

Exploring Moroccan University EFL Teachers' and Students' Perceptions towards the Explicit Instruction of Communication Strategies

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Abstract

Communication strategies serve as key tools in addressing learners' psychological and linguistic deficiencies and fostering their communication skills. However, the teachability of these strategies remains a highly contentious issue, with some researchers advocating for their explicit instruction and others arguing against it. The present study, therefore, investigates Moroccan university EFL teachers' and students' perceptions towards the explicit teaching of communication strategies. It specifically aims to explore whether both groups endorse or reject the explicit instruction of these strategies and seeks to identify the potential benefits associated with their incorporation into the university EFL classroom. To this end, a qualitative research approach was adopted. Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews with ten third-year university EFL students and five university EFL teachers from Moulay Ismail University, representing the Moroccan higher education context. Furthermore, thematic analysis was employed to examine the participants' responses. The study results revealed that both groups favoured the explicit instruction of communication strategies. The findings further indicated that the incorporation of communication strategy instruction can be perceived to enhance EFL students' strategic competence, promote oral fluency, foster learners' self-confidence, and support the development of learner autonomy, thereby contributing to the enhancement of learners' communicative competence.

1. INTRODUCTION

Communication strategies (henceforth CSs) have been conceptualised based on two perspectives: the interactional and psycholinguistic perspective. The interactional perspective views CSs as efforts to negotiate meaning during communication, where interlocutors jointly attempt to establish mutual understanding in case of unclear or missing shared meaning (Tarone, 1980; Rost & Ross, 1991). The psycholinguistic perspective, however, emphasises their cognitive and problem-solving function, describing them as conscious or semi-conscious plans employed by speakers to overcome difficulties in attaining a communicative goal (Faerch & Kasper, 1983). Taken together, these perspectives are fundamental, since interaction often originates as a cognitive process and evolves into an exchange shaped by negotiation (Mali, 2007).

Accordingly, while the interactional approach underscores the collaborative process of meaning negotiation, the psycholinguistic perspective highlights the individual's cognitive efforts to navigate communication challenges. Together, these perspectives disclose that CSs are not only tools for coping with linguistic gaps but also vital mechanisms for maintaining effective interaction and promoting successful communication.

These two perspectives foreground the teaching of CSs, wherein learners need not only to be equipped with strategies to overcome linguistic and psychological limitations but also to be provided with tools that enable them to engage and interact effectively with others. However, the teachability of CSs remains a contested issue. Some scholars advocate their explicit instruction (Faerch & Kasper, 1983; Tarone & Yule, 1989; Oxford, 1990), whereas others question the value of such pedagogical interventions (Canale & Swain, 1980; Bialystok, 1990; Kellerman, 1991).

Despite the ongoing debate and the substantial body of literature on the teaching of CSs (Tarone & Yule, 1989; Oxford, 1990; Bialystok, 1990; Kellerman, 1991; Teng, 2012; Mesgarshahr & Abdollahzadeh, 2014; Behroozian et al., 2021), there remains a significant gap in empirical research investigating how these strategies are actually taught in Moroccan EFL classrooms, particularly at the tertiary level. Accordingly, this study seeks to address this gap by conducting a Moroccan-based investigation that explores university EFL teachers' and students' attitudes towards the explicit instruction of CSs, as well as the perceived benefits of integrating these strategies into Moroccan university EFL classrooms. In line with these objectives, two research questions were formulated:

1. What are the attitudes of Moroccan university EFL teachers and students towards the explicit instruction of CSs?
2. What are the perceived benefits of teaching CSs in Moroccan university EFL classrooms?

The significance of this study stems from several key considerations. First, it contributes to the field of language education by providing insights into Moroccan university EFL teachers' and students' attitudes towards the explicit instruction of CSs. Second, it highlights the perceived benefits of integrating these strategies into classroom practice. Finally, the findings are expected to inform practitioners by assisting university EFL teachers in tailoring instruction to learners' needs, while simultaneously raising their awareness of strategic competence as a means of overcoming communication difficulties and enhancing oral proficiency.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The teachability of CSs remains a subject of considerable scholarly debate, with some researchers endorsing the explicit instruction of these strategies and others questioning their implementation. Proponents such as Faerch and Kasper (1983), Oxford (1990), and O'Malley and Chamot (1990) argue that CSs can be both taught and effectively developed. For instance, Faerch and Kasper (1983) contend that although learners may possess implicit knowledge of CSs derived from their first language, instruction should focus on raising their awareness of how these strategies operate in communication. Similarly, Oxford (1990) and O'Malley and Chamot (1990) emphasise the importance of enhancing learners' strategic awareness, maintaining that equipping them with communication and learning strategies can contribute to improved language proficiency.

Nevertheless, several scholars, including Terrell (1977), Canale and Swain (1980), Bialystok (1990), and Kellerman (1991), have questioned the teachability of CSs. For instance, Canale and Swain (1980) argue that these strategies are more effectively developed through authentic communicative situations rather than through classroom-based instruction. Similarly, Bialystok (1990) conceptualises CSs as manifestations of underlying psychological processes, contending that focusing primarily on their linguistic dimension does not necessarily enhance their use. Instead, she advocates training that strengthens learners' ability to analyse and regulate the target language. Kellerman (1991) adopts a comparable stance, maintaining that explicit communication strategy (CS) instruction in classrooms is unnecessary. He further argues that increased exposure to the target language allows such strategies to develop naturally.

Correspondingly, teaching CSs entails raising learners' awareness of these strategies, encouraging them to take risks in applying them, and providing L2 examples that illustrate how specific strategies can be used (Faerch & Kasper, 1986). The explicit instruction of these strategies may further involve equipping learners with appropriate linguistic devices (Tarone & Yule, 1989) and creating opportunities for the implicit practice of CSs (Kellerman, 1991).

However, these claims have been challenged by subsequent empirical research. For instance, studies such as Teng (2012) and Mesgarshahr and Abdollahzadeh (2014) provide evidence that the explicit CS instruction can lead to improvements in learners' communicative effectiveness and willingness to communicate, thereby questioning the perspective that these strategies develop solely through natural exposure. In this regard, Teng (2012) investigated the impact of CS instruction on both the frequency of strategy use and learners' communicative effectiveness. The study involved 24 advanced learners in northern Taiwan. Data were collected using a role-play oral test adapted from Nakatani (2005) and a communicative effectiveness scale based on Littlemore's (2003) framework.

The training program provided 15–20 minutes of explicit instruction each week. As the course progressed, students were given increasingly improvisational tasks. To examine learners' strategy use, a coding scheme based on Tarone's (1977) taxonomy was applied to identify and analyse nine CSs. A paired t-test was then used to assess changes in learners' performance from pre- to post- training. The study results demonstrated a notable improvement in both the frequency of CS use and learners' communicative effectiveness. In particular, appeal for assistance emerged as the most frequently employed strategy in the post-test, showing a marked

increase compared to the pre-test. Additionally, while learners initially relied heavily on non-verbal signals, this tendency declined after the training, with the participants shifting towards L2-based strategies such as appeal for assistance and circumlocution.

On the other hand, Mesgarshahr and Abdollahzadeh (2014) investigated the effect of teaching CSs on EFL learners' willingness to communicate (WTC). Their study involved 120 learners, enrolled in a private language institute. All the participants were assigned to an experimental group (N = 58) and a control group (N = 62). While the control group followed the standard EFL curriculum, the experimental group received targeted CS training.

Data were collected using a 27-item self-report questionnaire designed to assess learners' willingness to communicate (WTC) in speaking, reading, writing, and comprehension. It was adapted from MacIntyre et al. (2001) and translated into Persian. Both the experimental and control groups completed the questionnaire before and after the intervention to measure changes in WTC. The results indicated that learners in the experimental group showed a significant increase in WTC following communication strategy (CS) instruction, whereas the control group showed no significant change.

Building on empirical studies supporting the effectiveness of CS instruction, very recent research has explored teachers' and students' perceptions towards the teachability of these strategies, further informing this debate. Correspondingly, Behroozian et al. (2021) investigated Iranian EFL teachers' and students' perceptions of the teachability of CSs. The study included 20 teachers and 110 students from universities and private language institutes in Tabriz, Iran. Employing a mixed-methods design, data were collected through a language proficiency test, a questionnaire, and interviews. The quantitative results revealed that students' perceptions of the usefulness of CSs became significantly more positive after receiving the instruction, while the qualitative findings indicated that most teachers considered CSs both useful and teachable. The study also demonstrated that these strategies enhanced learners' speaking abilities and increased their awareness of communication strategies.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current study aims to explore Moroccan university EFL teachers' and students' attitudes towards the explicit instruction of communication strategies (CSs) and to identify the perceived benefits of incorporating these strategies into Moroccan university EFL classrooms. To achieve these objectives, a qualitative approach was adopted for several reasons. First, it allows for an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives. Second, it facilitates the collection of non-numerical data. Finally, this approach offers the flexibility to probe participants' responses, helping to uncover unanticipated themes.

3.1. Research Design

Aligned with the study objectives outlined above, this inquiry adopted an exploratory qualitative research design. This design was particularly chosen as it allowed for exploring teachers and students' subjective perceptions and uncovering unexpected themes rather than testing hypotheses or measuring variables.

3.2. Participants and Sampling

The study included five university EFL teachers, aged between 30 to 45 and ten third-year university EFL students, ranging in age between 21 and 30. Purposive sampling was employed

to select participants who can provide relevant and fruitful information. Teachers were selected based on their experience in teaching oral communication or speaking courses, while students were selected for their advanced level. This approach ensured that the participants could offer distinct and meaningful perspectives on the explicit instruction of CSs and its perceived benefits.

3.3. Research Site

The present research was conducted at Moulay Ismail University, Faculty of Arts and Humanities. This site was selected due to its accessibility, familiarity, and the presence of both experienced university EFL teachers and advanced EFL students, making it suitable for exploring attitudes towards the explicit instruction of communication strategies.

3.4. Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

To address the research questions, data were collected using semi-structured individual interviews. This research tool was mainly employed to create a dynamic setting in which participants could freely express their views, allowing for the emergence of shared and divergent perspectives. In total, two semi-structured interview sessions were conducted: one with ten third-year university EFL students and one with five university EFL teachers. Each session lasted approximately 20 minutes and followed a semi-structured format guided by open-ended questions. All interviews were then audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

3.5. Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis, which allowed for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within the participants' responses. All interviews were transcribed and carefully reviewed manually. Initial codes were generated from the transcripts, organised into categories and then synthesised into overarching themes reflecting the key ideas.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section outlines and interprets the findings of the study in relation to the two research questions. It is organised into two sub-sections: the first responds to the initial research question, and the second deals with the following one. The data gathered from the focus group interviews were examined using thematic analysis, and the resulting themes are presented below.

4.1 Research Question 1: What are the attitudes of Moroccan university EFL teachers and students towards the explicit instruction of communication strategies?

The first part of the study results revealed that both university EFL teachers and students held positive attitudes towards the integration of communication strategy instruction in Moroccan university EFL classrooms. The participants emphasised that communication strategy training is not only favourable but also perceived as important for supporting the quality of EFL learning.

The analysis of the data revealed two key themes. The first theme pertains to participants' interest in explicit communication strategy instruction, while the second theme relates to the pedagogical value of such instruction, highlighting their positive attitudes towards the explicit teaching of CSs. The two themes identified through thematic analysis are outlined below.

Theme 1: Interest in Explicit Communication Strategy Instruction

Both Moroccan university EFL teachers and students held positive attitudes towards the explicit instruction of CSs, showing their interest in communication strategy training. The two participants underscored the prominence of these strategies in managing learners' linguistic and psychological challenges and enhancing their speaking skill. The following excerpts illustrate these perspectives.

“I encourage the explicit instruction of communication strategies. These strategies empower learners to manage communication breakdowns, compensate for gaps in vocabulary or grammar, and maintain interaction in real-life settings. When taught explicitly, students become more aware of how to use these strategies deliberately and effectively, which boosts their confidence and communicative competence.” (Teacher extract)

“I do endorse the explicit instruction of CSs because it helps me boost my confidence and overcome communication barriers.” (Student Extract)

Theme 2: Pedagogical Value of CS Instruction

Both participants advocated for the explicit teaching of CSs. Specifically, the respondents expressed their attitudes regarding the pedagogical value of these strategies, showing how such strategies can enhance the quality of learning. The following extracts depict these perceptions.

“In higher education, we are dealing with young adults who have reached a level of learning where they need to understand the reasoning behind what they are exposed to. Therefore, learning communication strategies can significantly enhance students' learning experiences.” (Teacher extract)

“If teachers explicitly teach us these strategies, it would help us express our ideas clearly and feel more confident during classroom activities.” (Student extract). Figure 1 provides a visual representation of teachers' and students' attitudes towards communication strategy instruction.

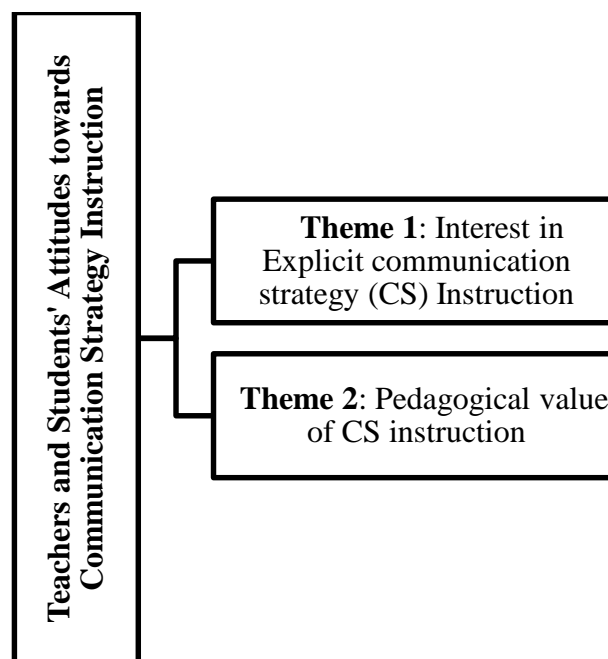


Figure 1. Thematic Map of Teachers' and Students' Attitudes towards Communication Strategy Instruction

The favourable perceptions of both university EFL teachers and students towards the explicit instruction of CSs, along with their shared recognition of its pedagogical value, underscore the critical role of these strategies in EFL learning. The present findings are consistent with those reported by Behroozian et al. (2021), who found that both teachers and students held positive attitudes regarding the teachability and usefulness of communication strategies. Moreover, these findings align with earlier research suggesting that the explicit instruction of CSs can substantially enhance learners' communicative competence (Faerch & Kasper, 1983; Oxford, 1990; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). In addition, the results corroborate more recent studies emphasising the positive influence of CS instruction on EFL learners' communicative effectiveness and willingness to communicate (Teng, 2012; Mesgarshahr & Abdollahzadeh, 2014).

4.2 Research Question Two: What are the perceived benefits of teaching communication strategies in Moroccan university EFL classrooms?

According to the second part of the study findings, both groups perceived that the implementation of communication strategy instruction can significantly enhance EFL learners' strategic competence by equipping them with concrete tools to navigate communicative challenges. Such instruction was perceived to contribute to the promotion of oral fluency by addressing linguistic and psychological constraints, including difficulties related to vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation, as well as factors such as anxiety, low self-esteem, and fear of making mistakes. Furthermore, the explicit teaching of CSs was reported to foster learners' self-confidence and facilitates smoother interaction. It was also acknowledged to promote the development of learner autonomy by encouraging greater independence in managing linguistic and psychological challenges. Accordingly, four major themes emerged, as presented below.

Theme 1: Improvement of Strategic Competence

The two groups of participants highlighted the contribution of communication strategy instruction to the development of learners' ability to navigate communicative challenges, negotiate meaning, and maintain the flow of interaction, thereby enhancing their strategic competence, as evidenced in the extracts below.

“The explicit instruction of communication strategies can yield in several benefits for EFL learners, including the development of problem-solving skills in communication and the ability to negotiate meaning in real life situations.”

(Teacher extract)

“I think that incorporating communication strategies into EFL classrooms can help me address communicative challenges, promote smoother communication, and preserve the communicative exchange.” **(Student extract)**

Theme 2: Promotion of Oral Fluency

EFL teachers and students consistently underscored the prominent role of explicit communication strategy instruction in compensating for learners' linguistic and psychological constraints, thereby enhancing their oral fluency. This is illustrated in the following excerpts:

“The explicit instruction of communication strategies can yield several benefits for EFL learners, including promoting fluency and confidence, developing

problem-solving skills in communication, and acquiring the ability to negotiate meaning in real-life situations.” (Teacher extract)

“The main benefits of explicitly teaching communication strategies are improving fluency and building confidence.” (Student extract)

Theme 3: Development of Self-Confidence

A recurrent theme related to CS instruction concerns the development of learners' self-confidence, particularly in addressing fear of making mistakes, embarrassment, and anxiety, thereby encouraging more active engagement in communicative tasks. This theme was evident in the participants' excerpts.

“The benefits are profound and far-reaching, mainly building confidence. It allows students to express themselves without fear, cultivating the same self-assurance they need on stage or in creative collaboration.” (Teacher extract)

“The key benefits of CS instruction include improved fluency and increased confidence.” (Student extract)

Theme 4: Enhancement of Learner Autonomy

Another prominent theme associated to the teaching of CSs is fostering learners' self-reliance, reducing dependence on teacher intervention, and enabling students to navigate communicative challenges independently. This theme emerged in the respondents' extracts, as illustrated below.

“Some key benefits of CS instruction include improved fluency and confidence, greater learner autonomy, enhanced strategic competence, and increased classroom participation.” (Teacher extract)

“The explicit instruction of CSs can help me improve fluency and confidence, as well as increase my autonomy.” (Student extract)

The figure below outlines the themes related to the benefits of CS instruction.

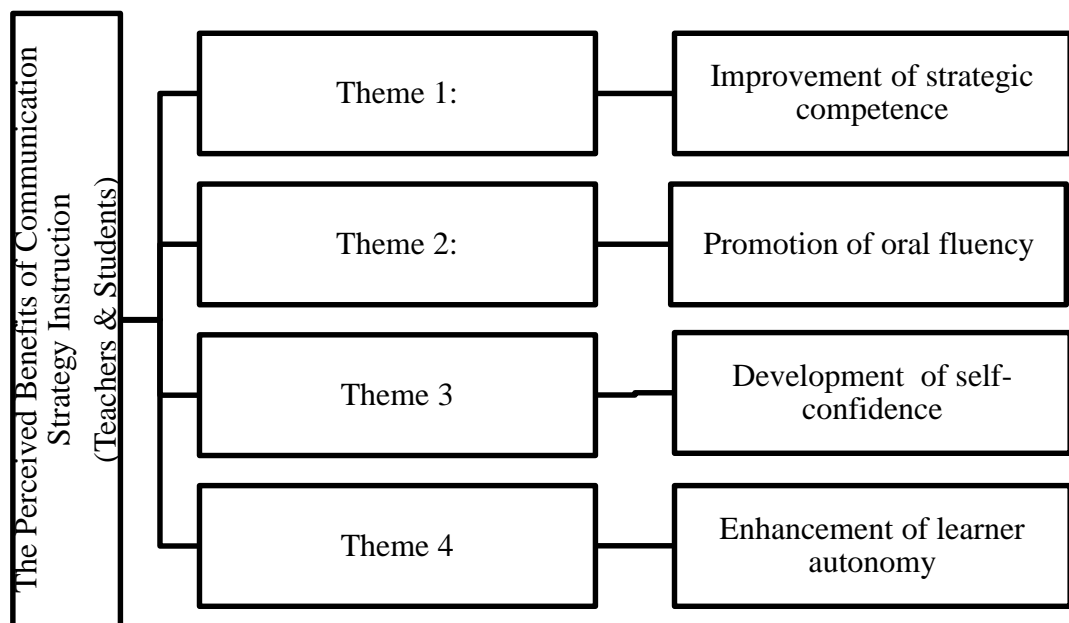


Figure 2. Thematic Map of the Perceived Benefits of CS Instruction

The present findings are consistent with those reported by Behroozian et al. (2021), who found that teaching CSs improved learners' speaking performance and increased their awareness of such strategies. Furthermore, these results indicate that CS instruction extends beyond merely teaching compensatory strategies; it plays a crucial role in fostering EFL learners' linguistic competence and psychological resilience. By reducing anxiety and fear of making mistakes, while simultaneously enhancing fluency and accuracy, such training creates conditions for more confident and autonomous language use. These insights underscore the importance of integrating CS instruction into EFL classrooms as a means of promoting learners' overall communicative competence.

5. CONCLUSIONS, CONTRIBUTIONS, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study findings revealed that both university EFL teachers and students favoured the explicit instruction of CSs, emphasising that its implementation in EFL classrooms may effectively enhance students' strategic competence, promote oral fluency, foster learners' self-confidence, and encourage the development of learner autonomy.

This study, therefore, contributes to the body of literature in the field of language education by shedding light on the attitudes of Moroccan university EFL teachers and students towards the explicit instruction of CSs. It also highlights the perceived benefits of integrating these strategies into classroom practices. Consequently, these findings may inform teacher training programs, curriculum development, and classroom pedagogy aimed at enhancing learners' communicative competence in the Moroccan university EFL context.

Despite the findings obtained, this study faced several limitations that should be acknowledged. A primary limitation lies in the small sample size and the narrow research context, which restrict the generalisability of the results. Consequently, future researchers are encouraged to replicate this study with a larger sample and in more diverse contexts. Additionally, relying solely on participants' self-reported perceptions may introduce subjectivity. Future research

could combine interviews with observational data to provide a more comprehensive understanding regarding the benefits of communication strategy instruction.

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