

The Effect of Teaching Communication Strategies on Iranian EFL Learners' Speaking Self- efficacy in Content-based Courses

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The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of teaching communication strategies on students' self-efficacy in speaking in content-based courses in Iranian EFL context. To this end, 30 students in two content-based classes, one as the experimental group and another as the control group, in SAMA private junior high school school in Tabriz, participated in this study. Communication strategy instruction was taught explicitly over a period of 16 one-hour sessions to the experimental group, while the control group didn't receive any explicit communication strategy teaching. Data on the learners' self-efficacy in speaking were collected through a researcher made questionnaire. The results of the data analysis using ANCOVA revealed the positive effect of teaching communication strategies (CSs) on students' self efficacy in speaking in content-based courses in Iranian EFL context. The findings of this study have important implications for material developers for designing activities involving communication strategies and for teacher training programs for teaching communication strategies to improve learners' self-efficacy regarding speaking skill.

Keywords: Communication strategies, Content-based Course, Self-Efficacy in Speaking

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The common ease and fluency with which we move from one idea to the next in our first language is shattered by our language deficiencies in a second language (Bialystok, 1990). As Færch and Kasper (1983), Bialystok (1990), and Dornyei (1995) pointed out, the development of communication strategies enable language learners to remain in a conversation, make up for language deficiencies, get their message across and develop their communicative competence.

Since the notion of Communication Strategies (CSs) was first introduced by Selinker (1972), it has been investigated by different researchers (Mei & Nathalang, 2010); nevertheless, there has not been a consensus on its correct definition (Huang, 2010). Scholars appear to have widespread disagreement on the exact nature of communication strategies and the issue of teachability of these strategies. There are generally two approaches to the debate (Chamot, 2005; Gallagher, 2001; Lam, 2006; McDonough, 1999, 2006); intra-individual approach and inter-individual approach (Kasper & Kellerman, 1997).

Proponents of the first approach (e.g., Bongaerts & Poulisse, 1989) regard CSs as learners' problem solving behavior and evidence of their underlying mental processes. They note that since underlying mental processes are unaffected by teaching, there is no need to teach CSs. According to Færch and Kasper (1984) "advanced learners, who are capable of planning longer units, can often predict a communication problem well in advance and attempt to solve it beforehand, as part of the normal planning process" (p. 60). Those who support psycholinguistic problem solving school of thought on CSs assert that each learner selects one or another strategy on the basis of his/her specific underlying cognitive processes. Kellerman (1991) advocating this approach further mentioned that CSs have already been developed in L1 and since the strategic competence is transferable from first language, there is no need to teach communicative strategies.

The proponents of inter-individual approach (Dornyei, 1995; Gallagher Brett, 2001, Lam, 2005, 2006; Tarone, 1981) put emphasis on the interactional function of communication strategies and speak for the necessity to teach these strategies. Oxford and

Nyikos (1989) asserted, "Unlike most other characteristics of the learner, such as aptitude, attitude, motivation, personality and general cognitive style, learning strategies are readily teachable" (p. 291). Considering CSs as one of the categories of learning strategies (William, 2006), we can conclude that communication strategies can lend themselves to teaching as well.

Cohen, Weaver, and Li (1996) investigating the effect of strategy-based instruction on speaking a foreign language, tried to determine whether strategy-based instruction should have a role in the foreign-language classroom. The findings of his study speak in favor of such a role. Cohen, et al. (1996) believe that if instructors systematically introduce and reinforce strategies that can help students speak the target language more effectively, their students may well improve their performance on language tasks.

Gallagher Brett (2001) worked on an eight-week project in which communication strategies including turn taking phrases, requests for help, clarification and repetition; greetings and pause fillers were taught to beginners and the range of learners' responses to these strategies were investigated. He (2001) reported that, although the use of CSs might depend on task and context, a range of strategic phrases could be successfully instructed to most learners.

Successful performance of students in the class is related to other variables, such as self-efficacy. The concept of self efficacy, as defined by Bandura (1994), refers to people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce certain levels of performance. Self-efficacy gained much attention with the publication of the article *Self-efficacy toward a unifying theory of behavioral change* and the book *Social Learning Theory* (Gahungu, 2007). Since then self-efficacy has been tested in many disciplines and found to be related to clinical problems, such as phobias, addiction, depression, social skills, assertiveness, stress, smoking behavior, pain control, health and athletic performance (Pajares, 1997). Self-efficacy beliefs have also gained increasing attention in education. Much research shows that self-efficacy influences motivation constructs, learners' academic performance, college major, and career choices (Pajares, 1997).

According to Bandura (1994) people can heighten their sense of self-efficacy by four main sources of influence that are as follows: mastery experiences, seeing people similar to oneself manage task demands successfully, social persuasion that one has the capabilities to succeed in given activities, and inferences from somatic and emotional states indicative of personal strengths and vulnerabilities.

Studying the link between self-efficacy and language learners' grades, Templin (1999) reported that there is a significant positive relationship between self-efficacy and students' scores. Similarly, Mahyuddin, Elias, Cheong, Muhamad, Noordin, and Abdullah (2006) studied the relationship between students' self-efficacy and their English language achievement. Mahyudin, et al. (2006) reported that self-efficacy correlates with achievement outcomes in such a way that learners with high self-efficacy often display greater performance comparatively to the learners of low self-efficacy. Magowe and Oliver (2007, as cited in Rahimi & Abedini, 2009) studied the relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and language learning strategies. These scholars reported that there is a positive relationship between self-efficacy and language learning strategies. Schunck (1995, as cited in Gahungu, 2007) noted that, strategy instruction raises students' self-efficacy and helps the learners to feel capable of overcoming learning difficulties.

Over the years, due to the apparent success of content-based programs and the dissatisfaction with the traditional programs, content-based program became so popular that it grew internationally (Chen, 2006). In content-based courses, learners receive instruction in L2 and, at the same time, pick up the L2 in a very natural way (Madrid & García Sánchez, 2001). In Iran, content based program has existed for about five years. As far as the researchers know, overseas schools department of SAMA organization affiliated with Islamic Azad University is the only administrator of content-based program in Iran.

Each summer content-based instructors attend in a workshop held by Sama organization. There is a clear goal kept at the center of the workshops which is training professional Content-Based

teachers. Since content-based teachers are language and subject-matter teachers at the same time, highly proficient teachers are needed to teach the courses. Therefore, they are selected on the basis of the interviews and highly advanced tests. Highly knowledgeable Professors in different fields such as mathematics, human science, computer, biology and psychology try to make these young teachers ready to **wear two hats**. Group discussions, roundtables, power point presentations, demonstrations and lectures are among the activities organized for the workshops. At the end of each workshop a comprehensive assessment is made which involves an oral demonstration and a pen and pencil test. Finally, on the basis of the scores the teachers get, a certificate of achievement is issued by the Sama Overseas School Department to certify the attainments of proficiencies required for completion of Content-Based English teacher training courses.

In Sama junior high schools, students study subject matters such as mathematics and science in English as extra-curricular courses. In Sama content- based Instruction (SCBI), language teaching is organized around the subject matter content rather than around a linguistic syllabus. Thus, students need to have meaningful communication in English for which they need to develop their communication strategies. However, students cannot easily meet all the conditions for meaningful communication. As Williams (2006) asserted, students are reluctant to speak because of the fear of encountering unfamiliar words and phrases that hinder their comprehension and language production. Introducing communication strategies can have a role in helping learners to cope with their linguistic problems which are one of the causes for their reluctance to speak. It allows learners, especially weak learners, to possess a feeling of "I can do" something with the language (Willems, 1987), which is closely related to the concept of self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy has been seldom applied in the field of foreign language learning (Gahungu, 2007), and even less so in the area of variables that affect this construct. Researchers such as (Mahyudin, Elias, Cheong, Muhamad, Noordin, Abdullah, 2006 ; Rahimi, & Abedini, 2009) investigated the effect of self-efficacy construct on

different attributes, language skills and achievements, but a little attempt has been made to examine which variables affect self-efficacy. Furthermore, as the empirical studies reviewed above indicate, there are few studies, if any, on the effect of teaching communication strategies on students' self-efficacy in content-based courses in Iranian EFL context. Thus, the researchers made an attempt to investigate the effect of teaching communication strategies on students' self-efficacy in Iranian content-based courses. Accordingly, the following research question was formulated: Does Communication Strategy Teaching (CST) have any effect on learners' speaking self efficacy in Iranian content-based courses?

Method

Participants

Sixty male students, comprising two content-based classes with 30 students in each class, in Sama private junior high school in Tabriz with age range of 14-15 years old participated in this study. In order to homogenize the participants on the basis of their general language proficiency level, Key English Test (KET) was administered. Calculating the mean score of the participants and setting it as a criterion score, 15 students whose scores were above the mean (Mean = 47) were drawn out of 30 students in each class. Thus, 15 students in one of the classes comprised the experimental group and received 16 hours of communication strategy instruction and the other 15 students in the other class served as a control group and received no communication strategy.

Instrumentation

Two instruments were used to collect data in this study. The first instrument administered to homogenize the participants on the basis of their general language proficiency was KET. The second instrument used in this study was a researcher made questionnaire on self-efficacy in speaking skill. It was a likert scale type of questionnaire with 29 items which was constructed based on three questionnaires, including Persian Adaptation of the

General Self-efficacy Scale constructed by Nezami, Schwarzer and Jeursalem (1996), self efficacy questionnaire about listening comprehension constructed by Rahimi and Abedini (2009) and a 40 item questionnaire developed by Gahungu (2007). The students were asked to read the items and decide if they choose: (1) strongly disagree (2) disagree (3) no idea (4) agree (5) strongly agree. This instrument was piloted on a similar group of 18 students who were not involved in the actual study. The Cronbach alpha of the reliability of the questionnaire was 0.86, which indicated a highly acceptable reliability. The questionnaire was intended to elicit the information on students' self-efficacy. The instructor asked the students to respond as frankly and as fully as possible.

Procedure

After the pilot study of the self-efficacy questionnaire in speaking skill, the main study began by administering the Key English Test (KET) to homogenize the participants in terms of general language proficiency. In the second stage the self-efficacy questionnaire about speaking skill was administered, before the treatment, as the pre-test. For the sake of clarity, the self-efficacy questionnaire was translated into Persian. In the third stage, an eight week (16 sessions) treatment was given to the experimental group. The experimental and control groups received their common content-based instruction. However, the experimental group received additional communication strategies instruction, whereas the control group did not. In instructing communication strategies, the researchers followed the explicit approach (Chamot, 2004, 2005; Rossiter, 2003). In the fourth stage, to gauge whether communication strategies instruction improves the learners' self-efficacy, the self-efficacy questionnaire about speaking skill was administered at the end of the treatment, as the post-test.

Instructional Treatment

The treatment in this research involved eight lessons spread over eight weeks. Communication strategy instruction was undertaken over 16 one-hour sessions. Each lesson lasted about

one hour. At the beginning of every session, the teacher tried to raise learners' awareness of communication strategies through speaking about rational, value, and communicative potentials of communication strategies. In each lesson, the teacher taught the names and examples of communication strategies. Pupils were taught seven most common communication strategies, such as time-gaining strategies, circumlocution, appeal for help, approximation, code-switching, all-purpose words, and non-linguistic signals like mime and gesture. After that, the instructor provided the learners with opportunities to use and practice communication strategies during pair work including tasks, role-plays, information gap activities, games and group discussions. The following description (Table 1) depicts the brief summary of treatment sessions in the experimental group.

Table 1

Description of the instructional treatment: type of strategy, example, and activity

Types of Strategy	Example	Activity
Non-linguistic signals	Using facial expression, mime, gesture or even sound imitation.	Asking students to describe a series of sport activity and animal drawings through non-linguistic signals.
Circumlocution	Describing the word scissor ...as "a tool used for cutting things such as paper and hair".	Asking students to List the items to be taken on a trip.
Time-gaining strategies	Using fillers and hesitation devices such as well, now let's see, as a matter of fact, uh, um, er, let me see, oh really?, and hmm....	Interviewing: Interviewees were supposed to share their likes and dislikes with other students. They had the chance to have a look at the list of time-gaining strategies written on the board.
Appeal for help	Asking for explanation by using structures, such as What do you mean? Sorry,	Using information gap activity; Acting as a customer and the

	I didn't understand....would you please repeat it? ... I didn't get the point....	telephone salesperson; the students practice different ways of asking for help.
Approximation	Using dairy instead of cream....	Listing ten concrete items within groups and writing the alternative terms denoting the same meaning.
Code-switching	Using "Konjed" (An L1 word with L1 pronunciation) when the L2 lexicon such as "sesame" is lacking	Roleplay: Acting as a chef and giving a recipe of their favorite food; students practice how to use code-switching.
All-purpose words	Using empty lexical item, such as thing, stuff, what do you call it?	Describing a picture-based story telling task and using all-purpose words in the case of not finding the specific words.

Design

The researchers employed a quasi-experimental design with pre-test, post test, and control group. In this research, teaching communication strategies served as an independent variable and students' scores on self-efficacy questionnaire served as the dependent variable. Through ANCOVA statistical analysis, the post-test scores of self efficacy questionnaire in the control and experimental groups were compared, using pre-test scores as the covariate variable.

Results

In order to test the null hypothesis, which is: Communication Strategy Teaching does not have any effect on learners' self efficacy in speaking in Iranian content-based courses, one-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was conducted to know whether the data have normal distribution or not. Table 2 presents the results of

one-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test about the experimental and control groups in pre and post-test.

Table 2
One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test

	Group	N	Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Self-efficacy.pre	control	15	.46	.98
	experimental	15	.74	.62
Self-efficacy.post	control	15	.40	.99
	experimental	15	.55	.91

On the basis of Table 2, we can conclude that the significance levels of self-efficacy scores follow a normal distribution pattern in control and experimental groups at $p > 0.05$.

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics of the Control and Experimental Groups on the Pre-test

	group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Self-efficacy.pre	control	15	109.33	14.54	84	129
	experimental	15	107.67	14.85	66	128
	Total	30	108.50	14.47	66	129

As Table 3 indicates, the mean and standard deviation of the control group is 109.33 and 14.549, respectively, and the mean and standard deviation of the experimental group is 107.67 and 14.855, respectively, on the pre-test.

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics of the Control and Experimental Groups on the Post-Test

group	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
control	108.800(a)	1.694	105.324	112.276
experimental	117.467(a)	1.694	113.991	120.943

As Table 4 indicates, the mean and standard deviation of the control group is 108.80 and 1.69, respectively, and the mean and standard deviation of the experimental group is 117.46 and 1.69, respectively, on the post-test.

Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was carried out between the post-tests of the control and experimental groups, using the pre tests of the two groups as the covariate variable (Table 5).

Table 5

Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) Comparing Post-Test Scores Across Groups

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Self-efficacy	3877.761	1	3877.761	90.229	.000	.770
group	561.491	1	561.491	13.065	.001	.326
Error	1160.372	27	42.977			
Total	389416.000	30				

As the result of ANCOVA in Table 5 indicates, $F = 13.06$, $p = < 0.01$, there is a significant difference in self-efficacy at $p < 0.01$, that is after balancing the students' self-efficacy scores on the

pre-test, students' self efficacy showed a significant difference in favor of the experimental group on the post-test. So, the null hypothesis which is: Communication strategy teaching does not have any effect on learners' self efficacy in speaking in Iranian content-based courses is rejected. In other word, Communication strategy teaching is rejected. In other word, Communication Strategy Teaching (CST) has a positive effect on students' self-efficacy in speaking in Iranian content-based courses.

Discussion

The results of the study indicated that experimental group, which received instruction in the use of communication strategies, outperformed the control group, suggesting that the communicative strategy training improves learners' self-efficacy. In other words, communication strategies help the learners to feel more confident expressing themselves and managing stressful situation that might be caused due to their language deficiencies. The results of this study go in line with the Opinion of proponents of inter-individual approach such as (Dornyei, 1995; Gallagher Brett, 2001, Lam, 2005, 2006; Tarone, 1981) who speak for the necessity of teaching communication strategies. Moreover, the findings of the study confirm Bandura's (1994) belief that mastery experience can heighten the sense of self-efficacy. In fact, by teaching communication strategies in content based courses in which meaningful communication is needed, teachers can help the students to develop a belief that in spite of all their language breakdowns they are able to attain their speaking goals.

Grabe and Stoller (1997) noted that, "CBI lends itself well to strategy instruction and practice" (p.15). Communication strategies still do not feature in many content-based courses in Iran, because these strategies are not featured in textbooks. Moreover, CST in content-based courses is an innovative idea to get the student familiar with these strategies. Teaching communicative strategies in content-based courses is an innovative idea to get the student familiar with the strategies that help them overcome their language deficiencies.

So, the findings of the present study might throw light on the implementation of CST in content-based courses. The present study has offered some techniques the teachers can use to teach CSs in content-based programs in order to develop students' self-efficacy. As Gahungu (2007) mentioned, many teachers can initiate an ongoing dialogue about what they can do to increase their students' sense of self-efficacy. The findings of this study suggest that the designated committee of Sama Content Based Instruction (SCBI) in Iran should attach more importance to activities involving communication strategies in both material development stage and teacher training programs. This area of research can be enriched by investigating the factor of gender regarding the concept of self-efficacy and by carrying out a qualitative study to take a closer look at students' self-efficacy.

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Appendix A

A Questionnaire on EFL learners' self-efficacy in speaking skill

1) I have a special ability for improving speaking skill.	Strongly disagree ☐	Disagree ☐	No idea ☐	Agree ☐	Strongly agree ☐
2) I believe that if I try hard enough, my proficiency in speaking skill will improve very soon.	Strongly disagree ☐	Disagree ☐	No idea ☐	Agree ☐	Strongly agree ☐
3) I am sure that if I practice listening more, I will get better grades in the course.	Strongly disagree ☐	Disagree ☐	No idea ☐	Agree ☐	Strongly agree ☐
4) I can speak better than other students.	Strongly disagree ☐	Disagree ☐	No idea ☐	Agree ☐	Strongly agree ☐
5) No one cares if I do well in speaking skill.	Strongly disagree ☐	Disagree ☐	No idea ☐	Agree ☐	Strongly agree ☐
6) My teacher thinks that I am smart.	Strongly disagree ☐	Disagree ☐	No idea ☐	Agree ☐	Strongly Disagree ☐

7) My classmates usually get better grades than I do.	Strongly disagree ☐	Disagree ☐	No idea ☐	Agree ☐	Strongly Disagree ☐
8) Even if the speaking task is difficult and I don't have the required vocabulary, I can find the strategy to get the message across.	Strongly disagree ☐	Disagree ☐	No idea ☐	Agree ☐	Strongly agree ☐
9) I am so stressed during the speaking class.	Strongly disagree ☐	Disagree ☐	No idea ☐	Agree ☐	Strongly agree ☐
10) I enjoy speaking with a proficient partner.	Strongly disagree ☐	Disagree ☐	No idea ☐	Agree ☐	Strongly agree ☐
11) I am one of the best students in speaking course.	Strongly disagree ☐	Disagree ☐	No idea ☐	Agree ☐	Strongly agree ☐
12) I enjoy meeting tourists because I can speak with them well	Strongly disagree ☐	Disagree ☐	No idea ☐	Agree ☐	Strongly agree ☐
13) The more difficult the speaking practice is, the more challenging and enjoyable it is.	Strongly disagree ☐	Disagree ☐	No idea ☐	Agree ☐	Strongly agree ☐
14) When the teacher asks a question, I raise my hand to answer it even if I'm not sure about it.	Strongly disagree ☐	Disagree ☐	No idea ☐	Disagree ☐	Strongly agree ☐

14) If I can't find the right word to use in a conversation, I use a gesture.	Strongly disagree ☐	Disagree ☐	No idea ☐	Agree ☐	Strongly agree ☐
15) I ask my interlocutor to tell me the right word if I cannot find the right word in a conversation.	Strongly disagree ☐	Disagree ☐	No idea ☐	Agree ☐	Strongly agree ☐
16) I'm confident about my ability to interact with other English speakers.	Strongly disagree ☐	Disagree ☐	No idea ☐	Agree ☐	Strongly agree ☐
17) . While speaking, I can deal efficiently with unexpected events.	Strongly disagree ☐	Disagree ☐	No idea ☐	Agree ☐	Strongly agree ☐
18) While speaking, I can remain calm when facing difficulties because I rely on my coping abilities.	Strongly disagree ☐	Disagree ☐	No idea ☐	Agree ☐	Strongly agree ☐
19) While speaking, I can usually handle whatever comes my way.	Strongly disagree ☐	Disagree ☐	No idea ☐	Agree ☐	Strongly agree ☐
20) Thanks to my resourcefulness, I know how to handle unforeseen situations in speaking.	Strongly disagree ☐	Disagree ☐	No idea ☐	Agree ☐	Strongly agree ☐
21) When I'm talking with fluent speakers, I let them know if I need help.	Strongly disagree ☐	Disagree ☐	No idea ☐	Agree ☐	Strongly agree ☐

22) I'm confident I can communicate the major points of what I need to say in English.	Strongly disagree ☐	Disagree ☐	No idea ☐	Agree ☐	Strongly agree ☐
23) I feel confident that I can master the English language.	Strongly disagree ☐	Disagree ☐	No idea ☐	Agree ☐	Strongly agree ☐
24) I am confident about my ability to interact with other English speakers.	Strongly disagree ☐	Disagree ☐	No idea ☐	Agree ☐	Strongly agree ☐
25) I know I'm able to actively participate in my speaking classes.	Strongly disagree ☐	Disagree ☐	No idea ☐	Agree ☐	Strongly agree ☐
26) I'm sure I can use English outside the classroom.	Strongly disagree ☐	Disagree ☐	No idea ☐	Agree ☐	Strongly agree ☐
27) I believe I am a good language learner.	Strongly disagree ☐	Disagree ☐	No idea ☐	Agree ☐	Strongly agree ☐
28) I strongly believe that, given enough time, I can achieve native-like fluency in English.	Strongly disagree ☐	Disagree ☐	No idea ☐	Agree ☐	Strongly agree ☐