The Effect of Implicit vs. Explicit Metapragmatic Instruction on the Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners' Pragmatic Comprehension of Apology and Refusal

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Abstract

Within the broad domain of SLA, 'pragmatic competence' was brought to the fore following the assertation of communicative competence, but explicitly premiered in Bachman's (1990) model of communicative competence, accentuating the significance of the relationship between "language users and the context of communication" (p.89). The vitality of L2 pragmatic competence alongside grammatical competence is the main motive behind the multitudinous number of studies carried out since the communicative revolution in language teaching in an effort to improve L2 pragmatics instruction. Ever since, a welter of studies have sought answers to three main questions as constituting the essence of interlanguage pragmatic competence research: whether and how pragmatic competence can be instructed, whether instruction is more effective than no instruction, and whether different instructional approaches addressing interlanguage pragmatics can be differentially effective (Kasper & Rose, 2002). Scholarships have corroborated that pragmatic features are amenable to instruction; however, more research is still needed to find out which interventional approaches and what type of instructional input and materials are more conducive to learning. One potential framework within which pragmatic competence can be investigated from an acquisitional perspective is Schmidt's (1993) noticing hypothesis and Sharwood Smith's (1981) consciousness raising. Since these postulations, a large number of studies have been conducted to substantiate claims as to the significance of learners' pragmatic consciousness for interlanguage development. However, the pendulum has swung towards the production of speech acts, and comprehension of speech acts in interlanguage pragmatic competence seems to be an under-explored area of research. Therefore, the present study aimed to investigate the effects of implicit vs. explicit

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instruction on the pragmatic comprehension of two speech acts of apology and refusal being taught through video prompts. These two speech acts were opted because of their face-threating features. In doing so, a quasi-experimental pretest posttest research design was used. To this end, of 68 initial participants, 49 (F=33; M=16) intermediate EFL learners majoring English Literature and Teaching English as a Foreign Language from a state university were selected based on Oxford Quick Placement Test (2004). The age of these participants ranged from 18 to 33. These participants were randomly assigned into three groups: explicit, implicit, and control. The explicit and implicit treatment groups received two different types of instruction accompanied by specific tasks on pragmatic awareness using 60 video-driven prompts extracted from Prison Break movie series and Touchstone 2 video book series (Höst, 2006). The explicit group received metalinguistic explanation, feedback, and discussion, whereas the implicit group received implicit feedback through examples. In contrast, the control group did not receive any specific instruction on the use of apology and refusals and they were taught different sections of Touchstone 2. A validated Multiple-choice Discourse Completion Test (MCDCT) which consists of 128 items including 8 conversations for the speech act of refusal and 8 conversations for the speech act of apology was used. The results of running One-way ANOVA indicated that learners' comprehension of speech act of apology and refusal across the two treatment groups developed after the treatment, and they outperformed the control group. Moreover, the explicit group outperformed the implicit group and the control group. The present paper recapitulates some pedagogical implications for materials developers, teachers, and learners. In the light of the results gained, it was proved that instruction had a positive influence on the pragmatic comprehension of apologies and refusals, substantiating that pragmatics is impervious to teaching drawing on dichotomous (explicit vs. implicit) approaches of language teaching. With respect to learning pragmatics, learners are advised to pay attention to the language forms, sociocultural facets of language and the germane contextual factors that could possibly affect the forms in the given context. The results suggest that sole exposure to contextualized input, video vignettes, may not necessarily result in students' gain in pragmatics. Consequently, learning is augmented if the linguistic, analytic, and cultural features along with sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic features are brought to learners' attention. Moreover, when instructing various speech acts, sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic features in the movies should be taught directly and explicitly which per se contributes to more pragmatic awareness and comprehension. Our findings are suggestive of the fact that scenes from movies serve as a contextualized source of pragmatic input inasmuch as they encompass a myriads of conversational exchanges in which the speaker's reply does not provide a straightforward answer to the question. To obviate such a downside, audiovisual materials can be capitalized upon to enrich our language classes if students are provided with explicit feedback and practice. In a nutshell, it can be argued that sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic features, through video-driven materials to simulate real life situations, should be juxtaposed in the textbooks by textbook developers and materials designers.