

Teaching Communication Strategies to EFL College Students

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The study aims to examine how communication strategy instruction works in university EFL classrooms in Taiwan. The instruments included an oral test and a communicative effectiveness scale. The participants took the pre-test and then received explicit strategy instruction to help them effectively employ communication strategies. After 15 weeks of strategy training, participants took the posttest. A coding system based on Tarone's (1977, 1981) taxonomies was adopted to identify the communication strategies used in the oral test. Results show that the participants employed significantly more strategies and had higher communicative effectiveness after they received the instruction of communication strategies. Thus, the present study has confirmed the facilitating effect of teaching communication strategies to EFL college students.

本研究は、コミュニケーションストラテジー指導が、台湾の大学のEFLの授業においてどのような効果をあげるのか調べることを目的とする。二十四人の参加者はすべて台湾の大学で英語を専攻している四年生である。調査方法には、口頭試験およびコミュニケーションの有効性の尺度が含まれており、参加者はまず、口頭試験を受けてから、効果的にコミュニケーションストラテジーを使用するのを支援するための、体系的なストラテジー指導を受ける。15週間のストラテジーを受けた後、事後テストを行う。口頭試験で使用したコミュニケーションストラテジーを識別するために、Tarone (1977, 1981) の分類法に基づく符号化システムが採択された。その結果、参加者はコミュニケーションストラテジーの指導を受けた後、かなり多くのストラテジーを利用しており、コミュニケーションの有効性をより高めたことが明らかになった。従って、本研究は、台湾のEFLの学生にコミュニケーションストラテジーを教えることの促進効果を提示し、コミュニケーションストラテジーの学習可能性を改めて裏付けるものである。

MOST PEOPLE have the experiences of struggling to find the appropriate expression or grammatical construction when attempting to communicate their meaning. Language learners use *communication strategies* to enhance the effectiveness of their communication (Littlemore, 2003). Although there still is not consensus among researchers, communication strategies have been generally defined as the means that speakers use to solve their communicative problems. According to Dörnyei and Scott (1997), the notion of second language (L2) communication strategies was raised with the recognition that the mismatch between L2 speakers' linguistic resources and communicative intentions often leads to difficulties or breakdowns in communication.

The purpose of the present study is to examine the effects of teaching communication strategies to EFL college students in Taiwan. The major research questions explored in the study



were: (1) Does the instruction of communication strategies increase the frequency of strategy use? (2) Does the instruction of communication strategies improve the effectiveness of strategy use?

According to Willems (1987), correctness and appropriateness should remain the central issue in language teaching and not be replaced by the teaching of communication strategies. However, the latter has received so little attention that encouraging their use in foreign language teaching seems appropriate. As Foster (1998) claimed, despite the substantial theoretical arguments for the effectiveness of negotiation interaction, there has been little research demonstrating clear links with L2 acquisition. Dörnyei (1995) also indicated that very little systematic strategy training research has been conducted to test the teachability of communication strategies. By providing empirical evidence, the current study will seek to facilitate our understanding of the effects of communication strategy instruction, and to assist Taiwanese college students to become more effective EFL communicators.

Literature Review

For the past 25 years, research has been conducted to examine the communication strategies employed by Chinese EFL learners. For instance, Huang and Naerssen (1987) found that functional practice was the strategy that distinguished successful Chinese EFL learners from less successful ones. Chen (1990) indicated that the frequency, type, and effectiveness of communication strategies employed by Chinese EFL learners varied according to their proficiency level. Moreover, Liao and Bresnahan (1996) found that Americans and Chinese use different formulaic expressions in refusal and apply different strategies. Americans are less likely to refuse a friend, Chinese a family member. Tuan's study (2001) indicated a positive relationship between EFL learners' language proficiency and their strategic competence.

In addition, there have been some studies involved in teaching communication strategy to L2 learners. Dörnyei's (1995) study confirmed the possibility of developing the quality and quantity of Hungarian EFL learners' use of some communication strategies through focused instruction. Moreover, Russell and Loschky (1998) indicated that Japanese university students benefited from second-language-based communication strategy training. Nakatani (2005) found that Japanese EFL learners in a strategy training group significantly improved their oral proficiency test scores. Naughton (2006) suggested that the communication strategy training program was successful in encouraging Spanish EFL students to engage in interactional activities. Maleki (2007) also suggested that teaching communication strategies is pedagogically effective for Iranian EFL students.

As suggested by Yule and Tarone (1997), the definitive study on the value of communication strategy teaching remains to be done. Moreover, Faucette (2001) concluded that very few studies have evaluated communication strategy from a pedagogical perspective. Nakatani (2005) also pointed out that there is little research investigating learners' use of communication strategy by using their actual discourse data. Thus, this study aims to fill this void by examining the effects of communication strategy instruction in EFL classrooms.

Methodology

Participants

Participants in the current study were one senior class of 24 English majors at a university in northern Taiwan, including 20 females and 4 males. They ranged in age from 22 to 25 years old. All of them had at least ten years of EFL study in high school and university. The majority had TOEIC test scores more than 750 and some of them scored higher than 900. As a result, they could be designated as high-intermediate or advanced EFL learners.

Instrument

The main instrument was an oral test of two speaking tasks, which have been adopted from previous research, specifically concept description (Chen, 1990) and role play (Nakatani, 2005). The same test was adopted for both the pre-test and post-test. With concept description, there are 24 concepts provided by Chen (1990), 12 concrete and 12 abstract. Each student was required to communicate one concrete and one abstract concept to an interlocutor in an interview situation. Since the students were not allowed to use the exact target words, they would be forced to make use of communication strategies. The role-play task engaged two students engaged in a simulated conversation derived from a situation described on a card. Each pair was given five minutes to prepare the role play. A scale of communicative effectiveness was designed mainly based on Littlemore's study (2003) with the scoring criteria of *ease of comprehension*. On a five-point scale ranging from "very difficult" to "very easy", the raters circled the response, which indicated how easy it was to work out what the participant was talking about.

Procedures

The study was conducted during the class hours of the senior required course *English Speech*. The participants were informed that they would participate in EFL communication strategies training. The experiment was based on the following three steps. First, the pre-test was given to the participants in class. The speech production of the two tasks was videotaped. Then, participants received explicit instruction to help them effectively employ EFL communication strategies. The experiment consisted of a 15-week strategy training program. The strategy instruction of nine communication strategies took place in one lesson each week, lasting for about 15-20 minutes each time (see Appendix). The teaching program is mainly based on the

techniques and concepts of communication strategy instruction from previous research (Scarcella, 1990; Dornyei & Thurrell, 1991; Dornyei, 1995; Ogane, 1998). The strategy training was supplemented with awareness-raising discussion and feedback. The teacher first gave definitions of each of the nine strategies, explained their usages and provided demonstration of the strategies, and then students were asked to perform these in their native language, Mandarin. In the next stage, students were given time to prepare their strategies in the target language, English, and their performances were discussed after completing the communication task. Later during the course, an increasing amount of improvisation was required, such as role-play. Finally, participants took the oral post-test after the strategy training program was finished.

Data Analysis

With regard to the scoring of the oral test, participants' narrations and responses in the two tasks were transcribed. Then, a coding system based on Tarone's (1977, 1981) taxonomies was adopted to identify the communication strategies used in the transcriptions. Thus, a checklist of nine strategies was developed to make the coding more efficient. All the occurrences of communication strategy in the participants' transcriptions were identified by two raters, including the researcher and a college EFL teacher who was also familiar with the communication strategy research. The decisions about each occurrence were based on the two raters' agreement. The frequencies were calculated to assess the selection and the distribution of communication strategy. After completing the strategy coding, the two raters also assess each participants' communicative effectiveness of strategy use based on the scale of comprehension ease. The inter-rater reliability of the pre-test and the post-test were 0.87 and 0.91 respectively, which show that the two raters were able to assess all participants' test performances with high degree of

consistency. A paired t-test was conducted to analyze participants' strategy frequencies and effectiveness scores on the oral test.

Results

The speech productions of the pre-test and the post-test by the 24 participants were coded according to the coding scheme. Frequency counting was conducted to assess the selection of communication strategies. Table 1 shows the frequencies of the nine communication strategies used by participants where *f* represents the frequency of communication strategy use, and "Gain" refers to the increase of frequency from pre-test to post-test. In the pre-test, participants applied the communication strategy of "circumlocution" most often. The other strategies which were more often adopted included "nonverbal signals", "topic avoidance" and "appeal for assistance". The least frequent strategy was "word coinage". In the post-test, participants applied the communication strategy of "appeal for assistance" most often. The other strategies which were more often adopted included "circumlocution", "topic avoidance" and "message abandonment". The least frequent strategy was "word coinage". As for the difference of strategy frequency, the total frequency in the post-test was higher than that in the pre-test. Among the nine communication strategies, eight strategies had positive differences, while only one strategy of "nonverbal signals" was applied much more often in the pre-test.

Table 1. Frequency of Communication Strategies

Communication strategy	N	Pre-test		Post-test		Gain
		<i>f</i>	Rank	<i>f</i>	Rank	
Topic avoidance	24	29	4	101	3	+72
Message abandonment	24	8	6	49	4	+41
Approximation	24	16	5	25	5	+9
Word coinage	24	0	9	5	8	+5
Circumlocution	24	97	1	144	2	+47
Literal translation	24	4	8	6	7	+2
Language mix	24	5	7	5	8	+0
Appeal for assistance	24	51	3	235	1	+184
Nonverbal signals	24	79	2	7	6	-72
Total	24	238		577		+339

The main intent of the study was to empirically investigate the effect of strategy instruction on college students' use of EFL communication strategies. Participants' speech productions completed before and after the strategy instruction respectively were analyzed and compared. The results of paired t-test for strategy frequency are shown in Table 2. Among the nine communication strategies, there were significant differences in the frequency of four strategies, including "topic avoidance", "message abandonment", "appeal for assistance", and "nonverbal signals". Significant difference was also found for the total frequency of communication strategies employed by the participants in the pre-test and the post-test respectively.

Table 2. Paired t-test for Communication Strategies

Communication strategy	N	Pre-test		Post-test		t
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Topic avoidance	24	1.21	1.18	4.21	0.81	4.11**
Message abandonment	24	0.33	0.64	2.04	2.07	4.00**
Approximation	24	0.67	0.70	1.04	0.95	1.62
Word coinage	24	0.00	0.00	0.21	0.59	1.74
Circumlocution	24	4.04	4.97	6.00	4.44	1.60
Literal translation	24	0.17	0.48	0.25	1.22	0.30
Language mix	24	0.21	0.66	0.21	0.83	0.00
Appeal for assistance	24	2.13	2.05	9.79	7.27	5.48**
Nonverbal signals	24	3.29	2.71	0.29	0.86	-5.34**
Total	24	1.34	0.77	2.67	1.23	6.51**

** p<0.01 SD: standard deviation

Moreover, the study also aimed to examine if the instruction of communication strategies can improve the effectiveness of students' EFL communication. Table 3 shows the result of paired t-test for the scale of communicative effectiveness on a five-point scale. It can be seen that participants had significantly higher communicative effectiveness in the post-test than in the pre-test.

Table 3. Paired t-test for Communicative Effectiveness

Test	N	Mean	SD	t	p
Pre-test	24	3.42	0.83	2.099	0.047*
Post-test	24	3.79	0.51		

*p<0.05

Discussion

In the study, the total frequency of communication strategy employed in the post-test was higher than that in the pre-test. Among the nine communication strategies, eight strategies were applied much more often in the post-test after the 15-week strategy training program. The study results indicate that EFL college students employed significantly more strategies after they received the instruction of communication strategies. Furthermore, participants had significantly higher communicative effectiveness in the post-test than in the pre-test. The findings support previous research on communication strategy instruction (Dörnyei, 1995; Russell & Loschky, 1998; Nakatani, 2005; Naughton, 2006; Maleki, 2007). Therefore, the study implies that it is feasible and worthwhile to teach communication strategies to EFL college students to help them become effective interlocutors.

With regard to the influence of strategy instruction on the use of individual communication strategy, some findings will be discussed below. After the strategy training, participants employed the communication strategy of "appeal for assistance" most often, and they also used this strategy significantly more often in the post-test than in the pre-test. The finding supports Maleki's (2007) which indicated communication problems arose from L2 learners' linguistic deficiency, and that any request from their part for clarification or assistance would lead to feedback and help interlanguage develop. In addition, Faucette (2001) found that appeal for assistance was included in all eight of the surveyed teachers' resource books. Through strategy instruction, the participants in the study significantly increased their use of strategies for negotiation in order to solve communication problems and avoid misunderstanding. Therefore, it is suggested that strategy training can facilitate EFL learners' use of appeal for assistance to deal with communication difficulties.

Participants also applied the communication strategy of "circumlocution" more often in the pre-test. As defined by Willems

(1987), circumlocution involves exemplifying, illustrating or describing the properties of the target object or action. This strategy is quite similar to the common practice of paraphrasing in writing. In Faucette's (2001) study, circumlocution strategy was found in seven out of eight of the teachers' resource books. As a result, participants were already familiar with circumlocution and frequently use it before they received the strategy instruction. However, there is no significant increase of the frequency of circumlocution in the post-test. This finding is consistent with Dörnyei's (1995) posttraining results which showed no significant improvement of the quantity of circumlocution. It seems that strategy instruction may not be effective to improve the use of circumlocution for EFL learners.

Moreover, participants seldom used such communication strategies as "word coinage", "literal translation", "language mix" before and after the strategy instruction. It seems that less proficient L2 learners will consider these communication strategies easy and convenient to employ since the strategies involve creating a non-existing word, translating literally from L1 to L2, and including L1 words with L1 pronunciation in L2 speech. In the study, participants who were high-intermediate or advanced EFL learners may not like to use these communication strategies which would generate the language of incorrect usage. The result is in line with Faucette's (2001), which revealed word coinage was rarely included in the reviewed conversation teaching materials.

Before the strategy training, participants used the strategy "nonverbal signals" more frequently than most other strategies. This finding supports Russell and Loschky's (1998) which found the Japanese college students seemed to avoid a perceived weakness in EFL competence, whenever possible, depending on other perceived non-linguistic strengths. However, after receiving the strategy instruction, participants seldom used nonverbal signals and instead adopted those L2-based strategies more often, such as "appeal for assistance" and "circumlocution".

Conclusion

The present research proposed that systematic strategy instruction result in the improvement of communication strategy use and communicative effectiveness for EFL learners. The study supports Dörnyei's (1995) argument that communication strategies provide L2 learners with a sense of security by allowing them room to maneuver in times of difficulty. Teaching communication strategies may empower the learners to participate in L2 communication by helping them not to give up in the conversation (Faucette, 2001). The current study is expected to shed some light on the controversial issue of teaching communication strategies and provide pedagogical implications on how to implement communication strategy training in EFL classrooms.

Bio Data

Huei-Chun Teng got her Ph.D. in Second Languages Education at University of Minnesota. She is currently a professor at Department of Applied Foreign Languages in National Taiwan University of Science and Technology. Her research interests include L2 listening research, communication study, learning strategy, and language assessment.

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Appendix

Syllabus of the Training Program on Communication Strategies

Week	Topic	Definition
1	Introduction to communication strategies	
2	Topic avoidance	Avoiding linguistically problematic topics
3	Message abandonment	Cutting communication short
4	Review	
5	Approximation	Using superordinate term or analogy
6	Word coinage	Making up a new word
7	Circumlocution	Describing properties or action
8	Review	
9	Literal translation	Translating word for word from L1
10	Language mix	Using L1 words without translating
11	Review	

Week	Topic	Definition
12	Appeal for assistance	Asking for the correct term
13	Nonverbal signals	Using nonverbal tacticommunication strategy
14	Review	
15	Review of all strategies	