



The Feasibility of Teaching Communication Strategies from the Standpoint of EFL Teachers and Students

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Received: September 02, 2022

Accepted: January 30, 2023

ABSTRACT

The present study attempted to investigate English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers' and students' perceptions of the possibility of teaching communication strategies (CSs) among pre-intermediate learners. A review of the related literature suggests that the teachability of CSs has been the source of controversy among different researchers. The participants of this study were 20 EFL teachers and their 110 students from three universities and a private Institute in Tabriz. In this mixed methods study, three research tools were used for gathering data: a language proficiency test, a modified questionnaire, and a structured interview. The quantitative phase included the administration of the CSs questionnaire at the beginning and end of the course and instructions on these strategies for 12 weeks. The qualitative phase included the analysis of the teachers' responses to the interview and coding comments thematically by the researcher. After analyzing the quantitative data by running paired sample t-test, it was found that EFL students confirmed the possibility of teaching communication strategies and suggested that CSs are teachable and useful. The important implication of the study is that strategy training was the factor of progress and the teaching of communication strategies can be pedagogically possible and their instruction is beneficial to students.

Keywords: Perceptions; Speaking strategies; Strategy training; Teachability of communication strategies

INTRODUCTION

Communication is an inevitable part of L2 learning. As noted by Skehan (1989), one must talk in order to learn L2. Similarly, MacIntyre and Charos (1996) posited that one must be able to use language to communicate. Thus, the main goal of L2 teaching should be to create language learners who want to use the language for authentic communication (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Communication is over and further than speaking. Speaking is a significant element of communicating, but it is not the only instrument.

As a result, speaking has been considered to mean more language use and practice which

in turn leads to higher levels of communicative competence and success.

In communication, there are some obstacles, for example, the speakers may produce incomplete sentences or convey unclear messages. There may also be many interruptions. To prevail over the obstacles of speaking which is the essence of communication and to facilitate effective learning, the students require some specific strategies or techniques. Communication strategy is one tactic to overcome the linguistic difficulties to solve students' speech problems in L2 and support communication. These strategies, which are considered strategic competence enhancers, can help solve communication breakdowns, increase interaction and language

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use in the target language, and deal with reticence (e.g., Dörnyei & Scott, 1997; Lafford, 2004; Nakatani, 2010). Dörnyei and Scott (1997) defined CSs as "a conscious technique used to achieve a goal" (1997, pp. 184–185).

The concept of 'communication strategies' for the current study expresses the techniques proposed by L2 teachers to solve verbal communication problems of their students. According to Faerch and Kasper (1983, p.36), CS describe as "potentially conscious plans" which are applied by the students in order to solve a problem to achieve a certain communication goal. CSs not only contribute students to compensate for language deficiency, but also play a role in encouraging language learning and mastering communication competence. In addition, the role of CSs is to increase students' awareness with regard to what to say and how to say in communicative situations (Tarone, 1977). Therefore, CSs are not only employed to overcome the communication difficulties because of linguistic deficiency or other resources, but also to enhance communication efficacy, fluency, and despite negotiating meaning, they keep the communication channel open (Dobao & Martínez, 2007). The students play an important role in communication (Tarone, 1977). Some learners with higher confidence seem to be more successful in conversations because they may be more sociable and prepared to communicate than the other ones, and they will show greater interaction and apply more interactive strategies in communication (Zhang, 2008). The personality of the students may also influence the choice of CSs (e.g., Wang, 2005; Wannaruk; 2003). For example, they found that the active students who were more sociable and eager to exchange their opinions employed more cooperative strategies and imitation strategies, but the other ones who were too shy and conservative to ask for help used more reduction strategies. Due to the fact that perceptions are dynamic and flexible (Brown, 2009), the current study illuminates the perceptions of teachers and students on their main beliefs about the possibility of teaching CSs. Perceptions are the result of one's experience, beliefs, attitudes as well as personal reactions.

It described as a state of mind that contains thoughts and views and is admitted as an important notion to realize one's behavior as it makes the experience of our surroundings; it forces everyone to act in this environment and understand the world and reach various problems of life. So, perception in this research is the consciousness, realization or an understanding of the possibility of teaching CSs. 'Perception' in this context also expresses students' and teachers' private and intellectual attitudes about the teachability of CSs in this field. Baker (1992) cited three important reasons for examining EFL teachers' and students' perceptions; "its close connection to individual construct systems, its value as an indicator of viewpoints in the community, and its centrality in psychological theory and research assets to perceptions as a central topic. (P.10)" According to Corder (1983), CSs are described as teachers' and students' struggles to support the conversation while facing difficulties. What is the "problem/difficulty?" Based on Tarone, Cohen and Dumas (1983), this is a position "where the appropriate systematic target language rules have not been found". As stated by Faerch and Kasper (1983, p.36), it is a "problem in reaching a particular communicative goal". There are two kinds of problems we encounter in communication: some problems in expressing and some others in comprehending. This paper is related to the first one. Indeed, the problem is that you cannot say exactly what you want, hence, it seems your message was not delivered or sent to the listener.

One of the main problems in the EFL programs in Iran is the over-emphasis on the written language to the extent of relative exclusion of the spoken language which requires a mastery on verbal communication skills. Teaching only grammar and vocabulary does not lead to a significant development in the students' oral performance (Willems, 1987). One of the reasons that makes speaking in the EFL classroom less significant can be due to the nature of speaking and the intrinsic difficulties and arguments related to 'teaching'. In this respect, Richard and Renandya (2002) point out that,

“A large percentage of the world’s language learners are study English in order to develop proficiency in speaking” (p. 201).

The second problem is that, language tests ignore the aspects of spoken skills when assessing communication competences of learners in real life as well as calculating learners’ communicative skills in the target language. This is because speaking contains a variety of processes. It involves “acquiring knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, negotiating effectively and adapting to different contexts within cultural and social rules of the communication setting” (Wells, 1985, p.22). The findings of the present research can be significant in both theoretical and practical dimensions. Theoretically, the findings can add to the related literature with regard to the teachability and usefulness of CSs. On the practical and pedagogical grounds, the study can raise crucial implications for teachers and learners in EFL classes who seek to achieve a communicative command of the foreign language. The present study tried to replicate the previous research in the field and to fill some perceived gaps with regard to the possibility of teaching CSs in Iranian EFL context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A Historical Overview and Trends in Research on Communication Strategies

Initially, in the early 1970s, the concept of communication strategies was launched on the acquisition of second language and has still attracted the attention of researchers. At the same date, four studies developed the field for investigating communication strategies, as a new topic of discussion within applied linguistics. In 1972, Selinker invented the concept of ‘communication strategy’ “as one of the five central processes involved in L2 learning” (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997, p. 175). Corder (1983) confirms that it was Váradi (1973, but published in 1980) who was the first to examine CSs empirically. In 1980 and 1983, Canale and Swain introduced CSs within the theoretical concept as a strategic competence, then considered them as one of four sub-branches of communicative competence, respectively (Brown, 2007). Numerous researchers categorize

communication difficulties in varied manners. Kongsom’s (2016) taxonomy of CSs was used as the basis for the selection of the CSs to address in the questionnaire of this research. This choice was based on the fact that the 11 selected CSs out of 16 seemed more feasible to teach in our EFL classes than the excluded ones. Due to the restricted time of the CSs instruction program, these selected strategies can be used to solve possible communication problems. This view has been supported by many researchers (Tiwaporn Kongsome, 2016; Domyei, 1995; Nakatani, 2005) who maintained that these CSs are very useful for students to solve their communication problems. A student’s and teachers’ perception toward the possibility of teaching CSs is one of the most important predictors of success in learning English language as well as plays an important role in classroom practices and performances. ‘Perceptions’ are the ability to know something through the senses or the way we perceive, or interpret something. Weber (1992), described it as “an evaluative reaction - a judgment regarding one’s liking or disliking - of a person, event or other aspect of the environment” (p. 117). They can have a positive or negative effect on learning. These perceptions may include teachers’ and students’ preferences as to how their teaching CSs should be delivered (Lightbown & Spada, 2008), their perceptions of the teacher’s role and their own in the learning process, their beliefs about CSs learning (Tudor, 1996) and their perceptions about the knowledge required (Kalebic, 2005).

Teachability of Communication Strategies

In terms of CS identification, the studies tended to be either from the Pros’ or Cons’ perspectives, terms coined by Yule and Tarone (1997).

The Cons or the Arguments against Teaching Communication Strategies

Researchers implied that the concept of CSs has some ‘Pros’ and ‘Cons’. The Cons based their CS descriptions on non-observable intra-individual cognitive processing, or those who stand against teaching CSs (Bialystok, 1990; Kellerman, 1991), disagreed to link CSs to educational issues. They referred to the diver-

gent views on the pedagogical aspects of language. These researchers compared the L2 function with their first language performance and discovered similarities between them. Bialystok (1990) suggests that the similarities are a result of two main factors. Firstly, the continuity is a result of researchers building on previous work and refining them to suit their own ideas. Secondly, the convergence in CS description is due to the differences in criteria being apparent rather than real. In other words, the differences lie in the surface structure, while the underlying structure remains the same. Mariani (2010) discussed that the “cons” have taken an extreme position to suppose that adult students have already developed cognitive abilities in their first language and had the similarities between the L1 and L2 communication strategies, thus they can transfer their first language strategies to the second language, so there is no need to teach CSs.

The Pros or the Arguments in Favor of Teaching Communication Strategies

On the other side, the Pros based their CS categories on observable inter-individual communication, or the advocates of teaching CSs such as Faerch and Kasper (1983); Tarone and Yule (1987); Kongsom (2009); Dornyei and Thurrell (1991) characteristically favor and recommend the pedagogic usefulness of teaching CSs. They compared the real efficiency of L2 with that of the native speaker. They refer to many differences between the two and based on these results, they maintain the idea of teaching communication strategies (Faucette, 2001). In response to the claim of Cons researchers, one can declare that, although there are some similarities between the communication in L1 and L2, there are also some differences. L2 students may face a variety of communication difficulties in using L2, therefore, they may require to develop extra CSs to solve difficulties. Manchon (1999) speaks out in support of CSs teaching.

According to the participants, teachers agreed with the ‘Pros’ that they think communication strategies can be taught and can also help students develop their communication skills. This idea is advocated by many re-

searchers such as Nakatani (2010) and Faucette (2001). Maleki (2007) asserted that “teaching communication strategies is not only useful, but feasible”.

The researcher summarized Tiwaporn Kongsom’s study (2016) on CSs training as one of the proponents of these strategies. Kongsom (2016) implemented a study on the impact of teaching CSs on English speaking of 57 Thai engineering undergraduate students. They were taught ten communication strategies for ten weeks and responded to a questionnaire before and after the communication strategy instruction. His study provides more empirical evidence that the instruction of CSs is possible and desirable among second or foreign language learners.

The findings from research questionnaire showed that the instruction in the use of the ten communication strategies had a positive influence on the students’ reports. They successfully transferred all taught communication strategies to their utterances in the four speaking tasks after receiving instruction. Another research about CS has been carried out by Hosein Vafadar, Thomas Chow Voon Foo, and Afsar Rouhi (2019). This study investigated the effects of communication strategies on Intermediate Iranian EFL Low- and Mid-Willing Learners’ Willingness to Communicate (LWTC and MWTC).

The results revealed that the LWTC learners’ WTC significantly increased as a result of CSs use compared to that of the MWTC learners. Although various empirical studies and academic writings have been conducted in this field until now, but they might not portray real representations of the issue being investigated. Thus, in line with the purposes of the present study and in order to fill the gap in the literature to obtain a more comprehensive picture, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ1: *Which strategies do EFL learners find more useful and teachable in their classrooms?*

RQ2: *What are the Iranian EFL teachers’ perceptions towards the possibility of teaching communication strategies?*

MTHODOLOGY

Design

The study adopted a mixed method design which included both qualitative and quantitative procedures for data collection and analyses. The combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches is supposed to be feasible, practical and useful for removing obstacles and can find solutions that ‘pure design’ cannot overcome (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). Denzin (1989, p.307) quoted Denscombe (2010, p.141) remarks that “by combining multiple theories, methods and data sources, researchers can hope to overcome the intrinsic bias that comes from single-method, single observer, and single theory studies”. Engaging in a single method “will inevitably yield biased and limited results” (Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989, p. 256).

Participants

In the present study, the number of participants was 20 pre-intermediate EFL teachers (7 male and 13 female) with the age range of 30 to 48 who agreed to cooperate and help the researcher to collect the necessary data for the study. The teachers had all more than five years teaching experience in communication classes both at universities and private language institutes in Tabriz. In addition, a group of 110 EFL learners (55 males and 55 females) with the age range of 17 to 32 who studied in the pre-intermediate level, under the teaching of the teacher participants in the present study was the sample from which the data were collected for the experimental phase of the study.

Instrumentation

Three instruments were used for data collection: a language proficiency test, a questionnaire and an interview. The English language proficiency test and the questionnaire were used for quantitative part to collect data from student participants and the interview was used for qualitative part to collect data from the teachers of the study.

Preliminary English test (PET)

At the beginning of the study, an English proficiency test was taken from the students of the

study. The preliminary English test (PET) produced by the Cambridge ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) and administrated for the pre-intermediate level students of this study. The test had four sections corresponding to four language skill; however, since the learners’ English proficiency level was not among the main variables of the study and it was used only to select a more homogeneous participants as the sample, and also for practicality considerations, only the reading section was administered and the other parts were excluded in the study. The reading section consisted of five parts in matching, multiple-choice, and fill-in-the blank’s forms.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire was developed by the researcher to examine the learners’ perceptions towards the usefulness and teachability of CSs. The current study did not depend on adopting one unique questionnaire. It was made in accordance with Nakatani’s (2006) Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI), Hmaid’s (2014) adapted version of Lam’s (2006) Strategy Questionnaire, Alahmed’s (2017) Strategy Questionnaire, and Kongsom’s (2016) Communication Strategy Questionnaire. The reason for the compatibility and the use of four questionnaires was that some aspects of the existing questionnaires were beyond the scope of the present study.

The questionnaire had 29 close-ended items and one open-ended item. The items targeted 11 CSs selected from 16 CSs defined in Kongsom’s (2016) classification which were divided into five categories based on Alahmed’s scale (2017).

The 11 CSs included in this study were approximation, circumlocution, use of all-purpose words, appeal for help, clarification request, pause fillers and hesitation devices, topic avoidance, comprehension check, confirmation check (or asking for confirmation), self-repair, and gesture & facial expression, respectively.

The internal reliability of the items in the questionnaire before and after the CS instruction, using Cronbach’s alpha was estimated 0.79 and 0.83 respectively, which stated that all items in the questionnaire could reflect the

students' perceptions of the teachability and usefulness of CS with sufficient consistency (Pallant, 2007, p. 98).

Structured Interview

The instrument which was used in the qualitative phase of the current study was a structured interview which was developed by the researcher and administered to teacher participants of the study. Structured interview consist of a complete set of interview questions and each interviewee is questioned the same items (Patton, 2002).

Procedure (Data Collection Procedure)

Participants' perceptions about the development of CSs was measured through questionnaire completion and stimulated interviews. At the beginning of the study, PET test was administered to the 153 students to select a homogenous sample and exclude students who their scores were beyond the range of one standard deviation. The next step was the administration of the questionnaire in two phases of pre-test and post-test to the selected participants by the teachers in their classes. The questionnaire with 29 close ended items and 1 free response item and production type were distributed in a part of normal class time among the students by the teachers.

Data Analysis

In terms of data analysis, the analysis of the PET test results showed that 110 scores were within the homogeneity range and 43 scores were either too high or too low, thus excluded from the later stages of data collection. After the pretest, CSs treatment were administered in weekly sessions over a period of twelve

weeks. In the current study, the 12-week CS training program consisted of a number of strategy training activities proposed by Tiwaporn Kongsom (2009). The purpose of the treatment was the instruction of CSs and show the applying these strategies in their speaking activities. At the end of the study, the students' perceptions toward the teachability and usefulness of CSs was tested again through administration of the post-tests. The results of pretest and posttest scores in the questionnaire were statically compared with each other. Additionally, the interview questions were answered by teacher participants at the end of the term. Thematic coding was used to analyze the collected data from six open-ended interview questions. As stated by Bryman (2008), the thematic qualitative coding approach is a common method for qualitative data analysis. Meanwhile, the teachers' responses were used to find out their perceptions toward the possibility of teaching communication strategies.

RESULTS

Preliminary English Test (PET) was administered to 153 students at the beginning of the term. Students mean score was 24.69 and SD of the scores collected from students was 6.16. Among these number of participants, 110 students were selected whose scores were within the range of one SD below and above the mean. The hypothesis of t-test, namely, normality was examined before performing the main statistical test by calculating One-Sample Kolmogrov-Smirnov test of normality. The results of the analyses in Table 1, indicate the normality of the distributions.

Table 1
Results of One-Sample Kolmogrov-Smirnov Test of Normality of the Distributions

		pretest	posttest
N		110	110
Normal Parameters ^{a,b}	Mean	88.47	108.97
	Std. Deviation	22.547	19.908
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.077	.073
	Positive	.077	.049
	Negative	-.046	-.073
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z		.807	.763
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.533	.605

a. Test distribution is Normal.

It was shown in Table 1 that the p-values was above the alpha level of significance (.05) and were seen for both pretest and post-test scores (.533 and .605). It means that the normality hypothesis could be affirmed and it was logical to use parametric inferential statistics

to compare the two means obtained from pretest and post-test.

Table 2 displays the results of the descriptive statistics consists of the mean and SD for the scores gained from the administration of the questionnaire in the pretest and posttest.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics for Pretest and Posttest Scores of Students' Perceptions

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	pretest	88.47	110	22.547	2.150
	posttest	108.97	110	19.908	1.898

As it was shown in Table 2, in the pre-test, the mean scores of students' perceptions toward the possibility of teaching

CSs was 88.47 and in the posttest was 108.97. Table 4 shows the results of the analysis.

Table 3
Results of Paired-Samples t-test; Comparing Pretest & Posttest Perceptions and Mean Scores

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	pretest posttest	-20.500	9.351	.892	-22.267	-18.733	-22.992	109	.000

As it is shown in Table 3, the p-value was below the alpha level of significance (.05), and were seen for both pretest and post-test scores, indicating a statistically significant difference between the two mean scores. The results of the data analysis to answer the research question 1 indicated that the participants' perceptions significantly increased toward the nine CSs after the instruction. The majority of

them declared their positive opinions about teaching these strategies and felt that CSs are teachable and their instructions were beneficial for them in many ways.

In pre-test and prior to the instruction of five CSs categories, the participants' responses to each strategy included in the questionnaire items were analyzed one by one and then each choice was calculated.

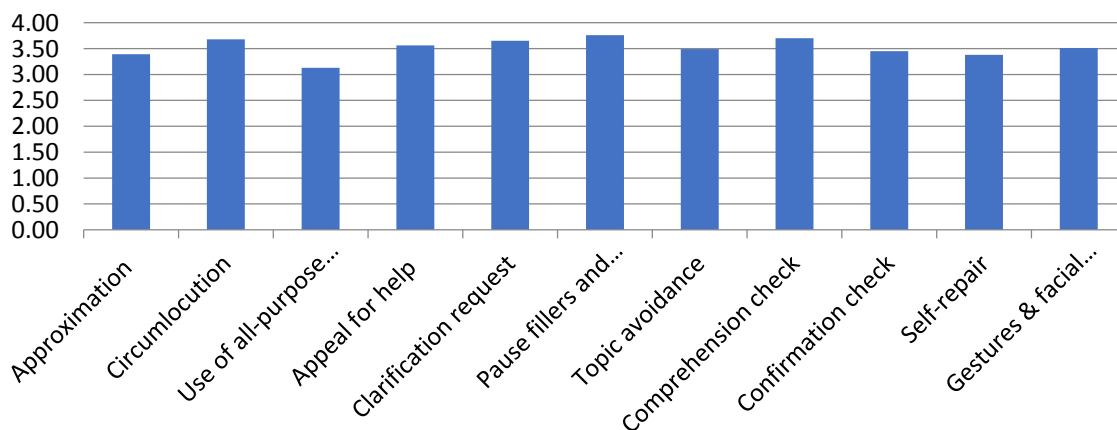


Figure 1
Bar Graph for Mean Distribution in eleven strategies of Pre-test

The results of pre-test revealed the mean scores of students' perceptions towards CSs to identify which one of these eleven strategies is more useful and teachable in their classrooms. The mean value of the approximation was 3.39; circumlocution, 3.68; use of all-purpose words, 3.13; appeal for help, 3.56; clarification request, 3.65; pause fillers and hesitation device, 3.76; topic avoidance, 3.49; comprehension check, 3.70; confirmation check, 3.45; self-

repair, 3.38, and finally the mean value of the gesture & facial expression was 3.51.

Students' mean scores in seven strategies such as, 'Pause fillers and hesitation device', 'comprehension check', 'circumlocution', 'clarification request', 'appeal for help', 'Gesture & facial expression', and 'Topic avoidance' were higher in the pre-test. The lowest of the mean scores of students' perceptions about CSs in this phase belonged to the 'Use of all-purpose word'.

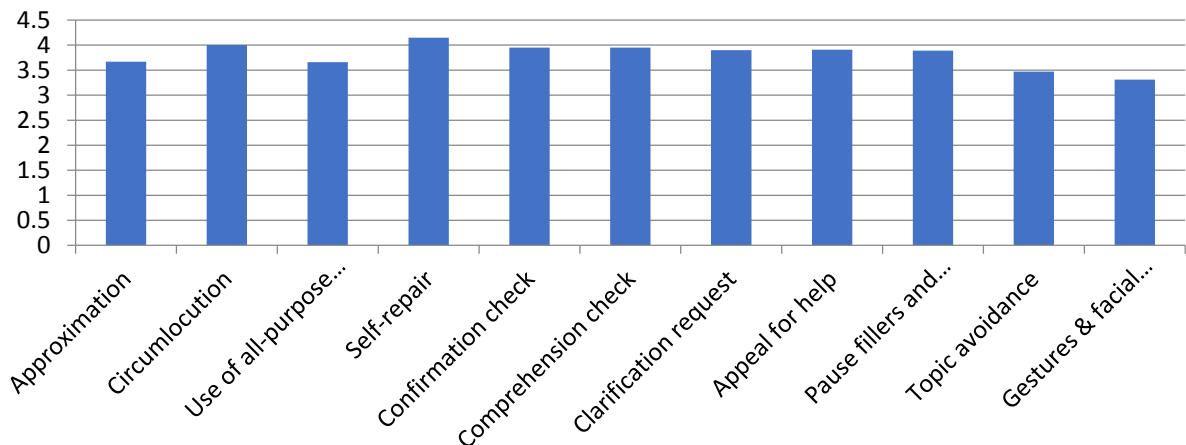


Figure 2

Bar Graph for the Distribution of Mean for eleven Post-test Strategies

In post-test and after the 12-week teaching program there were statistical increases in some taught CSs, especially in self-repair, circumlocution, confirmation check and comprehension check, appeal for help, and clarification request. In addition, students decreased their use of topic avoidance, and gesture & facial expression, after the teaching of CSs. The lowest of the mean scores of students' perceptions toward CSs in the posttest were for the gesture & facial expression.

In order to response the second research question which were related to the qualitative phase of the study, data obtained from six free answers to interview questions were analyzed, transcribed, coded, and arranged according to the relevant topics.

The responses to interview questions showed that most teacher participants believed that CSs can be taught to foreign language learners and help them become more confident in their communication. While the data do not suggest that all twenty teachers think alike for the possibility of teaching CSs, it does indicate

that many teachers had the same idea towards the teachability of CSs. Teachers commented that the instruction of CSs is possible and helped improve students English speaking abilities. They agreed that the focus of CSs classes is on communication, and strategies are an attempt to meet the challenge of communication.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to investigate EFL teachers' and pre- intermediate students' perspectives toward the possibility of teaching CSs in their classrooms from three aspects including PET test, questionnaire and structured interview.

Based on the result of the research question 1, teachers and students displayed positive emotions towards the teachability and usefulness of CS. They were satisfied with CSs training. Both teachers and students believed teaching these strategies led students to meaningful communications and encouraged them to collaborate which in turn resulted in the students' further moti-

vation for learning the language. The teaching of CSs might increase the students' awareness of each strategy because they commented more perceptions toward the use of nine CSs after getting the 12-week CS instruction and reduced their statements about the use of the non-taught CSs and non-verbal CSs. The results of this study were compatible with those in Dornyei's (1995) study which revealed that the students found these strategies are teachable and useful and their overall perceptions towards the teaching were positive. The students' comments revealed that they realized the importance of using CSs in conversation.

Research question 2 try to discover EFL teachers' perceptions towards the possibility of teaching CSs by analyzing the teacher participants' written responses to question one in the written interview questions that asked "what does the term communication strategies mean for you"? Key findings of this research question, is that communication strategies can be taught. Regarding the interview data on the teachers' perceptions, they welcomed the teaching of communication strategies, but there is some controversy among researchers on this issue.

Researchers adopted different approaches based on the conceptualization of communication strategies which impacted on their views about the educational perspective of communication strategies. Nakatani's (2010) proposes that students who try to find alternative techniques to overcome communication problems, feel more confident about themselves to apply the foreign language. They highlighted the role of 'power' and 'culture' in communication, the importance of raising students' awareness or consciousness of communication strategies, as well as the significance of promoting students' communicative competence. In short, O'Malley and Chamot (1995) argue that students can profit from teaching CSs and become motivated as they gain experience to use these strategies successfully. As an overall conclusion, based on the teachers' interview, it was found that all interviewees' teachers not only assert, but also demonstrated the possibility of teaching CSs.

CONCLUSION

Overall, research on CSs has a history of about 40 years, and in the last decade, we have seen a variety of CS research and changes on them due to their teachability, but they are still surrounded by controversy and there is much room for research and development. However, the previous studies on CSs at home and abroad, mostly focus on the student's attitude towards oral communication; no CSs research has been conducted in teachers' and students' perceptions about the possibility of teaching communication strategies.

The results of this study had some theoretical and pedagogical implications. Regarding the theoretical ground, it gives both EFL teachers and students an opportunity to explain in detail their perceptions, and attitudes about the possibility of teaching CSs in which they have been engaged. In terms of pedagogical phase, this study uses an alternative method of teaching CSs for development of Iranian students speaking ability and conversation. It supplies evidence of how Iranian English teachers and students perceive the teachability of CSs. It can empower students to participate in communication and attempt to remain in the conversation and achieve their communicative goal in times of problem. Applying CSs can serve as a scaffold for weak students, develop strategic competence and become autonomous students. In instructional phase, teachers believe that CSs teaching may improve oral communication performance.

Furthermore, the results of the study showed that, through comparing the results of the pretest and posttest, it is obvious that students performed better on the posttest than the pretest. Thus, strategy teaching was the factor of progress. Students can communicate better by mastering CS.

This study has a number of limitations which should be considered when generalizing the findings. Concerning the key factors, the following are found to be negatively affecting the implementation of CSs; firstly, shortage of time to practice these strategies in the classroom and to cover all the content. Secondly, the researcher focused only on pre-intermediate English learners and the findings cannot be generalized to all EFL students with full English proficiency.

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