The Effect of Explicit Instruction of Discourse Markers on Iranian EFL Learners' Speaking Ability

Hanieh DavatgariAsl

Assistant Professor, Department of ELT, College of Humanities, Ahar Branch, Islamic Azad University, Ahar, Iran

Alireza Moradinejad *

Talesh Branch, Islamic Azad University, Talesh, Iran

Abstract

Since non-native speakers of English lack a deep and wide knowledge of discourse markers (henceforth DMs), they misuse or overuse a limited set of them. Therefore, explicit instruction (EI) of DMs has recently received a significant importance in EFL teaching. The present study attempts to investigate the effect of EI on EFL learners' use of DMs in speaking. To this end, 41 Iranian university EFL learners with an age range of 20 to 23 participated in this study which lasted for one academic semester. They were randomly assigned to an experimental group (20 male and female learners) receiving explicit instruction of DMs and a control group (20 male and female learners) without EI of DMs. Results indicated that the participants in the experimental group outperformed the members of the control one in appropriate and frequent use of DMs.

Keywords: discourse marker, explicit instruction, nonnative, EFL learners

INTRODUCTION

Conversation analysis is an approach to the analysis of spoken discourse that looks at the way in which people manage their everyday conversational interactions. It examines how spoken discourse is organized and develops as speakers carry out these interactions. Conversation analysis works with recordings of spoken data and carries out careful and fine-grained analyses of this data (Paltridge, 2012).

Conversation Analysis and L2 Conversation

Regarding conversation analysis, most of the studies have examined native speaker talk, while the attention has also shifted to non-native speaker speech. Markee (2000), conducted a study in which he showed how conversation analysis can be used as a tool for analyzing and understanding the acquisition of an L2. He argues the importance of examining "outlier" data in L2 acquisition studies saying that, from a conversation analysis point of view, all participants' behavior makes sense to be the individuals involved and must be taken to consideration, rather than put aside, in the analysis.

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* Correspondence: Alireza Moradinejad, Email: alireza_moradinejad@yahoo.com

White (1987) claims that a full lack of focus on form in teaching is not learners' interest. She also believes that when instruction focuses on meaning to the virtual exclusion of formal aspects of language, learners may fail to reach high levels of linguistic knowledge and performance despite extensive exposure to target language input. Focusing only on meaning provides insufficient input of some forms and gives no chance to practice other forms and purely communicative approach does not serve language learners well enough (Swan, 1987).

Explicit instruction facilitates learners' metalinguistic awareness of the target structure (DeKeyser, 1995). Reactive explicit instruction refers to a learning process in which the instructor provides learners with metalinguistic or explicit corrective feedback and learners produce the target structure. Proactive explicit instruction, on the other hand, is an a learning condition which deals with a structure and reacts upon it even before it is proven to be problematic and it can be direct or indirect. In direct proactive explicit instruction the structure is explained meta-linguistically before doing any activity, while in the indirect mode, the instructor allows learners to discover the rules on their own based on the data provided (Ellis, 2005, 2009). Dekeyser (1995) states that direct focus on form does not mean a shift to a structural syllabus but, he believes it can imply the explicit teaching and systematic practicing of certain forms for some learners.

According to Poole (2005), explicit instruction is a type of instruction that, on the one hand, emphasizes the importance of communicative language teaching principle such as authentic communication and learner-centeredness and, on the other hand, implies the importance of the occasional and overt study of problematic L2 grammatical forms, which is more reminiscent of non-communicative teaching. Furthermore, Long and Robinson (1998) argue that formal second language instruction should focus most of its attention to exposing students to oral and written discourse that resembles real-life, such as job interviews, and engaging in classroom debates, nonetheless, when it is observed that learners are facing difficulties in the comprehension and or production of particular L2 grammatical forms, instructors and their peers must assist them notice and examine their erroneous use and/ or comprehension of these forms and provide them with the proper and correct explanations and models of them. Moreover, teachers can help their students and learners can help their peers notice the forms that they currently lack or have problem with, yet should know to enrich their overall L2 grammatical development. Explicit instruction of grammatical rules, especially simple rules involving transparent form-function relations, proves beneficial to adult learners' writing skill (Alanen, 1995; Robinson, 1995; Williams & Evans, 1998).

Explicit teaching involves directing learners' attention toward a specific learning objective in a highly structured environment. Topics are presented to learners by the teacher through demonstrating, explanation and practice. Explicit learning is a "conscious awareness and attention" to learning (Brown, 2007, p.291). In addition, explicit learning involves "input processing to find out whether the input information contains regularities, and if so, to work out the concepts and rules with which these regularities can be captured" (Brown, 2007, p. 291). Explicit learning is an active

process through which learners seek out the structure of information that is presented to them.

Sharwood Smith (1981) proposed the term 'consciousness raising' (C-R), referring to increasing or raising learners' conscious awareness of particular linguistic forms, altered by input; hence, 'all input is intake'. Sharwood Smith (1991, p. 118) defines input enhancement as 'the process through which language input becomes salient to learners'. In other words, input enhancement is regarded as an approach to second language teaching, and refers to a deliberate attempt to make the target form in this input enhanced by visually altering its appearance in the text. Sharwood Smith (1991, 1993) suggests many techniques which may be used in order to make input salient, such as color coding, bold-facing, using error flags, stress, 'intonation and gestures', as well as pointing out and explaining construction using metalinguistic terminology. For example, grammatical English morphemes (third person's singular *s*) could be bolded, underlined or highlighted. Using one or all of these techniques could draw learners' attention to the target language form. This kind of input enhancement is known as 'visual or textual enhancement.' The purpose of explicit teaching is: a)Introducing a new topic or skill, b) Providing guided instruction for understanding rules, skills, and thinking and, c) Giving learners specific instruction through modeling, which allows learners to practice (Best et al., 2005).

The term *discourse marker* has been defined by scholars for various research fields. Schiffrin defines DMs as "sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk" (Schiffrin, 1987). Fraser defines a DM as a linguistic expression. He believes that the discourse marker has a core meaning which can be enriched by the context and at the same time, DM can highlight the relationship between the foregoing utterance and the rear the speakers tend to express (Fraser, 1999). Based on the Relevance Theory, Blakemore calls DMs as "discourse connectives": "expressions that constrain the interpretation of the utterances which contain them by virtue of the inferential connections they express" (Blakemore, 1987). DMs are those linguistic expressions which connect sentences, show the speakers' attitudes, and facilitate comprehension of texts (Ismail, 2012). A theoretical definition of DMs is described as "members of functional class of verbal (and non-verbal) devices which provide contextual coordinates for ongoing talk" (ibid.41). At the deeper level, they are reflexive; they reflect the mental processes of speaker as imagined and predicted in "the fabric of talk-in-interaction" noticing on what happens in speaker's mind (Redeker, 2006). Therefore, DMs can be regarded as some expressions that are able to limit the hearer's understanding, because they clearly show the speaker's intention and the utilization of DMs is an important way to make contextual assumptions which help hearers to interpret speakers' utterance deeply and completely.

EFL learners' knowledge of DMs is crucial to their reading ability. Understanding a text without identifying the elements that contribute to the creation of meaning such as DMs is not possible (Aidinlou & Shahrokhi, 2012). DMs are believed to correlate highly with reading comprehension and that they facilitate the EFL readers' understanding the texts

by improving their reading speed and recall (Khatib & Safari, 2011; Martinez, 2009). We analyze DMs in order to provide information regarding the way speakers and hearers jointly integrate forms, meanings, and actions to make a comprehensive sense out of what is said in the process of communication. In this process the emergence of discourse coherence is based on the proper and well-functioned application of DMs. So, the study of the way DMs create and display relationships between speech units, linguistically and functionally, would provide important guidelines concerning how texts are produced, re-expressed, reformulated, distributed, and consumed in social contexts such as EFL classrooms (Schiffrin, 1987).

DMs are also important features of *spoken* language in terms of their frequency and multi-functionality in spoken discourse. Due to their significance as "sharing devices and intimacy signals in our everyday talk" (Quirk et al., 1985, p.31), their pragmatic and indispensable value is salient in spoken discourse. They play an important role in cohesion and coherence, and consequently, communicating the intended meaning of speaker/writer. They bridge the gaps of communication and guide the addressees to decode the flow of received information. Trujillo Saez (2003) suggests, "the speaker uses DMs to reduce the cognitive effort required from the hearer to interpret the utterance, by signaling which inference reflects more accurately the speaker's meaning". Lahuerta Martínez (2004, p. 65), also, states that speakers use DMs in order to direct their audiences to appropriate interpretation of the discourse communicated. In other words, DMs are one of the linguistic devices which help hearer to comprehend the message correctly. Lahuerta Martínez (2004, p. 65) citing Blakemore (1993) continues that DMs are those clues which narrow down the relevant context to help hearers/readers interpret the speakers'/writers' intended meaning. He proposes that, "since DMs facilitate communication, it is logical to suppose that the lack or inappropriate use of them in an L2, could, to a certain degree, hinder successful communication or lead to misunderstanding".

According to Louwerense and Mitchell (2003), DMs mostly occur in spoken rather than written discourse. They are words like, *y'know, i mean, oh, well, like, for example, so, but, then, y'see, etc,*. Due to their significance in native discourse, they have been of interest and attention in second/foreign language teaching as well. They are necessary items in spoken discourse to promote communicative and pragmatic competence of speakers (Hellermann and Vergun, 2007; Lam, 2009; Muller, 2005; O'Keeffe, et al., 2007; Wierzbicka, 1991). Non-native speakers use DMs in their own language significantly, but they do not feel independent and confident when using DMs in the target language. This inability to use DMs in their spoken interaction may make the speakers "potentially disempowered and at risk of becoming a second-class participant" (O'Keeffe et al., 2007, p.39). Failing to master the use of DMs may seriously impair the communicative competence of learners (Wierzbicka, 1991). Considering the common and frequent use of DMs in everyday *spoken* discourse of native speakers and due to their important role in the coherence and naturalness of speech, it can be concluded that it should be included in EFL classrooms as well. Hellermann and Vergun's (2007) in their study on DMs concluded that teachers in language classrooms play a fundamental role in

promoting DMs to language learners. They suggested that learners should be explicitly aware of DMs and their different functions.

DMs are of great importance in pedagogical settings as well. Classroom, as Walsh (2006) calls attention to, is a "dynamic" context (p. 4) where series of interactions take place among teachers, learners, discourses, settings and learning materials. Communications between teachers and learners like conversation and dialog are realized through the medium of classroom discourse. As one main part of classroom interaction, DMs are advantageous to support the flow of speech. Schiffrin (1987) points out that DMs are exploits in discourse due to the point that they contribute to building the local coherence which is jointly constructed by speaker and interlocutor in their discourse structure, context, meaning and action during interaction. They serve to demonstrate how what is being said is related to what has already been said, either through a speaker's turn or across speakers' turns.

DMs are important lexical expressions in pragmatics. They are able to state clearly the structure of discourse, to give the hearer a cue for the context, and to express clearly the concrete speech acts (Wilson, 2000). A wealth of studies that have tried to state or define the meaning or functions of DMs, indicates that listening instruction which is based on the theory of discourse markers can significantly enhance college students' listening proficiency in English as Foreign Language environment (Zhang, 2012). A number of theoretical and empirical studies as well as sufficient examined evidence in pragmatics illustrate that instructions are capable of aiding the grasp of pragmatic competence and of having a positive influence on second language acquisition. With the development of pedagogical research, numerous evidence shows that a range of features of second language pragmatics can be taught through various pedagogies, so nowadays, the disputes in pragmatics are focused on explicit instruction or implicit instruction (Rose, 2005). Fung (2003, 2011), did a study on the use of DMs by British and Hong Kong speakers of English. She came to the conclusion that British speakers use DMs for different pragmatic functions while the Hong Kong speakers used limited range of DMs, mostly functional DMs. Fung and Carter (2007), proposed that DMs should be instructed explicitly to second/foreign language learners in order to facilitate more successful language use as well as to aid them to become interactionally competent speakers.

De La Fuente (2009), in her study with 24 undergraduates in fifth semester Spanish found that the explicit focus on the treatment of forms (called Conscious Raising in her study) was more effective in the acquisition of DMs than the input enrichment (IE) group. De La Fuente came to the conclusion in her study that EI and meta-linguistic awareness might be required for even advanced L2 learners to acquire. Rahimi and Riasati (2012) investigated the relationship between the explicit vs. implicit instruction of DMs and learners' speech. They offered the experimental group five sessions of DMs explicit instruction, 20 minutes every session. They applied semi-structured interview to collect data. Results showed that the control group that received implicit teaching of DMs did not use them frequently. But, the experimental group which received explicit

teaching of discourse markers used them frequently in their oral production proving the usefulness of the explicit teaching. Innajih (2007) investigated the effect of explicit instruction of DMs on the reading comprehension of the second language learners. The participants in the treatment group were explicitly taught DMs types and their relation to reading comprehension. The result showed that the treatment group performed better than the control group on the discourse cloze test. Nazari (2013), examined the effects of implicit and explicit language instruction on learners' ability to learn grammar and their appropriate use in writing. The results showed the outperformance of the participants taught explicitly over the performance of the participants receiving implicit instruction in both productive and receptive modes. Sahebkheir and Davatgari Asl (2014), conducted a study on the effect of input enhancement on writing proficiency of Iranian EFL learners majoring in English language teaching. They came to the conclusion that learners receiving input enhancement with regard to their writing skill used more conjunctions in their compositions and outperformed those having no input enhancement treatment.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Forty students participated in this study. They were Iranian university TEFL male and female students in their third year of study. The participants were randomly put into two groups (experimental and control) with 21 and 20 members, respectively. The experimental group attending the speaking course received explicit instruction of DMs, while participants in the control group received no explicit explanation on DMs. Gender was not considered as a moderator variable. The medium of instruction was English. The range of the participants' age was between 20 to 23. The classes met twice a week during an academic semester (6 months). Each session took about 90 minutes. The same teacher (the researcher) taught both classes.

Procedure

At first, in order to take out a homogeneous group of participants in terms of their language proficiency, the Michigan Test of English language Proficiency (1997) was administered to them. The validity of this test was already presupposed. The reliability index, as calculated through Kuder and Richardson formula (KR-21), was reported to be 0.89. Therefore, 41 homogeneous participants were selected and randomly divided into two groups of 21 and 20 male and female students. The experimental group received explicit instruction of DMs in their conversation (speaking) course while members of control group received no explicit treatment on DMs. The present study took an academic semester (6 months). The participants attended the class twice a week. The teacher (the researcher himself) spent about 30 minutes each session on explaining directly the appropriate use of DMs to the experimental group, but did not refer directly or explicitly to the use of DMs to control group.

Since this study was designed to investigate EFL learners' use of DMs after applying a special treatment (explicit instruction of DMs), a pre-test and post-test of DMs were administered to the participants of both experimental and control groups. As the DMs pre-test, the participants were asked to talk about a general and social issue known to all of them for three minutes and the interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed for the purpose of further analysis and comparison. Then the investigation went through as explained above (explicit instruction of DMs to experimental group and no explicit treatment on DMs for control one). At the end of the investigation, in order to find out the probable effect of DMs' explicit instruction on learners' use of DMs, again, the participants had an interview on some other common and known topics as a post-test. The participants' speeches were audio-recorded and transcribed again. Finally, the results of the pre-test and post-test were compared through the use of a t-test.

Data Analysis

In order to analyze the data, the researcher used the 22nd version of SPSS software. To find the effect of explicit instruction of DMs on Iranian TEFL students' use of DMs in their speaking, a series of descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations and standard deviation errors) and inferential statistics such as *independent-samples t-test* and *paired-samples t-test* were used. A descriptive statistics was applied to estimate and report the mean score of the participants. In order to investigate if there is a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores of the participants of experimental and control groups, *independent-samples t-test* was run. Furthermore, the *paired-samples t-test* was used to compare the pre-test scores and post-test scores of the control group or those of the experimental group.

RESULTS

To compare means of each test within each group, a paired *t*-test was used to analyze the data collected. An independent-samples *t*-test was also used to compare the mean of the post-test scores of control group with the mean of post-test scores of treatment group (between groups). In this study, the dependent variable was the speaking test scores while the independent variable was explicit instruction of DMs.

Control Group

Statistics for speaking test score are presented in Table 3.1. In control group, the means on the posttest did not change so much (from 7.85 to 8.45). The standard deviation (SD) also remained almost stable (1.424 and 1.849). Similar small-sized improvements in the range and mode were also found. Median remained stable, too. The two distributions had neither significant skewness nor kurtosis problems.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of speaking test (control group)

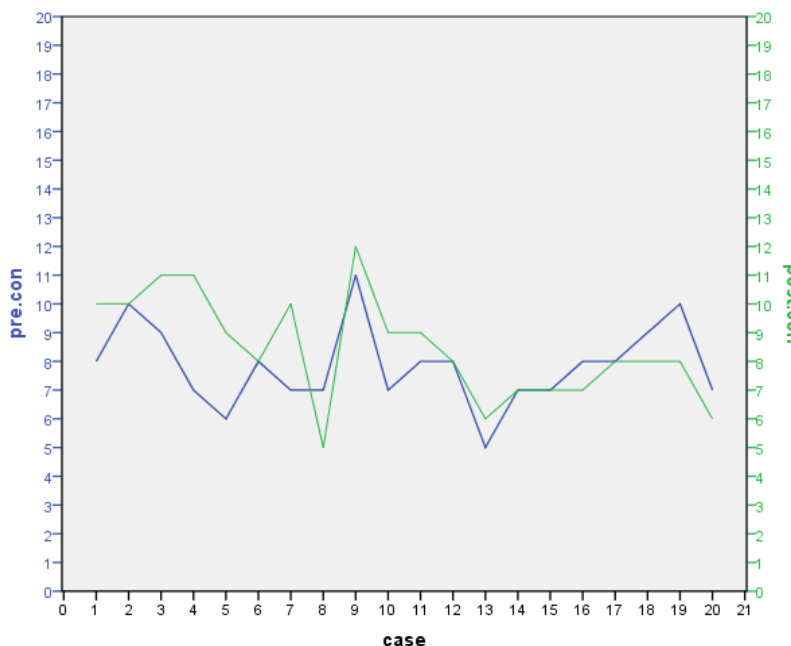| Test	N	Range	Mean		Std. Deviation	Skewness		Kurtosis		Median	Mode
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Statistic
pre	20	6	7.85	.319	1.424	.413	.512	.427	.992	8.00	7
post	20	7	8.45	.413	1.849	.088	.512	-.521	.992	8.00	8

Figure 1. The comparison of differences of each student's scores on pretest and post-test of speaking test (control group)

Figure 1 displays the comparison of differences of each student's sores on pretest and posttest of speaking test in the control group. The scores on the posttest of the speaking exhibit the same histogram as those of the pretest, and those of the posttest are slightly better than the pretest.

Table 2. Paired samples test (control group)

	Paired Differences					T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
pre - post	-.600	1.667	.373	-1.380	.180	-1.610	19	.124

Table 2 shows the result of a paired *t* test of speaking test score in control group (M = -0.600, SD = 1. 667, at a 95% confidence). It shows that the difference is not statistically significant, *t* (19) = -1.610, at $p < .05$, 2-tailed. Therefore, it is observed that there was no significant difference within group means. That is, the average difference of 0.600 between speaking test score in pretest and in posttest was not statistically significant.

Treatment group

Statistics for speaking test score, for the treatment group, are presented in Table 3. In treatment group, the means on speaking score from the pretest to the posttest improved from 8.14 to 13.43. Similar improvements in mean, mode, and range scores were also found. The standard deviation (SD) remained stable (1.824 and 2.181).The two distributions had neither significant skewness nor kurtosis problems.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of speaking test (treatment group)

	N	Range	Mean	Std. Deviation		Skewness		Kurtosis		Median	Mode
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Statistic
pre.tre	21	6	8.14	.398	1.824	.095	.501	-.992	.972	8.00	6a
post.tre	21	8	13.43	.476	2.181	.346	.501	-.351	.972	13.00	13

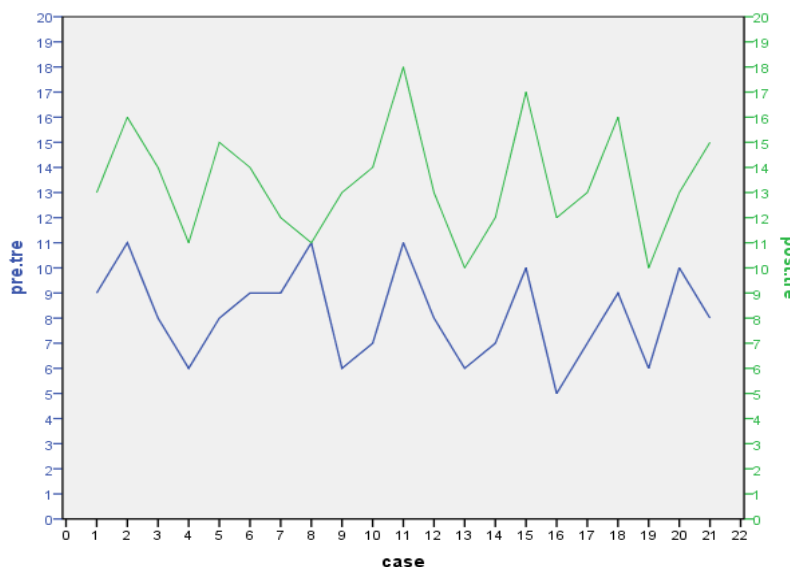a. Multiple modes exist. The smallest value is shown

Figure 2. The comparison of differences of each student's sores on pretest and posttest of speaking test (treatment group)

Figure 2 displays the comparison of differences of each student's pre- and post-speaking test in treatment group. It indicates that most of the students' posttest speaking test score increased. Except one student (8), all students were able to boost their scores from 3 to 7 numbers.

Table 4. Paired samples test (treatment group)

	Paired Differences					T	df	Si+g. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
pre.tre - post.tre	-5.286	1.848	.403	-6.127	-4.445	-13.109	20	.000

Table 4 shows the result of a paired *t* test of speaking test score in treatment group (M = -5.286, SD = 1. 848, at a 95% confidence). I shows that the difference is statistically significant, *t* (20) = -13.109, at *p* < .05, 2-tailed. Therefore, the null hypothesis of no difference within group means was rejected. That is, the average difference of 5.286 between speaking test score in pretest and in posttest was statistically significant.

Table 5. Independent samples test (the post-test of control group and treatment group)

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
T.S	Equal variances assumed	.411	.525	-7.865	39	.000	-4.979	.633	-6.259	-3.698
	Equal variances not assumed			-7.897	38.4 97	.000	-4.979	.630	-6.254	-3.703

Table 5 shows the result of a independent *t* test of speaking test score between the post-test of control group and treatment group (M = -4.979, at a 95% confidence). It shows that the difference was statistically significant, *t* (39) = -7.865, at *p* < .05, 2-tailed. Therefore, the null hypothesis of no difference between post-test of group means was rejected. That is, the average difference of -4.979 between speaking test score in the post-test of control group and treatment group was statistically significant. This suggests that the students' speaking in the treatment group improved to a statistically significant degree compared to control group in the 6-month period, during which they engaged in learning DMs based on explicit instruction of DMs.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of the present study showed that, in both groups, before the study, the participants' overall performance on speaking (based on DM) was poor; the mean score was 7.85 and 8.14 out of 20 respectively for the control and treatment groups. However, EFL learners' speaking ability improved significantly in the treatment group after a six-month teaching explicit instruction of DMs. The overall low means in both control and treatment's pretest suggests that speaking test was difficult for the students. However, two groups showed different behavior on the post-test.

The result of a paired *t*-test of speaking test score in the treatment group (M = -5.286, SD = 1. 848, at a 95% confidence) showed that the difference was statistically significant, *t* (20) = -13.109, at *p* < .05, 2-tailed despite the difficulty in achieving rapid improvement of speaking ability. In the present study the participants' speaking scores were shown to increase by about 55 percent in the treatment period. In fact the differences were larger than what was expected. This suggests that the students

increased in their speaking to a statistically significant degree in the 6-month period, during which they engaged in learning DMs based on explicit instruction. The result of a paired *t*-test of speaking test score (M = -0.600, SD = 1. 667, at a 95% confidence) in the control group, which were taught based on a traditional instruction of DMs, showed that the difference was not statistically significant, t (19) = -1.610, at $p < .05$, 2-tailed. This suggests that the students did not improve in terms of their speaking to a statistically significant degree in the 6-month period, during which they engaged in learning DMs based on a traditional instruction.

Indeed, the results of the control group supported the research hypothesis that EFL learners' speaking ability was improved by learning DMs based on explicit instruction: since in the control group students did not learn DMs based on explicit instruction, their post-test score did not change significantly. This indicates that the EFL learners' improvement on speaking test in the treatment group was not the effect of normal classroom teaching, or of having taken the test twice since if this was the case, students in control group should have had the same improvement.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The results of the present study indicated that explicit instruction of DMs to EFL learners significantly helped them in using DMs appropriately in speaking. Therefore, explicit instruction of DMs undoubtedly deserves more direct attention in language learning and teaching. Another important pedagogical implication for English teachers is that, since as the results of this study showed the learners exposed to explicit instruction of DMs had a better and appropriate performance in speaking than those receiving implicit mode of teaching of DMs, explicit instruction can be a better approach to use for teaching other language forms as well and should be taken into consideration by the teachers. This approach also draws the attention of curriculum designers to incorporate the explicit instruction of DMs into EFL learners' textbooks as well.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

No research is absolutely complete and no researcher can claim that the result of his/her study can be generalizable to all cases. This study investigated the effect of explicit instruction of DMs on upper-intermediate EFL students. It is recommended that the explicit instruction of DMs be examined to/on different proficiency levels. Another study can examine the explicit instruction of DMs on learners' speaking skill with relation to the gender of the EFL learners.

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