

## **The Impact of Individual Differences on the Interlanguage Pragmatics of Iranian EFL learners in Institutional Discourse**

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### **Abstract**

This study investigated the impact of individual differences like language proficiency, gender and age on the Iranian EFL learners' interlanguage pragmatics in institutional discourse especially, their capacity to recognize and to rate pragmatic and grammatical infelicities in speech act situations of request and apology. To this end, one hundred and eighty-seven EFL university students at three academic levels (undergraduate, postgraduate and PhD) participated in the study. Cross-sectional data collection was undertaken to analyze the relationship between the variables and the speech acts recognized and rated by learners at different proficiency levels. A three-way between-subject analyses (ANOVA) showed quantitative differences among the three groups according to individual differences. Further, in-depth analyses of test items indicated that EFL learners at the three proficiency levels identified and rated grammatical errors as more serious than pragmatic errors. Results revealed qualitative, developmental information about the cognitive and individual traits followed in pragmatic awareness. One significant implication is that any account of the development of ILP should take into consideration the individual differences that will intervene between the stages of noticing and target-like production. Moreover, being linguistically competent is not only essential for the EFL learner but acquiring pragmatic competence is also important.

**Keywords:** interlanguage pragmatics, institutional discourse, individual differences, speech acts

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## INTRODUCTION

Pragmatics, the ability to act and interact by means of language, is a necessary and sometimes daunting learning task for second and foreign language learners. Having pragmatic ability according to Ishihara and Cohen (2010, p. 5) means being able to go beyond the literal meaning of what is said or written, in order to interpret the intended meanings, assumptions, purposes or goals, and the kinds of actions that are being performed. Pragmatics is not only used in analyzing what people mean in a particular context and how the context influences what is said, it examines how speakers organize what they want to say in accordance with who they are talking to, when, where, and under what circumstances (Yule, 1996).

Pragmatics, as a domain within L2 studies, is usually referred to as interlanguage pragmatics (ILP), as analogy with interlanguage grammar, interlanguage phonology, and interlanguage lexicon (Kasper & Rose, 2002). As the study of L2 use, ILP examines how nonnative speakers (NNSs) comprehend and produce actions in a target language and as the study of L2 learning, it also investigates how L2 learners develop the ability to understand and perform actions in a target language (Kasper & Rose, 2002). According to Kasper and Schmidt (1996), focus is given to the ways NNSs pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge differs from that of native speakers (NSs) and among learners with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (p. 150).

ILP as such is influenced by certain factors like individual differences (IDs). The study of learner characteristics or individual differences such as language proficiency, gender and age has a long-standing interest in the field of ILP as factors affecting pragmatic competence (Kasper & Schmidt, 1996; Kasper & Rose, 2002; Kuriscak, 2010; Taguchi, 2013). Research on individual differences in second language acquisition (SLA) has always tried to explain the relationship between socio-affective factors and second language acquisition (LoCastro, 2001, p.70). Individual differences naturally follow from the fact that individuals tend to actively select and manipulate the contexts in

which they function (van Geert & Steenbeek, 2005a, as cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2006). Moreover, individuals not only determine what aspects of the outside world are relevant to them, but they actively construct a world around themselves and are constantly altering it (Lewontin, 2000, as cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2006).

The present study contributes to our understanding of the influence of individual characteristics and environmental factors on the Iranian EFL learners' interlanguage pragmatic development.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Pragmatic and Grammatical Awareness**

Only a very small number of studies have examined the pragmatic and grammatical awareness of second or foreign (L2) language learners in an integrated paradigm. The first study undertaken in this area was by Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) who investigated the recognition and rating of grammatical errors and pragmatic infelicities by ESL and EFL learners as well as teachers of English. The findings of this study supported Schmidt's noticing hypothesis (1993) and indicated that three factors play an important role in the learner's linguistic awareness: the proficiency level, the learning environment, and the student's access to authentic L2 input.

Niezwoda and Roever (2001) who replicated the original study (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998) centered on EFL learners in the Czech Republic and ESL learners in Hawaii. They employed the same video and questionnaire as in the original research design and concluded that overall L2 proficiency might be a more reliable determinant in L2 pragmatics. In addition, Bardovi-Harlig and Griffin (2005) investigated the results of a pragmatics awareness activity in an ESL classroom prior to specific instruction on pragmatics, given time, explicit directions, and a partner (p. 402). During the activity, learners worked in pairs to identify pragmatic infelicities in videotaped scenarios and performed short role-plays to repair the infelicities they had identified. The role-plays showed that learners recognized and supplied missing speech acts

and semantic formulas, although the form and content of the repairs differed from target-like norms in some respects.

Schauer's (2006) replication of the original study investigated EFL and ESL learners' pragmatic awareness by focusing on two issues: (1) the recognition and ratings of pragmatic and grammatical errors and (2) the effect of length of extended stay. Her data showed that the German EFL participants were less aware of pragmatic infelicities than the ESL group and that the ESL learners' pragmatic awareness increased significantly during their stay in Great Britain. Tagashira, Yamato, and Isoda (2011) incorporated learners' motivational factors to study the relationship between motivation and pragmatic awareness. Their results revealed that learners' motivational profiles influence not only perception of error identification but also the ratings of errors, suggesting that noticing and understanding of pragmatic information (Schmidt, 1993) can be important aspects in the future study of interlanguage pragmatics.

### **Institutional Discourse: Requests and Apology**

Institutional discourse, an important source of spontaneous discourse in ILP research is the type of discourse, which is purely academic in structure (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1990, 1993, 1996, 2005). It refers to the interaction that takes place between students and faculty in colleges and universities and occurs in the course of carrying out an institution's business. University students perform various activities with respect to their academic study, which involves at least one, but mostly several types of academic skills, central to a place of learning. According to Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (2005), this type of interaction involves an orientation by at least one of the participants to some core goal, task or identity (or set of them) conventionally associated with the institution in question. This helps in data collection because the nature of such discourse topics can be anticipated in advance (p.15). Moreover, ascertained information about the institutional client allows researchers to describe speakers according to the variables relevant to a given study,

researchers generally know the institutional speaker (s) and they have the capacity to identify them too (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 2005).

At universities, interacting with academic staff is an important communicative task for students (Gravatt et al., 1997, as cited in Crandall & Basturkmen, 2004). For example, a student may need to ask a lecturer or professor for help with an assignment or for an extended time for finishing the assignment. Tajeddin and Malmir (2015) point out those pragmatic strategies are moment-by-moment strategies used by L2 learners to produce the needed speech acts appropriately. Hence, there is a basic premise in ILP<sup>v</sup> that is, it is not enough just to know the equivalent words and phrases in a second language (L2). Learners need to determine the situationally appropriate utterances, namely, what can be said, where can it be said, when it can be said and how to say it more effectively (Cohen, 2004, p. 1).

Participants in institutional settings have generally fixed roles, as determined by the nature of the institutional context itself and one of the central research questions in the field of interlanguage pragmatics is how learners produce speech acts. Requests, one of the target speech acts are frequently used in human interactions. As pre-events, requests (Abdolrezapour, 2012; Abdolrezapour & Eslami-Rasekh 2012; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2008; Felix-Brasdefer, 2004, 2007; Jalilifar, 2009; Shively & Cohen, 2008) are the most impositive, face threatening acts that express the speaker's intention to get the hearer to perform some action (Uso-Juan, 2010). When making a request, the speaker may resort to a wide range of linguistic expressions in order to pose his/her request appropriately and in accordance with the expected norms of interaction in his/her culture.

On the other hand, apologies as post-events (Afghari, 2007; Maeshiba, Yoshinaga, Kasper, & Ross, 1996; Rose, 2000; Sabaté i Dalmau & Curell i Gotor, 2007; Shariati, & Chamani, 2010) are required when the social norms of politeness demand the mending of a behavior or when a linguistic expression has offended another person (Trosborg, 1995) or when somebody's personal expectations are not fulfilled. The social goal of an apology is to maintain harmony between the speaker

and hearer. Evidently, inappropriate speech act strategies can easily lead to breakdown in institutional communication. In a more formal situation, a speech act involves a high-degree of imposition and is addressed to a person who has more power. In such a situation, a greater degree of indirectness is required to protect the face of the interlocutor. Thus, in all institutional settings, the greater the social distance between the interlocutors, the more politeness is generally expected.

### **Individual Differences: Proficiency, Gender, Age**

The literature on IDs in second language acquisition commonly distinguishes such categories as age, gender, language aptitude, personality variables, and cognitive, social, and affective factors (Ellis, 1994, p. 472). The importance of examining these factors, according to Shehadeh (1999) is that they might enable us to specify the nature of the input that best suits L2 learners comprehension, and the nature of the output which they produce at a particular stage of their learning (p. 256).

Proficiency is clearly the dominant independent variable adopted in SLA studies, and most cross-sectional studies measure development of a targeted dependent variable against some measure of proficiency (Bardovi-Harlig & Bastos, 2011). Numerous cross-sectional studies compared L2 pragmatic performance across different proficiency levels determined by standardized exams, grade level, or length of formal study (e.g. Bardovi-Harlig, 2009; Garcia, 2004; Geyer, 2007; Taguchi, 2007, 2011, 2013; Takahashi, 2005; Trosborg, 1995; Xu, Case, & Wang, 2009 to name a few). These studies revealed that high proficiency generally leads to better pragmatic performance but it does not guarantee a native-like performance.

The relationship between language, gender and age has been the center of attraction for most sociolinguistics. Especially, differences between the way males and females speak have been noted for some time now (Davies & Skilton-Sylvester, 2004; Holmes, 2008; McKay, 2005). Gender identity in all speech communities is one social identification as a boy or a girl, a man or a woman. The linguistic forms used by men

and women contrast to different degrees in that, women and men talk differently because they belong to two different sex categories or because they belong to two different gender categories. However, ways of speaking are not identified with every individual man or woman but rather are associated with the class of women or the class of men in a given society (Kendall & Tannen, 2001). Moreover, in ILP study, Kasper and Rose (2002) note that the issue of age too is not treated as a neuropsychological trait but as a social category. They argue that the question is how nonnative speakers' membership in a particular age bracket might affect their contacts with native speakers, the activities in which they participate, the input they receive, how they are expected to act and speak, and whether or not their L2 use is corrected.

### **PURPOSE OF STUDY**

This study, anchored in the field of interlanguage pragmatics, explores L2 speakers' pragmatic awareness in relation to their individual differences like language proficiency, gender and age of the Iranian EFL learner on the speech acts of request and apology in institutional discourse. The present study gains significance in that very limited attempt has been made to develop tests that measure differences in learners and target-language production in grammar and pragmatics. Unlike grammatical knowledge, pragmatic knowledge is dependent upon the simultaneous interaction of both language forms and language functions. Therefore, the focus of this study is on what EFL learners *know* and what they can *do* under communicative conditions.

The special interest in institutional discourse is purely on pragmatic behavior that reflects one's linguistic competence and performance, which is the manifestation of one's personality and character. In institutional discourse, the interaction that takes place between the faculty and the student depends largely on how the EFL student comprehends the situation and the choice of language used to address the interlocutor. Unfortunately, EFL learners do not acquire a sufficient level of L2 pragmatic competence because the target language they encounter in the L2 classroom simply lacks a sufficient range and emphasis of

relevant exemplars. Very often, the status-appropriate input is often limited or absent from the status-unequal encounters (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1996) and rules of interaction between the faculty and the student are taken for granted. In the educational domain the far-reaching repercussions that pragmatic infelicities can have, as Boxer (2002) believed is that, students *may* run the risk of not getting the help required in order to succeed in their education (p. 158).

However, not all students acquire the target language in a monolithic way and individual differences largely influence learners' lives and learning contexts. Evidently, our IDs and social relationships determine a great deal of what we want to communicate. The important task therefore, must be to identify what psycholinguistic and cognitive processes are involved in L2 acquisition and what motivates individual learner selectivity, and how selectivity and processes interact in the performance of pragmatic tasks.

This study was designed to investigate the following research questions:

1. Is there any significant difference between ID factors (language proficiency, gender and age) and recognizing and rating pragmatic and grammatical infelicities in speech act situations of request and apology in the three groups of EFL students when interacting in an unequal status?
2. Does the learning environment influence the EFL learners' pragmatic and grammatical awareness?

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

One hundred and eighty-seven Persian speaking, male and female EFL university students from two State/National and two Open/Azad universities participated in this study. The participants were selected from three academic levels: undergraduates (B.A.), postgraduate (M.A.) and PhD (doctoral). Their ages ranged from 20 to 35 years. Due to institutional constraints, the participants were from intact classes making this study a sample of convenience.

Personal information of all the participants revealed that they had started studying English at school when they were about twelve years old. They declared that they had little or no contact with the English language and culture outside the classroom. All the participants had undergone the basics of English as a foreign language (60 units) the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing as university courses.

### Instrumentation

Initially, an English language proficiency test (Oxford Placement Test) was administered. The focus of this test was on structure and vocabulary in two formats five cloze passages and multiple-choice items. The total number of items was about 60. The time allotted was 30 minutes. The following Table 1 provides background information of the participants according to their proficiency levels and academic status.

**Table 1:** Background information of participants (N=187)

| Group       | Number | Males | Females | Age   | Level        | OPT score |
|-------------|--------|-------|---------|-------|--------------|-----------|
| Under grad. | 73     | 37    | 36      | 20-24 | Low inter.   | 37-47     |
| Post grad   | 82     | 47    | 35      | 25-30 | Upper inter. | 48-54     |
| PhD         | 32     | 19    | 13      | 30-34 | Advanced     | 55-60     |

Next, a recognition/judgment task was used as a replication of the study conducted by Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998), Bardovi-Harlig and Griffin (2005), Niezgodna and Roever, (2001) and Schauer (2006). The purpose of this test was to investigate the EFL learners capacity to recognize and rate the pragmatic and grammatical infelicities in speech act situations of request and apology in institutional discourse. As such, sixteen situations were adapted from Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) and Crandall and Basturkmen (2004). Prior to the administration of the

test minor modifications were made to the speech act situations of requests and apology. After the study, retrospective verbal reports were collected from the students in order to understand their cognitive and social stances toward the recognition task.

## **Procedures**

This study was part of a larger project investigating interlanguage pragmatics of the Iranian EFL learner. Therefore, prior to conducting the main study a pilot study was undertaken with 40 EFL university students who shared the same learning conditions as the participants. The goal of the pilot test was to establish the contextual appropriateness of the recognition items in eliciting the speech acts of request and apology under study. Regarding the test items, various respondents indicated that it took them a while to understand the test format. A second problem occurred in the rating scales where students had to mark sentences for being grammatically/pragmatically correct or incorrect. Explanations were given and all drawbacks and shortcomings experienced in the pilot study were gradually modified for the final study.

At first, the OPT was administered. Based on the OPT scores, participants were divided to three proficiency levels (see Table 1). In the second phase, participants were administered the recognition test in order to investigate what kinds of (pragmatic or grammatical) errors learners notice most and how serious they consider them to be. Grammar relates to the accuracy of structure, including morphology and syntax, whereas pragmatics addresses language use and is concerned with the appropriateness of utterances given specific situations, speakers, and content (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998).

As already mentioned in the literature, this study was a replication of previous studies. The speech act situations of request and apology designed concentrated only on institutional context and discourse~ the discourse that normally takes place between the faculty and the students. In addition, the speech act situations also included contextual constraints of power, distance, and degree of imposition (requests) or severity of offence (apologies). The test comprised of 16 items: ungrammatical (6)

items, pragmatically inappropriate (6) items and (4) items that were both pragmatically and grammatically appropriate. Only 12 items were inappropriate. No item was both grammatically and pragmatically inappropriate. Due to administrative and practical reasons, instead of the videotaped format used in the original study, the test was administered through a written questionnaire and students had to read the test items and mentally comprehend the speech act scenarios to rate them. The whole test was conducted in a paper and pencil version.

**Table 2:** List of speech act situations of requests and apology

|                                    |   |
|------------------------------------|---|
| Situation 1: going to library      | Situation 9: arrangements for class party |
| Situation 2: talking to teacher    | Situation 10: changing class timing       |
| Situation 3: class presentation    | Situation 11: forgetting borrowed book    |
| Situation 4: meeting teacher       | Situation 12: exam grades                 |
| Situation 5: borrowing book        | Situation 13: research project            |
| Situation 6: college canteen       | Situation 14: topic for assignment        |
| Situation 7: filling questionnaire | Situation 15: class trip                  |
| Situation 8: meeting H.O.D.        | Situation 16: snack bar                   |

Students first recognized and judged the appropriateness of the item by marking the box labeled *yes or no*. Based on their judgment they had to rate them on a five-point scale from 1(*least acceptable*) to 5 (*most acceptable*). Next, they had to identify the status relationship between the speaker and hearer. In addition, since the sentence to be judged was the last sentence in the scenario, the participants were asked to not only mark the infelicities but also to supply the correct form of the sentence (see Appendix). By recognizing what is pragmatically and grammatically inappropriate or less appropriate, learners are able to raise their awareness to avoid producing those erroneous features and to concentrate only on the acceptable structures. No time limit was proposed for the test. However, the recorded time for the three groups was a range between 60 to 120 minutes.

Rating for the study was based on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from least acceptable to most acceptable,

Rating:                    \_1\_ . \_2\_ . \_3\_ . \_4\_ . \_5\_

1. Least Acceptable
2. Less Acceptable
3. Acceptable
4. More Acceptable
5. Most Acceptable

This rating scale was decided due to its ability to allow for comparisons and slight differences in ratings across messages, while at the same time allowing for manageable analysis. The scale requires the rater to make holistic judgments about the acceptability of a message based on experience and pragmatic intuition. The main reason for using the recognition/judgment task was to investigate whether the wording of the recognition task attempted to assess whether learners will notice the expressions in the input. Factors affecting judgment include an adequately formed request/apology, an appropriate level of politeness, and an adequate use of downgraders and positive supportive moves. As such, the total score of each participant was the rating(s) given by participant for each test item. The Cronbach alpha of this scale in this study was .74.

Three experienced native speaking EFL instructors, all university lecturers, were selected as evaluators because of their experience in using holistic assessment guidelines (*cf.* Hughes, 2003; Tajeddin & Alemi, 2014) to evaluate L2 learner production (i.e. writing). They also had a full command of Persian and had lived in the country for more than twenty-five years. The inter rater reliability was .92.

## RESULTS

### Quantitative Data

In order to answer the first research question, a three-way between subjects analysis (ANOVA) was employed according to language proficiency, age and gender. Table 3 shows the quantitative analysis of the recognition/judgment test.

**Table 3:** Three-way between-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA)

| Tests of Between-Subjects Effects |                               |     |                |          |      |                        |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----|----------------|----------|------|------------------------|
| Dependent Variable: recognition   |                               |     |                |          |      |                        |
| Source                            | Type III<br>Sum of<br>Squares | df  | Mean<br>Square | F        | Sig. | Partial Eta<br>Squared |
| Corrected Model                   | 1837.224 <sup>a</sup>         | 11  | 167.020        | 9.448    | .000 | .373                   |
| Intercept                         | 163216.407                    | 1   | 163216.407     | 9233.115 | .000 | .981                   |
| Proficiency                       | 341.722                       | 2   | 170.861        | 9.666    | .000 | .970                   |
| Age                               | 7.774                         | 2   | 3.887          | .220     | .033 | .380                   |
| gender                            | 32.089                        | 1   | 32.089         | 1.815    | .018 | .100                   |
| proficiency * age                 | .533                          | 1   | .533           | .030     | .862 | .000                   |
| proficiency * gender              | 28.099                        | 2   | 14.049         | .795     | .045 | .009                   |
| age * gender                      | 34.131                        | 2   | 17.066         | .965     | .383 | .011                   |
| proficiency * age * gender        | .744                          | 1   | .744           | .042     | .838 | .000                   |
| Error                             | 3093.525                      | 175 | 17.677         |          |      |                        |
| Total                             | 355873.000                    | 187 |                |          |      |                        |
| Corrected Total                   | 4930.749                      | 186 |                |          |      |                        |

A three way between groups analysis of variance was conducted to explore the effect of age and gender and proficiency level on pragmatic development of EFL learners, using a recognition test. The participants in this study were divided into three groups according to their age (group 1: 20-24; group 2: 25-30; group 3: 30-35). The results show that there was no interaction between proficiency, age, and gender,  $F(1, 175) = .042$ ,  $p = .838$ . However, proficiency had a significant effect on the performance of the participants  $F(2, 175) = 9.666$ ,  $p = 0.000$ . The effect size of proficiency was large (partial eta squared = .970). In the same vein, age had a significant effect on the performance of the participants  $F(2, 175) = .220$ ,  $p = 0.033$ . The effect size for age was moderate (partial eta squared = 0.380). Moreover, gender had a statistically significant effect on the performance of the EFL learners  $F(1, 175) = 1.815$ ,  $p = 0.018$ . However, the effect size for gender was small (partial eta squared

= 0.100). Therefore, the null hypothesis proposed by the research question was rejected. It seems the numerical findings are statistically significant.

### Qualitative Data: Verbal Reports

In order to get an in-depth understanding of the influence of ID factors on the ratings and responses given by the students, frequency and percentage scores were calculated for each of the test items that were grammatically or pragmatically incorrect. Because this study aimed to analyze learners' use of internal, cognitive context while recognizing and judging the pragmatic and grammatical errors, verbal reporting was considered potentially useful in tracing learners' mental processes during comprehension. Verbal reports were taken from 40 students~ 17 males and 23 females. The following Tables 4 and 5 give the total performance of the participants on the test pragmatic and grammatical items according to proficiency, age and gender.

**Table 4:** Total percentage of performance on pragmatic tests

| Groups                | Age            | Gender            | Rate 1, 2 | Rate 3, 4 |
|-----------------------|----------------|-------------------|-----------|-----------|
| <b>Under graduate</b> | 20-24<br>N= 73 | Males<br>N= 37    | 29.5%     | 72.7%     |
|                       |                | Females<br>N =36  | 52.2%     | 87.0%     |
| <b>Post grad</b>      | 25-30<br>N=82  | Males<br>N=47     | 43.6 %    | 56.4%     |
|                       |                | Females<br>N =35  | 33.3 %    | 66.7%     |
| <b>Advanced</b>       | 30-35<br>N= 32 | Males<br>N= 19    | 100.0%    |           |
|                       |                | Females<br>N = 13 | 86.5 % %  | 13.5%     |

**Table 5:** Total percentage of performance on grammar tests

| Groups | Age | Gender | Rate 1, 2 | Rate 3, 4 |
|--------|-----|--------|-----------|-----------|
|--------|-----|--------|-----------|-----------|

|                        |       |         |        |        |
|------------------------|-------|---------|--------|--------|
| <b>Under graduate.</b> | N= 73 | Males   | 72.7%  | 27.3 % |
|                        |       | N= 37   |        |        |
|                        |       | Females | 78.3%  | 21.7%  |
|                        |       | N = 36  |        |        |
| <b>Post grad</b>       | N= 82 | Males   | 97.4%  | 2.6%   |
|                        |       | Females | 91.7%  | 8.3%   |
| <b>Advanced</b>        | N= 32 | Males   | 100.0% |        |
|                        |       | N = 19  |        |        |
|                        |       | Females | 100.0% |        |
|                        |       | N = 13  |        |        |

The percentage scores of the participants in the three groups evident in Tables 4 and 5 show that advanced level learners rated both the grammatical as well as the pragmatic errors more severely than the other two groups.

All test situations were based on university setting since it is the one that the EFL learners operate in and thus they can relate pragmatic items to their daily experience. The pragmatic problems included utterances addressed mainly to the faculty (e.g., a bare imperative used for a request without an alerter; a denial where an apology was expected; the use of upgraders in a suggestion without downgraders; the lack of an explanation or a query preparatory formula with a speaker-oriented request, *I would like you to*, and the lack of explanation formulas in refusals) (Bardovi-Harlig & Griffin, 2005). Following is an in-depth, qualitative data analysis together with verbal reports from participants of pragmatic errors only.

### **a. Pragmatic incorrect item 3: class presentation**

Quantitative statistics (Tables 4, 5) shows that males in all the three age groups had a better understanding of the situation as compared to females. Nevertheless, there was a difference in the ratings given by the participants. Those who had understood the situation correctly rated the item as 1 and 2 (58%). 75.2% low-proficiency learners and 68.5% upper intermediates had ratings of 3, 4 showing a leniency for rating. All students added an apology formula and most requested a new date for

their presentations. The verbal reports showed that all the students agreed (with the exception of a few) that the expression (see Appendix) used by the student was not only inappropriate but also impolite. It seemed to be *too rude and the student could have given a better response.*” *Making use of expressions like ‘Yeah’ or ‘great’ or being too abrupt in saying ‘Not ready for...’ is really inappropriate for a university student.*

In institutional discourse, impoliteness cannot be interpreted as a form of intimacy. As learners become more self-determined and proficient in the language, they perceive the severity of pragmatic errors in the utterance as well as identify the pragmatic errors themselves. Corrections made by the three groups:

- *Sorry! I am not ready now. Could I talk next week, please?*(low intermediate)
- *No sorry I cannot. I have a cold. I am sick today.* (low intermediate)
- *It is better to say, “I apologize, but I’m not really ready because of some unexpected obstacles. Would you be kind enough to let me give my talk next week?”* (upper intermediate)
- *Excuse me, Dr. Rahimi, I am sorry. I am really not prepared today. If you don’t mind can I give the talk the next week?* (Advanced).

The justification for the frequency of willingness strategy by the learners could be their preference for two request formulae, namely *Would you mind ...*” and *“Would you be so kind as to... ”* as appropriate for high-status, high-imposition situations.

#### **b. Pragmatic incorrect item 4: meeting at office**

Females (52%) as compared to males (43.6%) had a better understanding of this situation. One reason could be that females seem to be more linguistically socialized than males. Women’s greater use of politeness as a strategy to deal with problems arises from their social position. As Holmes (2008) believed, this may be an indication of their sensitivity to contextual factors. All the students agreed that the student’s answer and

behavior was too presumptuous and it is not appropriate in an institution.

Corrected sentence:

- *I will come at 8 in the morning.* (Repetition of the original ~ low proficient).
- *Alright, anytime you say. Will 8 o'clock be alright with you?* (upper intermediate)
- *Okay Sir, I will be here whenever it will be suitable for you. Can I come at 8 tomorrow?* (advanced)

**c. Pragmatic incorrect item 7: filling questionnaire**

22.7% low proficiency males and 23.9 % females had rated the item 1. Nearly 72.2% males and 52.5 % females had rated 4. This is evidence of pragmatic insensitivity. Clearly, the advanced group had better ratings 94.4% females and 80% males respectively.

- *Hello, will you help me? /I want to ask you to help me.*
- *Good morning, I am sorry; will you help me to fill this form?*
- *Excuse me, I am sorry to disturb you/ I am sorry for disturbing you. My name is Anna Kovacs. Will you be kind enough to fill this for me when you are free?*

**d. Pragmatic incorrect item 12: about grade**

Analysis of item 12 showed that advanced group females (94.4%) outperformed males of the same age (51 %). (46 %) females from the upper intermediates outperformed (33.4%) males of the same age group. In addition, (42.2 %) low intermediate females followed by males (31.8%) rated the item as 1 and 2.

- *Sorry, I want to talk about my score.* (low proficiency)
- *Excuse me Prof. X. I know I should not talk about my grade. I am sorry I am worried about my average score.* (upper intermediate)
- *I am sorry I have to say that I studied really hard for this test and I thought that I would do better than 14. Is there any way that you could review my test and double check my grade?* (advanced)

Although the low proficient students had understood the situation they did not have a clear idea about when and how the two words *excuse me* and *sorry* are used. Their reply was the Persian equivalent *sharmandeham mazerat mikham*. Maybe participants had the perception that they have to use an external apology like *I am sorry* and it is compulsory in each apology situation. Persian by itself is a sophisticated language involving an independent system to encode the speech acts of request and apology. It happens that the use of *'please'* and *'thank you'* to signal politeness turns out to be trickier than one might think. In addition, being *sorry* for a situation could be painstaking for some.

#### **e. Pragmatic incorrect item 13: research project**

32.7% low intermediate females compared to 23.2 % males rated this item as 1 and 2. Upper intermediate females had a rating of 47.8% compared to 38.6% males of the same age group. Evidently, the ratings given by the females in both groups revealed that they had a better understanding of the situation.

- *I am sorry. Excuse me I want to ask you to see this.* ( speaker-oriented, low)
- *Sorry Mr. Heydari, just see if this is correct.* (low)

This situation is a speech act of request and the student use of *alerter* or *attention getter Sorry* is clear evidence of the inappropriate use of the word. However, in Persian, the apology (*bebaxšid*) is used as an expression of phatic communication.

- *Excuse me, Mrs. X. I had already written the review. Do you have the time to correct it for me?* (hearer-oriented, upper)
- *Thank you Sir. I have written the review of literature of my project. Will you be kind enough to take a look at it whenever you are free?*(hearer- oriented, advanced)

The student is offered a seat by the professor. Only the advanced level students noticed this and responded appropriately. The high-proficiency learners correctly identified conventionally indirect requests

with a significantly higher frequency than the low proficiency learners did. Comparatively participants in the other two groups did not have a proper response for this item. In general, all those who had understood the situation had better ratings but in some cases, the corrected version showed clear evidence of speaker imposition on the production of requests clearly reflecting the influence of not only language proficiency but largely the effect of age, social and psychological maturity of the participant.

#### **f. pragmatic incorrect item 15: about class trip**

In the Class Trip scenario (situation 15) which contained a refusal, an explanation was omitted in the original. Learners (37.3%) added explanations and this (as they later on explained) showed more respect and sincerity. Students' responses show that there is a clear link between pragmatic awareness and the socio-cultural issue of what is correct and incorrect.

- *Peter should say, "I am sorry Madame, but I can't. I am going to my friend's apartment and I won't be able to help you."*
- *I am very sorry. I will ask my brother to do so.(explanation)*
- *I am sorry I think I cannot help you this tonight because I will be going to my friend's apartment this week. I have to prepare for my exam. (explanation) *Is it alright if I check the bus timing tomorrow morning? OR Do you think it will be late if I check the bus timings tomorrow morning?**

A few responses from the low intermediate (24.2%) were changed into an acceptance.

- *Oh sure, Teacher. I will do it for you. It will be a great pleasure.*
- *I will check the time for you.*
- *Okay, be sure I will do it for you.*

The respondents indicated that they had many things on their minds while responding. They reported analyzing the situational variables such as the interlocutor's age and status and confessed to thinking the utterance through quickly in Persian before producing it in English. In

line with Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1996) overall analysis of students responses showed that in dealing with institutional discourse the status-appropriate input is often limited (L1 in our case) or absent from the status-unequal encounters that characterize talk in out-of-class sessions and classrooms. Learners attend to interactions and reactions, consider the effect of one choice of words over another, and select the information with the least processing effort and the greatest relevance for interpretation. Their individual differences like language proficiency, age and gender can be attributed to learners different preferences for certain categories of strategy.

## **DISCUSSION**

Bardovi-Harlig (2001) identified four main ways in which nonnative speech act production may vary from native production: (1) production of different speech acts, (2) use of different semantic formulas, (3) use of different content, and (4) use of different form. This framework was used to organize the report with a focus on the interaction between ID factors and ILP and to what learners notice most about pragmatically infelicitous utterances, how serious they consider them to be and how they attempt to repair them. This type of information can provide suggestions for material development and activities for instruction in pragmatics.

In response to research question (1), an attempt was made to probe the effect of ID variables and students recognition and rating of NSs requests and apologies as being pragmatically appropriate especially in interactions in status unequal speech act situations. Thus, initially, EFL students responses to the test items were analyzed according to their proficiency levels. The obtained results showed the clear interaction between individual learner characteristics and the speech act situations. Although students had a clear understanding of the situations, the ratings for the pragmatic errors especially by the low proficient learners showed that they are not yet sensitive to pragmatic infelicities and have not attained pragmatic competence in the target language clearly indicating that students at this proficiency level still lack the necessary input for

recognizing pragmatic errors. Although the low proficient learners generally knew what to change, many admitted that supplying the appropriate content seemed somewhat harder than supplying the expected semantic formula. Particularly, the repairs made by learners was not target-like suggesting that learners may move toward the target in stages (Bardovi-Harlig & Griffin, 2005), such as by providing a *mitigator* of some type where a specific *mitigator* is expected, or offering an explanation, where the content is less specific. This indicates to the issue that in those contexts in which learners receive explicit instruction in pragmatics, learning outcomes and pathways may be different (Shively & Cohen, 2008). Results also showed that the participants had misunderstood the written format with the spoken one in that, more than 80% of the students did not pay attention to the use of *alerters* or *attention getters* in their writing and some even felt justified in using *upgraders*. Their syntactic patterns tended to be direct because they were not pragmatically competent to mitigate a request or an apology. The frequent use of direct forms (imperatives, performatives and want statements) probably helped them to achieve their goals in order to avoid confusion or fear of being misinterpreted by the interlocutor. The gap in the participants knowledge suggests that usually learners in EFL contexts are primarily exposed to traditional teaching methods that highlight grammar rather than communication and pragmatic competence.

On the other hand, in spite of pragmalinguistic variations, most of the low proficient female participants of the same age group could employ the sociopragmatic strategies to rate the items and some were quite strict about the degree of imposition or the severity of the offense. This was clear evidence of the influence of the two major variables~ age and gender~ on their language awareness. Moreover, the variation in the length and content of responses was a clear indication of *selectivity* , where some students expressed their opinion and thoughts very freely and elaborated on a number of points. Apparently, for most giving the appropriate expressions seemed to be more difficult in that, in social interactions Iranians are more concerned about the social power, gender

and age of the interlocutor. Students' verbal reports showed that they were not at ease with writing the responses and felt that if the test was conducted as a role-play probably they would not have made use of direct strategies. These findings suggest that students have to be instructed about the concepts of imposition and status in making requests or apologies and learn that the use of imperatives is only appropriate in a rather limited number of circumstances. As Takahashi (2005) believes, we often witness learners who are aware of a mismatch or gap between what they can produce and what they need to produce, or between what they produce and what proficient target language speakers produce.

In line with Bardovi-Harlig and Griffin (2005), the repairs to the situations made by upper intermediates showed they were often able to identify the source of pragmatic and grammatical infelicities and they frequently provided new utterances that addressed the problem. Although they rated the pragmatic infelicities for being inappropriate, most of them if not all, were not able to produce the correct form and this can be attributed to their level of language proficiency. As research suggests it was understood that learners usually begin with a limited range of pragmalinguistic resources, often symbolized by the overgeneralization of a few forms over a range of functions or the use of formulaic language. Together with the increase in language proficiency, they gradually expand their pragmalinguistic repertoire by adopting a new form-function mapping into their systems. This process is slow, unless learners are exposed to explicit correction, feedback, or modeling.

In analyzing the speech act situations, learners were fairly consistent in providing explanations for why they couldn't help the teacher with the class trip (item 15) or give their class presentation (item 3) by providing the expected semantic formula. However, most of the responses produced by the low and upper intermediate levels showed that the content of the explanations was not always comparable to the original attested native speaker responses in the studies (Bardovi-Harlig & Dorneyi, 1998; Crandall & Basturkmen, 2004) from which the scenarios were drawn. The findings of the present study are in line with previous studies mentioned in the literature, in that EFL learners' rating of

grammatical errors was much higher as compared to the pragmatic ones (see Table 5). According to Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (2005) understanding differences among speakers rather than reporting group data is a necessary step to understanding acceptable usage and variation in the target language by both native speakers and nonnative speakers (p. 18).

Analyses of verbal reports revealed that learners discussed pragmatic infelicities as politeness errors. Productions as *'I would like you to....'* showed that learners might recognize the string *would like* as potentially polite and be unable to recognize the force of the full expression. Interestingly, other students had similar access to inferential processes, but they were less confident or hesitant about giving definite answers and provided very short answers. These findings, are in accordance with Schmidt (1993) claim that those who are concerned with establishing relationships with target language speakers are more likely to pay close attention to the pragmatic aspects of input and to struggle to understand than those who are not so motivated (p. 36). Similarly, when pragmatic information is noticed, whether attended to deliberately or purely inadvertently, the input has the potential to become intake. The findings indicated that the targeted population of EFL learners could in principle identify both pragmatic infelicities and grammatical errors and distinguish them from non-problematic sentences in context. Their interpretations of the utterances were strongly related to the speaker intentions. An understanding of the motives behind the EFL learners linguistic choices is important because the needs of L2 speakers, who are becoming functional bilinguals, may not be identical with those of monolingual native speakers.

Regarding the second research question, evidently environment plays an important part in learning the pragmatic norms of L2. Findings in general, revealed that learners were capable of making use of the limited input to understand what is pragmatically appropriate in a certain context and even report recognizing formally appropriate strings at high levels, but they had more difficulty in producing (writing) these strings, although their production improved in parallel with their language

proficiency. Evidently, responses given by the upper intermediate and advanced levels showed that their pragmatic development was comparatively better and neared native standards indicating their greater and longer experience with the language that remarkably affected their ratings of the scenarios. In line with Maeshiba et al. (1996), results showed that advanced learners compared to the low intermediate were found to be better in identifying the contexts in which L1 apology or request strategy could or could not be used. In addition, qualitative analysis showed the strong interaction between individual learner characteristics and students' ratings of the items (see Tables 4 and 5). Evidently, these students scored significantly higher in both their pragmatics and grammar ratings (that is, they either noticed more mistakes and rated them higher, or did a combination of the two), but the increase in the grammar scores exceeded the increase in the pragmatics score.

The overall analysis of findings supported both Schmidt (1993) noticing hypothesis and Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei (1998) and indicated that three factors play an important role in the learner's linguistic awareness: the proficiency level, the learning environment, and the students' access to authentic L2 input.

## **CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

The overall analysis of the results revealed that grammatical proficiency was not equivalent to pragmatic proficiency. Moreover, as Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) believed this could be attributed to two key factors related to input: the availability of input and the salience of relevant linguistic features in the input. Analysis of effective input from the point of view of the learner and the learning environment clearly shows that EFL students' access/exposure to native speakers and natural discourse is limited. Pragmatics as a separate course has so far not been explicitly included in our curriculum and learners in a foreign language learning environment lack opportunities and has no potential for interaction in the L2; all the input that they get is limited either to textbooks, classrooms or the media. Very often, they have no

explanations as to why L2 speakers commonly use the language as they do, why certain meanings are conveyed differently in the L2, and how underlying L2 ideologies and shared cultural values influence L2 speakers' pragmatic behavior. Moreover, the additional task of producing the correct form can be challenging for these EFL students. The low intermediate students were capable of understanding the speech act situations but they were not able to demonstrate this knowledge evident in the ratings and also the corrections made in the L2. As Bardovi-Harlig and Griffin (2005) observed L2 pragmatics, like all components of second language competence, seems to emerge in stages, and it is likely that learners can take advantage of instruction in form according to their individual stage of grammatical development (p. 412).

Language is not only an instrument for communication but it is also related to a set of behavioral norms and cultural values, which construct one's self-identity. After learning a new language, one's perceptions of his or her competence, communication styles and value systems may undergo some changes. Context is a reflection of one's cognitive state because it contains all the facts that one is aware of or is capable of becoming aware of and the context that the student brings to understand a message may differ among individuals because of their internal states and cognitive abilities.

One significant implication of this study is that, increased pragmatic awareness should be one of the goals of classroom instruction. However, it is very important to remember that the Iranian EFL curriculum is so designed that it has strong links and roots in the Iranian culture and lifestyle itself. Although cultural rules and conceptualizations are not equally imprinted in the minds of everybody but they are shared as part of social-identity or even self-identity, and this identity helps a person to comprehend situations like institutional discourse.

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## Appendix

**Situation 3:** It is Anna's day to give her talk in class, but she is not ready.

Teacher: Thank you Steven, that was very interesting. Anna, it's your turn to give your talk.

Anna: No! Not now. I cannot do it today I will do it next week.

- a. Was the last part appropriate?  Yes  No.
- b. If there was a problem, how bad do you think it was?
- c. Please rate the sentence: \_\_\_\_ . \_\_\_\_ . \_\_\_\_ . \_\_\_\_ . \_\_\_\_
- d. Is the sentence grammatically correct/incorrect or pragmatically correct/incorrect?
- e. What is the status relationship between Peter and his instructor? Is it higher, equal or lower?
- f. Write the correct form of the sentence if you think it is incorrect.

**Situation 4:** Peter goes to see his professor at his office. When he arrives, his professor is busy.

Peter: (knocks on the door)

Professor: Yes, come in.

Peter: Hello, Mr. Gordon. Are you busy?

Professor: Uhm . . . I am afraid so. Could you come back later?

Peter: OK, I will be here tomorrow morning at 8.

**Situation 7:** Anna goes to ask a lecturer to fill in a questionnaire. She knocks on the office door.

Anna: (knocks on the door)

Lecturer: Yes, come in. (Student sees: The lecturer is seated at her computer in her office typing)

Anna: Hello. My name is Anna Kovacs. If you do not mind, fill this in for me.

**Situation 12:** Mark has come to see his lecturer about his grades.

Lecturer (female): Good morning! Yes, what can I do for you?

Mark: Um, I have come about my grades for last term. I think it is too low. Are you sure, you corrected my paper?

**Situation 13:** Bob has gone to see his lecturer about his research project.

Lecturer: Come in. Please take a seat.

Bob: Okay, look I have written the review of literature for my project, and I just want to check I m on the right track.

**Situation 15:** The students of the English class are going on a trip. The teacher asks Peter to help with the plans for the class trip.

Teacher: OK, so we will go by bus. Who lives near the bus station? Peter, could you check the bus times for us on the way home tonight?

Peter: No, I cannot do it tonight. I will live at my friend s apartment this week. nnot do it tonight. I will live at my friend s apartment this week.

