

## Expressions of Compassion in L1 and L2: A Study of Persian EFL Learners

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### Abstract

The present study seeks to explore Persian EFL learners' expressions of compassion in four situations with different levels of emotional gravity and social distance between the interlocutors in their L1 (Persian) and L2 (English). The subjects' expressions of compassion collected through an open discourse completion task were parsed into strategies in both their L1 and L2. Drawing on comments provided by three native English speakers, the study revealed that the upper-intermediate EFL learners generally fail to express compassion properly in their L2 as a result of a negative transfer and lack of exposure to the required linguistic materials. Finally, it is suggested that EFL curriculum should undergo a revision to better develop learners' intercultural competence when expressing compassion.

**Keywords:** Expressions of Compassion, Persian, EFL Learners

### INTRODUCTION

Many ties can potentially bind people to one another. Among these ties, one can name social relations such as the role of being a spouse, son, friend, boss, etc. as well as the feelings of affection, obligation, gratitude, respect, and sympathy (Meiners, 2013). The emotion of compassion, which flows among society systematically rather than randomly (Clark, 1997), greatly binds people together. When individuals express and receive compassion, they build the relationships and rapport among themselves. Hence, "sympathy plays a part in constructing the larger social order, giving shape and substance to interaction, relationships, and social bonds" (Clark, 1997, p. 6).

Even though there might be various rules determining the manifestation of feelings and actions, there are recognizable norms of interaction. As argued by Clark (1997), the norms and logics of feelings that make up the social order for the interlocutors who express and receive compassion are part of a 'socioemotional economy', that is "a system for distributing valuable but perhaps intangible resources that links the members of groups, communities, and societies together in networks of reciprocal feeling and interaction" (p. 20).

The ability to empathise with one another is greatly determined by some social factors. To offer an instance, a school principal may not find it easy to empathise with the pupil suffering some sort of misery since he is not familiar with the pupil's situation or sub-cultural background. Moreover, although having an empathetic ability, or the capacity to appreciate the role or situation of others, human beings do not always use this ability. Some people simply are not keen on empathising, or they are extra careful with whom to express compassion. Yet, others do not manage to express their compassion despite their attempt. Furthermore, there are individual personality differences, as some people are simply better than others at expressing their emotions including compassion. Particularly, when the appropriate expression of compassion requires an abundance of emotional involvement, speakers find it easier to empathise when they have been through a similar situation (Meiners, 2013). Also, as Clark (1997) maintains, even though the human ability to express compassion varies greatly, people are highly expected at least to show an attempt to empathise, as the beginning step in the process of sympathising.

There are some situational and social factors that should be taken into account when deciding on how to express compassion. Firstly, the relationship between the interlocutors is a deciding factor when choosing the appropriate manifestation of compassion. Obviously, the compassion a boss expresses toward his employee differs greatly from the one employed by someone who wants to sympathise with his close friend. If language users do not draw this sharp line between the situations in question, the appropriate expression of sympathy in one situation might fail to have the desired effect in the other, if not having a destructive effect. Secondly, the type of display can vary depending on the particular hardship. For instance, a different display would be warranted for a death than for a headache. Comparing a high gravity situation and a low gravity situation, different strategies as well as varying manifestation of sorrow is both required and expected. One cannot express their compassion toward the interlocutor who is suffering from a headache and the one who has recently experienced the death of a relative in the same way. Hence, the current study involves two situations of differing gravity - a death for the high gravity situation and a headache for the low gravity situation.

L2 learners' pragmatics competence in general and their ability to express and perceive emotion in particular is one of the goals in SLA programs. When expressing emotion, one can not only express the targeted emotion but also at the same time perform other illocutionary acts. For example, when one expresses sorrow it might also be seen as closeness, or when one expresses anger it might also be seen as complaining. Also, an illocutionary act is considered successful if the addressee perceives the speaker's intent. Therefore, the appropriate performance of the illocutionary act depends on the fact that whether the social and situational context is considered and subsequently the linguistic strategy employed is appropriate. Since expressions of emotion in conversation are usually subtle and are done indirectly as well as being subject to great variation, understanding and producing language that expresses emotion can be challenging tasks for L2 learners (Rintell, 1984).

Performing the appropriate speech acts in an L2 requires not only learners' mastery of a variety of linguistic means, but also their having a pragmatic understanding of how, when, to whom, and to what extent a particular emotion can be expressed, and which mitigators, if any, are appropriate to be exploited (Rintell, 1990). However, it goes beyond saying that "despite the growing awareness of the importance of emotional expression, foreign language classrooms rarely teach learners how to perform affect" (Pavlenko, 2005, p. 144). Consequently, L2 learners often fail to express their own feelings (Polanyi, 1995; Rintell, 1989, 1990; Toya and Kodis, 1996) and are not certain about interpreting those of others (Rintell, 1984). It is also claimed that since "to perform affect appropriately in another language, L2 learners have to internalise language-specific terms and expressions and also uncover similarities and differences between translation equivalents in their respective languages", and "they also need to master the intricacies of conventionalised indexing of affect", mastering the norms for emotional expression in an L2 can be quite challenging (Pavlenko, 2005, p. 119). Previous studies exploring interlanguage pragmatics have shown that L2 learners' abilities to understand or produce speech acts demonstrate some gaps in their pragmatic knowledge that are needed in order for them to understand or express illocutionary force or politeness. These gaps are not restricted to elementary or intermediate learners but also they have been found in learners of high proficiency learners (Meiners, 2013), which suggests that mastering grammar and vocabulary does not necessarily guarantee L2 pragmatic competence.

In addition, studies have shown that the learners' L1 socio-cultural and linguistic features influence their knowledge, acquisition, comprehension and production of the L2 communicative acts (Giao, 2004). While this influence is labelled pragmatic transfer, Kasper (1998) proposed 2 distinct types of positive and negative transfer. Positive transfer occurs "when learners' production of a pragmatic feature is the same as a feature used by target language speakers in the same context and when this feature is paralleled by a feature in learners' L1". On the other hand, negative transfer takes place "when a pragmatic feature in the interlanguage is the same as in L1 but different from L2" (Kasper 1998, p. 193-195). That is to say, speakers may use pragmatic features from their L1 when speaking the L2, although these features may not match in the L1 and L2. Pragmatic failure, which is the speakers' failure to express their intended meaning accurately and appropriately, can take place when there is negative transfer (Blum-Kulka, 1997).

In the present study, attempts have been made to answer the following research questions:

1. What strategies do Persian EFL learners employ when expressing compassion in L1 and L2?
2. How are Persian EFL learners successful in expressing compassion appropriately in L2?

## BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Bardovi-Harlig et al. (2010) explored a number of speech acts including speech act of expressing compassion. Their data was collected via a questioner asking participants to express their sympathy in the situations of the death of one's dog and his father. They claimed that the most frequent strategy while sympathising in English is 'I'm sorry!', or its variants using intensifiers like 'so' and 'very'. Comparing ESL learners' and English native speakers' responses, Bardovi-Harlig et al. (2010) concluded that the aforementioned strategy is appropriately employed by both ESL learners and native speaker. Also, both groups elaborated on the more serious situation more than the less serious one. Hence, they claimed that pragmatic competence had improved hand in hand with the knowledge of grammar and vocabulary by the ESL learners.

Nakajima (2003) also examined sympathy expressions of three groups of people: American college students, Japanese college students and Japanese learners of English. Drawing on the data collected through written elicitation tasks and a questionnaire, she found out that the number of words used by each group to express sympathy varies. She also concluded that Americans use more words compared with Japanese learners of English who use more words compared with Japanese college students. When exploring the participants' sympathy expressions in two situations -a high gravity situation and a low gravity situation-, Nakajima's study shows that sympathy expressions vary across cultures and these differences may lead to misunderstandings among interlocutors.

In a cross-cultural study, Meiners (2013) explored the native speakers of Spanish and English as well as Spanish ESL learners' expressions of sympathy and compassion in situations of differing gravity. She found out that differences exist in how sympathy is expressed by the three groups. She argues that due to linguistic limitations, ESL learners were often unable to react properly. Also, while some learners transferred pragmatic knowledge from their L1 to their L2, others had acquired sufficient L2 pragmatic knowledge to react appropriately in the given situations. Meiners (2013) also claims that native speakers of English are more lenient regarding pragmatic errors committed by non-native speakers of English, however, many consider that the failure of expressing compassion in certain contexts would negatively impact upon the relationship between interlocutors.

Elwood (2004) also explored the compassion expressions of native English and Japanese speakers as well as Japanese ESL learners. Eliciting data through a discourse completion tasks in two situations of differing gravity - death of someone's dog and his grandmother, she categorised condolence strategies in five classes: 1) acknowledgement of the death, 2) expression of sympathy, 3) offer of assistance, 4) future-oriented remark and 5) expression of concern. Her study showed a variety of differences among the three groups of respondents as well as between the situations under scrutiny.

Exploring the expressions of sympathy in American culture, Clarks (1997) showed that, in American culture, sympathy is both expected to be expressed and is expressed to

different people ranging from close friends to strangers. She argues that the contextual situation in American culture dictates the appropriate form of compassion to be expressed as well as the time and way of doing so. Nonetheless, Clark (1997) explains that Americans might sometimes be unsympathetic, as they intentionally refuse to express sympathy. She adds that the reason for being unsympathetic in some situations is that through this Americans inhibit the notion of independency, which is everyone's responsibility for their own wellbeing.

In an attempt to explore compassion in social support settings, Pudlinski (2005) investigated telephone conversations between community mental health staff and callers with some sort of distress, and concluded that speakers exploit eight distinct sympathy strategies of 1) emotive reactions, 2) assessments, 3) naming another's feelings, 4) formulating the gist of the trouble, 5) using an idiom, 6) expressing one's own feelings about another's trouble, 7) reporting one's own reaction and 8) sharing a similar experience of similar feelings to mitigate the interlocutors' pain. Further, she explains that these expressions are used at different points during the course of interaction and are chosen considering the three criteria: the depth of appreciations of the interlocutors' feelings, the similarity of the shared feeling and the speakers' ability to lessen the emotional or physical pain.

Garcia (2010) scrutinised sympathy strategies of native Spanish speakers condoling someone in a situation exhibiting power differential and social distance between the interlocutors - employees condoling their boss's wife on his death. Using role-plays and written questionnaire and analysing the data through rapport management theory, she found out that participants use 15 distinct strategies with varying degrees of frequency to express their condolence: 1) claiming in-group membership, 2) providing an explanation, 3) requesting information, 4) expressing disbelief, 5) expressing sorrow, 6) expressing empathy, 7) offering comfort, 8) expressing sympathy, 9) giving advice, 10) offering cooperation, 11) preparatory, 12) providing business information, 13) parsing the deceased, 14) praising the widow and 15) criticising the deceased. Garcia (2010) also found a significant difference between male and female participants. She found out that females favoured the expression of empathy and involvement while males favoured the expression of respect and empathy (see Spencer-Oatey, 2005). However, she maintains that participants observe their own behavioural expectations, involvement and respect when expressing condolence.

Although literature is abundant in studies exploring Persian EFL learners' pragmatic competence (e.g. Eslamirasekh, 1993; Yarmohammadi, 2003; Afghari, 2007; Jalilifar, 2009; Farnia and Suleiman, 2009; Allami and Naeimi, 2011), Persian EFL learners' pragmatics competence when expressing compassion has not received the attention it deserves. The present paper contributes to filling the gap by performing a study that examines how Persian learners of English express compassion in L2.

## METHODOLOGY

Information regarding the methodology used to collect and analyse the data in this study is presented in what follows.

### Participants

This study was conducted on 32 Persian EFL learners including 17 males and 15 females ranging from 18 to 42 years of age at an upper-intermediate level of proficiency studying at a language school in Tehran, Iran. All the subjects were accessed at the language school.

Moreover, three native English speakers (including a teacher, an accountant and a university student) who were born and lived in England voluntarily took part in this study to evaluate the appropriateness of subjects' expressions of compassion in English.

### Instruments

#### *Oxford placement test*

The first instrument exploited in the study was the Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT) consisting of 60 multiple-choice items. The questions measure the test-takers' English language knowledge in relation to reading, prepositions, vocabulary and usage of language in the form of cloze passages and fill-in-the-blank questions. The test was administrated on a number of 40 students among whom 32 learners were found to be upper-intermediate based on the scoring rubrics of the OQPT, therefore were chosen for the study.

#### *Open discourse completion task*

The second instrument employed in this study was an open discourse completion task (hereafter DCT) in the form of a questionnaire introducing four natural situations in which the respondents were expected to express compassion. Since DCTs can be easily administrated to participants and assessed with no need to transcribe the data, they are advantageous in interlanguage pragmatic research (Allami and Naeimi, 2010). DCTs are effective data collection instruments when the goal of the study is to scrutinise the speakers' pragmalinguistic knowledge of linguistic forms and strategies to perform a communicative act (Kasper, 2000). Also, Olshtain (1993) argues that DCTs, as controlled elicitation methods, immensely help the researchers to control various variables significant in cross-linguistically. As the purpose of the present study was to explore the participants' use of compassion expressions under four given situations, a DCT was believed to be an adequate instrument to be exploited.

To meet the objectives of the study, a DCT consisting of four situations was constructed. In two of the situations participants were expected to express their compassion to someone suffering from a headache (low gravity); however, the other two situations asked participants to express their compassion on the death of the addressee's

grandfather (high gravity). Furthermore, low gravity and high gravity situations each consisted of two questions - one with a social distance between the interlocutors and the other without a social distance between them.

In addition, these four situations were followed by a question asking the participants about their conception of their own responses in the questionnaire. The DCT was prepared in English and Persian and was double checked by a linguist who had command of both languages to be the same in both versions.

## Procedure

First, the English version of the DCT was administrated to the learners. They were encouraged to respond immediately in the researcher's presence. Then, in order to lessen the effect of the English DCT on the Persian one and have a more reliable data, after a two-week interval the Persian version of the DCT was administrated to the same learners in the same situation.

The participants' responses to the English DCT was then sent by email to the three native English speakers who evaluated the appropriateness of the compassions expressed. They were asked to rate each response on a scale of one to five with one being quite appropriate and five quite inappropriate. The rated DCTs were returned by email to the researcher in one week.

Since there was a desire to have a sound analysis of the data, the expressed compassions were parsed into strategies. The participants' compassion strategies in English and Persian were qualitatively and quantitatively analysed using their own comments and the raters' evaluation.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Following Sheikhan (forthcoming a) and Sheikhan (forthcoming b), the author analysed the participants' compassion expressions in L1 which are as follows:

- Requesting information: e.g., 'chera?' meaning 'Why?'/ 'che etefaghi vasashun oftad?' meaning 'What happened to him?'
- Giving advice/suggestion: e.g., 'boro ye ghorsi chizi bokhor!' meaning 'Take a pill or something!'/ 'niaz be yekam tafrih dari!' meaning 'You need some entertainment!'
- Offering assistance: e.g., 'mikhay man jozvato vast benevisam?' meaning 'Do you need me to write the notes for you?'/ 'age kari az man bar miyad hatmanbehem begid!' meaning 'Just let me know if I can do something for you!'
- Expressing a wish: e.g., 'ishala zudtar khub mishid!' meaning 'I hope you feel better soon!'/ 'ishala ghame akharet bashe!' meaning 'I hope this is your last sorrow!'
- Associating with fate: e.g., 'sarneveshteshun injury bude dige!' meaning 'It was his destiny!'

- Expressing religious remarks: e.g., 'khoda rahmateshun kone!' meaning 'May God bless his soul!'
- Expressing sadness: e.g., 'kheili narahat shodam!' meaning 'I became so sad!'
- Expressing condolence: e.g., 'tasliat migam!' meaning 'My condolences!'

In the same vein, EFL learners' compassion strategies in L2 are as follows:

- Expressing sadness: e.g., 'I'm so sorry to hear that!'/ 'So bad!'
- Offering assistance: e.g., 'Can I help you?'
- Expressing a wish: e.g., 'I hope it is your last sorrow!'/ 'I hope you feel better soon!'
- Expressing condolence: e.g., 'Condolences!'
- Making religious remarks: e.g., 'May God bless his soul!'

Below I shall discuss the frequency and appropriateness of the Persian and English compassion strategies used by the participants in each situation.

### Situation 1

- You are informed that your close friend's grandfather has recently passed away. What do you say to him/her?

**Table 1.** Situation 1

	Persian		English	
Compassion Strategies	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Requesting information	12	12	6	11
Giving advice/suggestion	17	18	13	25
Offering assistance	3	3	0	0
Expressing a wish	5	5	0	0
Associating with fate	3	3	2	4
Expressing religious remarks	28	29	19	36
Expressing sadness	20	21	9	17
Expressing condolence	9	9	4	8
TOTAL	97	100	53	100

As shown in table 1, in the first situation which asked participants to express their compassion to a close friend (solidarity between the interlocutors) on the death of his/her grandfather, strategies expressing religious remarks, expressing sadness, giving advice/suggestion and requesting information with 28 or 29%, 20 or 21%, 17 or 18% and 12 or 12% respectively are used more than the other ones when sympathising in Persian. On the other hand, strategies expressing religious remarks, giving advice/suggestion and expressing sadness which constitute 19 or 36%, 13 or 25% and 9 or 17% respectively are used more than the other strategies to sympathise in English.



As confirmed by the raters, it can be argued that expressing religious remarks would not be a proper strategy to be used more than the other ones when expressing compassion in English. Here, an obvious case of negative transfer is observed. Since clinging onto religious beliefs is a common way to express compassion in Persian language and culture, Persian EFL learners, ignorant of this cultural difference, use the same feature to produce the pragmatic function of expressing compassion. Participants' comments also suggest that other cases of negative transfer would have been possible which were blocked by learners' inadequate knowledge of the language. In other words, a considerable proportion of participants mentioned that they wanted to use other strategies like associating with fate but didn't know how to do say so. Hence, it can be claimed that since EFL learners have been introduced to strategies giving advice/suggestion and expressing sadness in their course books earlier, they had the knowledge of using these strategies when expressing compassion.

In addition, English native speakers' comments show that offering assistance, which was not exploited by the EFL learners, could also be a proper strategy when expressing compassion in such situations.

## Situation 2

You are informed that your teacher's grandfather has recently passed away. You meet him in the school. What do you say to him?

**Table 2.** Situation 2

Compassion Strategies	Persian		English	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Requesting information	2	3	6	14
Giving advice/suggestion	0	0	11	26
Offering assistance	0	0	0	0
Expressing a wish	12	17	0	0
Associating with fate	4	6	0	0
Expressing religious remarks	22	32	17	40
Expressing sadness	3	4	5	12
Expressing condolence	26	38	4	9
TOTAL	69	100	43	100

The second situation asked participants to express their compassion to a teacher (without solidarity between the interlocutors) on the death of his/her grandfather. Table 2 shows that expressing condolence (with 26 or 38%), expressing religious remarks (with 22 or 32%) and expressing a wish (with 12 or 17%) are the most frequently used strategies when expressing compassion in Persian. Besides, expressing religious remarks and giving advice/suggestion, which constitute 17 or 40% and 11 or 26% respectively, are utilised more frequently by EFL learners when expressing compassion in their L2.

Once again, a negative transfer has taken place when EFL learners used expressing religious remarks in their L2 production of compassion expressions. Moreover, the

proportion of exploiting the strategy giving advice/suggestion in L2, since the situation exhibits social distance and power differential between the interlocutors, does not seem to be quite appropriate. Furthermore, expressing condolence, as a proper strategy in this situation, is only used 4 times which makes up 9% of the entire strategies produced in L2. It can be argued that the absence of exposing EFL learners to condolence strategies and the situations demanding such a strategy in their textbooks resulted in their lack of knowledge of an appropriate condolence expression. Similarly, expressing sadness as another appropriate strategy was only used 5 or 12% which also roots in learners' lack of exposure to the situation.

It is worth noting although requesting information might be considered as the strategy violating autonomy control of the addressee, if not overused, it would not have such a function in the given situation since this is an attempt to make the speaker part of the addressee's inner group (see Spencer-Oatey, 2005).

### Situation 3

- You are in class and your close friend tells you that he/she is having a headache. What do you say to him/her?

**Table 3.** Situation 3

	Persian		English	
Compassion Strategies	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Requesting information	10	16	8	23
Giving advice/suggestion	28	46	16	46
Offering assistance	13	21	0	0
Expressing a wish	3	5	2	6
Associating with fate	0	0	0	0
Expressing religious remarks	0	0	0	0
Expressing sadness	7	11	9	26
Expressing condolence	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	61	100	35	100

The information presented in table 3 shows that in the third situation, which exhibits solidarity between the interlocutors and absence of a social distance between them, giving advice/suggestion with 28 or 46% is the most frequently used strategy to sympathise in Persian. Offering assistance, Requesting information and Expressing sadness with 13 or 21%, 10 or 16% and 7 or 11% are the other strategies used by participants when expression compassion in their L2. On the other hand, when sympathising in their L2, participants used giving advice/suggestion, expressing sadness and requesting information which respectively constitute 16 or 46%, 9 or 26% and 8 or 23% of the whole compassion expressed in L2 in the given situation.

Raters' comments show that subjects' compassion expressions in L2 was to a great extent acceptable and proper in the context of the given situation. It can be argued that the EFL learners have already been exposed to the same situation in their textbooks. They, for instance, have learned how to express their compassion to someone who has broken

his leg and/or is having a cold. This exposure has equipped them with the proper pragmatic knowledge of the L2 and has raised their communicative and intercultural competence (see Sharifian and Jamarani, 2013). The only thing which could improve the participants' competence in this regard is the use of the strategy expressing a wish which is only used twice in this situation. Here, it seems that since in their L1 subjects do not find it appropriate to utilise this strategy, they have overgeneralised this cultural norm; hence did not use the strategy frequently in their L2.

#### Situation 4

- You are talking with your teacher and he says that he is having a headache. What do you say to him?

**Table 4.** Situation 4

Compassion Strategies	Persian		English	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Requesting information	6	13	5	14
Giving advice/suggestion	0	0	15	41
Offering assistance	13	28	2	5
Expressing a wish	8	17	3	8
Associating with fate	0	0	0	0
Expressing religious remarks	0	0	0	0
Expressing sadness	19	41	12	32
Expressing condolence	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	46	100	37	100

Through the fourth question, participants are asked to express their compassion to someone with social distance in a low gravity situation. As can be shown in table 4, expressing sadness which makes up 19 or 41% and offering assistance which constitutes 13 or 28% are most frequently used strategies by the participants in their L1. However, giving advice/suggestion with 15 or 41% and expressing sadness with 12 or 32% are used more than the other strategies by subjects in their L2.

Subjects' responses show a clear violation of the addressees' autonomy control in L2, which is the result of a negative transfer. Albeit EFL learners have been taught how to express compassion to someone with solidarity in a low gravity situation, they have not been exposed to the situation expressing sympathy to the interlocutor with social distance. Therefore, they have used the same strategies which show their lack of pragmatic and intercultural competence in their L2.

#### CONCLUSION

As was noted earlier in this paper, Persian EFL learners' compassion expressions in their L1 were requesting information, giving advice/suggestion, offering assistance, expressing a wish, associating with fate, expressing religious remarks, expressing sadness and expressing condolence which were used with varying degrees. Among these strategies, some were used in the low gravity situation and others in the high

gravity situation. Also, participants' compassion expressions in their L2 were expressing sadness, offering assistance, expressing a wish, expressing condolence and making religious remarks, some of which were mostly the result of a negative transfer. Moreover, data analysis shows that the EFL learners have not developed a proper level of pragmatic and intercultural competence while expressing compassion in their L2. It was also argued that this inadequacy would be the result of their lack of exposure to linguistic material needed in the given situation to show their competence.

It is also worth noting the present study suggests that EFL learners should be exposed to the situations in which they are to express compassion in L2 with different levels of gravity and to different interlocutors, which has been by far neglected in English classrooms.

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