

The Effect of Explicit Feedback on the Use of Language Learning Strategies: The Role of Instruction

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Abstract

The present study investigates the effects of strategy instruction and explicit feedback on the Iranian learners' use of language learning strategies. 40 participants took part in the present study. The learners in the experimental group (n=20) were provided with explicit assessment of their strategies while the learners in the control group (n=20) did not receive any feedback from the teacher. The participants consisted of both male and female learners to investigate the effect of gender on strategy use and the provision of explicit feedback. The results showed that learners employed the strategies more frequently when provided with explicit feedback. Results showed that no statistically significant differences were found to exist between gender and the effectiveness of the provision of explicit feedback. The results imply that it is important for instructors to enhance the strategic awareness of both genders, because it may lead to more active engagement in language learning process.

Key Words: language learning strategies, strategy instruction, explicit feedback, gender.

1. Introduction

Although there has been a growing interest in the area of language learning strategies, there is a limited amount of research on the effectiveness of explicit feedback to the learners' performance when using strategies. Strategies are developed more accurately and

appropriately if explicit instruction about their application can be provided. Task-related skill may be continually refined with explicit feedback and assessment of the learners' performance until it becomes almost automatic, requiring little in the way of conscious thought.

With respect to the efficiency of strategy training, teachers are given the responsibility to present the strategies that are more eminent and helpful to the students in performing different kinds of language skills. However, the major question to be addressed is to what degree this attention toward the language should be explicit. This study has focused on the effects of feedback which was provided explicitly in order to investigate the opportunities of learners to promote and internalize their strategies.

It is evident that the provision of learner opportunities to use the strategies is only possible in those classroom contexts that special importance is given to the role of communication and interaction either among teacher-learner or learner-learner. This type of classroom implies a kind of learner-centered situation where learners are given opportunities to take part in discussions. Therefore, in these kinds of classrooms student assessment plays a central and important role in teaching and learning. Teachers devote a large part of their preparation time to creating instruments and observation procedures in order to evaluate their learners' performance and attainment over a period of time. The complicated nature of classroom assessment, through which inferences are made about the cognitive, metacognitive, affective and social strategies of learners, constitutes a central and important role in teaching and learning. Thus, the task of the teacher who shares the same burden of responsibility to the process of learning is to determine the appropriate type of assessment of her learners' strategies to help in the better formation of strategies.

2. Review of the Literature

A number of studies were carried out to indicate the role of feedback in learner productions and outputs after the teacher correction of learners' non-target-like utterances (e.g., Dornyei, 1995; Ehrman, Leaver, & Oxford, 2003; Mcaro, 2006), but there are only a limited number of studies carried out to investigate the effect of feedback on learners' strategy use (Hsiao & Oxford, 2002; Ozmen, 2009). However, many studies have investigated the effects of instruction on how to use strategies and how to compensate for breakdowns during a particular activity (Knight, Padron & Waxman, 1985; Holunga, 1994; Nam & Oxford, 1998). The assumption is that learners can be taught to use strategies more effectively and provided

with the groundwork and foundation of the importance of feedback in strategy instruction. This importance placed on the need to help learners use the strategies more effectively has resulted in several arguments about the teachability of strategies among linguists which have led to controversial perspectives of it. Ehrman, Leaver and Oxford (2003) stated that because appropriate learning strategies make a difference to learning success many have attempted to design and execute strategy training programs, especially for inexperienced learners. Dörnyei (1995), for instance, carried out a study on the teachability of communication strategies in which he had a trenchant look at the teachability of strategies specially communication strategies and he saw the main reason for these controversial answers as the simplicity of the question of whether communication strategies in general are teachable or not.

In the study conducted by Dörnyei (1995), there was a strategy training course during which the effects of the treatment using pre- and posttests were assessed and the results with those obtained from control groups—one of them received no-treatment and the other received conversational training- were compared. The strategies under investigation were: (a) topic avoidance and replacement, (b) circumlocution, and (c) using fillers and hesitation devices. The results showed that in the treatment group there was an improvement in the quality of the definitions after the training, whereas in both types of control group the quality score decreases. Dörnyei concluded that the two types of control group showed a different pattern: There was no significant change in the no-treatment group, but students in the conversational training group improved in their speech rate significantly after the training.

Oxford (2002, pp. 125-132) argued for some of the problems in the research methodology that have obscured the findings of research on strategy instruction such as “1) too short a period for strategy training, 2) disproportionate ease or difficulty of the training task, 3) lack of integration of the training into normal language classwork and perceived irrelevance of training, and 4) inadequate pertaining assessment of learners’ initial strategy use and need”.

Nunan (2002, pp.133-143) carried out an action research in the classroom context to see the ways of making the learners more active participants in their language learning. Learners were told to monitor and report on their strategy use and personal goals for strategy development. The results of the strategy training by Nunan showed that “learners began to see language less an object to be studied than as a tool to be used, began to reflect on how they learned as much as what they learned, seemed to be more prepared to speak to stranger, started to explore causes of cross-cultural communicative breakdowns, developed a more accurate understanding of their difficulties, started to ask for strategies for getting additional

practice, and began to see the value of English courses for their other subjects. Results also indicated that strategy training not only promoted a greater sensitivity to the opportunities for communicating outside of the classroom, and, indeed, the university, but it also seemed to encourage learners actively to seek out such opportunities”.

Hsiao and Oxford (2002) believed in the teachability of strategies and argued that strategy training would be more effective if students carry out the tasks which require them to apply strategies explicitly.

One of the very recent studies that has addressed strategy instruction in writing to better help the learners write expository texts in the target language is that of Ozmen (2009). Ozmen has introduced a model which she has designed to help learners especially disabled learners to better write in the target language and to make use of their cognitive and metacognitive strategies. The proposed model by Ozmen is called “Modified Cognitive Strategy Instruction in Writing” (CSIW) and is the model which has been developed from two models of cognitive strategy instruction in writing (CSIW) and self-regulated strategy development (SRSD). According to the designer of the model, Modified CSIW removes many of the difficulties encountered by learners through informing students not only about the writing process but also the role of text-structure knowledge in planning, drafting, and revising their texts.

There have been numerous studies by researchers which have drawn on the effect of group work, a more learner-centered, and cooperative learning for the strategy instruction purposes (Naughton, 2006; Bejarano, Levine, Olshtain and Steiner, 1997; Lam, 2009; Dörnyei and Malderez, 1997). Dörnyei and Malderez (1997) have also emphasized the role of group dynamics in understanding of the complicated nature of the classroom. The learner group, according to Dörnyei and Malderez (1997), is a powerful entity whose characteristics have a major impact on the productivity of learning. Oxford, Cho, Leung and Kim (2004) found the positive effects of task-based strategy instruction on language learning.

Despite the successful appearance of the results of strategy training programs, some of linguists have argued for the value of these programs. In his recent paper, Swan (2008) has questioned the work done in classroom to instruct reading strategies and has called it simply a waste of time. He has pinpointed that the assumption lying behind most of the classroom practices advocating strategy instruction is that learners need to learn something else in addition to vocabulary and grammar in the comprehension of reading materials. The comprehension difficulties of learners in reading materials, which he does not relate to an unfamiliar language, are simply because of “temporary processing overload” (p. 267). Swan

has argued that if strategies are limited to those behaviors that are applied consciously by the learners, then strategies which are automatic need to be excluded in the pedagogic practice. Also some of the strategies which are characterized to be employed unconsciously (e.g. inferencing) then cannot be taught in classroom settings. For pedagogic purposes, Swan suggested, teachers need to involve problem-oriented strategies in their classroom context which require conscious attention and which are not employed automatically with all learners without teaching (p. 265).

These controversial findings and opinions about the effectiveness of raising learners' attention to their strategy use have informed the groundwork of this study to examine this issue with the Iranian learners.

2.1. Research Questions

In line with the different researches done in this area and in order to understand whether the explicit feedback can affect the performance of the Iranian EFL learners, the following research questions were proposed:

1. How effective is the explicit feedback in language classroom context in the promotion of learners' strategy use?
2. Is there any difference between learners' gender and the effectiveness of the provision of explicit feedback on strategy use?

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Two classes of undergraduate students in the University of Tehran acted as participants. Each class had 20 students (10 male, 10 female). One group of 20 Ss was allocated to the feedback condition and the other group received the control condition with no feedback. The test of TOEFL was used to assess learners' proficiency level and it was found that learners were of the similar level of proficiency (advanced). Since one of the objectives of the study was to investigate the effect of gender on the effectiveness of explicit provision of feedback, the class consisted of both female and male learners.

3.2. Instrumentation

The first instrument in this study was the TOEFL CBT success (2004) test. The test consisted of 5 passages each followed by 10 questions. The test consisted of the types of questions that were taught and practiced in the classroom.

The other instrument which was used for eliciting the learners' strategy use was the version seven of Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). This version of SILL (1989) is a questionnaire developed to assess the frequency of strategy use by non-native speakers (ESL/EFL, 50 items) which consists of these sub-scales (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995): memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective, social strategies. The questionnaire was translated to the native language of learners, i.e. Persian, to prevent the difficulties rising from the understanding of the language of the questionnaire.

3.3. Treatment

The participants of both the control and experimental group followed 40 hours of instruction. They took part in classes for two hours in each session as part of a total 20 sessions of learning. The experimental group participants received 10 hours of strategy instruction and if the students could not answer the reading questions, they were explicitly trained by the teacher. In other words, the teacher explained the strategy employment with a clear and understandable language. After the strategy instruction, students were assigned reading tasks and asked to answer the relevant comprehension questions. They were also required to verbalize the applied strategies in answering the questions in order to increase the level of awareness of appropriate strategy use.

The control group participants were given the same tasks and exercise but were not asked to verbalize the used strategies and were not given any explicit strategy instruction.

3.4. Procedure

The study was carried out in two sessions: each S was first presented with either the feedback or control condition. In the first session, the learners in the experimental group including both female and male learners were provided with explicit assessment of their strategies while in the second session the control group learners did not receive any feedback from the teacher. They were then asked to answer the questions in the TOEFL test and complete the strategy questionnaire by Oxford (1990) regarding their use of strategies during the task.

4. Results

The process of data analysis began with computing the descriptive statistics of the participants of control and experimental groups. As table 1 indicates, the results obtained from this procedure exhibit the difference. Regarding the standard deviation and mean score, the experimental group has a higher value compared with that of the control group.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics for EFL Reading Comprehension and Strategy Use Variables in Control and Experimental Groups*

		Strategies experimental	Strategies control
N	Valid	20	20
	Missing	0	0
Mean		20.1930	16.1200
Std. Deviation		1.85383	2.55500

The detailed statistics for the use of different strategies in the reading comprehension test indicates that the most frequently used strategy in the experimental group after the treatment is the cognitive strategy. The next frequently used strategy, according to the findings, is the metacognitive strategy. The results of the detailed use of strategies can be seen in table 2.

Table 2. *Descriptive Statistics for EFL Reading Comprehension and Strategies in the Experimental Group*

		cognitive	metacognitive	social	compensation	affective	memory
N	Valid	20	20	20	20	20	20
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		3.8115	3.6165	2.9000	3.3600	3.5400	3.0600
Std. Deviation		.84075	.72073	.81499	.72794	1.08405	.69842

The detailed statistics for the use of different strategies in the reading comprehension test for the control group indicates that the strategies have been used very sporadically in which the mean scores are close to each other. As table 3 shows, the most frequently used strategies in the control group were affective and compensation strategies. When we compare the results for both groups, it is evident that participants of the experimental group have used the

strategies much greater than the participants of the control group where there are only minute differences between the use of different strategies.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for EFL Reading Comprehension and Strategies in the Control Group

		cognitive	metacognitive	social	compensation	affective	memory
N	Valid	20	20	20	20	20	20
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		2.2000	2.4450	2.2250	3.1100	3.3850	2.7550
Std. Deviation		.91075	.84385	.77111	.91703	.57972	.76329

Table 4 below shows the results of T-test for the differences between the reading comprehension of experimental and control group participants.

Table 4. Independent Samples T-test for Experimental and Control Groups

	Levene's test for equality of variances		t-test for equality of means			95% confidence interval of the difference			
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.323	.401	-.197	38	.044	-.504	2.554	5.616	4.608
Equal variances not assumed	.572		-.198	38.88	.044	-.504	2.458	5.604	4.596

The results show that the significance level of Levene's test is $p=.401$, which means that the variances for the two groups (experimental and control) are the same. The results of t-test show that there is a significant difference in the use of strategies by the experimental and control group participants ($t_{(38)} = -0.197$, $p = 0.044$). This finding is supported by the result obtained from descriptive analysis according to which experimental group learners ($M= 20.19$, $SD= 1.85$) outperformed control group ($M= 16.12$, $SD= 2.55$) participants in reading comprehension strategy application.

To find the answer to the second question of the study, that is, the one dealing with the differences between the learners' gender and their scores on the measure of strategy use, an independent samples t-test was used. Table 5 presents the descriptive statistics for differences between males and females in terms of using strategies.

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics for Strategy Differences across Gender

	v1	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
strategies	male	20	3.6600	.59595	.13326
	female	20	3.6715	.85725	.19169

In order to achieve more reliable results, an independent samples t-test was used. Table 6 shows the results.

Table 6. Independent Samples t-test Results for Strategy Differences across Gender

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Std. Error Difference	lower	upper
strategies	Equal variances assumed	2.984	.092	-.049	38	.961	-.01150	.23346	-.48411	.46
	Equal variances not assumed			-.049	33.888	.961	-.01150	.23346	-.48600	.46

The results show that the significance level of Levene's test is $p=.092$, which means that the variances for the two groups (males and females) are the same. The results of t-test show that there is not a significant difference in the use of strategies by the male and female participants ($t_{(38)} = -0.049$, $p = 0.961$). Therefore, all the participants used the language learning strategies in the same way. This finding is supported by the result obtained from descriptive analysis.

The descriptive means show that there is not a difference between males and females in their use of strategies regarding the mean scores.

5. Discussion

This study had the purpose of examining the effect of teacher's explicit feedback on learners' strategy use and their improvement in the strategy usage. The means of two control and experimental groups were used to reach the results. The results suggest that teachers' explicit correction and assistance of learners' strategy use during a particular activity are linked with learners' overall achievement and effective use of strategies. In the present case, the more the teacher provided explicit feedback on learners' strategy use and instructed them, the more learners were motivated to use them effectively. The reason can be explained as because learners may not be aware of the strategies in how they can help them achieve success in the process of language learning, explicit instruction and feedback on how to use the strategies more effectively in an explicit format promoted their learning. Another finding of this study was concerned with the gender of language learners and their strategy use. The results indicated that there were no differences between male and female participants.

It is interesting to note that students discern other dimensions to teachers' behaviors in the provision of feedback and are necessarily the important because they may hinder or encourage the learners to use strategies. For example, in situations where the teacher provided the feedback with a negative attitude toward the learner, the learner was hindered in the process of learning. It is conceivable that a teacher could be perceived as well-intended, but still somewhat overbearing and this characteristic in itself would be sufficient to reduce intrinsic interest.

6. Conclusion

In this paper some aspects of strategy instruction and feedback have been discussed. Although students seem to rely on naturalistic processes in the acquisition of the target language, instruction and social processes also contribute. The results of this study indicated that language learning strategies can be used more effectively if students are taught how to use their strategies to learn English in order for them to be involved more actively and effectively in their own language learning. Therefore, it is critical for the teachers to help their students become self-directed and effective language learners by integrating language learning strategy instruction into regular language lessons

The findings offer further implications for the classroom: both naturalistic processes and the teacher instruction play a crucial role in language learning, and this role should be exploited to the learners' benefit. Also, foreign language learning involves more than the acquisition of the target language, as learners' develop cognitively, socially and linguistically at the same time.

The results of the t-test indicated that there were no statistically significant differences between gender and language learning strategies. The results imply that it is important for instructors to enhance the strategic awareness of both genders, because it may lead to more active engagement in language learning process.

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