Pragmatic Transfer in Iranian EFL Learners as Compared to Native English Speakers in Realization of the Speech Act of Promising

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ABSTRACT

Speech act theory is a widely disputed field and issues such as what speech acts are and how they are classified seem to be culture specific, and not as universal as some of the studies presented above have described. Evidence on speech act production and recognition from different cultures have demonstrated that more research needs to be done in order to provide a theory that has an integrated approach to speech acts. Thus, besides carefully defining the term used in the research and creating an appropriate taxonomy, social, cultural, and pragmatic influences on the meaning, perception, and production of speech acts need to be considered. This study aims at comparing the strategies used by Native English speakers and Iranian EFL learners for expressing promising in different situations. The participants of this study were 27 among whom 20 were Iranian EFL learners and 7 were native English speakers. The participants were both male and female, aging from 18 to 31 years old. An open-ended data collection technique (DCT) was employed for studying participants' responses and verbal reactions to different situations. Iranian EFL learners' sensitivity to L1 made them use inappropriate expressions and strategies in their English responses. It suggested that Persian learners of English transfer some of their L1 pragmatic norms to L2 because they perceive these norms to be universal.

Introduction

People occasionally encounter situations in which they make or receive promising. Language is a means of communication by which human beings can get certain objectives by giving and receiving messages. Chomsky (1986) defines language as "a set of very special universal principles that are intrinsic characteristics of the human mind and part of the species' genetic endowment". Most of the communicative acts that people are attempting to make and understand are speech acts such as requesting, promising, apologizing, warning, thanking, greeting, advising and criticizing.

Levinson (1983: 5) defines pragmatics as "the study of language usage" and Kasper and Rose (2002) define it as "the study of communicative action in its sociocultural context". Pragmatic studies are related to speech acts within a social context. The ability to understand and produce such acts is considered as pragmatic competence which refers to both cultural and linguistic knowledge and also the social distance of the interlocutors.

To communicate much effectively with people from different cultures, we need to be aware of their cultural background (e.g., thoughts, customs, beliefs) and also their language ability. It is clear that language and culture are interdependent so much so that knowing the culture of the target language helps second/foreign language learners to communicate much effectively. The relationship between language and culture is embedded in the rules of speaking in any speech community. Hymes (1972) believes that the rules of grammar would be useless without the rules of use.

Studies on speech act can be studied from two aspects: first, those studies which research native speakers' recognition of the meant speech act, and second, the studies which investigate EFL learners' recognition of a given speech act comparing with that of second language native speakers (Pishghadam and Sharafadini, 2011). This study would be of the second type. The attempt is to see how Iranian EFL learners differ from the native English speakers in realizing the speech act of promising. The same as most of speech act studies, the Discourse Completion Test (DCT) have been used as a means for the data collection methods, which was first introduced by Blum-Kulka (1982).

Review of Literature

The Theory of Speech Act

Speech acts are, in fact, acts of communication. To communicate means to express a specific attitude, and the kind of speech act which is performed is the same as the kind of attitude which is expressed. For example, a statement expresses a promise, a request expresses a desire. It can be said that a speech act is considered successful if the audience identifies, in accordance with the speaker's intention, the attitude which has been expressed. It means that when the utterances are used, they are not only holding the expressions but also involve certain meaning to function particular action. Thus, the utterances of '*It's hot in here'* could result in someone opening the windows. Austin (1962) was the first language philosopher who introduced the 'speech act'. Then his theory was developed by Searle (1969). Austin (1962, p.12) explains that people not only produce utterances to merely say things about the world but also they produce utterances in order to do things.

According to Searle (1969), Speech acts can be defined as the basic unit of communication and they are part of linguistics competence. He used the term "speech act" to refer to what Austin calls "illocutionary act". In addition, he believes a speaker's performance of a speech act involves three different acts which form the complete speech act. These three acts are

"utterance act" (uttering words), "propositional act" (referring and predicating) and "illocutionary act" (e.g., stating, commanding, or requesting).

According to Richards et. al (1985) communicative competence includes knowledge of the grammar, vocabulary of the language, rules of speaking, knowing how to use and respond to different types of speech acts and knowing how to use language appropriately. Many researchers have agreed that communicative competence should be the goal of L2 teaching and communicative competence of learners should include the ability of how language is used in social contexts to perform communicative functions, and knowledge of how utterances and communicative functions can be combined according to the principles of discourse (Loveday 1982, Canale and Swain 1980).

The Speech Act of Promising

As a type of speech act, the promise has also been the object of numerous studies that attempted to clarify what exactly a promise is and how the different ways of promising can be classified, and also how this particular speech act is performed and perceived both in English and in different languages around the world. Just as in the case of speech acts, different scholars define promises in different ways. Also, as there are different types of speech acts, there are different types or categories of promises, as well. Some of these categories overlap in the different studies, yet other ones are unique to certain studies, mostly according to the specific features of the different populations used.

Palmer (1976) claims that there is some overlap between the speech act of promising and warning. He says "we cannot even produce speech acts with sentences containing performative verbs. A sentence beginning "I promise" could be a warning". Both promising and warning are about future acts to be accomplished by the speaker, the first is beneficial to the hearer while the second carries bad repercussions to the hearer. Wierzbicka (1987) classifies the following verbs within the promise group: promise, pledge, vow, swear, vouch for and guarantee. She contends that the above-mentioned verbs share some features. For example, these verbs denote some future acts to be accomplished by the speaker for the benefits of the hearer. This difference between promising and vowing can be accounted for in the light of assumption that promising is hearer-oriented while vowing is speaker-oriented.

Moreover, vowing includes the use of scared entity for the speaker, whereas promising does not necessitate such as entity. In the same spirit, vowing is private while pledging is public because in vowing the speaker asks God as a witness that he will do or not do something, while in pledging the speaker would like all people to know that he will do a certain act. To sum up, in all the previous cases the speaker is strengthening his resolve to fulfill his speech act promising.

Methodology

Population and Sample of the Study

The population of this study consisted of two groups: Native English speakers from America, England and Iran and Iranian EFL undergraduate students at two English schools of Gooyesh and Jam-e-Jam placed in Qom, Iran. The American subsample consisted of 2 (1 male and 1 female) respondents both of whom were 27 years of age. The English respondents were 2 people both of whom were male and 31 and 35 years of age. Three native English speakers who have been living in Qom province of Iran since 3 years ago, and whose job was

clergyman and were studying in the Islamic seminary of Qom were also selected for the study. On the other hand, the Iranian subsample consisted of 20 (10 male and 10 female) EFL students from the universities and high schools of Qom, Iran who were between 18 and 28 years of age. They were studying in the sixteenth term of their English schools of Gooyesh and Jam-e-Jam.

Instrumentation, Data Collection and Data Analysis

All participants were given a background questionnaire (BQ) to gather demographic information. The BQ was designed in order to reveal the subjects' social and educational background, and also other personal information such as their age and gender.

An open-ended questionnaire called DCT was chosen to be used in this study because it provided freedom for the participants to answer what they would do in real situations. It contained different contextual situations followed by a blank. The scenarios in the DCT questionnaire were categorized by a number of episodes and the word "promising" was used at the end of the given situational descriptions to attract the attentions of the participants' response choices (Beebe & Takahashi, 1989). The DCT was translated from Persian into English. The second group was going to fill the English version after completing the Farsi DCT but there was an interval of 10 days between two tests.

There were four main stages in this study: questionnaire design, pilot testing, data collection, and data analysis. First, the researcher designed ten scenarios for the written DCT questionnaire and also a background information survey questionnaire. The second step was to pilot test the ten situations listed in the DCT questionnaire. Third, participants completed the questionnaire and valid and complete responses in the questionnaires were selected to categorize. Finally, the collected data were quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed. As the first three stages were referred and explained before, only the data analysis of the study will be explained in the following.

The data obtained from the questionnaires were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. The quantitative analysis included the results in DCT. The responses of the DCT questionnaires were categorized into four main types of promising, which will be elaborated in the next section, by counting their frequencies. Besides the quantitative analyses, the responses of both groups were qualitatively compared to examine whether the Iranian participants' native culture influenced their performance of speech act of promising. At the end, the results were compared with those of natives in order to explore the socio-pragmatic differences between the two cultures.

The findings of the study evidenced that the negative transfer from L1 was found out in many situations. Because of the exposure of a different socio-cultural and linguistic system, Iranian EFL learners displayed their inter-language development which made them produce different semantic formulations other than native speakers of English. The primary aim of this study was to investigate the socio-pragmatic knowledge level of Iranian EFL learners in L2. In order to establish baseline data the preferences of native speakers of English should also be determined (Brown, 1996). In the light of the analysis of baseline data, students' deviations from native speakers of English can be discussed from two aspects. The first one is the negative transfer strategies of learners and secondly, the inter-

language development of learners will be discussed. In the flow of the discussion below, firstly the findings related to the negative transfer strategies of learners will be discussed, this will follow the findings on inter-language development of learners.

The question of this study to be under investigation was "In what way do advanced Iranian learners of English differ from native speakers of English in their realizations of the speech act of promising?" The study results discussed earlier evidenced that: (1) English language learners deviated from native speakers of English in their speech act productions by transferring their Iranian socio-cultural norms negatively in their attempts to react situations in L2. For example, in situation 1, some Iranian EFL learners consider it as a friend's duty to accept your request and if the room owner asks you to keep the room clean it is an insult and s/he is never a friend as most of Iranians do the same according to their culture. The native English speakers gave answers like "No problem, I'll be sure to clean up everything before you get", "Don't worry. I won't mess up your room. If I do make a mess, I'll clean it up. If I don't clean it up, you don't have to let me use it again.", … all of which assures the room owner that the room will be clean when coming back; while the Iranian EFL learners replied by: "BASHEH VALI AGAR SHAK DARI NEMIYAM", "INSHALLAH CHIZI NEMISHEH", "MAN SAYE KHODAM RA MIKONAM" (باشه ولی اگر شک داری " , " انشالله چیزی نمیشه " , " من سعی خود را می کنم" نمیام"), … none of which assures the friend and s/he should not be surprised if the room was messed up after coming back.

Now we consider situation 3. With regard to this situation, the answers given by native English speakers were: "The next time I'm in that store, I'll be sure to pick up a copy for you. How much do you want to pay for it? OK, if it's more than that, I'll let you know that I couldn't pick it up.", "I'll get it today and hand it to you tomorrow, I promise.", "Wish I could help you out with that but I'm on my way to class now and don't have the time to go and buy that book for", … But the Iranian EFL learners answered in somehow different way such as: "AGAR MASIRAM KHORD MIGIRAM", "SAY MIKONAM BEGIRAM", "CHASHM HATMAN VALI CHAND ROOZI TOOL MIKESHEH" (" اگر مسیرم خورد می گیرم " , " سعی میکنم بگیرم " , "چشم حتما ولی چند روزی طول میکشه ") , … (2) Iranian English learners' behaviors in infrequent and formal situations showed that they were more liable to transfer Iranian socio-pragmatic norms into L2. Thus, the more infrequent and formal the situation is, the higher the possibility of negative transfer occurrence could be, (3) as a result of EFL learners inter-language continuum, not only did learners negatively transfer their L1 socio-pragmatic norms to L2 but they made use of some semantic formulas which were all specific to them as well. That is to say, learners regardless of the formality/informality or frequency/infrequency of the situation both transferred socio-cultural norms from L1 and preferred different semantic formulas other than native speakers of English. (Yule, 1985).

Results

Based on the results above, it may be concluded that native English speakers tend to utilize direct promising as a pragmatic strategy; relying on this more than any other type of promising identified in this study. Although the data revealed that Iranian males and females employed all types of promising, but it was identified that the conditional type of promising is the most frequently type of promising used by Iranian EFL learners. As

shown earlier 'Promising' is universally understood as a commitment to do something. Therefore, when the interlocutor issues any kind of promises, he or she should fulfill it. According to Searle (1969), each speech act has four felicity conditions, which makes it a successful act, Searle (1969) states the following conditions (A=act; S=speaker; H=hearer; T=utterance).

Table 1. Four Felicity Conditions according to Searle

(1)Propositional content:	A must be a future act of S.
(2)Preparatory conditions:	Promise must be something H wants done or at least would prefer to have done rather than not done. S will not do the act in the normal course of events
(3)Sincerity condition:	S intends to do A.
(4)Essentialcondition:	S intends that the utterance (T) will place him under an obligation to do A.

In a native English speaker's culture, saying things like "I'll visit you tomorrow" is meant and understood as a promise. And promising something is committing oneself to doing it, and before promising something, the native English speaker wants to be sure s/he will be able to fulfill it. S/he may well desire to do something that s/he knows the hearer would prefer her/him to do, but unless s/he has reasonable evidence for the fact that s/he is also able to do it, s/he will not make a promise to do it. S/he would rather say something like "Sorry, I'd like to do X, but I'm afraid I can't," or "I'll try, but I can't promise." With such a scenario in mind, consider the following example:
"I will visit you tomorrow? inŠaallah"

The same utterance has been given but the difference is just in inserting the willing of Allah at the end of the sentence which has totally changed the function of this speech act, this promise is not meant and understood as a pure promise. It is a conditional promise as understood by Iranian EFL learners which means "if Allah is willing to do X action", these points serve as a point of departure for this research to better understanding the speech act of promising in Persian which could help avoid cultural misunderstandings since studies on different speech acts would help in bridging the gap between the speakers of different languages regarding the potential pragmatic failures that may arise in pedagogical and translation domains.

In addition to the previously mentioned types of promising, data analysis in this study points to the existence of several other types of promising that may be summarized as follows: 1) Direct promising, 2) Evasive promising, 3) Satirical promising, and 4) Conditional promising. Table 2 offers a comparison of the frequency and percentages for the four types of promising identified in the study for native English speakers.

Table 2. A Comparison of Promising Types of Native English Speakers

Types of promising	Frequency	Percentage
Direct	6	44%
Evasive	2	14%
Satirical	2	14%
Conditional	4	28%

Direct promising: Data revealed that direct promising occurred exclusively in the speech of native English speakers in (3) responses out of 7 total responses (44%). The table illustrates that native English speakers tend to rely most on direct promising in their speech.

Evasive promising: This type was used in 1 response (14%) of the study sample. The use of this type of promising was less than direct promising.

Satirical promising: This type of promising was used in 1 response (14%) of the study sample. This indicates that use of this type of promising in the data was restricted compared to the first type but the same as the second type of promising.

Conditional promising: This type represented (2) responses (28%) out of the total responses collected for purposes of this study.

Table 3 below illustrates a comparison of the frequency and percentages for the four types of promising used by Iranian EFL learners identified in this study. As shown in the table, Iranian EFL learners use all types of promising among which the conditional type is used much more than other types.

Table 3. A Comparison of Promising Types among Iranian EFL Learners

Types of promising	Frequency	Percentage
Direct	10	25%
Evasive	6	15%
Satirical	8	20%
Conditional	16	40%

1.Direct promising: The table illustrates that this type is used less by Iranian EFL learners than native English speakers but it is worthy to mention that this type of promising was used much more by Iranian males than females (67 % vs. 33%).

2. Evasive promising: Iranian subsample used this type less than previous type and only 3 respondents used it.

3. Satirical promising: Iranian EFL learners employed this type more than evasive promising type but less than the direct type of promising.

4. Conditional promising: This type is used much more than other three types of promising. After careful analysis of the data, it became clear that the most commonly used type of promising by Iranian male and female EFL learners was conditional promising.

Conclusion

The appropriate use of language differs from one culture and context to another. Language is an integral part of our life. We use language to transmit our ideas and thought and to communicate with each other. The appropriate use of language, however, is sometimes dependent on the context it is used to respond and be understood correctly. The speech act of promising is a rich source of information about the speakers as well as the community under investigation. In the vein of culture difference among Iranian EFL learners and Native English speakers and the way they issue promising, it has been noticed that Native English speakers tend to use direct type once they issue their promises and they speak and hear a language of status and independence, focusing on social order and the exhibition of knowledge and skill. So; while and on account of the present study, Iranian EFL learners typically speak and hear a language of connection and intimacy stressing confirmations and support within their specific online communities and they use the conditional type of promising. Their speech is inclusive, less direct, and along with arguments and confrontation whenever possible.

Finally, studies on different speech acts will ultimately help in bridging the gap between speakers of different languages regarding the potential pragmatic failures that may arise in pedagogical and translation domains. The main objective of this investigation is to explore the differences between Iranian EFL

learners and native English speakers' production of the speech act of promising. Analysis of data generated through a (DCT) reveals some important results. It is found that Iranian EFL learners, in spite of the so many years they spend in learning English, are not yet capable of performing adequate promises in English. Their utterances are not always consistent with native speakers in terms of appropriateness to the situation. It is also found that Iranian EFL learners produce fewer components of the semantic formulas necessary for making the target speech act of promising. Pragmatically, the Iranian EFL learners seem to swing between two extremes. They are either too complacent (when promising to a close friend) or too confrontational, (when promising to a stranger or a person having high position) and in both cases they fail to conduct promising appropriately in English. Iranian EFL learners seem to resort to conventions of their own culture when performing this speech act, and hence their promising will be inappropriate if used in the target language context.

Our study has shown that although the Iranian EFL and native English participants share similar distributions in overall and combined strategy use, they differ in the linguistic forms and content carried by certain strategies or patterns, which are influenced by different cultural norms. This finding coincides with Gu's (1990) analysis which indicates that while there are general principles or concepts governing the speech act, the strategy preferences of the two speaker groups are subject to "a culture's ethos and its own specific way of speaking." Seen in this light, culture can never play a minor role in speech-act performances across languages, since according to Wierzbicka (1991: 26), "different cultures find expression in different systems of speech acts, and different speech acts become entrenched, and, to some extent, codified in different languages." This study investigated the different types of promising employed by Iranian EFL learners and native English speakers. The following types of promising were identified:

1- **Direct promising**: The study revealed that this type of promising was the most frequently used strategy by native English speakers.

2- **Evasive promising**: The study also concluded that the use of this type was restricted by both groups

3- **Satirical promising**: This was the least frequently used strategy by both groups.

4- **Conditional promising**: This was used more frequently used by Iranian EFL learners than native English speakers.

This study has some important theoretical and pedagogical results. Theoretically, this study reveals that Iranian EFL learners do not always follow the same conventions of native speakers when performing the speech act of promising. Instead, they resort to their own socio-cultural background to reformulate their promising strategies. This implies that it is not always the target language norms that decide the choice of certain speech act strategies.

On the pedagogical level, this study reveals the importance of the cultural dimension for proper communication in the target language context. To help students realize maximum pragmatic success, teachers need to make their learners fully aware of the specific speech act sets and the accompanying linguistic features to produce appropriate and acceptable promising and other important speech acts. It is claimed that this awareness could only be enhanced through a variety of classroom drills and exercises that involve realization

of the target speech act in different situations. Learners should be given ample time to practice these drills of pragmatic competence until they become part of their linguistic repertoire. It is proposed that specific speech act instruction could improve pragmatic competence of nonnative speakers, and Hudson, (2001) suggests the use of (DCT) in the classroom to focus on the social distance between speakers. Role play may also be recommended as a classroom procedure to enhance linguistic and cultural appropriateness of different speech acts. From the above discussions, we can see that the strategies that people use to realize making promises in the two languages are very similar, but the forms of expressions are different due to the differences in social conventions, psychological states and culture.

Implications

Speakers of different cultures are observed to bring into interactions assumptions and norms of their own cultures, which is probably the source of unintended impressions, miscommunication and cultural conflicts. According to Bouton (1991), there are at least two reasons why language learners may have different patterns of realization. Learners do not have enough linguistic or pragmatic devices at their disposal. In many cases, learners are not exposed to appropriate and sufficient input. Lack of pragmatic awareness or linguistic proficiency can lead to failure in verbal communication. The findings of this research may serve as guidance for teaching English as a second language to Iranian EFL learners. It also suggests that it is necessary for language teachers and learners to be fully aware that native English speakers seemed to exploit more indirect strategies than Iranian EFL learners when they are promising. On the basis of the study, the dissimilar pragmatic rules between two languages may pose difficulties for Iranian EFL learners, one of which is the pragmatic failure.

With a view to helping Iranian EFL learners to avoid pragmatic failure, they are teachers, textbook writers, and course designers that are responsible for raising the learners' pragmatic knowledge. The tendency to make the learners use English in the same way as native English speakers may be considered as "cultural imperialism" (Verschueren, 1984). It is recommended that the extent to which learners should acquire native – like ways of using English is determined by the contexts in which and purposes for which they are likely to use the language.

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Appendix (A)

Discourse Completion Test (DCT)

Directions: Please write your responses in the blank area. Do not spend a lot of time thinking about what answer you think you should provide; instead, please respond as naturally as possible and try to write your response as you feel you would say it in the situation.

Situation One:

You want to stay in your friend's room over the weekend to prepare for your final exams since you know that your friend's room will be vacant as he is going to visit his family who lives in another city. He will permit you to stay if you promise not to mess up the room. How do you promise?

You:

……..
....

Situation Two:

Reza is applying for a position with a highly acclaimed company. He has passed all the steps, but the interview committee wants to have a recommendation letter from his previous employer by tomorrow. He asks his previous boss to promise to send this letter to the company immediately. Now if you were the boss, how would you promise Reza to do that by the deadline?

Theboss:
....
....

Situation Three:

You and one of your English teachers meet in a bookstore. He/she is considering buying an expensive book about English vocabulary learning. However, you have seen the book in another bookstore at a lower price. Your English teacher wants you to promise to buy it for him. What would you promise your teacher?

You:
....
....

Situation Four:

A university teacher mistook one student's exam paper for another due to the similarity in their names and failed him. The teacher knew that he made a mistake, and the student knew what happened and went to the teacher. Now, supposing you are the teacher, how do you promise the student you will check the paper again?

Theteacher:
....
....

Situation Five:

Maryam has been working with a company for a short time. Her supervisor is not satisfied with her work and he is going to fire her. Maryam wants to keep the job and promises to do better work if her supervisor will give her another chance.

Maryam:
....
....

Situation Six:

You are working in a factory. Your mother is sick, and you urgently need to take one day off to take her to the doctor. But your manager doesn't agree to this because he thinks that you will fall too far behind in your duties. You promise him to it up the time if he lets you have the day off.

The manager*:* You are always asking for special favors.

You:
....
....

Situation Seven:

You didn't study the lessons you were supposed to be prepared for because you were sick. You give this reason to your teacher and also promise him to be ready for the next session but he doesn't believe you.

Teacher: You always bring excuses of this kind. I can't take your word for it.

You:
....
....

Situation Eight:

You informed your parents you would visit them on the weekend, but you were too busy with a project and you couldn't go. While asking for your parents' forgiveness, how would you make them believe your promises to visit them in the future?

Your parents*:* You never keep your word.

You:...
....

Situation Nine:

You are sick, and the doctor has prescribed some bitter drugs. Your mother brings the drugs to you, but you don't want to take them right now. Asking her to leave you alone, you promise to take the medicine in a short while.

Your mother: To get better, you must take your medicine now.

You:
....
....

Situation Ten:

You have been invited to your friend's birthday tomorrow at 8 o'clock. Since you have been late to previous parties, your friend asks you to come on time. Promise that you will try to be there on time.

Your friend*:* I am sure you will be very late and will be the last person to arrive.

You:
....
....