Iranian EFL learners' Use of Thanking Speech Act: An ILP Study

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Abstract

One important aspect of pragmatic competence is the ability to comprehend and/or produce speech acts appropriately in different contexts. The acquisition and use of such an ability by non-native speakers of a language has been a major research line in interlanguage pragmatic competence (ILP) studies. Among different speech acts, the speech act of thanking is one of the most recurring acts, which has been comparatively less under the spotlight of ILP researchers. The purpose of this study is to explore how Iranian EFL learners express their gratitude and what thanking strategies they use in 14 different thanking situations. For this purpose, data were collected from 59 Iranian female advanced EFL learners through Written Discourse Completion Tasks (WDCT). Quantitative and qualitative analyses of data demonstrated a variety of thanking strategies were used by the participants in different thanking situations; however, the direct expression of gratitude without any preceding or succeeding complementary expression was the most frequently used strategy. Moreover, the diversity of different thanking strategies were almost similar in different thanking situations. The obtained results might imply that Iranian EFL learners need to be made more sensitive to both less direct and a wider variety of thanking speech act realization strategies.

Introduction

Ever since 1980s, second language researchers and educators have redirected their attention to second (SL) or foreign language (FL) learners' pragmatic competence development issues and have designed different cross-cultural and/or developmental research projects in this regard (Bardovi-Harlig, 2013). Such studies, called interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) studies, primarily deal with SL or FL learners' production and comprehension of linguistic actions in a particular context (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993). In other words, Interlanguage pragmatics is the study of non-native speakers' coding and decoding of meaning in a second or foreign language (Eslami & Eslami-Rasekh, 2008; Li, 2019; Schauer, 2009).

It has been for more than half a century that scholars have come to the understanding that language learners' mastery of grammatical competence alone does not guarantee their successful communicative interactions in a second or foreign language (Ahmadi Safa & Mahmoodi, 2012), and for long they have warned that the development of grammatical competence should not result in the underestimation of communicative competence (Hymes, 1971). This means that language learners should acquire multiple competences to be able to communicate successfully in a foreign language or even in their mother tongue (Leech, 1983). Such multiple competences have been differently named in the competing models of communicative language ability. One of the most influential models of language ability which was proposed in language testing and evaluation context was that of Bachman (1990) in which the author nominated pragmatic and organizational competences as two major competences of communicative language ability and ever since then foreign and second language learning researchers have focused on different aspects of pragmatic competence (e.g. Cohen, 2008; Pishghadam & Zarei, 2012; Derakhshan & Eslami Rasekh, 2015; Sonnenburg-Winkler, Eslami, & Derakhshan, 2020). The primary foci of L2 learners' pragmatic competence development studies have classically been the comprehension and production of speech acts, implicatures, and routines (Kasper & Dahl, 1991). This might be partly justified given the research finding that native speakers are mostly tolerant of grammatical errors made by non-native speakers, but they are not much tolerant of errors resulting from pragmatic failures (Thomas, 1983; McGee, 2019). Inability to conform to the pragmatic norms of the target community and having inappropriate pragmatic behavior can lead to communication failure and misunderstandings (Malmir & Derakhshan, 2020; McGee, 2019; Sykes & Cohen, 2018); moreover, the speaker may appear rude or socially inferior in such a context (Cohen, 1996; Eslami-Rasekh, 2005; Jiang, 2006; Nguyen, 2011; Taguchi & Kim, 2018; Taguchi & Roever, 2017; Yates, 2010).

Thomas (1983) dichotomized pragmatic failure in terms of pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic failure types. Pragmalingistic failure as a commonplace linguistic deficiency among foreign language learners happens when linguistic forms and strategies are transferred incorrectly from a speaker's mother tongue to the target language (Koike, 1996). On the other hand, sociopragmatic failure is concerned with the social conditions of the speech event and arises when cultural expectations are transferred inappropriately. Speakers' ability to communicate and use different speech acts relies on their ability to use pragmalinguistic as well as sociopragmatic knowledge correctly in different situations and language contexts (Derakhshan & Eslami, 2019; Padilla Cruz , 2018; Taguchi, 2015, 2019; Tanck, 2002).

The speech act of gratitude is one of the high frequently used speech acts in the interpersonal relationships of people in both L1 and L2 contexts (Eisenstein & Bodman, 1993) and is defined as

> An illocutionary act performed by a speaker which is based on a past act performed by the hearer. This past act benefits the speaker and the speaker believes it to have benefited him or her. The speaker feels grateful or appreciative, and makes a statement which counts as an expression of gratitude. (Eisenstein & Bodman, 1986, p.167)

In general terms, people thank someone when the thing they thank for has benefited them (Searle & Searle, 1969), but considering discourse structure, expressions of gratitude are considered as a reaction to previous utterances with the aim of balancing the social relationship between hearer and speaker (Leech, 1983). On the other hand, the expression of gratitude has an important social value. Eisenstein and Bodman (1993, p. 64) mentioned that it is one of the few functions that most speakers can remember being explicitly taught as children. They also maintain that "used frequently in a wide range of interpersonal relationships, this function, when appropriately expressed, can engender feelings of warmth and solidarity among interlocutors. Conversely, the failure to express gratitude adequately can have negative consequences for their relationships". In addition, if the expression of gratitude is appropriately done, it leads to the satisfaction of both the speaker and hearer and if it is not applied correctly, the rudeness and impoliteness of the interlocutor will be most likely concluded (Intachakra, 2004). Despite the significance and high frequency of the speech act, the expression of gratitude is a potential challenge for speakers (Anwari, 2020; Aston, 1995; Díaz Pérez, 2005; Eisenstein & Bodman, 1986; Eisenstein & Bodman, 1993; Kasper, 1990; Schauer & Adolphs, 2006; Thomas, 1983; Wong, 2017; Yoosefvand & Rasekh, 2014). In the case of L2 speakers the challenge for the expression of gratitude might be even stronger as non-native speakers face great difficulty expressing gratitude because of both their inaccurate sociocultural perceptions and the paucity of the available linguistic means (Pishghadam & Zarei, 2011).

Finally, it needs to be admitted that compared to other speech acts, the study of gratitude speech act has been relatively less at the focus of the researchers' attention (Gkouma & Mikros, 2020; Pishghadam & Zarei, 2012); however, an increasing interest in the study of L2 learners' production and comprehension of thanking or gratitude speech act has only been observed lately (Gkouma & Mikros, 2020). Considering the importance of expressing gratitude appropriately for foreign or second language learners in intercultural communications (Cheng, 2005; Yoosefvand & Rasekh, 2014) and the scarcity of studies focusing on this speech act in Iranian EFL context, this study partially investigated thanking speech act and its realization strategies in different speech act use situations.

Literature Review

From a theoretical stance, pragmatics researchers and theoreticians have put the speech act of gratitude expression/thanking under different classifications of speech acts. Austin (1962) for example identified expression of gratitude as behabitative speech act as it deals with the attitudes and the expression of those attitudes toward other's social behaviors. On the other hand, Searle (1976) assigned thanking to the class of expressive speech acts. From a different perspective, Brown and Levinson (1987) considered thanking as a face threatening act since there is a sense of indebtedness that the speaker feels obliged to express his/her gratitude.

Researchers have studied thanking speech act from different perspectives in different contexts. For instance, Eisenstein and Bodman (1986) studied the expression of gratitude by 67 advanced L2 speakers of English from 15 different nationalities and revealed that the participants failed to express gratitude in a native-like manner due to both pragmalinguistic inadequacies and sociopragmatic mismatches between their L1 and L2. In another study, Eisenstein and Bodman (1993) studied the prosodic characteristics of expressions of gratitude used by non-native speakers of English. It was shown that non-native English speakers' expressions of gratitude were not warm and sincere enough in comparison with native speakers' intonation features.

Similar findings to those of Eisenstein and Bodman (1986) were reported by Cui (2012) who investigated the expression of speech act of gratitude by native English speakers and advanced-level non-native speakers of English from three different nationalities (Chinese, Korean, and Indonesian). It was reported that non-native speakers of English could not express gratitude appropriately because of syntactic errors and inappropriate use of conventions. Negative transfer and cultural differences and social norms were identified as the sources of difficulty which learners faced in achieving native-likeness in expressing gratitude (Cui, 2012).

In another cross-cultural study, Johansen (2008) examined how native speakers of Norwegian and learners of English as a foreign language express gratitude in particular thanking situations. The participants were asked to complete WDCT consisting of thirteen situations. The WDCT included six thanking situation in Norwegian and seven situations in English. The study revealed that the length of utterances was similar in English and Norwegian. However, the responses given by Norwegians in English were longer than both the Norwegian responses and the native English responses. The results also illustrated that the Norwegian relied on their L1 pragmatic competence in their expressions of gratitude.

Focusing on the thanking speech act realization strategies, Farnia and Suleiman (2009) compared the strategies used by Iranian English learners for the expression of gratitude with those of American native speakers of English. The findings revealed that Iranian and American English speakers used the same type of strategies; however, the frequency of strategies used was different. Native speakers of English used thanking and appreciation strategies more frequently.

Similarly, Chinese EFL learners' use of gratitude strategies compared to native English speakers was aimed at by both Cheng (2005) and Wong (2010). Cheng (2005) conducted an exploratory cross-sectional study of the Chinese learners of English expression of gratitude. He also investigated the influence of first language on their expressions of gratitude. The findings demonstrated that there were differences between Chinese EFL learners and English native speakers in the use of thanking strategies. Significant differences were seen in the length of speech and use of strategies between the two groups. Different factors, including contextual variables, social status, familiarity and imposition were shown to have significant influences on the length of speech and the use of strategies. Moreover, the results verified the influence of L1 on the L2 speakers' interlanguage pragmatic competence development. Moreover, length of residence in the United States was shown to have a positive effect on the pragmatic development of Chinese English learners. Also, Wong (2010) cross-culturally studied the expressions of gratitude among Chinese speakers of English and suggested that different from the English native speakers, Chinese English speakers used "thank you" as a terminating signal at the end of conversations.

Naturally observing native English and Thai speakers, Intachakra (2004) comparatively examined the realization of the speech act of gratitude in English and Thai. The findings showed that British English speakers preferred to thank each other directly in comparison with Thai speakers. While the same communicative goals in expressing gratitude were used in both cultures, their thanking strategies were different. The study concluded that Thai speakers could not express gratitude as effectively as the British, so they tend to use a practical method for expressing their thankfulness.

In a corpus-based study, Leung and Seto (2015) investigated the variety of thanking strategies performed by speakers of various national or cultural backgrounds in different domains and contexts of situation. They also identified core thanking expressions, and collocational and colligational patterns of these core forms of thanking across four spoken English corpora. The study revealed that the most frequent forms of thanking included *thank you*, *thanks*, *thank you very much, thanks very much,* and *thank you for*.

Floyd et al. (2018) investigated means of gratitude expression across eight languages among five different continents. The researchers aimed to compare gratitude as an emotion with gratitude as a linguistic practice. They verified the existence of minor cross-cultural variation and indicated that Western European languages, English and Italian tended to express gratitude verbally while the other studied languages expressed implicit gratitude. The study also indicated that English speakers put a particular cultural value on stating 'thank you' to show politeness and gratitude.

Concerning the thanking speech act realization strategies applied in Iranian EFL context a couple of studies are noteworthy. As for the first, Pishghadam and Zarei (2011) studied the strategies used for the expression of gratitude. The researchers concluded that Iranian EFL learners felt the necessity to express their gratitude to those who did a favor to them in every possible form ranging from using the strategies to express their positive feelings to direct thanking expressions. In addition, the results showed that female EFL learners used gratitude more often than the male learners of English.

As for the second and a more recent study in the Iranian context, Faqe et al. (2019) conducted a descriptive-qualitative research to examine the most common thanking strategies used by Kurdish EFL learners. The results showed that both male and female participants used *thanking*, *state of favor*, and *appreciation* thanking strategies more frequently than the other strategies.

Against the backdrop of the reviewed literature and the apparent relative scarcity of the studies focusing on the speech act of gratitude in general (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993) and in Iranian EFL learning context compared to the studies focusing on other speech acts like request (Ahmadi Safa & Mahmoodi, 2012; Derakhshan & Shakki, 2021), refusal (e.g., Hashemian, 2021), complement (Bordbar, et al., 2017), apology (Khatib & Ahmadi Safa, 2011; Ahmadi Safa & Mahmoodi, 2012) in specific, this study explored the thanking strategies used by Iranian EFL learners for their expressions of gratitude in different thanking situations. With the stated purpose in mind, the researchers formulated the following research questions.

Research Questions

1. What thanking strategies do Iranian EFL learners use for expressing their gratitude in different thanking situations?

2. How do sociopragmatic dimensions affect Iranian EFL learners' expressions of speech act of gratitude?

Method

Participants

The first group of study participants included 28 Iranian EFL learners who were asked to write the latest and the most frequent situations in which they expressed their gratitude. The second group of participants to whom the final version of the researcher-made WDCT was given to assess the occurrence frequency of the WDCT thanking scenarios comprised of 32 EFL learners. Finally, 59 Iranian EFL learners completed the WDCTs. All three group participants were female, and they were all at advanced levels of general English proficiency. Their average age was 27.08 (SD=3.41) years, and they were all native speakers of Farsi.

Instrument

The data for this study were elicited by means of a WDCT. The test comprised of 14 socially differentiated thanking situations which varied in terms of the interlocutors' relationship, that is to say, on the dimensions of dominance or social power, social distance or familiarity, and degree of imposition. The WDCT was used to investigate the realization patterns of expressions of gratitude among Iranian advanced EFL learners. It also provided the opportunity to study the effect of the social factors on the speech act realization patterns.

For the design of the WDCT, following Hudson et al. (1995), the degree of imposition was categorized into high and low levels of imposition; however, the categorization of social status classes was minimally different from that of Hudson et al. (1995) framework. In fact, the category of equal power was added to the classification of the concept in this study. In addition, familiarity i.e., social distance, category was divided into three categories: (a) high-familiarity: speaker and hearer know each other very well (e.g., close friends), and (b) low-familiarity: speaker and hearer know each other, but not very well (e.g., classmates, acquaintances), and (c) no-familiarity: speaker and hearer do not know each other. Table 1 shows the classification of these 14 scenarios according to these modifications of social contextual variables. The WDCT was viewed by two English language experts to assure its sufficient content coverage and relevance, clarity, and construct validity**.**

Table 1. Social Factors of the Scenarios.

Scenarios	Familiarity	Power	Imposition
Thanking for dinner party	-	=	+
Thanking for job promotion	-	-	+
Thanking for birthday gift	+	=	-
Thanking for bank clerk help	No	=	-
Thanking restaurant manager	No	=	-
Thanking colleague for standing in for you	-	=	+
Thanking your housekeeper for her help	-	+	-
Thanking your university classmate	-	=	+
Thanking your friend For lending money to you	+	=	-
Thanking sport trainer for lending car to you	-	-	+
Thanking professor for postponing the exam	-	-	+

Thanking your colleague for helping you	No	=	+
Thanking your doctor for helping you	-	-	+
Thanking your spouse for buying TV	+	=	-

Note. + indicates high; = indicates equal; − indicates low

Procedure

The first step to design WDCT was to collect an item pool. So, 28 Iranian EFL learners were asked to write down the most frequent situations in which they usually express their gratitude. The responses were translated into English, and the most frequent thanking situations were given to two native English speakers to evaluate speech act realization context and decide the likelihood of the occurrence of the speech act (context validity). Some thanking situations mentioned by Iranian EFL learners were eliminated because they were considered as less likely to occur in authentic English contexts.

As the next step, the most frequent thanking situations were used for the scenario generation and the development of a WDCT test of EFL learners' thanking speech at realization in different situations and circumstances. The WDCT test was expert-viewed by two English language experts to further guarantee the validity of the measure. The final edited version, which consisted of 14 scenarios, was piloted on a group of 32 EFL learners to check if they expressed their gratitude in those situations (Table 2). These scenarios varied on the contextual factors of interlocutors' familiarity or social distance, social status or power, and degree of imposition for thanking. All selected scenarios were the most common situations that EFL learners may encounter in different thanking situations in and out of academic contexts. Finally, 59 Iranian advanced EFL learners took the WDCT test, and the completed WDCTs were scored by a couple of EFL teaching experts.

Data analysis

The data obtained from WDCTs were coded and analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Moreover, quantitative measures were employed to analyze the frequency of the use of each thanking strategy in each scenario.

Results

As mentioned earlier, the present study was an attempt to investigate thanking strategies used by Iranian EFL learners in 14 socially different thanking situations.

Table 2 presents the obtained frequency for the expression of gratitude in each one of the 14 scenarios. As can be seen, except for the one which is titled as "Thanking your housekeeper for her help", in all other 13 scenarios, the EFL learners mostly confirmed the frequent use of the gratitude speech act.

Table 2. The Frequency of the Use of Scenarios (|n = 32).

Scenario	Frequency
Thanking for dinner party	19
Thanking for job promotion	20
Thanking for birthday gift	25
Thanking for bank clerk help	19
Thanking restaurant manager	18

Thanking colleague for standing in for you	18
Thanking your housekeeper for her help	13
Thanking your university classmate	24
Thanking your friend For lending money to you	24
Thanking sport trainer for lending car to you	23
Thanking professor for postponing the exam	25
Thanking your colleague for helping you	21
Thanking your doctor for helping you	27
Thanking your spouse for buying …	29

Table 3 demonstrates the use of different thanking strategies used by 59 Iranian EFL learners in 14 gratitude scenarios.

Table 3. Thanking Strategies in 14 Thanking Scenarios.

Scenario	Strategies	Frequency	Percentage
Thanking for dinner party	Thanking	32	54.2
	Thanking + Expressing Pleasure	6	10.2
	Thanking + Expressing Pleasure+ Offering Reciprocity	3	5.1
	Thanking + Expressing Pleasure+ Leave-taking	6	10.2
	Thanking + Complementing the Action	6	10.2
	Complementing the Action+ Expressing Pleasure	1	1.7
	Thanking + Giving Reason	5	8.5
	Total	**59**	**100**
Thanking for job promotion	Thanking	12	20.3
	Thanking + Expressing Pleasure	4	6.8
	Appreciation	3	5.1
	Thanking + Stating The Title	13	22.0
	Appreciation + Stating The Title	2	3.4
	Expressing Surprise + Thanking	6	10.2
	Expressing Surprise + Thanking + Appreciation	8	13.6
	Expressing Surprise + Appreciation	5	8.5
	Thanking + Complementing the Person	2	3.4
	Expressing Surprise + Complementing the Person	2	3.4
	Expressing Pleasure + Thanking	2	3.4
	Total	**59**	**100**

Scenario	Strategies	Frequency	Percentage
Thanking for birthday gift	Expressing Surprise + Thanking	31	52.5
	Expressing Surprise + Complementing The Gift + Thanking	10	16.9
	Thanking + Complementing the Person	7	11.9
	Thanking + Expressing Lack of Necessity	2	3.4
	Thanking	9	15.3
	Total	**59**	**100**
Thanking for bank clerk help	Thanking	33	55.9
	Thanking + Complementing the Person	2	3.4

	Strategies	Frequency	Percentage
	Appreciation	7	11.9
	Thanking + Appreciation	2	3.4
	Thanking + Giving Reason	15	25.4
	Total	**59**	**100**
Thanking restaurant manager	Thanking	24	40.7
	Appreciation	4	6.8
	Thanking + Appreciation	1	1.7
	Thanking + Giving Reason	16	27.1
	Thanking + Complementing the Action	7	11.9
	Thanking + Expressing Liking	7	11.9
	Total	**59**	**100**
Thanking colleague for standing in for you	Expressing Gratitude	6	10.2
	Thanking + Giving Reason	24	40.7
	Thanking + Complementing the Person	9	15.3
	Thanking + Offering Reciprocity	7	11.9
	Thanking + Expressing Indebtedness	5	8.5
	Thanking	8	13.6
	Total	**59**	**100**
Thanking your housekeeper for her help	Thanking	26	44.1
	Thanking + Complementing the Action	15	25.4
	Thanking + Giving Reason	18	30.5
	Total	**59**	**100**
Thanking your university classmate	Thanking	23	39.0
	Complementing the Person + Thanking	10	16.9
	Expressing Indebtedness + Thanking	2	3.4
	Thanking + Giving Reason	24	40.7
	Total	**59**	**100**
Thanking your friend for lending money to you	Thanking	21	35.6
	Thanking + Expressing Indebtedness	7	11.9
	Complementing The Person + Thanking	10	16.9
	Thanking + Giving Reason	18	30.5
	Thanking + Expressing Lack of Necessity	3	5.1
	Total	**59**	**100**
Thanking sport trainer for lending car to you	Thanking	1	1.7
	Thanking + Appreciation	10	16.9
	Appreciation	15	25.4
	Complementing The Person + Thanking	6	10.2
	Expressing Surprise + Thanking	11	18.6
	Expressing Surprise + Complementing the Action + Thanking	7	11.9
	Thanking + Giving Reason	9	15.3
	Total	**59**	**100**

Scenario	Strategies	Frequency	Percentage
	Appreciation	21	35.6
	Thanking + Thanking	4	6.8

Thanking professor for postponing the exam	Thanking + Appreciation	6	10.2
	Thanking + Stating The Title	8	13.6
	Thanking + Giving Reason	14	23.7
	Complementing the Person + Thanking	6	10.2
	Total	**59**	**100**
Thanking your colleague for helping you	Thanking	12	20.3
	Complementing the Person + Thanking	8	13.6
	Thanking + Giving Reason	23	39.0
	Thanking + Appreciation	16	27.1
	Total	**59**	**100**
Thanking your doctor for helping you	Thanking	6	10.2
	Thanking + Appreciation	18	30.5
	Thanking + Stating The Title	10	16.9
	Thanking + Expressing Indebtedness	3	5.1
	Complementing The Person + Thanking	4	6.8
	Expressing Pleasure + Thanking	3	5.1
	Expressing Relief + Thanking	6	10.2
	Thanking + Giving Reason	9	15.3
	Total	**59**	**100**
Thanking your spouse for buying …	Expressing Surprise + Thanking	15	25.4
	Thanking + Complementing the Person	7	11.9
	Thanking + Expressing Indebtedness	1	1.7
	Appreciation	3	5.1
	Thanking	18	30.5
	Thanking + Giving Reason	9	15.3
	Expressing Pleasure + Thanking	6	10.2
	Total	**59**	**100**

As can be seen in the table above, 7 different mixtures of thanking strategies were used by the participants in the first scenario 'thanking for dinner party'. While the strategy of 'thanking' (for example, thank you!) was the most frequent one used by 32 participants out of 59 (54.2%), 'complementing + expressing the pleasure' (for example, that was great! I enjoyed it!) was used by only a single person. The participants used more different thanking strategies in the second situation of gratitude 'thanking for job promotion'; however, they used the least variety of strategies in showing their gratitude in the situation 'thanking your housekeeper for her help'.

As it is evident, 11 different mixture of thanking strategies were used in 'thanking for job promotion' gratitude situation. The strategies of 'thanking + stating the title' (for example, thanks a lot Dr. Adib!) and 'thanking' (for example, thank you very much!) were the most frequent ones used by 13 and 12 persons (22% and 20.3%), respectively. 'Appreciation + stating the title' (I appreciate it Mrs. Tat!), 'thanking + complementing the person' (for example, thanks! It's really kind of you!), 'expressing surprise + complementing the person' (Wow! You are the best!), and 'expressing pleasure + thanking' (It's really *appreciating*! thanks a million!) were the least frequent strategies (each one used by only 3.4%). In 'thanking for birthday gift' and 'thanking for bank clerk help' situations, Iranian EFL learners used 5 different mixtures of thanking strategies. But while the strategy of 'expressing surprise +

thanking' (for example, Oh, my God! Thanks a lot!) was the most frequent one used by 31 persons out of 59 (52.5%) in the 'thanking for birthday gift' situation, the strategy of 'thanking' was the most frequent one used by 33 persons out of 59 (55.9%).

In the situation of expressing gratitude in 'thanking restaurant manager' like 'thanking for dinner party', 'thanking for birthday gift', 'thanking your spouse for buying …' and 'thanking for bank clerk help' situations, the most frequently used strategy was found to be 'thanking' (for example, thanks a billion!). It was also the case with 'housekeeper' thanking situation.

As shown in Table 3, there was a similarity in strategy use pattern in the situations 'thanking colleague for standing in for you' and 'thanking your university classmate'. In both of these situations, the strategy of 'thanking + giving reason' (for example, thank you for your kindness!) was the most frequent one while 'thanking + expressing indebtedness' (for example, thanks a lot! I owe you one!) was used the least although participants used fewer strategies in the latter situation. Similar to these two thanking situations, the participants used thanking strategy 'thanking + giving reason' (for example, thank you very much for your help) the most for expressing their gratitude in 'thanking your colleague for helping you' situation; however, the least frequently used strategy was 'complementing the person + thanking' (for example, you are a great person! Thanks!).

Similarly, the strategies of 'thanking' and 'thanking + giving reason' were used the most in the situation 'thanking your friend for lending money to you' while in another borrowing situation i.e., 'thanking sport trainer for lending car to you', strategies of 'appreciation' and 'expressing surprise + thanking' were used the most. In 'thanking professor for postponing the exam' situation, 6 different mixtures of thanking strategies were used by the participants. The strategies of 'appreciation' (for example, I do appreciate!) was the most frequent one used by 21 (35.6%). On the other hand, 'thanking + thanking' (for example, Thank you! Thanks a lot!), and 'complementing the person+ thanking' (for example, you are really kind! Thanks a lot!) were used by only 4 and 6 persons, respectively as the least frequent strategies in this scenario (6.8% &10.2%, respectively). The participants used the strategy of 'thanking + appreciation' (for example, thank you! I really appreciate that!) the most in 'thanking your doctor for helping you' gratitude situation. The strategy of 'thanking + expressing indebtedness' (for example, thanks a billion! I really owe you!) was used by 3 persons as the least frequent strategy in this scenario (5.1%). The same percentage was true for 'expressing pleasure + thanking' strategy.

With regard to sociopragmatic dimensions of expressing gratitude in 14 different scenarios of the present study, as shown in Table 1, in 'thanking for dinner party', 'thanking colleague for standing in for you', and 'thanking your university classmate', the familiarity was low, power was equal, and degree of imposition was high. Among different mentioned thanking strategies, 'thanking' and 'thanking + giving reason' were used the most in these three scenarios with the same social dimensions.

As illustrated in Table 1, thanking situations with social dimensions of low familiarity, lower power, and high imposition included: 'thanking for job promotion', 'thanking sport trainer for lending car to you', 'thanking professor for postponing the exam', and 'thanking your doctor for helping you'. As shown in Table 3, a variety of strategies were used in these

four scenarios. The strategies 'thanking', 'thanking + giving reason', 'thanking + stating the title', and 'appreciation' were used the most by the participants.

Moreover, on the basis of Table 1, in 'thanking for birthday gift', 'thanking your friend for lending money to you', and 'thanking your spouse for buying …', familiarity was high, power was equal, and imposition was low. As illustrated in Table 3, 'thanking' and 'expressing surprise
+ thanking' were the most frequently used thanking strategies in these three scenarios.

Also, as shown in Table 1, the social dimensions included no familiarity, equal power, and low imposition in scenarios 'thanking for bank clerk help' and 'thanking restaurant manager'. Based on Table 3, thanking strategy used the most by the participants in these two scenarios was 'thanking'. However, in 'thanking your colleague for helping you' scenario with the social dimensions of no familiarity, equal power and high imposition, 'thanking + giving reason' was used the most.

Finally, as demonstrated in Table 1, there was no familiarity, higher power, and low imposition in 'thanking your housekeeper for helping you'. The most frequently applied thanking strategy was 'thanking'.

Table 4 demonstrates the frequency and percentage of each thanking strategy in all 14 scenarios. As is shown, the most frequently used thanking strategies in the study were 'thanking, 'thanking + giving reason', 'expressing surprise + thanking', 'appreciation', 'thanking + appreciation'. Among them, 'thanking' was used the most, and 'appreciation' and 'thanking + appreciation' were used with the same frequency. The least strategies used were 'complementing the action + expressing pleasure', 'expressing surprise + complementing the person', 'appreciation + stating the title', 'expressing indebtedness + thanking' and some other mixtures of strategies mentioned in Table 4.

Table 4. Frequency and Percentage of Each Thanking Strategy in 14 Thanking Scenarios.

Strategies	Frequency	Percentage
Thanking	225	27.24
Thanking + Giving reason	184	22.27
Thanking + Expressing Pleasure+ Offering Reciprocity	3	0.36
Thanking + Expressing Pleasure+ Leave-taking	6	0.72
Thanking + Complementing the Action	28	3.39
Complementing the Action+ Expressing Pleasure	1	0.12
Thanking + Expressing Pleasure	10	1.21
Appreciation	53	6.41
Thanking + Stating The Title	31	3.75
Appreciation + Stating The Title	2	0.24
Expressing Surprise + Thanking	63	7.62
Expressing Surprise + Thanking + Appreciation	8	0.96
Expressing Surprise + Appreciation	5	0.60
Thanking + Complementing the Person	27	3.26
Expressing Surprise + Complementing the Person	2	0.24
Expressing Pleasure + Thanking	11	1.33

Expressing Surprise + Complementing The Gift + Thanking	10	1.21
Thanking + Expressing Lack of Necessity	5	0.60
Thanking + Expressing Liking	7	0.84
Expressing Surprise + Complementing the Action + Thanking	7	0.84
Thanking + Appreciation	53	6.41
Expressing Gratitude	6	0.72
Complementing the Person + Thanking	44	5.32
Expressing Indebtedness + Thanking	2	0.24
Thanking + Offering Reciprocity	7	0.84
Thanking + Expressing Indebtedness	16	1.93
Thanking + Thanking	4	0.48
Expressing Relief + Thanking	6	0.72
Total	**826**	**100**

Discussion

This study was carried out to explore into the strategies Iranian advanced EFL learners use to express gratitude. Moreover, attempts were made to consider the effect of sociopragmatic factors on the typology and distribution of the applied thanking strategies. For these purposes, data were collected from 59 Iranian female advanced EFL learners who completed WDCT containing 14 thanking scenarios with different social factors including interlocutors' familiarity or social distance, social status or power, and degree of imposition for thanking. The findings revealed that various 28 thanking strategies were applied by Iranian EFL learners in different thanking situations (Table 4). The most frequently used strategy was the direct expression of gratitude, which was classified as 'thanking' in this study. The second most frequent strategy was 'thanking + giving reason'. In addition, it was found that the participants were not open to using rather complicated strategies like 'complementing the action + expressing pleasure', 'appreciation + stating the title', etc. Furthermore, the diversity and percentage of using different thanking strategies were almost the same among thanking situations affected by similar social factors.

As elaborated in Table 1, in the first thanking situation named 'thanking for dinner party', the familiarity between interlocutors was low, power was equal, and degree of imposition was high. In this situation, seven different thanking strategies were used by the participants. 'Thanking' was reported as the most frequently used strategy in this situation. This finding reflects earlier studies findings indicating that second or foreign language learners acquire simple 'thanking' strategy earlier than other strategies in expressing their gratitude because it is more conventionalized among different languages and cultures (Ahar & Eslami-Rasekh, 2011; Cheng, 2005; Faqe et al., 2019; Wong, 2017).

The social factors for thanking situation 'thanking for dinner party', which involved low familiarity, equal social power, and high imposition degree, was the same for the situation 'thanking colleague for standing in for you'. Comparing thanking strategies used in these two situations, almost similar strategies were used in these two situations. In fact, the following six strategies were used in 'thanking colleague for standing in for you' situation: 'thanking + giving reason', 'thanking + complementing the person' (e.g. thanks a lot, you are really

helpful), 'thanking', 'thanking + offering reciprocity', 'expressing gratitude' (e.g., I'm very grateful), and 'thanking + expressing indebtedness' (e.g., thank you very much, you did me a big favor). However, some differences in the use of thanking strategies were observed in these two situations. For instance, although the most frequently used strategy in 'thanking for dinner party' was 'thanking', in 'thanking colleague for standing in for you' it was 'thanking + giving reason'. In addition, the percentage and the type of strategies were not quite similar. Such a finding might be indicating that similar social factors in different thanking situations cannot result in exactly similar thanking strategies, but they can lead to almost similar strategies. As, Al-Momani et al. (2017) stated, language learners and native speakers have the same repertoire of thanking strategies, but culture affects the way they organize and use these strategies in different situations with different social variables.

Also, the strategies 'thanking' and 'thanking + giving reason' were used more frequently in thanking situations of 'thanking your university classmate', 'thanking for dinner party' and 'thanking colleague for standing in for you', which were under the same social factors' influence. On this basis, it is justified to claim that social factors (familiarity, power and degree of imposition) determined the use of thanking strategies among Iranian female advanced EFL learners. This confirms Cheng (2005), who concluded that different factors including contextual variables, social status, familiarity and imposition affect the use of gratitude speech act realization strategies.

The situations 'thanking for job promotion', 'thanking sport trainer for lending car to you', 'thanking your doctor for helping you', and 'thanking professor for postponing the exam' were featured by social factors including low familiarity, low power, and high degree of imposition. In these different situations, various strategies with different frequency pattern were used. For example, the diversity of strategies in 'thanking for job promotion' was more than the other situations. In addition, while 'thanking + appreciation' and 'thanking + stating the title' were the most frequently used strategies in 'thanking your doctor for helping you', 'appreciation', 'expressing surprise + thanking' and 'thanking + appreciation' were used more in the scenario 'thanking sport trainer for lending car to you'. In 'thanking for job promotion' situation, 'thanking + stating the title' and 'thanking' were reported as the most common thanking strategies while 'thanking' was the least frequently used strategy in 'thanking sport trainer for lending car to you' situation. In fact, although almost similar strategies were used in these situations, it cannot be said that these similar social factors can lead to the same results in the use of thanking strategies. This finding is not in accordance with Ahar and Eslami-Rasekh (2011), who found that non-native Iranian EFL learners used inappropriate expressions and gratitude strategies in L2 due to the sensitivity to social variables, including social status and size of imposition. They concluded that some L1 pragmatic norms were transferred by Iranian EFL learners' to their L2 because they considered the norms to be universal across different languages and cultures (Ahar & Eslami-Rasekh, 2011).

High familiarity, equal power, and low degree of imposition were the common social factors characterizing 'thanking for birthday gift', 'thanking your friend for lending money to you' and 'thanking your spouse for buying …'. In the first situation, thanking strategies including 'expressing surprise + thanking' (e.g., Wow! Thanks a lot), 'expressing surprise + complementing the gift + thanking' (e.g., Wow! it's very beautiful! Thank you very much),

'thanking', 'thanking + complementing the person' (e.g., thanks a million, you are very kind), 'thanking + expressing lack of necessity' (e.g., thank you very much, you didn't have to do that) were used, which were mentioned in order from the most frequent one to the least. In the case of 'thanking your friend for lending money to you' situation, 'thanking' and 'thanking + giving reason' were reported as the most frequently used strategies which were different from the strategies used in 'thanking for birthday gift' situation. However, in both 'thanking for birthday gift' and 'thanking your friend for lending money to you' situations, 'thanking + expressing indebtedness' was used the least. This might roughly mean that this strategy is not usually applied by Iranian EFL learners.

In the case of 'thanking your housekeeper for her help' situation that was characterized by low familiarity, high social power, and low degree of imposition, 'thanking', 'thanking + giving reason', and 'thanking + complementing the action' were used with approximately same percentage although 'thanking' was used the most. The results for this situation apparently indicate that when social power is high and degree of imposition is low, less gratitude strategies are used by Iranian EFL learners.

Conclusions

Overall, this study showed that although Iranian advanced EFL learners had access to a good range of gratitude strategies, they most frequently used few classes of simple thanking strategies. Moreover, the participants were found to be sensitive to sociopragmatic aspects of thanking speech act. Social factors including interlocutors' social distance, power and degree of imposition were found to affect the way the participants expressed gratitude in various thanking situations. In other words, such factors affected the choice of particular thanking strategies in expressing gratitude. The diversity and percentage of the use of different thanking strategies were almost the same in various thanking situations which were affected by relatively similar sociopragmatic factors.

On the basis of the obtained results, some pedagogical implications are inferable which might contribute to a more clear understanding of speech acts realization strategies used by Iranian EFL learners and their ILP competence development. Concerning ILP development in terms of sociopragmatic aspects of thanking speech act, EFL teachers are recommended to include a richer range of context specific thanking realization strategies. The less frequency of more sophisticated thanking strategies underscore either EFL learners' lack of exposure to such strategies in their textbooks, and audiovisual foreign language learning materials, or lack of adequate focus on such strategies in the classroom context and teaching/learning activities.

Despite the researchers' attempt to maximally control the intervening factors which might restrict the generalizability of the study findings, the present study was limited to the study of thanking strategies used by Iranian EFL learners in only 14 recurring thanking situations. Moreover, this study was limited in its data collection procedure to a single DCT type instrument, and this might adversely affect the generalizability of the findings.

Future studies are recommended to include EFL learners with varying proficiency levels and a greater variety and number of gratitude speech act realization situations. Moreover, this study used WDCT instrument; future studies are recommended to rely on more triangulated data types in their study of gratitude speech act realization strategies.

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