The Effect of Explicit Instruction on English Language Learner Recognition of Sarcasm

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Abstract

The present study evaluates the effectiveness of explicit instruction on English language learner recognition of sarcasm. Sarcasm is a prevalent feature in conversational English but it is difficult for language learners to recognize and is not often a focus of English language instruction, possibly due to the limited research on sarcasm instruction. 16 nonnative speakers were divided into two groups, a comparison group (10) and an experimental group (6). Both groups then took a pretest and a posttest with the experimental group receiving instruction in between the two tests. The results were analyzed to look for difference between the groups and within the experimental group on the pretest and posttest. One difference was found but was not in the expected direction. The findings of this study are beneficial for the creating of similar, but improved, research designs in the future.

Keywords: pragmatics, sarcasm, recognition, explicit instruction

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Background

Sarcasm is a pragmatic feature frequently used by native speakers of English for to convey an alternative to the literal meaning of an utterance. Speakers usually implicate the opposite of what they actually say when they convey sarcasm. What a speaker says is often defined as part of the speaker's direct or primary speech act, which then is open to global pragmatic interpretation as to whether the utterance is sincere or sarcastic (Camp, 2012). Recognition of sarcasm, however, is difficult especially for language learners. A review of the literature revealed that, while there is literature that addresses the various features by which sarcasm can be recognized, it mostly addresses how native speakers recognize sarcasm. There is relatively little research done on the recognition of sarcasm by L2 learners in English in the literature. It is possible that students may benefit from instruction on the use and recognition of sarcasm. The purpose of this study is to examine the link between explicit instruction and L2 learners of English recognition of sarcasm.

Research Questions

1. Can second language learners recognize sarcasm without being explicitly taught?

2. Does the explicit instruction of sarcasm help improve second language learners' recognition of sarcasm?

Methods

Two intact groups taking the PIE 105 English composition course at Program in Intensive English (PIE) at Northern Arizona University (NAU) were used. The study included 10 students

in the experimental group and 6 students in the comparison group. Most of students are native speakers of either Arabic or Chinese with one native Korean speaker. The students had a level 6 proficiency on the PIE scale which is equivalent to a score of 70 to 100 on the TOEFL iBT. This population was chosen because the recognition of sarcasm generally requires a higher proficiency level. Two tests were used, a pretest and a posttest. The tests consisted of watching four videos and answering 5 questions per video for a total of 20 questions. The videos were short clips from the popular TV shows *Friends, Modern Family, The Big Bang Theory,* and *How I Met Your Mother.* The students were provided with the transcript of all the videos in the tests. There were two types of questions in the tests. One question asked students to identify and underline where the sarcasm appeared in a transcript of the video. The other four questions were multiple choice with four possible answers. Each question was worth one point and was scored as either correct or incorrect. Each video clip was shown twice before students answered the questions. The experimental group was given a 30-minute lesson on recognition of sarcasm immediately after the pretest while the comparison group did not receive any instruction. The lesson included teaching students about contextual cues that are used to detect the use of sarcasm. During instruction, students listened and filled out a handout as the instructors went through a PowerPoint presentation. The students then practiced identifying sarcasm by watching video clips and noting the features they observed on the handouts. The posttest was given to both groups two weeks later.

Results

Three questions from each test, which were different on both, were deleted due to poor item discrimination, resulting in fourteen total questions. After the items had been deleted the Cronbach's alpha was 0.70.

After adjusting the reliability, the comparison group had a mean score of 8.10 and the experimental group had a mean score of 8.17 on the pretest. No statistical difference was found between the experimental group and the comparison group on the pretest (see Table 1).

Regarding the first research question, an independent sample t-test was run on the posttest scores of both groups. The results indicate that there is no statistically significant difference between the experimental and comparison group on the posttest (see Table 1).

Table 1

Independent Samples T-test for Pretest and Posttest

Administration	Group	n	k	Mean	SD	t
Pretest						
	Experimental	10	14	8.10	1.78	
	Comparison	6	14	8.17	3.92	-0.47
Posttest						
	Experimental	10	14	6.6	1.43	
	Comparison	6	14	7.3	2.73	-0.71

Note. t_{crit} (14 df, 2 tailed) = +/- 2.15; *$p < 0.05$

Regarding the second research question, a paired sample t-test was run on the pretest and the posttest scores of the experimental group to see if they improved after the instruction. The results indicate a statistically significant difference between the pretest and the posttest scores. (see Table 2). An eta-squared value of 0.5 shows a large effect size. However, the mean scores on Table 2 indicate that the experimental group scored lower on the post-test.

Table 2

Paired Sample T-Test for Experimental Group

Administration	Group	n	k	Mean	Sd	t
Pretest	Experimental	10	14	8.10	1.79	
Posttest	Experimental	10	14	6.60	1.43	*3.00

Note. df (n-1) = 9, t_{crit} = 2.26, *p < 0.05; eta^2 = .5

Relevance to PIE and Second Language Learning

Although the results did not indicate any positive effect of instruction on recognition of sarcasm, other people interested in researching sarcasm can use this study to create a better instrument to measure student recognition of sarcasm. Additionally it is possible for people to modify the instruction that was used in this study. It is useful for instructors and research to know the difficulties associated with teaching and researching the recognition of sarcasm. This study revealed some of the difficulties associated with teaching students sarcasm and measuring the recognition of sarcasm.

This study brings to focus to the challenge of teaching pragmatic features such as sarcasm to English language learners. For students at the PIE learning to recognize sarcasm might be an important skill but learning this skill, as was shown in this study, does not happen in one lesson. The true benefit of learning sarcasm needs to be further investigated and different methods or instruments need to be used to measure the recognition of sarcasm. Overall this study benefited students, and can benefit future students, by showing the difficulties of learning to recognize sarcasm and that it is something that takes more than one lesson to learn.

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