

## **Interlanguage Pragmatics Development: Iranian EFL Learners' Interpretation and Use of Speech Acts**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article investigates the Iranian EFL learners' interpretation and use of speech acts as part of their interlanguage pragmatic knowledge. The questions this article is intended to answer include: 1) whether formal instruction of pragmatic knowledge plays any role in the enhancement of Iranian intermediate L2 learners' interpretation of speech acts, and 2) whether formal instruction of pragmatic knowledge plays any role in the enhancement of Iranian intermediate L2 learners' use of speech acts. To answer these questions, 60 Iranian intermediate EFL learners were selected via administering the Oxford Placement Test (OPT). Following the Martinez-Flor and Uso-Juan's 6R approach (2006), two researcher-made tests of speech acts were administered as the pre-test before the targeted speech acts were instructed to them for 10 sessions as treatment. Two posttests of speech acts were then administered and the data were analyzed via calculating ANCOVAs for the pretest and the posttest scores of each participant group independently. The results indicated that intermediate Iranian EFL learners showed a higher progress in the interpretation but no significant change in the use of the speech acts from the pretest to the posttest of the study.

**Key Words:** Interlanguage Pragmatics, Interpretation, Use, Speech Acts

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### **INTRODUCTION**

This study examined the effect of pedagogical intervention on second language pragmatic learning. The rationale for examining the effects of instruction in pragmatics has been underscored by Schmidt's (1993) contention that classroom instruction of the target language is insufficient – pragmatic functions and relevant contextual factors are often not salient to learners in the classroom context and so not likely to be noticed even after prolonged existing ways of instruction. Furthermore, Bardovi-Harlig (2001) makes a strong case for the necessity of instruction, documenting that second language learners who do not receive instruction in pragmatics differ significantly from native speakers in their pragmatic use and interpretation in the target language. The researcher of this study will first state the problem focusing on Iranian EFL learners' pragmatic communication failure resulting from lack of pragmatic instruction, and will review the literature focusing on main trends and theories on the issue. He will next elaborate on the methodology as well as the analysis procedures and the results.

#### **Statement of the Problem**

The field of interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) is an important part of second/foreign language teaching. Kasper and Blum-Kulka (1993) describe ILP as a "second-generation hybrid" deriving from the two research traditions of L2 acquisition research and pragmatics. The ILP field is dedicated to research that deals with the speech act behavior of nonnative speakers. It is defined by Kasper (1998: 184) as "the study of nonnative speakers" comprehension, production, and acquisition of linguistic action in L2. The notion of interlanguage in SLA as introduced by Selinker (1972) is extended to cover the field of ILP. Selinker coined the term to represent the language learners' developing linguistic system in the target language (TL). Interlanguage includes all features from a learner's L1 and the target language (TL) together with other phenomena that cannot be traced to these language systems. Selinker's notion of interlanguage focuses only on the formal aspects of language; namely, syntax, phonology, morphology, and so on. This notion was then extended to the field of pragmatics by L2

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researchers in their investigation of pragmatic knowledge of language learners in the TL. Pragmatic knowledge is then defined by Kasper (1998) as the ability to understand and produce speech acts in language.

Some interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) studies have observed that second language (L2) learners display an L2 pragmatic system that is noticeably different from that of the target language (TL) native speakers, both in use and interpretation (Bardovi- Harlig, 2001; Kasper, 1997). ILP research has also shown that even among advanced L2 learners, L2 pragmatic competence is lacking (Kasper & Schmidt, 1996; Kasper & Rose, 1999). Miller's (1974) article, 'Psychology, language and levels of communication' underscores the importance of L2 pragmatic competence. He states that most of our misunderstandings of other people are not due to any inability to hear them or to parse their sentences or to understand their words. Instead, a far more important source of difficulty in communication is the failure to understand a speaker's intention. This cross- cultural communication breakdown is referred to as pragmatic failure (Thomas, 1983). It is now generally accepted in the field of second/foreign language acquisition that to be successful in learning an L2, the learner does not only need competence in the L2 grammar and vocabulary but also, most importantly, pragmatic knowledge.

As a result of studies done on the interlanguage pragmatic, the performance of speech acts by foreign language learners are quite different to those of native speakers. Therefore Scholars , ( Blum-kulka, House and Kasper ,1989) recommended that there be explicit pragmatic instruction in the second and foreign language curricula. Following this many studies were conducted and they all agreed upon the inclusion of pragmatic instruction in the classroom situations.

However, even a cursory analysis of the English language teaching and learning in Iranian universities shows that the teaching of English in Iran is driven by a kind of curriculum that adheres uniquely to the sequential coverage of the linguistic description of the target language but the issues around communicating with language i.e. English pragmatic knowledge and socio-cultural rules of the language are ignored.

To the best of the researcher's knowledge, English language learning in Iran, which is English as a Foreign Language (EFL), is based on the input which is available in language classrooms. In such an impoverished learning environment the learners are not likely to have much exposure to authentic input; consequently, they do not have the opportunity to acquire the English pragmatics. For the purpose of this study if we focus on speech acts, we will be in urgent need to develop ways to teach various aspects of speech acts that native speakers of English manipulate when they produce or respond to such speech acts. Teaching speech acts must include both the perceptive and productive knowledge of speech acts realization patterns in English.

Following Kasper & Schmidt (1996) and Bardovi-Harlig (1999), who pointed out the necessity of conducting research about the role of instruction in interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) development in order to make stronger the link between ILP and second language acquisition and foreign language learning, the researcher of this study aims to carry out a developmental interlanguage pragmatics research among of Iranian intermediate EFL learners.

Therefore, the task of the researcher in this study is to find a suggestion; that is, the instruction of some speech acts, namely, 'request', and 'refusal' to Iranian EFL learners at intermediate level of proficiency in terms of both interpretation and use of the mentioned speech acts, to fill the gap most ILP practitioners and EFL teachers feel between classroom input and authentic input.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Research on pragmatics in SLA has been essentially modelled on cross-cultural pragmatics and has been largely dominated by studies focusing on performance or use, rather than on acquisition/development (cf. Kasper and Schmidt 1996; Bardovi- Harlig 1999). The particular influence of cross-cultural pragmatics has led to studies contrasting native speakers' (NSs) and non-native speakers' (NNSs) performance of pragmatic aspects (cf. Blum-Kulka, S., House, J. and Kasper, J. (eds.) 1989). The issues that arise from studies in pragmatics in SLA are concerned, for instance, with realization strategies of speech acts, their universality, constraining contextual factors and cross-cultural contextual variation. They are broadly the same issues as those which have been investigated in cross-cultural pragmatics (cf. Kasper and Schmidt 1996: 150). The perspective on communicative competence as sociocultural competence has yielded a significant amount of research on the impact of cultural aspects on second language learners' pragmatic choices although with little consideration of learning constraints. Thus it remains a challenge for ILP to integrate the insights offered by cross-cultural, contrastive pragmatics into theories of learning. This need is not unrecognized in ILP studies. Hymes (1972) sees pragmatic knowledge as a component of 'communicative competence', interacting with sociocultural knowledge and other types of knowledge, so that the task of a language user in her performance of verbal action "is to select and combine elements from these areas in accordance with her illocutionary, propositional and modal (or 'social', 'politeness') goals" (cf. Kasper 1989: 39). Kasper argues that to account for the acquisition or development of pragmatic abilities "pragmatics needs to relate

(product) description not only to social processes but also to the psychological processes of speech production/reception, as well as to language learning and acquisition” (Faerch and Kasper 1985: 214).

For Faerch and Kasper, a “cognitive-pragmatic approach” in the learning and teaching of a second language implies that procedural aspects of pragmatic knowledge need to be incorporated as well as its interaction with declarative knowledge in interlanguage studies.

### **Speech acts in ILP research**

In their study of the contribution of speech act theory to the understanding of second language learning, Schmidt and Richards (1980: 129) argue that an account of speech acts in second language learning must include “knowledge of the rules of use and communicatively appropriate performance”, that is the development of a communicative competence. Their study constitutes one of the first steps in broadening the scope of second language acquisition research from the sentence level to the discourse level. The methodological side of their understanding of speech act theory (consideration of discourse structures going beyond the sentence level) has been taken up by ILP studies in a much stronger way than the learning factors such as perception of input and inference.

### **Input and the Learning of Pragmatics**

There have been few studies in ILP which make direct reference to the relationship between input and the learning of pragmatics. Bardovi-Harlig (1999) argues that because ILP has been essentially modelled on cross-cultural pragmatics, interlanguage issues, such as the role of input in acquisition, have been neglected in ILP. Nevertheless, there have been some studies in ILP which explain their results with reference to the exposure (or lack) of input. Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1993, 1996), for instance, conducted a study on the development of suggestions and rejections by non-native speakers of English in academic advising sessions, where learners received negative feedback on the appropriateness of speech acts but not on realization strategies (e.g., levels of directness). The persisting inappropriateness of the use of forms (e.g., the use of few politeness markers as mitigators) in learners’ realization strategies led Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford to conclude that the development of speech act strategies (especially pragmalinguistic knowledge) towards native speaker norms is dependent on access to feedback and input.

Although ILP studies have begun discussing acquisitional issues, such as the impact of input, they have tended, on the one hand, to present input as an external factor and on the other to establish a direct relationship between its availability and its acquisition and use. In other words, if specific pragmatic features are available in learners’ interactions with native speakers, then they are going to be learned. Thus, research questions such as whether the learning of pragmatic abilities in a second language can be seen as more dependent on the availability of input (i.e. can rely less on universals) or, whether input to pragmatics is subject to the same conditions discussed above in the context of learning grammar remain central to the ILP research agenda.

### **Teaching Speech Acts**

The particular context, in which learners are immersed, namely second versus foreign language classrooms, influences their chances to be in contact with the target language (Kasper, 2001; Kasper and Roever, 2005). Whereas in second language settings learners have rich exposure to the target language outside the classroom and a lot of opportunities to use it for real-life purposes, in foreign language contexts the chances to directly observe native-speakers’ interactions and opportunities to be engaged in communicative situations are very scarce. To compensate this lack for foreign language learners, researchers in the field proposed a lot of useful techniques and pedagogical models to teach different speech acts.

### **Research Questions of the Study**

- RQ1: Does formal instruction of pragmatic knowledge play any role in the enhancement of Iranian intermediate L2 learners’ use of speech act of request?
- RQ2: Does formal instruction of pragmatic knowledge play any role in the enhancement of Iranian intermediate L2 learners’ use of speech act of refusal?
- RQ3: Does formal instruction of pragmatic knowledge play any role in the enhancement of Iranian intermediate L2 learners’ interpretation of speech act of request?
- RQ4: Does formal instruction of pragmatic knowledge play any role in the enhancement of Iranian intermediate L2 learners’ interpretation of speech act of refusal?

### **Research Hypotheses of the Study**

- H1: Formal instruction of pragmatic knowledge does not play any role in the enhancement of Iranian intermediate L2 learners' use of speech act of request.
- H2: Formal instruction of pragmatic knowledge does not play any role in the enhancement of Iranian intermediate L2 learners' use of speech act of refusal.
- H3: Formal instruction of pragmatic knowledge does not play any role in the enhancement of Iranian intermediate L2 learners' interpretation of speech act of request.
- H4: Formal instruction of pragmatic knowledge does not play any role in the enhancement of Iranian intermediate L2 learners' interpretation of speech act of refusal.

### **The significance of the study**

Theoretically, this study may contribute to the increasing body of research on instructed interlanguage pragmatics, by providing detailed description not only of the research study, but also complete information about the instructional treatment, particulars of Iranian EFL setting. Pedagogically, the uniqueness of this study may stem from its vast application to a variety of educators including university professors, language institute teachers, material designers, test developers and SLA researchers in general and interlanguage pragmatics researchers in particular.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The participants of the study contained 60 B.A. candidates of TEFL who were selected from among 200 university students via administering an OPT test. The participant group was given a pretest of speech acts including Multiple Choice Questionnaire (MCQ) for interpretation and Discourse Completion Task (DCT) for use. The group was treated with the two speech acts adopting the Martinez-Flor and Uso-Juan's 6Rs Approach (2006) on the use and interpretation of appropriate 'request', and 'refusal', for 10 sessions. The treatment consisted of six steps. In the first step, that of Researching, learners were explained what pragmatic competence is, as well as the definition and difference between requests and refusals. After this explanation, learners were asked to collect naturally occurring requests and refusals in their mother tongue, and to write down sociopragmatic information about these speech acts in different situations. In the second step, that of Reflecting, learners were asked to work on the data they had collected and answer a variety of awareness-raising questions that focus on both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic issues. They were also encouraged to compare their data with their partners in order to gain access to a wider sample of strategies for both speech acts and reflect about how the social factors surrounding the performance of a particular speech act affect the choice of specific strategies. Having worked on data from their mother tongue, they moved on to the third step, that of Receiving, in which they were provided with explicit instruction on the pragmalinguistic forms employed for making requests and refusals in the English language. Once they received instruction in all possible forms, they were asked to compare them with the ones they had found in their mother tongue, so that learners could notice similarities and differences between the two languages. In the fourth step, that of Reasoning, learners were involved in three different types of awareness-raising activities that deepen their understanding of how the form that a speech act takes may depend on the sociopragmatic factors surrounding them, as well as the speaker's intention and the setting in which the speech act occurs. After having engaged in a variety of activities designed to develop their pragmatic awareness, learners got engaged in the fifth step, that of Rehearsing. Here, learners were provided with opportunities to put all that knowledge into practice by participating in two types of production activities, namely controlled and free. As far as the controlled activities are concerned, learners were engaged in both oral production tasks, involving the use of video or digital video, and written production tasks related to sending emails. Once they participated in these oral and written controlled production activities, they were ready to engage in free activities to actually see if they had acquired the pragmatic knowledge to appropriately use the speech acts of requesting and refusing. Finally, in the sixth step, that of Revising, learners received the teacher's feedback regarding their performance when using requests and refusals in the free activities assigned in the previous step. Finally, the group was given a parallel posttest of the speech acts of the study including Multiple Choice Questionnaire (MCQ) for interpretation and Discourse Completion Task (DCT) for use. The data gathered for the hypotheses of the study were analysed via applying the ANCOVA.

## **RESULTS**

### ***Descriptive Analysis of the Data***

The data of the present study were descriptively analyzed via using the SPSS software; and the summary of findings have been presented in tables 1 to 4 as follows:

**Table 1. Descriptive analysis of the Request (Use) variable of the study**

<b>Pretest/Posttest</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>	<b>N</b>
Posttest	9.5667	2.70822	60
Pretest	9.1667	1.69912	60
Total	9.3667	2.26012	120

Table 1 illustrates the means and the standard deviations of the Request (Use) variable of the study. As is seen, the difference between the means of the pretest and the posttest of the study is not significant; also, there is more variety among the posttest scores regarding this variable.

**Table 2. Descriptive analysis for the Refusal (Use) variable of the study**

<b>Pretest/Posttest</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>	<b>N</b>
Posttest	11.7500	1.01889	60
Pretest	11.2833	1.29001	60
Total	11.5167	1.18096	120

Table 2 illustrates the means and the standard deviations of the Refusal (Use) variable of the study. As is seen, the difference between the means of the pretest and the posttest of the study is not significant similar to what was seen for the Request (Use) variable; also, there is more variety among the pretest scores regarding this variable.

**Table 3. Descriptive analysis of the Request (Interpretation) variable of the study**

<b>Pretest/Posttest</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>	<b>N</b>
Posttest	17.3333	1.50329	60
Pretest	10.7833	1.43906	60
Total	14.0583	3.60041	120

Table 3 illustrates the means and the standard deviations of the Request (Interpretation) variable of the study. As is seen, the difference between the means of the pretest and the posttest of the study is significant; also, there is more variety among the posttest scores regarding this variable.

**Table 4. Descriptive analysis of the Refusal (Interpretation) variable of the study**

<b>Pretest/Posttest</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>	<b>N</b>
Posttest	15.6667	1.18846	60
Pretest	9.0000	1.30189	60
Total	12.3333	3.57003	120

Table 4 illustrates the means and the standard deviations of the Refusal (Interpretation) variable of the study. As is seen, the difference between the means of the pretest and the posttest of the study is significant similar to what was seen for the Request (Interpretation) variable; also, there is more variety among the pretest scores regarding this variable.

***Inferential Analysis of the Data***

The inferential analysis of the data of this study was done through calculating the Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) between the pretest and the posttest of each participant group separately. The summary of findings here has been presented in tables 5 to 8 below:

Table 5. One-way ANCOVA analysis of the Request (Use) variable of the study

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	4.800 <sup>a</sup>	1	4.800	.939	.334	.008
Intercept	10528.133	1	10528.133	2.060E3	.000	.946
<b>Pretest*Posttest</b>	<b>4.800</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4.800</b>	<b>.939</b>	<b>.334</b>	<b>.008</b>
Error	603.067	118	5.111			
Total	11136.000	120				
Corrected Total	607.867	119				

As is shown in table 5 above for the Request (Use) variable of the study, there is no significant progress. This can be justified by the F value as to be less than 1 ( $F < 1$ ), and the significance level of .939 which is more than .05 ( $\text{Sig} > .05$ ). The partial Eta squared value ( $\text{Eta} = .008$ ) indicates that the effect size of the treatment of the study (formal instruction) has been significantly low which represents that the ability of the participants of the study in using request has not been changed as a result of being treated by the formal instruction.

Table 6. One-way ANCOVA analysis for the Refusal (Use) variable of the study

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	6.533 <sup>a</sup>	1	6.533	4.835	.030	.039
Intercept	15916.033	1	15916.033	1.178E4	.000	.990
<b>Pretest*Posttest</b>	<b>6.533</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>6.533</b>	<b>4.835</b>	<b>.030</b>	<b>.039</b>
Error	159.433	118	1.351			
Total	16082.000	120				
Corrected Total	165.967	119				

As is shown in table 6 above for the Refusal (Use) variable of the study, there is no significant progress. This can be justified by the F value as to be of a low distance with 1 ( $F > 1$ ), and the significance level of .030 which is more than .05 ( $\text{Sig} > .05$ ). The partial Eta squared value ( $\text{Eta} = .039$ ) indicates that the effect size of the treatment of the study (formal instruction) has been significantly low which represents that the ability of the participants of the study in using refusals has not been changed as a result of being treated by the formal instruction.

Table 7. One-way ANCOVA analysis of the Request (Interpretation) variable of the study

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	1287.075 <sup>a</sup>	1	1287.075	594.383	.000	.834
Intercept	23716.408	1	23716.408	1.095E4	.000	.989
<b>Pretest/Posttest</b>	<b>1287.075</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1287.075</b>	<b>594.383</b>	<b>.000</b>	<b>.834</b>
Error	255.517	118	2.165			
Total	25259.000	120				
Corrected Total	1542.592	119				

As is shown in table 7 above for the Request (Interpretation) variable of the study, there is a significant progress. This can be justified by the F value as to be much higher than 1 ( $F > 1$ ), and the significance level of .000 which is much less than .05 ( $\text{Sig} < .05$ ). The partial Eta squared value ( $\text{Eta} = .834$ ) indicates that the effect size of the treatment of the study (formal instruction) has been significantly high which represents that the ability of the participants of the study in interpreting requests has been changed as a result of being treated by the formal instruction.

Table 8. One-Way ANCOVA analysis of the for the Refusal (Interpretation) variable of the study

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	1333.333 <sup>a</sup>	1	1333.333	858.182	.000	.879
Intercept	18253.333	1	18253.333	1.175E4	.000	.990
<b>Pretest*Posttest</b>	<b>1333.333</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1333.333</b>	<b>858.182</b>	<b>.000</b>	<b>.879</b>
Error	183.333	118	1.554			
Total	19770.000	120				
Corrected Total	1516.667	119				

As is shown in table 8 above for the Refusal (Interpretation) variable of the study, there is a significant progress. This can be justified by the F value as to be much higher than 1 ( $F > 1$ ), and the significance level of .000 which is much less than .05 ( $Sig < .05$ ). The partial Eta squared value ( $\eta^2 = .879$ ) indicates that the effect size of the treatment of the study (formal instruction) has been significantly high which represents that the ability of the participants of the study in interpreting refusals has been changed as a result of being treated by the formal instruction.

### DISCUSSION

The findings of this study as a result of descriptive and inferential analyses of the data contribute to final comments on the hypotheses of the study. Accordingly, the first hypothesis of the study i.e. ‘Formal instruction of pragmatic knowledge does not play any role in the enhancement of Iranian intermediate EFL learners’ interpretation of speech acts’ was rejected. The rationale behind such a rejection comes from the evidence in tables 7 and 8. Further, the second hypothesis of the study i.e. ‘Formal instruction of pragmatic knowledge does not play any role in the enhancement of Iranian intermediate EFL learners’ use of speech acts’ was supported. Tables 5 and 6 provide the data necessary to show the support of the hypothesis.

The results of this study may bring the research to the point that Iranian EFL learners face the production (use) of speech acts more commonly than the comprehension (interpretation) of them. In addition, such an inference can imply that Iranian experts in teaching English as a foreign language should focus on the problem of language production as seriously as possible. As a result, the findings of the current study are expected to lead to devising new teaching materials that enhance language production, specially, speech acts use. They are also expected to result in devising new teaching methods that include techniques to teach learners how to work to produce and use English as a foreign language. Finally, the findings of the current study should contribute to using new testing approaches that will enable language teachers to direct their language testing techniques towards the use of language attributes that testing them through their interpretation.

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