare the role play. Moreover, a scale of communicative effectiveness was designed mainly based on Littlemore's study (2003) with the scoring criteria of *ease of comprehension*. On a five-point scale ranging from "very difficult" to "very easy", the raters circled the response which indicates how easy it is to work out what the participant was talking about.

3.3. Procedures

The present study was conducted during the class hours of the senior required course *English Speech*. The participants were informed that they would participate in the training program of EFL communication strategies. The experiment was directed based on the following three steps. First, an oral test was given to the participants in class. The speech production of the role-play task was videotaped. Then, participants received explicit instruction to help them effectively employ EFL communication strategies. The experiment consisted of a 15-week strategy training program. The strategy instruction took place in one lesson each week, lasting for about 15-20 minutes each time. The teaching program is mainly based on the techniques and concepts of communication strategy instruction in previous research (Scarcella, 1990; Dörnyei & Thurrell, 1991; Dörnyei, 1995; Ogane, 1998). The strategy training was supplemented with awareness-raising discussion and feedback. The teacher first provided demonstration of the strategies, and then students were asked to perform these in their native language, Mandarin. In the next stage,

students were given time to prepare their strategies in the target language, English, and their performances were discussed after completing the communication task. Later during the course, an increasing amount of improvisation was required. Finally, participants took the posttest of the oral test after the strategy training program was finished.

3.4. Data Analysis

With regard to the scoring of the oral test, participants' narrations and responses in the task were transcribed. Then, a coding system was adopted to identify the communication strategies used in the transcriptions. The coding system based on Tarone's (1977, 1981) taxonomies included five major strategies with some subordinate strategies. Thus, a checklist of nine strategies was developed to make the coding more efficient. All the occurrences of communication strategies in the participants' transcriptions were identified by two raters, including the researcher and a college EFL teacher who was also familiar with the CS research. The decisions about each occurrence were based on the two raters' agreement. The frequencies were calculated to assess the selection and the distribution of communication strategies. After completing the strategy coding, the two raters also assess each participants' communicative effectiveness of strategy use based on the scale of comprehension ease. The inter-rater reliability of the pre-test and the post-test were 0.87 and 0.91 respectively, which show that the two raters were able to assess all participants' test performances with high degree of consistency. A paired t-test was conducted to analyze participants' strategy frequencies and effectiveness scores on the oral test.

4. Results

The speech productions of the pre-test and the post-test by the 24 participants were coded according to the coding scheme. Frequency counting was conducted to assess the selection of communication strategies. In the pre-test, participants applied the communication strategy of "circumlocution" most often. The least frequent strategy is "word coinage". In the post-test, participants applied the communication strategy of "appeal for assistance" most often. The least frequent strategy is "word coinage". As for the difference of strategy frequency, the total frequency in the post-test is higher than that in the pre-test. Among the nine communication strategies, eight strategies have positive differences, while only one strategy of "nonverbal signals" was applied much more often in the pre-test.

Table 1. Paired t-test for communication strategies

Communication strategy	N	Pre-test		Post-test		t
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Topic avoidance	24	1.21	1.18	4.21	0.81	4.11**
Message abandonment	24	0.33	0.64	2.04	2.07	4.00**
Approximation	24	0.67	0.70	1.04	0.95	1.62
Word coinage	24	0.00	0.00	0.21	0.59	1.74
Circumlocution	24	4.04	4.97	6.00	4.44	1.60
Literal translation	24	0.17	0.48	0.25	1.22	0.30
Language mix	24	0.21	0.66	0.21	0.83	0.00
Appeal for assistance	24	2.13	2.05	9.79	7.27	5.48**
Nonverbal signals	24	3.29	2.71	0.29	0.86	-5.34**
Total	24	1.34	0.77	2.67	1.23	6.51**

** p<0.01

Based on the research purpose, participants' speech productions completed before and after the strategy instruction respectively were analyzed and compared. The results of paired t-test for strategy frequency are shown in Table 1. Among the nine communication strategies, there were significant differences in the frequency of four strategies, including "topic avoidance", "message abandonment", "appeal for assistance", and "nonverbal signals". Significant difference was also found for the total frequency of communication strategies employed by the participants in the pre-test and the post-test respectively.

Moreover, the study also aims to examine if the instruction of communication strategies can improve the effectiveness of strategy use. Table 2 shows the result of paired t-test for the scale of communicative effectiveness

on a five-point scale. It can be seen that participants had significantly higher communicative effectiveness in the post-test than in the pre-test.

Table 2. Paired t-test for communicative effectiveness

Test	N	Mean	SD	t	p
Pre-test	24	3.42	0.83	2.099	0.047*
Post-test	24	3.79	0.51		

* $p < 0.05$

5. Discussion

In the study, results indicate that there is significant difference in the participants' use of communication strategies. That is, EFL college students employed significantly more strategies after they received the instruction of communication strategies. Furthermore, participants had significantly higher communicative effectiveness in the post-test than in the pre-test. The findings support a number of previous researches on communication strategy (CS) instruction. For example, Dörnyei's (1995) study confirmed the possibility of developing the quality and quantity of Hungarian EFL learners' use of some communication strategies through focused instruction. Moreover, Russell and Loschky (1998) indicated that Japanese university students benefited from second-language-based CS training. Nakatani's (2005) found that Japanese EFL learners in the strategy training group significantly improved their oral proficiency test scores. Besides, Naughton (2006) suggested that the CS strategy training program was successful in encouraging Spanish EFL students to engage in interactional activities. Maleki (2007) also suggested that teaching communication strategies is pedagogically effective for Iranian EFL students. Thus, the present study has confirmed the teachability of communication strategies by presenting the facilitating effect of CS instruction to Taiwanese EFL students.

With regard to the influence of strategy instruction on the use of individual communication strategy, some findings were discussed below. After the strategy training, participants employed the communication strategy of "appeal for assistance" most often, and they also used this strategy significantly more often in the post-test than in the pre-test. Based on Dörnyei and Scott's (1997) inventory of strategic language devices, "appeal for assistance" includes direct appeal for help, indirect appeal for help, asking for repetition, asking for clarification, and asking for confirmation. The finding supports Maleki's (2007) which indicated communication problems arose from L2 learners' linguistic deficiency, and that any request from their part for clarification or assistance would lead to feedback and help interlanguage develop. Nakatani (2005) also presented that the students in the strategy training group significantly increased their use of strategies for negotiation in order to solve communication problems and avoid misunderstanding. In addition, by analyzing CSs found in English language teaching materials, Faucette (2001) found that appeal for assistance was included in all eight of the surveyed teachers' resource books. It is suggested that strategy training can facilitate EFL learners' use of appeal for assistance to deal with communication difficulties.

Besides, participants applied the communication strategy of "circumlocution" most often in the pre-test. As defined by Willems (1987), circumlocution involves exemplifying, illustrating or describing the properties of the target object or action. This strategy is quite similar to the common practice of paraphrase in writing. In Faucette's (2001) study, circumlocution strategy was found in seven out of eight of the teachers' resource books. As a result, participants were already familiar with circumlocution and frequently use it before they received the strategy instruction. However, there is no significant increase of the frequency of circumlocution in the post-test. This finding is consistent with Dörnyei's (1995) posttraining results which showed no significant improvement of the quantity of circumlocution. It seems that strategy instruction may not be effective to improve the use of circumlocution for EFL learners.

Before the strategy training, participants used the strategy "nonverbal signals" more frequently than most other strategies. This finding supports Russell and Loschky's (1998) which found the Japanese college students seemed to avoid a perceived weakness in EFL competence, whenever possible, depending on other perceived non-linguistic strengths. However, after receiving the strategy instruction, participants in the study seldom used nonverbal signals and instead adopted those L2-based strategies more often, such as "appeal for assistance" and "circumlocution". The

frequency change from nonverbal signals to L2-based strategies may as well support the effect of CS instruction in EFL classrooms.

6. Conclusion

The present research proposed that systematic strategy instruction result in the improvement of communication strategy use and communicative effectiveness for EFL learners. In spite of some doubts on the teachability of CSs, the study supports Dörnyei's (1995) argument that communication strategies provide L2 learners with a sense of security by allowing them room to maneuver in times of difficulty. Teaching CSs may empower the learners to participate in L2 communication by helping them not to give up in the conversation (Faucette, 2001). The current study is expected to shed some light on the controversial issue of teaching CSs and provide pedagogical implications on how to implement CS training in EFL classrooms.

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