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The Effect of Pre-speaking Strategies Instruction in Strategic Planning on Iranian EFL Students’ Awareness as well as Students’ Fluency and Lexical Resources in Speaking

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Abstract

This study attempts to find out if pre-speaking strategies instruction in strategic planning has any effects on Iranian EFL students’ use of pre-speaking strategies as well as their fluency and lexical resources. Two groups of control and experimental were given a picture-cued narrative task to think and speak about it, and then a pre-speaking strategies questionnaire as pre- and post-tests. The experimental group received pre-speaking strategies instruction in strategic planning with ten minutes of planning time. Data analysis showed the experimental group outperformed the control group. Therefore, for effective speaking, strategic planning should be coupled with pre-speaking strategies.

1. Introduction

Speaking, among the four major skills, seems mostly favored as every English language learner aspires to be effective in communication with others in oral mode. The importance of teaching speaking skill is that language is acquired through speaking and listening before one learns reading and writing. As Brown and Yule (1983) state many language learners regard speaking as the criteria for knowing a language and progress is assessed in terms of success in spoken communication. Therefore, it is important if teachers teach students how to speak strategically for effective communication. Strategy based instruction is a process oriented approach to teaching which focuses on the learning process, and results in improvements both in the process and product of learning.

Strategy means a plan, step, or conscious action toward achievement of an objective (Oxford, 1990). Brown (1994) states that strategies are referred to as specific methods of approaching a problem or task, modes of operation for achieving a particular end, or planned designs for controlling and manipulating certain information. Cohen (1998) defines strategies as the processes which are consciously selected by learners.

An important component of language programs is that of speaking strategies. According to O’Malley and Chamot (1990), speaking strategies are important as they help learners “in negotiating meaning where either linguistic structures or sociolinguistic rules are not shared between a second language learner and a speaker of the target language” (p. 43).

Therefore, classrooms should support the use of spoken language and provide a place where strategic speaking is valued. By assigning speaking tasks, language instructors can help learners use strategies for effective communication. These strategies may appear at three stages in task performance for (1) getting prepared for upcoming speaking tasks, (2) monitoring language input and output, and (3) evaluating or reflecting back on the task.

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Task-Based Language Learning (TBLT) has become an important approach in the last years as it improves language learning as a result of communication and social interaction. Tasks provide the basis for an entire language curriculum and are an important feature of CLT (Ellis, 2003). In an attempt to study the effect of task-specific strategies, Cohen, Weaver and Li (as cited in Nakatani &Goh, 2007) conducted an intervention study to investigate the effect of metacognitive strategy instruction on the development of speaking. Thirty two foreign students of English in the US were taught to use metacognitive strategies for preparing to speak and to self-monitor during speaking and for self-evaluation after having spoken. They were also assigned three tasks: self-description, story retelling, and city description and requested to make checklists of their use of task specific strategies before, during and after these tasks. Analysis of data showed an improvement in speaking performance shown by the experimental group on the city description task.

In task-based language teaching (TBLT), planning can happen in different phases and can be classified into two kinds: pre-task planning and within-task planning (Ellis, 2005). In pre-task planning, as the name speaks for itself, learners plan what they are going to say or write before they actually do the task. Pre-task planning is subdivided into rehearsal and strategic planning. In rehearsal planning students perform the task before their actual performance of the task. In fact, it is a preparation for the later performance.

Strategic planning is student’s preparation of what the content is and how it is expressed for the task. They can be divided into guided planning, in which learners are guided in the planning phase about what and how to plan, and unguided planning, in which learners receive no guidance or advice in the planning phase. Empirical studies on the effects of both pre-task and within-task planning on written production have indicated that planning has a positive effect on fluency, complexity, and accuracy in general (Skehan &Foster, 1999; Sangarun, 2001). Fillmore (1979) elaborates on the concept of fluency and conceptualizes it in four different ways. First, fluency is the ability to talk at length with few pauses by filling the time with talk. Second, fluency is the expression of one's message in a coherent, way. Third, a fluent person knows what to say in different contexts. And fourth, fluent speakers are creative and imaginative in their use of language. Skehan and Foster (1997) reported that planners had greater fluency than non-planners. Ortega (1999) showed that L2 Spanish students who planned strategically had faster speaking speed. Accuracy can be described as the mastery of language forms and structures and the accurate use of them (Hamdan Salim Shahin, 2003). Ellis (1987) suggested that planning helped students use regular past tense correctly. Vocabulary knowledge is one of the important language components whose impact on language fluency is undeniable. It serves as a means of expression and is “of critical importance to the typical language learner” (Coady & Huckin, 1997, p. 5).

As speaking is a skill most fundamental for oral communication it seems that in the Iranian EFL classrooms more focus is on the speaking product and less attention is paid to the processes and strategies of speaking.

Task-based teaching of language, therefore, is most fruitful if it is guided, as students may not know how to do the tasks and need a guided plan for their performance. Actually, with all merits found in strategic planning, it seems that in order to improve the speaking ability of EFL learners strategic planning must be guided and thoughtfully carried out so that students do not go astray in their planning time. Therefore, the present study is going to couple strategic planning for speaking with pre-speaking strategies and investigate their effects on three components of speaking, namely, fluency and lexical resources of Iranian EFL learners. To this purpose, the following questions are put forward to be investigated:

1. Is there any difference between pre-test and post-test phases in the overall score of speaking performance as a result of the instruction of pre-speaking strategies in guided strategic planning?
2. Which of the components of speaking (fluency, lexical resources) were more and less affected as a result of the instruction of pre-speaking strategies in guided strategic planning?
3. Does the instruction of pre-speaking strategies in guided strategic planning have any effect on increasing the awareness and use of pre-speaking strategies of Iranian EFL learners?

A null hypothesis was suggested for the above questions.

H.1 There is no difference between pre-test and post-test phases in the overall score of speaking performance as a result of the instruction of pre-speaking strategies in guided strategic planning.

H.2 None of the components of speaking (fluency, lexical resources) were more and less affected as a result of the instruction of pre-speaking strategies in guided strategic planning.

H.3 The instruction of pre-speaking strategies in guided strategic planning have no effect on increasing the awareness and use of pre-speaking strategies of Iranian EFL learners.
2. Methodology

2.1. Participants
Participants of this study were first-year students of English language and literature at the University of Mazandaran. At the beginning, 40 male and female students (29 females & 11 males) whose ages ranged from 18-20 consented to take part in this study voluntarily. Then, through administering a NELSON test of proficiency 20 learners who were of intermediate proficiency level were selected. The researcher selected the scores within the range of 25-39 which were one standard deviation below and above the mean (Mean = 32 and standard deviation = 6.62). Later, they were randomly (using tables of random numbers) assigned to two groups of control and experimental (10 participants for each group).

2.2. Material
In order to carry out this study the following instruments were employed:

A: Nelson test of proficiency (1976, series 250): this instrument was used to select a homogeneous group of participants. It contained 50 items assessing grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation knowledge of students. The test was piloted against 6 students and the reliability was calculated to be 0.72.

B: Picture-cued narrative task in which a sequence of pictures was distributed to the students and the students were expected to make a story out of them. All the tasks were shown to two experts in the field to make sure they are suitable for the purpose of this study. The pictures were selected based on the interest of the students, depicting a sequence of events, and being of a reasonable cognitive load according to the experience of the researchers of this study.

C: Rating scale: For scoring the oral production of the students an appropriate rating scale (IELTS Assessment Criteria) in speaking was employed. It was shown to two experts for making sure it meets the aims of the study and to get their comments on the scale selected.

Finally, among the four criteria in the original instrument, it was decided not to use the pronunciation criteria. The other three criteria of speaking ability (i.e., fluency and coherence, lexical resources) were under spotlight for the purpose of this study.

D: Pre-speaking strategies questionnaire: the instrument contains 16 items. The instrument was adopted and adapted from Cohen (1996). The original instrument has three sections of before you speak, while you are speaking, and after you speak. The details of the classification were compiled by three teachers. For this study, only the before you speak section was employed. The questionnaire was given for pre-test and post-test phases. Eight students were selected randomly before giving pre-test to answer the questionnaire for the purpose of piloting the instrument. The reliability of the questionnaire base on Cronach Alpha was 0.84.

2.3. Procedure
The following steps were taken to conduct the research.

First, the Nelson English proficiency test was administrated to 40 students through which the intermediate group was identified. Those whose score were between -1 and +1 standard deviation on the normal distribution curve (i.e., 25-39) were considered as intermediate and selected for the purpose of this study. The selected students were then put into control and experimental groups, each containing 10 students. To find out the speaking ability of subjects, the picture-cued narrative speaking tasks were given to students. Then, the pre-speaking strategies questionnaire as a retrospective measure of pre-speaking strategies was distributed to them. All of these were done at the pre-test stage.

Then, the experimental group received 10 sessions of treatment with pre-speaking strategies coupled with strategic planning. Both control and experimental groups received ten minutes time to think about the picture and retell the story based on the picture-cued tasks. However, the control group was not guided how to use the available time but the experimental group received guided pre-task planning in the form of pre-speaking strategies. Strategies included, for example, predicting the appropriate grammar and accurate structure and using a wide range of vocabularies and strategies for new and unknown words. It also focused on pause fillers in order to reduce the number of silence and long hesitation, to decrease repair, repetition and to maintain coherence during narration. All these strategies were taught to enhance student’s speaking ability in the areas of accuracy, fluency and lexical resources. First, in this study the five strategy instruction elements by Winograd and Hare (as cited in Carrell, 1998) were employed. They include a) what is the strategy? b) why should a strategy be learned? c) how should a. strategy be used? d) when and where should the strategy be used? And, e) how should a strategy use be evaluated? The model is about the instruction of reading strategies, but it was adapted for the purpose of this study and its framework was used for teaching speaking strategies.

For the sake of instructing the participants, four other pre-speaking strategies whose original model was provided by Dornyei (1995), Dornyei and Thurell (1991), and Willems (1987) were selected in this study. It was then adopted for the purpose of this study. The four strategies are: A) approximation, which involves “using an alternative term which expresses the meaning of the target words as closely as possible” (Dörnyei & Thurrell, 1994); B) circumlocution is thinking about using synonyms, antonyms, explanation, or nonverbal communication for unknown vocabularies.
It is viewed as the most important achievement strategy and a major component of strategic competence (Canale & Swain, 1980); C) lexicalized fillers: They are words or gambits used to fill pauses and to gain time to think in order to keep communication channel open and maintain discourse when speakers face communication problems (Graham, 1997); and D) Preparing general outlines such as using notes, keywords which are necessary during planning time, and predicting the structure and grammar. After the pre-test was over, both control and experimental groups received posttests.

For rating purposes, two non-native speaking teachers judged the participants’ performance by listening to the tapes and at the same time having the transcription at hand. The two teachers were females with at least 3 years of experience in teaching. They were trained about the scale components and how to measure student’s performance. For piloting the instrument, the scores of 8 students by two raters were correlated and the inter rater reliability index turned out to be 0.90 which is acceptable. In the next step the correlation coefficient of the scores announced by the two raters for all 20 students was calculated and the results showed a reliability of pre-accuracy, fluency and lexical resources as .98, .92, .96, respectively and for post-accuracy, fluency and lexical resources the reliability was computed as .96, .91, .99. The reliability of each component between two raters is shown in the next section.

3. Data analysis
As discussed above, the correlation between two raters was quite acceptable for the purpose of this study. As a result, only one of the rater’s reported scores was considered.

The first research question addressed the difference between pre-test and post-test phases in the overall score of speaking. In response to this question, a series of ranks test (Wilcoxon) was carried out on each dependent variable in order to determine for which measures differences reached a significant level. The mean ranks and sum of ranks and significance level of speaking performance including fluency and lexical resources from pre-test to post-test were considered. The minimum alpha for confirmation of the research hypothesis was set at .05. At first the descriptive data (mean, standard deviation, minimum and maximum) for overall score of speaking performance (fluency and lexical resource) are displayed in table 1.

| Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the Pre-test (PR) to post-test (P0) of the Experimental group |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| N              | Mean             | Std. deviation  | minimum         | maximum         |
| 10             | 4.86             | .945            | 4               | 6.67            |
| 10             | 6.76             | .648            | 6               | 8.33            |

Comparison of the mean score of the students’ speaking performance from pretest to posttest shows that they performed better in the post-test (mean=6.76) than in pre-test (mean 4.86). Table 2 shows inferential statistics using Wilcoxon signed rank tests of the students’ scores in the experimental group.

| Table 2. Wilcoxon signed rank tests Ranks |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| N              | Mean Rank       | Sum of Rank     | sig.(2-tailed)  |
| overall score  | Negative Ranks  | 0               | .00             |
| Positive Ranks | 0a               | 5.50            | 55.00           |
| Ties           | 0a               |                 |                 |
| Total          | 10               |                 |                 |
| PO - PO overall score | .005 |

a. post-overall1 < pre_overall1
b. post_overall1 > pre_overall1
c. post_overall1 = pre_overall1
Group: experimental
The mean ranks of the overall score with respect to control and experimental groups are presented in Table 3.

| Test                          | N   | Mean Rank | Sum of Rank | sig. (2-tailed) |
|-------------------------------|-----|-----------|-------------|-----------------|
| verall score                  |     |           |             |                 |
| Negative Ranks                | 3.80| 19.00     |             |                 |
| Positive Ranks                | 7.20| 36.00     |             |                 |
| Ties                          | 0   |           |             | .37             |
| Total                         | 10  |           |             |                 |
| PR-PO overall score           |     | .37       |             |                 |

The mean ranks of the experimental group were higher. The results of Wilcoxon test, illustrated in Table 3 showed that, there is statistically a significant difference (p < .05) between pre-test and post-test of speaking scores in experimental group (sig in experimental = .005 < .05) and (sig in control = .37 > .05). The mean of post-test was greater than pre-test. It indicated that the students performed better after treatment sessions, and the null hypothesis for question one was rejected.

The second research question investigated more and less affected components of speaking (fluency, lexical diversity) as a result of instruction. The picture-cued task was given for pre-test and post-test and students narrated the story and two raters rated speaking performance according to IELTS scale. As it was mentioned in the last section, it was proved that the differences between pre to post-test means were significant. Also in the following part comparing of post-tests of experimental and control group (Mann-Whitney test) were presented but for answering the second question, researcher compared differences of each dependent variable from pre-test to post tests. Table 4 shows descriptive statistics of the student’s scores in the experimental group.

| Test        | N   | Mean | std. deviation | minimum | maximum |
|-------------|-----|------|----------------|---------|---------|
| PR vocab    | 10  | 4.8  | .67            | 4       | 6       |
| PO vocab    | 10  | 6.7  | 1.15           | 5       | 9       |
| PR fluency  | 10  | 5.1  | 1.37           | 4       | 8       |
| Po fluency  | 10  | 6.7  | 1.05           | 5       | 8       |

Means, standard deviation, minimum and maximum level for lexical resources and fluency in the pre-test and post-test were shown. The mean scores of each variable suggested that both variables show differences but student’s vocabulary was better than fluency and it can be claimed that lexical resources was more affected variable. Finally, the mean scores of fluency showed that student’s performance in fluency was the less affected.

A series of nonparametric test (Mann-Whitney test) were carried out on each dependent variable in order to compare the post-test of experimental and control group. The mean rank and significance of speaking performance (fluency and lexical resource) in post-tests of experimental and control group were considered. The minimum alpha for confirmation of the significant difference was .05. The mean rank and significance of components (fluency and lexical resource) are displayed in Table 5.

| Test        | N   | mean rank | sig. (2-tailed) |
|-------------|-----|-----------|----------------|
| PO fluency  | Exp | 10        | 13.60          | .016          |
|             | Con | 10        | 7.40           |               |
| PO-fluency  |     |           |                |               |
The mean scores of each component with respect to post-test in control and experimental groups are presented in table 5. Fluency in post-test of experimental group was 13.60, while, in control group was 7.40. Mean score of vocabulary in experimental group was 13.70 and in control group it equals 7.30. The mean scores of vocabulary was greater and fluency was lower in post-test of experimental group.

The results of Mann-Whitney test, illustrated in table 5 showed that, both components were affected by instructions and there is statistically significant difference (p < .05) between post-test of accuracy, vocabulary and fluency in experimental group (vocabulary: p = .013 < .05 and fluency: p = .016 < .05) in comparison with control group. Thus, the second null hypothesis predicting that none of the components of speaking (fluency and coherence, lexical resources) would be affected as a result of instruction was rejected.

The third research question investigated the effect of guided strategic planning on Iranian intermediate EFL learners’ awareness and use of pre-speaking strategies. To this purpose the nonparametric test (Wilcoxon Sign rank test) was run. In order to achieve this goal, first, the descriptive statistics of student’s score in the pre-speaking strategies questionnaire is shown in table 6.

| Test                  | N    | Mean   | Std. deviation | minimum | maximum |
|-----------------------|------|--------|----------------|---------|---------|
| PR                    | 10   | 2.68   | .138           | 2.44    | 2.88    |
| PO                    | 10   | 4.83   | .432           | 4.38    | 5.56    |

By comparing the mean scores of the students, it is concluded that students’ performance was better in the post test ($M = 4.83$, $SD = .432$) than pre-test ($M = 2.68$, $SD = .138$)

In the following, pre-test and post-test of experimental group were compared. Table 7 shows the difference between pre-test and post-test in experimental group is significant.

| Pre-Post questionnaire | N     | Mean Rank | Sum of Ranks | sig.(2-tailed) |
|-----------------------|-------|-----------|--------------|----------------|
| Negative Ranks        | 0a    |            | .00          |                |
| Positive Ranks        | 10b   | 5.50      | 55.00        | .005           |
| Ties                  | 0c    |            |              |                |
| Total                 | 10    | .005      |              |                |

A significant difference between students’ performances from pre-test to post- test was observed. The minimum alpha for confirmation of the research hypothesis was .05. In experimental group (sig = .005), as we discussed earlier if sig < .05, It shows the increase of students use and awareness in pre-speaking strategies instructions in experimental group.

Next, the comparison of pre-test and post-test in control group was done by Wilcoxon signed ranks test and table 8 indicated that the difference between pre-test and post-test in control group was not significant.
Table 8. Wilcoxon signed rank tests in Control group

|                   | N  | Mean Rank | Sum of Rank | sig.(2-tailed) |
|-------------------|----|-----------|-------------|----------------|
| Pre- Post questionnaire Negative Ranks | 6  | 0.00      | 36          |                |
| Positive Ranks    |    |           |             |                |
| Ties              | 1  |           |             |                |
| Total             | 10 |           |             |                |
| Control group     | 3  | 3.00      | 39          |                |

The difference of student’s performance from pre-test and post-test was considered. The minimum alpha for confirmation of the research hypothesis was .05. In control group (P = .1), thus .1>.05; it shows the students’ use and awareness of pre-speaking strategies did not change in the control group.

4. Conclusions and Implications

The research issues that this study is addressing and investigating are:

A: Is there any difference between pre-test and post-test phase in the overall score of speaking guided task performance. Actually, the first question of this study investigated the overall effect of using speaking strategies for better fluency, accuracy and lexical resources during performing task in guided strategic planning. Analysis of the data on the basis of the students’ performance on the picture-cued task in oral narration in pre-test and post-test showed that the students’ overall scores in fluency and lexical resources was improved from pre-test to post-test. This research has shown if students develop using pre-speaking strategies, the fluency and lexical resources will show significant improvement. In previous studies, researchers such as Foster and Skehan (1996), Skehan and Foster (1997) reported that planners had greater fluency than non-planners. Yuan and Ellis (2003) also discussed the influence of strategic planning on fluency. Crookes (1989) showed that 10-minute planned students had more complex sentences and a broader lexical range. Some of the studies have reported positive effects on accuracy (e.g., Mehnert, 1998; Kawauchi, 2005) but it was not supported in studies by Yuan and Ellis, (2003) and Ellis and Yuan (2004). As mentioned before, in the present study strategic planning is coupled with some guidance which is pre-speaking strategies.

B: Which of the components of speaking (fluency and lexical resources) was more and less affected as a result of instruction? Further analysis of the data showed the effect of speaking strategies on two components, but lexical resources was more affected and fluency was less affected.

While, findings of the majority of studies have shown clear effects for planning on complexity and fluency of learners’ language (Foster & Skehan, 1996; Skehan & Foster, 1997; Wigglesworth, 1997; Mehnert, 1998; Ortega, 1999) Ortega (1999) showed that L2 Spanish students had faster speaking speed if they had planned strategically and Wendel (as cited in Ellis, 2005) found that the planners produced more syllables in a certain period of time and less pauses in two narrative tasks. Although, the present study combined with pre-speaking strategies as a guide along with strategic task planning, the analysis of data revealed differences on fluency from pre- to post-test phases but it was the less affected in comparison with other component.

C: Does the instruction of pre-speaking strategies in guided strategic planning have any effect on increasing the awareness and use of pre-speaking strategies in speaking? Analysis of the data collected through pre-speaking strategies questionnaire showed the effect of pre-speaking instructions on student’s awareness and use of strategies in guided strategic planning. In other words, analysis of the data shows learners used significantly more pre-speaking strategies such as trying to make error free sentences, using wide vocabulary resources in order to convey meaning, using paraphrase effectively, speaking with rare repetition or self-correction or hesitation, and speaking coherently. In the post test, students performed better in using pre-speaking strategies.

The basis of this study was on the advantages of coupling strategic planning with pre-speaking strategies instruction, as it was felt that just giving students time to plan for their speaking performance is not enough and they need to be taught how to make best use of the allotted time. This improves students’ awareness and use of pre-speaking strategies and their speaking performance. Therefore, in guided strategic planning the teacher gives the students the necessary help for a more fluent and lexically rich and appropriate speaking ability. It is recommended that language teachers give more importance to strategic task planning along with the instruction of pre-speaking strategies. Material developers are also recommended to implement pre-speaking strategies in pre-task planning so that students practically learn how to come over their speaking problems in different areas of speaking, namely vocabulary resources, fluency.
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