

The Effect of Teaching Conversational Strategies on Developing Pragmatic Competence of Iraqi EFL University Students

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Abstract

This study aims at investigating the effect of teaching conversational strategies on enhancing students' pragmatic competence. Accordingly, forty first year students of English Department at College of Education were selected to be the sample of the study. This sample was distributed into an experimental group and a control one, each with twenty students. Instruction on using conversational strategies had been done on the experimental group only. The data which were collected through pre and posttests showed that the use of conversational strategies enhanced students' pragmatic competence. There were significant differences between the experimental and control group in their use of different conversational strategies after the treatment.

Keywords: Conversational strategies, pragmatic competence, EFL university learners.

1. Introduction

Conversational skills are essential for affecting and influencing communicators' interaction. To maintain conversational situations, communicators should have shared background. However, being able to communicate with others is an essential objective of learning a foreign language. To improve students' speaking abilities, they must regularly practice conversing with others (Nunan, 2001). Doing that requires not only mastering of grammar, comprehension and other kinds of abilities in the target language, but also involves knowing how to use language to interact.

Many students in EFL countries cannot communicate successfully and confidently to meet the needs of using English in their daily life (Chuanaisit & Prapphal, 2009; Kawale, 2011). Learners' Incompetence in communication may be related to their low proficiency in language, dearth of terminology toward conveying thoughts, timidity or dearth of trust, dearth of a milieu for applying and using English, or dearth of a number of essential plans to preserve a discussion (Thanh Ha, 2008).

To avoid and overcome communication breakdowns among interlocutors in holding conversations, they must ordinarily work together. In this regard, Pica, Young, & Doughty (1987, p.40) point out that "To engage in the kind of interaction believed to activate the acquisition process, classroom activities must be structured to provide a context whereby learners not only talk to their interlocutors, but negotiate meaning with them as well".

Accordingly, teachers of English language should deal with different strategies to make students improve their conversational abilities to be prepared for spontaneous communication. To be more specific, it is important, in classroom, to supply students with strategies that help them to communicate interactively and to eschew or overwhelm communication failure. These strategies are useful for learners who habitually encounter problems in conversations. Furthermore, using these strategies by learners equip them with a feeling of being secure in the language (Dörnyei and Thurrell ,1994).

Regarding the context of teaching strategies of conversation to students different ways might be followed such as tasks of picture dictation (Kebir, 1994), pair-taping (Washburn & Christianson, 1995), or telephone conversation role-plays (Ting & Lau, 2008).

This study investigates the use of conversational strategies by Iraqi EFL university students. It deals with identifying the communication methods used by those students in natural interactions. Additionally, relying on the data collected, the researchers want to examine to what extent these conversational strategies influence students in maintaining conversations and overcoming communication breakdowns and finally helping them to achieve their communicative goal. It is hoped that this study will encourage students to develop their speaking abilities by teaching them such strategies.

In this study , conversational strategies center on asking for clarification, message abandonment, topic avoidance, circumlocution, appeal for help, approximation, paraphrasing, word coinage, foreignizing, and repairing .The researchers intended to check how these strategies can effect learners' performance through teaching .

Research Hypothesis

The following null hypothesis was formulated:

Teaching conversational strategies through role- play activities does not significantly affect learners' pragmatic competence.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Pragmatic Competence

Barron, (2003, p. 10) defines pragmatic competence as “knowledge of the linguistic resources available in a given language for realizing particular illocutions, knowledge of the sequential aspects of speech acts and finally knowledge of the appropriate contextual use of the particular language’s linguistic resources.” .The notion of pragmatic competence can be defined as “a set of internalized rules of how to use language in socioculturally appropriate ways, taking into account the participants in a communicative interaction and features of the context within which the interaction takes place” (Celce-Murcia and Olshtain ,2000,p .20).

To use and understand language in certain situations, concerning pragmatic competence, various abilities are required by the interlocutors(the speaker and the listener) .With respect to speaker, different determinations are involved when using language for example, requesting, instructing or making change. In the same way, the listener should have the ability to process language and understand the actual meanings of the speaker, particularly when these meanings are not transmitted directly by forms. Hence, pragmatic competence involves knowledge of the system by which words are joined to each other to make a text (Bialystok 1993,p. 43).

2.2 Conversational Strategies

According to Dörnyei & Thurrell (1994,p.44), conversational strategies are “invaluable means of dealing with communication ‘trouble spots’, such as not knowing a particular word, or misunderstanding the other speaker”

Conversational strategies may be defined as the helpful ways by which speakers and listeners can keep the talk going on naturally and easily (Kehe &Kehe,2004). In the same line,Kehe & Dustin(2005,p.2) define them as skills that assist the interlocutors to keep a conversation continued to attain a desired termination. Finally, Nguyet & Mai (2012) confirm that conversational strategies are devices by which conversers can keep a conversation going on and finally their communicative aim can be achieved.

2.3 Types of Conversational Strategies

Tarone(1980, p.429) mentions different kinds of communication strategies.They mainly fall into five different categories. Each category involves various subcategories. They are distributed as:

1. Paraphrase

It comprises of the following:

a. Approximation: It is a strategy that enables the learner to use the language items of the target language that is not correct to be shared semantically by means of the required point to convince the interlocutor (e. g. "pipe" on behalf of "water pipe")

b. Word coinage: It means that the speaker forms or produces novice word to converse the needed terms (e. g. "airball" for "balloon")

c .Circumlocution: To this strategy the student is capable of giving a description of the features of a thing or an act rather than employing the suitable target language concept (for instance, “She is, uh, smoking something. I don't know what its name is. That's, uh, Persian, and we use in Turkey, a lot of")

2. Transfer

It consists of two components.

a. Literal translation: An item is interpreted by a learner for an item of the indigenous tongue (for example "He invites him to drink" for "They toast one another")

b. Language switch: the use of the indigenous vocabulary by a learner to be translated without trouble (e. g. "balon" for "balloon" or "tirtil" for "turtle")

3. Appeal for help

It stands for the interlocutor’s asking of the right item (e. g. "What is this?").

4. Mime

In this strategy, non-verbal strategies are employed by interlocutors to be situated by a semantic pattern (e. g. “clapping one's hands to illustrate applause”).

5. Avoidance

This is composed of two elements:

a. Message abandonment: It refers to the learner's starting to converse regarding an item; however, he is incapable to continue because of the lack of meaning structure.

b. Topic avoidance: It indicates that learners avoid items since the semantic characteristics cannot be recognized by them.

Other strategies type called "achievement strategies”. These strategies are named as so depending on the viewpoint related to the students’ language resources they use to communicate meaning, regardless of their speech is grammatically or socially correct. The list of such strategies involves

Simplification

Word coinage

Literal translation and foreignizing
Generalization
Paraphrase
Appeal for repair and confirmation
Establish foreign identity
Restarts and approximation
Code-switching and gesticulation

(Johnstone, 1989, p.71 as cited in Mali, 2007, p.48)

In the same line, another classification made by Dörnyei & Thurrell, (1994). To this classification, strategies are arranged depending on their importance into: “message adjustment or avoidance, paraphrase, approximation, appeal for help, asking for repetition, asking for clarification, interpretive summary, checking (for comprehension and confirmation), and use of fillers/hesitation devices”

Dörnyei (1995) set these strategies into twelve types:

1. Message abandonment: due to the language difficulties, the learner abandons the concept for example: learner’s saying “he took the wrong way in mm...”
2. Topic avoidance: By using this strategy, learners attempt to avoid speaking of hard terms or items in the target language since; for example, these terms either are not known by learners or forgotten.
3. Circumlocution: according to this the strategy, the target object or action is represented by learners through showing its characteristics. To put it in instance: “if a learner does not know the word *corkscrew*, he/she replaces it by saying ‘*the thing that you use to open the bottle*”.
4. Approximation: this refers to the use of the alternative lexical item of the target language which shares the closer meaning. For instance: “*ship* for *sail boat*; *pipe* for *water pipe*”
5. All-purpose words using: empty lexical item extended to context where specific words are missing. For example: “the overuse of the words *thing, stuff, make, do, what-do-you call-it, what-is-it*”.
6. Word coinage: generating non-existing L2 item relying on learner’s knowledge L2 rules. e.g.: “*vegetarianist* for *vegetarian*”
7. Use of nonlinguistic means: the meaning is conveyed by facial expression, mime, gesture, and sound imitation “For instance: a learner uses his/her hands and acts like flying to refer to *birds*”
8. Literal translation: a structure explained or translated by learners as of their L1 to L2. For instance: “*do not enter sign* for *no entry sign*.”
9. Foreignizing: means that L1 item are used by adjusting it to L2 phonologically. For example: “a learner does not know the word *tap*, he/she uses the L1 word, that is *kran* but with L2 pronunciation, so he/she says *kren*.”
10. Code switching: Learners’ L1 word is used by employing L2 articulation, such as: “if a learner does not know the word *baki*, he/she will say ‘*baki*’ with L2 pronunciation.”
11. Appeal for assistance: asking for support from interlocutor because of forgotten some concepts as in this instance: “a learner may ask his/her friend by saying ‘*What do you call...?*’”
12. Fillers usage : interlocutors are enabled to obtain time for thinking by using filler phrases such as “*well, as a matter of fact, now let me see., I think, you know, you see, um, mm, ah, sort of, OK, right, really*”.

2.4 Significance of Conversational Strategies

Dialogue is an important aspect of existence which enables inhabitants negotiate information and make and sustain social dealings. Yet, loads of EFL learners cannot originate

denotation of chatty systems or patterns. As a result, they encounter problems in maintaining their conversations sustainable (Walter, 2008). One of the effective ways to overwhelm troubles in maintaining conversations is to use conversational strategies. It is asserted by Dörnyei and Thurrell (1994) that using such strategies by conversers enable them to be well prepared to grip cases of obviously occurring conversations. In addition, conversational strategies promote learners' knowledge of both structure and meaning of the language. In brief, conversational strategies are of a great value since they can reinforce communication and competency (Walter, 2008).

Similarly, Brown (2006) considers conversational strategies, as elements of communication, more representing of what the speaker wants to say. It is by conversational strategies students' minds, ideas and thought can be expressed freely and spontaneously.

Moreover, Faucette (2001,p.6) confirms that the effective use of conversational strategies extends learners' contact which indicates that learners can get additional input, can keep on in the discussion, and expand their capability She adds that using appropriate strategies by learners assists them to reach their learning goals. Furthermore, conversational strategies encourage acquisition through the meaning negotiation that takes place between the interlocutors (Ellis, 1994). Seven ways of in which conversational strategies could assist language acquisition are recognized by Ellis (1994,p. 511 as cited in Kasper and Kellerman ,1997):

1. Aid to maintain the surge the flow of conversation and therefore enhance learner's exposure to input.
2. Activate mutual meaning which enhance acquisition
3. Raise learners' control in excess of their current linguistic structures
4. Allow learners to get admittance to novel linguistic resources once they integrate strategic resolutions into their interlanguage.
5. Replenish pauses in the learner's vocabulary through constructive feedback .
- 6 .Create pressed output
7. Enlarge general processing control.

Ahmadian(2012,p.1) asserts that through conversational strategies, Learners might get the access to words and grammatical structures and their reformulation can be done in an efficient, effective, and accurate way. Furthermore, such strategies can lead vocabulary acquisition or reinforcement. (ibid, P.64).

2.5 Activities of Role Play

The turn play means the manner of simulating the role of a different person, for example as a working out exercise or in language learning (Collins English Dictionary, 2020).

According to Neuendorf and O'Connell (2011, p.2182), turn-plays are "activities with a specific learning outcome designed to create a realistic learning experience for participants". Using role-plays also has the latent to ease the progress of extra inclusive learning experience in support of teacher education students in comparison with the more traditional cognitive focused approach.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

To carry out this study, a non-equivalent groups design with a pretest-posttest has been used. This design presents the selection of two groups along with assigning them to an experimental group and a control one. The two groups were pretested .The independent variable (conversational strategies) was administrated to the experimental group only. The

traditional method of teaching conversation was used to teach the control group. The post-test was administrated to both groups to measure the dependent variable (pragmatic competence). Scores of both groups in the post-test are then compared and if the scores of the experimental groups are found to be considerably different from those of the control one, the difference is ascribed to the independent variable (conversational strategies).

3.2. Participants

This study comprises 40 first year students of English Department at College of Education /University of Al-Qadisiya, Iraq for the academic year 2017-2018. The participants were selected randomly among 120 students based on their scores in Oxford Quick Placement Test (2003). Then, they were divided into two groups, each with 20 students, the experimental group (using the conversational strategies) and the control group (using the traditional method of teaching conversation). The two groups were equalized according to their pre-test to check their level in pragmatic competence before giving the treatment. The statistical results indicated in Table 1.

Table 1
The Pre-test Statistics for Control and Experimental Groups
Level in Pragmatic Competence

Variable	Control		Experimental		t-test	Sig.(2-tailed)	Levene's Test	Sig
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.				
Pragmatic Competence	13.500	3.035	13.450	2.819	0.054	0.957	0.114	0.738

3.3 Instrumentation

To collect the required data of this study, structured interviews and a test of nine questions was constructed by the researchers. The Test was used as pretest and posttest. SPSS were used for analyzing the data. Experts in English language and ELT reviewed the test for its suitability, level, accuracy and content validity. Alpha Cronbach was applied to measure the reliability of the test. It was (76) which means that the test is reliable. The learners discussed in pairs the subject matter with nine questions (see Appendix A).

3.4 Procedures

The treatment of the study started on 13th of November, 2017 and ended on 27th December, 2017. It lasted for six weeks. The researchers taught both groups. The participants in both groups studied the same conversational dialogues specified for first year university students. The steps were as follows:

1. Selecting a sample from first year university students and then assigning them randomly to two groups: the control and the experimental one.
2. Applying the test (the pretest) on both the experimental and control groups.
3. Selecting different conversational strategies, as referred to at the introduction part of this study, from different educational films and resources.
4. Arranging the lessons for both groups as two sessions per week.
5. Instructing and teaching students of the experimental group the strategies in question.
6. After the treatment period, the students of the two groups were post tested to find out the difference between them with respect to the independent variable (pragmatic competence).
7. Analyzing and interpreting the results.
8. Stating the conclusions.

With reference to point (3) above, the conversational strategies taught through the implementation of role- play activities in which the teachers (the researchers) assigned the steps as follows:

1. Dividing the students under experiment into groups (pair work).
2. Identifying the situations to be done by students.
3. Assigning students' roles.
4. Acting out the scenarios by students.
5. Recording students' performance.
6. Discuss strategy type involved in each situation.
7. Evaluating students' performance.

4. Results and Discussion

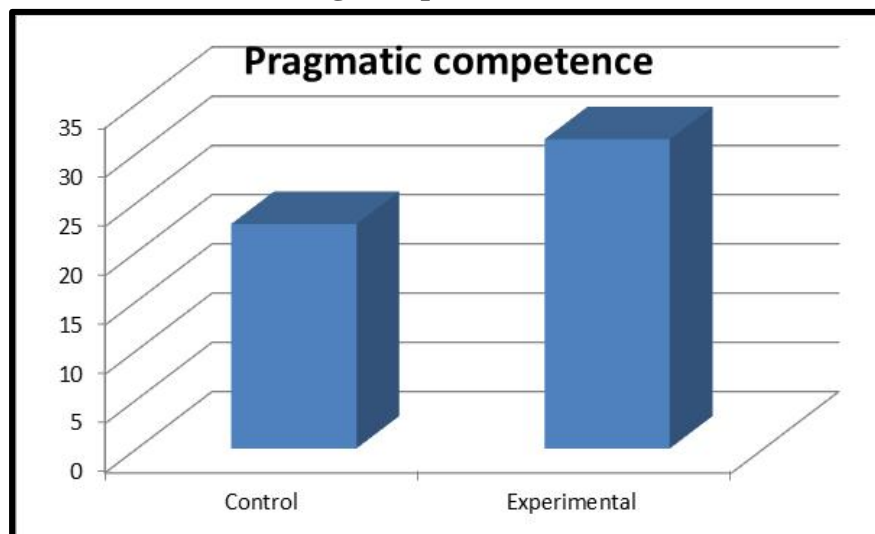
To examine the effect of study treatment, a posttest was applied on both groups. The participants' performance in pragmatic competence was assessed in posttest .Posttest results were compared with that of the pre-test through analysis of t-test. Table 2 shows the results for this analysis:

Table 2
The Post-test Statistics for Control and Experimental Groups
Level in Pragmatic Competence

Variable	No. of students		No. of students		T-Value		Sig.(2-tailed)	d.f
	20		20		Computed	Tabulated		
	Control		Experimental					
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.				
Pragmatic Competence	22.800	3.578	31.400	3.676	7.497	2.024	0.000	38

Table (2) shows that the experimental group mean score is (31.400) , and that of the control group is (22.800) .The computed value (7.497) is higher than the tabulated value (2.024) at significance level of (0.000) and the degree of freedom is 38. The results affirm that a statistically significant difference is gained between the performance of the two groups in pragmatic competence of the posttest in favour for the experimental group (see Graphic 1).

Graphic 1
The Post-Test Mean of the Experimental and Control Groups
Reading Comprehension Performance



This difference indicates that the participants in experimental group outperformed those in control group revealing the effect of conversational strategies. Thus, the null hypothesis stating that “Teaching conversational strategies through role- play activities does not significantly affect learners’ pragmatic competence.” is rejected. In other words, applying conversational strategies has more significant effect on EFL learners’ pragmatic competence than that of conventional method.

The results of the posttest reveal that the students' performance of the experimental group is higher than that of the control group students. This means that teaching conversational strategies through role play activities and structured interviews could generally lead to progress the pragmatic competence of students. This result might be expected since training conversational strategies may draw students’ attention and knowledge of these strategies. This way of teaching helped learners evade and overcome communication breakdowns in holding conversations and became self-assured, interactive and skillful which in turn improved their communication positively. Accordingly, the repeated application of conversational strategies could improve the students’ pragmatic performance as they can recognize at what time and how to use these strategies in a proper way.

Conclusions

According to the results obtained, it can be concluded that conversational strategies have an effectual role in developing the learners’ pragmatic competence involved in the experiment. Post-test results give clear indications of the learners’ level of pragmatic competence, in favour of the experimental group to which the proposed conversational strategies were applied. This denotes that instruction of such strategies make interaction easy and sustain fluency in conversations. To put it in other words, these strategies are most positive for helping learners get ready for strange or difficult situations.

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Appendix (A)
Pre-Test and Post-Test
(Constructed by Researchers)

1. Do buildings in a city differ from that in countryside? How?
2. What means of transportation do people often use in a city and in countryside?
3. Is it healthier to live in a city or in countryside? How?
4. How are the job opportunities in a city? Are they different from that in countryside?
5. Are people helpful in a city? What about those in countryside?
6. What kinds of conveniences are there in a city? What about those in countryside?
7. What are health care services in a city? What about that in countryside?
8. How is the lifestyle in a city? Is it different from the life in countryside?
9. What are the means of entertainment in a city? What about that in countryside?