THE IMPACT OF STRATEGIES-BASED INSTRUCTION ON EFL LEARNERS’ SPEAKING PERFORMANCE

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Abstract

The main purpose of the current study was to find out the effect of strategy-based instruction (SBI) on improving Armenian L2 English learners’ speaking performance, as well as to find out the learners’ attitude towards using the strategies. From the two groups involved in the study, the experimental group received the treatment, whereas the control group received the placebo. The students’ age ranged from 12-14. The effectiveness of the treatment was investigated through quasi-experimental design. The study comprised both quantitative (pre and post-tests, attitudinal questionnaire) and qualitative (semi-structured interview) data collection instruments. The results of the statistical analysis displayed that there was a trend towards significant gains in the learners’ oral production after the treatment. It was also revealed that the learners of the experimental group had positive attitude towards the program.

Keywords: speaking, strategy, EFL learners.

1 INTRODUCTION

In this age of globalization, there is a great demand for speakers who can use English effectively as it has become the main medium in every domain of communication. English is not only the International language but also the second language of many countries in the world. In Armenia, English is considered to be a foreign language and it is studied in an environment where learners’ exposure to the target language is restricted as they can put the target language into work only in a classroom, where the time is limited and they do not have enough chances to speak. Despite the fact, that it is regarded to be a difficult skill to acquire, it attracts many people to learn as it is the prerequisite of a successful future career.

Speaking is deemed to be an important skill to acquire when mastering a foreign language. It is considered to be “the most fundamental” (Baily, 2002, p.121) and the most demanding” (Bailey & Savage, 1994, as cited in Celce-Murcia, 2001, p.103) as compared with other skills. According to Bailey and Savage (in Fauzai, 2010: 15), “speaking in a second or foreign language has often been viewed as the most demanding of the four skills”. According to Nunan (1991, p.39), for most people mastering speaking skills is the single most important aspect of learning a foreign language, and success is measured in terms of the ability to carry on a conversation in that language (Nunan, 1991, p. 39). Moreover, Celce-Murcia(2001) mentions that “the ability to speak a language is synonymous with knowing that language since speech is the most basic means of human communication” (p.103). Hence, it becomes obvious that for a learner to master a language, she/he must be able to speak the language as the latter is regarded to be a means of communication.

Speaking is viewed to be a difficult skill to acquire. Learners find it as the most arduous skill as it requires not only great courage but also preparation to express his/her thoughts in the target language. Regarding this, Brown (1994) says that the nature of speaking is interpreted as an interactive process of constructing meaning which involves producing, receiving, and processing information. It requires the combination of linguistic and sociocultural competence, i.e. learners should not only know how to produce certain points of language regarding grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary, but also understand when, why, and in what ways to produce language (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000). Therefore, being able to speak a foreign language, create a coherent and meaningful conversation and achieve communication in real-life situations successfully requires more than just knowing its grammatical and semantic rules. Shumin (as cited in Widiati & Cahyono, 2006) notes an important issue that effective oral communication requires the ability to use the language appropriately in social interactions. This refers to the notion of communicative competence. Accordingly, foreign language learners need to acquire not only linguistic but also pragmatic competence of the language which is the knowledge acquired through exposure and use (Hedgcock as cited in Chen, 2005).
As far as English is a foreign language in Armenia, it causes a real challenge both for teachers to teach and learners to learn. One of the major difficulties that Armenian teachers face when helping learners to improve speaking skills is that students do not live in an English speaking environment. They have limited opportunities to use the language both inside the classroom and outside of it. The learners, as a rule, do not experience the appropriate occasions to transfer their knowledge from language learning situations to language using situations. Despite the fact, that there have been a variety of language teaching methods introduced which emphasize the use of the English language in real life situations and for social interactions in order to develop the students' skills, the outcomes are not satisfying. The problem lies not only in methods used but also the students themselves as their role in language learning process is of crucial importance. Students should realize that they are the ones who are responsible for their own learning and they should become active learners and get involved in their own language learning process. It is in this context where strategies become important to enhance students' language abilities in order for them to be self-sufficient and able to direct their own learning process. According to Oxford (1990), language learning strategies help learners learn by themselves and they are steps taken by students to enhance their own learning (p. 1). Dörnyei (2005) states that language learning strategies can help learners become active and conscious, and can help them gain language learning proficiency.

Performing a quick search in the review of literature it becomes obvious that there are a relatively few number of research studies that aim at evaluating the effectiveness of providing foreign language learners with formal training in the application of strategies for speaking as compared with other language skills such as reading, writing and listening.

The results of the study carried out by O'Malley and Chamot (1990) showed that there is a positive relationship between the use of metacognitive, cognitive, and social-affective strategies and the performance of speaking tasks. The learners of the experimental group improved their speaking skills significantly as compared with that of the control one.

The results of another study carried out by Dornyei (1995) revealed that it is quite possible to train learners to employ communication strategies. The researchers trained high school students in Hungary who were learning English as a foreign language to use three communication strategies: topic avoidance and replacement, circumlocution, and fillers and hesitation devices. The researchers draw the conclusion that training learners directly to use communicative strategies is efficient as “they provide the learners with a sense of security in the L2 by allowing them room to manoeuvre in times of difficulty. Rather than giving up their massage learners may decide to try and remain in the conversation and achieve their communicative goal” (p.80).

The focus of the current study is to reveal whether exposing EFL learners to an instructional treatment in which speaking would be developed with the implementation of strategies/activities would result in the learners’ better gains in speaking proficiency in terms of fluency, pronunciation, grammar, as well as vocabulary. The study also aims at disclosing the learners’ attitude towards implementing strategies.

2 METHODOLOGY

Based on the background described above, this study following cause-effect and descriptive research focuses on the following two questions:

1. To what extent do strategies develop EFL learners’ speaking skills?
2. What is EFL learners’ attitude towards using strategies for the purposes of improving speaking skills?

The study went with null hypothesis which was the following:

*There is no relationship between EFL learners’ speaking skills and digital storytelling.*

2.1 Research Design

The study is reported to be a mixed-method research study with a quasi-experimental design. Two groups of participants took part in the study as the investigated groups. One of the groups was experimental which received the treatment, i.e., speaking skills were addressed to be developed with the implementation of four strategies/activities. The other was the control group which received the placebo, i.e. the same speaking tasks were carried out on the traditional speaking activities.
At the beginning of the research study students had a diagnostic test and were assigned the task of giving oral presentations based on the topics of their interest. They were given 15 minutes to prepare on the topic and speak. The results revealed that students of both the experimental group and the control group could not complete the task successfully. They had difficulty with linking and organizing ideas and lacked confidence. Researchers have come up with the following strategies to overcome the mentioned problems.

The first suggested strategy was "Building a wall", which is an effective way to help students express their thoughts coherently. Students were given topics and asked to relate them to real life situations. The purpose of asking students to speak about their personal live is to help students have a natural flow of words. Students have to combine these words using sequencing words (e.g, first, second, ... finally; to start with;... eventually) to have an organized speech.

The second strategy is "Listen and comprehend", the aim of which is to help learners listen attentively and make discussions. The students were supposed to listen, write: 1. a summary of main points, 2. questions put forth by the speaker, 3. write the view of the speaker (positive, negative) and 4. general theme of the topic.

The third strategy/activity is called "Competition", when there is a game that drives everyone to win. Games develop not only language knowledge but also boost confidence.

The fourth one is called "The use of flowery language". The use of idioms unquestionably plays a very important role in enriching speaking skills. It shows the level of sophistication of the speaker.

2.2 Setting and Participants of the Study

The current study was conducted in an EFL context in Yerevan, more specifically in the Experimental English Classes (EEC), offered by the Department of English Programs at American University of Armenia. The study was conducted with students of information level who had pre-intermediate level of language proficiency. They were placed to the level according to the results of the placement test that they had taken at the very beginning of the course. The total number of the participants was 24 including males and females, whose age ranged from 10 to 15.

2.3 The Instrumentations of the Study

There were three sets of measurement instruments employed in this study: speaking proficiency pre-test and post test, a semi-structured interview, and a close-ended attitudinal questionnaire.

2.3.1 Speaking Proficiency Tests

Speaking proficiency pre and post tests were developed according to the criteria suggested by PET Speaking Test. The criterion-referenced assessment was applied when grading the examinees, i.e., they were assessed on their individual performance, not in relation to each other. They were expected to develop conversations, participate in the interactions, and respond to the tasks correctly and appropriately.

2.3.2 Interview

The interview was administered to the participants of the experimental group at the end of the course. The series of questions aimed to investigate the learners' viewpoints, perception, and impression of implementing speaking skills. It was conducted face-to-face, and the participants were tape-recorded and transcribed.

2.3.3 Questionnaire

The aim of the questionnaire employed in this study was to investigate the Armenian EFL learners' attitude and perception towards using speaking strategies/activities with the purpose to develop their speaking skills. The questionnaire was conducted with the participants of the experimental group at the end of the course. The statements of the questionnaire were provided in the target language and the learners' native language, i.e., both in English and in Armenian. The reason for providing the questionnaire in both languages was twofold: firstly, it put the researcher on the safe and more confident side to gain reliable results, and secondly, it saved the learners of the concern of misunderstanding.
2.4 Data Analysis

The study used both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data obtained from pre and post test scores was analyzed through non-parametric Wilcoxon and Mann-Whitney tests using a statistical program SPSS for within and between group comparisons. The quantitative data obtained through questionnaire was analyzed through descriptive statistics.

To analyse the quantitative data collected through the second category in the interview, a frequency analysis was conducted through descriptive statistics. Cross-case analysis was employed to analyse the qualitative data obtained through the semi-structured interview.

3 RESULTS

The results of the data analysis are presented in accordance with the posed research questions.

3.1 Analysis of the Data of the First Research Question

To answer the first research question, quantitative data was collected via pre and post tests conducted at the beginning and at the end of the course, respectively. Both tests were graded by two raters.

3.1.1 Inter-Rater Reliability Analysis

Since there is a need to be sure that the scores obtained for data analysis are consistent measures of the ability which is intended to be measured, two raters graded the participants. In order to establish inter-rater reliability of the scores of both pre and post speaking tests, statistical analysis was conducted using the reliability test. Cronbach’s alpha reliability scale was employed to measure the internal consistency of scores.

While conducting inter-rater analysis for the pre-test scores, it was disclosed that Cronbach’s Alpha was equal to 0.951 which suggests that the items have a very high internal consistency since a reliability coefficient of .70 or higher is regarded as high reliability. Cronbach’s Alpha for the post-test was equal to 0.975 which again assigns a very high reliability.

Inter-rater reliability for both pre and post test was also calculated and Cronbach’s Alpha for the four items was revealed to be 0.952 which suggests a very high internal reliability. Accordingly, it can be stated that there exists a high inter-rater reliability between the speaking pre and post test scores.

3.1.2 Wilcoxon Tests for within Group Comparisons

To determine whether participants of both of the groups (experimental and control) have improved their spoken production due the instructions, Wilcoxon test was employed. To conduct within group analysis, two comparisons are made:

Comparison 1: Did the control group improve speaking skills significantly due to the instruction at the end of the course?

To conduct this comparison, Wilcoxon test was carried out based on the pre-test and the post-test scores of the control group. Table 1 below displays the results of the analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Wilcoxon Test for Control Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Z</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the table illustrates, for Wilcoxon test of within group comparison of the pre and post test results of the control group, the Z value is 3.070 with significance level of p =.002. As the analysis show, the probability value is less than 0.05 which shows a significant difference between the pre-test and the post-test scores of the control group in favour of the post-test. Therefore, it can be concluded that the learners in the control group benefited from the instruction to a great extent.

Comparison 2: Did the experimental group improve speaking skills significantly due to the treatment at the end of the course?
In order to answer this question, another Wilcoxon test was accomplished between the pre and post test scores of the experimental group. The results of the analysis of the experimental group are tabulated in the table below.

Table 2. Wilcoxon Test for Experimental Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Z</th>
<th>-3.074a</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.002</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In close line with the results represented in the table above, for Wilcoxon test of comparison of pre and post test results in the experimental group, the Z value is 3.074 with significance level of p = .002. Since the probability (p) is less than 0.05, it can be assumed that there is a significant difference between the learners’ performance of speaking pre and post tests in the experimental group in favour of the post-test.

Thus, the results of the Wilcoxon test analysis revealed that the learners in both the control and the experimental groups performed better on the post-test, and there was observed a significant progress in both groups. This may mean that the instructions in both groups were effective and promoted the improvement of speaking skills.

3.1.3 Mann-Whitney U Test for between Group Comparisons

With the aim to determine the results of the pre and post test scores between both groups, Mann-Whitney U test was employed. In order to analyze the data and answer the first research question, the following comparisons were made subsequently:

Comparison 1: *Was there any significant difference between the performances on the speaking proficiency pre-test of the control and experimental groups before the experiment?*

The table below illustrates the results of the mean rank of twelve sets of the pre-test scores for the experimental and control groups.

Table 3. Mann-Whitney Test of Pre-Test Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Z</th>
<th>-1.072</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.284</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exact Sig. [2*(1-tailed Sig.)]</td>
<td>.291a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As it can be seen in Table 3, for Mann-Whitney test of comparison of the pre-test results for both the experimental and the control groups, the Z value is 1.072 with a significance level of p=0.291. Since the probability value is larger than 0.05, it can be stated that there was no significant difference in the pre-test results of the two groups. Accordingly, it can be concluded that the two groups were at the similar level of oral proficiency at the beginning of the course.

Comparison 2: *Was there any significant difference between the performances on the speaking proficiency post-test of the control and experimental groups after the experiment?*

Mann-Whitney test was carried out to compare the mean ranks of the speaking post-test scores of both groups. Table 3 shows the results of the post-test scores of two groups after getting the treatment.

Table 4. Mann-Whitney Test of Post-Test Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Z</th>
<th>-3.351</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exact Sig. [2*(1-tailed Sig.)]</td>
<td>.000a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
According to the results presented in the table above, for Mann-Whitney test of comparison of the post-test results for the experimental and control groups, the Z value is 3.351 with a significance level of p=0.000. The probability value is less than 0.05 which indicates statistically significant difference between the two groups. Accordingly, it can be concluded that the two groups, having the similar level of speaking skill at the beginning of the course, showed statistically different results on the post-test in favour of the experimental group.

3.2 Analysis of the Data for the Second Research Question

To answer the second research question and disclose the learners’ attitude towards using strategies to improve the speaking skills, both quantitative and qualitative data was collected. The quantitative data was collected through an attitudinal questionnaire, and the qualitative data was collected via a semi-structured interview.

3.2.1 Analysis of the Quantitative Data

Summarizing the results of the post attitudinal questionnaire, it may be inferred that the learners highly appreciate the role that strategies may play in language learning process. The great majority of the learners stated that it helped them to improve their speaking skills. They agreed and strongly agreed that due to the implementation of the strategies/activities their pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary, as well as grammar and comprehension of the target language were improved.

The participants stated that strategy-based instruction provided them with more opportunities to practice the target language outside the classroom. They also highlighted that it helped them to better organize and express their thoughts and produce more organized and beautiful speeches. To the negative statement that strategy-based instruction did not help them practice and improve their speaking skills, the vast majority of the learners strongly disagreed and the rest of them simply disagreed. Therefore, it can be claimed that all the learners were sure and stated that the strategies/activities enabled them to practice and improve their speaking proficiency in the target language. The analysis of the statement which aimed at investigating the learners’ attitude towards the use of strategies in terms of its advantages and disadvantages showed that the vast majority of the learners stated that it had more advantages rather than disadvantages.

Summing up the results of the attitudinal questionnaire, it can be inferred that the participants demonstrated a very positive attitude towards the chosen strategies. They stated that using strategies helped them to improve their speaking skills, and that they would like to have another course in which the strategy-based instruction would be implemented again.

3.2.2 Analysis of the Qualitative Data

The analysis of the data obtained for the second research question revealed the learners’ positive attitude towards using strategies. The learners restated the positive effect of strategy-based instruction on the development of their speaking skills. Among the advantages, the learners mentioned the fact that it provided them with great opportunities to improve their speaking skills by highlighting the positive effect that the using strategies had on their vocabulary, fluency, grammar, and pronunciation.

4 CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This study set out to investigate the effect of strategy-based instruction on EFL learners’ speaking skills, and reveal the learners’ attitude towards it.

4.1 Discussion on the Findings Related to the First Research Question

The findings of the quantitative data collected for the first question via the pre and post tests suggest that the effectiveness of the treatment on speaking skills is positive. While conducting the statistical analysis of the pre-test data, it was revealed that there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups’ oral proficiency at the beginning of the experiment. Carrying out statistical analysis for within group comparisons, it was revealed that both groups had developed their proficiency in oral production to a large extent. However, between groups comparison conducted for the post-test showed a statistically significant difference (p=0.000) in the learners’ oral production in favour of the experimental group. Accordingly, it can be concluded that the two groups having similar level of oral proficiency at the beginning of the treatment, showed significant gains on speaking post-test, which suggests that the participants in both groups developed their speaking skills due to the
instructions. Therefore, the research hypothesis was rejected, and a positive relationship between strategy-based instruction and speaking performance was affirmed.

The findings of the study allow us to assume that in this way, learners get lots of practice in their fluency, grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary and become more confident in using the target language and communicating in it. Thus, the positive results of the study also suggest that strategy-based instruction can be viewed as a good way to engage learners in modern ways of learning as it has a significant potential for developing EFL learners’ communicative competence in the target language.

4.2 Discussion on the Findings Related to the Second Research Question

The study was also directed to reveal the learners’ attitude towards the program and investigate its benefits and shortcomings according to the learners’ perception. The results of the questionnaire and the interview data analysis revealed that the learners had a very positive attitude towards the instruction. The findings showed that they felt very enthusiastic about integrating strategy-based instruction into their learning and enjoyed it to a great extent.

The findings disclose that according to the learners’ positive attitude, strategy-based instruction is viewed to contribute to the enhancement of their vocabulary and the improvement of speaking skills in terms of pronunciation, fluency, and grammar. The learners think that the strategies/activities, besides providing better outcomes in speaking proficiency, makes speaking in the target language easier and more comfortable, helps to organize and express a fluent and accurate speech. Their repetition in the pronunciation of words until obtaining the correct form contributes positively to the development of their pronunciation. In addition, the learners assess their own fluency by listening to their recorded voices and stories.

4.3 Limitations of the Study

No research is perfect and the current one is no exception. The limitations encountered in this study are the limited number of participants, the time restriction, and the fact that it lacked randomization.

4.4 Recommendations for Further Studies

In close line with the limitations of the study and the fact that the field has not been fully explored, further investigations are encouraged. For the further research, it is recommended to investigate the following areas and reveal

- the relationship between strategy-based instruction and writing/listening/reading skills
- the relationship between strategy-based instruction and vocabulary enhancement
- the relationship between strategy-based instruction and the reinforcement of learners’ engagement

For further studies, it would also be appropriate to do longitudinal research using broader samples of populations.

REFERENCES


