

The Effect of Applying Semi-structured DVD Short Films on Teaching Communicative Strategies to Iranian EFL Upper-intermediate Learners

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Abstract—One of the concerns of EFL learners in holding a successful communication is to avoid and overcome communication breakdowns. They must use strategies and tactics, communicative or conversational strategies, that create satisfaction, the sense of being understood. However, few classroom instructors can provide EFL learners with enough activities to learn how to use these strategies to communicate effectively with native speakers. One way to teach these conversational strategies is to provide learners with the authentic materials to use in the classroom and in the interaction with native speakers in real situations. To this end, this study suggested a technique that meets these needs and help learners to achieve some of the important strategies for avoiding and overcoming the breakdowns in conversations. This study presents the effects of teaching conversational strategies through semi-structured DVD short films on speaking performance of learners. It is carried out as an experimental study with two groups of Iranian EFL upper- intermediate learners in an English language institute, Tehran Oxford institute, in Iran. All participants received six weeks of instruction on four conversational strategies: Paraphrasing, asking for clarification, checking for comprehension, and turn- taking. The control group received direct instruction from the teachers' handout but the experimental group watched six relevant semi-structured DVD short films and the film-based observational tasks. Research data was collected from pre- and post-tests on speaking performance. The results showed that after the treatment, the experimental group used these strategies frequently in their communication, the learners' speaking performance was improved, and they showed a positive attitude towards the treatment.

Index Terms—conversational strategies, semi-structured DVD short films, observational tasks, learners' speaking performance

I. INTRODUCTION

After several years of learning English at schools and universities, many students around the world cannot communicate confidently or successfully for their jobs and careers (Chuanchaisit & Prapphal, 2009; Kawale, 2011; Xiao & Petraki, 2007). This is also a critical problem for EFL Iranian students (due to inaccessibility to native speakers), even graduated university students. There are some factors that cause this problem that leads to breakdowns in communications. Some researchers believe that learners' inefficiency in communication is due to their low level of language proficiency, lack of knowledge of necessary vocabularies to exchange their ideas, lack of confidence, lack of appropriate and real environment for using English language, or lack of some necessary communicative strategies in holding an effective conversation (Nguyet.N.T.M. & Mai.L.T. T.2012). Although some English language learners promote their communicative abilities by finding opportunities to talk with native speakers of English language on computers through activities such as online chat or watching English TV programs or films, one of the major challenges and concerns of all language teachers and instructors, syllabus designers, designers of teaching methodologies, and teacher educators is finding effective ways to prepare students for having successful communication (Dörnyei & Thurrell,1994). In this regard it can be stated that, choosing teaching methods and instructions in classes to teach students how to use necessary conversational strategies helps them overcome communication breakdowns. Dörnyei and Thurrell (1994) stated that conversational strategies are really helpful for language learners who face problems and difficulties in the flow of conversations, because learning these strategies brings them a sense of security and satisfaction in the language, the sense of being understood, belonging, and sharing identity.

Regarding the teaching context, EFL teachers and instructors can teach conversational strategies through different ways, for example, through picture dictation tasks (Kebir, 1994), pair-taping (Washburn & Christianson, 1995), telephone conversation role-plays (Ting & Lau, 2008) or video clips (N.Thi M. Nguyet & L.Thi.T.Mai 2012). In this

study, semi-structured DVD short films were used in teaching conversational strategies, that in turn it provides a good base for speaking tasks. In this way EFL Iranian language learners specially upper-intermediate learners will learn how to use these strategies in native English speakers' cultures and situations.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Learning strategies concerns with the receptive aspect of intake, memory, storage, and recall of the strategies, however, communication strategies concern with using verbal or nonverbal mechanisms for the productive aspect of communication which is exchanging of information. In the domain of linguistic interaction, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between the two, as Tarone (1983) noted, comprehension of strategies and production of them can occur almost simultaneously.

The researches of the 1980s- 1990s (Varadi 1980 and others) have paid the researchers attention to communication strategies (Rost and Ross 1991, Bailystock 1990, Bongaerts and Poulisse 1989, Oxford and Crookall 1989). In this regard, communication strategies are described as "potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal by Faerch and Kasper (1983)". While the earlier researches focused on the compensatory aspect of communication strategies, most of the recent studies have a more "positive" view of communication strategies as elements of an overall strategic competence in which learners try to use all the possible aspects of their competence to send clear and acceptable messages in the second or foreign language. In addition, through observations of first language acquisition strategies which are similar to those strategies used by adults in second or foreign language learning contexts, it can be concluded that these strategies are probably "potentially conscious" (Bongaerts and Poulisse 1989).

Riggenbach (1998) stated that communication strategies are certain conscious ways to help learners have effective communication. Dörnyei & Thurrell (1994) noted that these strategies are valuable means of concerning with communication 'trouble spots', when learners do not know a specific word, or misunderstand the other speaker of the language". Moreover, Kehe and Kehe (2004) claimed that conversational strategies are useful methods for speakers and listeners who want to continue a natural and real conversation. It should be noted that conversational strategies are as a sub-division of communication strategies. These strategies help speakers to hold a successful natural conversation and to achieve their communicative goals.

Tarone (1983), Dörnyei & Thurrell (1994), Brown (1994) categorized conversational strategies into: message adjustment or avoidance, paraphrasing, approximation, word coinage, language switch, literal translation, mime, asking for repetition, asking for clarification, interpretive summary, checking for comprehension and confirmation, and use of fillers/hesitation devices.

As Conversation is a process to exchange information and create and develop social relationships, it can be said that these conversational strategies have a positive effect on holding successful communications, but only some of EFL learners use conversational rules, strategies, and patterns, therefore; they face troubles in continuing the flow of their conversations (Walter, 2008). Applying conversational strategies as an effective way is a helpful tactic in overcoming problems in conversations. Dörnyei and Thurrell (1994) suggested that with these strategies, EFL/ESL learners can handle spontaneous conversations. Walter (2008) also stated that conversational strategies help raise learners' awareness of form and function of the language. As a whole, it can be said that conversational strategies are worth attention because they can facilitate interaction and create a fluent conversation.

Advantages of Applying Semi-Structured DVD Short Films in Teaching communication strategies in EFL Classes

Teaching English, especially conversational strategies, in an authentic way, by using semi-structured DVD short films can be helpful and beneficial for EFL learners particularly for Iranian EFL learners who have less opportunity to use English language in real situation with English native speakers.

Firstly, "using films to teach language provides learners with real models to imitate for role-play and increase their knowledge of the foreign culture." (Arthur, 1999, cited in Çakir, 2006). In addition, it is noted that only a small part of information (about 10%) is sent through words and phrases; the remaining (90%) of communication is non-verbal and sent through gestures, body language, and kinetics (Mehrabian, 1972). Swan (1996-1997) stated that the well-prepared proposed films show verbal and non-verbal behaviors of the speakers that make the conversations as a meaningful conversation to learners. As, Gower, Phillips, and Walters (2005) noted that additional information can be conveyed by facial expressions, gestures that causes the meaning of the conversation to become understandable.

Secondly, when learners are watching the prepared semi- structured DVD short films, they will be encouraged and stimulated to follow the film (Denning, 1992). DVD short films are also useful for group and team working, particularly for tasks and activities that learners asked to apply what they have learned (Denning, 1992).

Thirdly, when learners watch authentic and real communication among native speakers, their cultural knowledge of the foreign language will be improved (Rammal, 2006).

Generally speaking, using semi-structured DVD short films for EFL learners is effectively a useful way to expose them to the target language to learn the conversational strategies as well as the foreign language culture in an authentic way.

In this regard, this research was carried out with EFL Iranian learners at upper-intermediate level, need to use English language fluently in communication, in an English language institute, Tehran Oxford Institute, in Iran. They attended the class 3 sessions per week. Although the participants were at upper intermediate level and had been provided with vocabulary and some basic structures, most of them usually had difficulty in maintaining spontaneous conversations. The problem might be due to the inaccessibility to English native speakers and the way they use to convey the meanings in conversations. Thus, the researcher decided to suggest a way, teaching the students the necessary conversational strategies through applying well-prepared semi-structured DVD short films, to partially solve this problem.

The conversational strategies in this study focused on: Paraphrasing, asking for clarification, checking for comprehension, and turn-taking for two reasons. 1) these strategies help learners convey the meanings in conversations and reduce or avoid communication breakdown. 2) the choice of these strategies was based on the content of the learners' textbook subjects.

This study had been conducted to examine the effects of teaching conversational strategies through semi-structured DVD short films on learners' speaking performance.

The study was carried out to answer the following questions:

1. Does teaching conversational strategies through semi-structured DVD short films improve the learners' speaking performance?
2. What are the learners' attitudes towards learning conversational strategies through semi-structured DVD short films?

It was considered that teaching conversational strategies through semi-structured DVD short films can increase the frequency of the learners' use of these strategies and improve their speaking performance; in addition, there would be a positive and considerable relationship between the use of conversational strategies by the learners and their speaking performance.

III. METHOD

Design

This study was conducted with two-groups of Iranian EFL learners, experimental and control. Both groups participated in the same listening / speaking class designed for students at upper-intermediate level, which had a six-week supplementary course on four kinds of conversational strategies (paraphrasing, asking for clarification, checking for comprehension, and turn-taking). In addition to their specific level, upper-intermediate, the participants homogenized through performing a pre-test. English language was used for the teaching and treatment in the classes, only when learners were confused and have problems in understanding, Persian translations or explanations were used. The control group just received handouts and direct instruction on the selected strategies while conversational strategies were taught to the experimental group through watching six semi-structured DVD short films. After the teaching course, both groups practiced the strategies in pair or group activities such as role-playings.

Participants

Sixty four upper-intermediate Iranian students, studied in Tehran Oxford institute, participated in this study. They were female and range in age from 16 to 24 years old. They were homogenous in general language ability and randomly divided into two equal groups, an experimental and a control group.

Two teachers, one Iranian and one American, were involved in this study. The researcher, as the teacher of the two groups and also rater of the tests, teaching English for over 15 years and taking a master's course in English language Methodology. The American teacher who teaches English films, helped teachers evaluate the DVD short films' content and the conversational strategies which are used in the films and check the parts of short films' transcripts.

Instruments

Two speaking tests (a pre-test and a post-test) were used to collect data for the study. The pre-test was given to the subjects of both groups (control and experimental group) at the beginning of the study to measure how they use specific conversational strategies and also to confirm the homogeneity of the two groups. All students involved in the discussion of the specific assigned topic in pairs with seven discussion questions (Appendix A). The post-test, having the same content as the pre-test, was given to the students after the six-week teaching treatment to consider the changes in the learners' speaking performance. Then the results of the pre- and post-tests of each group were compared to see whether there was any significant change in speaking performance of learners after treatment. The learners' pre- and post-tests were recorded, transcribed, and then graded on the same marking scale, consisting of five components: range, accuracy, fluency, coherence, and interaction. These components of the marking scale were used to grade and mark their speaking performance; the interaction component was directly related to the application of the specific assigned communication strategies.

Materials

The learners' textbook used as the course syllabus for the two groups was "*In English upper intermediate level*" by Peter and Karen Viney (2005). The students studied the second five units in this book. Five native and original semi-structured DVD short films were carefully selected for the treatment program with the experimental group.

The films were according to the content of the material of the students' textbook. The vocabulary and structures used in the DVD short films were at the level of the participants, upper- intermediate level, in the experimental group.

Although the same textbook was used for the two groups, there were different lesson plans for each group according to the objectives of the study. For the subjects in the control group a handout of the selected conversational strategies were used (*Appendix B*). For each unit, while students discussing any issue related to the topic of the unit with each other, they practiced one strategy. In any unit they practiced a new communication strategy and reviewed the previous learned one(s).

On the other hand, for the experimental group, each unit began with a DVD short film with a topic related to the content of each unit in their textbook. Then there were film transcription in the form of film-based observational tasks that increased learners' awareness on applied communication strategies, and they learn how and why these strategies were used, then students watched the film and after that they checked items in the film transcription as they were heard, there are also examples how the speaker confirms his / her understanding, or examples of when the speaker checks the listener' comprehension, examples of how the speaker paraphrase his/her meaning ,and how to take turns. For every semi-structured DVD short film, there was one or more strategies applied which are appropriate for holding communication; therefore, from each film, the learners learn one or more communication strategies and review these strategies in another film. After watching the film, the applied communication strategies were explained by the instructor as they are summarized on the handout provided to the learners. The transcriptions of the films are just accessible for the learners in the experimental group.

Data Analysis

The learners' pre- and post-tests on speaking performance were analyzed according to the frequency use of conversational strategies by the learners (Frequency Formula in Appendix A). Then, the results of the learners' pre- and post-tests, scored and marked by two raters, were used to measure the learners' speaking performance before and after the treatment. To evaluate the inter-rater consistency on each test, a correlation test was used on the mean of the given scores by the two raters. To demonstrate whether there was any significant change in the two groups after the treatment, the average scores on the pre- and post-tests were analyzed by a paired- samples T-Test.

Analysis and Findings

During the study, to avoid some learners' factors such as learners' mortality, lack of knowledge of necessary vocabulary and structures that influences the results of tests, the instructor provides the learners with essential and necessary vocabularies and structures for the pre-test and post-test.

TABLE 1:
PRE- AND POST- TEST FREQUENCY USE OF CONVERSATIONAL STRATEGIES OF CONTROL GROUP

Conversational strategies	T/W		T/W × 100=F		Pre-post Results
	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test	
Paraphrasing	1.22	3.31	0.04	0.09	+ 0.05
Checking for comprehension	1.22	15.31	0.04	0.47	+ 0.43
Asking for clarification	0.22	3.31	0.00	0.09	+ 0.09
Turn-taking	1.22	3.31	0.04	0.09	+ 0.05

T = total raw frequency of strategies use; W = total number of words;
 F = frequency of strategies use per 100 words

TABLE 2:
PRE- AND POST- TEST FREQUENCY USE OF CONVERSATIONAL STRATEGIES OF EXPERIMENTAL GROUP

Conversational strategies	T/W		T/W 100=F		Pre-post Results
	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test	
Paraphrasing	0.16	12.27	0.00	0.44	+ 0.44
Checking for comprehension	2.16	21.27	0.12	0.76	+ 0.64
Asking for clarification	1.16	10.27	0.06	0.36	+ 0.30
Turn- taking	0.22	3.31	0.00	0.09	+ 0.09

T = total raw frequency of strategies use; W = total number of words;
 F = frequency of strategies use per 100 words

Comparing the results of tables (1, 2) showed that the use of the assigned conversational strategies (paraphrasing, checking for comprehension, asking for clarification, turn-taking) increased after the treatment in both groups. The increased number of the assigned strategies showed that the treatment in the both groups caused positive changes in the use of these strategies by the learners; however, the changes in control group were slight and insignificant, the changes in experimental group were remarkably great and significant. The results showed that in control group in which conversational strategies had been taught by giving the handout and explanations could not raise learners' awareness much on how to use the strategies appropriately when communicating with each other. However, the results in experimental group demonstrated that more learners were able to use effectively the selected conversational strategies after the treatment (applying semi-DVD short films).

To know whether there was any significant difference between the ability of both groups at pre-test stage on speaking performance a T-Test was used.

TABLE 3:
GAIN DATA ON PRE-TEST OF THE TWO GROUPS

	Experimental Group	Control Group
X	14.14	13.31
SD	2.18	2.39
N	32	32

$P \leq 0.05$

df:68, t_o : 1.53, t_c : 2:00, t_o (observed t), df (degree of freedom), t_c (critical t)

To determine whether the ability of the learners of the two groups in post-test on speaking performance were different, the researcher performed a T-Test. The data are given in the following table:

TABLE 4:
GAIN DATA ON POST-TEST OF THE TWO GROUPS

	Experimental Group	Control Group
X	15.65	13.62
SD	1.95	2.49
N	32	32

$P \leq 0.05$

df: 68, t_o : 3.90, t_c : 2:00, t_o (observed t), df (degree of freedom), t_c (critical t)

According to the results from tables 3 at the pre-test stage both groups relatively had similar speaking performance scores, regarding the results from table 4, after the treatment, the experimental group out performed in post-test speaking performance. It is evident that using semi-structured DVD short films in teaching conversational strategies was beneficial.

To determine the relationship between speaking performance and frequency use of assigned conversational strategies by the learners in the experimental group after the treatment a correlation test was conducted.

TABLE 5:
CORRELATION OF FREQUENCY USE OF CONVERSATIONAL STRATEGIES AND POST-TEST OF EXPERIMENTAL GROUP

Frequency	frequency	Mean
	Pearson correlation	1
	Sig.(2-tailed)	.447
	N	.048
		32
Mean	Pearson correlation	.447
	Sig.(2-tailed)	.048
	N	.32
		32

Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

According to table (5), although the correlation coefficient was small ($r = .45$), the relationship between the speaking performance and the frequency use of assigned conversational strategies was significant ($p = .048$). These results showed that teaching the specific assigned conversational strategies had a positive effect on the learners' speaking performance.

The results showed that these strategies should be used in both listening and speaking courses because they help all language learners in general and EFL learners in particular solve oral communication problems, avoid breaking down the conversation, improve fluency, develop communication skills, and increase confidence in learners, because learners learned how to use gestures, mime and kinetics in communication through hearing and watching English films simultaneously, and on the other hand, the DVD short films attracted the learners' attention and encouraged and motivated them to learn, and this program would be beneficial if the selection of the semi-structured DVD short films was based on the course syllabus and learners' needs and interest.

IV. CONCLUSION

The results showed that) although the speaking performance of the two groups was the same in the pre-test ($p = .36$), the experimental group outperformed the control group in the post-test ($p = .040$). The findings also indicated that in the post-test, the experimental group improved significantly and teaching conversational strategies through semi-structured DVD short films attracted learners' attention, because the observational tasks, film transcriptions, can raise the learners' awareness on the strategies used in reality in the selected authentic films. Although the participants of the control group after the course used some of the conversational strategies in their interactions with their partners, the participants in experimental group outperformed in using the assigned strategies and they showed they had greater progress in holding successful communication and enhancing their conversational fluency. Moreover, it was remarkably observed that these selected semi-structured DVD short films could show how these selected conversational strategies are used with verbal and non-verbal (gestures, kinetics, ...) behaviors and provide the learners with more vocabulary, speaking patterns, and useful grammatical structures.

V. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATION

As the conversational strategies are necessary for learners to hold the conversations and avoid communication breakdown, syllabus designers should include these strategies in course books or adding them to supplementary teaching materials on listening and speaking activities. The course books should also include supplementary materials, such as audio- visual CDs, structured and semi- structured DVD short films, and video clips to show learners how to use the necessary strategies in real conversations. Moreover, to provide class lessons, the selected strategies should be based on learners' levels and their interests to motivate and stimulate them to watch the films. In addition, listening and speaking teachers of ESL classes particularly EFL learners should be creative in choosing conversational strategies, teaching methods, selecting and teaching materials, and designing tasks that are according to the learners' levels, needs and interests. In this study, the proposed technique, watching semi-structured DVD short films, doing observation tasks as film transcriptions, and practicing the strategies in role play, is an efficient and useful way for teaching conversational strategies, when the content of the DVD short films are based on the tasks, levels, and activities of the text books. Unfamiliar words and grammatical structures, patterns and expressions in the selected films should be explained in advance to learners to reduce their problems while they are watching the films.

APPENDIX A

Frequency Formula: $F = T/W \times 100$

F (frequency per 100 words)

T (total raw frequency of strategy use)

W (total number of words)

Pre-Test and Post-Test

(Adapted from WWW.englishforums.com/English)

Questions for Discussion: The teacher can choose from these topics:

1. Are women less intelligent than men?
2. Are computers very important in education?
3. Are "Talk shows on TV "useless and boring or useful and interesting?
4. Being a team worker is more important or being a brilliantly creative person?
5. What job would you like to do and why?
6. Is teaching one of the most fascinating jobs or not?
7. Would Working in an advertising agency be very interesting or not?
8. Do you think "TV is bad for young people"?
9. What would you do if you won \$ 1 million?
10. What are the advantages and disadvantages of "Private English classes and group courses"?
11. Are Women equal to men in our society?
12. Are Parents too permissive with their children nowadays?
13. Do examinations exert a bad influence on education?
14. Can Teaching machines replace teachers?
15. What means of transportation do people often use in a city and in a town?
16. What do you think about the traffic in a city? How about in a town?
17. Is the air in the city clean or polluted? Is it the same with the air in a town?

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