

Original Article

The Effect of Learner-centered Instruction on Iranian EFL Learners' Critical Thinking and Pragmatic Competence

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Abstract — *The present study was an attempt to investigate the effect of learner-centered instruction on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' critical thinking. Furthermore, it tried to figure out the impact of learner-centered instruction on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' pragmatic competence. To do so, 95 EFL learners studying English as a Foreign Language at Language Institutes of Karaj, Iran, participated in this study. Utilizing a Quick Oxford Placement Test, 58 EFL female learners who got the band score of QOPT (i.e., from 30 to 48) were selected as the intermediate participants of the study. The data were collected through a critical thinking questionnaire and a pretest, and a posttest of Discourse Completion Test (DCT). The findings revealed that learner-centered instruction did have a statistically significant effect on enhancing the pragmatic competence of Iranian intermediate EFL learners. Besides, the results revealed that learner-centered instruction did have a moderate effect on the critical thinking of the EFL learners, but the effect was not statistically significant. Finally, the results of the study would be useful to EFL learners and teachers, material developers, and syllabus planners, too.*

Keywords — *critical thinking, EFL learners, learner-centered instruction, pragmatic competence.*

I. INTRODUCTION

As a matter of fact, the importance of learning English is increasing all over the world. English is a widespread international language with universal political and business importance. Language as a communication tool plays the most important role in conveying information, and people cannot communicate without it. Communication among people from different nations has become more common and significant because of the development of societies and the economy, and this intensifies the need for pragmatic

competence on the part of English language users (Brown, 2007). Most English learners' pragmatic competence cannot be expected to meet the requirements of practical work in all over the world. In other words, they have inadequate knowledge of pragmatic competence to communicate with others successfully. According to Kasper and Rose (2001), the field of pragmatics focuses on language use in real communication, and mainly on the relationships among sentences, context, and situations. So, pragmatics involves the study of how to interpret and use utterances, and it also depends on real-world knowledge, how speakers employ and perceive speech acts, and the speaker-listener connection, which influences the construction of sentences (Richards & Schmidt, 2010; Thomas, 1983). As a result, it appears that working and dealing with pragmatic competence in the field of language teaching and learning is important.

The ability to think clearly and logically is known as critical thinking. It entails the ability to think critically and independently, as well as the ability to make decisions about what to do or believe (Ennis, 2011). In another definition, critical thinking is defined as the use of cognitive skills or strategies that increase the probability of a desirable outcome. Critical thinking is purposeful, reasoned, and goal-directed (Halpern, 1998). Higher education and the professions both value critical thinking (Moon, 2008). Critical thinking can be considered as the main part of higher education and as a fundamental goal of learning (Halvorsen, 2005). In the present study, the effect of learner-centered instruction on critical thinking and pragmatic competence will be studied. The reform of teaching English as a foreign/second language focuses on improving the EFL learners' communicative approaches and learner autonomy in language classrooms. Over the last three decades, with the emergence of communicative language teaching, the learner-based approach as a reaction to the teacher-based approach was taken into consideration in teaching English as a second



or foreign language (Richards, 2006). The learner-based method has been considered in teaching English as a second or foreign language throughout the last three decades, with the advent of communicative language instruction as a counter to the teacher-based approach (Richards, 2006). The learner-centered approach (active learning) is a method of teaching in which the learner is in the center of the learning process, and the teacher has the least impression in language teaching and learning (Lynch, 2010). The learner-centered method is defined as "the concept that all parts of language instruction, including planning, teaching, and evaluation, should be oriented on the nature of learners." Learning is dependent upon the nature and will of the learners" (Richards & Schmidt, 2010, p. 326). Baldauf and Moni (2006) state learner-centered instruction refers to a fundamental change in teachers' behavior from their traditional roles (i.e., authority) to modern roles (i.e., coordinator). The learner-centered theory backs to the constructivist approach. In other words, the learner-centered approach claims that through this method, students learn better and achieve fundamental experiences instead of doing a simple activity such as observing. Furthermore, the learner-centered approach provides an opportunity for learners to develop the learning instructions by their own efforts, and they are active and do interaction in the teaching-learning process. (Brown, 2008). The focus was on social constructivism, which indicates how social events shape meaning, connections, and comprehensions, according to the theory's pioneers, including Dewey and Vygotsky (Brown, 2007). In reality, the theory suggests that learners perform better when they are asked to think about issues rather than having the thinking done for them. Despite the importance of critical thinking and pragmatic competence in learning English as a second/foreign language, most EFL learners' pragmatic competence is not good enough to achieve a good general proficiency in the language. To solve the problem, the present study was an attempt to investigate the effect of learner-centered instruction on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' critical thinking. Furthermore, it tried to figure out the impact of learner-centered instruction on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' pragmatic competence.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Learner-Centered Instruction

Learner-centered approaches have their origins in constructivist theory, which asserts that learners learn more effectively by doing and experiencing than by observing. Students, rather than being passive "vessels" that acquire knowledge from experienced professors, are the initiators and architects of their own learning and knowledge creation in this approach (Brown, 2008). The teachings of John Dewey and psychologist Lev Vygotsky informed the development of this idea at the turn of the twentieth century. Its main focus was on social constructivism, which refers to how social events shape meaning, connections, and

comprehensions.

According to Duck Worth (2009), students do better when they are asked to think about issues rather than having the thinking done for them. In other words, rather than focusing on their own (teachers') thoughts, the learner's thoughts are prioritized. In an ideal student-led class, the instructor does not impose information on students or attempt to persuade students to agree with what the teacher sees.

Nunan (1999) says that in order to engage learners actively in the learning process, decisions about what to teach and how to teach should be made with the learners and the goal of language instruction in mind: learning by doing (Pham Thi Hanh, 2005). Most of these studies, on the other hand, used a small number of classroom activities defined in broad terms like "chat," "mistake correction," or "discussion," which may cause differing interpretations among respondents and may not accurately reflect classroom activities in reality (Peacock, 1998).

B. Pragmatic Competence

According to Barron (2003), pragmatic competence is defined as knowledge of the sequential perspectives of speech actions, knowledge of the linguistic resources employed in a certain language for realizing special illocutions, and knowledge of how to use the linguistic resources in the correct context. As a result, pragmatic competence is defined as the use of linguistic resources in context and the learner's linguistic resources in the target language. Furthermore, pragmatic competence was described by Thomas (1983) as "the ability to utilize language effectively in order to achieve a given goal and to interpret language in context" (p. 94). Pragmatic competence, according to Chomsky (1965), is the knowledge of circumstances and accurate language use in L2 culture by foreign or second language learners. There are a variety of approaches to promoting pragmatic competence.

Authentic materials in instruction, according to Omaggio Hadley (1993), is one of the essential elements of communicative language knowledge or instruction. The term "authentic material" refers to language that has been developed in the course of actual communication (Nunan, 1999). Authentic second language input is necessary for pragmatic learning, but it does not guarantee good pragmatic growth, according to Kasper (1997).

C. Critical Thinking

CT is defined in a variety of ways. CT was explained by Dewey from a philosophical perspective, in which education was designed to establish conditions for the development of habits or the training of the mind (Dewey, 1993). The development of critical thinking abilities is a significant issue in cooperative language learning, as it is in any other field of education. Some authors place critical thinking on par with the essential language skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking, according to Olsen and Kagan (1992). In the changing environment of the twenty-first century, thinking

critically means acting effectively. As a result, only conscious learning and moderately active teaching with a focus on critical thinking abilities may assist a student in achieving favorable outcomes in any discipline, including foreign languages (Klimoviene, et al., 2006)

Cooperative language learning is a successful method for teaching critical thinking because it creates an ideal classroom environment in which students feel comfortable, have intellectual freedom, and are valued as individuals.

If the correct method is implemented, cooperative learning frameworks can aid in the development of critical thinking.

D. Related Studies

Gholami and Ziafar (2015) compared the effect of two teaching methods, namely the presentation-practice-production method and the observe-hypothesize-experiment method, on reducing pragmatic failure among female intermediate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in Ahvaz's Aran language institute. The current study found that the strategies of observe-hypothesize-experiment and presentation-practice-production were effective in minimizing pragmatic failure among female intermediate English Foreign Language learners in Ahvaz's Aran language institute. It should also be highlighted that the Observe-Hypothesize-Experiment strategy had a greater impact. Teacher-centered and student-centered learning was the subject of a research study done by Zohrabi, Torabi, and Baybourdiani (2012). The findings of a study comparing a learner-centered strategy to a teacher-centered approach in teaching English grammar as a foreign language in an Iranian high school context are presented in this paper. The researchers were able to confirm the null hypothesis by concluding that there was a significant difference in mean between the two groups based on the findings of this investigation. As a result, the findings support the use of a teacher-centered approach to help Iranian EFL students strengthen their grammatical skills (p. 28). The contrast between the learner-centered approach and the teacher-centered approach in teaching English as a foreign language was the subject of a research study done by Mutlaq Al-Zu'be (2013). The contrasts between the two techniques for teaching English were investigated in this study. "A comparison of the two approaches in terms of efficiency and effectiveness in terms of student proficiency indicated that each technique has its own strengths and limitations, therefore choosing one approach means foregoing the benefits of the other."

However, the student-centered method was found to be better suited to teaching English as a foreign language" (p. 24). Khaled Ahmed (2013) examined teacher-centered and learner-centered teaching styles and identified the type of teaching style used by education teachers at a mid-sized, publically funded Midwestern university. The study's findings revealed that graduate education lecturers at Midwestern University had two distinct teaching methods.

However, the trend was toward learner-centered rather than teacher-centered instruction. Geisli (2009) investigated the impact of student-centered training methods on student achievement. When comparing the student-centered group to the teacher-centered group, the results showed that measured success was much higher in the student-centered group. Although some studies have looked into the impact of learner-centered learning on various aspects of second/foreign language learning (e.g., Zohrabi, Torabi, & Baybourdiani, 2012; Khaled Ahmed, 2013), research on the impact of learner-centered learning on critical thinking and pragmatic competence is limited. According to Richards and Schmidt (2010), allowing learners to think logically can encourage deeper processing of the target language, involve learners more actively with the aspects of the offered language, and regard learners as autonomous thinkers. Furthermore, according to Thomas (1983), pragmatic competence is the ability to use language effectively to achieve a certain objective and to comprehend language in specific situations. As a result, based on the above-mentioned interaction among the study's variables, this study investigates the impact of learner-centered instruction on the critical thinking and pragmatic competence of Iranian intermediate EFL learners.

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ1: Does learner-centered instruction have any significant effect on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' critical thinking?

RQ2: Does learner-centered instruction have any significant effect on Iranian Intermediate EFL learners' pragmatic competence?

IV. METHOD

A. Participants

The participants of the study were 95 EFL learners studying English as a foreign language at the Language Institutes of Karaj, Iran. They were non-randomly selected from all the EFL learners of the Language Institute. Among the population, 58 EFL learners who got the band score of QOPT (i.e., from 30 to 48) were considered as the intermediate learners and participated in this study. They were all female students, and their age range was from 12-18 years old. Then, the homogenized students took a critical thinking questionnaire and were divided into two groups based on their scores in the questionnaire. Each group consists of 29 intermediate language learners.

B. Instruments

The major instruments in this study were a quick oxford placement test, a critical thinking questionnaire, and a pretest and posttest of pragmatic competence.

C. Procedure

In order to homogenize the participants of the study, 95 EFL learners were given the QOPT. Out of the whole

participants, 58 learners who got the band score of OQPT were considered as the intermediate learners since their scores were between 30 and 45. After homogenization of the learners, the Persian version of Honey's (2004) critical thinking questionnaire translated by Naeini (2005), including 30 multiple Likert scales, was administered to the participants to assess analytical, inferential, evaluative, inductive, and deductive thinking abilities.

According to Naeini (2005), the English version of the critical thinking questionnaire was translated by her to guarantee the full comprehension of the questions by participants. Having administrated the questionnaire to 58 intermediate EFL learners, two groups were selected. Then, the homogenized learners were divided into two equal groups. Each group consisted of 29 EFL learners. After the classification of the learners, the whole participants of the study were given the pretest of pragmatic competence (WDCT). To investigate the pragmatic capability of the students with respect to their knowledge of refusal speech acts, a paper-based WDCT was used as the pretest. After administration of the pretest, the treatment was commenced for the experimental group regarding learner-centered instruction while the control group was not. The whole instruction for the experimental group took place in 10 sessions, and each session lasted for 60 minutes. The groups had received several conversations, including refusal speech acts through learner-centered instruction. These conversations were extracted from different English coursebooks such as *American English File* ³, *New Interchange 1*, *English Result Intermediate*, and *Top Notch 3*. Due to the current state of language teaching in Iran, these teaching materials were taught at the intermediate level.

Having finished the instructional period, the two groups took the posttest of WDCT. Pretest and posttest of refusal speech acts had been taken from Mohammed (2012).

V. RESULTS

A. Reliability Statistics

Table 1: Cronbach's Alpha Reliability of Critical Thinking Questionnaire and Pragmatic Competence Test

Instruments	No. Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Results
Pragmatic Competence Test	10	0.784	Acceptable (Reliable)
Critical Thinking Questionnaire	30	0.735	Acceptable (Reliable)

Based on the results from Table 1, the instruments used in the present study had an acceptable range of reliabilities.

B. Descriptive Statistics

In the following table, the scores of the critical thinking questionnaire and pragmatic competence test were shown, respectively.

Table 2: Descriptive Data of Critical Thinking Questionnaire and Pragmatic Competence Test

Maximum	Minimum	Std. Deviation	Mean	N		
				Pre	post	
145	30	2.832	88.50	29	Pre	CriTh
137	39	2.718	92.80	29	post	
15	5	3.471	7.80	29	Pre	PraPer
18	8	4.199	13.20	29	post	

Based on the results of table 2, it was observed that there was a difference between the pre and posttests scores of the critical thinking questionnaire. On the other hand, the mean score of the pragmatic performance test had a substantial increase in the posttest in comparison with the pretest stage. In sum, learner-centered instruction did have a statistically significant effect on the critical thinking of Iranian Intermediate EFL learners. Moreover, the instruction did have a significant effect on developing the pragmatic competence of the EFL learners.

C. Checking Data Normality

Table 3: Test of Normality

Group	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a	Shapiro-Wilk					
		Statistic	df	P			
Critical Thinking Tool	Pretest	0.59	29	0.96	0.200*	29	0.15
	Posttest	0.18	29	0.93	0.11	29	0.17
Pragmatic Performance Test	Pretest	0.54	29	0.96	0.200*	29	0.143
	Posttest	0.46	29	0.96	0.200*	29	0.148

Based on the results of Table 3, the significance level (sig) of the pre and post-tests of the critical thinking questionnaire and pragmatic performance test was greater than the p-value ($p > 0.05$). Therefore, it is concluded that the questionnaire and the test were normally distributed.

D. First Hypothesis

H₀₁: Learner-centered instruction does not have a statistically significant effect on the critical thinking of Iranian Intermediate EFL learners.

In order to test the first and second null hypotheses, the pre and post-tests of the critical thinking questionnaire and pragmatic test were investigated by two Paired samples t-tests.

Table 4: Paired Samples t-test for Critical Thinking Questionnaire

	M	SD	SEM	L	U	t	df	Sig
pre-cri	3.2	2.9	0.54	2.1	4.3	1.2	28	0.00
post-cri	7	4		7	6	6		0

Based on the results of Table 4, there was a significant difference between the pre and post-tests of the critical thinking questionnaire ($t(28) = 1.26, p < 0.05$). The results revealed that learner-centered instruction did have a moderate effect on the critical thinking of the EFL. Consequently, the first null hypothesis was rejected, and learner-centered instruction did have a statistically significant effect on the critical thinking of Iranian Intermediate EFL learners.

E. Second Hypothesis

H₀₂: Learner-centered instruction does not have a statistically significant effect on the pragmatic competence of Iranian intermediate EFL learners.

Table 5: Paired Samples t-test for Pragmatic Performance Test

	M	SD	SEM	L	U	t	df	Sig
pre-cri	5.5	2.0	0.37	4.77	6.29	15.	28	0.00
post-cri	3	3				58		0

Based on the results of Table 5, there was a significant difference between the pre and post-tests of the pragmatic performance test ($t(28) = 15.58, p < 0.05$). The results revealed that learner-centered instruction did have a statistically significant effect on enhancing the pragmatic competence of Iranian intermediate EFL learners. Therefore, the second null hypothesis was rejected.

VI. DISCUSSION

The obtained results revealed that learner-centered instruction did have a statistically significant effect on the critical thinking of the EFL learners. On the other hand, learner-centered instruction did have a statistically significant effect on developing the pragmatic competence of Iranian intermediate EFL learners.

The results of the present study are in line with Mutlaq Al-Zu'be (2013), who conducted a research study in order to explore the difference between the learner-centered approach and teaching English as a foreign language with a teacher-

centered approach. The findings of the research showed that each approach had its own strengths and weaknesses, but the student-centered approach was recognized as more suited for teaching English as a foreign language. Likewise, Geisli (2009) conducted a study to determine the effect of student-centered training approaches on student success. When comparing the student-centered group to the teacher-centered group, the results showed that measured success was much higher in the student-centered group. Another study showed the positive effects of learner-centered approaches on the quality of learning (Gravoso & Pasa 2008). The student-centered groups regularly had a higher level of the grasp of the difficulties than the teacher-centered groups. The results also showed that the learner-centered environment tended to engage students in knowledge construction, while the teacher-centered environment fostered the mere absorption of information.

Meanwhile, the results of the present research are not in line with Zohrabi, Torabi, and Baybourdiani (2012), who conducted a research study on the investigation of teacher-centered and student-centered learning in the Iranian context. The researchers found that there was a significant difference between the mean of the two groups allowing the researchers to accept the null hypothesis. Therefore, the results support the implementation of the teacher-centered process for the purpose of developing grammar learning in Iranian EFL learners. Similarly, the results of the present research are not in line with Khuvasanond (2013), who worked on three different techniques used for teaching vocabulary to English as Foreign Language students in Thailand in his Ph.D. thesis. The results of the study revealed that students who received teacher-centered instructional techniques performed better in some parts of the vocabulary test than those who received a learner-centered instructional technique. Similarly, Nonkukhetkhong, Baldauf, and Moni (2006) have conducted a research study on teachers' perceptions and implementation of the learner-centered approach to teaching English as a Foreign Language in Thai secondary school contexts. As a conclusion of the research, they commented that teachers are attempting to implement the new learner-centered approach to CLT required by the 1999 Education Act. Finally, Atara, Wong Leung, Woon, and David (2000) examined the effectiveness of active learning through the use of several learning activities implemented in two undergraduate programs at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Questionnaires and interviews were used to examine the effectiveness of these activities by probing students' attitudes and learning styles. The exercises utilized aided in the development of independent learning skills and the ability to apply knowledge, according to the findings. They also had an impact on student learning by influencing how they studied and achieving the desired learning outcomes.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

This study was designed to investigate the effect of learner-centered instruction on the critical thinking and pragmatic competence of Iranian intermediate EFL learners. It is important to note that the mean score of the pragmatic performance test had an increase in the posttest in comparison with that of the pretest. Furthermore, there was no significant difference between the pretest and posttests scores of the critical thinking questionnaire. Generally speaking, learner-centered instruction did not have a statistically significant impact on the critical thinking of Iranian Intermediate EFL learners. However, the instruction did have a significant impact on improving the pragmatic competence of the EFL learners. It was observed that there was a significant difference between the pre and post-tests of the pragmatic performance test. The results showed that learner-centered instruction had a significant effect on developing the pragmatic competence of Iranian intermediate EFL learners. Consequently, the first null hypothesis was rejected. In terms of critical thinking, the findings revealed that there was a significant difference between the pre and post-tests of the critical thinking questionnaire. The results indicated that learner-centered instruction had a moderate impact on the critical thinking of the EFL learners, but the effect was not significant. Thus, the second null hypothesis was accepted, and learner-centered instruction had not a significant effect on the critical thinking of Iranian Intermediate EFL learners. Finally, it is hoped that studies in SL/FL pragmatics would not only improve our perception of pragmatic development in the realization of speech acts and of the nature of strategies, but also help us to include the best methods of teaching pragmatics in the EFL classes.

A. Implications of the study for teachers

This study can help teachers to be aware of the impact of learner-centered instruction on critical thinking, pragmatic competence, and goals of their learners and desire to perform language, specially request inappropriate context. If learners' goals include striving for critically thinking and use the language appropriately, consideration needs to be given to approaches to achieving these goals. If learners can perform pragmatic competence and utilize the refusal speech acts when is needed, educators need to be sensitive to their learners' instruction and adjust its goals accordingly. In addition, this study may help English teachers to determine what kinds of instructions be applied in their classes regarding performing, procedure, and evaluation of pupils' learning of refusal speech acts.

B. Implications of the study for language learners

The main pedagogical implication of this study is that speech acts should be worked on learners in intermediate and advanced proficiency levels since learners at these levels usually have more opportunities and capabilities to communicate. The findings of the current study also suggest

that learners can learn the sociopragmatic norms and pragmalinguistic forms of refusal speech act properly. Besides, the outcomes of the current study can aid Iranian EFL learners to remove the pragmatic failures and become more competent learners and critical thinkers in terms of the speech act of refusals through communication. Based on the obtained results, it can be said that EFL learners in Iran should increase their knowledge about the significance of improving their competence because it would impact their success of language use in the future and try to boost their free-speaking skills in order to prepare themselves for future needs and requirements.

VIII. SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Regarding the variables investigated in this study, some suggestions can be made for further research. This study was conducted on students of English language institutes; however, it is not apparent whether more heterogeneous participant groups will perform the same or will give the same results. Therefore, it is suggested that other studies can include more heterogeneous learner groups in their researches. The role of gender in pragmatic competence can be further studied for each gender. This study investigated only the effect of learner-centered instruction on the critical thinking and pragmatic competence of female learners. New studies can investigate this domain of research on EFL males learners. Moreover, this study was done on Iranian EFL learners of English language institutes of Karaj, Iran. Future studies can be done in different schools and universities in other regions in Iran and other countries. Finally, this study only focused on one component of pragmatic competence, refusal speech acts. Further studies can include other types of speech acts such as requesting, complaining, ordering, apologizing, and etc.

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