A Pragmatic Analysis of the Interactions in MA TEFL Students' Defense Sessions

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the performance of Iranian MA TEFL students in their defense sessions from pragmatic point of view. Common face-saving and face-threatening acts were identified in Iranian MA defense sessions, and pragmatic competence of students in handling their defense sessions was evaluated. In other words, it was estimated whether Iranian MA TEFL students have enough pragmatic competence to cope up with face-saving and face-threatening interactions of their defense sessions. To achieve the aim of the study, the following steps were taken. The participants of the study were 10 MA TEFL students at Islamic Azad University of Abadeh. For collecting data, direct observation was used; the researcher provided a video of 'Question and Answer' section of the defense sessions and then analyzed them. The results of this study revealed whenever the students were located in a face-threatening situation like criticism, they tried to save their face and defend themselves by answering the examiner's questions and justifying themselves; whenever they faced face-saving situations like compliments, they thanked. It was also showed that sometimes the students used some body language instances like laughing and silence for saving their face due to the lack of pragmalinguistic knowledge.
Keywords: Conversation analysis, face, FCT, pragmatics.

INTRODUCTION

This article discusses about pragmatic competence and examines specific instances of real situation, defense sessions, to see whether the participants have enough pragmatically competence in their defense sessions. The data is taken from ten recorded MA defenses conducted in Iran. The performance of MA TEFL students is here focused. The attention is paid to how participants answer the questions in a situation which is inherently defensive and sensitive. In other words, it is estimated how

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participants face with face-threatening and face-saving acts in their defense sessions. The question addressed is how participants are competent from pragmatic point of view to handle their defense sessions. To find an answer, we analyze selected segments of talk and interactions typically containing the Question and Answer (Q&A) sessions which form part of the defense sessions under investigation.

When we evaluate the performance of participants and the way they face with face-saving and face-threatening acts in their defense sessions, it is necessary to shed more light on some concepts like: pragmatic competence, pragmatic knowledge and language learner, face, face-saving and face-threatening acts.

Pragmatic Competence

Defense session is the last stage of education for MA students of every major. For MA TEFL students, this session is very important and they should handle all the interaction in this session. This aim is achieved through meeting optimum levels of skills in three notions of English language including professionalization, academic literacy and pragmatic knowledge. In other words, successful defending of MA thesis requires mastery of these skills. In this stage, the students are expected to perform like a professional and be able to use technical language. An MA TEFL student should have enough readiness and academic literacy for running their defense sessions. In other words, they must have competence to speak about their thesis lucidly. As the students are in the lower level of power than the professors, when a debate raised between them in defense sessions, it is essential for them to be careful about achieving face and reacting against the examiner's face-threatening acts.

Professionalization means mastering in language skills; for example, the ability to write articles and lecturing. Academic literacy, as a sub-part of professionalization, refers to the ability to perform language skillfully. In other words, MA TEFL students should write and read papers and theses accurately, and also the student should be able to participate actively in academic meeting, academic session and conferences. The third notion is pragmatic knowledge that must also develop. Pragmatic competence for common people in community has a different meaning from its application for the educated peoples as MA TEFL students. Pragmatic knowledge is a common concept which all the people in the world are familiar with when they use their language in every day situation. In the professional scope, the pragmatic knowledge has another meaning. Pragmatic competence for people with higher education like MA TEFL students refers to appropriateness of communication in professional events like defense sessions and conferences. The competent students can defend their rights and sometimes they accept other ideas and sometime reject it. They can realize suitable time for a function like apology. The students who are pragmatically competent are ready to be criticized, and they know completely how to face with the interactions in their defense sessions. If students can answer the questions of the examiners correctly, they have defended themselves successfully, but if they keep silent or just smile, it may show that they do not have enough pragmatic knowledge and will fail in encountering with face-threatening and face-saving acts.

There are some notions that can be viewed as necessary factors which MA TEFL students must master in their defense session. The first one is professionalization. An MA student should be perfect and professional in all language skills. The second notion is academic literacy that refers to being skillful in four language skills for an efficient attendance in academic settings. The third one is pragmatic competence that must also develop. The MA TEFL students should be competent programmatically in defense sessions and conferences. In other words, they should have ability to speak and defend themselves against other ideas. They should be able to accept the opposite ideas in some points and reject them sometimes. They should be competent to perform apology act and negotiate whenever it is necessary.

This article intends to evaluate the MA candidates' pragmatic knowledge. The point is that when students present in defense sessions and want to defend their theses, they must be ready for being questioned and having interaction. For making it clear that a TEFL student is competent or not, their questions and answers must be considered one by one. For example, when a student is criticized and answers convincingly, he has defended himself, but if he says nothing, just smiles or becomes upset, he has not defended himself.

One important point is that having academic literacy and pragmatic competence is necessary for MA TEFL student to handle the defense session. The candidates are expected to cope with ups and downs of the defense session; for example, when they face with a face-threatening act like rejecting the criticism of examiner and a face-saving act as justifying. The present study is an attempt to shed more light on the issue of whether the MA TEFL student have enough pragmatic competence to tackle the interactions in their defense session or not.

Pragmatic Knowledge and Language Learners

Pragmatic is a very important scope in learning a foreign language. For mastering a new language, anyone should have the ability to communicate successfully with people in that foreign language. In other words, the people should understand the real intention of the utterances in an interaction. This aim will be achieved by passing through pragmatics. Paying attention to the surface meaning of utterances does not lead to a true communication in the interactions, so the people should make sense of each other linguistically to get the right meaning.

In the conversations, speakers pay attention to the addressee, time, place and the situation in which the conversation is occurring. In other words, pragmatic is the study of the meanings which depend on situation and its features (Kasper & Rose, 2002). Pragmatics focuses on conversational implicature, which is a process in which the speaker implies and a listener infers. Pragmatics studies language that is not directly spoken. Instead, the speaker hints at or suggests a meaning, and the listener assumes the correct intention. In other words, there are some invisible meanings in a sentence that usually the listener guesses them. Between two speakers, while negotiating, there is what is unsaid but recognized as communicated. What determines choice between the

said and the unsaid is the degree of distance between the interlocutors (Sweetser, 1991).

In a sense, pragmatics is seen as an understanding between people to obey certain rules of interaction. In everyday language, the meanings of words and phrases are constantly implied and not explicitly stated. In certain situations, words can have a certain meaning. It seems that words always have a specifically defined meaning, but that is not always the case. Pragmatics studies how words can be interpreted in different ways based on the situations (Fisher & Adams, 1994). Pragmatics has relationship with other areas of linguistic analysis like syntax and semantics. Pragmatics consists of investigating the relationship between linguistic from and the people use these forms. Characteristic of people, when, where and the context of the utterances expressed is the focus in pragmatics. The human is taken into account into the linguistic analysis only via this perspective, i.e. pragmatics, but other linguistic scopes, syntax and semantic, have nothing to do with human and are apathetic of interlocutors in communication (Andersen & Aijmer, 2012).

Many people within a linguistic community have some experiences of the world in common, and they have similar non-linguistic knowledge. Some researchers believe that grammar of the language people use leave impression on the speakers of that language and causes them to have the same point of view about the world (Whorf, 1997). An individual may say words clearly and use long, complex sentences with correct grammar, but still have a communication problem - if he or she has not mastered the rules for social language known as pragmatics. In a community in which there is the similar basic knowledge among people, if the selection of linguistic forms is correct but pragmatics use of utterances is inaccurate, language user may be treated as someone with no essential knowledge, i.e. as stupid or even an offender (Brown & Yule, 1983). When the people who are non-native speakers of a language communicate in that second language, they do not behave in a way which is based on pragmatically correct form. Even the advanced learners cannot act exactly like native speakers. It is interesting that it is not enough only to be exposed in that foreign language, for improving pragmatic ability but formal instruction is essential, too (Cohen &Ishihara, 2010). In spite of the explicit instruction and exposure of authentic language, learners may not try to apply language in a native-like manner because of the sense of identity, and also having a nonnative-like manner in applying language is not sometimes interpreted as fault; it can be inferred as novelty and melodious (Kasper & Schmidt, 1996).

There are some general causes that prevent learners from using language correctly from pragmatic perspective. The some causes is referred to lack of knowledge about pragmatic norms and in some others, learners know about pragmatic rules in target language and can produce accurate sentences but intentionally infringe the pragmatic rules in the special situation. Maybe it is for showing their identity. When the learners are not familiar with pragmatic principles and culture in the target language, they try to apply rules and pragmatic norms of their first language in the context in which

communication is based on the target culture. The learner's knowledge of their first language and culture has impact on their pragmatic use when interact in the target language; this phenomenon is called pragmatic transfer which contain both positive and negative result, negative results are known as divergence.

Learner's grammatical potency affects their L_2 pragmatic competence. They understand better some messages which contain the grammar that is more comprehensible for them. In addition, they have more power to produce sentences that have more grammatical control over them, and there is familiar grammar within them. For example, the learners who have little grammatical ability can produce just simple sentences and also understand only single-clause requests like: could I borrow your book for a moment? About compound sentences, they can neither create nor perceive correctly. When the learners develop a linguistic rule to language context that is not appropriate for applying that special rule, they are known to overgeneralize that rule. This phenomenon can also be investigated within the pragmatics scope, too. When learners have limited understanding of target culture and its pragmatics norms, they may use preconceived concepts and improperly apply them in the wrong and anomalous contexts. Furthermore the mentioned above learners sometimes extend their own culture and pragmatic norms to L_2 communicative context. Sometimes learner's pragmatic divergence is not related to ineptitude in pragmatic knowledge of learners but it is derived from defect instruction. It should be considered that in some occasions when the learner wants to apply the instructed rules in classroom in real environment, the interaction will fail.

The previous four causes of learners pragmatic divergence is related to lack of the pragmatic knowledge of learners but in the last one, learners are familiar with L_2 pragmatic principles, and there is no gap in the learner's pragmatic proficiency. However, learners intentionally try to not to elect the appropriate pragmatic forms in the interaction. Learners have their own culture identity, attitude and beliefs, so they stand against using L_2 pragmatic norms (Cohen, 2012).

Face

In most of interactions, what is communicated is more than what is said. For determining the real intentions of interlocutors, it is essential to pay attention to a lot of notions and factors. When a communication is considered from pragmatic perspective, face will be negotiated as a key concept. Many definitions have been presented about face by many researchers. For example, Goffman defines face as public self-image of a person or a sense or image that everybody has about himself or herself and likes others to realize it and be aware of it (Goffman, 1955). Generally, face means prestige; honor but linguists and sociologists have proposed more specified meaning for it. Ervin Goffman believes that face is individual wants or social identity of people in their interactions. Arundale views face conception from different perspectives and presents different definitions of it. In his opinion, face refers as relationship created between people in an interaction (Arundale, 2009). He established a theory in face constituting in the communication which is distinct from preceding existing theory about face. In the

previous theories such as Goffman's, the face is viewed as person-based attributes such as social needs, public self-image interlocutors have about himself or herself and social identity (Arundale, 2010).

The theories and ideas of Goffman are different from Arundale. Goffman believes that face is interlocutor's self-image, and also it has pre-established pattern of action and this idea is in contrast with interactional and eventual nature face (Arundale, 2006). Goffman emphasizes the individualistic aspect of face; on the contrary, Arundale focuses on the interpersonal aspects of face and accepts that face is relational and interpersonal phenomenon (Arundale, 2004). He then suggested face constituting theory. Face constituting theory addresses the question: How do participants achieve face in everyday talk? This theory consists of two parts. First is planning the conjoint co-constituting model of human communication as a concept of the attaining of meaning and action in interactions, and second part interprets face as a relational phenomenon. Face constituting theory illustrates face as interlocutor's comments of relational connectedness and separateness, conjointly co-constituting in the interactions. In other words, this theory investigates how participants interpret face that ultimately threaten or support their relationships (Arundale, 2009).

Arundale clarifies the face constitute theory in the way communicators interactionally attain and conjointly co-constitute or make both connection with and separation from addressees as they obtain and conjointly co-constitute or build meaning and actions in the interaction. This theory is new and is not following the antecedent theoretical model of communication which is based on encoding and decoding messages in the interactions (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2003). In the face constituting theory's perspective, face is not seen as a "my own face" or "your own face", based on the Goffman's idea in which face is public self -image of a person, but it is "our face" which is interpreted in the relation with both speaker and receiver in the interaction. An utterance can threaten the face of both speaker and hearer. The interlocutors receive the utterances of the addresses and then interpret it and according to this process, produce the utterances and accomplish communication (Arundale, 2013).

Face Saving and Threatening Acts

In the interactions, people respect their face needs, face wants or public self-image. When a speaker ignores the needs and expectations of another's face, says an utterance or behaves so that demonstrates a threat to another person's request referring to face. It is defined as face threatening act. In other words, when a person does not honor to another's face, he is doing a face threatening act. For example, using direct and imperative sentences in conversations, where there is no intimacy among interlocutors, is a face threatening act (Wilson, Aleman & Leatham, 1998).

 When the participants try to abstain of humiliating and affronting to another's face wants, they are doing a face saving act. In other words, a speaker uses a sentence to mitigate a threat to hearer's face, it is named face saving act. Generally speaking, the choice of a type of expression that is less direct and with a more complex structure

means that the speaker is making a greater effort for saving the partner's face (Lim & Bowers, 1991). The participants in the communication endeavor to save and threaten each other's face, they may notice or disregard to each other's negative face desires or each other's positive face needs. The negative face refers to the wish for having autonomy and liberty and freedom of action and selection and rejecting imposition by others. Positive face comprises the desire to be liked and admired and confirmed by interlocutors. Positive face consists of a need for contiguity and joins with others, and negative face wants contains independence. It should be considered that these two kinds of face, though susceptible to cultural variation and elaboration, embody two valid social needs that transcend cultural boundaries (Mao, 1994).

Face threatening acts may threaten or damage negative people's face or positive people's face. If face threatening act violates the participant's feelings, it is positive face threatening act, and if it ignores the people's need to be independent it is named negative face threatening act, like using imposition on hearer(Cupach & Carson,2002). It is the same about face saving acts. When a face saving act respects to the negative face of people, it will manifest dignity and prevent imposition on others. This is named negative politeness. There are some face saving acts that focus on the positive face and advert the participant's positive face needs and so disclose solidarity, involving with others and connectedness. It is called positive politeness, like using the hearer's first name or applying partner's language and accent (Trees & Manusov,1998).

METHOD

Data

The data is taken from some samples selected from a video-recorded corpus of ten Iranian MA defenses. The participants comprise of 10 MA TEFL students; two students are male and 8 students female. They had already passed the required courses for their MA degree and completed their MA thesis. They were waiting for their defense sessions, so the sessions are really important for them. They agreed with video recording of their defense sessions. The video recording was done in Islamic Azad University of Abadeh.

The first step was to provide a video of question-answer segment of defense sessions. The video recording was done for defense sessions of 10 MA TEFL students including two males and 8 females. All the interactions and question-answer segments and also all the body languages of students in their defense sessions were recorded and then were transcribed. All the recorded videos were considered carefully and all the transcriptions were analyzed. According to the videos and transcriptions, the interaction and conversations between student and examiner and supervisor were analyzed. In analyzing interactions, the turn and the reactions against face saving and face threatening acts were investigated. Distinguishing the type of the acts which every turn included was very important, whether face-threatening or face-saving. In analysis, the main focus was on this issue that whether the students were pragmatically competent to overcome these acts. The data was transcribed following Atkinson and Heritage's transcription conventions (1984) (see the Appendix for the transcription conventions).

MA defense sessions usually go through five main stages: Introduction, Presentation by the Candidate, Question and Answer (Q & A), Evaluation, and finally the Result. We here analyze selected segments of talk from the Q & A sessions involving 3 participants: one MA candidate, one examiner and one supervisor.

ANALYSIS

The four sets of data chosen for analysis include interaction between examiner and candidate and in some cases examiner, candidate and supervisor. In analyzing the performance of students in their defense sessions, we show how the participants, MA students, face with face-threatening and face-saving acts of examiners. In other words, we focus on this point that whether the students have enough pragmatic knowledge to tackle the acts and interactions and defend their thesis against the examiner's criticisms. It is not possible to present the transcript in full, but the extracts should be sufficient for the purpose of our analysis.

In every defense session, the examiners have right to ask questions and raise critical comments that depicts a status of power for them. Although defense sessions usually start with face-saving acts of connectedness interactions, the following face-threatening and attempts of separateness are inevitable. Generally, defense sessions contain face-threatening acts and create face-threatening situations for candidates due their unique social relations and also marked differential power between the participants in DD (defense session). The examiners have power over the candidates, and it is common for them to probe, question, demand explanation and justification and give negative comments and criticisms in a viva. The candidates have to answer the EX's question and defend themselves against criticisms. Locating in such a circumstance that candidates should answer the questions creates a face-threatening situation and tension for them. The candidates try to free themselves from the face-threatening situations or even sometimes attempt to prevent face-threatening acts. Whenever the examiners want to create a face- threatening act they use direct sentences and when they want to make a face-saving and maintaining act usually utilize indirect sentences. Each Q& A sequence addresses one issue which calls for proper reply from the candidate in the subsequent turn. The issue, which is usually concerned with what the examiner finds problematic or interesting in the thesis, will become the focus in interaction and will remain an issue until the examiner is pleased with the student's answer.

Examiner-candidate interactions (A)

For the sake of brevity, we analyze just that part of the talk which is more appropriate for our analysis. In the selected data, the examiner starts the turn by thanking the candidate and praising her efforts and then switches to criticism immediately to conduct the defense session and show his role as an examiner. There is a distinct line between pleasantries events at the beginning of a defense session which is based on the cultural schema of *ta'arof* and the defense proper which can be almost unpleasant. It is necessary to explain some Iranian cultural schema like: *ta'arof, ehteram* and *shaxsiat*. In Iranian culture *shaxsiat* is one component of face that means character or honor

(Koutlaki, 2002), *ehteram* is another component of face that means respect or deference (Sharifian, 2007) and *ta'arof* is a component of face that is a kind of politeness which express good will and intentions (Sharifian, 2007). Consider the following interaction between examiner and candidate:

Example 1 (The talk between a male examiner (EX) and a female candidate (CF)

1	EX	ok thank you for your nice presentation ((candidate smiles))
2		you said about learners and teacher's
3		attitudes toward methods of teaching (..)
4		No mutual methods of teaching in your
5		research question
6	CF	* yes I didn't find any questioner about teachers*
7	EX	ok and similar to (...) *unluck other defenders*
8		you have (...) a few references without citation ok?
9	CF	ok yes ((candidate laughs))
10	EX	just (..) check the all references and citations
11		before final version thank you
12	CF	thank you

This defense session is began with a face-saving act and a high degree of *ta'arof*, as it is common in Iranian culture, and then will come criticisms and face-threatening acts. EX's utterance (line 1) which praises the candidate for her presentation and expresses thanks and appreciation to her demonstrates EX's orientation to connection with her. CF's reaction to this face-saving act, i.e. the smile of pleasure shows an interpreting of connection. EX begins his criticism with "you say" (line 2), using "you say" is disaffiliative and is a sign of separation. EX puts another unhedged comment on the CF's thesis (line 4) "No mutual methods of teaching in your research question"; EX believes that what the CF has said at first, is absent in research question and so he is threatening CF's face. CF starts her turn with "yes" (line 6) which is a sign of agreement, she also defends herself linguistically and explains the cause and uses a body language like smiling for saving more her face against EX's face-threatening act. EX criticizes CF (line 8) and mentions a defect in reference section and uses face-threatening act but (line 7) EX's smile while uttering the phrase "unluck other defender" jocularly softens this threat. CF doesn't know how to solve this problem and escape from the face-threatening act so instead of apology uses body language, i.e. laughing and saves her face in this way. Examiner determines an obligation (line 10 and 11) for candidate to correct all citations and references; this unmodulated comment is a face-threatening act and orients to separation from candidate. At the end candidate says nothing except thanking against this face-threatening act.

Examiner-candidate interactions (B)

Let us consider the following talk in which there are many face-threatening situation created by examiner:

Example 2 (The talk between a male examiner (EX) and a female candidate (CF))

1	EX	you know that you work on a topic that one of the
2		students here worked before but the subject or
3		participant is different.
4	CF	ya ya Mr Honarmand ((nodding head))
5	EX	yes but you didn't mentioned this reference in
6		your reference section because [Honarmand worked with me]
7	CF	[? ya ya I mentioned it] ((candidate nods head and
8		look astonished))
9	EX	in reference section you didn't have Honarmand
10	CF	(...) not in my reference? ((Candidate seems confused))
11	EX	no not this no: r lots of reference
12	CF	ok: I applied for further research I
13		[mentioned the name of Honarmand]
14	EX	[would you please listen to me] listen tome
15		In your reference section you have sixty five
16		items good? Sixty five items but in the body nineteen
17	CF	ya I understand [I didn't mention Honarmand]
18	EX	[It was very time-consuming for me]
19		mrs ((candidate's name)) let me to speak It was
20		very time-consuming for me I didn't
21		want to let you to defend your thesis, your
22		reference section was so imperfect, what ever
23		you said in your thesis has no address ((EX seems angry))
24	CF	((candidate is silent and just look))
25	EX	ok would you please refer to second research
26		question? (..) according this question did you
27		find any match between what you did and
28		what Honarmand did?
29	CF	(..) No uhuh the result?
30	EX	yes
31	CF	No, the result of Honarmand show that the improved
32		separately uh uh but me not (.) had effect
33	EX	How did you find the effect? it means negative effect?
34	CF	No positive effect
35	EX	so positive effect is improvement or what is it?
36	CF	positive improved all the three groups? ((Candidate become silent))
37	EX	ok thank you very much please check the references.

In this session, with saying twice "ya" (line 4) and completing the EX's information and nodding head, the candidate intend to confirm the EX's utterance in previous sentence

to show her connectedness orientation with EX. The EX with mentioning a defect of candidate's thesis directly (line 5), orients to separation from the candidate and so use face-threatening act. The candidate disturbed the EX's speaking with on overlap (line 7) and also with saying "ya" definitely twice, rising intonation and nodding her head shows her certainty about her work and defend herself against EX severely. EX again repeat his criticism (line 9) and demonstrate his orientation to separateness from candidate. The candidate's utterance (line 10) shows that she hasn't accepted her mistake. CF's response after a long pause accompanied with a state of confusion shows that she is uncomfortable with this comment which provide evidence for her interpreting of separateness. She defend again herself against EX's face-threatening act by asking a question. EX' answer displays his orientation for separation from CF because he points out some other references that were missing and also accentuate the word no: r. CF's answer (line 12, 13) is evidence of connectedness with EX because she is justified and pronounce the word "ok" with stress. In this moment of talk CF confesses her mistake for stopping more face-threatening acts. EX uses "would you please" that is hedging and politely and depict EX's orientation to connection with CF (line 14) but after that immediately uses direct and imperative sentence "listen to me" that is a face-threatening act because EX is interrupted by CF frequently and it is not usual in defense session where there is marked differential of power between EX and CF. EX continues to criticize about other parts of reference section that was defective. The candidate's agreement (line 17) at first evidences her interpreting of connection with EX but then she tries to ignore all other defaults, except Honarmand, in reference section. EX's utterances (line 18-23) demonstrate very high separation from CF. EX applies address term "Mrs" (line 19) to get CF's attention to stop and then by using an imperative sentence "let me to speak" and also with strong criticisms on CF's work attempts to prove her mistakes; all of these are a sign of separation from CF and so show that EX is threatening CF's face. EX's very strong censuring (line 21) about CF signals EX's projection of very very high separation from CF, and this can be seen in sentence "I didn't want to let you to defend your thesis" emphasizing disaffiliation and also it depicts using a real face-threatening act specially when it is expressed with a state of anger (line 21-23). CF's answer to EX's face-threatening act (line 24) is different. She does not defend herself linguistically this time but uses some non-linguistic strategies, being silent and looking, foe free herself from face-threatening situation and prevents more and worse face-threatening acts. EX's question (line 25-28) projects orientation toward connectedness with CF, because of using "would you please" and then EX tries to evaluate CF's knowledge. CF gives some explanations and justifies herself but the EX's questions in (line 33 and 35) show that he is not satisfied with CF's answer. At the end, EX accepts CF's explanation and uses 'please' which softens his direct sentence; these reactions evidence orientation to connection with CF. CF didn't thank at the end also didn't use apology against her mistakes and EX's face-threatening acts that it suggests her inadequate pragma linguistic knowledge for saving the face.

Examiner-candidate-supervisor interactions (C)

Example3 (The talk between male examiner and female candidate and female supervisor)

1	EX	ok if you recommend using games to teach
2		proposition do you consider to age limitation
3	CF	age of participant?
4	EX	No in general out of your [thesis]
5	CF	[age] I think uh games uh is good uh uh to for young
6		learners about fifteen not older participant (..) because
7		older older participants uh didn't pay attention to [and]
8	EX	[maybe] they aren't interested in ga: ms if you want to
9		teach proposition to? Older learners > ok thank you <
10	EX	ok in research question and hypothesis I don't know
11		down have such a kind of format for hypothesis?
12	CF	hypothesis question 1 and hypothesis question 2
13	SF	No we have hypothesis in hypothesis 1 and hypothesis
14		2 these q are extra, we don't have hypothesis question
15	CF	yes I'm so sorry
16	EX	ok you know that you used a lot of references
17		and it took me a lot of time to check them one
18		by one and most of the time
19		you used an idea in parentheses you cited
20		someone, when a reader read your document, it
21		is very boring. Please in your citation check the
22		APA style you didn't write and sometime some
23		miss spelling. On the whole it was good to me
24		thank you
25	CF	thank you

A first the examiner initiates his turn with asking a question for estimating the candidate's knowledge about the research (line 1 and 2). The candidate (line 5-7) disturbs the speaking of EX and begins to explain hurriedly and defends herself. It seems she wants to demonstrate her mastery and competence to EX. Examiner's speech (line 8 and 9) evidences orientation to connection with CF and using a face-saving act. Confirming the CF's speaking, continuing her descriptions and giving similar explanations and also thanking depict that EX is satisfied with CF's justifications and is using face-saving act. EX threats the CF's face (line 10-11) by asking a question that does not solicit information, it is clear that EX knows the answer. The question is face-threatening because it discloses CF's mistake and a defect of her thesis. CF tries to defend herself with saying a sentence (line 12) that Imagines is correct. In this moment of talk, SF begins her turn with a face-threatening act for CF and orienting a separation from her by expressing her disagreement with CF (line 13 and 14). CF (line 15) accepts the supervisor's criticism and uses apology intensifier like 'so' that may suggest her adequate pragmalinguistic knowledge for saving the face. EX uses face-threatening act (line 16-23) and give some negative and critical comments about CF's thesis and also

mentions some faults in some parts of her thesis. In the last sentence, EX praises CF's work "on the whole it was good to me" and thanks her, which it is interpreted using face-saving act. The candidate thanks for this face-saving act.

Examiner- candidate interactions (D)

We now consider the following extract in which there are some Iranian cultural norms:

Example 4 (Some parts of the talk between male examiner (EX) and male candidate (CM))

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1      EX    uhuh (.) I didn't find big point or big
2            error in your document ok except some
3            references that should be corrected I mark
4             your document as a good one ok

21     EX    ok uhm (.) let's (.) review your methodology
22     CM    what do you mean? Sorry
23     EX     chapter three
24     CM     chapter three?=
25             ((looking for chapter 3 by candidate))

38            I did it because I wanted to you know
39             know the student's reading knowledge and
40             after that session sorry ((shaking hands))
41           after that part, I made it to them in
42            three groups in each group twenty
43            students one in one group control one
44            and two others experimental I mean
45            One is divergent and another one is
46            convergent ↑ finally (.) uhuh (..) we did
47            sorry we run a posttest ↓ as I said
48             before the post test and the pretest
49            was the same (…) is it necessary to
50             explain more?
51     EX     thank you

62     EX      > thank you very much <
63     CM      *your welcome thanks for all of
64              you I'm very proud that I have
65              so so nice professors like you
66              and ((supervisor's name))*
67     EX      thank you
68     CM      your welcome ((candidate bows)
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As demonstrated above, both EX and CM project orientation towards separateness from and connectedness with each other at proper time in the flow of talk. EX'S first sentences (line 1 and 2) include encourager and good comments "I didn't find big point or big error in your document" and also (line 3 and 4) "I mark your document as a good one". The comments are face saving and because EX is giving the candidate some degree of *shaxsiat*, so he orients great connection with the candidate. In this session, line 4 'I mark your document as a good one' could suggest that EX did not mean to continue the session from the status of power (+power). In line 21, the EX uses 'let's do' structure suggesting the EX's intention of maintaining the CM's face.

Although frequent use of apology expression in non-apology contexts is common in Persian culture, lines 22, 40 and 47 and using 'sorry' (apology for nothing) may indicate that the defense session was still in process and CM was concerned about upcoming face-threatening acts. In the end, the CM was so satisfied with face-saving and face-maintaining acts of the EX as well as lack of any severe face-threatening acts. Therefore, CM felt that it was necessary to end with thanking and strong comments for connectedness by giving 'very high levels' of *shaxiat* to the EX in lines 64 and 65. In the last line, candidate bows for showing respect to the professors and also for displaying a high degree of *ta'arof* and *ehteram* which is common in Iranian culture.

DISCUSSION

The findings obtained in this article, in general, show the Iranian MA TEFL students' performance in their defense sessions. In line with the research question, the common face-saving and face-threatening acts in Iranian MA defense sessions and also the amount of pragmatic competence of students in handling their defense sessions were investigated. What have been considered in the analysis of Iranian MA dissertation defenses (henceforth DDs) are face-saving and face-threatening situations which are created by examiner (EX) for students or candidates (c) and also the way of candidate's encounter with these two situations from pragmatics point of view.

Generally speaking, defense sessions contain face-threatening acts and create face-threatening situations for candidates due their unique social relations and also marked differential power between the participants in DD. The examiners have power over the candidates, and it is common for them to probe, question, demand explanation and justification and give negative comments and criticisms in a viva. The candidates have to answer the EX's question and defend themselves against criticisms. Locating in such a circumstance that candidates should answer the questions creates a face-threatening situation and tension for them. The candidates try to free themselves from the face-threatening situations or even sometimes attempt to prevent face-threatening acts. For instance, in Example 4, using apology strategy in some irrelevant situation, there is no fault with the student, depicts that he intended to prevent occurring a face-threatening act by examiner. The Iranians get used to apologize without committing any sin; it is common in their culture. Other face-threatening acts considered in these defense sessions contained requesting and criticisms especially on the reference parts that was common in most of DD, asking for explanation, more clarification, and asking questions.

There are also some face-saving acts done by candidates in these DDs such as: answering the questions, apology and giving justifications for their works.

As it was mentioned before, unhedged criticism and direct and imperative sentences can be considered as a sign of separation and creation of a face-threatening atmosphere. In Example 2, the examiner's unmodulated and negative comments about a defect of candidate's thesis demonstrated that EX was threating the CF's face. When CF was put in such a face-threatening circumstances, it was necessary to defend herself, but she gave a justification for her work and save her face. However, EX did not accept the CF's explanation and again did a face-threatening act toward candidate. This time, CF remained silent and said nothing against this threat; this silence was a kind of face-saving act by CF to prevent more and worse face-threatening acts. The candidate did not apologize to save her face in front of her mistakes and did not thank at the end of session as it is common in Iranian defense, so she may not have enough pragmatic competence to handle her defense session.

It is common in Iranian DDs, based on Iranian culture, that the session begins with face-saving acts that show the performance of *ta'arof* and also orienting to relational connection. After the face-saving acts like thanking and complimenting that come at the beginning of session, the face-threatening acts will appear as the main part DDs and include direct criticism and negative comments. In Example1, after EX praises candidate for her work which is a sign of doing face-saving act, the criticisms and face-threatening acts about the thesis were presented. Challenging the accuracy of the information given by CF, EX threatened her face, so the candidate was obligated to explain about her work, defend herself and save her face against this face-threatening situation. The candidate did not know how to solve this problem and escape from the face-threatening context, so instead of answering the question or explaining, she used body language instances like smiling and also silence and saved her face in this way. Taking these strategies reveal that the CF did not have enough pragmalinguistic knowledge to tackle the face-threatening interaction.

Defense sessions usually start with face-saving acts of connectedness interactions and after that face-threatening acts and attempts of separateness will come. One of the social norms in Iranian culture is *ta'arof* that includes the acts of thanking, praising and complimenting. The use of *ta'arof* before asking the questions is a sign of relational connection and demonstrates the speaker is paying attention to principles of politeness. In addition, the utilization of complementing and some other face-saving acts which makes the preliminary longer than the usual forms discloses paying attention to the co-participant's *shaxsiat* which is a sign of achieving relational connection. To deal with main duty of defense which is asking questions and evaluating candidate's knowledge after the quipping at the beginning of the session is done by a change in the examiner's communicative behavior. While the preliminary focuses on the interpersonal aspect of communication, the defense proper concentrates in the ideational aspects and is made up questions and critical points which orient to relational separation from the

candidate. This mentioned status is observed at most of the defense session (Done& Izadi, 2011).

Some communicative behaviors which threaten *shaxsiat* are emphatic in Iranian culture. It is common for all Iranian interlocutors in DDs to respect to their co-interlocutor's *shaxsiat* and behave politely. For example, by accepting the examiner's critical comments of the thesis, candidates follow social norms and pay *ehteram* to the examiner, thus attending to the examiner's *shaxsiat*. For instance, in Example 3, there was an example of interaction among EX and candidate and supervisor in which the candidate respected the EX's and supervisor's disagreements and oriented a connection with them. EX threated the candidate's face by asking a question which disclosed the candidate's mistake and a defect of her thesis. Candidate tried to justify herself and save her face. After that, the supervisor began her turn with a face-threatening act through which expressed her disagreement with the candidate's justification. At the end, the candidate accepted the supervisor's criticism and apologized for her mistake that could be a sign of having enough pragmalinguistic knowledge for saving her face in that situation. In this moment of talk, candidate's apology is considered as a face-saving act.

CONCLUSION

The results of the research showed that the face-saving acts include apology, answering questions, giving justifications, complementing and praising and face-threatening acts consist of criticism, negative comments and critical questions. It was also indicated that when the students encountered face-saving acts, they usually thanked, and when they were located in face-threatening situations created by examiners, they tried to defend themselves and save their face through answering the examiner's questions, giving explanations and sometimes by apologizing for their mistakes. Moreover, the students used body language instances like nodding, smiling, laughing and occasional silence; it suggested their lack of pragmalinguistic knowledge to free themselves from face-threatening situations.

Regarding the data analysis in this study, it can be concluded that the defense sessions in Iran have special features. The first characteristic is their lengthy preliminaries. Due to the Iranian culture and culture-specific voicing of relational connectedness and separateness and also cultural schemata, *ta'arof*, *shaxsiat* and *ehteram*, the participants used many face-saving acts, complementing and praising, at the beginning of the defense sessions, so preliminaries of DDs tend to be rather lengthy.

Second feature regards respect and honor the candidates had for their examiners and supervisors. In some occasions, even when the examiner used much unhedged criticisms which threatened the candidates' *shaxsiat* and were offensive and also went beyond what was considered acceptable in the context of Iranian DDs, the candidate respected examiner and continued respectable relationship with him. It was the same about the supervisors that sometimes in spite of their institutional role as a defender of supervisee, criticized candidates.

In this study, the way relational connection and separation were achieved in the context of DDs and also the events involving in large measure negative pragmatic acts such as questionings, disagreements and criticisms were examined. The results of this examination revealed that whenever the students encountered face-threatening situations, negative pragmatics acts like disagreements, they defended themselves and saved their face by answering the examiner's questions and sometimes through using body languages like laughing and nodding.

Generally speaking, in the current study, the results of analysis of dissertation defense indicated how the candidates encounter with face-saving and face-threatening interactions. Whenever the students were located in the face-threatening situation created by examiners, they tried to save their face and utilized some strategies like apology, answering the questions and justification. Therefore, these linguistic acts like apology, giving explanation and responding to questions and also some non-linguistic acts like laughing, smiling, nodding and even silence are the instances of face-saving acts which all the Iranian students did to free themselves from face-threatening circumstances.

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APPENDIX. TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

[ ]   overlapped voice starts
(. . .)   long pauses up to 3 s
(..)   medium-long pauses up to 2 s
(.)   tiny gap between or within utterances
=   latching
:   elongation of previous sound
-        cut off sentence or word
?   rising intonation
↑   sudden rise in intonation
↓   marked fall in intonation
**   smiling voice
@   laughter through words
˚ ˚   words between degree sign are soft words
< >   sotto voce
> <   faster voice
( )   undecipherable voice
(( ))   transcriber's description