

Pragmatic Transfer of Iranian EFL Learners: The case of Refusals

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Abstract

Many studies show that in spite of having a perfect competence in L2 grammar, learners have difficulties at pragmatic level when having a conversation with native speakers. The present study deals with pragmatic transfer of Iranian EFL learners' refusal strategies as reflected by their responses to a modified version of 10- items discourse multiple choice task. Each question in the questionnaire has three options. One of the options is correct, one is a distracter and one is an option that has been effected by learners' L1. The participants are 60 Iranian EFL learners in advanced level that haven't been to English speaking countries. The purpose of this study is to find out the pragmatic competence of EFL learners in Iran. This study first investigates pragmatic failures that Iranian EFL learners tend to commit in understanding pragmatic multiple choice tasks and answering the questions. Then, building on the analysis of the collected data, it further discusses the amount of the pragmatic failures among Iranian EFL learners and the source of this failure. The results of the study show that all of Iranian EFL learners commit pragmatic failure and answered more than 72 percent of the questions incorrectly. The results show that almost half of the pragmatic failure of Iranian EFL learners are due to L1 interference. The results of the present study are useful for language teachers and syllabus designers.

Keywords: refusal strategies, pragmatic transfer, discourse multiple choice task, Iranian EFL learners

INTRODUCTION

Pragmatic failure, as Thomas defines it, is “[...] the inability to understand what is meant by what is said” (1983, p.93). It is the result of a hearer's failure to understand the message that the speaker intended to communicate with a contextualized utterance or a failure to capture the intended pragmatic force of an utterance. Two types of pragmatic failures are distinguished: ‘pragmalinguistic’ failure, which is the consequence of inadequate transfer of linguistic strategies from L1 to the L2, and ‘sociopragmatic’ failure, which is the output of differing perceptions of appropriate linguistic behavior in specific

contexts (Thomas 1983). It is clear that there is a cross-linguistic influence in the learners' L2 discourse and perception of message, because their knowledge of a language and culture other than the L2 influences their linguistic production and understanding (Kasper, 1992). Such an influence unfolds when learners' lack of L2 obliges them to rely on their L1 pragmatics to apply it in their interlanguage.

Linguistic and Communicative Competence

Chomsky (1965) draws teachers' attention to the linguistic competence, the speaker-hearer's knowledge of his L1 performance, the actual use of language in real situations. He states that linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a concrete and homogeneous speech-community, who is perfect in his L1 and is not influenced by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interests, and errors in applying his knowledge of L1 in performance in actual contexts.

The first person who pointed out that the Chomskyan notion of competence dealing with the ideal speaker-listener in a homogeneous speech community provides no place for competency for language was Dell Hymes (1972). He believes that the theory fails to account for the whole socio-cultural dimension. Hymes was concerned on the one hand with linguistic theory, and on the other hand with the socio-cultural dimension of language.

Hymes is concerned with is "performance" that is the actual use of language in a real situation; its use moreover by speaker-listeners who are far from "ideal" and whose language behaviour cannot be characterised as that of any homogeneous speech community. Hymes points out that Chomsky's narrow concept of competence represents a "Garden of Eden" view which disregards questions of use by relegating them to the area of performance. This limitation of Chomsky's linguistic competence led Hymes to coin the term "communicative competence", as described by Hymes (1972), communicative competence is a wide term including not only linguistic Knowledge but also knowledge of a set of sociolinguistic codes and rules for using them. Communicative competence, he claims is "the most general term for the speaking and hearing capabilities of a person - competence is understood to be dependent on two things: (tacit) knowledge and (ability for) use". (p. 16).

The Concept of Pragmatics

Pragmatics is a field of analysis which blossomed from the delayed 1960's and early on 1970's. Some meanings of pragmatics right here will reveal what this specific field is approximately. Leech (1983) defines pragmatics as the analysis of the way utterances get symbolism throughout contexts (p. x). Kasper and Blum-Kulka (1993) watch pragmatics of people knowledge and usage of linguistic actions throughout real conditions (p. 3). In terms of Mey (2001), pragmatics scientific tests the use of vocabulary throughout man verbal exchanges as determined by the particular problems of society (p. 6). Yule (1996) talks about four places in which pragmatics scientific tests: speaker meaning, contextual meaning, the way more obtains conveyed when compared with is stated (how listeners

can get the particular designed message) and also the appearance of family member distance (what establishes the decision between stated and also the unsaid) (p. 3).

Pragmatic competence

According to Savignon (1991) pragmatic competence is a crucial part of communicative competence, and believes that communicative knowledge is required for participation and incorporates besides grammatical knowledge and pragmatic competence (Ellis, 1994). Koike (1989) emphasizes on speaker's ability, and states that pragmatic competence lies in the particular speaker's information and his use of regulations of appropriateness and respect which in turn affect what sort of speaker will realize and make communication operates.

Pragmatic Failure

Thomas (1983) defines pragmatic failure throughout Cross-cultural Realistic Failure as the inability of conversation participant to understand what is intended with what is said.

L1 Interference

The term interlanguage was popularized by Lany Selinker in an influential article published in 1972; interlanguage is a linguistic system that would be the result of the contact between two, or more, languages; it is a separate linguistic system which is not exactly one or the other and is the result of learning a second or a foreign language that is not learned completely. This concept has been reused and reformulated by many other linguists; Shoshana Blum- Kulka, for instance, defines interlanguage pragmatics (1996, p. 167), a further development of the original idea, as the system developed when two languages come into contact; these two languages meet in the mind of a person who is learning them and the resulting intrapersonal system is interlanguage, learners recreate the language they are learning - the target language – incorporating influences from their mother tongue and making hypotheses about the target language.

Interlanguage studies soared in the 1970s and were mostly involved with learners' linguistic competence, but emphasis on communicative competence and especially its application to second language learning has expanded those studies including interlanguage research on learners' pragmatic and discourse knowledge, and gave rise to interlanguage pragmatics (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper, 1989), that is a field developed in the 1980s defined by Kasper as "the branch of second language research which studies how non-native speakers understand and carry out linguistic action in a target language and how they acquire L2 pragmatic knowledge" (1992, p. 203).

The belief that most difficulties encountered by L2 learners were influenced with their first language dates back to the days after World War II. At that time it was thought that the differences between L1 and L2 and students' knowledge about their L1 would interfere with the development of the L2 (Jessner, 1996), but, as some other linguists have stated, it is still a general belief in interlanguage pragmatics that there are transfer consequences and that intercultural miscommunication is often the result of learners' L1 influence regarding sociocultural norms and conventions (Takahashi and Beebe, 1993). Contrastive analysis developed in the late 50s and with it the conception that

habits created in L1 were transferred to L2: when linguistic parts in L1 and L2 were similar, L1 would actively help L2 learning: this is called positive transfer; unlikely, when L2 were different from L1 there would be negative transfer (Jessner, 1996).

Speech Act

The term "speech act" has been used by Crystal (1992) to refer to a communication activity that is defined in connection to the intentions of a speaker while speaking and influence on a listener. Forms of language generally serve specific communicative functions. A question like "How much does this car cost?" is usually a form functioning as a question. On the other hand a question can function as a request. For instance, the question "Can you pass the salt?" said at a dinner table does not show the speaker's intention at gaining information about the listener's abilities or inabilities. It rather functions as a request. This manifests the fact that linguistic forms are not always unambiguous in their functions.

The Speech Act of Refusals

The speech act of refusal occurs when a speaker directly or indirectly says no to an invitation. Refusal is a face-threatening act to the listener/requestor/inviter, because it is inconsistent with his or her expectations, and is often manifested through indirect strategies. Thus, it requires an approximately high level of pragmatic competence (Chen, 1996).

It is the kind of utterance which is used to perform the action of refusal. Refusals are used frequently in our daily life. Proper care should be taken in uttering them as it is a negative response to requests, offers, suggestions, and invitations. It can result in misunderstanding if it is not used properly mainly by non-native speakers due to culture differences from place to place. (Chang, 2011). Moreover, as Gass and Houck (1999) note, the final result may or may not be mutually satisfactory. A refusal leads to resistance of harmony in relationships. Therefore, to save a relationship from prevention, the communication participants are required to employ a variety of strategies to mitigate the negative effect of the act of refusing (Umale, 2011).

The Classification of Refusals by Beebe et al.

For investigating and categorizing the refusal data, most researchers have used the Classification of Refusals by Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990) as the basis for analysis. According to Beebe et-al (1990), refusals are divided into two main groups as follows.

Direct refusals and indirect refusals

The direct refusals have very limited subdivisions in comparison to indirect ones. The direct refusals include non-performatives like "no" and performative verbs such as "I can't". The indirect refusals involve various types (Wang, 2001):

1. Statement of regret like: "I'm sorry."
2. Wish like: "I wish I could help you."

3. Excuse, reason, explanation like: "I have an exam."
 4. Statement of alternative.
 5. Set condition for future or past acceptance like: "If I had enough money"
 6. Promise of future acceptance like: "I'll do it next time."
 7. Statement of principle "I never drink right after dinner."
 8. Statement of philosophy like: "One can't be too careful."
 9. Attempt to dissuade interlocutor:
 - 9-1. Threat or statement of negative consequences to the requester like: "If I knew you would judge me like this, I never would have done that."
 - 9-2. Criticize the requester "It's a silly suggestion."
 - 9-3. Guilt trip (waiter to customers who want to sit for a while: "I can't make a living off people who just order tea"
 10. Acceptance functioning as a refusal:
 - 10-1. Unspecific or indefinite reply "I don't know when I can give them to you"
 - 10-2. Lack of enthusiasm "I'm not interested in diets"
 11. Avoidance:
 - 11-1. Non-verbal (silence, hesitation, doing nothing and physical departure)
 - 11-2. Verbal (topic switch, joke, repetition of past request, postponement and hedge);
An example for postponement can be "I'll think about it."
- There are also some adjuncts to the refusals as follows:
12. Statement of positive opinion like: "That is a good idea"
 13. Statement of empathy "I know you are in a bad situation"
 14. Pause fillers like "well" and "uhm"
 15. Gratitude/appreciation like: "Thank you."

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Aside from the native and non-native speakers of English who collaborated in a series of pilot studies leading to the development of the MDCT, a sample of 60 male and female advanced EFL learners took the final version of the test.

To answer the research questions, 60 Iranian senior students from English language institutes of Tabriz were participants of this study. Their age ranged from 20 to 31. The mother tongue of all the participants was Turkish except for 3 females that were native speakers of Persian language. The participants were asked to respond to a MDCT questionnaire that consisted of 10 situations and no time limit was set for their response.

Instruments

Multiple choice Discourse Completion Test

The data were collected by means of a Multiple choice Discourse Completion Test (MDCT), containing 10 situations prepared in English. This MDCT test is made by the researcher and with the help of Tabriz and Sarab Azad University professors in order to use in the present study. The MDCT employed in this study comprises 10 situations to collect data on the realization of pragmatic recognition ability of Iranian EFL learners. Every situation contained a clear description of a face-threatening act (refusal).

Development of DCT

In order to generate scenarios corresponding to refusal speech act, several sources from the literature were consulted. The selected situations and scenarios were converted into discourse completion items and randomly distributed throughout the questionnaire. As an early pilot, the test was presented to 10 experts including Ph.D. holders and native speakers of English as well as 13 upper-intermediate and advanced learners of English in order to check the comprehensibility and eligibility of the descriptors and situations.

Once the WDCT or the open-ended version of the questionnaire was ready, it was administered to a sample of 20 advanced learners of English. Simultaneously, eight native speakers of English were asked to complete the same test e-mailed to them. An analysis of the replies to these written tasks launched the next step, that is, the development of the multiple choice version of the questionnaire (MDCT).

Procedure

60 advanced EFL students from Tabriz English institutes participated in this study. Since all these learners in advanced levels should participate in three tests each term to advance to the next level, there was no need to homogenize them.

The (10) situations of the MDCT were printed and distributed to participants. Each participant got 2 pages where every 5 situations were printed on one page. Before running the test, the researcher explained what is meant by refusal. They were also taught how to respond to situations. Then, they were asked to read each situation carefully and then choose the best option. There was no time limitation for answering.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In second language learning, language competence is not equal to pragmatic competence. Language competence is the base and explicit to be taught; pragmatic competence, however, is somewhat beyond it. Without this basic understanding, no pragmatic competence can be acquired. The present study set out to investigate Iranian upper-intermediate and advanced EFL learners pragmatic recognition ability.

Table 1 shows the number of each option selected by learners. In this table the number of selected options (a,b,c) are presented. Green color shows the correct response and the red one shows the option that is chosen as a result of L1 interference. The other that is in white, is also incorrect but not interfered by L1. Under each choice and inside the colors

there is a number that shows the number of learners that have chosen this choice in each item. For example in number1, 5 learners have chosen option *a* that is correct, 4 option *b* which is incorrect, and 51 option *c* that is incorrect and the result of L1 interference.

Table 1. The number of each option chosen by learners

items	choices		
	a	b	c
1	5	4	51
2	42	7	11
3	7	49	4
4	8	10	42
5	46	8	6
6	38	9	13
7	5	9	46
8	8	40	12
9	14	38	8
10	6	9	45

As it is shown in table 1 a few participants have answered the questions correctly and a considerable amount of learners have chosen the L1 interfered option.

In order to make these numbers comparable they should be changed to percentages. Table 2 presents the number and percentage of correct and incorrect responses resulted by L1 interference chosen by learners.

Table 2. The number and percentage of correct and incorrect (L1 interfered) responses by learners

items	correct		incorrect (L1 interfered)	
	number	percentage	number	percentage
1	5	8.33	51	85
2	7	11.66	42	70
3	4	6.66	49	81.66
4	8	13.33	42	70
5	6	10	46	76.66
6	9	15	38	63.33
7	9	15	46	76.66
8	8	13.33	40	66.66
9	8	13.33	38	63.33
10	6	10	45	75
total	70	116.64	437	728.3
mean	7	11.66	43.7	72.8

Table 2 shows the number and percentage of correct responses and also incorrect options that are a sign of L1 in learners' pragmatic recognition. This table manifests that the average amount of correct responses to each item is 11.66, and the average amount of L1 interfered incorrect responses are 72.8. This outstanding percentage (72.8) reveals Iranian EFL learners' failure in pragmatic recognition.

The present study set out to examine the extent to which Iranian advanced EFL learners can recognize pragmatic functions. In this section, the researcher will discuss the findings with reference to the research question.

The research question concerned the extent to which Iranian EFL learners can recognize pragmatic functions. The findings obtained through the analysis of the data gathered through a questionnaire revealed that there was a significant difference between what was expected from learners and the results. After calculating the mean of correct and incorrect responses by learners it is concluded that learners have answered 72.8 percent of questions incorrectly as a result of L1 interference and only 11.66 percent correctly. This result is far below what was expected from upper-intermediate and advanced learners. Then it can be concluded that Iranian EFL learners are weak in pragmatic recognition. This failure can have many reasons. From among the causes that result in pragmatic failure of Iranian EFL learners, L1 interference seems to be a crucial one.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the Iranian EFL learners' ability in pragmatic recognition of context based situations. As the findings of the study illustrated most of intermediate and advanced Iranian EFL learners have difficulty in pragmatic recognition of English language. This failure can have many reasons. One of the pivotal reasons can be L1 interference that is taken into account in this study. The results of the study showed that L1 interference is a vital reason of the pragmatic failure of Iranian EFL learners.

In accordance with the analysis of different reasons of pragmatic failures that occur in intercultural communication based on the data collected from the questionnaire, difference in culture, negative pragmatic transfer and teaching-related problems are concluded as being the major sources of pragmatic failures. Considering that Iranian EFL learners still have difficulties in accommodating with foreign social conventions, more efforts should be made to improve English teaching.

By analyzing the nature of the pragmatic aspects of learner language, this investigation can help both EFL learners and teachers to recognize the vital role pragmatic teaching plays in EFL classes, thus contributing to learners' advancement in improving their pragmatic and communicative competence.

EFL teaching thus will not only focus its attention on teaching the language itself but also attach equal importance to the pragmatic and cultural aspects of language mastery, including both increasing the students' cultural knowledge and developing their pragmatic competence.

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