The Effects of Explicit and Implicit Pragmatic Instruction on Iranian EFL Learners' Production of Suggestion Speech Act in the Context of Distance Learning

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Abstract

This study investigated the effects of various modes of pragmatic instruction (explicit, implicit, and combination of both) on learners' production of suggestion speech act in distance learning context. The participants, 60 Intermediate female EFL students, were randomly assigned to 3 groups of 20. Teaching materials were designed in pdf format and the internet Email service was used for course delivery. The instructional treatment for the explicit group contained ten selected target forms about making suggestion. These suggestion forms were divided into two different categories depending on the factor of status. The other group (implicit group) received the same forms on making suggestion embedded in a short conversation. However, the combination group was provided with both types of instructional material. At the end of the treatment period, to examine participants' productive knowledge of suggestion and their awareness of the appropriate use of this specific speech act in different situation, a DCT test was conducted which involved 4 natural situations and participants were required to make suggestions and respond. The findings showed that the combination group outperformed the other groups.

Key words: pragmatics, speech act, discourse completion test, distance learning

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, due to technological advancements, distance education has become widespread. In fact, despite its short history, this new trend has already had a facilitative role in education, especially in second language pedagogy. Furthermore, the internet has made it possible for learners to choose and manage the process of their learning regardless of the physical location of them.

Another side of this study is pragmatics with the focus on suggestion speech act. In fact, pragmatic or functional use of language, such as suggestions, invitations, requests,

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apologies, refusals, and agreements, are essential components of language learners' ''communicative competence'' (Hymes, 1972). Yule (1996) assumes that pragmatics is primarily concerned with both the study of speaker meaning and contextual meaning. Apparently, text authors and teachers as well as those who are attentive about the importance of learning pragmatics in becoming communicatively competent in the target language, try to find the most effective way of instructing how to make connections between language functions and forms. For example, how to express opinions or how to agree or disagree, a group of linguistic forms are presented in textbooks through conversations, exercises, or listening practice.

The pragmatic performance of second language (L2) learners often seems to fall short of ideal expectations. Even the most competent learners sometimes appear to have problems with L2 pragmatics in real-world situations (e.g., Hinkel, 1997; Martinez-Flor, 2005; Decapua & Dunham, 2007; Pishghadam & Sharafadini, 2011). Nevertheless, the issue of applying the most effective instructional mode of speech acts has generated a substantial amount of controversy among researchers.

The objective of the present study is to investigate the effect of three instructional modes (explicit, implicit, and combination of both explicit and implicit modes) on learners' production of suggestion speech act in distance learning context. Previous studies on pragmatic acts have demonstrated the positive effect of these modes of instruction on learning of speech acts in classroom context. This study is an attempt to compare them with each other in order to see which one is the most effective in the context of distance learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

By the use of the Internet and the World Wide Web, learners have the opportunity to manage the process of their learning based on their need and purpose. In addition, one crucially integrated aspect of any languages is pragmatics with the focus on speech acts. Also, there are many modes of teaching speech acts. The debate is about which mode is the most effective and compatible in distance learning context.

Many research studies on communicative competence have affirmed that second language learning is no longer viewed as mastery of grammatical forms alone (Bachman, 1990; Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Canale & Swain, 1980). In other words, acquisition of functional and sociolinguistic control of the forms as well as the ability to perform language functions appropriately in social context have come to be regarded as an essential aspect of second language learning. Leeh (1983) makes a distinction between pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics. On the one hand, pragmalinguistics deals with pragmatics strategies like directness and indirectness. On the other hand, sociopragmatics refers to social factors such as status, social distance and degree of imposition. The focus of this study is improving learners' ability to choose linguistics form appropriate to particular social status, namely: equal status (i.e. student to student) and

higher status (i.e. student to professor). Additionally, there are some useful activities aimed at raising learners' pragmatic awareness, such as presentation and discussion guided by the teacher, translation, dramas, simulations, and role-play activity. These activities can be instructed either explicitly or implicitly. The main difference is that explicit instruction provides learners with detailed explanations about target-structure forms, functions, and why certain forms are culturally preferred, while implicit instruction does not. Several research studies have investigated and compared the effect of explicit and implicit instruction on pragmatic enhancement (Safont-Jorda, 2003; Eslami-Rasekh, 2005).

Aufa (2013) conducted a study to investigate the effectiveness of DCT as explicit pragmatic instruction to facilitate second language learners in developing their pragmatic competence. The findings supported the effectiveness of explicit instruction results in some variations of linguistic forms that contribute to the development of learners' pragmatic competence. Similarly, Chen (2009) asserts that most of intervention studies to date have shown that learners who get explicit instruction perform better than those who get implicit instruction. However, Reber (1989) conducted a study on the relationship between implicit and explicit modes in the learning of a complex rule structure. Its results are discussed in terms of the complex, interactive roles that these 2 modes of apprehension (implicit and explicit) have on acquisition of richly structured stimulus domains. Likewise, Mathews, Buss, Stanley, Blanchard-Fields, Cho, and Druhan (1989) hypothesized that the two modes of learning interact positively when they occur sequentially rather than simultaneously.

 In today's society, increasing second language learning demands and the shift of emphasis in teaching towards student engagement and peer support has led to the recognition of the importance of web-based instruction in second language pedagogy. Within this new context of learning, students have the opportunity to enhance their L2 knowledge through the use of more appealing materials regardless of the physical place and time and to keep their connectivity with other students and receive feedback.

Distance learning is defined as: "the linking of learners and teachers in different locations and often in real time, by telephone, telecast, satellite, computer, or through the use of learning packages" (*Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching & Applied Linguistics,* 2002, p.165). Also, Marsap and Narin (2009) define distance learning as a kind of flexible learning and a model of education that is done without seeing each other (teacher-student) through using some equipment.

The factor of interaction with other students and teachers has an important effect on developing distance learning via internet for the e-learning environment. To show the powerful role of distance learning, Harper, Chen, and Yen (2004) states that while distance learning can cross geographic boundaries, it also has the potential to break cultural rules, norms, and educational learning systems.

Additionally, the use of Internet technology in language learning leads to improving self-concept and mastery of basic skills, more student-centered learning, engagement in the learning process, more active processing resulting in higher-order thinking skills, better recall, and gaining confidence by learners in directing their own learning (Warschauer, Shetzer, & Meloni, 2000).

THIS STUDY

Following what has been mentioned earlier, the present study addresses the following research question.

- Are there any significant differences among the effects of various modes of pragmatic instructions (explicit, implicit, and combination of both) on production of suggestion speech act in distance learning context?

In line with the above-mentioned research question, the following null hypothesis is formulated.

- There are no significant differences among the effects of various pragmatic instructions (explicit, implicit, and combination of both) on production of suggestion speech act in distance learning context.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants of this study were 60 female EFL students at intermediate level of proficiency. All of the participants were native speakers of Persian studying in Iran Language Institute in Kermanshah, Iran. Randomly, they were divided into three groups. Each group contained 20 participants who received one of the treatment conditions via the internet.

Instruments

In this study, the following instruments were utilized:

In order to homogenize the participants in terms of their level of proficiency, a Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency was used. It contains 100 multiple-choice items including 40 grammar items in a conversational format, 40 vocabulary items requiring the selection of a synonym or completion of a sentence, and reading passages followed by 20 comprehension questions.

The particular speech act that was chosen for the present study was that of suggestions. Furthermore, for the purpose of this study we decided to focus only on the factor of status in making suggestions. Thus, we focused on two levels of status, equal status (i.e. student to student) and higher status (i.e. student to professor). According to Cohen (1997), one of the means to glean the pragmatic data is Discourse Completion Task (DCT) and if it is

prepared appropriately, it reveals how respondents activate their pragmatic knowledge (Martinez-Flor, 2005). Therefore, two written production tests for both pre and post-test in the form of DCT were administered. Each DCT consisted of 4 natural situations were defined elaborately, and participants had to make suggestions and they required to respond as they thought they would actually do under the same circumstance.

The selection of suggestion DCT, borrowed from the study by (Martinez-Flor, 2005). The DCT was based on the status of people. A pilot study was administrated in which 20 EFL learners took apart. Moreover, to reach more reliable data, 2 raters corrected the respondents' replies. These tests have been regarded as email tasks. The students were asked to study each situation and send an email to the mail addresses provided.

Procedure

In order to achieve the aim of the study, the following procedures were followed. First of all, to homogenize the participants, a multiple-choice MTELP was administered to 80 participants. The analysis of the scores indicated that 20 of the participants had to be excluded from the study because of a different proficiency level. So, 60 female intermediate learners took part in the in the virtual course of study. Second, to minimize the effect of the participants' background knowledge of the target suggestion speech act, a pre-test was administered in the second week of the winter semester 2015 through email. The particular speech act that was chosen for the present study was that of suggestions. The pre-test, a DCT, consisted of 4 natural situations was defined elaborately, and participants were required to respond as they would say in daily conversations. Then, the participants were divided into three groups randomly. For the purpose of this study, all the units were designed in pdf format and the internet Email service was used for course delivery.

The instructional treatment for the explicit group contained ten selected target forms of making suggestion. These suggestion forms were divided into two different categories depending on the factor of status: equal status (i.e. student to student) and higher status (i.e. student to professor). These forms have been taken from the native speakers interacting and making suggestions depending on the level of formality. All of which are illustrated in table 1.

Table 1. To make suggestion based on level of formality

Equal status	Higher status
Why don't you…?	I would probably suggest that…
Have you tries…?	Personally, I would recommend that…
You can just…	Maybe you could…
You might want to…	It could be helpful if you…
Perhaps you should…	I think it might be better to…

This group received instructional material included each forms of suggestion in table1 in pdf format through Email. For each session participants were provided with two forms

of both categories in addition to some explanation about appropriate and accurate use of suggestions, with the consideration of the status, and level of formality as well as some sample sentences including these forms (e.g., It was helpful if you go to this bookshop).

In implicit group, the same forms of making suggestion embedded in a short conversation were sent to the participants as shown in the following example:

> You are working as an assistant in the department office. A new professor arrives and asks you about setting up the email account.
>
> Professor: Excuse me, I am new at the university and I don't know how to set up my email account. Could you explain to me how to do it?
>
> You: I am not sure about it, but I think it might be better to call the HELP desk at the computer center.

Indeed, the reason for choosing these short conversations as an instructional material was because they contained authentic and standard forms of suggestion in appropriate difficulty level to roughly match the learners' ability. That is, it was neither too difficult nor too easy.

However, the third group (combination of explicit and implicit) was provided with both types of instructional material sequentially. The final phase was the administration of the posttest. In order to examine participants' productive knowledge of suggestion and their awareness of the appropriate use of this specific speech act in different situation, a DCT test was conducted which involved 4 natural situations were defined elaborately, and participants asked to read these different situations and imagine that they were in the same situation. Therefore, they were required to make suggestions and respond. The obtained scores were based on learners' production of not only appropriate but also grammatically accurate suggestions. Likewise, to reach more reliable data, 2 raters corrected the respondents' replies.

RESULTS

The aim of the research question was to investigate whether or not there are any significant differences among the effects of various modes of pragmatic instructions (direct, indirect, combination of direct and indirect) on production of suggestion speech act in distance learning context? To do so, a One-Way ANOVA procedure was used. Descriptive statistics, including the mean, standard deviation, etc. are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for the ANOVA on production of suggestion

groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
combination	20	18.3000	1.38031	.30865	17.6540	18.9460
explicit	20	14.1000	2.44734	.54724	12.9546	15.2454
implicit	20	13.7000	2.47301	.55298	12.5426	14.8574
Total	60	15.3667	2.98565	.38545	14.5954	16.1379

Based on Table 2, it can be observed that the highest mean on the DCT test belongs to the combination group ($\bar{x}$ =18.30) followed by the explicit group ($\bar{x}$ =14.10). The group instructed through the implicit instruction has the lowest mean ($\bar{x}$ =13.70). To see whether or not the differences among the groups are statistically significant, the One-Way ANOVA procedure was used. The obtained results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. ANOVA on learners' idiom comprehension

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	259.733	2	129.867	27.808	.000
Within Groups	266.200	57	4.670		
Total	525.933	59			

In Table 3, based on the observed F value and the significance level, F(2,57) = 27.8, P <.05, we can safely claim that there are significant differences among the means of the groups. So, the null hypothesis developed beforehand is rejected. To locate the significant differences, a post hoc Scheffe test was used, the results of which are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Multiple comparisons for the ANOVA on DCT

(I) group	(J) group	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval for mean	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
explicit	implicit	.40000	.68339	.843	-1.3177	2.1177
	combination	-4.20000(*)	.68339	.000	-5.9177	-2.4823
implicit	combination	-4.60000(*)	.68339	.000	-6.3177	-2.8823

As the above table shows, there are statistically significant differences between the performance of combination group and both explicit and implicit groups. In other words, the combination group outperformed the other two groups on the DCT of suggestion production. At the same time, there are no statistically significant differences between the explicit and implicit groups. It can be claimed that combination of explicit and implicit pragmatic instruction can positively influence production of suggestion speech act in the distance learning context.

DISCUSSION

Regarding the research question of this study, the outcomes supported the positive effect of combination of explicit and implicit modes on production of suggestion speech act in the context of distance learning. This finding is consistent with the claim of Mathews et al. (1989) who hypothesized that the two modes of learning interact positively when they occur sequentially rather than simultaneously. They supported the synergistic effect of using both implicit and explicit learning processes. This hypothesis is based on the view

that implicit learning is a memory-based learning mechanism that automatically identifies patterns of family resemblance among similar experiences. Also, Reber (1981) conducted a study on the relationship between implicit and explicit modes in the learning of a complex rule structure. Its results are discussed in terms of the complex, interactive roles that these 2 modes of apprehension (implicit and explicit) have on acquisition of richly structured stimulus domains. Similarly, Kasper and Rose (2002) claimed that the implicit treatment without incorporating any additional teaching assistance has been regarded as insufficient to demonstrate the effectiveness of this type of instruction.

Nevertheless, Lewicki (1988) has proposed that implicitly acquired knowledge is totally independent of explicit knowledge. In Lewicki's theory, implicit knowledge is totally inaccessible to explicit conscious retrieval, and it cannot be modified by conscious learning mechanisms. In addition, implicit knowledge may remain inconsistent with existing explicit knowledge. However, some of the previous research that has compared explicit versus implicit instruction has found more benefits for explicit instruction (House and Kasper, 1981; House, 1996).

CONCLUSION

The present study attempted to investigate the effects of various modes of pragmatic instructions (explicit, implicit, and combination of both) on production of suggestion speech act in distance learning context. The findings showed that the combination group outperformed the other two groups in the use of both pragmatically appropriate and linguistically accurate suggestions. To conclude, the combination of both explicit and implicit instruction facilitates production of suggestion speech act.

As multimedia make materials appealing, using this presentation mode can be useful for both teachers and learners. The present study may have implications for material writers, textbook authors, CALL package designers and distance learning planners in that it may encourage them to use both explicit and implicit instructional material.

It is worth to mention that some limitations and delimitations need to be taken into account about the present study. The first and the most important limitation was the difficulty of finding 60 homogeneous participants who had access to computer and internet, and enjoyed a satisfactory level of familiarity with computer-based learning for this self-access study. Second, the sex of the participants was limited to female learners; therefore, the results of the study may not be generalizable to male learners. Also, the participants of this study were limited to the intermediate level learners. So, care must be exercised in generalizing the results beyond its proper limits. Furthermore, another factor to be taken into account is the small sample of the participants this further limits the generalizability of the findings. Likewise, modes of speech act instruction are classified into different types. It is impossible to compare all the modes in one study. This study has chosen to focus on only selected modes of instruction. Finally, the result of this study may be affected by other variables, like age, personality and social factors. These factors have not been taken into account in the present study.

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