ON THE TEACHABILITY OF COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES TO JORDANIAN EFL BEGINNERS: EXPLORATION AND REFLECTION

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Abstract

This study examines the effect of communication strategy instruction on Jordanian EFL students' oral performance and strategy use. Following a thorough content analysis of units 10- 13 of the prescribed *Action Pack* textbook, the instructional material was designed and implemented over a duration of eight weeks. A three-task oral pre-/ post-test, a communication strategies-based observation checklist, and a 10-item scoring rubric were used to collect data from a purposeful sample of 24 sixth-grade students. The (predominantly interactional) communication strategies of *approximation, circumlocution, repetition, appeal for help, self-repair, appeal for confirmation, appeal for clarification,* and *guessing* were targeted. The data analysis, both quantitative and qualitative, suggests that the utilization of communication strategies in language instruction both improves oral performance and increases strategy use.

Keywords: communication strategies, EFL, oral performance, strategy instruction

1. Introduction

The core of communication resides in sending and receiving messages effectively and negotiating meaning either in written or spoken form (Rubin & Thompson, 1994). To communicate effectively, learners may attempt to overcome difficulties by modifying their messages through avoidance (Tarone, 1981) or reduction strategies (Dörnyei & Kormos, 1998; Færch & Kasper, 1983) whenever they lack for a word or expression needed to convey a particular meaning. For the same purpose, language learners may also resort to achievement (Færch & Kasper, 1983) or compensatory strategies (Poulisse, Bongaerts, & Kellerman, 1990) through which they use alternative means of expression.

Communication strategies, also known as *communicative strategies* (Corder, 1983), *communicational strategies* (Váradi, 1973), *compensation strategies* (Harding, 1983), and *compensatory strategies* (Poulisse et al., 1990), are quite distinct from *learning strategies*.

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[1] This manuscript is an extension of the second author's doctoral dissertation per the regulations in force at Yarmouk University, Irbid, Jordan.

Whereas communication strategies are used to "meet a pressing communicative need", learning strategies are used to manage "a perceived gap in knowledge or skill" (Ellis, 2003, p.515).

Communication strategies (henceforth, CSs) were first introduced by Selinker (1972) as an interlanguage process, defined as potentially conscious problem-solving techniques used by language learners to avoid communication breakdowns whenever they encounter difficulty in L2 oral communication (Brown, 1994; Corder, 1983; Færch & Kasper, 1983; Mitchell & Myles, 1998; Stern, 1983). Gass and Selinker (1994) and Ellis (2003) further emphasized the utility of CSs whenever learners need to express themselves in the target language but lack the linguistic knowledge to do so. Mitchell and Myles (1998) also define CSs as tactics used by non-fluent learners to avoid eminent communicative breakdowns and sustain interaction during oral exchanges. Therefore, CSs are catalysts for communication and comprehension alike, which makes them a matter of significant concern for both EFL learners and teachers.

CSs have been the subject of a plethora of theoretical and empirical research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA), with two major theoretical orientations: the interactional and the psycholinguistic. The former views CSs as elements of discourse and, thus, concerns itself with their linguistic realization (Corder, 1983; Tarone, 1981; Váradi, 1973) whereas the latter addresses the cognitive processes of the learner as he/she encounters language difficulty and, thus, views CSs as individual mental plans (Bialystok, 1990; Færch & Kasper, 1983; Kellerman & Bialystok, 1997; Poulisse et al., 1990).

CSs gained further popularity with the advent of communicative competence (viz., the knowledge of the rules for understanding and producing both the referential and social meaning of language (Hymes, 1972)) and the shift of emphasis from language as an isolated linguistic phenomenon to language as communication. Strategic competence, of which CSs, are an essential component (Wood, 2012), entails "the mastery of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that could be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication" (Canale & Swain, 1980, p.30). Hence, CSs are potential catalysts for communicative competence and negotiation ability in a foreign language (e.g., Dörnyei & Scott, 1995; Mitchell & Myles, 1998; Nakatani, 2010).

CSs are classified differently across research (e.g., Dörnyei & Scott, 1995; Færch & Kasper, 1983; Tarone, 1977). However, Tarone's (1977) taxonomy was probably the first to classify CSs as *paraphrase* (i.e., *approximation, word coinage* and *circumlocution*), *transfer* (i.e., *appeal for assistance, language switch, literal translation* and *mime*), and *avoidance* (i.e., *topic avoidance* and *message abandonment*) strategies.

Most previous CS research aims to identify types of CSs in a particular corpus (Dörnyei & Kormos, 1998; Færch & Kasper, 1983; Poulisse et al., 1990; Tarone, 1977; 1981), the factors which affect learners' CS use (viz., native language (e.g., Si-Qing, 1990), proficiency (e.g., Fernández Dobao, 2001, 2002), cognitive styles (e.g., Littlemore, 2001), task-demands (e.g., Fernández Dobao, 2001)), CS effectiveness (e.g., Poulisse et al., 1990), and the teachability of CSs (e.g., Jourdain & Scullen, 2002).

Relevant to the scope of the current research, whether or not CSs are readily teachable and of utility to EFL learners is a matter of controversy, but the empirical evidence for or against CS instruction is inconclusive. Whereas a good number of scholars (e.g., Alibakhshi, 2011; Dewaele, 2005; Dörnyei, 1995; Lam, 2005; Nakatani, 2005; Yule & Tarone, 1997) advocate CS instruction, other scholars (Bialystok, 1990; Grenfell & Harris, 1999; Kellerman, 1991; Schmidt, 1983; Skehan, 1998) hold an opposing view on the grounds that CS instruction is redundant and its effect is marginal at best since EFL learners 'automatically' transfer the strategic competence already developed in their first language. Schmidt (1983), Bialystok

(1990) and Kellerman (1991), for example, claim that even though the learner's strategic competence may improve, teachers should concern themselves more with teaching the language itself as, to them, the linguistic competence takes precedence over teaching CS strategies. Skehan (1998) also claims that skilled learners' resort to CSs may slow down the development of their interlanguage knowledge resources.

However, the instructability of CSs, be it directly (viz., through the provision of specific language input to raise the learner's awareness, increase his/her willingness to take risks and use CSs, and provide opportunities for practicing strategy use (Dörnyei, 1995; Dörnyei & Thurrell, 1994) or indirectly (through engaging the learner in oral interaction (Richard cited in Skehan, 1998)) is a matter of considerable debate. Empirical research (e.g., Abdollahzadeh & Mesgarshahr, 2014; Benson, Fischer, Geluso & Von Joo, 2010; Chun, 2012; Ellis, 2003; Lam, 2005; Maleki, 2007; Nakatani, 2005; Rabab'ah & Bulut, 2007; Russell & Loschky, 1998; Yule & Tarone, 1997), albeit not prolific, seems to suggest that CS instruction is beneficial for EFL learners, as it potentially raises their awareness of the utility of these strategies and, eventually, improves their performance through allowing them opportunities to hear more input and produce new utterances. Furthermore, learners who receive CS instruction are reported to develop their strategic competence more than those who do not. Yule and Tarone (1997), for instance, maintain that CS instruction potentially leads to effective CS use.

Irrespective of the controversy surrounding CS instruction (Jidong, 2011), CSs have been hailed not only as catalysts for problem-solving (Tarone, 1980; Williams, Inscoe, & Tasker, 1997) but also as tools of pragmatic discourse functions (Nakatani, 2005), which has been the driving force behind the current research.

2. Purpose, Questions, Significance, and Limitations of the Study

The current study attempts to examine the potential effect of teaching eight achievement CSs on Jordanian EFL sixth-grade students' oral performance and strategy use. More specifically, it seeks answers for the following research questions:

1. To what extent, if any, does communication strategy instruction affect Jordanian EFL sixth-grade students' oral performance?
2. To what extent, if any, does instruction affect Jordanian EFL sixth-grade students' communication strategy use?

The findings of the current research may be significant due to the relative novelty of the topic in the Jordanian EFL context. They are hoped to add to the little existing literature on strategy instruction (viz., Al-Rabadi & Bataineh, 2015; Bataineh, Al-Rabadi & Smadi, 2013; Bataineh, Bataineh & Thabet, 2011; Bataineh, Thabet, & Bataineh, 2017; Rabab'ah & Bulut, 2007; Rababah, 2002, 2005). Furthermore, the findings may raise Jordanian EFL teachers' awareness of the potential utility of CSs in developing EFL learners' oral performance. The findings may also encourage further research encompassing variables which may affect CS use in the EFL classroom (e.g., gender, proficiency, task type).

This research is exploratory in nature; hence, the researchers do not make any claims as to the generalizability of the findings. The research is also limited by its scope as only eight *achievement* strategies are examined in a purposeful sample of 24 sixth-grade students. An additional limitation may relate to the researchers' deliberate exclusion of three CSs (viz., *mime, literal translation,* and *language switch*). These strategies, albeit instrumental for beginner learners such as the ones targeted in this research, have been excluded to encourage foreign language use which would have been negatively affected had these three strategies been targeted in the instruction.

3. Sampling, Instrumentation,[2] CS Instruction, and Data Collection and Analysis

A purposeful sample of one intact sixth-grade section of 24 male and female students was drawn from Atfal ArRamtha Al Namothajiah (Ramtha Model School), a private school in Ramtha Directorate for Education, Jordan. This particular school was targeted because the second researcher has been teaching there for the past fourteen years.

Eight CSs (viz., *approximation, circumlocution, repetition, appeal for help, self-repair, appeal for confirmation, appeal for clarification,* and *guessing*) are targeted in the treatment. An oral pre-/post-test, a scoring rubric and a CS-focused observation checklist were used for data collection.

The oral pre-/post-test was used to assess the students' oral performance before and after the treatment. It consisted of three tasks: *talk about your experience* (15 minutes), *discuss information* (10 minutes) and *ask and answer* (10 minutes). These tasks, carried out both individually and within pairs, asses the learners' ability to express themselves satisfactorily. Similarly, the five-point scoring rubric (*excellent, very good, good, fair,* and *poor* with the numerical values of *5, 4, 3, 2,* and *1*, respectively) was designed to assess the participants' overall oral performance during the activities according to a number of criteria (e.g. ability to ask and answer questions about abilities, name different objects found in different places, describe objects from the past, produce simple, error-free sentences, talk about familiar situations, participate in conversations about unfamiliar topics).

The CS-focused observation checklist, based on Dörnyei and Scott's (1995) and Færch and Kasper's (1983) taxonomies, was designed to assess the participants' CS use during classroom interactions. The 10-item checklist focuses mainly on interactional CSs (viz., *repetition, appeal for help, request for confirmation, guessing,* and *request for clarification*). Paraphrase strategies (viz., *approximation* and *circumlocution*) are also incorporated into the checklist in addition to *self-repair*. The CS checklist was used by an independent observer, a fellow teacher who was trained for this purpose, over the 16 sessions of the eight-week treatment to note the participants' use of the targeted CSs.

The validity of the instruments was established by a jury of nine language/language teaching professors and school supervisors. To establish the reliability of the pre-/post-test, it was piloted on twenty sixth-grade students from another section in the same school, with a two-week interval between the two administrations. Cronbach's Alpha coefficient amounted to .88, which is appropriate for the purposes of the current research.

The participants were taught through the integration of the eight CSs under study (viz., *repetition, guessing, approximation, circumlocution, self-*repair*, appeal for help, appeal for clarification,* and *appeal for confirmation*) which comprised the medium through which the instructional materials were taught/learned. Over the eight weeks of the treatment, the teacher/second researcher introduced the eight CSs, modeled their use, and encouraged her students to use them whenever they had difficulty expressing themselves or interacting orally with the teacher or their peers.

A minimum of two CSs were integrated in every period which included oral activities. For instance, students were taught to make use of *guessing* in *listen and answer* activities, through

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[2] For a copy of the instruments used in the study, contact the corresponding author at rubab@yu.edu.jo.

resorting to expressions which denote *guessing* (e.g., *I guess, I think, it seems that*) before listening to the recording. Students also used various CSs during *ask and answer* activities. They made use of *appeal for help* expressions (e.g., *what do we say, how can I*) to elicit help from their teacher. In *talk about you* activities, the participants made use of *approximation, circumlocution*, or a combination of the two strategies whenever they were not able to remember a particular word/phrase (e.g., using *sewing on clothes* as an equivalent for *embroidery*). In the r*ead and say* activity, a number of CSs were used, but the participants especially *appealed for clarification* whenever they needed certain items explained or exemplified.

It is worth noting that as of the second week of the treatment, the participants began using a combination of CSs, usually two or three, during each period. As the treatment progressed, the participants essentially demonstrated efficient use of the target CSs, which reflected positively on their oral performance, especially from the fifth week on.

4. Findings and Discussion

The findings are presented and discussed according to the two questions of the research. The first question asks about potential improvement in Jordanian EFL sixth-grade students' oral performance, which may be attributed to the use the CSs under study, per the criteria of the scoring rubric, as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. *Learners' oral performance on the pre- and post- tests*

No.	Task The student is able to	Pre-Test			Post-Test		
		Mean	SD	Degree	Mean	SD	Degree
1	ask and answer questions about abilities.	3.84	1.19	High	4.08	1.00	
6	describe objects from the past.	3.81	1.18		3.87	1.09	
2	name different objects found in different places.	3.58	1.40		3.85	1.08	
3	produce simple, error-free sentences.	3.48	1.29		3.84	1.08	
5	participate in conversations about unfamiliar topics.	3.48	1.37		3.96	1.06	High
8	discuss information with classmates.	3.39	1.25	Moderate	3.77	1.25	
7	talk about past experiences.	3.27	1.42		3.85	1.16	
4	talk about familiar situations.	3.29	1.39		3.85	1.18	
9	present a simple (prepared) speech to the class.	3.10	1.48		3.77	1.11	
10	define, compare, and classify objects.	3.25	1.37		3.77	1.16	
Total		3.45	1.28	Moderate	3.86	1.07	High

Table 1 shows a marked improvement in students' oral performance after CS instruction. The participants' oral performance moved from being 'high' on two oral tasks (*asking and answering questions about past abilities* and *describing objects from the past*) on the pre-test to "high" on all the tasks in the post-test. This improvement is most probably the result of

teaching the CSs under study *(viz., approximation, circumlocution, appeal for help, appeal for clarification, appeal for confirmation, self-repair,* and *guessing).*

It is worth noting that the participants' performance on the pre-test varied according to the nature of the task. They scored high on tasks 1 and 6 (viz., *asking and answering questions* and *describing objects from the past*) which are both common in traditional instruction, hence familiar to the respondents. The participants were able not only to ask and answer questions but also to describe various objects (e.g., a ball) in simple sentences.

These essentially traditional tasks were incorporated into the treatment to encourage the participants to get involved and overcome hesitation. They have had ample experience with these tasks in this and previous grades. However, even though the other eight oral tasks (e.g., *presenting a simple (prepared) speech* and *defining, comparing, and classifying objects*) are fairly less familiar, the participants demonstrated moderate oral performance.

Teaching the CSs under study may have allowed the participants the opportunity to compensate for their language difficulties. For example, some resorted to *guessing* in *listen and answer*, using expressions, such as *I think* and *it seems*, to speculate on issues before listening to the recording. Some also used *appeal for help*, among other CSs, in *ask and answer*, using expressions like *how do we say* and *how can I say* to get help from the teacher.

The design of the treatment, in which the teacher explained, demonstrated and encouraged the use of the CSs under study, may also have been a catalyst for the improvement in the participants' oral performance. Individual differences among the participants were foremost in the researchers' mind during the design and implementation phases of the treatment. The activities were designed to be done either individually or in groups of two. Few activities depended on the learners' individual effort (e.g., *presenting a short (prepared) speech to the class*), but more activities involved pair work not only to encourage but also to enable less able learners to get involved, as more able partners served as scaffolds for their less able partners. The researchers witnessed first-hand the marked boost in the participants' self-confidence and willingness to get involved in the activities as the treatment went on.

The second research question addresses the potential effect of CS instruction on strategy use. Below are illustrations not only of the participants' overall CS use but also of their individual CS use before and after the treatment. Figure 1 shows the overall CS use before and after the treatment.
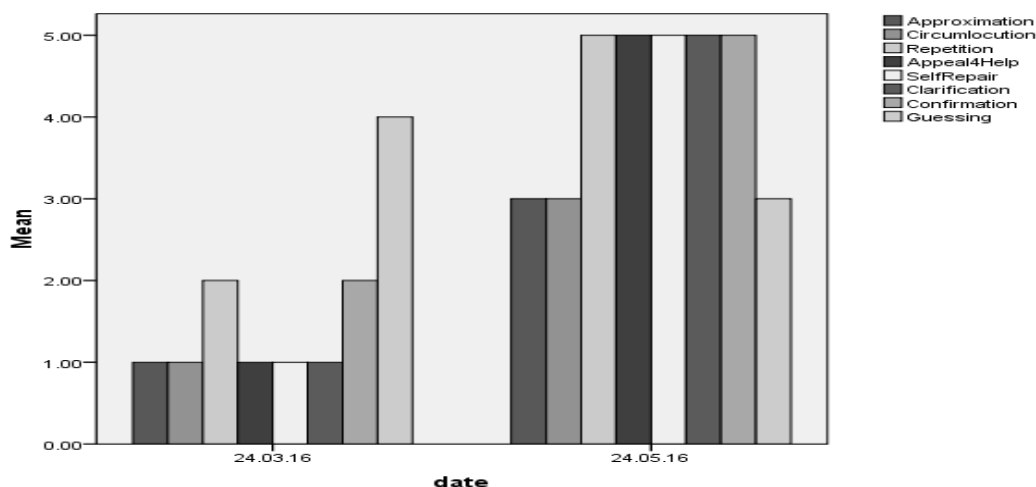

Figure 1. *Overall CS use before and after the treatment*

Figure 1 shows that among the eight CSs taught, all but one demonstrated substantial improvement. The use of *guessing* seems to have declined over the treatment, with means dropping from 4 before to 3 after the treatment. Figure 1 further shows that five (viz., *approximation, circumlocution, appeal for help, self-repair*, and *clarification*) out of the eight CSs under study started out with a mean of 1 and two (*repetition* and *confirmation*) with a mean of 2 to rise exponentially to means of 3 and 5.

The overall improvement in CS use, with the sole exception of *guessing*, is overwhelming, but the researchers are keen to highlight the improvement in individual CS use over the course of the treatment. Figures 2 through 9 below show the change in strategy use over time. To begin with, Figure 2 shows marked, albeit fluctuating, improvement in the use of *circumlocution* over the eight weeks of the treatment.
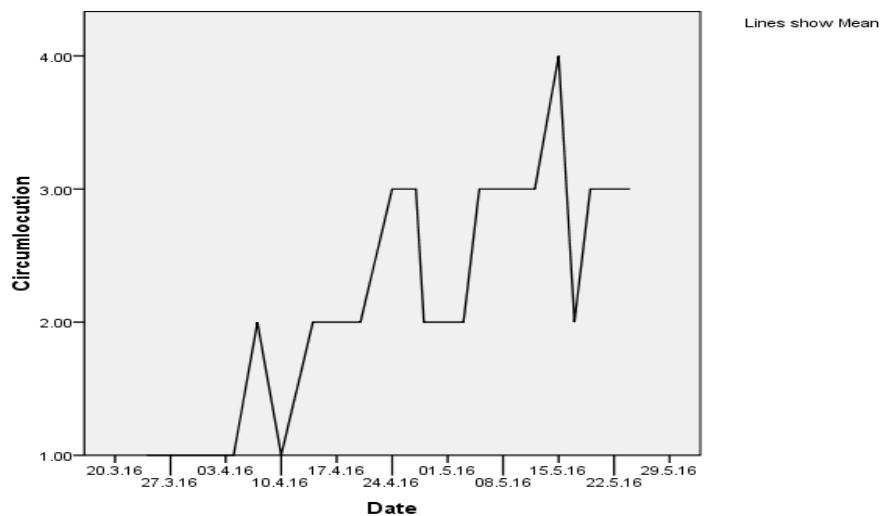

Figure 2. *Participants' use of circumlocution throughout the treatment*

Figure 2 shows that even though the participants' use of *circumlocution* started out low ($\bar{x}$ =1), gradual improvement is evident despite a few ups and downs over the course of the treatment. The highest mean score for *circumlocution* was 4, and the lowest was 1 (in which the participants reverted to their original position at the onset of the treatment). Figure 3 shows the use of *approximation* during the various phases of the treatment. Unlike that of *circumlocution*, the participants' use of *approximation* was relatively consistent.
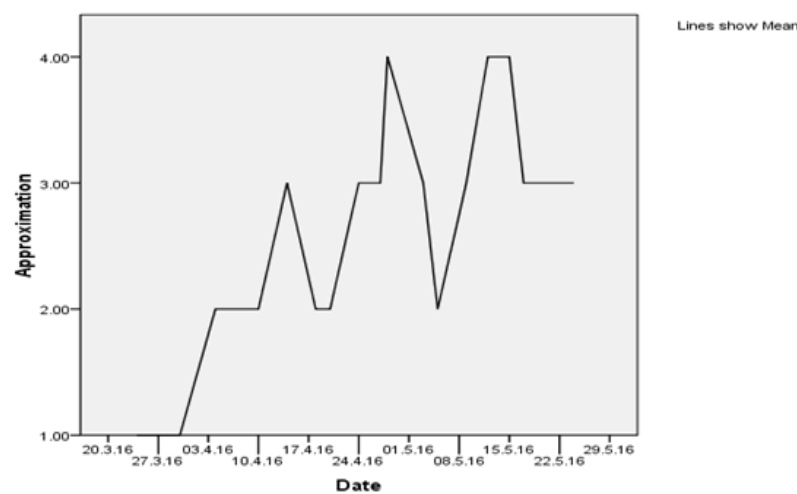

Figure 3. *Participants' use of approximation throughout the treatment*

Figure 3 shows improvement, albeit irregular, in the use of *approximation* over the treatment. Note how the strategy rose from a mean score of 1 at the beginning of the treatment to just below 4, but it seems to have hovered above 3 at various points in time. Figure 4 shows the participants' use of *repetition* during the treatment.
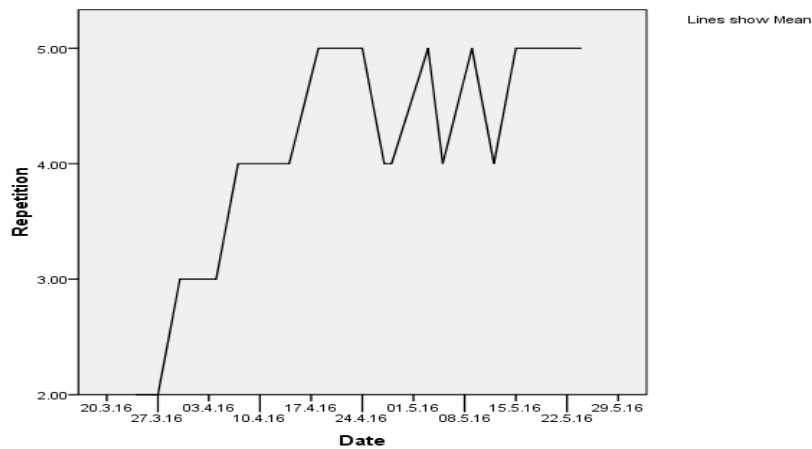

Figure 4. *Participants' use of repetition throughout the treatment*

Figure 4 indicates that the participants' use of *repetition* rose constantly during the first half of the treatment to reach the highest possible mean score of 5. Over the course of the treatment, *repetition* rose from a mean score of 2 at the onset to 5 to decline into a steady 4 to rise again to 5 towards the end of the treatment. Figure 5 shows the participants' use of *appeal for help*, which was similar to that of *repetition* over the treatment.
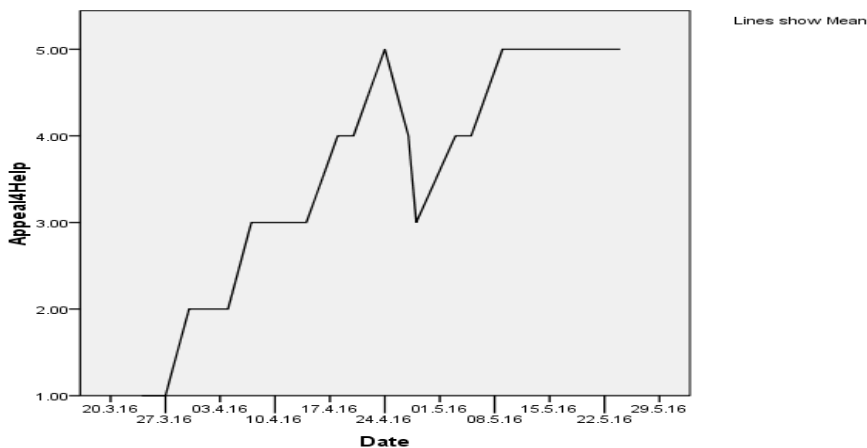

Figure 5. *Participants' use of appeal for help throughout the treatment*

Figure 5 shows relatively constant improvement in the participants' use of *appeal for help*, which rose from a mean score of 1 at the onset of the treatment to reach the highrst score of 5 at its conclusion. Similarly, *self-repair* rose early on in the treatment from a mean score of 1 to about 4 in the middle and 5 towards the end, as shown in Figure 6.
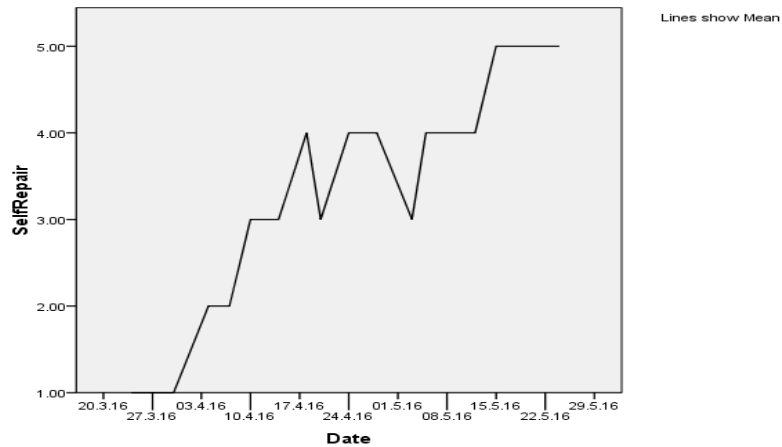
Figure 6. *Participants' use of self-repair throughout the treatment*

Figure 6 shows a marked improvement of the participants' use of *self-repair*. Figure 7 shows the use of *clarification* over the course of the treatment.
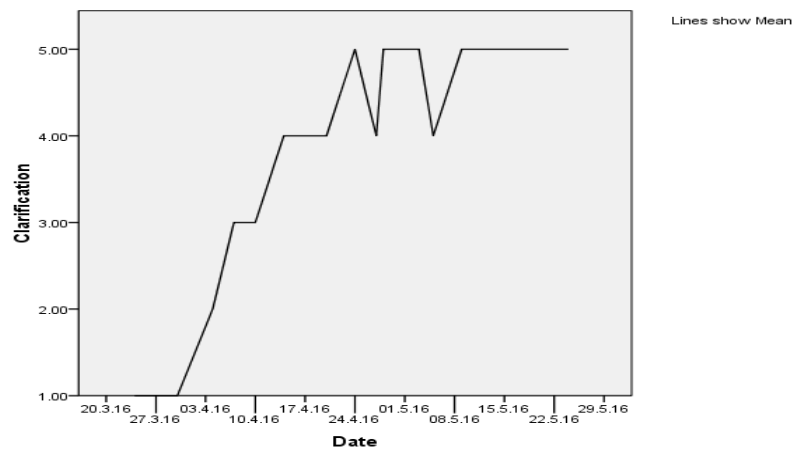

Figure 7. *Participants' use of clarification throughout the treatment*

Figure 7 demonstrates substantial improvement in the participants' use of *clarification*. Its use began with a mean score of 1 to reach a mean score of 5, with few ups and downs to 4, to stay steady at 5 towards the conclusion of the treatment. With a more pronounced series of ups and downs, the use of *confirmation* increases over the course of the treatment, as shown in Figure 8.
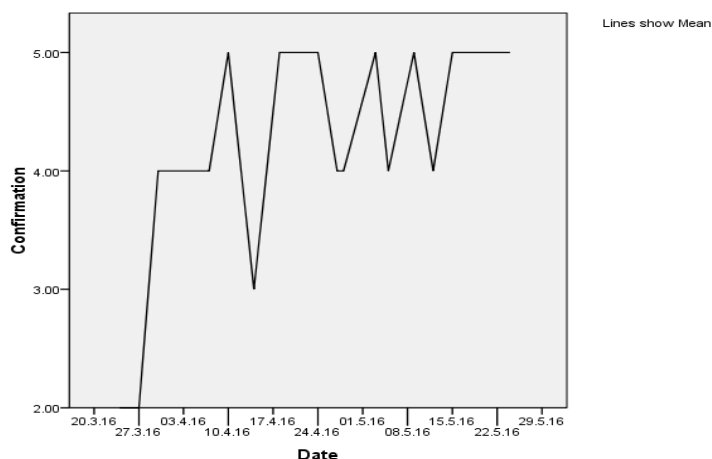
Figure 8. *Participants' use of confirmation throughout the treatment*

The use of *confirmation* started with a mean score of 2 to rise to about 4 and eventually to 5. The fluctuations were between 4 and 5.

Contrary to the other seven strategies, the participants' use of *guessing* declined over the course of the treatment from an initial mean of 4 (followed by a sharp rise and steady hold at 5) to a mean score of 1 (followed by a rise to just above 3), as shown in Figure 9.
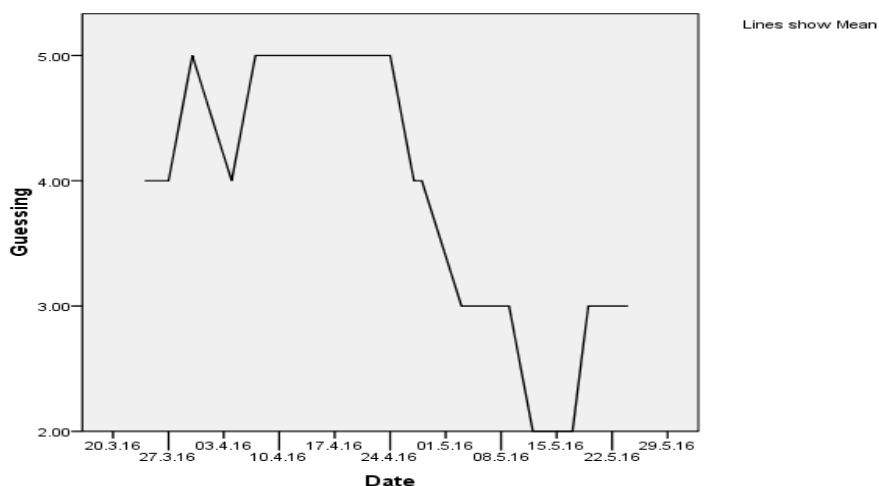

Figure 9. *Participants' use of guessing throughout the treatment*

Over the course of the treatment, substantial improvement was evident in the participants' use of the CSs under study, with the exception of *guessing*. The participants' use of *approximation* and *circumlocution* improved from a mean score of 1 to 3 whereas their use of *appeal for help, self-repair, clarification, repetition* and *confirmation* rose from mean scores of 1 or 2 to a sweeping 5.

The participants experienced the most improvement in the use of *appeal for help, self-repair, clarification, repetition,* and *confirmation* whereas their use of *guessing* declined over the course of the treatment. The decline in *guessing* is not altogether a negative phenomenon, as it may be taken as an indication of the participants' reliance on the other CSs in managing their communicative needs. The fact that the decline in the use of *guessing* was coupled with a marked increase in *appeal for help, self-repair, clarification, repetition, confirmation*, and, to a lesser extent, *approximation* and *circumlocution* may be seen as evidence of the systematic

and deliberate utilization of CSs by the participants, which may lend credence to the conclusion that CS use is readily teachable.

Even though it is not addressed in the questions of the research, it is worth noting that the participants demonstrated better utilization of *interactional* strategies (e.g., *repetition, appeal for help, appeal for confirmation, appeal for clarification*) than *paraphrase* strategies (e.g., *approximation, circumlocution*). This difference in CS use could be the result of the participants' limited lexical repertoire. Consequently, it may have been easier for them to use *interactional* CSs, which require relatively fewer words or simpler expressions, than *paraphrase* strategies, which require a lexical repertoire which may not yet be available to these sixth-grade learners.

5. Reflections, Implications and Suggestions for Further Research

This study examined the effect of CS instruction on Jordanian EFL sixth-grade students' oral performance and strategy use. The findings reveal that instruction improved not only the participants' oral performance but also their CS use over the course of the treatment. More specifically, even though CS use increased in all but one strategy (viz., *guessing*), some strategies (viz., *appeal for help, self-repair, appeal for clarification, repetition* and *appeal for confirmation*) were used more frequently than others (viz., *approximation, circumlocution* and *guessing*).

For considerations related to sampling and design, these findings are hardly generalizable beyond the current participants and, to a lesser extent, those in similar contexts. However, the fact that this study is exploratory in nature does not detract from the merit of its findings which may be readily taken as indications in favor of strategy instruction.

Thus, these researchers believe that EFL teachers should not only create situations which encourage students to engage in oral tasks but also introduce CSs and explicitly highlight their utility. These researchers share Færch and Kasper's (1983) conviction that, through learning CSs, learners are better able to reconcile formal and informal communicative situations and transfer learning to situations beyond the language classroom.

Raising teachers' awareness of the utility of CSs may be another catalyst for improving oral performance in the foreign language classroom and beyond. Previous reports (e.g., Rodríguez Cervantes & Roux Rodriguez, 2012) suggest that EFL teachers are generally either unaware of the utility of teaching communication strategies to their students or inactive models of strategy use, as they either abandon the message or switch to the first language to prevent communication problems in the classroom.

Even though CSs have been researched over the past four decades, they are still often surrounded by vagueness and controversy (Jidong, 2011). Thus, more research is needed to corroborate the findings of existing CS research from broader perspectives and on more diverse audiences. Further research is needed not only to examine other variables that may affect CS use (e.g., gender, class size, seating arrangement, task type) but also to encompass other grades and proficiency levels. As the current research examines the effect of CS instruction on beginners, future research may examine intermediate and advanced levels.

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