The Effects of Teaching Communication Strategy (CS) on Japanese EFL Learners’ Syntactic Accuracy of Speech Production

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Abstract

The current study investigates whether explicit instruction of paraphrases as a communication strategy (CS) improves EFL learners’ syntactic accuracy of speech production. For that purpose, 30 undergraduate students participated in this study. 15 of them performed as an experimental group receiving explicit instruction focusing on using paraphrases with relative clauses (RCs) to avoid communication breakdown. The other forms a control group without instruction of paraphrases, but just taking pre-, post-, and delayed tests. While the result of ANOVA revealed that using paraphrases with RCs did not contribute significantly to accurate speech production, it was shown that the experimental group did not increase their errors among three tests. Additionally, a multiple regression analysis showed that errors of morphemes and word omission influence the number of total errors per 1 analysis of speech unit (AS-unit).

1. Introduction

Current language education trends in Japan have been toward improving what Skehan (1996) refers to as “complexity” and “accuracy” as well as “fluency” of learners’ language use synthetically. However, consider for a moment what degree of fluency would be required for learners as future negotiators at international meetings or in international debates to solve world-wide problems through mutual exchange of opinions. The author insists that Japanese people who will play an active part in the world in this century should be equipped with sophisticated linguistic abilities.

To this end, it is necessary to explore feasible approaches and instructional materials to develop both “Grammatical Competence” and “Strategic Competence” simultaneously, which is assumed to be directly concerned with practical communicative abilities. Therefore the effects of instruction for communication strategies (CSs) which appear in the definition of “Strategic Competence” (Canale, 1983) should be investigated, especially in terms of their effects on
learners' syntactic accuracy of speech production.

Hence, it is deemed necessary to investigate empirically whether focused instruction of a type of CSs which is assumed to contribute to improving grammatical competence, namely paraphrases, would indeed affect the improvement of syntactic accuracy.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Definition of a Paraphrase

The definition proposed by Færch and Kasper (1983, p. 49) is adopted for the present study. They defined it as filling the gaps which are presented in a planning stage with well-formed structures constructed by following their interlanguage systems. Additionally, they clarify that paraphrases employ the forms of descriptions or circumlocutions (Váradi, 1983) and that learners are to focus on the features (e.g., functions) of intended referents.

2.2 Teachability Issue

Let us start by discussing the views against the teachability of CS and examine the implications for teaching learners how to utilize CS. First of all, it is widely accepted to those researchers who oppose CS instruction that CS which is acquired in the process of development of L1 can be easily transferred to L2. This is the main reason why CS is not worth teaching (Paribakht, 1985).

Before these points of view are accepted, it is necessary to examine them empirically to make certain whether even EFL learners with poor opportunities to converse in the foreign language (FL) with native speakers or with other FL learners can transfer their strategic competence acquired in their L1 to FL. It is important here to note the viewpoints of researchers who support the possibility of CS instruction.

Færch and Kasper (1983, p. 55) propose that it is necessary to teach how to make the best use of CS if we regard “teaching” as how “to make their behaviors conscious.” Furthermore, Dörnyei (1995), who strongly approves of CS teachability, clarifies that CS functions only if one can use it immediately after he/she encounters linguistic problems and that such automaticity is necessarily achieved through intensive practice. In the same vein as Dörnyei (1995), Russell and Loschky (1998) argue that teachers should provide opportunities to promote CS use and prepare a place in the classroom to teach related structures which make their CS expressions richer.

2.3 Use of Paraphrases Enhancing Effective Communication

Concerned with enhancing effectiveness of learners’ speech production, Haastrup and Phillipson (1983), maintaining the same stand point as Færch and Kasper (1983), insisted on the importance of teaching appropriate CS for the appropriate situations and reported that many of their participants benefited by using paraphrases consciously. Actually, they claimed that one of
their participants learned how to utilize his strategic competence from the instruction.

As one of the researchers who clearly supported the necessity of teaching paraphrases, Willems (1987) strongly argues that what we should teach is achievement strategies. One of the most noteworthy points he proposes is ways of practicing approximations or paraphrases.

2.4 Task Effects on CS Use

Potential features of elicitation tasks as well as the effects of learner’s L2 proficiency have important effects on CS use, which was dealt with by a specific type of research group. The Nijmegen group is included as one of those groups. While quite a few researchers (Bialystok, 1983) demonstrated that learners use different types of CS according to the different demands which different tasks have, Poulisse and Schils (1989) of the Nijmegen group offer comprehensive considerations of this issue.

In terms of the effects of tasks on CS use, they clarified the relationship between task features and learner choice of compensatory strategies (CpS). In brief, task features are task demand, context, time availability, and presence of an interlocutor. To complete the picture description task, since a time limit was not preset, participants were required to give as much information as they could. Thus, it was understandable that ANCO (analytic conceptual strategies which is realized, for example, by providing a definition of a concept.) was used for the task because this type of CS can contain a lot of information. Additionally, Poulisse and Schils assume that an absence of interlocutors must have led to participants’ extensive use of ANCO for the picture description task. That is because they execute excessive compensatory behaviors by trying to provide as much information as possible, since they could not receive any feedback to indicate whether speakers provide enough information for interlocutors to comprehend the intended referents. They conclude that learners assess the required amount of information and choose CpS which can provide an optimal amount of information, considering the potential features contained in the individual tasks.

As one of the main focuses of the present study is to explore the shift of frequency of a specific CS type – paraphrases—we presumed that it was most reasonable to adopt picture description tasks. We might be able to elicit utterances with targeted linguistic forms more by making use of its features – namely, that intended message or information should be highly clarified to achieve the goals, or by an absence of interlocutors, which leads speakers to provide excessive amounts of information.

2.5 Grammatical Competence and CS Instruction

Many CS researchers have claimed that it is crucial to investigate whether teaching CS affects learners’ grammatical competence (Russell & Loschky, 1998). Of those researchers, Iwai and Konishi (2003) produced a computer-based CS training program, English Generative Learning (ENGEL), focusing on its effects on grammatical accuracy.
The effects of this CS instruction program were empirically investigated by Iwai and Gobel (2004). The results revealed that the experimental group improved their grammatical accuracy (overall ratios of accurate use of verbs) as well as message quality. The results of the study, especially those concerning the effects on grammatical competence, are of great use to both CS researchers and language teachers alike. The data obtained serve to strengthen the claim that CS instruction can possibly promote improvement of learners’ grammatical accuracy and that it fosters practical communicative competence.

2.5.1 Syntactic Patterns for Paraphrases

Concerning syntactic patterns for paraphrases, Konishi and Tarone (2004) proposed five such patterns which are produced by NS when they use CSs. They argue that teaching CSs contributes not only to the learners’ ability to use the L2 in communicative contexts, but also provides them with abundant opportunities to practice syntactic patterns to be utilized when they use the L2 communicatively.

Furthermore, Konishi and Tarone analyzed the features of 17 target items from 30 NSs of English. One noteworthy point which they found is that there are strong correlations between the captured features and the syntactic patterns used for describing those features. When referring to the feature, “Function,” NSs used “Subject + Verb + Superordinate Term + Post Modifier (PoM)” frequently. For PoM, they used relative clauses (RCs), adverbial clauses, and prepositional phrases. In addition, Konishi and Tarone found that RCs were used for describing “bursar” (83% of all the participants), “caretaker” (83%), “laboratory” (76%), “furnace” (58%), “thermostat” (57%), “pliers” (55%), “ambulance” (52%), and “carburetor” (41%).

Based on these observations, it seems possible to instruct EFL learners intensively to use paraphrases in the classroom setting by making the best use of the relationship between NSs’ syntactic structures elicited when they use CSs and the features of the target items. This will possibly lead to having learners focus attention on constructions of speech production, and consequently, I assume that learners can increase the syntactic accuracy of their speech. Moreover, language teachers should, as Konishi and Tarone (2004) claim, implement various types of referential communication tasks proposed by Yule (1997). Teachers should also provide as much opportunity for output practice as possible instead of just giving routine practice of sentence combining tasks. For this purpose, researchers and language instructors should employ appropriate and elaborate methodologies or speech elicitation procedures.

2.5.2 Findings on the L2 Acquisition of Relative Clauses

Schachter (1974) examined the number of errors which Persian, Arabic, Chinese, and Japanese learners of English committed when they used RCs. Although the results revealed that Chinese and Japanese learners made less frequent errors, he argued that the results were caused by less frequent RCs production by those learners. Additionally, she analyzed the results of their less
frequent RCs production more closely and concluded that participants with a left-branching L1 avoided using RCs since they faced with difficulty of making RC appear in the right side of head noun phrases (NP). However, as Schachter conjectured, they only used RCs when they were sure that the RCs were correct.

Furthermore, Ohba (2002) explored the proficiency levels Japanese learners reach when they can comprehend and produce RCs at the same level as NSs. The results showed that Japanese learners comprehend and produce RCs at the same level as NSs when they reached a High-intermediate level.

2.6 Research Questions

Based on the above discussion, this inquiry was guided by the following research questions:

1: Does explicit instruction for paraphrases using RCs improve the frequency of paraphrases?
2: Does its instruction improve their accuracy of speech production?
3: What factors affect the syntactic accuracy of learners’ speech production?

3 Method

3.1 Participants

30 undergraduate students participated in this study. 15 of them performed as an experimental group receiving explicit instruction focusing on using paraphrases with relative clauses (RCs). The remaining 15 participants formed a control group without instruction of paraphrases.

To control the overall English ability of each group, a shortened version of the TOEIC was administered. The result of one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) revealed no significant difference between mean scores of each group ($F(1, 28) = 1.09, n.s.$). Likewise, a sentence-combining test Ohba (1988) made based on the Noun Phrase Accessibility Hierarchy (AH) (Keenan & Comrie, 1977) was administered to control over prior knowledge about relative clause constructions. The result of one-way ANOVA manifested no significant difference between mean scores of each group ($F(1, 28) = 0.99, n.s.$).

3.2 Tests

Picture description tests were administered to examine whether there are significant differences between the two groups in terms of frequency of paraphrases with RCs and syntactic accuracy of speech production. The participants described 10 target items in each of three tests, that is, pre-, post-, and delayed tests, including both abstract and concrete words. The names of items (both in English and Japanese) and accompanying pictures were printed separately on every single paper.
3.3 Procedures

Both the experimental group (group CS) and the control group (Group NT) took an abridged version of the TOEIC and a sentence-combining test as placement tests (40 minutes and 20 minutes, respectively). Immediately after those tests, they answered a questionnaire about their learning background. The following week, the pretest was administered in 10 minutes to each participant. The posttest was set three weeks after the pretest. The delayed test was administered two weeks after the posttest.

From the succeeding week after the pretest, the treatment for Group CS had been conducted for three weeks. Each treatment session consisted of visual instruction, instruction with a handout, and output practice using a picture description task in 45 minutes (15 minutes, 10 minutes, and 20 minutes (for one pair), respectively). The present writer administered the session twice a week. During the treatment period, Group NT received no treatment, but took prearranged lessons based on a communicative approach given by native teachers of English.

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Frequency of Paraphrases Using Relative Clauses

In order to examine the differences in mean scores between two groups for three tests, a repeated measure ANOVA was conducted in a 2 (Group) × 3 (Test) design. The results revealed that, as shown in Table 4.1, the interaction between Group and Test was significant ($F (2, 56) = 22.14, p < .01$). Therefore, it was confirmed that Group CS used a significantly greater number of paraphrases with RCs than Group NT both on the posttest and delayed tests. What needs to be emphasized at this juncture is that the treatment in this study contributed to, not only increasing the frequency of paraphrases with a complex structure, but also maintaining its effect on CS learners’ speech production. Table 4.1 represents the means, standard deviations, and the results of ANOVA for the number of paraphrases using relative clauses.

Table 4.1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Results of ANOVA for the Number of Paraphrases Using RCs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Group CS ($n=15$)</th>
<th>Group NT ($n=15$)</th>
<th>ANOVA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
<td>$M$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pretest</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>5.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>posttest</td>
<td>12.27</td>
<td>4.95</td>
<td>5.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>delayed test</td>
<td>10.87</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>5.53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* $p < .05$  ** $p < .01$

The main factor behind these results is assumed to be the task features inherent in the picture description tasks implemented during each treatment session. Those features are (a) the ease with
which the task goal was achieved, (b) a low dependability on the context of the setting, and (c) no possibility of receiving any feedback. These three factors contained in the task might strongly affect performance. As Poulisse (1997) discusses, by working on the low difficulty tasks to achieve the goal, that is, undemanding tasks, learners are expected to sacrifice brevity and provide as much information as possible, which results in clear expression of information. Additionally, Poulisse argues that more elaborate strategies are likely to be used when learners are given a task with no possibility to receive any feedback or with lower dependability on the context of the task environment.

4.2 Syntactic Accuracy of Paraphrases

A repeated measure ANOVA for Group and Test was performed to explore whether explicit instruction for paraphrases using RCs affects learners' syntactic accuracy of their speech production. The results revealed that the interaction between Group and Test was not significant. Table 4.2 shows the means and standard deviations for the number of errors per 1 AS-unit.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Group CS (n=15)</th>
<th>Group NT (n=15)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pretest</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>posttest</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>0.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>delayed test</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Now let us turn our discussion to this cause in terms of L2 acquisition and attention to forms. Schachter (1974) argues that Chinese and Japanese learners avoid using RC and that they use them only when they are confident enough to do so correctly. Based on this, it seems evident that the participants of the present study made as many errors as Arabic and Persian learners of Schachter’s (1974) experiment did. That is because participants of the present study were compelled to use RCs even though they were not confident enough to use them correctly. This pushed output was deemed to have diverted their attention from forms.

4.3 Multiple Regression for the Effects of Each Error Type on Total Errors

To explore what type of errors, namely, (a) morphemes, (b) word order, (c) word omission, and (d) word choice influence the number of total errors per 1 AS-unit, a multiple regression analysis (using All Possible Subsets Method) against total errors as the dependent variable was performed. The result showed that both errors of morphemes and word omission significantly affected total errors (morphemes: \( b = .98, \quad \beta = .31, \quad p = .05 \); word omission: \( b = .96, \quad \beta = .55, \quad p \))
= .00, respectively). Thus, it was manifested that these errors had significant positive influence on the increase of total errors per 1 AS-unit. Table 4.3 summarizes the result of a multiple regression analysis for variables predicting the increase of total errors.

Table 4.3
Results of Multiple Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting the Increase of Total Number of Errors per 1 AS-unit (N = 30)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>variable</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>SE b</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>morpheme</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>2.18</td>
<td>.04*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>word order</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>word omission</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>4.72</td>
<td>.00***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>word choice</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>1.46</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

R = .91, R squared = .82 (F (4, 25) = 28.86, p < .001)
*p < .05 **p < .01 ***p < .001

First of all, concerning the increased number of errors of morphemes, we can look at a reasonable account from a perspective of L2 acquisition. That is to say, I assume that the participants have not reached the adequate acquisition level to make use of RCs yet. This was deemed to have diverted their attention from forms, which resulted in their not being able to activate knowledge of morphemes. Additionally, the two types of morphemes that were chosen for the present study were derivational morphemes and inflectional morphemes containing third person singular (-s) or past regular (-ed)/irregular. These are among the tense-aspect markers which learners evidently achieve when they reach a sufficient level of acquisition in the later stages. From this perspective, it is quite reasonable to assume that there is a relationship between acquisition levels and increased number of errors.

Secondly, as for errors of word omission, four grammatical categories were identified from the word omission errors and were each divided by their number of compulsory contexts. The categories are articles, pronouns, be (copula), and be (auxiliary). The results revealed that the most frequently omitted category was articles (0.25, definite articles: 0.34, indefinite articles: 0.24), followed by be (auxiliary) (0.20), pronouns (0.04), and be (copula) (0.04). The order of the most frequently omitted categories is summarized below:

pronoun = be (copula) < be (auxiliary) < article (indefinite < definite)

Related to these results, Shirahata (1988) demonstrates that acquisition of articles is achieved in considerably late stages. In the case of the current study, the participants were made to use complex structures. They committed word omission errors with articles, since it was assumed that their incomplete acquisition of the construction of those structures led to considerable
diversion of attention to forms, especially to function words. In other words, they had not reached an adequate level where they could utilize RCs. This prevented them from accurately making use of knowledge about articles and led to their omission. Indeed, the order mentioned above was derived simply from the omission rate for each category. However, it showed almost the same order as that Shirahata (1988) proved for acquisition order of morphemes. Based on these results, it is speculated that the lower the acquisition order of a grammatical feature, the greater degree of diversion of attention to forms.

5 Conclusion

Seeing as how the treatment in this study contributed to increasing the frequency of paraphrases with a complex structure, such explicit CS instruction as was conducted in the present study should be regarded as an activity to provide abundant opportunities to communicatively practice target structures. Furthermore, the teaching material created for the current study should be encouraged to be utilized, since there seem to be few such resources in present course materials or textbooks (Hirano & Suzuki, 2005; Iwai, 2001; Tatsukawa, 2000). As for editing course materials and textbooks, editors should include task activities that focus on developing learners' strategic competence as well as grammatical competence.

Regarding the fact that reducing errors of morphemes and word omission contributes to making learners accurate speakers of English, teachers should provide feedback on those errors while implementing explicit instruction of paraphrases. For that purpose, teachers should be sensitive to learners' errors which prevent listeners from clearly interpreting a speaker's intention.

References


