The Effect of the Instruction in Circumlocution on the Problem-Solving Ability in L1 and L2 Communication

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Abstract

The present study focused on the effect of instruction in circumlocution among communication strategies (CSs) on the communicative ability of Japanese EFL learners. Concerning the teachability of CSs, considerable controversy has persisted for the last decade. Negative viewers of CSs teachability have claimed that strategic competence develops in L1 and is freely transferable into L2, while positive viewers insist the usefulness of instruction in CSs. The present study hypothesized that circumlocution consists of transferable and untransferable parts between L1 and L2, both of which are teachable, and that instruction in circumlocution contributes to the development of communicative ability of the learners. In order to prove this assertion, two-month period instruction was given to the learners, and pre and post-test were conducted on L1 and L2. The results showed the significant improvements of the communicative ability and CS use of the learners both in L1 and L2, although the effects were greater in L2. It is assumed that in L2 the learners have improved both in referential level, which is transferable between different languages, and in encoding level, which is untransferable between languages, while they improved only in referential level in L1.

1. Introduction

There has been controversy over the teachability of CSs. Some researchers such as Kellerman (1991), Bialystok (1990) and Poulisse (1990) reject the validity of the training of CSs, claiming that CS competence develops in the learner’s L1 and is freely transferable to L2, while other researchers emphasize the teachability of CSs and report the usefulness of the training in CSs (e.g., Tarone, 1984; Dörnyei, 1995; Færch & Kasper, 1983b). Ellis argues that ‘... little has been discovered about the developmental nature of CSs in L2 production. Do learners simply use the strategic competence they have developed in relation to L1 production, or do they have to re-learn it for L2 use?’ (1994, p. 402).
The purpose of the present study is to discover how well EFL learners acquire the ability to make use of their existing linguistic knowledge to convey their intended message by instruction. To acquire a technique to manage the problems caused by the lack of linguistic resources whenever the speaker encounters them is, in other words, to gain the ability to make the best use of his/her already existing resources to achieve communication. If training in circumlocution can improve learners' communicative ability, it can make a considerable contribution to English education. The present study proposes the instruction in circumlocution to improve the EFL learners' communicative problem-solving skills, and conducts a comparative analysis of pre and post-tests in L1 and L2 to see how CSs are transferable between languages.

In the present study, CSs are regarded as productive strategies and are defined as conscious and intentional strategies or means by which L2 learners use to avoid discontinuity of communication in L2. They thus compensate for their insufficient linguistic competence, when they encounter communicative problems due to a lack of linguistic resources to conveying their message. Therefore the present study focuses on research concerning the EFL learners' production only, but not on the interaction in which an interlocutor is involved. Concerning circumlocution, it is regarded as the major part of CSs and is identified as all indirect approaches to indicate the speaker's concept, paraphrasing or describing the features of the target meaning in question when a speaker cannot obtain the exact expression to directly convey his/her intended meaning. The detailed contents of circumlocution are discussed later. To make the research methodology as clear as possible, the definition of communicability is limited to the ability, which the speaker has to convey his/her message or concept to the collocutor by some means or another. At the same time, the term communicative ability also refers to the equal definition.

The research questions addressed in the present studies are as follows:

Research Question 1: Can the instruction in circumlocution change meaningless silence in EFL learners' speech into meaningful production in English?

Research Question 2: If so, is the effect of the instruction on EFL learners' meaningless silence transferable to Japanese as well?

Research Question 3: Do EFL learners come to use a wider range of approaches to circumlocution in English by the instruction in circumlocution?

Research Question 4: If so, is the effect of the instruction on the range of approaches transferable to Japanese as well?

Research Question 5: Can the instruction in circumlocution improve the EFL learners' communicative ability in English?

2. Review of Related Studies

The most large-scale research on CSs so far is the Nijmegen project, a series of several studies by Kellerman, Bongaerts, and Poulissee. Their studies have achieved great results, which
contribute much to the field of CSs. Among them, their claim concerning the teachability of CSs is that since there were not any significant differences between L1 and L2 reference, L2 learners do not need to learn CSs in L2. They argue that CSs “are part and parcel of normal native speaker communicative life, then they already constitute a ready-made resource to be exploited in the second language” (Kellerman, 1991, p.144). Kellerman argues as follows:

There is no justification for providing training in compensatory strategies in the classroom. All things being equal, if learners seem to be poor strategy users in the L2 (worse than they are in the L1), it will be because they do not possess the linguistic means to use strategies properly. … Teach the learners more language and let the strategies look after themselves. (p. 158)

However, the problem is not as simple as regarding CSs in L1 and L2 as the same thing. The present study proposes that the problems in L2 communication should be addressed at two different levels: the referential level and the encoding level. As to the matter of whether the speaker knows what to refer to, there is no difference between L1 and L2 as Kellerman claims, while in the case of the encoding level, which concerns whether the speaker knows how to express his/her message, there is a big difference between them. It does not follow that we should not give the instruction in CSs after knowing “they do not possess the linguistic means to use strategies properly”. It is worth emphasizing that L2 learners will easily find the proper way to use the strategies if they are taught and trained in combination with the reference and the corresponding encoding. The concept model of the communicative problem for L2 learners is shown in Figure 1.

![Figure 1. Concept model of communicative problem](image)

Kellerman has discussed the matter of the teachability of CSs on the assumption that the learners already possess the enough referential ability both in L1 and L2. However, if they do not know the proper references to convey their meaning, they should rather be taught both the references and the forms together so that they can acquire the technique of how to use appropriate references with proper forms. If the instruction is efficient for the development of the L2 strategies, it will possibly be efficient for improvement of the L1 reference of poor strategy users in L1 as well.

Dörnyei (1995) reports the results of his quasi-experiment in EFL learners’ use of topic replacement, circumlocution and fillers as communicative problem-solving mechanisms due to
the learners' insufficient linguistic knowledge. According to the results, "in the treatment group, the posttraining results showed improvement in measures related to both the quality and quantity of strategy use" (p. 79) regardless of the learners' pre-training language proficiency, claiming that "more students in the treatment group showed improvement in their use of fillers" (p. 74). However, his analysis "did not produce significant results with respect to circumlocutions" (p. 74). As for this phenomenon, he proposed two possible reasons; "the treatment affected not so much the frequency of the circumlocutions but rather their quality" and "circumlocutions are not very common in everyday speech, and even in our tasks which were designed to pose language difficulties to the learners and thus elicit CSs, the frequency of circumlocutions was rather low" (pp. 74-75). There is however another possibility as a reason for this. In the training of circumlocution, he tended to put an emphasis on using relative clauses as forms to describe or define the objects. That possibly had an effect on the frequency of using circumlocutions by the learners. That is, the learners might have avoided using long and complex structures during their oral performance. If the learners had been encouraged to use short and simple forms to describe the objects, however, the results might have been different.

3. Method

First of all, it is necessary to give a supplementary explanation about circumlocution to clarify the range of circumlocution in the present study. The term 'circumlocution' referred to in the present study contains a wider range of concepts than those in traditional taxonomies. It includes generalization proposed by Færch and Kasper (1983b), approximation presented by Tarone (1977), and the superordinate term and paraphrase referred to by Yarmohammadi and Seif (1992). Superordinate term is regarded as a part of circumlocution in the present study, since when one tries to describe some object, it is usual to begin by limiting the range of the concept by using superordinate term, such as 'it's a kind of stationary and …' (correction fluid). One also might say such as 'it's like a spoon' (ladle) while he/she is circumlocuting, therefore resemblance should be included in circumlocution as well. Someone might identify this approach as being similar to approximation. However, Tarone’s examples of approximation, such as ‘worm’ for ‘silkworm’ and ‘pipe’ for ‘waterpipe’, are rather regarded as subordinate terms in the present study. Resemblance is the approach where the speaker refers to a similar object or concept using a form such as ‘it is like ~’ or ‘it looks like ~’. Likewise, generalization is considered to be equal to superordinate term in the present study.

In the present study, thirteen approaches as parts of circumlocution are identified, which were presented in the training and were observed in the learners’ performance. The followings are the description and example forms for each approach.

Circumlocution identified in the present study includes:

1. Function. Purpose of use. For example: it's used for cooking, it's used to cook soup, it's
used when you cook soup, you use it for cooking, you use it to cook soup, you use it when you cook soup (ladle)

2. Material. For example: it’s made of plastic (protractor), it’s made from milk (cheese)
3. Shape. For example: it’s ball-like shaped (orange), its shape is like a ball (orange), it’s round (orange), it’s long (ruler)
4. Size. For example: it’s a handful size, it’s small, it’s about ten centimeters (stapler)
5. Color. For example: its color is brown, it’s brown, the color is brown (tea)
6. Value. Price. For example: it’s about one hundred yen, it’s very cheap (tweezers)
7. Resemblance. Referring to a similar object or concept. For example: it’s like a spoon, it looks like a spoon (ladle)
8. Superordinate term. Referring to the upper categories. For example: it’s a fruit (orange), it’s a kind of stationary (protractor)
9. Direction for use. Explaining how to use the object or describing the manner of using it. For example: You shake it and put it on the paper (correction fluid)
10. Occasion for use. The situation or the place in which the object is used. For example: you use it in a science experiment (syringe), it’s used in mathematics class (protractor)
11. Location for purchase. The place where you can get it or the store where you can buy it. For example: you can buy it at a stationary store (protractor)
12. Attendant item. The item, which is usually used together with the concerned item. For example: you use it with a frying pan, it’s used with a frying pan (spatula)
13. Other features. For example: it’s often used by older people (magnifying glass), it has liquid inside (correction fluid)

These approaches can be used independently or in combination with another choice or more, using relative pronouns or/and conjunctions. For example: it’s a type of stationary (superordinate term) which is long (shape) and made of plastic (material) (ruler).

3.1 Participants

The participants were twelve undergraduate and graduate students, who belonged to various departments at university, and whose L1 was Japanese. The participants joined the training and research voluntarily, having been informed about the concerned program through the campus bulletin board. Besides the concerned training course, they had just one English class a week in the university curriculum although they did not take any extra English lessons outside the university.

3.2 Procedure

In the present study, the participants joined two-month lessons in which they received training in circumlocution. Lessons were held once a week lasting ninety minutes each time. Participants individually took a pretest before the course began and a post-test afterward, which
lasted about fifteen minutes each. The pretest and post-test were designed in the same way, that is, the participants were given tasks in which they had to orally describe five objects in English and in Japanese. The time limit for the description of each object was one minute. As soon as each of the objects was presented, a timer was set for one minute. Therefore participants needed to start their performance without any preparation. Every participant had to go through performing each of five objects in English, then in Japanese. Their performances were digitally recorded to be analyzed in how their performances improved by comparing pretest and post-test according to the ratio of silence, the variations of circumlocution, and the communicability.

3.3 Description of the Training Program

The training program aimed to teach and train learners how to consciously discover alternative means to convey a message without breaking off the communication when the learners encounter difficulties due to the lack of lexical knowledge while they are talking in English. In contrast to the instruction in circumlocution by Dörnyei (1995), in the present study learners were encouraged to use simple forms with their already existing lexicon to describe things. The first half of the course was mainly engaged in analytic activities, but then gradually moved toward practical ones. The program included activities such as comparative analysis of the definitions in several English-English dictionaries, picture description, description of Japanese traditional things, explanation of working processes, and a game called the circumlocution competence game. Much of this was carried out working in pairs or small groups, in which the learners could consciously gather the variation of what to refer and how to express it practicing circumlocution. In class, the learners could basically use English-English dictionaries but they were not allowed to use Japanese-English dictionaries to emphasize the learners’ ability to use the best use of their already existing vocabulary.

3.4 Analysis

The data from the pre and post-tests were written into the script and classified into the subordinate references, which were calculated totally for each object for both languages. Then the total length of silence was calculated for each performance using speech analyzing software. The present study was employed down to the 0.1-second level, since silence shorter than 0.1 second sounds quite natural and smooth. Although use of L1 might be considered as the sign to show that the speaker has some communicative problems, speech in Japanese were regarded as silence in the present study for the reason that the purpose of the present study was to determine whether the learners could acquire the ability to produce meaningful speech in L2 through the training. From this perspective, fillers should be regarded as silence as well. However, although the participants used Japanese fillers (e.g., ‘eeto...’, ‘anoo...’, and so on) many times, English fillers (e.g., ‘well’, ‘let me see’, and so on) were not observed in their performances.

As concerns the participants’ communicability, three tests were conducted. First, all of the
descriptions were listened to by native English speakers to see if they were identifiable. Each of twelve native English speakers listened to the descriptions performed by one of the twelve participants so that each native speaker guessed each object just once. Next, the references in the description of each object were divided into two groups: ability or the group of references which the speaker could refer to both in L1 and L2, and disability or the group of references which the speaker could refer to only in L1 but not in L2. The margin of the ability score and disability score shows the score that the learner wanted to say but could not say in L2 because of the lack of linguistic resources. If the margin of the ability score and disability score decreases across pre and post-test, the learners are supposed to have developed the productive ability through the instruction. Finally, the numbers of ability and disability in use of superordinate terms were analyzed. Superordinate term is the most important reference among all, since it is an essential trigger to start describing things. Actually in the pretest, many of the participants fell into silence at the very beginning of his/her performance where he/she should describe the superordinate term of each object. Therefore it is worth seeing if the learners showed any improvement in the post-test. Two-tailed ANOVA was conducted to see if there were any significant differences between pre and post-test results of all tests.

4. Results and Discussion

As concerns the ratio of silence, the average length of silence was reduced over pretest as is shown in Table 1. The results in ANOVA showed striking significant differences between pre and post-test results both in the L1 ($F(1, 23) = 6.81, p < .05$) and L2 performance ($F(1, 23) = 59.01, p < .000$) as is shown in Table 2, indicating that the instruction in CSs was greatly efficient in reducing EFL learners' meaningless silence and developing their ability to produce meaningful output instead.

As concerns the variation in references, the numbers of the types of references which the participants could make use of in their performance increased over pretest as is shown in Table 1. The results in ANOVA showed remarkable significant differences between pre and post-test both in the L1 ($F(1, 23) = 12.38, p < .01$) and L2 performances ($F(1, 23) = 46.14, p < .000$) as is shown in Table 2, suggesting that the learners could gain a variation of approaches to reference through the instruction that they could make use of to convey their concepts. In the same way as the ratio of silence, the results support the claim that the instruction is strikingly efficient for developing EFL learners' CS use.

As concerns communicability, the mean in the Test 1, that is the numbers of items that the native speakers could successfully identify by listening to the speakers' performances, rose over pretest as is shown in Table 1. A striking significant difference was likewise observed in the result of ANOVA ($F(1, 23) = 19.96, p < .001$) as is shown in Table 2. From this result, it is obvious that the learners acquired not only the means to challenge their communicative problems, but also their
actual communicative ability improved through instruction. As the result of Test 2, ability, or the numbers of references that the learners could produce both in L1 and L2 increased from 103 to 192, and disability, or the numbers of references that the learners could produce only in L1 but not in L2 decreased from 111 to 108. What, the learners thought, was necessary for the description, appeared in their L1 performances. However, not all approaches, which the learners could refer to in their L1 performances, appeared as well in their L2 performances. In other words, what they could say in L1 but not in L2 is due to the proficiency gap between their L1 and L2. Therefore if the margin of the ability and the disability should shrink over time, then it can be said that the learners certainly improved their communicative ability. As the results in ANOVA showed in Table 2, there was a significant difference in the margin of ability and disability, supporting the claim that they have surely become better able to express what they wanted to say in L2 ($F$ (1,23) =10.83, $p < .01$). As the result of Test 3, ability, or the numbers of superordinate terms that the learners could produce both in L1 and L2 increased from 26 to 41, and disability, or the numbers of superordinate terms that the learners could produce only in L1 but not in L2 decreased from 27 to 13, showing a significant difference in ANOVA as is shown in Table 2 ($F$ (1, 23) = 5.69, $p < .05$). Therefore it is obvious that the learners have actually developed the ability to use superordinate terms, which is the trigger to start their speech with.

As mentioned earlier, circumlocution has two aspects: the referential level and the encoding level. It is noteworthy that the improvements have been observed not only in their L2 performance, but also in their L1 performance, even though the instruction was given only concerning problem-solving ability in L2. The fact indicates that the instruction certainly activated the EFL learners' language universal competence in circumlocution. On the other hand, the differences of effect size observed in L1 and L2 performances (e.g., ES = 1.256 in L1 and ES = 2.280 in L2 for Variation of References) indicate that the instruction has effected more on L2 than on L1. The fact is considered to be due to language specific factors, that is a linguistic matter necessary for encoding. Whether the speaker’s strategic trial to convey his/her message is successful or not depends on whether he/she can pass through the two steps or not, as is shown in Figure 1. To overcome the first step, which is at the referential level, it does not matter whether learners received the training concerning L1 or L2, since this matter is common to any language, and is more a conceptual matter than it is a linguistic matter. The learners who had not previously been conscious of L2, or even L1 references, could expand their own range of references after receiving the concerned instruction. Therefore they showed the improvement both in L1 and L2. On the contrary, to overcome the second step, which is centered at the encoding level, learners needed to receive instruction using L2. This is because the exact form to refer to a particular concept is a matter specific to each language. Through instruction concerning English, learners acquired the correct, concrete forms that refer to each specific concept. Therefore the learners have shown greater improvement in L2 performances than in L1 performances. As they could go through the referential level and the encoding level, they no longer needed to lapse into silence in order to
think of what and how to say something. That is supposed to be the reason why the learners could strikingly reduce silence in their performance and gain meaningful speech instead.

Table 1. Mean Scores on Ratio of Silence, Variation of References and Communicability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Pretest</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Post-test</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>ES</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>(ES)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ratio of Silence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L1</td>
<td>43.33</td>
<td>13.60</td>
<td></td>
<td>35.17</td>
<td>8.50</td>
<td>(0.74)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L2</td>
<td>76.50</td>
<td>13.82</td>
<td></td>
<td>62.08</td>
<td>17.24</td>
<td>(0.93)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variation of References</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L1</td>
<td>17.50</td>
<td>7.42</td>
<td></td>
<td>24.67</td>
<td>3.99</td>
<td>(1.26)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L2</td>
<td>10.50</td>
<td>2.47</td>
<td></td>
<td>18.83</td>
<td>4.85</td>
<td>(2.28)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicability</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td>(1.13)</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. ES = Effect Sizes.

Table 2. Analysis of Variance for Ratio of Silence, Variation of References and Communicability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>df</th>
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<th>p</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ratio of Silence</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L1</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6.81*</td>
<td>0.024</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>59.01****</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variation of References</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>L1</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12.38**</td>
<td>0.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>46.14****</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicability</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test 1</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>19.96***</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test 2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10.83**</td>
<td>0.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test 3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5.69*</td>
<td>0.036</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001. ****p < .000.

5. Conclusion

The present research attained the result that the EFL learners could develop their communicative ability through instruction in circumlocution to overcome their communicative difficulties. This fact is supported by statistically significant differences between pre and post-test results for Ratio of Silence, Variation of References, Communicability. The present study also argues that the problem-solving ability should be considered from two aspects: the referential level and the encoding level. The learners demonstrated improvement both in L2 and L1 performances after receiving the instruction concerning L2, although the effect was greater in L2. It is because the learners improved both referential and encoding abilities in L2, while they improved referential ability in L1. On the basis of this theory, it is assumed that the negative
viewers of CS teachability have not discussed the matter in the standpoint of encoding level as CS. However CS teachability should be discussed at concerned two aspects. Furthermore, it is obvious that referential ability is transferable not only from L1 to L2, but also vice versa.

References


