In the Name of God

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Department of English Language

M.A. Thesis

The Effect of Explicit Strategy Instruction and Task Type on L2 Oral Production of Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners: Focusing on Accuracy, Fluency and Complexity

Supervisor:
Dr. Mansoor Tavakoli

Advisor:
Dr. Hossein Vahid Dastjerdi

By:
Masood Esteki

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استاد راهنما:

دکتر منصور توکلی

استاد مشاور:

دکتر حسین وحید دستجردی

پژوهشگر:

مسعود استکی

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وزارت علوم، تحقیقات و فناوری
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Abstract

Communicative strategies have attracted the attention of many researchers during the last few decades. Research on communicative strategies has mainly focused on the effect of teaching these strategies in second language classrooms. There is still a question under investigation as to whether communicative strategies have fulfilled the promise their proponents have claimed. Tasks have also proved to be an inextricable issue in second language teaching. With an aim to determine the effects of strategy instruction and task type on second-language oral production, this paper examined the effects of explicit strategy instruction on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' oral production with regard to complexity, accuracy, and fluency. Intermediate EFL learners at Isfahan language schools formed the population of this study. After administering an OPT and an interview, 40 homogenous learners remained for the main study. These learners were randomly assigned to two groups. The experimental group received 8 lessons on strategies whereas the control group did not. In each group, 10 students performed an instruction task and 10 students performed a narration task. The results of two series of T-tests and a two-way ANOVA revealed that learners' oral performance improved in complexity, accuracy, and fluency, and that task type was significantly effective on complexity and accuracy, yet only marginally important in fluency. The results further showed that there was no interaction between explicit strategy instruction and task type. The findings of this study support the introduction and reinforcement of communicative strategies and have pedagogical implications for the use of tasks in EFL classrooms.

Keywords: accuracy; complexity; fluency; communicative strategy; task

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Chapter One
Introduction

1.1. Background to the Study

During the past two decades, the concept of communicative competence has become an icon in the area of foreign language teaching. The notion of communicative competence came into existence when Dell Hymes (1972) called for the study of language in context. Hymes challenged Chomsky's (1965) view of a theory of forms, which deals with language knowledge, including phonological, morphological, syntactic, and lexical rules. For Hymes, to speak of language as an entity outside the context of its use is meaningless. Indeed, he believes that communicative competence is the knowledge of not only if something is formally possible in a language, but also the knowledge of whether it is feasible,

appropriate, or done in a particular speech community. Communicative competence, as Richards and Schmidt (2002) also mention, includes grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. The above-mentioned aspects of competence have each attracted attention in copious lines of research; however, strategic competence, which refers to knowledge of communication strategies that can compensate for weakness in other areas, constitutes the general focus of this research.

Strategic competence, according to Canale and Swain (1980, p. 30), is defined as "verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be implemented to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient competence. Communication strategies, then, are expected to help tackle problems in performing and understanding communicative acts. These problems may stem from gaps in linguistic or pragmatic knowledge or from low accessibility of such knowledge (Faerch & Kasper, 1986).

Learners are constantly bombarded with an overwhelming number of thoughts they would like to express. Dressing the thoughts into words obviously calls for a good command of L2, which learners may not have. Even in case of proficient language learners, there may be times at which they do not have access to the required lexical or grammatical patterns due to memory failure or any other reasons.

The prime concern, then, for the learners and consequently for the language researchers is to investigate possible ways to circumvent this problem. As mentioned above, breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient competence should be compensated for by the use of communication strategies when called into action. Faerch and Kasper (1986) state that "there exists an inevitable gap between what learners are taught and what they need in present and future situations" (p. 179). In order to bridge this gap, learners are in need of "strategic competence" as referred to by Canale and Swain (1980).

Another issue of concern in this study is the role of tasks in L2 learning, particularly their interaction with communicative strategies. An enormous interest has aroused in recent years in the use of tasks to underpin the assessment decisions that are made. The oral task-based performance in this study was assessed with regard to complexity, accuracy, and fluency (abbreviated as CAF hereafter) which are called "performance conditions" or "characteristics of responses" (see Iwashita, McNamara & Elder, 2001).

Task type and its associated characteristics have systematic influences upon performance (Skehan & Foster, 1997). Skehan and Foster have also shown that it is worthwhile to probe into the complexity, accuracy and fluency of the language. These three areas compete over winning the scarce attentional resources and enhancing one may be detrimental to another. Moreover, the Cognition Hypothesis (Robinson 2005) claims that pedagogic tasks should be

sequenced for learners in an order of increasing cognitive complexity, and that along resource-directing dimensions of task demands, an increasing effort at conceptualization promotes more complex and grammaticized L2 speech production.

Given the aforementioned points, the present study is founded on the assumption that L2 learners need to attend to communicative strategies in order to manifest a better performance in expressing their thoughts and ideas. Moreover, given the importance of tasks in L2 learning, this study seeks to examine the overall effectiveness of strategy instruction and task type on EFL learners' oral performance.

The following sections will appear in this chapter. First, the research issue will be elaborated on in more detail in the Statement of the Problem. Then, the research questions and hypotheses will be presented. Later, the part called Significance of the Study will present why this study is important and how this issue has come to prominence. Finally, the key terms will be defined.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Second language learners are likely to find themselves in a situation where they need to express a lexical item in the target language but do not have the linguistic resources to do so. Some learners are able to paraphrase or make use of gestures to describe the meaning of the term. That is, they use a communication strategy

to express the intended meaning. Others, however, avoid the term or resort to silence.

Faerch and Kasper (1986) state that "there exists an inevitable gap between what learners are taught and what they need in present and future non-educational situations" (p. 179). Bridging this gap requires the learner to have another competence, referred to as "strategic competence" by Canale and Swain (1980). The authors point out that the concept of communicative competence should be understood in a broader sense and should include strategic competence in addition to linguistic and sociolinguistic competence. This framework of communicative competence has provided a theoretical basis to communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing (Bachman, 1990).

When there is a deficit in the target language resources required to meet the communicative needs, learners have to make use of all the means available to get the message across. This is the time when they should employ communication strategies to express their ideas and to avoid communication breakdowns. Strategies are specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques students use -often consciously- to improve their progress in apprehending, internalizing, and using the L2 (Oxford, 1990). A learner is claimed to be strategically competent when s/he does not give up easily in case of difficulty and tries his best to communicate the message with the strategies s/he can make use of.

In this sense, the learner who acquires the target language in a natural environment, in which the focus is on understanding and getting the meaning

across, will have more opportunities and more motivation to use communication strategies effectively. In contrast, learners in language classrooms often have fewer opportunities and less motivation to use communication strategies. They may not even be aware of the advantages of communication strategies when they encounter linguistic difficulties in their communication. Therefore, the issue of how classroom language teaching could help learners with limited second language resources communicate effectively has become a great concern of second language researchers and teachers.

Another focus of research is on the difference between learners' performance regarding various task types. The results from previous studies have shown that there is great variation on the types of tasks studied (e.g., Gilabert, 2007; Iwashita, McNamara & Elder 2001, Skehan & Foster, 1997). Skehan and Foster (1997) adopted an approach to tasks that are of a generally cognitive orientation and they made claims about the systematic influences of tasks upon performance. Skehan and Foster (1997) proposed that there is a trade-off effect between accuracy and complexity, which is notably caused by the interplay between task structure and planning time. In fact, a cognitive demanding task requires learners to produce complex language with weak control over language form, whereas a less ambitious task allows learners to focus on form and to gain greater accuracy.

This trade-off effect between accuracy and complexity is closely associated with a set of task characteristics. Tasks with clear inherent structure, such as a

narrative task to depict learners' experience in a journey or a description task to make a story based on cartoon strips, direct learners more naturally toward achieving accuracy. On the other hand, tasks that require multifaceted "on-line" processing push writers to produce complex language.

Following extensive work within cognitive psychology (see, e.g., Miyake & Shah 1999), Skehan (1996, 1998) makes the assumption that human beings operate with limited capacity attentional systems, and that to pay attention to one area of performance may well be to reduce the attention available elsewhere. In other words, if performance is multi-dimensional, improving performance in one performance condition may well cause achievement in other ones to be lowered; i.e. when task is demanding, it lowers accuracy or fluency and vice versa. For instance, complexity plays a more important role in doing argumentative tasks than in descriptive tasks, due to the fact that argumentation is more complicated and demanding to deal with. In a series of studies, Skehan and Foster and their collaborators have demonstrated that a number of task characteristics have systematic influences upon performance. First of all, regarding performance itself, they have shown (Skehan & Foster 1997) that it is useful to explore the complexity, accuracy, and fluency of language, and that these three areas enter into competition with one another for scarce attentional resources. Second, the range of evidence from several studies is consistent with different influences upon each of these performance areas.

Given the aforementioned points, this study seeks to investigate whether it is effective to teach learners how to use strategies (i.e., circumlocution, approximation, all-purpose words, lexicalized fillers) and whether task type plays a role in students' oral productions with specific focus on complexity, accuracy, and fluency.

1.3. Research Questions and Hypotheses

Based on the purpose and the problem under focus in the present study, the following research questions were addressed:

Q1. Does explicit strategy instruction have any effects on Iranian EFL learners' oral production in terms of accuracy, complexity and fluency?

Q2. Does task type have any effects on the fluency, accuracy and complexity of Iranian EFL learners' oral production?

Q3. Is there any significant difference between strategy instruction and task type regarding their influences on accuracy, complexity, and fluency of Iranian EFL learners' oral production?

In line with the aforementioned research questions, the following null hypotheses can be formulated:

H1. Explicit strategy instruction has no effect on Iranian EFL learners' oral production in terms of complexity, accuracy, and fluency.