

A Contrastive Pragmatics Study on the Use of Request Strategies by Iranian EFL Learners: A Case of Persian L1- English L2

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Abstract

Considering the importance of knowing and applying politeness strategies during a conversation for successful communication, This qualitative analytical research study investigated and compared the use of request strategies in English L2 and Persian L1 phone conversations uttered by Iranian EFL learners. The study sought for the patterns of strategy use in three different situations. The tasks were purposefully designed to elicit the request strategies required for different levels of formality and intimacy. A total of 180 Iranian female intermediate EFL learners from private language institutes in Mashhad, aged 18 to 35 years old, were purposefully selected to simulate the situations through phone conversations. Through a Discourse Completion procedure based on Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989) taxonomy, the strategy patterns used in both L1 and L2 were described, compared, and analyzed. The results indicate that “query preparatory” was the most prevalent request strategy used in both Persian and English in all three situations, alike. Additionally, the findings revealed not only the presence of transferability but also that of variation in relation to the diversity of context.

Keywords: Interlanguage Pragmatics, Speech acts, Request strategies, Persian L1-English

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Introduction

For the individuals to be competent in a language, along with the need for grammatical and lexical competence, there is a need to develop their pragmatic knowledge and skills, as well. In this respect, speech acts are the most significant aspects in pragmatics which are integral, as well as indispensable in routine individual interactions (Eslami-Rasekh, 1993), as well as some vehicles for individuals' filling the gap of lack of knowledge. Accordingly, the language learners' mastery of speech acts is considered a key to pragmatic competence development. More precisely, speech acts have been regarded in the literature as identifiable ways used for successful interaction all over the globe. However, as far as specific aspects are concerned, there are differences in how they are expressed across languages and cultures (Lightbown & Spada, 2006).

In the course of history, cultures themselves have developed the rules of appropriateness in using verbal behavior, especially as far as politeness is concerned. Each community and culture interprets the concept of communication based on their own pragmatic aspects. Hence, in cross-cultural social contacts, people with different cultures encode and decode behavior or words their own way. Therefore, when they encounter a communicative situation, they might interpret it inappropriately, leading to communication breakdowns. Moreover, there might be the danger of stereotypical labeling of non-native speakers by calling them rude, thoughtless, or inexperienced (Eslami-Rasekh, 2005).

It is axiomatic that even the most basic items in a language, such as the use of, for example, "denying", "giving orders" or "asking for favors" can possibly bring about a cross cultural misunderstanding, as a consequence of pragmatic differences between languages. For example, while one specific utterance may be considered polite in one culture, it is another culture's impolite behavior. More specifically, as much as the speech act of request plays a significant role in establishing a good rapport, its violation may result in negative consequences, known in the literature as Face Threatening Action (FTA) which has a wide application in our daily life as well as learning a second language (Flowerdew, 2013).

Individuals in the progress of learning a new language have a tendency to create pragmatic rules which are called interlanguage pragmatics (Eslami-Rasekh, 2005). A review of the literature

reveals that the native speakers' pragmatic knowledge is different from that of the second language learners' (Kasper, 1997). Given the widespread cross-cultural communication differences among languages, one should bear in mind that in inter-cultural communication, "erroneous attributions occur" when interlocutors "violate not just the surface features of language, but the conditions which give meaning to speakers' and hearers' intentions and interpretations" (White, 1993, p. 201). So, a trend in linguistics research requires a comparison of native and non-native pragmatic competencies.

Additionally, literature informs us that students with a lower proficiency level have problems in selecting appropriate request strategies in different situations (Ellis, 1994). Furthermore, a review of the literature reveals that such studies have mostly concentrated on the context of second language acquisition, not that of foreign language learning. It is assumed that an EFL context makes the task even more challenging for both language learners and teachers due to lack of adequate and sufficient exposure to the target language.

With respect to the importance given to the development of interlanguage pragmatics in language learning settings and regarding the theoretical background of the study, mainly the speech acts theory, there have been many studies on this research topic. However, there is not adequate research regarding Iranian English learners. Moreover, even the very few studies conducted on the Iranian English learners' use of politeness strategies, request, in particular, have concentrated particularly on advanced learners. So, there is a gap of information on how students with lower proficiency levels understand and use different kinds of L2 request strategies. Therefore, concerning the importance of pragmatic competence in foreign language learning and teaching, this study sets out a contrastive analysis research to investigate the use of request strategies by Iranian EFL learners.

Theoretical Background to the Study

Pragmatic Competence and Speech Acts

Pragmatics is a branch of linguistics that is concerned with the communicative functions of language, particularly examining language use and interaction in a context. It considers background knowledge and understanding of people about each other and the environment. Social, situational, and textual contexts are all of the importance in this field (Levinson, 1983). More specifically, pragmatic competence is referred to as “the speaker’s knowledge and use of rules of appropriateness and politeness which dictate the way the speaker will understand and formulate speech acts” (Koike 1989, p. 79).

Pragmatics considers people to have a shared understanding of certain principles while communicating, but it also may vary across cultures (Paltridge, 2006). Therefore, notwithstanding the generality of pragmatics, particularly speech acts rules, language learners are still to deal with the achieving of the components as “the forms chosen to convey pragmatic meanings are specific and obey language and cultural conventions” (Iragui, 1996, p. 54), thus, causing more challenge to language learners when it comes to having a successful communication with the L2 native speakers. In particular, “learners’ lack of knowledge of different sociolinguistic rules among cultures and then dependence on their L1 socio-cultural norms in realizing speech acts in L2 (i.e., pragmatic transfer) can cause intercultural misunderstanding and lead to serious consequences” (Chang, 2009, p. 478). So, the problem of overuse or under use of the pragmatic and linguistic principles, as a consequence of L1 transfer, may cause communication breakdown, misunderstanding or the labeling of stereotypes.

With all mentioned in the literature about the importance of the pragmatic aspect of language, speech acts, in particular, one comes to the realization that developing pragmatic competence is inevitable in the process of second language acquisition in order for the learner to achieve full success. Such learners should realize that every community has its own linguistic rules and principles to adhere to certain speech acts and it is vital to keep harmony in that community. Yet, as once pointed out by Wolfson (1983), second language learners who are not familiar with such formulas may have difficulty adjusting, and eventually, might experience failure. According to Kasper (1997), second language learners should understand that speech acts performance is a top down process. Moreover, students must distinguish the linguistic and

cultural limitations of native language speakers' speech acts, which is appropriate to the context. Therefore, learners must learn how to discover the speech acts according to the second language rules and formulas. As Grundy (2008) states, the reality is that language learners should “challenge the notion that there is a one-to-one correspondence between a form and its function” (p. 90).

As informed by the literature, speech acts theory, as one of the central issues in Pragmatics, is concerned with the philosophy of language, i.e. how we accomplish actions with words (form-function); with the knowledge of the required underlying assumptions (conventional/non-conventional); and with the interpretations of acts through language (Flowerdew, 2013). According to Searle (1999), “the meaning of a sentence does not in all cases uniquely determine what speech acts is performed in a given utterance of that sentence, for a speaker may mean more than what he actually says, but it is always, in principle, possible for him to say exactly what he means” (p. 18). The issue is believed to be dependent on the situational context.

Additionally, Searle (1975) distinguished between direct and indirect speech acts, highlighting in the former a transparent relationship between form and function. As to the latter, indirect speech acts combine “a non-literal primary illocutionary act” and “a literal secondary illocutionary act” constituting “a performance of that illocutionary act”. (pp. 60-62). To put it differently, indirect speech acts are performed indirectly through the performance of another speech act in a sense that the initial interrogatives or declaratives are not considered as the only ways of conveying certain speech acts, like requests. He also noted that speech acts are made possible by and are performed in accordance with certain rules for the use of linguistic elements. For instance, indirect speech acts are usually uttered through more complicated and longer sentences (Searle, 1999). He also came up with the rule that, the closer the relationship between interlocutors, the more directly the function is expressed; the greater the imposition, the more indirect the speech act (Flowerdew, 2013).

Speech Act of Request

The speech act of requests is related to directives category, proposed by Searle (1975) who defined it as “an attempt to get the hearer to do an act which the speaker wants the hearer to do, and which it is not obvious that the hearer will do in the normal course of events or of the hearer's own accord” (Searle, 1999, p. 66). Normally, the function involved is, “to instruct the hearer to carry out an act for the benefit of the speaker” (White, 1993, p. 195).

A related terminology is “face-threatening acts” which refers to the acts, which run contrary to the addressee’s public self-image, referred to as “face”. In verbal interactions, such a behavior is unavoidable and natural where an act may naturally damage the face of the speaker by acting in opposition to the wants and desires of the others (Brown & Levinson, 1987). It is believed that “face” is very fragile and any threat to this image is considered to be “face-threatening and not acceptable” (Cutting, 2008, p. 43). More importantly, language learners should be aware of the fact that although such concepts are universal, they vary from one culture to another; for instance, they should know that having a positive face toward others might cause embarrassment on the part of the speaker in one culture while the same act may indicate a sense of joy and pride in another.

Given the face-threatening nature involved in making the speech act of request, the speaker may want to modify the impact of it by employing particular modification devices of two types, internal and external. While internal modifiers are those devices appearing within the same request head act in order to mitigate or intensify its force, external modifiers are those appearing in the immediate linguistic context surrounding the request head act. As pointed out by Flowerdew (2013), the significance of a request depends on two factors: 1) personal relationship between the speaker and the addressee and 2) the imposition involved in the action requested by the speaker. The higher the degree of imposition and the longer the distance between the interlocutors, the higher is the value of the request.

In a learning context, learning to get the message in a second language involves the correct linguistic expressions as well as the appropriate usage of the cultural aspects involved in the new expressions. Koike (1989) particularly pointed out to the importance of appropriate use of request strategies to novice second language learners because their future interactions with native speakers would probably take place in the form of requests.

Kahraman and Akkus (2007) noted that request can be considered as one of the first components of social transaction which is learned by a second language learner as a strategy. The act of requesting should be explicitly distinguished from different linguistic forms, such as imperatives, declaratives, or interrogatives as in many cases there is no one-to-one

correspondence between form and pragmatic function. For instance, imperatives do not necessarily always indicate an order, but could be interpreted as invitation or request.

As stated in the literature, studies on request speech acts take different forms. In cross-cultural pragmatic research, speech acts have been analyzed across languages in order to investigate if there are general pragmatic rules and identify their characteristics (e.g. Chen & Chen, 2007; Eshreth, 2017; Eslami-Rasekh, 1993; Rinnert & Kobayashi, 1999). In contrastive linguistics, focusing on second language acquisition, a majority of researchers have studied the differences and similarities among language learners and native speakers. They have explored the speech acts of the request in a variety of languages. Previous studies have mostly concentrated on interlanguage pragmatic performance. More specifically, since requests differ across cultures to a large degree and due to their crucial role in the phenomenon of face-threatening, they require a high level of appropriateness for their successful completion; thus, calling for more research studies across cultures.

Degrees of directness in requests. Three types of directness in requests have been mentioned by Blum-Kulka, et al. (1989). They are: “Direct requests”, “conventionally indirect requests”, and “non-conventionally indirect requests”. Direct requests are defined as the non-verbal power of the word that is displayed by grammatical, lexical, or semantic means while conventionally indirect statements show the verbal force of the utterance. In contrast to direct requests, in order to properly comprehend the conventionally indirect requests, one needs to compute the meaning from the interaction of the expression with its context. Non-conventionally indirect polite request strategies are the ones with softeners to mitigate the impact of the request and can be used by learners to decrease the illocutionary force of a request. A more detailed classification by Blum-Kulka, et al. (1989) is presented in Table 1. A full description is found in Appendix A.

Table 1

<i>Degrees of Requestive directness: Requests for Action</i>		
Strategy		Example
Direct	Mood derivable	Leave me alone.
	Performatives	I tell you to leave me alone.
	Hedged Performatives	I would like to ask you to leave me alone.
	Obligation Statements	Sir, you'll have to move your car.
Conventionally Indirect	Want Statements	I want you to move your car.
	Suggestory Formulae	How about cleaning up?
	Query-preparatory	Would you mind moving your car?
Non-conventionally Indirect	Strong Hints	The game is boring.
	Mid Hints	We've been playing this game for over an hour now.

Cross Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP). One of the most famous projects studying speech acts is the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP), initially conducted by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1986). The project assumes that cultural diversity might have an impact on the speech acts performance, no matter if the cross-cultural studies on speech acts involve different situations or similar situations with different groups of learners. Thus, aspects such as social limitations could cause differences in the realization pattern of speech acts. The project holds that “diversity in the realization of speech acts in context may stem from at least three different types of variability: (a) intra-cultural situational variability; (b) cross-cultural variability; (c) individual variability” (p. 197).

Among the various objectives the project aimed to achieve, an important one was to build up the requestive patterns used by the speakers of a variety of languages by describing the similarities and differences in their linguistic production, as used in the same social constraints across languages. Accordingly, a number of studies have been carried out to meet such an objective. For instance, in a study by Eslami-Rasekh, Z., Eslami-Rasekh, A., and Fatahi (2004), it was found that non-native speakers of English, including Persian speakers, had a preference to use “conventionally indirect” strategy in terms of the request. Further, another research by Mohammadi and Zarei (2012) concluded that a large number of “query preparatory” as a conventionally indirect strategy was used as the request for action in Iranian EFL postgraduate students’ English emails. However, other studies carried out on participants from other cultural

and L1 background came up with different results. As an example, in the research done by Barron (2008) on Germans, and Garton (2000) on Hungarians, it was found that direct request strategy was the preferable one, and Sasaki (1998) found that the most frequent request strategies among Japanese learners of English were direct, specifically “mood variable” and conventionally indirect “want statement”.

It is in respect to such internationally-attended studies that the present researchers were motivated to shed light on the matter by examining the participants’ productions in English and Persian in different situational contexts, seeking for any instance of variation in the use of request strategies. To this end, this study focuses on the communicative behavior of Iranian speakers in making requests. The aim of this research is to identify similarities and differences between the utterances in realizing the pragmatic intention of the request strategies in English and Persian.

So, taking a contrastive analysis approach, this study aims at measuring the EFL learners’ interlanguage pragmatics in manipulating request strategies in oral production, identifying their ability to recognize and produce appropriate kinds of request strategies. A related objective is to explore the potential presence of transferability through a comparison between Persian L1 and English L2. Thus, the following questions are addressed:

1. What are the similarities and differences between English L2 and Persian L1, in terms of the realization of the request strategies?
2. To what extent is the transferability of the request strategies evident in Iranian EFL learners’ production?

Method

Participants and Setting

To collect the required data, 180 Iranian EFL learners from two private language schools were selected. The participants were all adult males and females, about 18 -35 years old. The sampling procedure was based on availability. A criteria-based sample of 180 was chosen out of the whole population of 10,000 EFL learners, based on the criterion of language proficiency; i.e. intermediate level, as informed by the school supervisors. As such, the participants were assumed to be competent enough to produce requests in English, on one hand, and on the other hand, the

researchers were intended to administer the study on EFL learners of rather lower linguistic proficiency to fill the gap in the literature. Also, care was taken to select the sample from language institutes located in the urban areas where people of a higher social class are likely to live. Thus, the probable effect of social status in using request strategies could be controlled, to some extent.

Instrumentation

In this study, three completion questionnaires were used as the instruments to collect the qualitative data. Each questionnaire presents the instruction for a phone conversation task to be role played in a particular situation which was purposefully designed to simulate different degrees of intimacy and formality. The purpose was to elicit the production of request speech acts which would fit in that particular situational context. The requests included borrowing a course book from a friend, a parent's requesting another parent to help their child with the registration process and accommodation, and the request from a non-acquaintance to deliver a message to a friend (see Appendix B for more details). They were supposed to carry out the tasks in both Persian and English. It is worthy to note here that since the participants showed no willingness to have their voice recorded for a conversation analysis, the researcher worked on the written data, only.

For the purpose of analyzing and evaluating the request strategies used by the participants, the framework developed by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) was adopted. In this analytical framework, a typology of request act formulation classifies requests into three levels of directness: direct, conventionally indirect and non-conventionally indirect (see Table 1).

Procedures

For collecting the data, one of the researchers distributed the questionnaires among the pairs of learners. They were asked to produce conversations according to the instructions, presented to them on the questionnaire sheets. The students were instructed to read the situation given, and then make two conversations, one in English and the other one in Persian.

During the process, the participants were being monitored by the main researcher to make sure they fully understood the task's instructions, first; and then to have a control over their use of language to complete the elicitation procedure. They were required to use the appropriate language for any one of those given situations. First, they were supposed to do the tasks in English for about 30 minutes.

As there was a need for comparing the production in English with that in Persian, the same groups were asked to make a similar conversation for the same situation, in Persian. The time allocated to complete this task was about 30 minutes. The researcher was present in the scene to give them the support and feedback they needed to complete the tasks successfully.

Study Design and Data Analysis

As a pragmatic contrastive analysis, the design of the study is a qualitative analysis, going through processes of identification, description, comparison, and evaluation of the features of the speech act of request. The data were elicited from the participants during the oral production (in both L1 and L2) of Persian speaking learners of English in three different situations, designated in terms of the formality of situation and the degree of intimacy between interlocutors.

In order to measure the request elements qualitatively, Blum-Kulka, et al. (1989) taxonomy of request strategies was employed. There are nine request strategies identified in the model which are classified into 3 main categories: “direct”, “conventionally indirect”, and “unconventionally indirect” (see Table 1). Following the convention of qualitative analysis; i.e. coding and thematic development, the main researcher started reading the whole data thoroughly, looking for the elements of politeness and marking them as topics. Then, through a second review, similar topics were clustered together and coded as a theme. Next, the whole data were revisited, seeking for any new code to emerge. The procedure followed by turning the topics into themes which were labeled according to the best-fit characteristics of request acts; i.e. whether they were defined as “direct”, “conventionally indirect”, or “unconventionally indirect”. For the quantitative measurement, the frequency and percentage of request elements (themes), based on the taxonomy proposed by Blum-Kulka, et al. (1989), were computed and tabulated. As for the collected data in Persian, the same procedures were followed.

Results and Discussion

This section discusses the results of analyzing 180 participants’ use of request strategies in three different situations. The task was to simulate the contextual situation by role playing and changing roles, first in English; then, in Persian. The data were analyzed based on Blum-Kulka et

al. (1989) analytical framework (see Table 1). Table 2 presents the frequency and percentage of the request strategies used by the participants in Persian L1 and English L2 in all three situations.

Table 2

Frequency Distribution of Request Strategy Types in Three Situations (in English & Persian)

(N=180)

Situation	Strategy type	English		Persian		
		F	%	F	%	
1. Student to student Request to borrow a course book	Direct	Mood Derivable	9	3.94	27	12.50
		Performatives	9	3.94	0	0
	Conventionally	Hedged	6	2.63	6	2.77
		Performatives				
	Indirect	Obligation Statement	6	2.63	9	4.16
		Want Statement	27	11.84	24	11.11
	Non-conventionally	Suggestory Formula	30	13.15	21	9.72
		Query Preparatory	120	52.63	75	34.72
	Indirect	Strong Hint	18	7.89	18	8.33
		Mild Hint	3	1.31	36	16.66
Total use		228	100% (rounded)	216	100% (rounded)	
2. Non-acquaintances Request for son's registration and accommodation in a non-home town	Direct	Mood Derivable	18	12	12	5.55
		Performatives	0	0	12	5.55
	Conventionally	Hedged	3	2	9	4.16
		Performatives				
	Indirect	Obligation Statement	3	2	3	1.38
		Want Statement	51	34	30	13.88
	Non-conventionally	Suggestory Formula	15	10	36	16.66
		Query Preparatory	30	20	54	25
	Indirect	Strong Hint	21	14	12	5.55
		Mild Hint	9	6	48	22.22
Total use		150	100% (rounded)	216	100% (rounded)	
3. Non-acquaintances Request to deliver a phone message	Direct	Mood Derivable	81	27.55	78	34.21
		Performatives	0	0	12	5.26
	Conventionally	Hedged	9	3.06	0	0
		Performatives				
	Indirect	Obligation Statement	9	3.06	0	0
		Want Statement	39	13.26	18	7.89
	Non-conventionally	Suggestory Formula	39	13.26	18	7.89
		Query Preparatory	111	37.75	102	44.73
	Indirect	Strong Hint	0	0	0	0
		Mild Hint	6	2.04	0	0
Total use		294	100% (rounded)	228	100% (rounded)	

As the first task, the participants were asked to make a conversation in pairs, simulating the situation where the conversation starts with a phone call by one of the pair partners. The details of the tasks are presented in the Appendix section. As it reads in Table 2, the most frequent strategy used in situation 1, in both Persian and English, was “query preparatory”, which is identified by the use of “can”, “could” and “would” in English; and the use of *mi-tun-æm?* (Can I?), *mi-tun-i?* (Can you?), and *mi-sh-e?* (Is it possible?) in Persian. The reason can be attributed to the similarities of the structure or being easy to be interpreted from Persian to English, or the simplicity of structure and use. Also, this structure is mainly appropriate in most situations, varying from formal to informal. Even in English textbooks or authentic materials, the use of “query preparatory” is very common, that can be considered as a model for EFL Learners.

On the other hand, the least frequent strategy in English was “mild hint”; i.e. the use of utterances that could be interpreted as a request by context without reference to the request itself. This strategy was used in Persian more than English for the same situation. The more use of indirect strategy in Persian can be due to the cultural influence, as in Persian, Iranians are conscious about appearing polite by avoiding imposing their request, and they try to ask their request as indirectly as possible by conveying their message through inferences and interpretations rather than direct expressions.

However, the few number of indirect requests used in English can be related to the EFL learners’ lack of English linguistic or pragmatic knowledge to utter their requests indirectly, in the most appropriate manner. Additionally, it can be explained by the fact that some requests are made clearly and vividly without the need for making the task more complicated by providing the background. The other reason could be that EFL learners have learned them that way, as the textbooks are loaded with simple requestive structures or they are taught to make their requests as clearly as possible. Accordingly, they do not feel the need to use this strategy that much.

Performatives were not used by EFL learners at all. The reason might be explained by the fact that such language is considered too formal by Persian speakers to be used with intimate friends, as it was the case in the first situation.

Some sample statements of English request strategies, exemplifying the categories, used in situation 1 are:

(1)

Is it possible for you to lend me your book? (Query Preparatory)

(2)

Can I borrow your book? (Query Preparatory)

(3)

Would you help me? (Query Preparatory)

(4)

I want to borrow your book. (Want Statement)

Sample statements of Persian request strategies used in situation 1 are as follow:

(5)

mi-tun-i ketab-et ro beh-emghærz bed-i?
PPM¹-can-2SG² book-Padj1³ DOM⁴ to-1PP⁵ lend/give-2SG?

“Can you lend me your book?”(Query Preparatory)

(6)

mi-sheh ye lotf-i be mæn be-kon-i?
PPM-is a/one favor-IndA⁶ to I EM⁷-do-2SG?

“Can you do me a favor?” (Query Preparatory)

(7)

mi-khast-æm be-pors-æm tækalif-e diruz chi bud?
PPM-want-1SG⁸ EM-ask-1SG homework-GM⁹ yesterday what was?

“I wanted to ask [you] what was yesterday’s homework?” (Want Statement)

As for the aspect of length, conversation 1 was moderate in length, not too short, not too long, which can be explained by the fact that the two speakers were classmates or friends, which

¹ PPM stands for present progressive marker

² 2SG stands for second singular person verb ending

³ PAdj1 stands for possessive adjective for first person singular

⁴ DOM stands for direct object pronoun

⁵ 1PP stands for first person dependent personal pronoun

⁶ IndA stands for indefinite article

⁷ EM stands for emphasis marker

⁸ 1SG stands fir first singular person verb ending

⁹ GM stands for genitive marker/enclitic

can build the background for having intimacy between them and making the request easier for the requester. In this respect, the length of the conversations can indicate that how great the request was and how imposing it could be on the part of the requestee. It is under such conditions, therefore, when the requester tries to mitigate the imposition through establishing the background for making the request, using some intimate address terms or building up a better relationship with the hearer to lessen the impact of the request (Searle, 1999). The use of address terms such as *æziz* (dear), and *dadash* (brother), typical in colloquial speech in Persian, was also evident in the obtained data. It may provide an explanation for the fairly long length of the conversations in this situation, as compared to the third situation.

The second task stimulates a situation where the level of intimacy is mild; i.e. the participants are not immediate relatives. Besides, the type of request indicates a rather high level of imposition. Based on the information presented in Table 2, it could be concluded that “want statement” (34%), followed by “query preparatory”(20%) in this situation were noticeably used more than the other request strategies in English productions, while conventionally indirect strategy (query preparatory = 25%), followed by indirect strategy (mild hint = 22.22%) were the most common strategies used by EFL learners in Persian conversations. Such a difference could well mark the differences bound by cultural values when it comes to using the language associated with that particular culture. It is also likely that Persian learners of English have learned such differences and try to adapt to English speakers’ cultural norms. Such a finding well indicates the fact that speech acts, including requests, are learnable.

In addition, as shown in Table 2, another frequent strategy used in Persian, following “query preparatory”, was reported to be “mild hint” as an indirect strategy. The use of “mild hint” in making a request in any language would be for the sake of reducing the face threatening act (FTA) on the side of the hearer, and as mentioned before, it can be considered as a culture-dependent issue. In addition, it is worthy to note that the use of Persian plural pronoun *shoma* for singular second person (*to*), as well as the use of plural verb ending for second singular person in Persian suggests an indication of polite language. The use of such strategy (example 14) by the

participants in their Persian production is another evidence of an attempt to concern about FTA, reflecting Persian culture.

Some sample statements of English request strategies used in situation 2 follow.

(8)

Please help him. (Mood Derivable)

(9)

I would like to ask you to find a place for my son. (Want Statement)

(10)

Can you help him find a place? (Query Preparatory)

Examples of Persian utterances including requests which were used in the second situation are:

(11)

mi-khast-æm *bæra-m* *ye* *kar-i* *be-kon-i*
PPM-want-1SG *for-1PP* *one* *work-IndA* *EM-do-2SG*

“I wanted you to do something for me.” (Want Statement)

(12)

ægær *mi-she væght* *be-zar-i* *væ* *bæra-sh* *ye* *khuneh* *ejarehkon-i.*
if *PPM-is time* *EM-put-2SG* *and* *for-3PP¹⁰* *one* *home* *rent do-2SG.*

“If you may, put some time and rent a home for him” (Suggestory Formula)

(13)

mi-tun-æm *æz-æt* *khaheshkon-æm* *ye* *modæt pish-et* *be-*
mun-e?
PPM-can-1SG *from-2PP¹¹* *ask-1PP* *one* *time* *near-2PP* *EM-*
stay-3SG¹²

“May I beg you to let him stay with you for a while?” (Query Preparatory)

(14)

æz *shoma mi-khah-(æ)m* *ye* *khuneh* *vase-æsh* *ejareh kon-in.*

¹⁰ 3PP stands for third person dependent personal pronoun

¹¹ 2PP stands for second person dependent personal pronoun

*from you(pl) PPM-want-1SG one home for-3PP rent do-2PL*¹³.

“I want you to rent a home for him.” (Want Statement)

Conversation two was the longest of all, which could be explained by the fact that in this conversation the requester wanted the requestee to do him a big favor, suggesting that the bigger the favor, the more need for providing the situation to make the request in any language. Therefore, the requester has to start the conversation in a friendly way, continue it talking about the related subject and then asking for his/her request in the appropriate situation. This was vivid, especially in Persian conversations. More precisely, “want statement” was the favored one in English, whereas, “query preparatory” and “suggestory formula” were the prevalent ones in Persian. The variety of the use of conventionally indirect strategy would depend on how intimate the requester would find the relationship with the requestee or how close they were. Also, using “suggestory formula” such as, *ægær* (if), *ægær emkanesh hæst* (if possible), and *ægær mish-e* (if it may) for making a request is very common in Persian, which can be considered as a culture-bound issue as Iranians try to appear polite through the use of conditionals in their requests, thus providing their requestees with a choice.

The third task requires making a request in a situation where the interlocutors do not know each other and there is not much imposition involved; i.e. the caller’s leaving a message for a friend to call back. Regarding the third situation, Table 2 demonstrates that the most frequent request strategy used by EFL learners in English was “query preparatory” (37.75%), followed by “mood derivable” (27.55%) whereas “performatives” and “strong hint” were not used at all. Interestingly, the most frequent strategy in Persian was “query preparatory” (44.73%), which was followed by “mood derivable” (34.21%). However, “strong hint” and “mild hint” were the strategies which were avoided in their Persian production.

Based on the information given, it can be discussed that conventionally indirect strategy, that is “query preparatory” such as the use of “could you.....?”, “Can you.....?”, “Would you.....” in English and the use of *mish-e?* (may it?), *mitun-æm?* (can I?), and *mitun-i?* (can you?) in Persian utterances was the most preferable strategy both in Persian and English. On the other hand, the

¹² 3SG stands for third person singular verb ending

¹³ 2PL stands for second person plural verb ending

least favorable strategy, in both English and Persian, was the indirect strategy, “strong hint”, with a partial reference to the request without making the request directly. Such findings can provide support for the phenomenon of “transferability” in that there is a tendency on the part of Persian L1 learners of English to positively transfer such strategies as they can easily find the equivalent. Interestingly, the use of plural verb ending for singular person was vivid in example 18. It seems that the third situational context (lack of intimacy) calls for showing more concern about FTA.

Some sample statements of Persian and English request strategies used in situation 3 follow:

(15)

Please tell him to call me. (Mood Derivable)

(16)

Can I take your message?(Query Preparatory)

(17)

If you have a message, you can leave it. (Suggestory Formula)

(18)

Lotfaen be-hesh be-gin be maen zaeng be-zaen-e.

Please to-3PP EM-tell (2PL) to I ring EM-strike-3SG.

“Please tell her to ring me.” (Mood Derivable)

(19)

mi-tun-aem peygham-i beh-esh be-resun-aem?

PPM-can-1PP message-IndA to-3PP EM-deliver-1SG?

“Can I deliver a message to her?” (Query Preparatory)

As for the length of the conversations, it was found that the participants produced the shortest conversations in this situation. For one, the task required making a request of very low degree of imposition. Also, lack of familiarity between the interlocutors may reduce the demand for having a longer conversation.

Conclusion

Summary of the Findings

As a whole, it could be concluded that Iranian EFL learners, whether speaking in Persian L1 or in English L2, tend to most frequently use “query preparatory” as a request strategy in

different situations. On the other hand, the least favorable strategies in English were direct and indirect, namely “performatives”, “mild hint” and “strong hint”, varying according to the different situations. The findings suggest that in all three situations, “indirect strategy” appeared to be the least favored in Persian. Thus, notwithstanding the inevitability of the use of request strategies, as a universal aspect, their application is subject to specific norms suggested by the degree of formality and intimacy of the situational context, as well as the imposition involved in the request. What follows is the discussion of the answers to the research questions.

Question1: What are the similarities and differences between English L2 and Persian L1 in terms of the realization of the request strategies? According to the findings, request strategies are used in both English L2 and Persian L1 more or less to the same degree, within a range of 9% to 11.10%. So, once more the phenomenon of universality is supported. Table 3 summarizes the results.

Table 3
Mean Percentage of Strategies in L1 and L2 by Situation

Situation	English	Persian
1. Student to student Request to borrow a course book	10.81%	11.10%
2. Non-acquaintances Request for son’s registration and accommodation in a non-home town	9.66%	9.56%
3. Non-acquaintances Request to deliver a phone message	11.10%	9.00%

The two languages are also similar in terms of realizing conventionally indirect strategies, such as “query preparatory” which was found to be the most prevalent in both English and Persian, alike. However, as for the minimum usage, it appears that there is a wider range of request strategies used in Persian. The least frequent strategies in English were “mild hints”, “strong hints”, and “performatives”, depending on the situation whereas in Persian, they were identified as “strong hint”, “mild hint”, “performatives”, “hedged performatives” and “obligation statement”.

Thus, the rather wide range of strategy pattern may be attributed to the different conditions defined in the tasks, mainly the degree of intimacy and formality of the situation as well as the rate of the imposition involved. No difference was found between the two interacting languages in this respect. In other words, the variation could be caused by the different social elements rather than the linguistic differences. For instance, the degree of intimacy and imposition involved in the tasks could serve as a determinant for using direct strategies.

The result of the present study regarding the tendency of using “conventionally indirect” strategy in EFL Learners’ production is in agreement with studies conducted within the CCSARP framework, such as Chen and Chen (2007) and Alfatah (2009). Also, this study supports the fact that the use of indirect requests serves as a pragmatic function to minimize imposition, as it was also emphasized by Eshreteh (2017) who studied diminutives in Palestinian Arabic. Moreover, such findings are in congruent with the results of research carried out by Iranian scholars, namely Eslami-Rasekh et al. (2004), and Mohammadi and Zarei (2012).

However, these findings contradict those of other studies, such as Sasaki (1998), Garton (2000), and Barron (2008). Altogether, such contradictions might be due to a number of factors involved, namely the participants’ level of language proficiency; the learning context including the teacher, the learners, and the textbooks; the quality and length of L2 exposure; and, last but not least, due to the similarities and differences in pragmatic and grammatical aspects existing between the two interacting languages.

Question2: To what extent is the transferability of the request strategies evident in Iranian EFL learners’ production. Based on the findings of the present study, the high frequency of conventionally indirect strategy, “query preparatory”, in all three situations and in both Persian L1 and English L2 productions could well support one of the assumptions of Contrastive Analysis in that the similarities of linguistic and pragmatic patterns existing in the interacting languages account for a positive transfer from L1 to L2. Such type of conventionally indirect requests is similarly prevalent in both languages where “please” with the equivalents, *lotfæn*, and *khaheshæn* in Persian, is used as a relieving tool to moderate a request. Besides the feature of conventionality, existing in both L1 and L2, facilitates the task of learning.

Altogether, the results of the present study are suggestive of positive transfer of pragmatics as a means to facilitate L2 production when it comes to using request strategies in the interlanguage. As an explanation, one could state that requests are general enough to be applied by speakers from diverse linguistic backgrounds, thus they are more likely to be considered as universal norms. A number of research studies, such as Koike (1989), Al-Issa (2003), Hassal (2003), Eslami and Noora (2008), and Octu and Zeyrek (2008) support the findings of the present study in that universality exists in the use of English request strategies, no matter what the first language is.

Overall, the findings reveal that the participants' utterances were influenced by their linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Iranian EFL learners were found to have a tendency toward the appropriate use of English conventionally indirect requests. However, they were not apt to realizing English direct request strategies, specifically "performatives", among others. Such evidence accounts for the existing differences in the related cultures. In Persian, directness is somehow taken as an indication of discourtesy.

The results also conform to one of the assumptions made by the CCSARP in that the diversity of the realization of request strategies can be rooted in the "intra-cultural situational variability" which was the case of the present study. As the findings indicate, it was in the third situational context where the interlocutors used request strategies, in both English and Persian, more than the other two situations. It is noteworthy here that in spite of the short length of the required conversation, the majority of requests, mainly Query Preparatory, were used in the third situation. This could be taken as evidence for the fact that the situational context set out for this task calls for the realization of conventionally indirect request acts which have been specifically conventionalized in both languages. To put it differently, the speakers have learned to use them as pre-fabricated clichés appropriate for such occasions.

All in all, this contrastive analysis study showed that in spite of the presence of universal aspects of pragmatics, such as the use of request strategies, in general, variation exists in the interlanguage of Persian L1 learners of English L2 which can be related to the specific differences of cultural norms in using direct or indirect request strategies. It can be concluded, then, that the use of the request strategy is a universal aspect, while the use of subdivisions is a

matter of specificity which can be determined by variation/situational factors like intimacy or formality.

Pedagogical Implications

The results of the present study may supply the need for the implementation of pragmatics in foreign language learning. It goes without saying that raising the awareness of EFL Learners' toward pragmatic competence will have a great impact on the appropriate use of request strategies. Therefore, it will be of great significance if EFL learners concentrate on the differences between English and Persian as far as the socio-cultural and pragmatic competencies are concerned.

The findings can help teachers and syllabus designers to integrate socio-pragmatic components into EFL curriculum. More productive activities should be included in the syllabi for the correct and native-like use of request strategies, such as completion tasks or simulation activities, as well as incorporating more authentic materials consisting of request strategies in the real situation, for instance, movies or conversations by native speakers. Doing so, the learners can produce what they have learned provided that they receive feedback where and how to use the appropriate requestive strategy. The application of an authentic model followed by beneficial and practical productive activities that engage the learners may lead them toward the autonomous production of correct request strategies in relation to the situation.

In doing so, as once stated by Kasper (1997), explicit teaching may be required to help foreign language learners develop pragmatic competence. In addition to that, Eslami-Rasekh (2005) states that teachers can have a great role in exposing the learners to the appropriate request strategies in communication through the explicit presentation of preferred and disapproved strategies.

Suggestions for Further Research

This study, like any other research, suffers from some limitations that may raise some new questions for further research in the field. First, since the focus was just on Iranian intermediate adult learners in language institutes, the findings of this research could only

represent the use of request strategies by such group of learners. Besides, due to the limitation of the regional scope of the present study, the statistical results obtained from the questionnaire analysis might not be generalized to the whole target population all over Iran, but rather, should be taken as preliminary indicators of such behavior.

Further studies are needed to shed light on some other intervening factors such as, the issue of gender differences in speech act behavior, social status variation, different levels of language proficiency, and other individual differences. Here, it is worth noting what Rose (2000) once mentioned, that "unlike performance research, studying pragmatic development requires either longitudinal research with a given group of participants over an extended period of time or cross-sectional studies with participants at various stages of development" (p.29).

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Appendix

A Descriptions of taxonomy of request strategies, adopted from Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989, p. 18)

Mood Derivable: Utterances in which the grammatical mood of the verb signals illocutionary force, e.g.: the imperative.

Performatives: Utterances in which the illocutionary force is explicitly named e.g.: I am asking you to ...

Hedged Performatives: Utterances in which the naming of the illocutionary force is modified by hedging expressions, e.g.: I must/ have to ask you to...

Obligation Statements: Utterances which state the obligation of the hearer to carry out the act, e.g.: You'll have to/ should/ must/ ought to...

Want Statements: Utterances which state the speaker's desire that the hearer carries out the act, e.g.: I really want you to/ I'd like to...

Suggestory Formulae: Utterances which contain a suggestion to do X e.g.: How about ...

Query Preparatory: Utterances containing reference to preparatory conditions (e.g., ability, willingness) as conventionalized in any specific language e.g.: Could you..., please? / Would you ?...

Strong Hints: Utterances containing a partial reference to the object of the element needed for the implementation of the act (e.g., you have left the kitchen in a right mess.)

Mild Hints: Utterances that make no reference to the request (or any of its elements) but are interpretable as requests by context (e.g., "I am a nun." in response to a persistent hassle).

B Task Instructions for Eliciting Request Strategies

Instruction: Study the following “simulation” tasks. In all three situations, the conversation starts with a phone call by one of the pair partners. After that, change roles and play again.

- Be sure you understand the situation and imagine yourself in that situation.
- What request strategies will you use in each situation?
- Perform each task first in English, then in Persian.

SITUATION 1**STUDENT A**

You are at home. It's 7:00 in the evening. You've already done your homework. You get a call from a friend who is in the same class as you. When the phone rings, pick it up and answer the phone call.

STUDENT B

You're at home. It's 7:00 in the evening. It's time to do tonight's English homework, but you have a problem. You've forgotten what the homework is, and you left your copy of your student book at school. You need to borrow a copy of the student book. You're going to call a friend who is in the same class. Ask him/her if you can borrow it. If so, where and what time you can pick it up.

SITUATION 2**STUDENT A**

You live in a large city. You're at home. You receive a phone call from a relative who lives in one of the provincial towns. Their son has been admitted to a university in your city nearby your house. He/she needs a favor. Their son doesn't know the city well and needs a place to accommodate. He has to sign up at the university in a limited time. He is going to live in your city for at least four months before the first-semester break. It is really hard to rent a home at this time of the year. The student's parent is going to call you. You haven't heard from them for quite a while. When the phone rings, pick it up and start the conversation. Decide if you can do them the favor.

STUDENT B

You live in a small town and your son has been admitted to a university in your home city. He hasn't been to that city very often and doesn't know the area around the university. You remember that one of your relatives lives nearby the university. You decide to call him/her and ask for a favor to help your son to, first register at the university, and then rent a place to live for at least 4 months. Call your relative in that city. Tell them about your situation. Emphasize that your son cannot do it on his own, and he desperately needs their help. Ask him/her to help out your son with the registration process and accommodation.

SITUATION 3**STUDENT A**

You're at home in your apartment, which you share with a roommate. It's 7:00 in the evening. Your roommate is out right now. Somebody you don't know calls and wants to talk to your friend. Start the phone conversation and ask if you can take a message.

STUDENT B

It's 7:00 in the evening. You want to talk to a friend of yours. It's very important and urgent to leave a message for him. You really want your friend to get back to you as soon as possible. Call your friend's home. Your friend's roommate starts the conversation. You haven't met yet. Tell him how important the message is and ask him/ her to make sure to deliver the message.