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L1-based Instruction: Does It Work for Learning Pragmatics in the EFL Context?

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Introduction

An overview of interventional studies in the field of interlanguage pragmatics reveals that researchers and practitioners were first concerned with the teachability of pragmatics. Their findings indicated that particular features of pragmatics are teachable, and instruction is both necessary and effective (e.g., Alcon-Soler, 2008; Alcon-Soler & Martinez-Flor, 2008; Jeon & Kaya, 2006; Ishihara & Cohen, 2010; Martinez-Flor & Uso-Juan, 2010; Rose, 2005; Rose & Kasper, 2001). The second issue in the ILP research dealt with the question of exposure versus instruction. The findings demonstrated that pedagogical intervention is more helpful for pragmatic learning than exposure to positive evidence (e.g., Alcon-Soler, 2005; Eslami-Rasekh & Eslami-Rasekh, 2008; Jeon & Kaya, 2006; Takahashi, 2010). Due to the consensus over the need to teach pragmatic competence, the main issue now centers on the question of how this competence should be attended to in the most effective way. A compelling body of interventional studies has targeted explicit/deductive and implicit/inductive teaching designs, generally suggesting an overall trend in support of explicit/deductive instruction (e.g., Ishihara, 2010; Martinez-Flor & Uso-Juan, 2010; Takahashi, 2010). This interest has overshadowed a third possibility: the employment of learners' mother tongue which has recently received a remarkable amount of attention in second language acquisition (SLA) research (e.g., Cheng, 2013; Lee & Macaro, 2013). Therefore, drawing on an already established means of pragmatic instruction and a recently growing trend in the classroom, the present study is an attempt to compare and contrast the relative effectiveness of explicit/deductive and L1-based instruction of pragmatic competence.

Literature Review

The question of whether or not and how learners' L1 should be integrated into the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom has long been a controversial issue in the field of language teaching. Once within the framework of the traditional grammar translation method, L1 use was the backbone of the field and in its heydays it was highly appreciated. Later, it was rejected by most second language researchers and practitioners (Ferguson, 2009). Today, in spite of all these ups and downs, a compelling body of

evidence supports the position that mother tongue utilization is a useful pedagogical resource (e.g., Cheng, 2013; Grim, 2010; Horst, White, & Bell, 2010; Lee & Macaro, 2013; Leeming, 2011; Macaro, 2009). These findings support the position of optimal, principled, and judicious application of L1 but in no way imply a regression to excessive L1 use.

Several studies have explored the effectiveness of learners' L1 and the potentialities that it can provide for second or foreign language teaching. Swain and Lapkin (2000), for example, noticed that the employment of L1 as a communication and negotiation means by their French immersion learners had a facilitative role in accomplishing dictogloss and jigsaw tasks. Guk and Kellogg (2007) studied the impact of their students' L1 on teacher-learner and learner-learner interactions in the classroom context. They found that L1 utilization had a positive role in learner-learner interaction and much of the students' meta-language talk was the result of integration of the L1 and second language (L2). In another study, Scutt and Fueute (2008) investigated the relative effectiveness of using the L1 in L2 learning. They found that taking advantage of the L1 culminated in sustained collaborative interaction among students and alleviated the mental demand of the complex activities. In the same vein, it came to light that the practice of using the L1 was beneficial for consciousness-raising and form-focused tasks. They asserted that even when language learners exclusively operate in the L2, they rely on their L1 to reduce cognitive overload and demand of complex activities. Kobayashi and Rinnert (2012) reported the positive role of L1 use in their writing class. They observed that their students' L1 and L2 knowledge merged and evolved in the process of writing. This process led to multicompetent writers who managed to rely upon their writing knowledge repertoire to select the most appropriate features for producing sophisticated writings.

In the same vein, the findings of various studies examining teachers' and learners' perceptions and attitudes towards L1 use support the position of principled use of the learners' mother tongue in limited instances. Burden (2000) conducted a study and found that most of his students appreciated the teacher's L1 use in the classroom. He advocated a humanistic approach for L2 teaching and suggested that the learners, their L1 language, and their culture should be respected. Brooks-Lewis (2009) considered the language teachers' and learners' attitudes towards L1 use. The results demonstrated that both learners and teachers were receptive toward L1 employment in the classroom. However, they did not know exactly how much class time should be devoted to L1 use or when and how L1 should be taken advantage of. Ma (2009) targeted a group of Chinese learners and their teachers and studied their attitudes and perceptions towards L1 use in the Australian English as a second language (ESL) context. The findings revealed that both the learners and teachers held a positive attitude towards L1 use and regarded it as an effective cognitive and pedagogical tool at the disposal of teachers and learners. And recently, Bruen and Kelly (2014) surveyed the attitudes of a group of teachers and learners regarding L1 use in the higher education context. The results showed that all participants found L1 use beneficial and supported its limited and principled use especially for reducing cognitive overload of complex activities and learners' anxiety in the classroom.

This Study

Contrasting explicit/deductive and implicit/inductive teaching designs has been the main concern of ILP studies in recent years. It seems that the application of learners' L1 in pragmatics instruction has been the missing piece. SLA researchers' and practitioners' attention has recently been drawn to the use of L1 because of its potentialities and the opportunities it can provide for L2 learning (e.g., Cheng, 2013; Lee & Macaro, 2013). However, few studies have explored the effectiveness of learners' L1 in the acquisition of pragmatic knowledge (Eslami-Rasekh, 2005). As a result, the present study is an attempt to compare and contrast explicit/deductive teaching approach, as a more effective pragmatic teaching design (Takahashi, 2010), and L1-based approach to specify the most effective means of pragmatic instruction. More specifically, this paper aims to answer the following research questions:

1. Is there a significant difference in EFL learners' pragmatic production of request, apology, and compliment speech acts before and after instruction in the explicit/deductive and L1-based groups?
2. Which instructional approach (explicit/deductive or L1-based) is more effective for EFL learners' acquisition of pragmatic knowledge?

Methodology

Participants

The study was conducted with 96 male and female Iranian undergraduate students majoring in EFL at the University of Qom. The participants had received between 8 to 12 years of formal English instruction at secondary school and different English language institutes in Iran. The results of the Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency (MTELP) that they had taken just prior to the commencement of the study indicated that they were mainly at Level 2 (intermediate level). The sophomore learners, aged 18-29, were randomly assigned to explicit (n=51) and L1-based (n=45) groups.

Instrument and Treatment Materials

A written Discourse Completion Test (DCT), consisting of seven requests, seven compliments, seven apologies, and four situational descriptions as distracters, was utilized as the pretest to evaluate the learner's ability to produce appropriate requests, compliments, and apologies for the target situations. The request, compliment, and apology scenarios were adopted from Schauer (2009), Rose and Ng (2001), and Afghari (2007). During the posttest, non-target scenarios were put aside and the learners were just presented with the same 21 target scenarios with a change of order.

As for the treatment, the participants received instruction on request, compliment, and apology speech acts through explicit/deductive and L1-based approach for 10 sessions. Schauer's (2009) taxonomy of request strategies and its internal and external modification devices, Olshtain and Cohen's (1983) apology strategies, and Manes and Wolfson's (1981) syntactic formulas for compliments were employed for the purpose of the instruction. In the explicit/deductive approach, the participants were first provided with explicit sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic rules and information about how to request, apologize, and compliment in English. Afterwards, they were asked to do some exercises on the presented information. Finally, by using the metapragmatic awareness provided, they were invited to make appropriate requests, apologies, and compliments of their own for specified situations. As with the L1-based approach, the learners were first presented with some situational descriptions which had been translated into the learners' L1, Persian. The learners were instructed to go through them in pairs and provide an appropriate answer (request, apology, or compliment) in their L1 to these scenarios. In the following, they were invited to translate their own L1 answer into English. Finally, they compared and contrasted their own productions with those of two native speakers who had answered the same scenarios in English. This phase was followed by doing some relevant exercises.

Data Collection Procedure

Two groups of intermediate learners were randomly assigned to explicit/deductive (n=51) and L1-based (n=45) groups and received instruction on three speech acts: request, apology, and compliment for 10 weeks. Due to administrative difficulties of randomization, convenience or available sampling was utilized. Available classes at the University of Qom were utilized in this study which used a pretest-posttest design.

The participants came together once a week and the treatment lasted about 40 minutes and was conducted at the end of the learners' regular class. After the pretest, the researchers of the study presented an outline of the purpose of the study and elaborated on the significance of pragmatics in general and

speech acts in particular in daily conversations. In the following weeks, the learners underwent instruction through the explicit/deductive and L1-based approach for 10 sessions. However, whenever the participants in the L1-based group encountered any ambiguous point or raised questions that could be useful for other students, the researchers called the whole class's attention to that point and elaborated on it. One week after instruction, the learners in both groups were presented with the same written DCT, but this time it consisted of just 21 target situations.

Data Analysis

Having collected the data, the researchers of the study employed Taguchi's (2006) rating scale of DCTs to rate the participants' performance on the pretest and posttest. This scale measures the participants' production based on appropriateness and correctness of the responses on a 6-point rating scale ranging from "no performance" (0) to "excellent" (5) in each situation. The Pearson correlation coefficient was employed to specify inter-rater reliability ($r = .85$). The average scores of the two raters were regarded as the final score of the participants on the DCTs. Moreover, a t-test was used to shed light on between-group and within-group differences.

Findings

The first research question of the study focused on group differences of both groups before and after the instruction. As Table 1 illustrates, the mean scores of both groups show considerable progress after the treatment.

TABLE 1
Descriptive Statistics for Within Group Differences of Both Groups

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pre explicit	2.63	51	1.113	.156
	Post explicit	3.73	51	.695	.097
Pair 2	preL1	2.62	45	1.134	.169
	postL1	4.29	45	.589	.088

Two t-tests were conducted to shed light on within group differences. The results of the t-tests (Table 2) revealed that the differences between the mean scores of both groups during the pretest and posttest were significant at the .05 level. Thus, it was concluded that instruction improved the learners' pragmatic knowledge.

TABLE 2
T-test for Within Group Differences of Both Groups

		Paired Differences				T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower				Upper
Pair 1	Pre explicit - post explicit	-1.098	.755	.106	-1.310	-.886	-10.385	50	.000
Pair 2	preL1 - postL1	-1.667	.905	.135	-1.938	-1.395	-12.360	44	.000

The whole point of this study was to compare and contrast the relative effectiveness of explicit/deductive and L1-based teaching of pragmatic competence.

TABLE 3
Descriptive Statistics for Pretest and Posttest of Explicit/Deductive and L1-Based Groups

	group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
pre	explicit	51	2.63	1.113	.156
	L1	45	2.62	1.134	.169
post	explicit	51	3.73	.695	.097
	L1	45	4.29	.589	.088

Prior to the instruction, the performance of the learners in both explicit/deductive (M= 2.63) and L1-based (M= 2.62) groups was compared on the DCT. As Table 4 demonstrates, the result of the t-test indicated no significant differences between the mean scores of the two groups on the pretest of the DCT. Thus, it was assumed that both groups were homogeneous in terms of their production of the request, apology, and compliment speech acts prior to the study.

TABLE 4
T-test for Pretest and Posttest of Explicit/Deductive and L1-Based Groups

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances								
		Equality of Variances								
		F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper	
pre	Equal variances assumed	.019	.891	.023	94	.982	.005	.230	-.451	.461
	Equal variances not assumed			.023	92.056	.982	.005	.230	-.451	.462
post	Equal variances assumed	1.954	.165	-4.255	94	.000	-.563	.132	-.826	-.300
	Equal variances not assumed			-4.299	93.853	.000	-.563	.131	-.824	-.303

To address between-group differences, the performance of the two groups on the posttest DCT was considered. The result of the analysis showed that the L1-based group (M= 4.29) obtained a higher mean than the explicit/deductive group (M= 3.73) (Table 3). Another t-test was run to see whether there was any significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups. The result of the t-test indicated that there was a significant difference at the .05 level between the mean scores of the two groups on the posttest DCT (Table 4).

Discussion

This study was designed to explore the impact of instruction on EFL learners' pragmatic development. More specifically, comparing the relative effectiveness of explicit/deductive and L1-based instruction of pragmatic competence was the main purpose of this study. The overall findings of this study, aligned with the results of many other studies (e.g., Ishihara, 2010; Martinez-Flor, 2012; Martinez-Flor & Uso-Juan, 2010; Takahashi, 2010), support the position of formal instruction of pragmatic knowledge suggesting that noticing the pragmatic features of input by L2 learners is essential for pragmatic development.

The comparison of the two approaches revealed that L1-based instruction was more effective, and the learners were generally receptive to this approach. This finding concurs with the results of previous studies suggesting that principled and judicious use of learners' L1 promotes second language acquisition in general (e.g., Cheng, 2013; Grim, 2010; Horst et al., 2010; Lee & Macaro, 2013; Leeming, 2011; Macaro, 2009) and pragmatic knowledge in particular (Eslami-Rasekh, 2005).

It seems that the very nature of the L1-based instruction has contributed to its effectiveness. In the case of the explicit/deductive approach, the learners were presented with rules and metapragmatic information directly. However, in L1-based instruction the participants were left to discover or induce rules for

themselves. It could be argued that the processes associated with discovery learning like observing, comparing, hypothesis formulating, and inferring have been more effective for pragmatic learning.

Furthermore, the main rationale behind the L1-based approach was to expose the participants to the pragmatic features of both L1 and L2. Through this approach, the learners were able to consciously compare and contrast the sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic features of their own language and the target language and notice the gap between their own production and those of the native speakers. This process helped the learners move from known to unknown and provided them with the required analytic tools to come up with the contextually appropriate language use (Eslami-Rasekh, 2005).

It appears that the participants' judicious application of the L1 along with target language has functioned as a significant cognitive, social, and pedagogical resource (Storch & Aldosari, 2010) and has reduced cognitive demands of the activities that the participants were supposed to complete (Dressler & Kamil, 2006). This function of the learners' L1 as a valuable cognitive and linguistic resource served as an essential tool and scaffolding instrument in the learning process that enabled the participants to negotiate meaning and communicate in the target language which led to more successful performance of the learners in the L1-based group (Hawkins, 2015).

Another possible explanation for more effective performance of the participants' in the L1-based group could be affective considerations. Many researchers (e.g., Cook, 2001; Kang, 2008; Meyer, 2008) argue that principled use of L1 in conjunction with target language makes the classroom environment administratively and pedagogically comprehensible for the learner which in turn, leads to lowering their affective filters. It seems that implementation of the learners' L1 and consequently better comprehension of the classroom procedures and the subject being studied in the L1-based group has lowered their affective barriers and resulted in greater achievement.

The final justification for the success of the L1-based group over explicit/deductive group could stem from the fact that L1 use connected with the learners' identity and promoted their identity investment (Cook, 2001; Manyak, 2004; Cummins et al., 2005). This process encouraged the learners, especially the silent students and the ones with limited language proficiency, to take advantage of both of their languages and be involved more willingly and confidently in the learning process.

Conclusion

A survey of the pedagogical interventions in the field of ILP shows that a substantial part of these studies has been concerned with explicit/deductive and implicit/inductive approaches, mainly generalizing in support of explicit/deductive teaching design. It seems that the application of a third possibility, learners' L1, is missing. The results of this study reveal that the employment of learners' first language and the opportunities that it can provide for the instruction of the second or foreign language is a rich area that requires more attention. Today, many researchers and practitioners advocate principled and judicious use of learners' L1 in conjunction with the target language (e.g., Cheng, 2013; Grim, 2010; Horst et al., 2010; Lee & Macaro, 2013; Leeming, 2011; Macaro, 2009), however, they never imply a regression to unlimited and extensive L1 use in the classroom. In the same vein, the findings of various studies reporting teachers' and learners' perceptions and attitudes towards L1 use indicate a positive and promising response (e.g., Brooks-Lewis, 2009; Bruen & Kelly, 2014; Ma, 2009).

The general acceptance of the L1-based approach by the participants of the present study suggest that the avoidance of L1 use deprives language learners of an essential educational tool in the learning process which can function as significant metacognitive, cognitive, pedagogical, and social assistance (Macaro, 2009; Storch & Aldosari, 2010). The findings of this study imply that by taking optimal advantage of language learners' L1, especially with less proficient language learners and in homogeneous classrooms, one more valuable educational tool can be added to teachers' toolbox which could result in amelioration and enrichment of EFL learners' present and future pragmatic reservoirs. Therefore, it is hoped that the application of the L1 will rectify and even improve the status quo within the pragmatic domain and add

one more significant dimension to the existing literature on ILP instruction, and we hope to be able to “integrate into our pedagogy the reality of L1 use and orientation toward bilingual development” (Levine, 2012, p. 4).

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