The effect of teaching pragmatics explicitly VS. Implicitly on language learning and teaching performance

Efecto de enseñar pragmática explícitamente VS. Implícitamente en el aprendizaje de idiomas y el desempeño docente

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the influence of direct instruction on Iranian EFL learners' development of pragmatic competence "complimenting and complimenting response". Since the routine language learning process may take a long time, and because the influence of teaching in pragmatics and speech acts cannot be ignored or overlooked, it also aimed to explore whether explicit or implicit instructions can ever accelerate the development of pragmatic competence and speech acts or not. The role of EFL learners' context is also going to be studied seriously. It is said that students form their structures more often based on what they frequently say in their L1. In other words, context, culture, etiquettes and the rules of polite behaviors may all intervene or interfere. This study discusses the major factors, such as those mentioned above, that prevent a typical EFL learner from making proper compliments and compliment responses. All these will help us identify the impact of explicit and implicit instructions on students' pragmatic competence development.

Keywords: EFL learners', explicit and implicit instructions, teaching performance, communication.

RESUMEN

Este estudio tuvo como objetivo investigar la influencia de la instrucción directa en el desarrollo de la competencia pragmática por parte de los estudiantes de EFL iraníes "cumplido y respuesta complementaria" (Bergqvist, 2009). Dado que el proceso de aprendizaje de idiomas de rutina puede llevar mucho tiempo, y debido a que la influencia de la enseñanza en la pragmática y los actos de habla no pueden ser ignorados o pasados por alto, también tuvo como objetivo explorar si las instrucciones explícitas o implícitas pueden acelerar el desarrollo de la competencia pragmática y los actos de habla o no. El papel del contexto de los alumnos EFL también se estudiará seriamente. Se dice que los estudiantes forman sus estructuras con mayor frecuencia en función de lo que dicen con frecuencia en su L1. En otras palabras, el contexto, la cultura, la etiqueta y las reglas de las conductas educadas pueden intervenir o interferir. Este estudio discute los principales factores, como los mencionados anteriormente, que impiden que un alumno EFL típico haga cumplidos y respuestas de cumplidos adecuados. Todo esto nos ayudará a identificar el impacto de las instrucciones explícitas e implícitas en el desarrollo de la competencia pragmática de los estudiantes.

Palabras clave: aprendices de inglés como lengua extranjera, instrucciones explícitas e implícitas, desempeño docente, comunicación.

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1- INTRODUCTION

One of the challenges in language instruction is teaching the appropriate use of language. Previous studies indicated that even learners with high linguistic proficiency might fail to convey the appropriate message because of the pragmatic information deficiency (Kasper &. Rose, 2002). It means that an individual with advanced grammatical development does not necessarily have corresponding levels of pragmatic development (Rose, 2001). Furthermore, studies addressing the realization of speech acts by second- or foreign-language learners (Rose, 2001; Sadeghi, 2012; Sharifian, 2005) have found that even advanced language learners often face difficulties in comprehending a speaker's intention and conveying the appropriate politeness values in communicative contexts. This could be due to language learners' partial knowledge or a total unawareness of pragmatic competence. There is a general agreement that pragmatic knowledge in the second language can be acquired through universal pragmatic knowledge, and that some aspects from the learner's first language can be transferred to the second (Rose, 2001) presented a model of pragmatics acquisition that includes her claim that the process of acquiring pragmatics competence requires two separate components: acquiring knowledge and acquiring control over attention to this knowledge, which allows the speaker to use the language automatically. According to Bialystok, the second component is crucial for adult second-language learners, who often produce pragmatically inappropriate second language utterances not because they lack pragmatic knowledge, but because they cannot access this knowledge when needed in real-world contexts. Studies have found that when pragmatics is not offered, opportunities for developing pragmatic competence are quite limited (Sadeghi, 2012). Therefore, those studying English for many years may still find it difficult to use language appropriately in communicative contexts. The main reason for this inability to use language appropriately is lack of interaction outside EFL contexts. Several studies have covered compliments and compliment responses. These studies mainly discuss compliments and compliment responses across cultures and genders. They also cover different patterns of compliment responses. But there are few studies covering the effects of deductive and inductive instructions on the acquisition of compliments and compliment responses. This study seeks to understand how two forms explicit and implicit instructions improve the learners' pragmatic competence in order to produce appropriate speech act "complimenting and complimenting response" in their daily conversations. Previous compliment studies mainly focused on the varieties of compliments and compliment responses in different cultures, among different genders, and the acquisition of compliments and compliment responses among ESL and EFL learners. Not many studies on the effects of explicit and implicit instructions on the acquisition of compliments and compliment responses, which are highly connected to the culture of English speaking contexts, have been done, especially in Iranian context (Yousefvand, 2012). This study gives further relevance to the importance of the understanding of speech acts across cultures and the fact that the understanding or lack thereof can hinder or strengthen the communication exchanges between cultures. This study could be especially relevant for teachers of foreign or second languages as it further supports the idea that language, particularly in speech acts, is laden with culture. Speech acts include real-life interactions and require not only knowledge of the language but also appropriate use of that language within a given culture. This may highlight the significance of the study.

2- METHODOLOGY

This section investigates the effectiveness of explicit and implicit instruction on the development of students' pragmatic competence of "Compliments and Compliment Responses", the geographical area where the study was conducted, the research design, the population and participants, and the instrument used to collect the data, including methods implemented to maintain validity and reliability of the instrument are described.

2-1. Participants

Three different groups of participants participated in this study. Participants, totally 57 EFL learners who were learning English at Jihad Daneshgahi of Kermanshah, were chosen from intermediate level (Top Notch English Book series, Top Notch 3B). The underlying philosophy for this similarity in level was to determine how equal they were in terms of proficiency, though they were all at the same level of learning process. It is necessary to say that the subjects were not selected randomly due to severe institutional constraints; rather, they were from three intermediate classes, each of which was planned to participate quite differently.

The first group of participants was the control group, which received no explicit and implicit instruction on pragmatics but had instructor-led lessons from the textbook (Top Notch); the second group was the experimental explicit instruction group, which learned pragmatics in a face-to-face classroom setting with explicit instruction on pragmatics from the instructor; and the third group was the experimental implicit instruction group which learned pragmatics in face to face classroom setting with implicit instruction on pragmatics.

2-2. Setting

The chosen groups, as mentioned earlier, were from Jihad Daneshgahi of Kermanshah. On the way to join the private sector, Jihad Daneshgahi is a co-educational language school in the western part of Iran. This paved the way and made it easier for the researcher to have both genders among participants. The textbook in Jihad was Top Notch which came in 12 series, ranging from Fundamental A for beginners to Summit 2B for advanced language learners participants of the study were selected from three classes of Top Notch 3A and 3B which have been designed for intermediate language learners. At the time, students attended the classes two days a week, 2 hours a session. The researcher selected these three groups at different times in order for her to be able to observe all classes.

Table 1: Participants and groups' information

In this research the DCT pretest and posttest, used to measure participants' pragmatic competence, were the same. The objective was to measure students' pragmatics competence with or without explicit instruction. Contextual variables such as relative social status, level of acquaintance (close, somewhat close, or distant), level of social distance, gender, and the intensity of the act (magnitude of imposition) were controlled for each situation.

2-3.Research Design and Procedures

This research adopted an experimental, pretest/posttest design (pretest, teaching, and posttest). Open-ended discourse completion tests (DCT) were used to collect the primary data in the pretest and posttest sessions. The treatment study lasted for three weeks. Participants in the control group did not receive any instruction on pragmatics. Participants in the experimental explicit instruction group received explicit instruction on pragmatics from their instructor. The instructor made them aware of what they were going to learn and also of how they can use the structures (figure 1). The participants in the experimental implicit instruction group received implicit instruction on pragmatics. That is to say, the instructor applied inductive method in teaching pragmatic competence and speech act so that language learners would achieve a general structure and rule for making statements in this regard themselves. In this regard the teacher used some story books, novels, tv series and when it came to teaching of the compliments the teacher did not try to give direct instructions, that is to say through the context and the examples, the students learned that when hearing a specific utterance, they would respond in that particular way, in other words the teacher did not give any obvious instructions on the patterns rather by giving examples of the situation, she put the students in that context and they learned the structures through practicing and using them in a concrete speech situation.

Figure 1. Research Design

3-   RESULTS

The data analysis scheme was adopted from Zhang's study for compliment response was used. He divided the informants' response to the situation into three types: Compliment, on compliment and Opt Out. Non-compliment refers to responses that cannot be regarded as compliments, be it either mere expression of thanks, or bound semantic formula occurring on their own, or replies that do not carry any positive meanings. Opt out refers to the cases where the informants indicate that "I would not say anything" when a compliment is expected in that situation. This means that the learner has no idea on how to give a compliment.

3-1. Answer to the Research Question 1

The study aimed to answer two questions on the effectiveness of implicit and/or explicit instruction for teaching speech acts of complimenting and CRs. The first research question was on the effectiveness of explicit instruction:

5- Does *explicit instruction* in teaching speech acts "compliment and complimenting response" affect EFL learners' pragmatic competence?

The analysis of our pretest showed that language learners may not be able to use speech acts properly at the right time and right place, but they learn, over time, how to compliment and respond to compliments properly.

The first research question focused on the effectiveness of explicit instruction and its advantages on teaching pragmatic competence. Prior to the treatment, 16.20% of the participants responded correctly deployed proper strategies. In other words, they used the schematic knowledge they already learned during the process. But this is not reliable because I was not sure whether they really knew the structure and the situations perfectly and they would reuse them later on for posttest or they applied the rules unconsciously which would be forgotten sooner or later.

The results collected from our posttest revealed that instruction, whether explicit or implicit, is effective and internalizes what language learners need to remember and use in the target context. Comparing the gathered data from both pre and posttests, it indicated that explicit instruction really works because it enhances conscious learning which is really necessary in a non-English speaking context. It was the explicit instruction group that deployed almost all strategies in both parts of the questionnaire. The total percentage of this group was 86.19% which was satisfactory enough.

3-2. Answer to research question 2

The second research question aimed to analyze the extent to which implicit instruction is effective in terms of the speech act of Cs and CRs. The question which arose is:

1- Does implicit approach in teaching speech acts "compliment and complimenting response" affect EFL learners' pragmatic competence?

The shift from explicit to implicit instruction was not an easy task to be performed. Language learners are not directly exposed to speech acts structures; rather, they only use examples and then they have to generalize the structure to other situations. They have the examples and model conversations in their textbooks, and then they need to produce general principles. This method which is common in implicit instructions is called inductive teaching.

First of all, we need to compare the retrieved data from posttests for this group with control group. All participants in control group used just three strategies in both parts of the questionnaire. In other words, 79% were able to use three strategies and the other 21% had irrelevant Cs or CRs. This is while 83% of language learners in implicit instruction group managed to use 8 strategies. This showed that instruction, regardless of the type, is helpful.

A question that arises here is which instructional type works better in teaching speech act of Cs and CRs. As I started the treatment by teaching speech acts to two groups of participants, and then I finished the data collection procedure by a posttest, a divergence in responding became notable between control group which received no instruction and the other two groups which received explicit or implicit instructions. They both improved their responses remarkably while the responding type of control group did not change.

The findings are in line with the literature on this topic since all those studies (Sharifian, 2005; Wolfson, 1983). that

examined whether the selected pragmatic features were teachable found the nearly same result on instructed students with uninstructed ones which reported an advantage for the instructed learners.

To sum up, not only did the study indicate the effectiveness of both types of instructions, but also it statistically showed that instruction has positive influence on learners' learning speech act of Cs and CRs. Learners in control group performed poorly since they did not received any instructions; therefore, their basic knowledge of speech acts, especially those of Cs and CRs, was not really helpful. This means conscious learning is a part of implicit or explicit instruction which informs students of what they are learning. If they lack these instructional types, it does not mean they do not learn English as good or appropriate as the other two groups. They learn during the learning process which may take a long time. It seems instruction speeds up the process by consciousness raising and feedback on accuracy.

4-   DISCUSSION

The first research question which deals with effectiveness of explicit instruction on language learners' pragmatic competence, and in this study that of compliments and compliment responses, was investigated thoroughly by a pretest and posttest. The participants were asked to answer a DCT which included 12 items. Each item depicted a situation, and EFL learners were going to give or respond compliments based on the given situations. Then the answers were gathered, tabulated, and analyzed. The researcher did the same for the second research question. This research question wanted to find out the effectiveness of implicit instruction on language learners' pragmatic competence, and in this study that of compliments and compliment responses. The data for both research questions was collected by a pretest and posttest. The pretest aimed to measure participants' knowledge of compliments and compliment responses. EFL learners were divided into three groups of control, explicit instruction, and implicit instruction groups. They did not receive any treatment, i.e. instruction. Then, they were given the DCT and were asked to consider the situations provided by each item and give or respond compliments for each one.

4-1. Analyzing Pretest for Both Research Questions

By analyzing the collected data from the pretests, the following results were driven:

a) The statistics gathered from the pretest showed that the participants were not apparently proficient enough in complimenting and making different CRs according to the immediate situations.

b) For the complimenting strategies, an average of 16.20% was able to answer the situations provided by the researcher. This could be due to their schematic knowledge of pragmatics gained through months of learning English.

c) 18.72% was the average driven from compliment response strategies. This revealed that language learners were not most aware of the pragmatic knowledge and the many ways one can give or respond to compliments.

The pretest results were carefully analyzed and they revealed that language learners are not that proficient to make native-like Cs and CRs in different levels and situations. We expected to achieve the same results for all groups in pretest since they were at the same level of learning. (Soleimani,& Esfahani, 2018).

But the retrieved results revealed the other thing. In other words, language learners did not score the same perhaps because they were not at the same level of proficiency in spite of the fact that the institute had grouped them under the same level, and it showed that they were not fully familiar with speech acts and various ways of complimenting. The most common way for language learners to use when giving and responding the compliments was expressions like "It is very nice" and "Thank you" which they mistakenly thought they could be used in all other situations.

4-2. Analyzing the Posttest for Both Research Questions

Explicit instruction group and implicit instruction group received their own treatments. The researcher instructed the first group explicitly and the second group implicitly, and then he gave the posttest. To measure the effectiveness of instructions, the control group did not receive any treatment but took the posttest. The results were then compared and analyzed. The following results for the posttest were achieved:

a) 83.60% of the participants in control group, which is an average percentage of both parts of the questionnaire, used only 3 to 5 strategies out of 11. Clearly, they were not familiar with complimenting and compliment responding strategies.

b) On the other hand, 79.93% of participants in explicit instruction group could use at least 9 strategies out of 11 strategies provided for both parts of the questionnaire. This showed that explicit instruction was effective in teaching Cs and CRs.

c) Finally, 77.71% in implicit instruction group was able to use at least 7 strategies out of 11 in giving compliments or responding them. This was again satisfactory in that teaching, no matter of what kind, helps learners learn things which are not clearly stated in textbooks.

Therefore, I achieved the expected answers for the effectiveness of instruction on learning Cs and CRs: Instruction, no matter of what kind, will help learners learn Cs and CRs and use them in different situations and in different ways.

5-   CONCLUSION

In this paper the collected data were first grouped and then analyzed carefully. Two research questions were to be answered based on our findings during the data collection procedures. This study generally aimed to figure out the extent to which implicit and/or explicit instructions are effective in teaching speech act of Cs and CRs. The applied

instrument for collecting the needed data included two DCT tests which were used once before the main process of teaching and then after the instruction. Three groups participated in this study, which were labeled control, explicit, and implicit instruction groups. The analysis of collected data indicated that instruction, no matter explicit or implicit, affects learning speech acts positively. Another point which was concluded is that pragmatic competence of Cs and CRs is not internalized without being exposed to the proper instruction and it takes a long time to be learned. Complimenting and responding to compliments strategies are definitely different and classified based on their structures and students' levels. And it seems instruction speeds up the process by consciousness raising and feedback on accuracy. We wanted to analyze the rate in which they learn pragmatics, however. The study revealed that they do learn better if they receive instruction, and language learners may become familiar with various strategies of Cs and CRs. And finally, the findings highlighted the influential factors in learning and giving corresponding to proper compliments. The first factor was gaining knowledge of the culture and netiquettes of the target language because they definitely help us give or respond to compliments in different situations. And the second one is the level of directness which, in turn, refers to and is related to cultural literacy. This also refers to students' grammatical knowledge and pragmatic competence that is acquired through instruction and practice.

5-1. Suggestions for Further Research

One pretest and one posttest was used to measure and rate students' proficiency in terms of pragmatic competence of Cs and CRs. What are some other reliable and valid ways for measuring and rating proficiency in this regard? It is possible to conduct a research covering the ways of measuring students' pragmatic competence.

In this study, the author aimed to investigate intermediate language learners' proficiency in terms pragmatic competence of Cs and CRs. Further studies can be done in this area considering Advanced EFL learners' pragmatic competence.

The researcher started and finalized the study in a context which owns completely different etiquettes and rules of polite behavior. It is crucial that further studies be conducted to investigate EFL learners' pragmatic competence in a different context yet similar to that of target language.

This study focused on immediate effects of implicit and explicit instructions, future studies can concentrate on long term influence of the instruction by administrating delayed posttest.

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