A Comparative Study of the Complaint Strategies among Iranian EFL and ESL Students – The Study of the Effect of Length of Residence and the Amount of Contact

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the pragmatic transfer Iranian EFL and ESL learners of English showed when complaining in English. The study aimed to find out if there exists any relationship between the amount of contact with English and pragmatic competence of both EFL and ESL groups as well as the relationship between the duration of stay in English-speaking countries and the pragmatic competence of complaining in the ESL group, living and studying abroad for some years. For this purpose, the data were gathered from four groups: twenty Iranian native speakers of Farsi and twenty English native speakers of English, as the baseline groups, as well as twenty EFL and twenty ESL learners, as the interlanguage data groups. The data were elicited through a personal information form and a DCT in which they were asked to answer six imaginative situations including complaint-required situations. The DCT data were examined to see to what extent the time spent with English and the duration of stay in target countries and the pragmatic competence of EFL and ESL respondents were related. The findings revealed no significant relationship between the amount of contact, the time spent abroad and the pragmatic competence of Iranian EFL and ESL learners.

Keywords: pragmatic competence, interlanguage pragmatics, speech act theory, complaint strategies

1. Introduction

1.1 Pragmatic Competence

During recent years, communicative competence has been paid more attention in the field of second/foreign language teaching and learning. Hymes (1972), holds that second language learners must learn to speak not only grammatically but also "appropriately" to achieve communicative goals.

Ahn (2007) confirms: "Acquisition of socio-cultural rules, which is widely known as pragmatic competence, is a basic requirement to second language learners". Tanck (2002) argues that speakers who seem "fluent" in a foreign language due to their command of the grammatical rules of that language and its vocabulary may still lack pragmatic competence, and as a result they may not be able to produce language that is socially and culturally appropriate.

Unfortunately, since nonnative speakers may be unaware of the socio-linguistic rules of the target language, they may use their mother language rules when using a second language. This makes some second language learners to use their first language rules of speaking when using a second language (Beebe, Takahashi & Uliss–Welts, 1990; Tanck, 2002).

However, most Interlanguage Pragmatics (IL) studies to date have been limited to how L2 learners perform a particular speech act, and there has been relatively little on acquisitional research on L2 pragmatics (Kasper, 1992). Kasper and Schmidt (1996) believe that mere looking at the differences and similarities between production and comprehension between native and non-native speakers of different languages is not enough; instead, in order to have a clear picture of pragmatic transfer the conditions that affect pragmatic transfer or in Bou Franch's (1998) words, "transferability constraints", should be seen, that is, the conditions that promote or inhibit pragmatic transfer. Kasper and Schmidt (1996) also call for the need to have more insights on the

development of pragmatic competence and the effect of learner-based factors such as attitude, proficiency, learning context, and length of residence in the target country.

Many studies have looked at the effect of a second-language context in the acquisition of L2 pragmatics. They claim that in a second-language context, learners encounter more opportunities to use the language and are exposed to the greater availability of pragmatic input in the L2. Therefore, it is generally believed that longer length of residence in the target country would lead to better results in acquiring of L2 pragmatics (Segalowitz & Freed, 2004). However, not all individuals who live abroad for a certain amount of time seem to benefit the advantage of living in the second language context equally the same. The second-language context that provides ESL (English as a Second Language) learners many opportunities to engage in using English would be advantageous for some, but not all learners take advantage of the available opportunities. (Ahn, 2007)

Ioup's study (1995) supports the positive effect of a natural context for language acquisition. According to her, language learners in informal linguistic environments can obtain an native-like level of proficiency.

On the other hand, however, some researchers argue that length of residence in the target country is not a sign of enhancements in pragmatic proficiency in the L2. Kondo (1997) examined Japanese EFL learners' apology performance before and after one year of home stay in the United States and compared them with L1 speakers of Japanese and American English. The findings showed that the students' apologies became more target-like, but in others they did not.

The researchers argued that mere living in the target community might not be the only cause of highly achievements of pragmatic competence of L2 learners, instead, the learners need to be involved in intensive interaction with native speakers of the target language to obtain native-like pragmatic skills in the L2.

In second language acquisition (SLA), it is mostly hypothesized that the extensive contact with language is one of the important factors in the better acquisition of the target language (Swain, 1998). For example, Milleret's (1991) study showed that lack of the learners' contact with the L2 led them to produce inappropriate language forms. According to her study, linguistic contact is essential for the learners who study abroad.

The above-mentioned studies have demonstrated that the amount of contact learners have with the target language is significant in increasing language proficiency. In spite of the fact that some studies examining the effects of contact with the L2 on learners' proficiency have reported different findings (Yager, 1998; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004).

The results of the above-mentioned studies depict that in spite of the many attempts, there is little known about the real relationship between the amount of contact with target language forms, the length of stay among native speakers of the target language, and the achievements in pragmatic competence.

1.2 Speech Act Theory

The concept of speech acts, one of the key areas of pragmatics, was first proposed by Austin (1962) who stated that "the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action" (p. 5). This implies that utterances convey a speaker's intent and can have an affect on the interlocutors.

According to Austin, utterances are locutionary acts, intents are illocutionary acts, and the effects of the utterances are perlocutionary acts. Searle (1969) argued that the illocutionary aspect of an utterance, or a "speech act" was the basic linguistic unit of communication and meaning. Therefore, based on Austin's definition, Searle refined and further developed the speech act theory (pp. 12-20). Searle (1976) divided illocutionary acts into five major classes:

1. "Representatives", which represent a state of affairs and denote the identification of the speaker to commit himself to the truth of the expressed proposition,

2. "Commisives", which obligate the speaker to carry out a future action,

3. "Directives", which are intended to get the hearer to take a particular action,

4. "Expressives", which project the speaker's feelings or attitudes,

5. "Declaratives", which bring about or change the state of affaires they name.

According to Searle's speech act theory, speakers give utterances to convey their intents including complaints. Based on the connection between linguistic forms and communicative intent in Searle's speech act theory, pragmatic competence can be explored through the study of speech acts and thus the speech act theory can provide a tool to investigate pragmatic competence. The present study will therefore use speech act realization, specifically complaints, to explore pragmatic development.

According to Searle, speech acts can be performed directly and indirectly. Direct speech acts refer to the performance of certain acts in which the speaker means what he literally says, and indirect speech acts refer to performative acts in which the speaker means more or something other than what is uttered. Searle proposed that all speech acts, except explicit performatives, are indirect to some degree.

1.3 Speech Act of Complaint

According to Tanck (2002), the speech act of complaint occurs when a speaker reacts with displeasure or annoyance to an action that has affected him/her in an unfavorable manner. It is believed that complaint is a face-threatening act to the hearer; therefore, it should be made cautiously by the speaker in order not to hurt the hearer's feelings and hence impair the relationships between them (Moon, 2001). When making complaints, people often use indirect strategies in order not to offend the other party and to avoid being impolite, rude or disrespectful (Wannurk, 2005). Because of the lack of sufficient socio-pragmatic knowledge of the second language, complaining becomes even more difficult for the non-native speakers of a second language. Yamagashira (2001) states that if nonnative speakers do not know how to make complaints in a second language, it is assumed that they will use their own language strategies and, consequently, misunderstandings occur.

1.4 A Selected Review of Empirical Studies on Complaints

Perhaps the most comprehensive study in the realm of complaint strategies dates back to the work by Olshtain and Weinback (1987) who examined complaints made by native and non-native speakers of Hebrew considering 1) the length of utterance 2) severity of complaint, and 3) the softeners and intensifires. The results showed that non-native speakers of Hebrew were more verbose than native speakers and they used more intensifires and softeners and their complaints were less severe. The results displayed interlanguage pragmatics; however, considering the social status, there was no clear distinction between the two groups.

Morphy and Neu (1996) identified the components of a complaint as 1) an explanation of purpose 2) a complaint 3) a justification and 4) a candidate solution. In the study of complaints by American native and Korean non-native speakers of English, they had two aims: 1) to compare components of the speech act of complaint produced by two groups and 2) to see how native speakers judged the production of this speech act through a number of factors such as whether it was aggressive, respectful, credible, appropriate and similar to what a native speaker would use. They found a high correlation between native and non-native speakers in producing three of the four speech act components, but the two groups were different when producing the second component, i.e, the complaint, as most Koreans produced a criticism instead of a complaint. The authors concluded that such criticisms may offend the interlocutor and shut down the interaction in an American context.

In more recent studies, Tanck (2002) investigated the differences between native and non-native English speakers' production of refusals and complaints. The author used a group of participants from varying first languages. To generate data for this study, the participants were given a "Discourse Completion Test" (DCT) whrerein they were asked to write their responses to six prompts, resembling the two acts of complaint and refusal as well as two distracters, within familiar, equal and superior/inferior relationships. Responses of native English speakers were reviewed for evidence of common components of speech act sets to establish a set of baseline responses. The responses made by the non-native speakers were then evaluated for the presence and quality of the speech act components as compared to the native speakers. The results of the study showed that although native and non-native speakers produced almost the same speech act set components, the quality of their responses were different. It was also found that nonnative speakers' responses were generally linguistically correct; however, they were pragmatically ill-formed, hence not perceived by the hearers as appropriate.

1.5 The Present Study

In line with the previous research in the area of ILP, the present study attempts to find out how and to what extent living in the target country contribute to the overall performance of nonnative speakers, and how they develop their pragmatic competence in a foreign country. We also try to understand in what ways their way of life promotes or inhibits them toward or away from this competency.

Complaining provides us a tool to reach our goal. Interestingly, we could not find any study to date with the focus on the complaint speech act from this perspective. More surprisingly, also, we found no evidence of tracing the way Iranian people complain in English once confronting complain-required situations.

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

Eighty people participated in this study that formed four separate groups. Twenty Iranian native speakers of Farsi

(NP), twenty Iranian speakers of English living in English-speaking countries (England, Canada, and The United States of America) (ESL), twenty Iranian learners of English (EFL) living in Iran, and twenty native speakers of English (NE). In addition, two native speakers of English (doctoral students in ESL) evaluated the responses given by EFL and ESL groups to DCT using Balci (2009) ten-point appropriateness rating scale in order to assess the degree of appropriateness and nativeness of their responses.

Table 1. Frequency and Percentage of the Length of Stay of ESL Participants in English-speaking Countries

		F (%)
	1-5	9 (45.0%)
	6-10	8 (40.0%)
Length of Residence	16-20	1 (5.0%)
	More than 20 years	2 (10.0%)
	Total	20 (100.0%)

2.2 Instrumentation

The data for the present study were collected through two types of elicitation instruments: a written background questionnaire and a discourse completion test (DCT).

2.2.1 Background Information Questionnaire

The NE and NP groups were handed a type of background questionnaire in which they were required to provide basic information including age, gender, course of study and the level of education. In the case of ESL and EFL groups, however, the researcher used the background questionnaire to identify the extent of English-language contact the participants were exposed to in daily life and length of time the ESL group had lived in the target countries. This background information was later used in analyzing the data.

The questionnaire was a self-report instrument designed to elicit information on the total amount of time both EFL and ESL groups were in contact with English during the week, both inside and outside the classroom, and the number of years ESL members spent in the target countries. The questionnaire contained a total of 10 items. Six of these items were designed to elicit general information about the participants' linguistic, educational, and personal background. The remaining 4 items were used to measure participants' contact. To get the total number of contact hours, the researcher totaled the number of hours given in answer to each question. The data obtained from the background questionnaire was used to examine whether there was a positive relation among the variables of amount of L2 contact, length of residence and, learners' L2 pragmatic competence.

The same DCT translated into Farsi was used to collect data on how native speakers of Farsi (NP) perform the speech act of complaint. As Trench (1995) has pointed out, one of the main shortcomings in controlled elicitation procedures is that, implicitly, they are forcing speakers to provide an utterance whereas in real life they might choose to remain silent. It is necessary to remember that complaint situations are face-threatening by nature and speakers might want to avoid a confrontation with the offender; they might also consider that a specific situation does not bother them at all and that it does not call for a complaint. Consequently, the questionnaire instructions indicated that a participant should write "SILENCE" in those situations in which they felt they would not speak.

The DCT included six situations in which the respondents were asked to write down what they would say in each situation. The scenarios took into account social relationships of power and distance between the two interlocutors, since it was important for the researcher to see how the degree of acquaintance affects linguistic performance. The situations were designed while differing in terms of intimacy among people involved, whether they were intimates, acquaintances and strangers.

Table 2. Description of DCT Situations

	Distance	Dominance/Power
Situation 1	-	=
Situation 2	+	=
Situation 3	-	+
Situation 4	+	+
Situation 5	-	-
Situation 6	+	-

_ Distance indicates that speaker and hearer know and /or identify each other. + Power means that speaker has a higher rank, title or social position, or is in control of the assets in the situation, whereas –Power means that speaker has a lower rank, social position, or is not in control of the assets in the situation, and =Power indicates that speaker has an equal rank or social position.

2.3 Encoding of the Data

2.3.1 Measurement of Pragmatic Competence

Data for examining pragmatic competence of Iranian ESL learners in the speech act of complaint were collected via a written DCT. The written DCT data were evaluated by two native speakers of English using Balci (2009) ten-point appropriateness and nativeness rating scale. All the details of the study and the way of giving scores were discussed with the two raters. After collecting rating forms the data went into the next stage which was finding out any relationship between the amount of contact Iranian speakers of English had in the target countries and their pragmatic competence. Besides, we were also to see if there is any relationship between pragmatic ability and the length of residence in the target country.

2.3.2 Appropriateness Rating Scale

Appropriateness was measured with a ten-point rating scale ranging from "no performance" (0) to "fully appropriate" (10). Appropriateness was defined as the ability to perform speech acts appropriately according to situations. The scale evaluated whether learners could use appropriate linguistic expressions at the proper level of directness and politeness according to situations. Discourse control (i.e., overall management of speech) was also incorporated into the rating descriptors in terms of the degree to which they interacted with appropriateness. For instance, speech acts received low ratings when they had major word choice errors or poor discourse control, including excessive repetitions, illogical response, or incoherent speech.

2.4 Data Collection Procedure

The investigator provided EFL and NP groups with detailed instructions about the tasks in their first language, that is, Farsi. In the case of ESL and NE groups, however, the investigator sent them consent forms in English first, and then only after they confirmed their willingness to participate in the study, the questionnaire was offered to them in order to be answered. Each of eighty participants was asked to complete the open-ended DCT. All four groups were required to fill in a background information form in which they were asked to answer some questions about their age, gender, course of study and the level of education. However, EFL and ESL groups were also asked to provide more information regarding the number of hours they spent with English per week. In the case of ESL group, they were additionally required to offer even more information about the number of years they were in the English-speaking countries (Canada, England and U.S.A) and their age of arrival in that country. Also the form asked EFL and ESL groups to record if they have been in any other English –speaking countries.

To assess the degree of appropriateness and nativeness of Iranian ESL learners' target-language structures, the written DCT data were evaluated by two native speakers of English using Balci (2009) ten-point appropriateness and nativeness rating scale. The internal consistency and inter-rater reliability of the rating scale were demonstrated by the study earlier. Value labels were used to allow the investigator to identify levels of the pragmatic ability of an individual participant. The researcher discussed the rating scale system with the two native English speaking raters (doctoral students in ESL) and provided them with training based on Balci (2009) study.

3. Data Analyses

3.1 Correlations

Correlation coefficient analyses were performed to investigate the relationship among all three variables. Correlations were used to express in mathematical terms the degree of relationship among two independent variables and the dependent variable. A main advantage of the correlational coefficient analyses is that it allows simultaneous measurements of several variables and their interrelationships.

Research Question 1

Is there any relationship between the length of stay in the target community and the pragmatic competence of Iranian residents (ESL) when they complain in English?

The second research question examined to what extent pragmatic competence of the participants' L2 is related to the length of residence in the second-language community. To examine the relationship between length of residence and pragmatic competence based on the DCT test, a Pearson product-moment correlation analysis was performed using SPSS with alpha set at .05. (r = 0.226, p = 0.3)

The correlation coefficient for DCT with length of residence indicates no significant effect of length of residence on the participants' pragmatic attainment at p > .05.

The relationship between the two variables was not statistically significant; that is, longer length of residence does not necessarily lead to better outcomes in the L2 pragmatics. The results are contrary to the common belief that longer living in the target-language community might lead to achieve better results in the second language. Thus, the findings in this research question in the present study do not lend support to those from many studies, in which pragmatic development was associated with learners' length of residence in the target-language context.

Research Question 2

Is there any relationship between the amount of contact with English and the pragmatic competence of Iranian ESL and EFL learners when they complain in English?

The present study accounted the amount of contact with the L2 as an indicator of pragmatic development. This section presents the results for Research Question 2, which investigated whether learners' pragmatic ability is related to the amount of contact with the target language.

A Pearson product-moment correlation matrix was used to examine the relationship between the amount of contact with English as measured by a background questionnaire and ESL students' level of pragmatic ability in English. (r = 0.348, p = 0.1). Also for EFL students' the obtained results are as follows, (r = 0.030, p = 0.9).

Contrary to what was expected, the correlation coefficients for amount of L2 contact were not statistically significant at p < .05. Based on the non significant interrelationship between amount of contact with English and the students' pragmatic abilities in the speech act of complaint, the claim that greater amount of contact with English would lead to higher levels of pragmatic competence is not supported. The result was consistent with other research that show language contact, which presumably provides learners with opportunities to develop their interlanguage, does not necessarily result in L2 proficiency (Yager, 1998; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004).

4. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to see if Iranian ESL and EFL learners' amount of contact with English, and ESL learners' length of residence in the target-language environment has any probable relationship with the pragmatic competence.

As the literature review has shown, numerous studies have shown that length of residence is related to language acquisition. Regarding the purpose of this study, the investigator has not found, consistent with most previous studies in SLA that length of residence is correlated to L2 pragmatic achievement. Also, contrary to what had been expected, amount of contact was not a valid sign of the acquisition of pragmatic competence.

5. Suggestions for Further Research

This research concentrates on the speech act of complaint which demands more social interaction skills as well as many face-saving strategies. Further studies should take the other variables that may affect the production of this speech act. Gender and age differences should also be carefully studied in future research. Further studies should also involve larger samples and more situations to yield better results.

Particularly, considering the results which exhibited no significant relationship between the amount of contact with the L2 and learners' pragmatic abilities, and between length of residence in the target country and pragmatic competence, more research is needed to further examine how and to what extent the learners take advantage of the second language contact, using different pragmatic measures, different type of measurement of contact, in other speech acts, and in other L2s.

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