

Enhancing High School EFL Students' Ability to Make English Suggestions via Explicit Instruction

Do Minh Hung¹ Dang Kim Loan²

1.Dong Thap University, Cao Lanh City, Vietnam 2.Go Guao High School, Kien Giang Province, Vietnam

Abstract

A gap has been widely noted between what high school EFL students learn in classroom of Vietnamese context and what they are able to use behind classroom. The present study made an attempt to investigate the enhancement of high school EFL students' ability to make suggestions in English via an explicit instruction treatment in comparison to that of the implicit approach. Explicit instruction group showed better results than those of the implicit group though both made improvement from the pre-test to the post-test. Additionally, the questionnaire revealed the explicit group's positive attitudes towards the 4-week treatment program. However, the results were not exceptionally significant and thus it calls for further pedagogical investments by EFL teachers and researchers in Vietnam and elsewhere.

Keywords: Explicit; Enhancement; Implicit; Instruction; Suggestion

1.Introduction

In Vietnam, like in many other countries around the world English has long served as a major foreign language subject compulsory in most secondary and high schools throughout the country' educational system. High school EFL Vietnamese students generally do fairly well in their English in-class exams. However, outside classroom it is really challenging for them to take part in interactions in the target language speaking environment. In reality, when Vietnamese EFL students interact with native English speakers, problems often arise because they lack the required knowledge and skills of the conversational norms involved in the production of appropriate speech acts, especially making suggestions (although they have learnt quite a great deal about these). Therefore, such cross-language/culture communication tends to break down in most cases and somehow cause negative impacts on participants involved. Recently, several researchers in second language acquisition have been concerned with the necessity and explicit instruction of different speech acts in classroom (Kasper & Rose, 2002; Farahian et al. 2012). However, the number of studies related to making suggestions in everyday communication and its teachability in second/foreign language acquisition, especially in Vietnamese classroom context, is certainly limited and still in great demands for innovative instruction at the present time. Thus, the present study made an attempt to deepen on the role of explicit instruction of making suggestions to high school EFL students in Vietnamese setting.

Research Aims and Questions

The aim of the present study was twofold: (i) To identify whether explicit instruction results in better enhancing high school EFL students' ability to make suggestions in comparison to that of implicit instruction; (ii) To investigate the target students' attitudes toward the explicit practice of making suggestions in English speaking classroom. Accordingly, answers were sought to two specific questions: (1) Does explicit instruction of making suggestions enhance high school EFL students' ability to make suggestions better than implicit instruction? (2) What are students' attitudes toward the explicit practice of making suggestions in English speaking classroom?

2. Literature Review

Speech Act

Speech act refers to an utterance and also the total situation in which the utterance is issued (Austin, 1962). When people use language, they tend to produce an isolated series of sentences and perform an action. Three different speech acts can occur simultaneously when one is performing a statement/utterance, i.e. locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts. A locutionary act describes only the action of saying something meaningful in the language. An illocutionary act can be defined as the action intended by the speaker, or the uses to which language can be put in society, e.g. informing, ordering, warning, promising and undertaking. A speaker performs the illocutionary act to make the utterance significant within a conventional system of social interaction. A perlocutionary act is the speech act that a speaker carries out making an utterance as the act of causing a certain effect on the hearer and others as well.

Based on Austin’s speech act theory, Searle (1969) develops ‘linguistic theory’ and proposes ‘linguistic acts’, emphasizing the conditions and rules which indicate how a listener responds to an utterance. Searle considers illocutionary acts containing the central linguistic units as a speech act rather than a sign. He classifies speech acts into five classes: directives (e.g. asking, advising, begging, ordering, requesting, forbidding, inviting); declarations (e.g. resigning, appointing, christening); commissives (e.g. promising, planning, offering, threatening, vowing); expressives (e.g. apologizing, celebrating, welcoming); assertives (e.g. boasting, claiming, swearing, concluding, putting forward).

Speech Act of Suggesting

Suggesting is a directive speech act to get the hearer to perform a certain action (Martinez-Flor, 2005). Haverkate (1984) distinguishes the difference between impositive directives (such as requesting and ordering, which benefits the speaker), and non-impositive directives of suggestions and instructions (which benefit the hearer). Although suggestions mostly benefit the hearer, this speech act is regarded as a face-threatening act because the speaker is in some way interfering into the hearer's presence by performing an act that concerns what the hearer should do (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The directive speech act might threaten not only the negative face of the hearer for the possibility of future action but also the positive face as it entails a negative evaluation of the hearer. Thus, polite suggestions could improve the relationship between the two parties, whereas disrespectful suggestions could generate frustration or be offensive to the receiver/hearer.

Types of Suggesting Strategies

Table 1. Types of Suggesting Strategies

Type	Strategies	Linguistic structures	Examples	
	Direct	Performative verb	<i>I suggest that you...</i> <i>I advise you to ...</i>	
		Nouns of suggestion	<i>My suggestion would be...</i>	
		Imperative/negative	<i>Try using...</i>	
		Imperative	<i>Don't try to...</i>	
		Let's....	<i>Let's work together on the project.</i>	
		Conventionalized	Specific formulae (interrogative forms)	<i>Why don't you...?</i> <i>How about...?</i> <i>What about...?</i>
	Modals & semi-modals		<i>You have/need to/should (shouldn't) /ought to/can/could</i>	
	Conditional		<i>If I were you, I would...</i>	
	Indirect		Impersonal	<i>Here's one possibility: ...</i> <i>It would be helpful if you...</i> <i>A good idea would be ...</i> <i>It would be nice if...</i>
			Hints	<i>I've heard that...</i>

Suggesting strategies used in the present study includes three main types of *direct forms*, *conventionalized forms* and *indirect forms* (Martinez-Flor, 2005). **Direct strategies** referring to what the speaker clearly means are performed by using performative verbs, a noun of suggestion or "illocutionary force indicating device" (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford 1996, p.180). **Conventionalised forms** (Banerjee & Carrell, 1988) permits the hearer to understand the interlocutor's meaning behind the suggestion since the illocutionary force indicator appears in the utterance. **Indirect forms** relate to those expressions in which the speaker's intentions are not clearly expressed, but just providing hints for the hearer to make inferences about it. EFL learners are supposed to not only get the basic knowledge in question, but use it appropriately in effect.

Explicit vs. Implicit Instruction

Explicit learning is considered a process of awareness in which learners concern the new knowledge they are receiving (Berry, 1994; Schmidt, 2001). Moreover, the forming and testing of hypotheses are involved in a search for the correct structure (Ellis, 1994). Differently, implicit learning is defined as a process of unconsciousness in which learners are not aware of what they are learning, since they only concern the surface features of a complex stimulus domain. More specifically, explicit instruction consists of all categories in which rules are overtly explained to learners, while rules or forms are not explained overtly in implicit teaching.

Table 2. Explicit and Implicit Instruction

Approach	Features	Aims
Explicit	A conscious process	Focus on target forms
		Rules or forms with the clear explanation
Implicit	An unconscious process	Not focus on meta-linguistic explanation
		Rules or forms without the clear explanation

Previous Studies Related

Banerjee and Carrell (1988) were one of the first to conduct a study on suggestions, comparing two groups of Chinese and Malay ESL students with 12 native speakers of American English. Results illustrated that non-native students made suggestions less frequently than the native group, and the type of suggestion used depended on the directness of the situation. Farahian et al. (2012) investigated the pragmatic use of refusals by 64 Iranian EFL college students via a treatment program. The findings confirmed the benefits of the explicit instructional approach to developing EFL learners' noticing and use of different types of refusals in English. Similarly, Langer's study (2013) on the explicit teaching of requests to L2 learners of Spanish revealed positive results. Other studies on EFL learners' suggesting strategies such as by Bu's (2011), and Pishghadam and Sharafadini (2011) generally marked the equal effects of explicit and implicit instruction.

However, most previous studies in point involved college EFL learners, either English major or non-English major, as participants. The present study was one of the first, especially in Vietnamese setting, to engage high school EFL students in the treatment program and reflective attitude display. Few would deny that EFL learning success at high school should highly result in greater motivations for the target language accomplishment continued and advanced use at college level and beyond.

3. Methodology

Participants

They were sixty-seven (29 males, 38 females) from Go Quao High School of Kien Giang Province, one of the southern-most areas of Vietnam. All of them were grade 12 students (senior high school; at the time of research they were finishing the final semester just prior to their high school graduation and college entrance). Their ages were between 17 and 18. Most of them started learning English when they were in grade 6, i.e. they took more than 6 years' English classes as a compulsory subject up to the time of research (4 years at secondary school and more than 2 years at high school). At the final semester (when the treatment was run), they learned English in class for 4 periods per week, 45 minutes each period. As widely seen in Vietnamese system, the students were placed randomly into two different classes by the school (often at the beginning of the school year). Thereby under the school authorities' permission, they were chosen randomly by the researchers as a control group (34 students of class 12A2, 16 males and 18 females) and the other as experimental one (33 students of class 12A6, 13 males and 20 females). Experimental group received the explicit instruction of suggestion speech act by one of the present researchers, while the control group was not involved in the treatment program, i.e. under the implicit instruction like other regular grade 12 classes at the school, which are based mainly on the scheduled textbook.

Instruments

A pretest and a questionnaire were used. The pretest measured the effects of the treatment program (to answer the research question 1), while the questionnaire elicited explicit instruction group' attitudes toward the practice of making suggestions in English speaking lessons (to seek the answer to the research question 2).

A multiple-choice discourse completion test (MDCT) was administered as a pretest one week before the treatment program, and also as a post-test one week after the treatment finished. MDCT (see Appendix 1) displayed 20 different situations that varied with mainly two levels of status and social distance of interlocutors involved. One level was equal status (student to student/friend), while the other was unequal (student to teacher/older sister/brother). MDCT was developed in formats found in previous studies (e.g. Farahian et al. 2012; Li, 2010). The test displayed twenty situations where a certain kind of suggestion speech act was expected. Since all participants were high school students and their English proficiency level were around pre-intermediate, all situations in the test (for the present study) were explicitly found at high school context. Each situation was made in a way that the students had to make only one suggestion (i.e. one correct answer, either option A, B, or C) in order to avoid different alternatives appropriate for the same situation, and thus convenient for measuring the variable in point. The pre-test and post test were in fact two versions of a single one in terms of content items and format, but dissimilar in option order only. Also, to ensure result reliability after the pre-test was collected, nothing related to the pre-test remained and no corrective feedback was given to the students until the end of the treatment program, i.e. after the post-test and questionnaire had been administered. The tests (30 minutes each) were done by the students in class with the researchers' administration and guidance (and also Vietnamese translation if necessary). One correct answer scored 0.5 point for each situation raised, i.e.10 points was the maximum.

The questionnaire (see Appendix 3) had 18 items in total. Each item presented a statement about students' attitudes towards using suggestion speech acts on a five-point scale (completely disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and completely agree). The items were divided into three sections: (i) students' interests in learning suggestion speech act via explicit instruction (item 1, 2, 3, 10, 11, 12), (ii) their attitudes towards the feasibility

of explicit instruction in classroom (item 4, 5, 9, 13, 15, 18), and (iii) their attitudes towards benefits of explicit instruction on the target speech act (item 6, 7, 8, 14, 16, 17). Before officially used, the questionnaire was piloted with the involvement of 30 students of similar background and English proficiency as those in the main study. The reliability of the instrument was confirmed with Cronbach’s alpha ($\alpha = .73$).

Treatment and Materials

The experimental group received explicit instruction of suggestion speech act (whereas control group was taught implicitly as usual or no special treatment involved) in English speaking classes. Each group regularly met two periods of 90 minutes every week during four weeks of the treatment program. The explicit class meeting regularly ran 3 major steps (see Appendix 2): Step 1, identify suggestions in interaction served as teacher-led activity in the classroom to make students aware that speech acts were co-built by two or more participants over multiple turns. Students watched chosen sequences from the selected materials and transcripts were provided to identify the beginning and end of suggestion sequences. They were asked to focus on the structure of the negotiation sequence by guiding questions, such as (1) Where do you think two speakers are? (2) What is the relationship between two speakers? (3) What is the status between them? (4) How many turns is the suggestion realized? (5) Pick up the structures of making suggestions. Step 2, explaining and noticing the speech act - was to provide pragmatic-linguistic and sociopragmatic information related to social status and the use of mitigation in the performance of suggesting. Explicit instruction on the speech act related to the power, social distance and degree of imposition was involved in the situation. Step 3, practicing and internalizing suggestion sequences - students performed suggestions from a discourse approach: (i) They were provided activities (e.g. role play) as essential tools to improve their ability of making suggestions; (ii) had opportunities to communicate in groups or pairs in order to practice making suggestions; (iii) participated in the given situations in relation to the power, social distance and degree of imposition. Additionally, they were encouraged to unload specific transcripts of the videos made available to them in a practical classroom and discover some more of the contents and linguistic points offered in steps 1 and 2 on their own.

The nationally required textbook “Tieng Anh 12” (English Grade 12) (Hoang, et al. 2008) was used to design lesson plans for both classes. However, other supplementary materials prepared by the researchers were included to aid the explicit group’s realization and interpretation of patterns, tokens of making English suggestions, rules and strategies in point.

4.Results and Discussions

Pretest Result

Table 3. Pre-Test Mean Scores

	<i>Groups</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Pre-test	Experimental	33	4.306	1.4913			
	Control	34	4.212	1.5862			
	Exp. vs. Control				.519	65	p=.605>0.05

As seen in Table 3, the mean score of the experimental group (4.306 out of 10) and that of the control

(4.212 out of 10) were almost at the same level. And with $p=0.605>0.05$, there was no statistically significant difference between the two means. Thus, it shows that before the treatment concerned both student groups' ability to make suggestions in English was equally below average level although they did take more than 6 years' English classes as a compulsory subject at both secondary and high school.

Making suggestions is definitely one of the basic pragmatic skills for students to feel confident and safe enough in the English-speaking environment, but then after more than 6 years of successive learning, it seems that their knowledge in point was not as good as expected. And thus, it is worth conducting studies like the present one to improve the situation, to some extent at least.

Post-Test Result

Table 4. Post-Test Mean Scores

	<i>Groups</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Post -test	Experimental	33	6.353	1.5152			
	Control	34	4.970	1.7586			
	Exp. vs. Control				-3.452	63	$p=.001<0.05$

Table 4 saw a difference between the experimental group's mean score (6.353) and that of the control (4.970). The t-test was run with $p=.001<0.05$, indicating that the difference between the mean scores of the two groups was statistically significant. Accordingly, after the treatment the experimental group made more enhancements in their ability to make suggestions in English than the other group.

Although it confirms the significant enhancement of the explicit instruction from the pre-test to the post one, the experimental group's ability to make suggestions in English was not very strong, just above the average level (6.353 out of 10). In other words, what has been done in the present study was not ideally enough, and thus there is still room for further research in this area of second language acquisition. Otherwise, the story remains the same as before, i.e. secondary and high school EFL students learn the target language just for exam taking in classroom rather than for practical use.

Next are considerations within each group.

Table 5. Control Group's Pre-Post Test Mean Scores

<i>Control group</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Pre – test	34	4.212	1.5862			
Post – test	34	4.970	1.7586			
Pre- vs. post-test				-3.497	33	$p=0.001<0.05$

Although the post-test mean (4.970 out of 10) was still a little below the average, there was statistically a significant difference between the two mean scores ($p=0.001<0.05$). As a result, the control group did make an improvement from the pre-test to the post-test. Then, implicit instruction might not be removed altogether by the explicit because it still makes certain contribution. However, it should be restricted in the case of high school students as seen above the explicit appears to make greater enhancement.

Table 6. Experimental Group's Pre-Post Test Mean Scores

<i>Experimental group</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Pre – test	33	4.309	1.4303			
Post – test	33	6.353	1.5152			
Pre- vs. post-test				-7.250	33	p=.000<0.05

Table 6 marked a remarkable difference between the two mean scores (4.309 and 6.353 out of 10) and with $p < 0.05$ the difference was statistically significant. Thereby, like the control group the experimental improved from the pre-test to the post-test, but unlike the control's mean score (below average), that of the experimental was above the average. This is encouraging and proves that the explicit instruction appears to have greater enhancement than the implicit on the target learners' ability to make suggestions in English.

Questionnaire Result

Table 7. Overall Descriptive Statistics

Correlation	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Exp. Group	32	3.17	4.39	3.6597	.29

The sample t-test indicates that the overall mean score $M=3.6597$ is higher than the accepted one ($M=3.0$) and is statistically significant ($t=-6.674$, $df=31$, $p=.000$). It can be concluded that the experimental group did have positive attitudes toward the explicit practice of making suggestions in English speaking classroom. But, like the post-test result, their evaluation was not very high (thus not statistically high). Again it calls for teachers' more attention and efforts to innovative instructions, not just stay where they are now.

Table 8. Questionnaire Result in Clusters

Clusters	Items	Min	Max	Mean	SD
(A) Interest	1,2,3,10,11,12	3.14	4.50	3.6979	.2822
(B) Feasibility	4,5,9,13,15,18	2.67	4.67	3.6146	.4684
(C) Benefits	6,7,8,14,16,17	2.67	4.33	3.6667	.3641

It is quite clear that the three clusters (A), (B) and (C) scored almost the same, just above the average like the overall mean score in Table 7. The students' interest and their evaluation on the feasibility and benefits of the explicit practice were all positive, but not very high.

5. Conclusion

The present study made an attempt to enhance Vietnamese high school EFL students' ability to make English suggestions by means of explicit instruction during a 4-week treatment program (special one compared to regular classes of the school). The post-test confirmed that both explicit and implicit instruction made enhancement on the target students' ability to make suggestions in English. It also showed that the explicit generated stronger enhancement than the other approach. The finding is in line with previous studies that also focused on the instructional effects of speech acts (e.g. Farahian et. al, 2012; Langer, 2013). In addition, it more

or less confirms the teachability of speech act of suggesting in EFL classroom context. However, probably partly because the treatment program was not long enough (only 4 weeks) and partly because enhancing the target ability is not an easy job (where the outside-class practice environment for EFL students in Vietnam is very limited at the present time), the concerned enhancement and the students' questionnaire evaluation were not exceptionally significant. Thus, the pedagogical message from the present study should be that there is still room for EFL teachers of Vietnamese high schools in particular to make further effort and research in the field so as to ultimately turn students' learning and acquisition of English subject into a tool for practical use rather than for exam taking only.

References

- [1]Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do thing with words*. Oxford: OUP.
- [2]Bardovi-Harlig, K. & Hartford, B. S. (1996). Input in an institutional setting. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 18, 171-188.
- [3]Banerjee, J. & Carrell, P. L. (1988). Tuck in your shirt, you squid: Suggestions in ESL. *Language Learning*, 38, 313-364.
- [4]Berry, C. D. (1994). Implicit and explicit learning of complex tasks. In N. Ellis (Ed.), *Implicit and explicit learning of lanuages*, pp.147-164. London: Academic Press.
- [5]Brown, P. & Levinson, S. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: CUP.
- [6]Bu, J. (2011). A study of pragmatic transfer in suggestion strategies by Chinese learners of English. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 3(2), 28-36.
- [7]Ellis, R. (1994). *The study of second language acquisition*. Oxford: OUP.
- [8]Farahian, M. et al. (2012). Does direct instruction develop pragmatic competence? Teaching refusals to EFL learners of English. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research* 3(4), 814-821.
- [9]Haverkate, H. (1984). *Speech acts, speakers and hearers. Pragmatics and beyond 4*. Amsterdam: John Benjamin Publishing Company.
- [10]Hoang, V. et al. (2008). *Tieng Anh 12*. Ha Noi, Viet Nam: Education Publishing House.
- [11]Kasper, G. & Rose, K. R. (2002). *Pragmatic development in a second language*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Limited.
- [12]Langer, B. D. (2013). Teaching requests to L2 learners of Spanish. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 4(6), 1147-1159.
- [13]Li, E. S. (2010). Making suggestions: A contrastive study of young Hong Kong and Australian students. *Journal of Pragmatics* 42, 598 - 616.
- [14]Martínez-Flor, A. (2005). A theoretical review of the speech act of suggesting: Towards a taxonomy for its use in FLT. *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses* 18, 167-187.
- [15]Pishghadam, R. & Sharafadini, M. (2011). Delving into speech act of suggestion: A case of Iranian EFL Learners. *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, 2(16), 152-160.
- [16]Schmidt, R. (2001). Attention. In P. Robinson (Ed.), *Cognition and second language instruction*, pp.3-33. New York: CUP.
- [17]Searle, J. R. (1969). *Speech acts: An essay in the philosophy of language*. Cambridge: CUP.