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English Abstract

An Empirical Study of a Direct Approach of English Conversation Instruction

The present study investigated the effects of a “direct” approach of instructing English conversation (i.e., having learners study and partake in English conversation as an end in itself) on learners’ conversational ability. Thirty-five English major and minor students at a large Taiwanese university were evaluated for their conversational competence in the cognitive, behavioral and affective domains both before and after receiving a semester English conversation instruction under such an approach. It was found that a direct approach could indeed result in learners heightened awareness of and increased ability to reproduce cognitively the English conversation process, discourse and microskills. A direct approach also successfully elevated learners’ competence to conduct an English conversation in dyadic interaction. The enhanced behavioral performance was evident in the skill clusters of altercentrism, composure, expressiveness, and interaction management. Finally, a direct approach was conducive of learners’ psychological empowerment, indicated by a higher level of confidence in one’s conversational ability, dissipation or reduction of mental barricades, and more positive outlook for the undertaking of English conversation. The study thus has empirically confirmed the pedagogical merits of a direct approach of English conversation instruction, which was either impressionistically presumed or theoretically contended in the conversation-teaching literature. Limitations and directions for future research are discussed.

Keywords: English conversation, direct approach, empirical study, university, Taiwan

中文摘要

直接式英語會話教學之實證研究

此研究報告旨在探討「直接式英語會話教學法」(即以學習者之研究及參與英語會話為本質之教學)對學習者英語會話能力之影響。研究過程針對三十五名就讀台灣某大學主、副修英語之大學生,進行為期一學期之直接式英語會話教學,且在該三十五名參與者修習該課之前後,分別就其在認知、行為、及情緒等三方面之英語會話表現實施多項測試。測試發現直接式英語會話教學確可有效增加學習者對英語會話過程、言談及技巧之認知了解;此教學法亦可改進、加強學習者在參與二人對話時之實際行為表現,如在「鎮靜度」、「他人中心」、「自我表達」及「互動過程經營處理」等技巧之運用處理上,皆有顯著進步;而就增進學習者之自信心、減低或排除其心理障礙、以及營造有利參與英語會話之正面心態等相關心理建設,直接式英語會話教學法經證實亦有相當助益。故此,不同於文獻中對直接式英語會話教學法之價值,多只停留於印象式推測或純理論主張之階段,本研究以實證方式,肯定了此教學法對提昇學習者英語會話能力之具體效益。報告中並就未來會話教學研究之可能方向,提出相關建議。

關鍵字： 英語會話、直接式教學法、實證研究、大學、台灣

INTRODUCTION

Owing to the wide array of materials and activities employed in the English Conversation class, the course was once termed by the linguist and language educator, Jack Richards, “an enigma in language teaching” (1990). Despite of the diversity of approaches, the instruction of the course can be generally categorized into an indirect and a direct approach (Richards, 1990; Dornyei & Thurrell, 1994; Sze, 1995). An indirect approach, or engaging students in communicative, i.e., interactive but unnecessarily dialogical, task activities such as discussion, problem-solving, information-gap, questions and answers, etc. (e.g., the activities introduced in *Teaching Conversation Skills in ESL* by Eckard and Kearny, 1981; in *Keep talking: Communicative fluency activities for language teaching* by Klippel, 1984; and in *Getting students to talk* by Golebiowska, 1990), was typical of communicative language teaching in the 1980s (Dornyei & Thurrell, 1994). It deems conversation as a means to an end (i.e., second language acquisition) not an end in itself. As the communication activities often focus on using conversation to convey information, negotiate meaning, or complete a task, it is the transactional uses of language that are focused and practiced. A direct approach, or teaching conversation largely through having learners study and partake in conversation (e.g., the activities contained in *Gambits: Conversational Tools Vol. I, II, & III* by Keller and Warner, 1976, and in *Conversation and Dialogues in Action* by Dornyei and Thurrell, 1992), however, focuses explicitly on the processes, discourse and strategies involved in casual conversation and views conversational competence an end in itself. Thus, a course adopting a direct approach is devised around teaching learners the conversation process, discourse devices, and skills/strategies entailed in everyday, spontaneous conversation. Conversation-teaching literature has been proliferate with either descriptive accounts of specific instructional activities or theoretical discussions of the proclaimed merits pertaining to the direct and/or indirect approach, with few studies having the activities or alleged merits subjected to empirical test.

This study, for a number of reasons, investigated the direct approach for its effectiveness on enhancing learners’ conversational competence. First, as this approach is viewing conversational competence as an end in itself and a number of scholars (Dornyei & Thurrell, 1994; Kaplan, 1997; Sze, 1995) also argued for the vital role of discourse and strategic competence in achieving oral proficiency in conversation and advocated for a more direct approach in the teaching of English conversation, it warrants the effort to empirically verify if the approach achieves what it claims to achieve. Second, since the relationship between discourse competence and L2 learning has been repeatedly confirmed in learners’ performance of such oral activities as lectures and presentations (Chaudron, 1983; Chaudron & Richards, 1986;

Rounds, 1987; Tyler, 1992; Williams, 1992), theoretically a direct approach, which focuses on cultivating learners' discourse and strategic competence (via learning of conversational routines, microskills and discourse structure), should stand a good chance in effectively enhancing learners' performance of another form of oral discourse, i.e., conversation. Besides, with the recently growing interest in and attention to corpus linguistics (i.e., studying and analyzing a collection of spoken and written texts gathered from everyday life), presently conversation pedagogy research seems to redirect its attention to a direct approach, a trend clearly manifested in the recently published conversation texts (e.g., Carter & McCarthy, 1997; Lee & Brockman, 2001; McClure, 1996).

PAST RESEARCH AND FOCUS OF THE STUDY

Though the existing literature pertaining to the present inquiry is insufficient, it does suggest a number of potential pedagogical values of a direct approach of instructing conversation (e.g., S. Chang 2001a, 2001b; Kaplan, 1997; Sze, 1995). First, a direct approach, for its focusing explicitly on the discourse, strategic and interactive features of casual conversation, can help learners become competent conversationalists knowledge-wise. A direct approach, for having learners involved in discrete exercises to practice conversational routines, discourse and techniques presumably can enhance learners' conversation performance in the target language. And a direct approach, for equipping learners with discourse markers and communication and conversational strategies which are either preemptive or reactive in nature, presumably can function to effectively alleviate or dismiss the fear or worries learners have over communication misunderstandings or breakdowns they expect to or actually experience in conversation. The psychological assurance learners gain from their knowledge of conversation as an oral discourse and skills of "doing" conversation may even elevate their level of comfort and self-confidence when dialoguing in the target language. In other words, theoretically a direct approach of teaching English conversation can mold language learners into competent interlocutors cognitively, behaviorally and affectively. Thus, the following hypotheses are formed for the study:

- RQ1: Do students who receive instruction under a direct approach in an English conversation class for one semester demonstrate significant progress in their conversational competence knowledge-wise?
- RQ2: Do students who receive instruction under a direct approach in an English conversation class for one semester demonstrate significant progress in their conversational competence skill-wise?
- RQ3: Do students who receive instruction under a direct approach in an English

conversation class for one semester demonstrate significant reduction in their fear or worries about conversing in English or significant increase in their confidence and willingness to engage in English conversation?

METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out in the fall semester of 2002-2003 academic year in two English Conversation classes the author taught—one for English majors and one for English minors. A direct approach was adopted in the instruction of the course for both classes for one semester. Pre-tests and post-tests, including two open-ended questionnaires assessing learners' attitudinal change and knowledge increment and one rating scale (Conversational Skills Rating Scale[Spitzberg, 1995]) evaluating their skill development, were conducted in both classes to verify the effect of this pedagogical approach on cultivating students' English conversational competence. As far as teaching materials are concerned, the conversation text, *Putting it Together: A Conversational Management Text* by McClure (1996), which embraces such an approach, was chosen. In addition to the text, handouts from miscellaneous sources (e.g., Brown, 1994; Carter & McCarthy, 1997; DeVito, 1992; Finger & Barnes, 1988; Jones, 2001) on conversation structure, conversational skills and strategies, and the syntactical and discourse features of English conversation were included as supplementary materials. To fit all the above issues into one single semester, the following topics were derived: "an overview on English conversational competence," "starting a conversation/eye-contact," "sustaining a conversation/facial expressions and gestures/postures," "ending a conversation/voice," "speaking alternatively," "the third ear: asking for clarification," and "joke-/story-telling." Depending on the number and complexity of the issues introduced, one to two class meetings were allocated to cover each topic. Content analysis was applied to the analysis of the participants' pre- and post-test responses on the two questionnaires as well as to their end-of-term written comments about the course. With regard to the participants' pre- and post-test dyadic conversation performances, two raters (including the author and a colleague of hers), after a training session, graded the 36 taped conversations on the CSRS independently. *T*-tests were then performed to test first the rater agreement and then the mean variance of each behavioral item and of the four skill clusters (i.e., altercentrism, expressiveness, composure, and interaction management) and the total mean variance for both the pre- and post-tests to verify the degree of behavioral change.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Taking one step further from merely theoretically contending its pedagogical

values, by which much of the literature is characterized, the study empirically documented the effectiveness of a “direct” approach in instructing English conversation. By evaluating learners’ knowledge, skills and attitudes/mentalities pertaining to English conversation both before and after one-semester instruction based on a direct approach, the study verified the effect of the approach on cultivating learners’ conversational competence in the cognitive, behavioral and affective domains.

Direct Approach and Learners’ Knowledge Increment

The findings showed that a direct approach of English conversation instruction could indeed effectively enhance students’ conversational competence knowledge-wise. This was shown by the participants’ heightened awareness of and their ability to adequately apply the structure, discourse and skills/strategies characteristic of English conversation in their analyses and written productions of the dialogues. In other words, after receiving the instruction under a direct approach, the participants were able to not only name but also reproduce cognitively the quintessential properties of English conversations.

Differences, however, was noted in the participants’ acquisition of the structural, discourse, and skill aspects of English conversation. Possibly due to the skill-emphasis of the course and the complexity of English conversation discourse features, the participants demonstrated greater progress in their learning of conversational skills than discourse. While some of the discourse features introduced in the course, like fillers, hedges, disclaimers and back-channels, were easier to pick up, others, such as fronting, heads, tails, delexical verbs, and fixed expressions, for their unique syntactic structures and highly preformulated and routinised natures, might call for more time to internalize.

The participants’ knowledge increment was also more evident in the situation of interacting and conversing with strangers than with acquaintances or friends. This discernible improvement was actually built upon the participants’ relatively humble knowledge and limited experience of interacting with strangers before the course. Their lack of social contact, particularly on their initiative, with strangers may be explained by how strangers are perceived in Chinese culture. Unlike the U.S., where the social walls that are erected between strangers may not be as thick and impenetrable as they are in some collectivistic cultures, in Chinese society, a typical example of collectivistic culture, people tend to develop the strong in-group bonds that would promote separation from outsiders (Lustig & Koester, 1996). As a result, a sudden and fleeting rapport among strangers can be established through conversation in the U.S. (Carroll, 1987), but strangers are treated with caution and

suspicion and usually kept in distance by Chinese. Thus, when instructed to converse with people of various degrees of familiarity, the participants naturally displayed more advancement in their knowledge of how to interact with strangers. An important implication for future conversation instruction, henceforth, can be drawn here: Among the various types of interpersonal relationships, interaction between strangers perhaps warrants more attention and practice among Chinese learners.

One unexpected finding was that the participants' knowledge of some rather basic, well-known lexical phrases was less than sufficient. The erroneous usage of such simple routine expressions as "Never mind" and "Of course," noted repeatedly in the write-ups in both tests, speaks of the need of including some common lexical phrases in conversation instruction (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1989), as English conversation is replete with them and their meaning and usage are often being misled by their Chinese translations.

Direct Approach and Learners' Skill Development

Speaking of the effects of a direct approach of English conversation instruction on learners' conversational competence, perhaps more important than a significant knowledge increment was the greatly improved behavioral performance. The study showed that a direct approach has successfully elevated students' ability to conduct an English conversation. Their enhanced competence was evident in all four skill clusters. With respect to altercentrism, after a semester of learning, the participants, via asking their partners questions and sending encouraging signals, were able to successfully engage their partners in the conversation. As both interlocutors were interested in and attentive to each other, a well-balanced dialogue was produced with neither interlocutor coming across as too passive or too aggressive. Through exercising certain prefabricated, routine expressions at different points or stages of the conversation, the participants in the post-test demonstrated their superb ability to manage such dyadic interaction, and their conversations, for being embellished with proper and coordinated openers, topic-shifting cues, and pre-closings, sounded a lot smoother and more skillful than those recorded in the pre-test. The practice of such nonverbal components as voice, eye-contact, gestures, and facial expressions and the skills of story-telling appeared to help contribute to the participants' improvement in expressiveness. The end-of-term conversations were characterized by more fluctuations in the participants' voices, more vivid expressions on their faces, more lively gestures to accompany the talk, and more details or stories told by the participants to elaborate a point. As to the aspect of composure, the participants' progress was manifested in the more open but relaxing posture, increase of speaking

volume, and reduction of unmotivated movements like head-touching, hair-twirling, or finger-playing in the second taped conversations. Thus, a direct approach proved to be effective in developing in learners a repertoire of practical conversational skills, which in turn transformed them into more competent conversationalists.

Direct Approach and Learners' Affective Change

The treatment of English conversation as an oral discourse genre in its own right, which is the essence of a direct pedagogical approach, proved to be conducive of learners' psychological empowerment as well. The majority of the participants either confessed more confidence or indicated their faith in making more progress in their conversational ability. Related to the boost of self-confidence was the dissipation of "diffidence" or "fear of being laughed at" as two of the mental barriers holding some participants back from taking part in English conversation. Under the instruction of a direct approach, the participants' willingness to engage in English conversations with foreigners was also kept high, and for some the incentive was to try out what they learned in class. The participants' willingness to initiate a conversation with foreigners, however, did not rise significantly as originally expected. Concern over the other's negative reactions, introverted personality, and lack of training and experience in associating with strangers had all contributed to the participants' reluctance to approach strange foreigners on their initiative. As discussed earlier, the perception of strangers and behavioral norms governing interaction with people unknown differ greatly between individualistic American culture and collectivistic Chinese society; thus, to strengthen Chinese learners' motivation to initiate contacts with strangers for a purely interactional purpose, aside from imparting of necessary skills, other cultural conventions concerning communicating with strangers should also be addressed.

It should be pointed out that the knowledge and skills entailed in competently conducting English conversation, though nothing recondite or profound, may not be effectively acquired via interacting with English natives in a natural environment. This was evidenced by the fact that one-third of the participants, though claiming having extensive experience interacting with foreigners in English in the past, were mostly still incognizant of the components of English conversational competence and did not quite procure those critical interactional skills before taking the course. Thus, in order not to leave learners' acquisition of such an important oral ability to chance, explicit, systematic instruction is indeed needed and exigent in spoken English education.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, this study has empirically confirmed the theoretical contention that a direct approach can effectively mold learners to competent conversationalists cognitively, behaviorally and affectively. Over a semester instruction under this approach, learners successfully acquired knowledge pertaining to conversation structure, discourse and skills, developed techniques and strategies to conduct and manage a conversation, and exhumed more confidence in their conversational ability and a more positive outlook for the undertaking of English conversation. These findings can serve as a valuable baseline for future research of conversation pedagogy, either furthering the study of a direct approach or comparing and contrasting the strengths and weaknesses of a direct and an indirect approach. Being a first formal, organized empirical attempt to “demystify” conversation pedagogy, the study has not only taken a “road less traveled” by language scholars and educators but also proved it is a “path so much worth a journey and more.”

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