

Training Learners to Recognize Language Strategies

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Abstract

Pragmatic competence, using language effectively and appropriately, often relies on the ability to choose appropriate language strategies for a particular situation. These strategies include “disarmers,” “grounders,” and “terms of address” which serve to mitigate the potential offense caused by face-threatening speech acts such as requests and invitations. As Schmidt’s noticing hypothesis (2001) states, a feature must be first be noticed before it can become intake; thus, it follows that learners must first notice and recognize the function of language strategies before they can understand and employ them. While many studies exist that test the effect of instruction on the output of these strategies, far fewer examine the understanding and recall of the strategies themselves. Further, the terminology used to describe the function of language strategies is often borrowed from the field of Linguistics, which may make it unfamiliar and overly technical for teachers and students. This study examines the effect of explicit pragmatic instruction and identification of language strategies from a small corpus of “suggesting” (Meizlish, 2023). Learners’ ability to identify strategies and use them appropriately was assessed through a pre- and post-task Strategic Identification Task and Discourse Completion Task.

Keywords: Pragmatics, Speech Acts, Politeness Strategies, Suggesting

Training Learners to Recognize Language Strategies

Throughout my experience of teaching speech acts in the classroom, I've consistently found it straightforward to present and teach "head acts." These are the part of the speech act most that most closely resembles the act itself. In the case of suggesting, a common head act be "You should..." It attempts to suggest something to the hearer. "Why don't you...?" is more indirect and "Have you considered...?" even more so. The choice of how indirect the head act should be for a particular situation depends on the context and the addressee. Students generally find the concept of indirectness easy to grasp and apply. While head act language forms the core of the speech act in many cases, it is rarely used without other language. Typically accompanied by what is termed a "supporting move" or a "strategy," this language is particularly prevalent in situations where there is a large power disparity and social distance between speakers, especially in speech acts of high imposition (Meizlish, 2023).

The terminology for supporting moves or strategies originates in the field of Linguistics and was created with specificity but not accessibility to learners in mind. "Disarmers" (Blum-Kulka, 1989), which are phrases such as "I'm sorry to bother you" or "I don't mean to be rude," attempt to disarm potential offense or resistance caused by the speech act, but this term is not readily recognizable to most learners. My experience has been that such terms are difficult for students to understand and recall. If these functions are not understood, learners lose out on being able to associate similar phrases in the same functional category. Semantic categories such as "colors," "furniture," or "companies" are essential in teaching vocabulary, and by analogy, so are the functional categories of language in teaching pragmatics.

While some published lesson plans and intervention studies of speech instruction continue to use more technical terminology in instructional materials, the majority opt for a simpler set of terms. In the classroom, I have found that students understand simpler terminology better than more technical jargon, so that is what I opt to use. However, even using simplified terminology, determining whether students have truly understood the function of the strategies studied or merely memorized the language can be challenging. It is often assumed that simply presenting students with simplified and functionally descriptive terminology is sufficient for understanding and uptake. In addition, most studies on language

strategy instruction that are available focus on the output of strategies rather than on the explicit understanding of their functions. Output is an important measurement but it does not capture learners' understanding of strategies. Without this deeper understanding, learners may struggle to recall or recognize these strategies in future contexts.

Schmidt (1993), citing data from experimental psychology, found learning from unattended processing to be “insignificant” compared to the results of attended processing. This hypothesis has been widely verified in the field of instructed L2 Pragmatics. Explicit instruction of how situational factors influence the choice of language for speech acts is found to be more effective for teaching students to produce a larger variety of appropriate strategies than implicit instruction. However, despite instruction which highlights the functions of speech strategies, post-instructional assessment of learners' comprehension and retention of these functions is rarely conducted, typically only inferred through their output.

The hypothesis this study aims to test is whether explicit identification of strategy functions will aid the understanding, recall, and production of strategies in a speech act. Two research questions will be addressed. First, it will be tested whether learners can identify language strategy functions post-instruction. Pre- and post-instruction multiple choice tasks were used to assess students' understanding and recall. Second, it was assessed whether students produced more appropriate strategies post-instruction compared to a baseline of corpus data from native and competent speakers. Both the native speakers and students completed the same eight-scenario Discourse Completion Task and their results were compared.

Theoretical Background

Pragmatics

The instruction of speech act strategies comes from the field of pragmatics and thus will be introduced here. Pragmatics can be defined as “the study of communicative action in its sociocultural context” (Kasper & Rose, 2001). More specifically, pragmatics is concerned with (1) how context contributes to meaning, (2) how speakers act through language, and (3) how speakers manage interpersonal relationships through language. Leech (1983) first divided pragmatics into two components: *pragmalinguistics* and *sociopragmatics*.

Pragmalinguistics

The linguistic resources speakers utilize, including directness, indirectness, and a large range of linguistic forms which can intensify or soften communicative acts, constitute the domain of *pragmalinguistics*. For example, employing directness, a speaker could say

“You should try yoga.” This statement explicitly states the intention of the hearer and would likely be appropriate between speakers with a close relationship. Conversely, by employing indirectness, one might say “Have you ever considered yoga?” In this instance, the speaker’s intention--to suggest the hearer try yoga--is not explicitly stated but rather implied and would be more suited between speakers who are not well acquainted. These phrases, which explicitly state or imply the speaker’s intention, are called “head acts.” Other linguistic forms, hereafter referred to as “strategies,” such as “disarmers,” “terms of address,” and “grounders,” are used to mitigate the force of the head act or may be used in place of one.

Sociopragmatics

The social perceptions and norms upon which speakers base their interpretation and performance of communicative acts are the concern of sociopragmatics (Leech, 1983). Brown & Levinson (1987) posited three factors which influence these perceptions and norms: Power, Distance, and Imposition.

1. Power is the ability to exert control or influence over others or the relative status difference between speakers, such as between a teacher and a student or a boss and an employee.
2. Social distance is the degree of familiarity between speakers. The distance between family members and long-time friends would usually be low whereas it would be high between new acquaintances.
3. Imposition is the degree to which a speech act interferes with the hearer’s desire for autonomy and acceptance. Suggesting someone change careers would infringe on their autonomy by requiring a large expenditure of time and effort. It would infringe their need for acceptance perhaps by implying their current career choice was misguided or that their ability or performance is lacking, hence the suggestion.

Face

The needs for autonomy and acceptance were conceptualized in the framework of “face needs.” The notion of face was drawn from Goffman (1976) and developed by Brown & Levinson (1983) who defined it as “the self-image that a person tries to protect.” Further, they postulated that these face needs fell into two categories: “positive” and “negative.” Positive face refers to the individual’s need to be accepted and appreciated, while negative

face is the need to be unimpeded in one's time and effort by others. These needs are managed by speakers while performing speech acts.

Speech Acts

The concept of the speech was first put forward by Austin (1962) in *Doing things with words*. He proposed that language is not only used to share ideas or representations or reality but also to accomplish actions in the world. He outlined three types of acts: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary.

- The locutionary act is the utterance itself and semantic meaning of the words. "Why don't you try yoga?" is a literally a question of why someone does not do something.
- The illocutionary act is the intention of the words, in this case, a *suggestion* to do something.
- The perlocutionary act is the effect or outcome of the words, in this case, the hearer trying yoga.

The relationship between the locution and illocution is often non-literal and the locution is a conventionalized expression. The locution of the speech act is composed of the "head act" and "supporting moves" or "strategies." Head acts are the minimal unit which can realize a speech act independently of other language and explicitly states the illocution of the speech act (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). In the above case, the head act is "Why don't you try yoga?" Strategies or supporting moves support, modify, or mitigate a head act. Strategies are numerous but may include "grounders," reasons for the illocution, "disarmers," which attempt to disarm resistance or offense, and "preparatory moves," which prepare the hearer for the speech act (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). For the above suggestion, a grounder could be, "Yoga really helps with back pain." A disarmer could be, "I know you're busy, but..."

Head acts have long been placed on a spectrum of directness and taught to students through this concept. Situations of low Power, Distance, and Imposition typically merit more directness and the opposite is true for situations of high Power, Distance, and Imposition. Numerous studies have evaluated the use of directness in speech acts by students, pre and post instruction, and it is often found that students improve appropriate use of directness. For a recent example, see Aufa (2016). Aufa found that in the post-task DCT, learners used more conventionally indirect strategies than direct strategies compared to the pre-task DCT. Strategies, if taught at all are often presented to students with much less structure and are rarely evaluated post-instruction. Lesson plans may present formulaic patterns of strategies to

use for speech acts for discussion and sometimes as a model for students to follow, but there is rarely much evaluation of their use of strategies. One notable exception is Kondo (2005) who presented learners with the results of a DCT the learners themselves completed compared with results of American English speakers to the same DCT. The learners then completed the DCT again and showed significant changes in the strategies they used for “refusing.” Considering the high frequency and patterned use of strategies found in a corpus for the speech act of suggesting (Meizlish, 2023), their importance in instruction has been undervalued.

Hypothesis and Research Questions

This study aims to test the hypothesis that training students to explicitly identify language strategies by function will aid their production and retention of said strategies.

Research Question 1:

Can learners be trained to identify language strategies? Five strategies were explicitly taught and students ability to identify them was assessed post-instruction.

Research Question 2:

Does training learners to identify language strategies aid their appropriate use of these strategies? Learners completed a pre and post-instruction DCT which was evaluated for their use of strategies compared with the responses of native and competent speakers of the same DCT.

Method

Participants and the Research Context

Thirteen third- and fourth-year university students in an advanced English class took part in two instructional periods. The first period consisted of explicit pragmatic instruction and practice with the concepts of Politeness, Directness, Power, Distance, and Imposition. The second period focused on identifying Speech Act Strategies in a naturalistic corpus. The usual content of the class was topic-based and focused on discussion and presentation about societal issues. This content was largely unrelated to the two instructional lessons of this study.

Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

Before the first instructional period, students completed two pre-instruction diagnostic assessments via google forms; a Strategy Identification Task and a Discourse Completion Task. Both tasks were to be completed online via google forms within one week.

After the second instructional period, students had one week to complete the post-instruction tasks also via google forms.

Strategy Identification Task

The Strategy Identification Task consisted of five multiple choice questions which asked the student to identify the “function” of three instances of a specific language strategy. Presented with three language examples, students had to identify them as being either “titles,” “hints,” “reasons,” “friendliness,” and “relaxers.” The three instances of each strategy were drawn from a suggesting corpus (Meizlish, 2023). The instances were presented out of context to isolate the strategies, but this method has the drawback of not being able to use the context to judge the function of the strategies.

Figure 1

Strategy Identification Task for “Relaxer”

1. "I don't want to be rude" *
 2. "Excuse me"
 3. "I just wanted to say"
- These three sentences are examples of:
- reasons
 - friendliness
 - title
 - relaxer

Note. Three instances of a strategy from the corpus and five choices of identifications.

Discourse Completion Task

The Discourse Completion Task consisted of eight scenarios to which the student must respond. The scenarios were designed to elicit suggestions. These eight scenarios were drawn from the same suggesting corpus mentioned above. Post-instruction, the same two tasks were administered again. Discourse Completion Tasks present a respondent with a scenario or line of dialogue and ask them to respond and are widely used in the field of speech act pragmatics. The intercoder reliability of the analysis and procedures was not tested, as all judgements and evaluations are solely those of the author.

Figure 2

DCT Situation #4

Situation 4:

*

You see a new classmate who you don't know well on campus. He/She is parking a bicycle next to a doorway blocking the entrance. There is a bicycle parking space nearby. What would you say?

Short answer text

Note. A situation from the DCT.

The students' pre-instruction results of the strategy identification task were compared to their post-instruction results. The students' pre-instruction results of the DCT were compared with their post-instruction results and both pre- and post- results were compared to the results of 10 University EFL instructors.

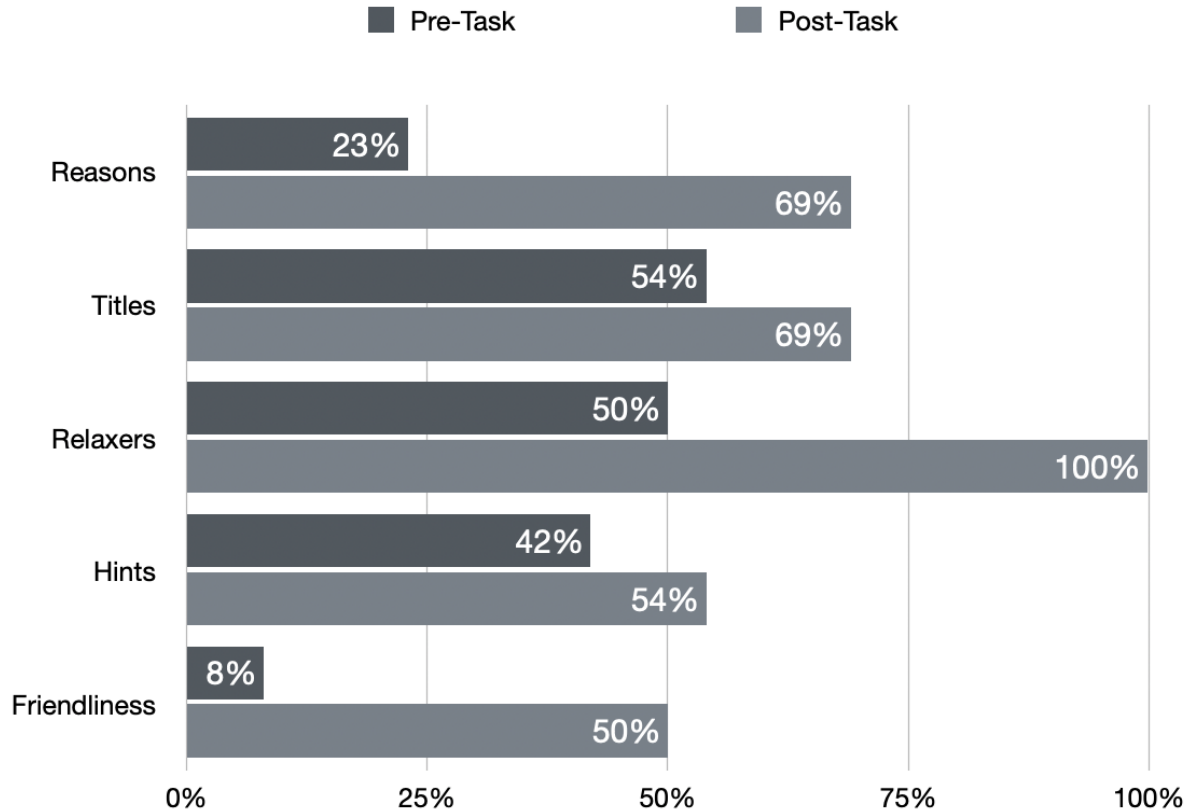
Results

Strategy Identification Task

The overall results of the strategy identification task will be presented and then each strategy's results presented individually.

Table 1

Pre- and Post-Instruction Results of the Strategy Identification Task



Note. Correct identification of each strategy in the Strategy Identification Task.

Reasons

Pre-instruction results showed the correct identification, “reasons,” at 23%. Incorrect identifications were “hints” (38%), “friendliness” (15%), “titles” (15%), and “relaxers” (8%). Post-instruction results showed the correct identification, “reasons” at 69%.

Relaxer

Pre-instruction results show the correct identification, “relaxer,” at 50%. 33% identified the examples as “friendliness” which is another reasonable function of “relaxers.” Post-instruction results showed a 100% correct identification as “relaxers.”

Friendliness

Pre instruction results showed most students identifying the three examples as “reasons” (77%) and the correct identification, “friendliness,” at only 8%. Post-instruction results showed a 50% correct identification as “friendliness.”

Titles

Pre-instruction results showed the correct identification, “title,” at 54%. The other prominent identifications, friendliness (31%) and relaxer (15%), showed are other reasonable functions of “titles.” Post-instruction results show a moderate improvement as students identified the three examples correctly as “titles” (69%). “Friendliness” (31%) was identified at the same rate as the pre-task.

Hints

Pre-instruction results showed the correct identification, “hints,” at 42%. 50% identified them as “friendliness,” which is a reasonable function of a “hint” and shows the term “friendliness” is likely too broad. Post instruction results showed the correct identification, “hints,” at 54%. 46% of students identified the language as “reasons,” which suggests overlap between the two terms “hints” and “reasons.”

Overall, in the pre-instruction task there is a greater range of responses while post-instruction showed an improvement in correct of identifications of all five strategies.

Discourse Completion Task

Three scenarios and their respective results from the eight scenario DCT will be presented.

Situation #1: Low Power, Low Distance, Low Imposition

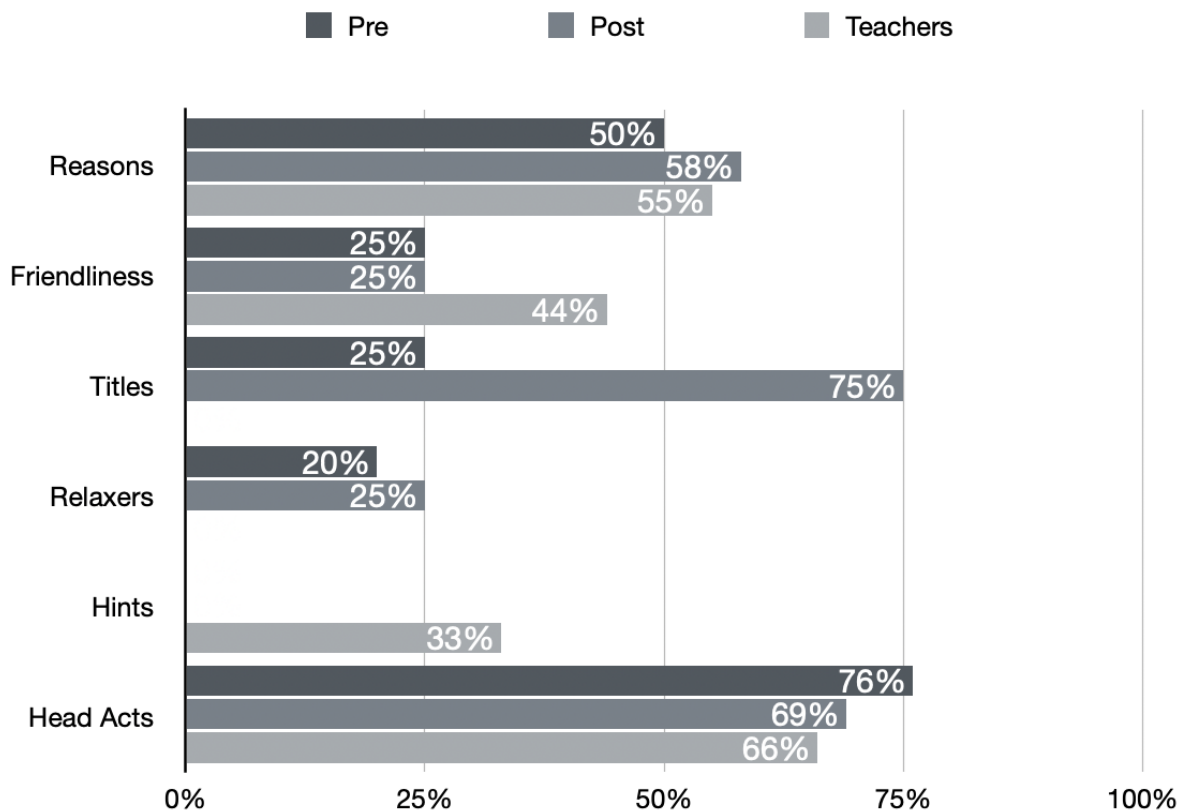
The prompt for situation #1 was:

You see your close friend on campus. He/she wants to buy a coffee but doesn't know where to buy a coffee nearby. What would you say?

Low power was indexed by “friend,” low distance by “close,” and low imposition by “wants to by a coffee nearby.”

Table 2

Strategy Use in Situation #1, Low P/D/I.



Note. The use of strategies in situation #1 by learners pre-task, learners post-task, and teachers.

There was a slight increase in reasons (+8%) and a slight decrease in head acts (-7%) which moved towards the teacher baseline. Titles saw a major increase (+50%), with language like “Hi (name)” and “Hey (name).” “Hints” and “Friendliness” showed no change.

Situation #4: Low Power, High Distance, High Imposition

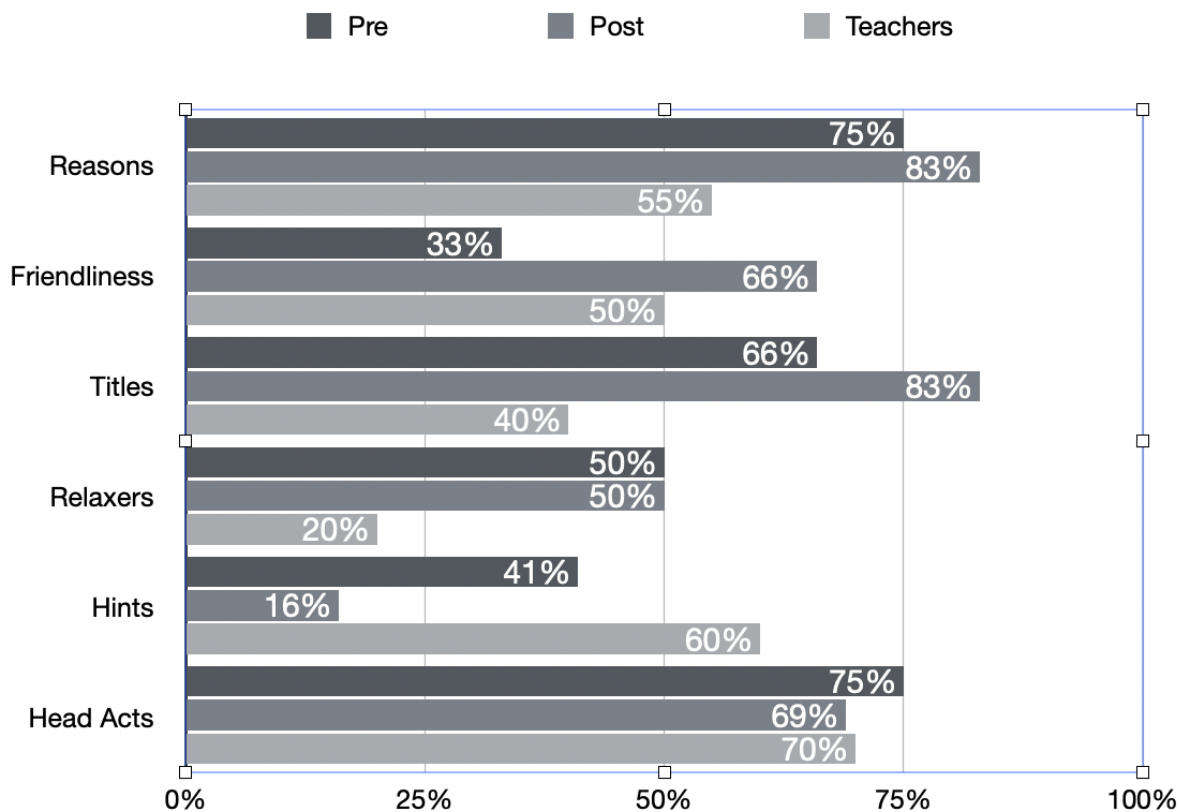
The prompt for situation #4 was:

You see a new classmate who you don't know well on campus. He/she is parking a bicycle next to a doorway blocking the entrance. There is a bicycle parking space nearby. What would you say?

Low power was indexed by “friend,” high distance by “who you don’t know well,” and high imposition by “He/She is parking a bicycle next to a doorway blocking the entrance.”

Table 3

Strategy Use in Situation #4, Mid P/D/I



Note. The use of strategies by learners pre-task, learners post-task, and teachers in situation #4.

Friendliness and relaxers moved towards the teacher baseline with an increase of 33% and (+0%) respectively. Reasons (+8%), titles (+17%), hints (-25%), and head acts (+ 25%) moved away from the teacher baseline.

Situation #8: High Power, High Distance, High Imposition

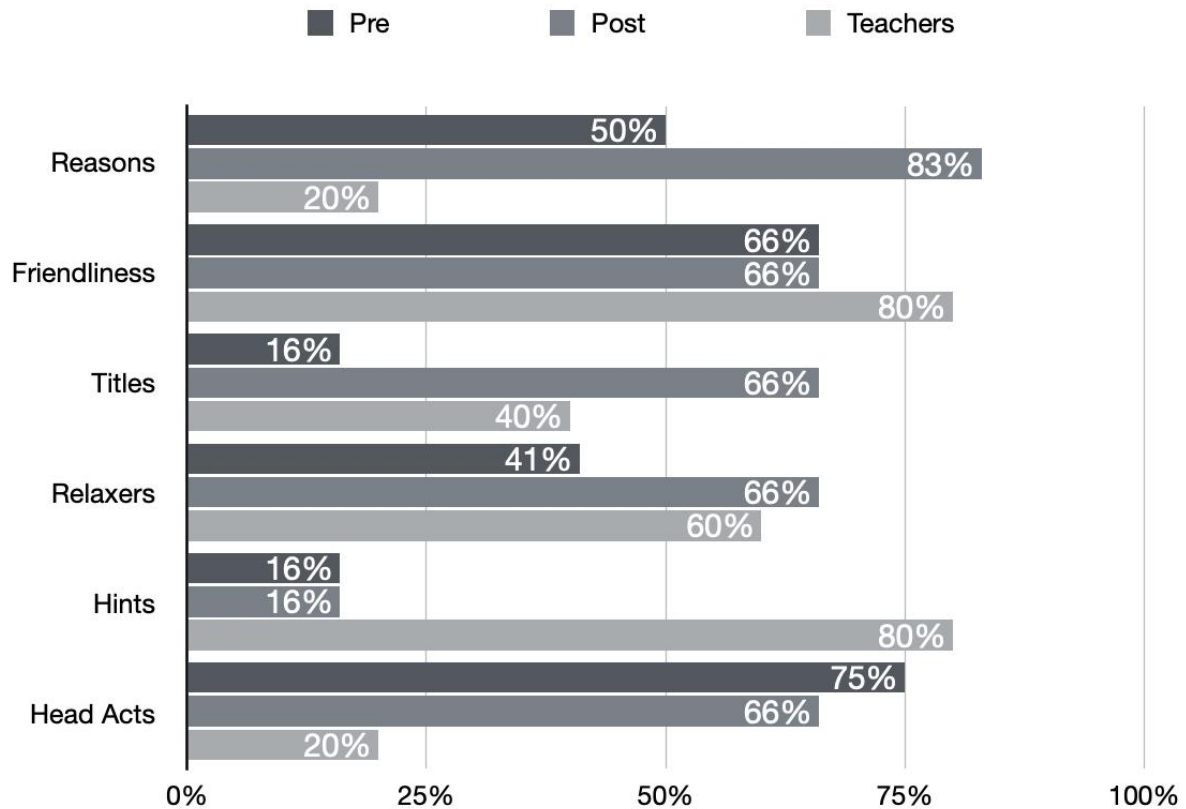
The prompt for situation #8 was:

You are talking with your new English teacher who you are not very close with after class. He/she is a heavy cigarette smoker. He/she looks very stressed and coughs often. You always think he/she should quit. What would you say?

High power was indexed by “professor,” high distance by “who you are not very close with,” and high imposition by “He/She is a heavy cigarette smoker. He/she looks very stressed and coughs often. You always think he/she should quit.”

Table 4

Strategy Use in Situation #8, High P/D/I



Note. The use of strategies by learners pre, learners post, and teachers in situation #8.

Titles (+50%), relaxers (+25%), and head acts (-9%) all moved towards the teacher baseline while hints (+0%) and friendliness (+0%) saw no increase. Reasons (+25%) saw an increase away from the teacher baseline.

Discussion

Strategy Identification Task

This section aims to answer Research Question 1: Can learners be trained to identify language strategies? The rate of correct identification for each strategy will be discussed in turn.

The “relaxer” strategy showed the highest rate of post-instruction correct identification (100%). “Relaxers” were explained to students as statements that attempt to relax the hearer before suggesting and this instruction seemed to be extremely effective in differentiating relaxers from friendliness. Their formulaic nature; e.g. “I don’t want to be rude,” “Excuse me,” and “I just wanted to say,” in addition to their nearly unvarying syntactic position, always at or near the beginning of the suggestion, likely also contributed to their high rate of post-task identification.

“Titles” showed a 69% post-instruction correct identification rate with the remaining 31% identification as “friendliness.” “Titles” were explained as expressions which address or greet the hearer and this explanation was mostly successful in differentiating them from “friendliness.” Titles” such as “hey (name)” or “Professor (name),” can show friendliness depending on the interlocutors’ relationship and this likely explains why they were also identified as friendliness.

“Friendliness” had the lowest pre-instruction correct identification rate at 8%, seeming to indicate this was the least familiar category before instruction. “Friendliness” was explained to students as expressions which show common ground or concern for the hearer. The post-instruction correct identification rate of 50% shows improvement but 42% of students identified them as “hints.” The identification of “hints” can likely be explained by considering the language examples given such as “I know this is a convenient place to park.” This utterance was part of a longer utterance which also contained an explicit suggestion that the hearer move their bicycle to a different parking place. In the context of a suggestion, it is understandable that such “friendliness” expressions could also be interpreted as “hints” and suggests the difficulty of students to strictly distinguish the two.

“Hints” saw only a modest improvement in correct identification pre- and post-task, from 42% to 54%, but in the post-task the remaining 46% identified them as reasons. As hints are usually reasons plus an implication to act, such as “There is a place over there where you can put your bike...,” compared to a pure reason, “Your bicycle is actually blocking the entrance,” this small distinction seemed difficult for students. It is reasonable to argue that the some of the language examples that were presented as reasons to students for imply an action even if not overtly hinted at. Pragmatically competent language users are adept at understanding illocution (intent) from a locution (utterance). Language learners may not find the distinction between “reasons” and “hints” important or useful leading to its relatively poor improvement in identification. Nonetheless, as those were the only two identifications chosen in the post-instruction task, this does show a general understanding of the strategy.

“Reasons” saw a significant improvement in identification, improving from 23% to 69%, with 8% identifying them as hints. The same 15% of students identified these reasons as “title,” the same percentage as in the pre-task, suggesting a lack of understanding of this strategy or of the task itself.

In summary, “relaxers” and “titles” were very successfully recalled and differentiated by learners from the other strategies. “Reasons” and “hints” were often conflated but were

successfully differentiated from the other three strategies. “Friendliness” was the hardest to identify and differentiate and was often identified as a “hint.” In the context of a suggestion, it could be argued their function was ambiguous or multifaceted. Overall, students showed a greatly improved ability to correctly identify strategies post-task.

Discourse Completion Task

The results of Situation #1 showed a modest improvement in the quantity of strategies used toward the teacher baseline with a possible overuse of some strategies. Although the teachers used very few titles compared with the learners post-instruction, the language used such as “hey (name)” and “Hi (name)!” are appropriate in a low P/D/I situation.

Situation #4 saw a significant increase in the use of “friendliness” and “titles” with a moderate increase in “reasons” by learners. Their 100% use of head acts is notable compared with only 70% by teachers, but almost all the EFL learners post-instruction used multiple mitigating strategies, such as those taught in class, before the head act. Hints saw a decrease as the students instead chose to directly suggest with head acts such as “maybe you could park there,” and “I know a better place to park, I can show you!”

Situation #8 showed a significant increase in “reasons,” “titles,” and “relaxers” with no increase in “friendliness” or “hints.” The increase in “titles” and “relaxers” moved toward the teachers’ usage rate. The use of “friendliness” remained high (66%) close to the teachers use at 80%. The EFL learners were not hesitant to give reasons why their teacher should not smoke such as “it will be good for you” and “you are always coughing.” These were classified as “reasons” and not “hints” if they occurred before a direct suggestion, such as “Would you consider quitting smoking?” These reasons were interpreted as functioning to justify the suggestion present rather than hint at one which was absent. In contrast, only 20% of the teachers attempted a direct suggestion. Instead, they relied on hints such as “That sounds like a bad cough” and “it may a good chance” without an explicit suggestion. The in-class instruction did present students with this very low occurrence of explicit suggestions in high P/D/I situations, and it was recommended to students not to be direct. Despite this, students mostly maintained their pre-instruction rate of direct suggestions. This is not necessarily incorrect or inappropriate considering most students used multiple strategies to mitigate their direct suggestion.

Ishihara (2022) explains that learners may exhibit *pragmatic resistance* where they “diverge from L2 norms to negotiate their linguistic or cultural uniqueness, even when they have sufficient pragmatic linguistic control.” Kondo (2007), after having Japanese learners

and American native speakers of English complete the same DCT, then showed the results of the two DCTs side by side for the Japanese learners to examine and compare. The students discussed the differences and did other pragmatic awareness raising activities. One result they discussed was that the American native speakers used expressions of “regret” only 22% of the time compared to the Japanese learners’ 69%. After instruction, the learners responded to the DCT situation again and in this assessment/post-instruction DCT, used regret 50% of the time. This would seem to imply that even with explicit knowledge of native speaker strategy use, the Japanese learners preferred not to mimic the native speakers, but instead asserted their own linguistic or cultural uniqueness. Kondo herself notes that learners “retained some culturally specific characteristics of their pragmatic behavior, which they strongly prefer, as was shown in their use of statements of regret, such as ‘I’m sorry’”(p.127). This pattern of moving towards the native speaker strategy use but not to the same degree, was also present in use of other strategies studied such as “gratitude” and “future (acceptance).” However, the Japanese learners did change their use to the rate of the native speakers in the strategy of “positive opinion.”

Conclusion

Research Question 1 asked whether learners could be trained to identify language strategies by function. Each of the five strategies tested in the Strategy Identification Task showed improved correct identification with one reaching 100% correct post-task identification. In addition, marginally correct answers such as “titles” being identified as “friendliness” were frequent in the post-task demonstrating that even learners who did not remember the correct identification exactly, identified the function of the strategy more closely with the correct identification.

Research Question 2 asked if learners would produce more appropriate strategies after being trained to identify them. The overall post-instruction results of three DCT situations showed an increase in the use of nearly all strategies. While the learners may have resisted, misunderstood, or disregarded some of the pragmatic norms presented to them, most of their strategy use moved closer to the teachers’ strategy use. This is thought to be due to the explicit instruction they received in strategy types and rates of use.

Limitations

The categorizations of language strategies are solely those of the researcher. The same set of three language examples for each of the five strategies in question were used in the pre- and post-instruction tasks so that even if the categorization of the strategies could be

disputed, the students' ability to identify those strategies as they were explained to them could be evaluated. The DCT results were also evaluated and categorized solely by the researcher although with constant reference to available coding schemes such as Martinez-Flor (2005), Trosborg's (1995), and Li (2010). The sample size of 13 learners and 10 teachers also limits the reliability and applicability of the results.

Future Directions

Larger sample sizes of both students and teachers would add greater validity to results of both tasks. A larger sample size of teachers responding to the DCT would yield a greater variety of language for each strategy as well as more strategies overall. Multiple coders would add intercoder reliability for the classification of language function and evaluation of DCT results. The choice of strategies to test students on could be made to increase the chance of students being able to distinguish them; using maximally contrasting strategies rather than strategies with possible overlap such as "reasons" and "hints."

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