Robot-Assisted Instruction of L2 Pragmatics: Effects on Young EFL Learners’ Speech Act Performance

Abstract: Technology, as a source of instruction, has fulfilled various purposes in foreign language learning environments. During the last decade, Robot-Assisted Language Learning (RALL) has attracted teachers' and researchers' attention due to the look and feel of humanoid robots. However, in the field of pragmatics, studies highlighting the role of RALL have gone relatively unnoticed. To bridge this gap, this study sought to explore the effect of RALL on pragmatic features, including request and thanking speech acts by young Persian-speaking EFL learners. For this aim, 38 preschool children (3 to 6 year-old boys and girls) with no English learning experience were randomly assigned to the RALL (19 students) and non-RALL (19 students) groups. In the RALL group, a humanoid robot was used as an assistant to the teacher to play games, repeat the sentences, and interact with the students. In the non-RALL group the lessons included games similar to those in the RALL group, but without the presence of the robot. There were eight one-hour teaching sessions over a period of four weeks for both groups. Following completion of the lessons in both groups, the results of post-tests were analyzed using an independent sample t-test. The findings revealed a significant difference between the RALL and non-RALL groups’ pragmatic performance for thanking and requesting. Based on these findings it can be concluded that RALL instruction was more effective than non-RALL instruction in improving the young learners’ performance.
Language performance and proficiency are believed to be multi-dimensional in nature, and that their principal dimensions can be examined through the notions of complexity, accuracy and fluency (Skehan, 1998; Ellis, 2008; Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005). To conduct the study, forty intermediate EFL learners from a language center in Iran were selected to participate in this study. Up to now, a number of studies have examined planning and its effect on L2 performance. In sum, the studies have found that giving learners time to plan prior to executing a task (speech production) resulted in more fluency and complexity. However, the results for accuracy are not consistent in different studies. Second-language learners and pragmatic competence. Research clearly shows that cultural differences lead to pragmatic differences among learners. from different language backgrounds (Olshtain and Weinbach 1993; Murphy and Neu 1996). Even advanced learners tend to transfer pragmatics from their first language and culture to their L2. In brief, pragmatic and cultural differences can result in negative transfer and inappropriate behavior and speech for L2 learners. In addition, students' pragmatic competence may lag behind their other skills and language knowledge; it may also suffer from insufficient input and lack of coverage in English language textbooks. Learners of all languages tend to have difficulty understanding the intended meaning communicated by a speech act, or producing a speech act using appropriate language and manner in the language being learned. Research has found that classroom instruction on speech acts can help learners to improve their performance of speech acts and thus their interactions with native speakers. Descriptions of Speech Acts. A collection of research-based descriptions of speech acts which includes practical information for language teachers, advanced learners, and developers of language learning materials. Pra...