Investigating Politeness and Academic Background: An analytical Approach

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Abstract. Within Language learners' pragmatic competence, speech acts play crucial role which is even further accentuated duet to cross cultural differences. The present study investigated the effect of academic education on acquiring native norms expressing condolences. To this e   nd a discourse completion test (DCT) was administered to two groups of Iranian EFL learners including 30 sophomores and 30 seniors as well as 20 English native speakers (ENS). The result of the study showed significant differences among the three groups in using different condolence strategies except apologetic and sympathy expressions. As the sophomores outperformed the seniors in the appropriate use of some strategies, more attention is required to be paid to the way such strategies are dealt with in English classes.

Keywords: analytical Approach, Investigating, Politeness

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1. INTRODUCTION

Communication in new century opens a window to a new world, and using language appropriately is the back bone of it. Regardless of our first language the foreign language knowledge usually matures in academic situations due to the fact that a lot of written resources in every field of study are in a foreign language particularly English. Investigation of how speech acts are realized in different cultures is of high importance (Elwood, 2004), and also someone's linguistic and pragmatic competence accents this importance. To be linguistically competent in a particular language dose not only mean that you know that language (Hymes, 1972). A linguistically well-formed sentence can be appropriate in one context but completely inappropriate in another (Allami & Samavarchi 2012) Despite its effectiveness, pragmatic competence suffers from de-emphasis in the realm of second language learning (Brock& Nagasaka, 2005). One of the most controversial situations in which native speakers have difficulty with let alone none- natives is expressing condolences because bereavement is the time when people may be particularly vulnerable (Elwood, 2004). Interaction among people in situations like death is usually hard to manage and small mistake in the expression of the condolence can severely hurt the feelings of the person suffering from bereavement. Hence giving condolences is special type of conversation leading to a polite action and making a speech act a result. The theory of speech act mainly developed by Jane Austin and Searle (Austin, 1975, Searle, 1969, 1985) which asserted that the minimal part of act of communication is not the sentence but certain types of language actions like requests, apologies or refusals. Speech act of condolence falls into the forth type of Searle's categorization i.e.

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expressive (Lotfollahi & Eslami-Rasekh, 2011). Plethora of studies have been done in order to investigate differences in socio-pragmatic competence of language learners in different situations, but to the knowledge of the researchers what almost remains untouched is the notion of politeness in academic situations. The primary concern in cross cultural studies is the degree of difference existing in social interactions between the two societies and the present study is not an exception. The current body of knowledge shows that most of studies deal with only differences regardless of the context of occurrence. In this study the researchers try to give a key insight into the issue of politeness in giving condolences with a contrastive analysis approach between Iranian learners of English and Native speakers with a focus on academic context.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Undoubtedly, social relationship in general and verbal relation in specific is distinctive feature of humankind. Vast amount of research has been done in this regard but because of the complexity of the subject and its interaction with humans' mind and culture more studies are needed, especially in the area of intercultural elaboration. In fact, the theory of speech act can play a fundamental role in such studies. Linguistically speaking speech act is a type of utterance which brings about performative functions in both language and communication (Austin, 1975).

In a study by Ahmadi, Kargar, and Rostampour (2014) it was indicated that there is no significant difference in utilization of speech acts like suggestion used by students with different levels of proficiency and also they showed that there is no relationship between gender and suggestion strategies.

In a similar study on suggestion speech act Sharafadini (2012) investigated the socio-cultural transfer of Iranian EFL learners versus native Persian speakers evidences of socio-cultural transfer from L1 to L2 by Iranian students were clearly demonstrated. Pakzadian &Vahiddastjerdi (2012) investigated the socio- pragmatic transfer of speech acts from Farsi to English by comparing Farsi learners of English and native speakers in five different situations. Farsi learners of English exhibited their native culture and norms of society which occasionally led to hearer's misunderstandings. The result was in line with the bulk of studies which show that cultural and social norms are transferable from native language of the learner.

One of the essential aspects of humanities deals with gender and its consequences on the human behavior. The effects of gender can be evaluated from Different perspectives leading to the higher efficiency of classroom instruction. Among the issues which are crystal clear is the impact of native language on the second language learners' performance. A curious fact was investigated by Tavakoli & Shirinbakhsh (2013) indicating backward pragmatic transfer in the case of refusals in Persian. The analysis on the native Persian speakers with no knowledge of English and Persian EFL learners with different levels of proficiency revealed that there is significant difference between the two aforementioned two groups with regard to the appropriate use of English refusals. In general this study provided evidences of backward pragmatic transfer of L2 in L1 among Persian EFL learners.

Creating a condition in which EFL learners acquire both culture and the language would be effective and also tricky for teachers, but the stark reality is that language and culture are totally integrated with each other, and in learning process they are mutually inclusive (Kramsch, 2007).

The case in point is that students have difficulties in establishing interpersonal conversations with Native speakers, the problem lying in the pragmatic constitute of language ability. L2 instructors frequently miss teaching pragmatic issues due to their difficulty. Since the lack of pragmatic competence can lead to communication breakdown, it would be a constructive suggestion for teachers to provide students with the nessecery tools such as rehearsing, role play and contrastive analysis for a better internalizing of pragmatic rules (Amaya, 2008).

For instance one of the problematic areas is the notion of directness across different cultures. Some people think that the more indirect is the more polite and vice versa. In a study Ogiermann (2009) showed the cross-cultural variation in Speech act realization by different speakers of English, Polish, German and Russian requests. And it was indicated that the relationship between indirectness and politeness is quite arbitrary and context bound.

In today's world of materialism, spirituality fades away gradually and perhaps a small effect of this change is reflected in the humans' speech. Civility, politeness and propriety are integral components of our life. This is the power of words which could mitigate or aggravate the pain of the accidents, and politeness strategies are used repeatedly in routine life. Numerous researches have been done in the related context exploring strategies, effective factors, and cultural differences in its social manifestation. Leech (2005) asserted that there is no East and West divide in politeness, and he suggested a common Pragmatic and behavioral basis for societies in politeness. In principle, this is the shared idea of politeness among societies which establishes the appropriate situation for conducting cross cultural studies.

Jalilifar (2009) asserted that Iranian EFL learners do not acquire socio-pragmatic knowledge in order to indicate a proper social behavior but, there is positive correlation between the level of proficiency of EFL learners and their utilization of similar strategies with native speakers in the case of requests.

For having an accurate assessment on the teachability and transferability of politeness strategies Azimi (2006) conducted a study on 30 native speakers of Persian and 30 native speakers of English by means of discourse completion test and, the result showed that even at advanced levels of proficiency Iranian learners were not acquainted with politeness principles of English, and it was suggested that transfer from L1 affects L2 speech in different situations.

By the passage of time and advancement of technology new ways of communication such as mobile phones are introduced. Behnam et al. (2013) assessed the act of expressing condolences in Persian and English via short messages. The results showed that Iranians were direct and utilized religious expressions while English people were apologetic and symbolic in their expressions. In other words they found a significant difference between Iranian and English people.

As the proceeding investigations indicate, the majority of the related studies on this topic concern the overall differences between the two societies. And no paper has directly examined the effect of education on politeness and existing differences between senior, sophomore EFL

learners and English native speakers in the appropriate use of the speech act of condolence. The current paper intends to measure the effect of exposure to academic settings and its effect on the use of correct strategies in expressing condolence.

1-Are there any significant differences between senior and sophomore Iranian EFL learners in expressing condolences?

2-Are there any significant Differences between senior EFL learners and English Native speakers?

3-Dose the education have an impact on students' performance in giving condolences?

2.1 .Objectives and Significance of the Study

According to Searl (1979) speech acts are of different types namely assertive, directive, declaratives, commissives and expressives. This study focuses on the expressive type of speech act i.e. verbalizing the mentality of the speaker in a way which is graspable for the hearer.

It will firstly help material developers and instructors to better recognize the areas in need of more attention. Secondly, it helps the language learners to learn the norms the native speakers use to express condolences so that they can upgrade their capability of being native like. In other words, it provides the language learners with the required information concerning the controversial issues which impede the act of communication and interaction. Finally, it shows the effect of academic education on the acquisition of pragmatic competence in the process of meaning negotiation.

3. METHOD
3.1. Participants

The participants of this study included 30 sophomore and 30 senior Iranian EFL learners in Vali-e-Asr University of Rafsanjan. 20 Native English speakers comprised the third group of participants resorted to provide the native norms.

3.2. Materials

A discourse completion test (DCT) was used for data collection. Both Iranian EFL learners and English Native speakers received English version of the questionnaire eliciting the respondents' reaction in 9 situations.

3.3. Procedure

As the first step of the study DCT was administered to the two groups of language learners i.e. sophomores and seniors after nessecery explanations and instructions. As the next step a group of English native speakers were contacted through Email and after getting their agreements they were sent the second Email with the DCT attached to.

After collecting the data from the three groups all responses were coded by the researcher based on the framework suggested by Elwood (2004).The coding process of the data resulted in eight categories based on aforementioned framework plus a newly discovered category named Avoidance. Below is the complete list of the categories detected in the collected data:
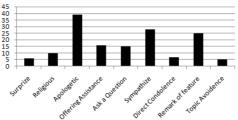
1)   Expression of surprise like 'oh' or ' oh my God'
2)   Religious expression like God may bless him
3)   Apologetic like I am really sorry for that
4)   Offering assistance like please put me in the picture in the case of any help
5)   Ask a -question, like what happened
6)   Sympathize, don't worry
7)   Direct condolence, I hope you accept our condolence
8)   Remarking feature, I hope this will be the last misfortune of your life
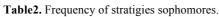9)   Avoidance strategy.
The frequency of each category was calculated in each group for later comparisons.

4. RESULTS AND DİSCUSSİON

The results of the study are demonstrated in the following tables explaining the frequency and distribution of choices by three groups of participants. Table 1 shows the Native speakers' reaction to DCT situations.

Table1. Frequency of stratigie natives speakers.

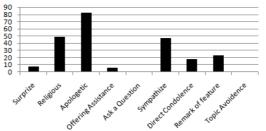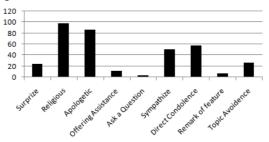**Table2.** Frequency of stratigies sophomores.

Table3. Frequency of stratigies seniors.

As the results revealed the most frequent response by the Native Speakers belonged to Apologetic Strategy including answers like ' I'm really sorry' and the most frequent strategies after apology were sympathizing and remarking the future respectively. The least frequent strategy used by native speakers as depicted above was topic avoidance.

For sophomore English language learners the most frequent choices were Apologetic and then religious strategies. (Table 2)

The senior students' most commonly used strategies were the same as those used by sophomores while they resorted more frequently to apologetic strategies instead of religious strategies.

Table 4. Chi square analysis.

Strategies	Natives & Sophomores Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Natives & Seniors Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Seniors & Sophomores Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Total Exact Sig. (2-sided)
Expression of surprise	.83	.00	.00	.00
Religious Expression	.00	.00	.7	.00
Apologetic	.63	.71	.68	.9
Offering assistance	.02	.43	.05	.00
Asking Question	.00	.01	.065	.00
Sympathizing	.229	.14	.00	.129
Direct Condolence	.01	.00	.00	.00
Remarking Future	.74	.03	.06	.00
Topic Avoidance	.04	.00	.00	.00

As the table above shows using two strategies are common both by EFL learners and native speakers of English including sympathizing and apologetic. Overlay there was no significant difference between the Native speakers, senior students and sophomore students.

As the results of Chi square analysis showed there was no significant difference between EFL learners and native speakers which could be due to some shared values between the two cultures but in utilizing the second common strategy i.e. sympathizing despite the lack of a significant difference involving all groups, the two groups of seniors and sophomores proved significantly different

Since the level of Significance between Native speakers and sophomores was .229 and between Native speakers and seniors was .14 we can conclude that sophomore students are closer to native speakers than seniors. The reason is that by learning a new language students try to form a new identity manifesting itself in using more complicated strategies while the use of some strategies is not always an indication of their proximity to native speakers.

Based on the results of table 4 in 7 situations we are facing significant differences among groups. Expression of surprise as one of the strategies people use when becoming aware of someone's death was most common between seniors. Table 4 shows that the level of significance was .83 between native speakers and sophomore students while it was .00 between native speakers and seniors and the same between seniors and sophomores. The seniors seem to try to accentuate the use of surprise strategy which leads to a deviation from the native speakers' norms.

The second strategy, using religious expressions; was less frequently used by native speakers compared with other groups. The reason could stem from the religious orientation of Iranian

people in general and EFL learners in specific. Regarding the frequency of using this strategy while the two groups of EFL learners proved almost similar, there was a significant difference between them and native speakers. This could mean that learners' religious culture was not changed through instruction.

Offering assistance is another type of strategy in giving condolence to others. Regarding the Total utilization of this strategy there is a significant difference among the three groups.

But since the difference lies between native speakers and sophomores and also between seniors and sophomores, we can regard education as an influential factor.

Asking questions about the accident was a common strategy by English native speakers but unfortunately neither seniors nor sophomores used this strategy. The reason could be lack of enough attention to such a strategy in a materials covered in class.

One of the most controversial areas of expressing condolences is the strategy of direct condolence. As the results showed sophomores and seniors resort to this strategy significantly more than native speaker. This over use of direct strategies could be due to the Iranian EFL learners not well developed pragmatic competence. The high frequency of utilizing the direct strategy both by sophomores and seniors and their deficient pragmatic competence could lead them to utilizing native norms of expressing condolence i.e. direct strategies.

Remarking future and wishing that such catastrophic situations won't happen to someone in future is another strategy which proved significant between native speakers and seniors. Finally, topic avoidance is the last category of strategies in expressing condolences.

Despite the extensive use of this strategy by seniors native speakers proved its medium uses. This is while sophomores didn't refer to this strategy at all. The reason could be again overusing an already learnt strategy by and lack of developing the needed pragmatic competence by sophomores.

5. CONCLUSION

The present study investigated the effect of academic education on acquiring Native English speakers' norms of politeness in expressing condolence. The results indicated that three groups of sophomores, seniors and English native speakers performed significantly different in using condolence strategies excluding the two strategies of apologetic and sympathy expressions. Based on the finding sophomores outperformed the seniors regarding the use of some strategies which could be justified as result of the process of overgeneralization by seniors to heighten their linguistic proficiency. The obtained results were also partly explained through the cultural proximity which in turn could occasionally lead to correct decisions by sophomores. the findings of the study are in harmony with the bulk of the relevant research in the same context (Behnam et.al, 2013; Ahmadi, et.al, 2014; Pakzadian & Vahid Dastjerdi, 2012 ;), and further confirm Yi Shih(2006) emphasis on the importance of acquiring socio-linguistic rules as well as grammatical competence. The results of the study highlight the need for further attention to the way pragmatic competence are dealt with in academic settings.

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