

The role of instruction in the development of EFL learners' pragmatic competence

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This paper reports on a study which examined the efficacy of explicit instruction at the pragmatic level. Specifically, the main purpose of the study was to investigate the effect of explicit instruction on EFL learners' development of refusal-related speech acts. A total of 104 EFL learners participated in this study and were assigned to two groups (explicit and control). The explicit group received direct instruction, explanatory handouts, role play, and metapragmatic explanation on the use of appropriate refusals. The control group received none of these. Findings indicated that the explicit group outperformed the control group.

Key words: explicit instruction; refusal speech act; pragmatic development; EFL; Iran

Introduction

L2 learners' linguistic development is a well-researched area with a wealth of literature in language pedagogy and applied linguistics with increasing attention paid to pragmatic competence. This gives rise to a growing interest in different aspects of pragmatics in language research and pedagogy. Previous studies have shown that teaching and learning pragmatic aspects of language decrease the possibility of communication breakdowns in L2 learning. Moreover, instruction is seen to have a bearing on functional abilities in L2 with the aim of producing and comprehending language to suit different conversational situations (T. Takahashi & Beebe, 1987). As Thomas (1983) put it, "pragmatic failure stems from the inability to understand what is meant by what is said" (p. 92). In order to avoid the anticipated effect of pragmatic failure in conversational situations, whether personal or political, scholars like Blum-Kulka (1989) believe that it may be beneficial to include explicit pragmatic instruction in L2 syllabi.

In educational contexts, various factors are thought to influence language learners' pragmatic development among which the role of instruction has lately been highlighted (Alcón Soler & Guzmán Pitarch, 2010). Moreover, earlier studies have indicated that language learners who master lexical and grammatical issues encounter difficulty in conveying their intended meaning appropriately in various communicative contexts (Eslami-Rasekh, Eslami-Rasekh, & Fatahi, 2004; Keshavarz, Eslami, & Ghahraman,

2006; Yu, 2008). In this regard the role of instruction sounds necessary in promoting L2 learners' pragmatic competence (Tajeddin & Hosseinpour, 2014).

As Cohen (2008) argued, language learners do not acquire pragmatic performance through osmosis. He referred to the beneficial effects of explicit instruction on successful pragmatic performance. In fact, his emphasis on the effectiveness of explicit instruction originated from his own personal experience of pragmatic failure.

Studies on pragmatics have emphasized the role of explicit instruction in promoting L2 pragmatic competence (Bacelar da Silva, 2003; Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989; Norris & Ortega, 2000; Rose, 2005). Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1986) stressed that pragmatic failure in learners' communication stemmed from inadequate linguistic knowledge or difficulty in processing general pragmatic knowledge easily. In this regard, pragmatic instruction would help learners to increase their pragmatic knowledge by providing sufficient input exposure, discussions about communicative action and its underlying metapragmatic knowledge, and conversational activities which challenge the learners' linguistic abilities. Therefore, based on the significance and necessity of instruction in increasing pragmatic competence, the goal of the current study is to seek the effect of instruction on promoting EFL learners' pragmatic competence.

Review of the related literature

Instruction of pragmatic competence has received remarkable attention because of its recognition as one of the main language ability components (Bachman, 1990). Research on pragmatic competence has mainly focused on the influence of different methodologies for its improvement. Those methodologies were mostly based on cognitive approaches to language learning (Bardovi-Harlig & Vellenga, 2012; Nguyen, Pham, & Pham, 2012) one of the major concepts of which is noticing (Schmidt, 1994, 2001) which can be accomplished through different instructional approaches such as implicit and explicit instruction (Eslami, Mirzaei, & Dini, 2015). Language teachers have different options at their disposal in order to enhance L2 learners' pragmatic competence. They can use explicit-implicit methodologies to instruct target form–function–context mappings.

Previous studies on the influences of L2 pragmatic teaching have mainly compared explicit and implicit instruction; or compared explicit instruction with no explicit instruction (see S. Takahashi, 2010). In a meta-analysis, Jeon and Kaya (2006) examined various aspects of pragmatics in 13 interlanguage pragmatic instruction studies. They reported larger average influences for explicit instruction ($d = .70$) than implicit instruction ($d = .44$). Nevertheless, considering the confidence intervals they could not make claims for the superiority of explicit instruction. Conversely, some researchers have reported that explicit instruction outpaces implicit instruction (Alcón Soler, 2005; Alcón Soler & Guzmán Pitarch, 2010; Bacelar da Silva, 2003; Koike & Pearson, 2005; Martínez-Flor & Fukuya, 2005; Rose & Ng, 2001; S. Takahashi, 2001; Tateyama, 2001). Favours the nature of explicit instruction over the implicit in the treatment phase of L2 pragmatic research, Bacelar da Silva (2003) conducted a longitudinal study to investigate the role of explicit instruction on the development of polite refusal speech acts. The researcher taught sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic aspects of refusal speech acts by means of incorporating metapragmatic knowledge into the principles of task-based language teaching methodology. Findings showed that explicit instruction promotes learners' pragmatic competence of refusal speech acts.

Consistent with this line of research, Alcón Soler and Guzmán Pitarch (2010) examined the effect of instruction on pragmatic awareness in the planning and execution

of refusal speech acts. In the treatment phase of their study, they used a pedagogical model which involved four optional steps: identifying refusals in interaction, explaining the speech act set, noticing and understanding refusal sequences, negotiating and exploring learners' use of refusals. Participants' retrospective verbal reports through interview in the pretest and posttest phase of their study were audio taped. Further, the audio-taped reports were played back to the participants in order to find their attitude toward paying attention to the linguistics, pragmalinguistic, and/or sociopragmatic aspects of refusal speech acts. Findings showed the effectiveness of explicit instruction in drawing learners' attention to pragmatics. In other words, regarding Schmidt's (1993, 1994, 2001) Noticing Hypothesis, findings of Alcón Soler and Guzmán Pitarch (2010) showed that instructional activities which require high levels of attention-drawing features are more helpful in increasing pragmatic knowledge than mere exposure to positive evidence. Moreover, findings confirmed that explicit instruction shifted learners' attention from linguistic to pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic issues in the posttest.

Rose (2005) conducted a review of the effects of instruction on the development of pragmatics, teachability of pragmatics, and the effectiveness of different methodologies on yielding different results. Based on the results of various studies, Rose (2005) stated that different aspects of pragmatics like discourse markers, speech acts, and pragmatic comprehension are teachable. Moreover, it appears that learners who received instruction on pragmatics outperformed those who did not. Norris and Ortega (2000) reported that:

The interpretation of the cumulative findings for explicit/implicit instructional treatments should be tempered by several methodological observations. Testing of learning outcomes usually favours explicit treatments by asking learners to engage in explicit memory tasks and/or in discrete, decontextualized L2 use; the explicit treatments are typically more intense and varied than the implicit ones; and, implicit treatments may require longer-post intervention observation periods for non-linear learning curves to be detected. (p. 501)

Methodology

Participants

The participants of this study were 104 upper-intermediate EFL learners studying English language at two language centres in Iran. They were in their third year of institute-level English. They consisted of 36 males and 68 females. Their ages ranged from 19-22. Most of the participants were bilingual (Persian and Turkish) and none of them had been in English-speaking countries.

Research design

The study used interventional classroom research in order to examine if explicit instruction contributes to the development of English refusal strategies. The participants were divided into two groups. The experimental group received explicit instruction on refusal speech act strategies (explicit group) and the other group did not receive any explicit instruction on the use of refusal speech act (control group). Before applying the treatment, the groups were given the Discourse Completion Test (hereafter DCT, and based on Blum-Kulka et al., 1989, see Appendix I) as a pre-test to obtain their existing knowledge of refusal strategies. After implementing the planned experimental procedure, the groups' gain of the target speech act was analysed through DCT as a

posttest. It's worth noting that the DCT included situations such as refusing invitations, requests, suggestions, and offers, for example:

You are at a friend's house watching TV. The friend recommends a snack to you. You turn it down, saying that you have gained weight and don't feel comfortable in your new clothes.

Friend: Hey, why don't you try this new diet I've been telling you about? It can make you lose weight. (Suggestions: refusing to equal status)

You refuse by saying:

Instructional target and materials

This study includes the four types of English refusals reported by Duan and Wannaruk (2010), that is: refusing invitations, refusing requests, refusing suggestions, and refusing offers. There are also three different status types in each of the refusal types and they refer to high, equal or low status between the person who refuses and his/her interlocutor. These status types can be classified into: "refusing a person of higher status, refusing a person of equal status, and refusing a person of lower status" (Duan & Wannaruk, 2010, p. 95). The contents of the instructional materials were adopted from Duan (2008) and Wannaruk (2008), and contain all of the above-mentioned refusal types and social statuses (Table 1).

Table 1. Contents of instructional materials (adopted from Duan, 2008, p. 80)

Session/Unit	Dialogue
1. Refusals to Invitations	1. Refusing a teacher's invitation to a party (L-H) 2. Refusing a friend's invitation to see a movie (E-E) 3. Refusing a junior classmate's invitation to speak for an orientation programme (H-L)
2. Refusals to Suggestions	1. Refusing a boss's suggestion to change a project design a little bit (L-H). 2. Refusing a friend's suggestion to have a party in your house (E-E) 3. Refusing a high school student's suggestion to skip the details (H-L)
3. Refusals to Offers	1. Refusing a dean (teacher)'s offer of teaching assistantship (L-H) 2. Refusing a friend's offer for a ride (E-E) 3. Refusing a cleaning lady's payment for a broken vase (H-L)
4. Refusals to Requests	1. Refusing a mother's request (L-H) 2. Refusing a classmate's request to use a computer (E-E) 3. Refusing a junior member's request for an interview (H-L)

Notes:

L-H=a lower refuser to a higher interlocutor

E-E= an equal refuser to an equal interlocutor

H-L= a higher refuser to a lower interlocutor

Procedures and treatment

Before starting the treatment, the participants were given a written refusal speech act DCT. A brief description and instructions were given to them to familiarize them with the required steps in completing this type of test task. After completion, 52 of the

participants were assigned to the explicit group and 52 to the control group. The treatment phase was then operated for twelve 90-minute sessions. The teachers were two experienced language teachers who had majored in teaching English as a foreign language, had spent 2 years in native English speaking countries and were familiar with different speech act realization in the two cultural contexts. They were considered to be interculturally competent. Before starting the instruction, the teachers were trained to follow the pre-planned procedures. To ensure accurate and precise instructional procedures, teachers were given handouts including every detail of the treatment phase. The materials were taken from Duan (2008) and the content of the used materials were exactly the same as used by Duan who had collected them based on the findings of previous studies and English teaching textbooks which, as Duan (2008) put it, “were proofread by American native speakers to check if the situations designed in the materials were real in American English situations” (p. 79).

Each session was devoted to one refusal type with its different status. The treatment started with listening to the adopted dialogues from textbooks, workbooks, and Duan’s study (2008). This stage was followed by some questions about refusal realization in the presented dialogues. By answering the questions, the learners were provided with explanatory handouts which explicitly presented the learning targets in each of the status types. At this stage, the teachers explained about the use of refusal strategies and their functions. They also compared Iranian and American English refusal strategies and discussed target speech act realization. The teachers explained the appropriacy of the use of learning targets of refusal strategies which suit each of the status types. Table 2 shows samples of strategies, adopted from Wannaruk (2008, p. 336), which teachers used in instruction process.

Table 2. Classification of refusal strategies

Regret	Utterances expressing regret (e.g., “I’m sorry”; “I feel terrible”) Positive opinion/feeling or agreement (e.g., “that’s a good idea”; “I wish I could help you but...”)
Excuse, reason and explanation	Excuse, reason and explanation: Explaining a reason for noncompliance Statement of negative consequences (e.g., “It’s your grade, not mine”).

After the teacher’s explicit instruction, the participants took part in role play in paired groups. The role play was supervised by the teachers in order to provide corrective feedback for any inappropriate refusal strategy use. The feedback was provided in the form of metapragmatic explanation. Unlike the explicit group, the control group did not receive any explanatory handouts, explicit instruction or metapragmatic explanation. In other words, they were just exposed to the dialogues and comprehension questions. Five days after the treatment, the DCT used as the pretest was administered as a posttest to both of the groups.

Data analysis

The rating criteria of Hudson, Detmer, and Brown (1992), Hudson, Brown, and Detmer (1995) and Hudson (2001) were used to rate the four aspects of appropriacy of the refusals in the pretest and posttest DCTs. The rating criteria ranged from “not appropriate and not acceptable” (1) to “completely appropriate” (5). The scale appraised the learners’ performance on the basis of 1) correct expressions, 2) quality of

information, 3) strategies choices, and 4) level of formality. Additionally, in order to obtain inter-rater reliability of the rated DCTs, two raters were employed to rate 25% of the DCTs independently. The interrater reliability was measured by administering a Pearson correlation, and the result yielded interrater reliability of ($r=0.88$). Moreover, a paired-samples t-test was used to determine the effectiveness of explicit instruction on making a contribution to the learners' development of refusal speech act knowledge.

Results

The effectiveness of explicit instruction on the development of refusal-related pragmatic competence was measured by analysing the participants' performance in the pretest and posttest DCTs. In this section, we focus on the differences between the explicit and control groups' gains in refusal-related pragmatic competence. A paired-samples t-test statistical analysis was conducted with the results of both groups. The results for the explicit group (Table 3) show a considerable difference in the means of the pre-test (2.01) and the post-test (3.28) which through use of a paired-samples t-test (Table 4) is demonstrated to be statistically significant ($t(51) = -10.29$, $p = 0.00$). This demonstrates that explicit instruction as administered to the explicit group caused their pragmatic production of the refusal-related speech act to develop.

Table 3. Pre- and post-test results for the explicit group

Test	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest	2.01	52	.239	.033
Posttest	3.28	52	.870	.120

Table 4. Paired-samples t-test for explicit group learners' use of refusals in the posttest

Test	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Differences	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Pretest	-	51	.00	-1.26	-1.516	-1.021
Posttest	10.29					

A comparison of the mean scores of the control group show that the means on the posttest (2.57) and on the pre-test (2.48) are very similar (Table 5) and the results of a paired-samples t-test (Table 6) show no significant differences between the scores ($t(51) = -1.93$, $p = .058$). Thus, it appears that the mere exposure to refusal-related speech act realizations in different situations did not carry the same benefits as explicit instruction did in terms of developing competence with refusal-related speech acts.

Table 5. Pre- and post-test results for the control group

Test	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest	2.48	52	.610	.084
Posttest	2.57	52	.605	.083

Table 6. Paired-samples t-test for control group learners' use of refusals in the posttest

Test	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Differences	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Pretest	-1.93	51	.058	-.096	-.195	.003
Posttest						

Discussion and conclusion

The study investigated the effect of explicit instruction on improving refusal-related speech act use. The findings, which show that the explicit group outperformed the control group, are in line with previous studies which highlighted the superiority of explicit instruction over mere exposure to target speech act (Alcón Soler, 2007). Our findings, specifically, are in line with Alcón Soler and Guzmán Pitarch (2010) study which provided support for explicit instruction's potentiality in making a contribution to the development of L2 learners' refusal speech act knowledge. Accordingly, our results, in line with previous studies (Eslami et al., 2015; Ifantidou, 2013; Koike & Pearson, 2005; Martínez-Flor & Fukuya, 2005; Safont, 2003, 2004, 2005; Trosborg, 2003; Wishnoff, 2000; Yoshimi, 2001), seem to confirm that instruction plays an influential role in directing language learners' attention to target pragmatic issues. Thus, our results can be linked to Schmidt's (1993) hypothesis, which states that awareness and noticing are considered to have a pivotal role in turning input into intake by directing L2 learners' attention to target features. In this regard, explicit instruction, in contrast to mere exposure, acts successfully in directing language learners' attention to the association of pragmalinguistic functions and sociopragmatic constraints involved in using refusal speech acts with relevant forms. In other words, mere exposure to target features does not guarantee EFL learner's pragmatic development (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001, 2013; Kasper & Schmidt, 1996). Regarding the efficacy of instruction in facilitating L2 learners' awareness of form-function-context mappings, Alcón Soler and Guzmán Pitarch (2010), based on the elicited data through verbalized retrospective method, reported that L2 learners improved in form-function-context mappings involved in using refusal strategies. Our findings, in line with previous studies, indicate the usefulness of instruction in improving L2 learners' pragmatic knowledge in an EFL context. The rationale behind the necessity of instruction in an EFL context is the lack of exposure to target features. Nevertheless, Cohen (2008) believed that mere exposure and submersion in target or L2 contexts cannot lead to native-like proficiency in pragmatics.

As indicated by recent studies in the realm of SLA (DeKeyser, 2003; Ellis, 2004, 2006; Norris & Ortega, 2001; Schmidt, 1994, 2001), factors such as noticing and metapragmatic awareness play an influential role in L2 learning. That is, when L2 learners' attention is directed to the relationship between linguistic forms and functions it can lead to L2 development. While mere exposure to target features does not draw conscious attention to the underlying relationship between form and function, the explicit instruction involves meta-talk over linguist rules and form-function-context mappings. The meta-talk might act as an important factor in directing L2 learners noticing to the target features (Eslami et al., 2015). Additionally, the inclusion of meta-talk in language classes can lead the learners to process and notice relationships between the meanings and underlying rules deep (DeKeyser, 2003). The findings of the current study provide evidence in favour of the effectiveness of explicit instruction on enhancing L2 learners' pragmatic competence (as suggested by Bardovi-Harlig, 2013; Halenko & Jones, 2011; Huth, 2006; Nguyen et al., 2012; Takimoto, 2009). Furthermore, this study buttresses the accumulating literature arguing for the importance of awareness and attention in SLA and interlanguage pragmatics.

Implications

Due to the significant role of appropriate language use and pragmatic competence in inter/cross-cultural communications (Taguchi, 2012), it is recommended that teachers draw L2 learners' attention to form-function-context mappings through explicit instruction. Employing different explicit instructional tasks and meta-talk enables L2 learners to process the relationship between linguistic forms and functions. It is worth noting that the role of explicit instruction of pragmatics in an EFL context like Iran is of prime importance because EFL learners have limited access to native speakers.

It might be highlighted that understanding of interlanguage pragmatic instruction can be maximized by examining the role of dichotomous interventional teaching approaches. In terms of pedagogy, promising future avenues to enhance L2 learners' pragmatic competence may be found in technology and equally in studying the effect of different teaching approaches to the development of competence with speech acts.

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Appendix I: Written DCT (after Blum-Kulka et al., 1989)

Instruction: In this questionnaire, you will find several communication situations in which you interact with someone. Pretend you are the person in the situation. You must refuse all requests, suggestions, invitations, and offers. Write down your response. Respond as you would in an actual situation.

1. You are in your professor's office talking about your final paper which is due in two weeks. Your professor indicates that he has a guest speaker coming to his next class and invites you to attend that lecture but you cannot. (Invitation: refusing to higher status)

Your professor: By the way, I have a guest speaker in my next class who will be discussing issues which are relevant to your paper. Would you like to attend?

You refuse by saying:

2. A friend invites you to dinner, but you have something important to do and you really can't stand this friend's husband/wife. (Invitation: refusing to equal status)

Friend: How about coming over for dinner Sunday night? We're having a small dinner party.

You refuse by saying:

3. You are a senior student in your department. A freshman, whom you met a few times before, invites you to lunch in the university cafeteria but you do not want to go. (Invitation: refusing to lower status)

Freshman: I haven't had my lunch yet. Would you like to join me?

You refuse by saying:

4. You are at your desk trying to find a report that your boss just asked for. While you are searching through the mess on your desk, your boss walks over. (Suggestions: refusing to higher status)

Boss: You know, maybe you should try and organize yourself better. I always write myself little notes to remind me of things. Perhaps you should give it a try!

You refuse by saying:

5. You are at a friend's house watching TV. The friend recommends a snack to you. You turn it down, saying that you have gained weight and don't feel comfortable in your new clothes.

Friend: Hey, why don't you try this new diet I've been telling you about? It can make you lose weight. (Suggestions: refusing to equal status)

You refuse by saying:

6. You are a language teacher at a university. It is just about the middle of the term now and one of your students asks to speak to you.

Student: Ah, excuse me, some of the students were talking after class recently and we kind of feel that the class would be better if you could give us more practice in conversation and less on grammar. (Suggestion: refusing to lower status)

You refuse by saying:

7. You've been working in an advertising agency now for some time. The boss offers you a raise and promotion, but it involves moving. You don't want to go. Today, the boss calls you into his office. (Offer: refusing to higher status)

Boss: I'd like to offer you an executive position in our new office in Hicktown. It's a great town---only 3 hours from here by plane. And, a nice raise comes with the position.

You refuse by saying:

8. You are going through some financial difficulties. One of your friends offers you some money but you do not want to accept it. (Offer: refusing to equal status)

Your friend: I know you are having some financial difficulties these days. You always help me whenever I need something. I can lend you \$20. Would you accept it from me?

You refuse by saying:

9. You are at your home with your friend. You are admiring the expensive new pen that your father gave you. Your friend sets the pen down on a low table. At this time, your nanny goes past the low table, the pen falls on the floor and it is ruined. (Offer: refusing to lower status)

Nanny: Oh, I am so sorry. I'll buy you a new one.

You refuse by saying (Knowing she is only a teenager):

10. Your professor wants you to help plan a class party, but you are very busy this week. (Request: refusing to high status)

Professor: We need some people to plan the class party. Do you think you can help?

You refuse by saying:

11. A classmate, who frequently misses classes, asks to borrow your class notes, but you do not want to give them to him. (Request: refusing to equal status)

Your classmate: You know I missed the last class. Could I please borrow your notes from that class?

You refuse by saying:

12. You only have one day left before taking a final exam. While you are studying for the exam, one of your junior relatives, who is in high school, asks if you would help him with his homework but you cannot. (Request: refusing to lower status)

Your relative: I'm having problems with some of my homework assignments. Would you please help me with some of my homework tonight?

You refuse by saying