



The effect of instruction on the pragmatic use of Iranian learners on the speech act of request

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to investigate the effect of instruction on the pragmatic use of Iranian learners on the speech act of request. The benefits of instruction on learners' production and awareness of speech acts is well documented (Alcón and Martínez-Flor, 2008). The subjects of this study were 40 upper- intermediate students at Arian Language Institute in Gorgan, Iran. They were learning English in an EFL context. The data were collected using discourse completion task (DCT) tests following Kasper and Dahl (1991: 9) formats. The data, then were rated using two native speakers. Hudson et al.'s (1995) rating scale was used to train the raters. In order to analyze the data t test was performed with mean level of students' scores as dependent variable and instruction as a grouping variable. The findings revealed that Iranian learners performed significantly better in experimental group for speech act of request.

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Introduction

A student who in reply to "got a watch?" says "Yes, I have" instead of telling time is an example of a person who might have a good grammatical competence, but does not know how to communicate properly. As English teachers we all might have experienced such students who are able to produce grammatically well-formed sentences which are not pragmatically appropriate. Considering the mentioned example, it is now quite clear why speech acts have an important role in our daily use of language: they are important because they allow us to perform a wide range of functions. They enable us to compliment, apologize, request, offer, promise, etc. The important question that should be taken into consideration is: Are speech acts picked up by chance in the process of second language acquisition, or should they be systematically taught? Olshtain and Cohen (1990), Ellis (1992), and King and Silver (1993) have argued that teaching speech acts to foreign students has a marked effect on their performance. In recent decades, a great deal of research has been done on the realization of speech acts, but much more remains to be learned, both on form and function.

EFL contexts are sometimes labeled as impoverished L2 contexts. Large classes, limited contact hours and little opportunity for intercultural communication are some of the features of the EFL context that hinder pragmatic learning (Eslami-Rasekh et al, 2004; Rose, 1999). Teaching English as a foreign language in Iran is limited to teaching grammatical and linguistic knowledge, while teaching how to communicate (pragmatically) at different levels is of negligent issues. Unfortunately teaching speech acts as a factor of socio-cultural skill is not emphasized in our English institutes, high schools and universities, as well. For this reason Iranian EFL learners often fail to recognize the correct function of speech acts in intercultural communications.

These learners often encounter communication challenges, not because of lacking grammatical knowledge but because of being unaware of how native speakers use the language in pragmatic context. To address these issues, this study aims at

providing adequate source of pragmatic input, using instruction, in order to improve learners understanding of various social interactions and their performance in using suitable language. As noted by Gass and Selinker (1983), when non-native speakers make pragmatics mistakes, they may be perceived as "rude or uncooperative, ... or, arrogant or insincere." Then, the researcher decided to undertake further exploration and collect additional evidence about the effectiveness of instruction on pragmatic use (production) of speech act of request in a foreign language learning situation in Iran. As a consequence, the following research hypothesis was addressed in this study.

H0. The instruction of speech act of request has no significant effect on the pragmatic use (production) of Iranian EFL learners.

Method

Subjects

The study drew from a population of fifty-eight intermediate level adult EFL learners at an intensive English program at Arian Foreign Language Institutes. From that population, forty subjects, representing two homogeneous groups, were selected through their mean scores of PET (Cambridge Preliminary English Test). Their age ranged from twenty to twenty five and their sex was not considered to be a determining factor. They are Iranian native speakers. None of the participants has the experience of living in English speaking countries. They were randomly assigned to experiment and control groups. Two English native speakers also participated in the study. They were assigned to rate participants' answers to DCT tests as native speakers.

Material and data collection procedure

The groups (experiment and control) were given tests consist of speech act including Discourse Completion Task (DCT). Kasper and Dahl (1991: 9) defined DCT as 'written questionnaires including a number of brief situational descriptions, followed by a short dialogue with an empty slot'. The questionnaire for DCT in this study followed such a format. In each situation there is a brief description that illustrates the relations between the participants (acquaintance or stranger) and their dominance over each other (high, equal or low).

Data for request situations is elicited from the sample through the form of DCT originally designed by Blum-Kulka in 1982 and has been widely used since then in collecting data on speech acts realization both within and across language groups. Hudson et al.'s (1995) rating scale was used to train the raters. This rating scale contains six components: the ability to use correct speech act expressions, amount of information, levels of formality, directness and politeness. In this study, the last three components were combined as one (level of politeness) due to the overlapping elements of speech existing among the three components.

Procedure

The study followed a pre -test, post -test design. The experimental group received treatment with regard to the request speech act adopting the Martinez-Flor and Uso-Juan's 6Rs Approach (2006) concerning the use of appropriate form for 12 sessions.

In the first step of treatment as Researching, learners were explained what pragmatic competence is and also, what pragmatically request means. After that in Reflecting step, learners were asked to collect some natural situations of request in their mother tongue. Then, the researcher drew learners' attention to the socio pragmatic and pragmalinguistic issues using some awareness raising questions. In the third step, that of Receiving, in which they were provided with explicit instruction on the pragmalinguistic forms employed for making requests. A set of programmed instructional materials explaining the realization and interpretation patterns, rules and tokens of the speech act under study was prepared and presented to the experimental group. The materials compiled started with presenting descriptions of various levels of directness, types and factors of variability, and face-keeping strategies following Schauer (2009) categorization system for requests. After receiving instruction, they were asked to compare them with their own language forms, in order to observe similarities and differences between the two languages. In Reasoning step, again three different types of awareness-raising activities were used to deepen learners' understanding of how the form that a speech act takes may depend on the three socio pragmatic factors of social distance, power and imposition discussed previously, as well as the speaker's intention and the setting in which the speech act occurs. After using a lot of activities to develop learners' pragmatic awareness, the fifth step started. In Rehearsing step, learners were engaged in some controlled and free productive activities. As far as the controlled activities are concerned, some video episodes were used to engage learners in some oral production tasks. Focusing on written mode, learners were asked to send emails to people with opposite socio pragmatic factors. These activities aimed to present a series of contrasting situations to make learners realize that different situational variables may affect the appropriate choice of speech acts. Then they were ready to participate in free activities. Finally, in Revising step, learners received feedback regarding their performance when using the speech act in free activities. Finally, the groups (both experiment and control) were given a parallel posttest of DCT related to the speech act of the study. Two English native speakers also participated in the study.

Results

Using independent sample T-test data identified the differences between pretests and posttests of control and experimental groups. The correlation coefficient also supported the results. The summary of findings was presented in tables 1 to 4 as follows:

Table 1: The descriptive statistics of the data for the speech act of request

Test	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Experiment	20	15.6000	1.27321
Control	20	12.6000	2.81724
Std. Error Mean			
			.62995

The comparison of control and experimental groups indicated that there was a meaningful difference between the mean scores of the subjects. The lower standard deviation of the Experiment group indicated less variety among the score intervals from the mean.

Table 2: Result of the Independent Sample T-test for the speech act of request

Test difference	t	df	sig.	Mean	Std.error
Lower Posttest (Exe&Con)	4.34	26.45	.000	3.00000	.69130
Upper Request	4.41981				
95% Confidence Interval of the Difference					

To answer the question of the study an Independence Sample T- test was applied to the means of both groups. As can be seen in table 2, the observed t value for the hypothesis of the study was 4.34 (tobs=4.34) which is much higher than the critical t value (t crit=2.02 with the level of significance of 0.05 and df=26.45). This rejected the null hypothesis of the study which meant that instruction of speech act of request was significantly effective on the enhancement of pragmatic use (production) of Iranian EFL learners.

The correlation coefficient between pretests and posttests numbers in experimental and control groups were calculated using Pearson's correlation and the results are as follows:

Table 3: Correlation coefficient between pretest and posttest scores of control group for the speech act of request

		precontrol	postcontrol
precontrol	Pearson Correlation	1	.963**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	20	20
postcontrol	Pearson Correlation	.963**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	20	20

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The relationship between pretest and posttest scores in control group for the speech act of request was investigated using Pearson product-moment correlation. As it is shown in table 3, there was a positive correlation between two variables, $r=0.963$, $n=20$, $p=0.00$.

Table 4: Correlation coefficient between pretest and posttest scores of experimental group for request

		pretest experiment	posttest experiment
pretest experiment	Pearson Correlation	1	.769**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	20	20
posttest experiment	Pearson Correlation	.769**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	20	20

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The relationship between pretest and posttest scores of experimental group for the speech act of request was shown in

table 4. As it was indicated there was a positive correlation between two variables, $r=0.76$, $n=20$, $p=0.00$.

Discussion

The research question of the present study was investigated and accordingly the hypothesis of the study i.e. "The instruction of speech act of request has no significant effect on the pragmatic use (production) of Iranian EFL learners." was rejected. The rationale behind this rejection came from the evidence in tables 1 to 4. The findings of the present study yielded the following pedagogical implications: the results of this study contributed to the theory of inter language pragmatic development and supported learnability of L2 pragmatics in an EFL context. The findings here supported the idea that L2 pragmatics does not develop sufficiently without instruction, as well. As a result, the findings are expected to lead to devising new teaching materials that enhance language pragmatic awareness, as well as pragmatic production (use). Besides, there is a necessity for teachers to be fully aware of pragmatic norms, as Kasper and Rose (2002: 52) state, teachers, no matter native or non-native, should sufficiently be socialized to L2 pragmatic practices, so that they can comfortably draw on those practices as part of their communicative and cultural repertoire, and their metapragmatic awareness enables them to support student learning of L2 pragmatics effectively.

This study also revealed that there are differences on the effectiveness of instruction on different speech acts considered as the learning targets. Learners' performance on the speech act of request was not quite as similar as their performance on the Speech act of apology (Khodareza & Pasandi, 2012). This difference might indicate that some pragmatics aspects of language are easier to develop. Also, it can be traced back to social norm differences existed between learners L1 and L2. As Salmani-Nodoushan (2008) proposed, native speakers of Persian prefer to use conventionally indirect strategies in their requestive speech acts. However in situations where there is no social distance, they frequently use direct request as if they have a potential for expressing camaraderie and friendship. Also, Eslamirasekh (1993) in her cross-cultural study identified, conventional expression of requests in Persian is extremely direct compared to English, and it reflects a culturally specific interactional style in the requestive behavior of the two languages.

Finally, this study was a response to the need to move away from teaching only linguistic aspects of language and neglecting pragmatic and socio-cultural aspects of language. In future research, hopefully such studies would be conducted with more participants, with a longer time line. Since there are not enough longitudinal studies examining extended instructional effects on learners' pragmatic ability (Rose & Kasper, 2001), it would be

beneficial to also have a mechanism for follow-up in order to determine if the material learned is retained.

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