Iranian English Teaching Applicants' Request and Apology Speech Acts: Special Focus on Language Proficiency

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Abstract—**Considering speech act formulas as one tenet of pragmatics has been one primary aspect of research domain in the recent years. The current study probes whether proficiency level plays any part in implementing request and apology speech acts, with special focus on Iranian English Teaching Applicants (ETA). To calculate participants' pragmatics performance, two Discourse Completion Tests (DCT) were administered, i.e. a multiple choice (MDCT) and a written form (WDCT), each of which was comprised of 10 request and 10 apology situations. MDCT was adopted from Birjandi and Rezaee (2010), and WDCT was adopted from Jianda (2006), and Olshtain and Cohen (1990). Participants of the study were 157 (81 males and 76 females) English teaching applicants studying in several language centers in Iran. After homogenizing the participants, Pearson product moment correlation was run to detect the relationship between two proficiency level groups' (i.e., high-score and low-score) proficiency scores and their request and apology realization. The resulting data revealed that different proficiency level did not produce any significant differences in request and apology speech act production. Accordingly, proficiency level may not be an influential variable in request and apology realization. The results of this study can inform English instructors and practitioners.**

Index Terms—**speech acts, request, apology, proficiency score, high-score, low-score, English Teaching Applicant (ETA)**

I. INTRODUCTION

Up to the recent decades, language teaching pedagogy considered grammatical and vocabulary knowledge as the major substance for an L2 curriculum. Accordingly, cultural and sociolinguistic aspects of language, presently termed as pragmatics, were not a basic concern in language programs. The present era, however, has witnessed a widespread quest over the significant role of pragmatic competence in language teaching and learning (Kecskes, Majeed & Janjua, 2014).

Pragmatics covers a vast area; for instance, conversational implicature, deixis, conversational structures, and presuppositions (Mey, 2009), all of which open new lenses in second language acquisition settings. Numerous studies have reported the importance of having pragmatic competence in learning a second or foreign language (see for example, Aksoyalp & Toprak, Naghavi & Razavi, 2015; Newokolo, 2014).

The role of speech acts, as one tenet of pragmatics, in language perception and production in particular, is recognized as an indispensable part of linguistic studies in inter-language settings (Aksoyalp & Toprak 2015; Naghavi & Razavi, Nakhle, 2015). The existing literature embraces a plethora of research on this issue including: Alcon Soler & Martinez Flor, 2008; Birjandi & Rezaei, 2010; Cohen, 2010; Kuhi & Jadid, 2014. Recognizing speech act as one of the cornerstones in pragmatics was firstly introduced by Austin (1962) and was discussed by his student, Searle, later on (Searle 1969). Cohen (2008, p.2) defined speech act as:

The patterned, routinized language that natives and pragmatically competent nonnative speakers and writers in a given speech community (with its dialect variations) use to perform functions such as thanking, complimenting, requesting, refusing, apologizing and complaining. (Cited in Zayed, 2014)

Meanwhile, selection of appropriate linguistic forms for the intended speech act with regard to power and distance has received considerable attention in recent years, yet still awaits further research to explore determining variables in this respect.

Literature is filled with the studies inspired by speech act theory (e.g., Aksoyalp and Toprak, 2015; Gaily, 2014; Halupka-Resetar, 2015; Saleem and Azam, 2015; Scherbakova, 2010; Zayed, 2015) and the impact of participants' proficiency knowledge on their pragmatic competence (e.g., Hamidi and Khodareza, 2014; Rattanaprasert and

Aksornjarung, 2011; Tabatabaei and Farnia, 2015; Taguchi, 2011). In particular, it seems that there is a tangible lack of research merely focusing on request as well as apology speech acts. That is, some researchers have conducted on these mentioned speech acts together with acts such as, refusal, complaint and the others (Aminifard & Safaei, 2014; Behnam and Niroomand, 2011). Meanwhile, there are no research studies specifically targeting the performance of applicants for teaching English. Consequently, the current research project aims to fill this void in pragmatics.

II. PREVIOUS STUDIES

A. Theoretical Background

Recently, the application of pragmatics in educational programs has attracted lots of attention. Considering Pragmatics definition, Yule (1996) stated that "it is the study of speaker and contextual meaning". Elsewhere, he added that "it is about how more can get communicated than is said" (p.4). On the other hand, Wales (1989) pinpointed that the primary target of pragmatists lies in "functions, intentions, and goals of utterances"(p. 369). In addition, it requires a kind of "linguistic competence" which is vital while using language in specific contextual situations.

In line with this issue, Bachman and Palmer (2010) stated that being linguistically competent awaits having both organizational and pragmatic competence. As for the former, i.e. the organizational competence, it necessitates interlocutors to have the knowledge of "producing grammatical sentences, understanding the propositional meaning, and ordering the sentences in the correct way to form a text"(p. 86). That is while, pragmatic competence deals with "the ability to use language appropriately in different contexts".

Considering specific perspectives presented in this model of language competence, its two dimensions (i.e., organizational and pragmatic competence) should be considered equally important. Hence, the current study aims to shed more light on the latter dimension, which is the most problematic issue in the educational and teaching context.

On the other hand, considering communication as a central target for learning a language (Afghari, 2007) necessitates English learners to use English speech acts communicatively with the aims of fulfilling their basic requirements (e.g., requesting other people, and/or apologizing them for their mistakes or misbehaves). The importance of this issue can be felt by pondering deeply on the Iranian learners' cultural background which prevents them from using specific speech acts, e.g. apology or request, while communicating (see Afghari, 2007; Witczak, 2012)..

B. Empirical Studies on Request and Apology Speech Acts

Among studies conducted on speech act formulas, some focused on examining different languages within various contextual situations. For instance, Halupka-Resetar (2015) investigated the type and frequency of internal and external request speech act production of 37 ESP students in Serbia. To establish participants' request performance, a modified version of WDCT was implemented to them. The findings revealed that request production of intermediate ESP learners with respect to both internal and external type of modification and frequency of utilization was very low. As for another finding, it was concluded that the participants' request production was due to pedagogical instruction which was significantly in a lower level than linguistic development of the participants.

On the other hand, Jordian EFL learners and instructors' practice of five speech act types (viz., apology, request, compliment, thanking, and greeting) were investigated by Zayed (2014). To conduct this research project, 30 female EFL instructors and their students were selected as the participants of the study. A classroom observation checklist was used to investigate their practice of the above-mentioned speech acts in the classroom. The researcher cited that the participants had no proper practice of any kind of these speech acts. In this study, the teachers practiced three speech acts of request, thanking, and greeting better than compliment and apology. However, results proved that the students implemented the greeting speech act better than the other acts.

Another research project was conducted by Gaily (2014) who attempted to assess the way programmed pedagogical sessions of English speech act instruction could affect Sudanese EFL learners' pragmatic performance. Accordingly, he investigated four types of speech acts, viz. request, apology, complaint, and refusal. One type of DCT and a Multile choice pragmatic comprehension test were used as pretest and post-test in that study. The findings revealed that after the instruction phase, participants' performance of the above-mentioned speech acts confronted a tangible development.

Another study is Aksoyalp and Toprak (2015) which dealt with the extent EFL course books address speech acts. To this end, the way EFL course books includes apology, complaint and suggestion formulas was investigated. Several books with different language proficiency level were chosen as the instruments of the study. At last, results indicated that pragmatic knowledge did not receive the deserved attention from course book writers and material developers. Consequently, some suggestions were presented to this problem.

Saleem and Azam (2015) also conducted a research project considering the socio-pragmatic appropriateness in apology strategies and pragmatic transfer in English. The participants were EFL University students of Pakistan whose pragmatic performance was analyzed according to group discussion questionnaire. According to the participants' reports, they used apology strategies by considering interlocutor's social norms and not translating apology strategies of their L1 cultural norms. Findings revealed that Urdu-speaking learners of English used these speech act strategies according to the severity of the offence. That is to say, intensifiers and indirect apology strategies were used by the participants when the situation was severe. However, when the situation was not severe, explicit apology strategies were utilized.

C. Studies on Iranian Context

Among studies on speech acts, some were conducted in Iranian context including Salehi (2013). He examined the effect of implicit vs. explicit teaching of apology and request speech acts. To this end, he gave a DCT to 40 university students and the results were compared with their midterm scores. The objectives of the study were to investigate the relationship between pragmatic and grammatical competence of the participants. The participants were divided to two groups and underwent two instructional procedures of implicit and explicit nature. Findings revealed that instruction was effective regardless of assignment of the students into the mentioned groups.

In another study by Mirzaei and Esmaeili (2013), the impact of planned instruction was investigated on Iranian L2 learners' interlanguage pragmatic development. Accordingly, participants' awareness and production of three types of speech acts (e.g., apology, request, and complaint) were explored. The other aim was to determine whether language proficiency plays any role in incorporating pragmatic instruction into the L2 classroom. The results were compared on the basis of participants' performance on pre- and post-test types of MDCT and WDCT. Findings indicated that explicit instruction facilitated the development of pragmatically appropriate language usage, however, the level of language proficiency had no significant role in incorporating instruction into actual use.

III. THE PRESENT STUDY

Considering all these studies, the current research is designed to investigate the relationship between Iranian ETAs' proficiency knowledge and their pragmatic performance. To this end, two speech acts of request and apology were investigated. The primary reason for choosing these speech acts is that they are both mostly used in everyday conversational situations, and social settings. Furthermore, other speech act types have already been studied in Iran context by different scholars (see for example, Meinl, 2010; Sadler and Eroz, 2001).The foremost objective of this study is to lead interlocutors to the best level of language competence with regard to its basic dimensions of organizational and pragmatic competence. Consequently, the following research questions were presented:

A. Research Questions

As to reach the above-mentioned ends in this study, the following research questions were posed:

1) Does proficiency level have any significant relationship with pragmatic performance of English teaching applicants, concerning request and apology speech acts?

2) Does high-score proficiency level have any significant relationship with pragmatic performance of English teaching applicants, concerning request and apology speech acts?

3) Does low-score proficiency level have any significant relationship with pragmatic performance of English teaching applicants, concerning request and apology speech acts?

B. Method

Participants and Setting

Participants of this study were 157 applicants for teaching English in several language centers, Hezareh Danesh and Novin, located in Jam, Shokuh and Modarres institutes, in Shiraz, Iran. The participants included 59 male and 51 female with an average age ranging from 25 to 30. For homogenizing the participants, Oxford Quick Placement test (OQPT, 2001) was administered. Afterward, the participants with advance proficiency level classified into two groups of high-score and low-score.

As to survey their demographic information, most of them had the experience of learning English as their field of study at university, and some studied other fields at university, computer engineering, agriculture, biology, information technology, and the others. Among them, some were familiar with other languages, i.e. Arabic, French, Turkish, and/or Germany. The participants' first language was mostly Persian and a very small number of them, i.e. less than four percent, had the experience of living abroad, however, none had studied English language abroad.

The chief reason for selecting this sample size as the participants of the current study was that according to Morgan (1970) Population sample chart, the sample required for 270 population members is 157. Accordingly, the results of the present study can be generalized to 270 participants within similar contexts.

Instrumentation and materials

Three standard types of instruments were employed in this study, Oxford quick placement test as for homogenizing the participants, one type of MDCT conducted by Birjandi & Rezaee (2010), and two types of WDCT(administered as one test) for request and apology speech acts. The request and apology WDCT forms were adopted from Jianda (2006) and Olshtain & Cohen (1990), respectively. The MDCT for the current study encompasses 10 different situations of request and 10 others for apology speech acts. That is, each of WDCT forms encompassed 10 items for either mentioned speech act types. Prior to administering the questionnaires, participants were asked to reply each situational item regarding contextualized conditions. In the meantime, personal information was recorded regarding the participants' gender, general experiences of learning/teaching other languages, and their fields of study. To ascertain the validity of the tests, the researcher asked for the judgment of five experienced EFL professors at the University of Zanjan.

Data collection Procedure

For collecting data, Firstly, to ensure the homogeneity of the participants and in the meantime measuring their general English proficiency, oxford quick placement test (2001) was administered. After that, one week later, the research objectives were explained to the advanced proficiency level participants by the researcher. Then, they were asked to fancy themselves in different situations of the questionnaire. Following that, the MDCT and WDCT were given simultaneously to them as the instruments for measuring their command of speech acts.

Data collection and analysis

Consequently, the MDCT responses were analyzed on the bases of Birjandi & Rezaee's (2010) answer keys. In addition, as for rating the participants' production on WDCT, their responses were rated on the bases of a 6-point Likert scale adopted from Taguchi (2006). As for assuring the validity of the ratings, the participants' responses to WDCT were judged by three M.A TEFL students at the University of Shiraz as well as the researcher of the current study. Taguchi's Likert scale ranged from 0 to 5, as shown in table 1 below.

TABLE 1.
APPROPRIATENESS RATING SCALE

Ratings	Descriptors
0	No performance
1 Very poor	Expressions are very difficult or too little to understand. There is no evidence that the intended speech acts are performed.
2 Poor	Due to the interference from grammatical and discourse errors, appropriateness is difficult to determine.
3 Fair	-Expressions are only somewhat appropriate. -Grammatical and discourse errors are noticeable, but they do not interfere appropriateness.
4 Good	-Expressions are mostly appropriate. -Very few grammatical and discourse errors.
5 Excellent	-Expressions are fully appropriate for the situation. - No or almost no grammatical and discourse errors

The gathered data from the WDCT forms were judged according to the above-mentioned rating criteria and added to the MDCT scores for request and apology speech acts production. Hence, two groups of high-score and low-score performances on request and apology speech acts were investigated using SPSS procedure. Next, descriptive statistics of the speech act types along with participants' proficiency scores were presented. Consequently, Pearson Product moment correlation was implemented to detect the strength and direction of the relationship between the aforementioned variables of the study.

IV. RESULTS

As previously mentioned, research questions of the current study tackle on the issue that if there is any association between proficiency level, for high-score and low-score proficiency level, and pragmatic performance of Iranian applicants for teaching English. In order to answer these questions, firstly, descriptive statistics of the variables, including minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation were calculated. Hence, it follows with correlation procedures in order to detect the kind and degree of the relationship between dependent and independent variables of this study.

TABLE 2.
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR WHOLE SUBJECTS, LOW-SCORE GROUP, AND HIGH-SCORE GROUP (N=157)

		N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
		Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic
Whole subjects (n=157)	Request	157	40.00	95.00	75.94	.907	11.369
	Apology	157	26.00	98.00	77.67	1.058	13.260
	Proficiency	157	78.00	99.00	87.78	.493	6.181
Low-score (n= 87)	Request	87	40.00	95.00	71.57	1.277	11.908
	Apology	87	26.00	95.00	70.36	1.336	12.458
	Proficiency	87	78.00	93.00	82.85	.313	2.924
High-score (n= 70)	Request	70	65.00	95.00	81.36	.939	7.854
	Apology	70	71.00	98.00	86.76	.869	7.270
	Proficiency	70	90.00	99.00	93.90	.318	2.660

As previously mentioned, 157 participants of this study were classified into two groups of high-score and low-score proficiency level, on the basis of their proficiency scores. Table 2, displays descriptive statistics concerning participants' (i.e. the whole subjects, low-score, and high-score group) proficiency knowledge and their performance on request/apology speech acts. Regarding the descriptive statistics, table 3 represents the Pearson product-moment correlation (hereafter Pearson's correlation) for the pair variables of pragmatics and proficiency knowledge in three groups of low-score, high-score, as well as the whole subjects. The reason for choosing this kind of statistical procedure among other correlational formulas was about its nature which measures the strength and direction of linear relationship between pairs of continuous variables.

To interpret the outcomes of inferential statistics, Cohen's (1988) criteria was used to determine the strength of the relationships between various variables in the current study. Cohen (1988) suggested that, a correlation of 0.10 to 0.29

regarded as small, 0.30 to 0.49 regarded as medium, and 0.50 to 1.0 considered as large (as cited in Pallant, 2005, p.126).

TABLE 3.
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCORES ON PROFICIENCY, AND REQUEST/APOLOGY
SPEECH ACT TESTS OF WHOLE SUBJECTS (N=157)

			Proficiency
Whole subjects (n=157)	Request	Pearson Correlation	.482
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	Apology	Pearson Correlation	.597
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

A Pearson correlation was run to assess the relationship between ETAs' scores on proficiency, and request/apology tests in whole subjects (table 3). The data showed no violation of homoscedasticity, linearity, or normality. Hence, it was found that there was a medium, positive correlation between the two variables of request and proficiency, r = 0.482, n = 157, p < 0.05 (p= 0.00). Concisely, the significant level is 0.00 which is less than 0.05 (p value < 0.05). On the other hand, r= 0.482 is positive and ranges between 0.30 and 0.49. Therefore, it can be interpreted as a medium, positive relationship between these two variables, i.e. scores of proficiency and request speech act. Hence, a higher pragmatic score was consistently associated with greater proficiency level and vice versa. On the other hand, there was a strong, positive relationship between the two variables of apology and proficiency, r = 0.597, n = 157, p < 0.05 (p= 0.00). That is, the significant level is 0.00 which is less than 0.05 (p value < 0.05). In addition, r= 0.597 is positive and a little over halfway between 0.00 and 1.00. Therefore, it can be interpreted as a strong, positive relationship between scores on proficiency and apology speech act.

TABLE 4.
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCORES ON PROFICIENCY, AND REQUEST/APOLOGY SPEECH
ACT TESTS OF LOW-SCORE GROUP (N=87)

			Proficiency
Low-score (n= 87)	Request	Pearson Correlation	.249
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.002
	Apology	Pearson Correlation	.175
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.104

As illustrated in table 4, there was a small, positive correlation between the two variables of request and proficiency in the low-score group, r = 0.249, n = 87, p < 0.05 (p= 0.002).Concisely, the significant level is 0.002 which is less than 0.05 (p value < 0.05). On the other hand, r= 0.249 is positive and ranges from 0.10 to 0.29 which is regarded as small. Therefore, it can be interpreted as a small, positive relationship between these two variables, i.e. scores of proficiency and request speech act. In contrast, there was no correlation between the low-score group's total scores of proficiency and apology speech act, r = 0.175, n = 87, p> 0.05 (p = 0.104). The significance is 0.104 that is more than (0.05) (p value > 0.05). Therefore, proficiency level and apology speech act had no statistically significant association with each other in this group.

TABLE 5.
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCORES ON PROFICIENCY, AND REQUEST/APOLOGY SPEECH
ACT TESTS OF HIGH-SCORE GROUP (N=70)

			Proficiency
High-score (n= 70)	Request	Pearson Correlation	.239
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.046
	Apology	Pearson Correlation	.070
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.710

Table 5 indicated that there was a small, positive correlation between the high-score group's performance on proficiency and request speech act, r = 0.239, n = 70, p < 0.05 (p= 0.046).Concisely, the significant level is 0.046 which is less than 0.05 (p value < 0.05). In addition, r= 0.239 is positive and ranges from 0.10 to 0.29 which is regarded as small. Hence, it can be interpreted as a small, positive relationship between scores of proficiency and request speech act in the high-score participants. Considering the relationship between proficiency and apology scores in this group, no correlation was found, r= 0.070, n=70, p> 0.05 (p= 0.710). The significance is 0.710 that is more than (0.05) (p value > 0.05). Therefore proficiency level and apology speech act had no statistically significant association with each other in the high score group.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The fundamental concern of the current study was to probe the strength and direction of the relationship between two variables of proficiency score and pragmatic performance, focusing on request and apology speech acts. To this end, descriptive and inferential statistics were presented separately for groups of low-score, high-score, as well as the whole subjects. As a result, it was confirmed that, the whole participants' request and apology competence had a positive association

with their proficiency knowledge. In addition, both low-score and high-score groups' request realization had a small, positive correlation with their proficiency scores. However, apology speech act was not significantly correlated with proficiency scores in both groups. Findings of the current study may indicate that the Iranian ETAs' proficiency knowledge play a significant role in their request realization. However, there was no association between their proficiency knowledge and apology competence.

The relationship between two variables of pragmatic competence and language proficiency was a fascinating topic of research for numerous scholars (e.g. Ashoorpour & Azari, 2014; Behnam 7 Niroomand, 2011; Rattanaprasert & Aksornjarung, 2011; Tabatabaei & Farnia, 2015; Tajeddin & Tayebipour, 2015) which implied the importance of this issue. As there were lots of inconsistencies in relation to the influential effect of proficiency level on pragmatic performance of the participants, the current study was presented to tackle on the issue more decisively. In addition, no research studies has already probed this subject on non-native applicants for teaching English, the void which aimed to be filled in the current study.

The results of the present study confirm the findings of some researches (e.g., Hamidi & Khodareza, 2014; Rattanaprasert & Aksornjarung, 2011; Taguchi, 2011) in that proficiency knowledge is significantly correlated with pragmatic performance. For instance, Taguchi (2011) explored whether proficiency level and having the experience of studying abroad have any effect on the participants' speech act production. To this end, 25 English native speakers and 64 Japanese English learners were selected as the participants. Then they were classified into three groups of low-proficiency level, high-proficiency level, and high-proficiency level based on their experience of studying abroad. Finally, it was concluded that there was a significant positive relationship between proficiency level and participants' speech act production.

The results of the current study were in contrast with the findings of some scholars who concluded that there was no significant relationship between pragmatic competence and language proficiency. For instance, Ashoorpour and Azari (2014) conducted a study on the relationship between Iranian EFL learners' proficiency knowledge and request speech act production. Consequently, it was indicated that there were no significant relationship between these two variables in pre-intermediate and intermediate level students.

In the same vein, Tabatabaei and Farnia (2015) conducted their research project considering the relationship between Iranian EFL learners' English proficiency and their refusal speech act acquisition. The results indicated that there was no correlation between language proficiency and pragmatic performance. That is, language proficiency could not be considered as a determining factor in the appropriateness and degree of pragmatic competence.

In addition, the findings of the current study were in contrast with Rattanaprasert and Aksornjarung's (2011) findings as they found a negative relationship between language proficiency and pragmatic performance. They investigated 62 first year medical students' vocabulary and grammatical knowledge and their pragmatic performance. Findings indicated that participants with high scores of vocabulary and grammar performed poorly on the bases of their pragmatic performance and vice versa. Hence, these two variables were negatively correlated in first year medical students in Thailand.

In conclusion, it can be inferred that Iranian ETAs' proficiency knowledge played a significant role in their request realization. However, there was no association between their proficiency knowledge and apology competence. Therefore, investigating a few specific speech act realization may not be a beneficial predicator of the participants' pragmatic performance, as a whole. That is, pragmatic performance should be judged more meticulously.

This study has important implications for foreign language learners, and instructors. They would be assured that having a high language proficiency does not necessarily imply having a better performance on speech act types. Therefore, other effective procedures should be explored to increase this vital communication competence, i.e. pragmatics. Also it is suggested that EFL learners should be provided with pragmatic functions in addition to the target language norms.

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