

# INTERLANGUAGE PRAGMATIC DEVELOPMENT: THE EFFECT OF FORMAL INSTRUCTION ON IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS' INTERPRETATION AND USE OF SPEECH ACT OF APOLOGY

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## ABSTRACT

*This article presents a discussion about the inclusion of explicit pragmatic instruction as a facilitative tool to develop interlanguage pragmatic competence of Iranian EFL learners' interpretation and use of speech act of apology. The questions this article is intended to answer include: 1) whether formal instruction of pragmatic knowledge play any role in the enhancement of Iranian advanced L2 learners' use of speech act of apology, and 2) whether formal instruction of pragmatic knowledge play any role in the enhancement of Iranian advanced L2 learners' interpretation of speech act of apology. To answer these questions, 60 Iranian advanced EFL learners were selected via administering the Oxford Placement Test (OPT). Following the Martinez-Flor and Uso-Juan's 6R approach (2006) two researcher made test of apology speech act were administered as the pre-test before the targeted speech act was instructed to them for 10 sessions. Two post-test of apology speech act were then administered and data were analyzed via calculating paired sample T-test. The results indicated that advanced learners showed progress both in interpretation and use.*

**Keywords:** Interlanguage Pragmatics, Interpretation, Use, Speech Act, Apology

## INTRODUCTION

A radical change in language teaching methodology began in the mid-1970s with transition away from the discrete study of separated grammatical structures and instead, a focus on communicative language teaching. Despite these theoretical changes, issues related to sociocultural, or pragmatic competence in the language classroom have largely been ignored for a variety of reasons.

Research about the performance of speech acts by FL learners have offered various explanations for the differences between learners and native speakers (NSs) realizations, namely, availability of input, proficiency, length of exposure, and transfer (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001). As a way to compensate for this imbalance, recommendations have been made since the late 1980's, for the inclusion of explicit pragmatic instruction as part of foreign and second language (L2) curricula (e.g. Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper, 1989). These instructional suggestions have been backed up by authors such as Kasper & Schmidt (1996) and Bardovi-Harlig (1999), who pointed out the necessity of conducting research about the role of instruction in interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) development in order to make stronger the link between ILP and second language acquisition and foreign language learning. Empirical studies on this direction have analyzed the effect of instruction in the development of pragmatic knowledge dealing with a multiplicity of features. The results from most of these studies are promising with regard to the positive effect of pedagogical intervention,

supporting in this way the view that pragmatic ability can be systematically and pedagogically developed through planned classroom activities.

However, even a cursory analysis of the English language teaching and learning in Iranian universities shows that the teaching of English in Iran is driven by a kind of curriculum that adheres uniquely to the sequential coverage of the linguistic description of the target language but the issues around communicating with language i.e. English pragmatic knowledge and socio-cultural rules of the language are ignored.

To the best of the researcher's knowledge, English language learning in Iran, which is English as a Foreign Language (EFL), is based on the input which is available in language classrooms. In such an impoverished learning environment the learners are not likely to have much exposure to authentic input; consequently, they do not have the opportunity to acquire the English pragmatics. For the purpose of this study if we focus on speech acts, we will be in urgent need to develop ways to teach various aspects of speech acts that native speakers of English manipulate when they produce or respond to such speech acts. Teaching speech acts must include both the perceptive and productive knowledge of speech acts realization patterns in English.

Following Kasper & Schmidt (1996) and Bardovi-Harlig (1999), who pointed out the necessity of conducting research about the role of instruction in interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) development in order to make stronger the link between ILP and second language acquisition and foreign language learning, the researcher of this study aims to carry out a developmental interlanguage pragmatics research on the advanced level of Iranian EFL learners.

Therefore, the task of the researcher in this study is to find a suggestion; that is, the instruction of speech act of apology in terms of both interpretation (comprehension) and use (production) of the mentioned speech act, to fill the gap most ILP practitioners and EFL teachers feel between classroom input and authentic input.

## **RESEARCH HYPOTHESES OF THE STUDY**

H1: Formal instruction of pragmatic knowledge does not play any role in the enhancement of Iranian advanced L2 learners' use of speech act of apology.

H2: Formal instruction of pragmatic knowledge does not play any role in the enhancement of Iranian advanced L2 learners' interpretation of speech act of apology.

## **METHOD AND MATERIALS**

The participants of the study contained 60 B.A. candidates of TEFL who were selected from among 200 university students via administering an OPT test. The participant group was given a pretest of speech acts including Multiple Choice Questionnaire (MCQ) for interpretation and Discourse Completion Task (DCT) for use. The group was treated with the apology speech act adopting the Martinez-Flor and Uso-Juan's 6Rs Approach (2006) concerning the use and interpretation of appropriate form for 10 sessions.

The treatment consisted of six steps. In the first step, that of Researching, learners were explained what pragmatic competence is, as well as the definition apology. After this explanation, learners were asked to collect naturally occurring apologies in their mother tongue, and to write down sociopragmatic information about this speech act in different situations. In the second step, that of Reflecting, learners were asked to work on the data they

had collected and answer a variety of awareness-raising questions that focus on both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic issues. They were also encouraged to compare their data with their partners in order to gain access to a wider sample of strategies for the speech act. Having worked on data from their mother tongue, they moved on to the third step, that of Receiving, in which they were provided with explicit instruction on the pragmalinguistic forms employed for making apologies in the English language.

Once they received instruction in all possible forms, they were asked to compare them with the ones they had found in their mother tongue, so that learners could notice similarities and differences between the two languages. In the fourth step, that of Reasoning, learners were involved in three different types of awareness-raising activities that deepen their understanding of how the form that a speech act takes may depend on the sociopragmatic factors surrounding them, as well as the speaker's intention and the setting in which the speech act occurs.

After having engaged in a variety of activities designed to develop their pragmatic awareness, learners got engaged in the fifth step, that of Rehearsing. Here, learners were provided with opportunities to put all that knowledge into practice by participating in two types of production activities, namely controlled and free. As far as the controlled activities are concerned, learners were engaged in both oral production tasks, involving the use of video or digital video and written production tasks related to sending emails.

Once they participated in these oral and written controlled production activities, they were ready to engage in free activities to actually see if they had acquired the pragmatic knowledge to appropriately use the speech act apology. Finally, in the sixth step, that of Revising, learners received the teacher's feedback regarding their performance when using apologies in the free activities assigned in the previous step.

Finally, the group was given a parallel posttest of the speech acts of the study including Multiple Choice Questionnaire (MCQ) for interpretation and Discourse Completion Task (DCT) for use. The data gathered for the hypotheses of the study were analyzed via applying the paired sample T-test.

**RESULTS**

**Descriptive Analysis of the Data**

The data of the present study were descriptively analyzed via using the SPSS software; and the summary of findings have been presented in tables 1 to 4 as follows:

**Table 1. Descriptive analysis of the data for apology Use (Paired Samples Statistics)**

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Advanced Use Apology After Formal Instruction	9.7667	30	1.71572	.31325
Advanced Use Apology Before Formal Instruction	6.6667	30	2.07337	.37854

As table (1.) indicates, the mean of the advanced apology use test before formal instruction is 6.6667 ( $\bar{X}$ =6.6667) while the mean of the advanced apology use test after formal instruction is 9.7667 ( $\bar{X}$ =9.7667). The lower standard deviation of the After-Formal-Instruction group indicates less variety among the scores intervals from the mean. Finally, the amount of standard error is lower in the After-Formal-Instruction group scores.

**Table 2. Descriptive analysis of the data for apology interpretation (Paired Samples Statistics)**

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Advanced Interpretation Apology After Formal Instruction	9.9667	30	1.69143	.30881
Advanced Interpretation Apology Before Formal Instruction	6.9333	30	1.50707	.27515

As table (2.) indicates, the mean of the advanced apology interpretation test before formal instruction is 6.9333 ( $\bar{X}=6.9333$ ) while the mean of the advanced apology interpretation test after formal instruction is 9.9667 ( $\bar{X}=9.9667$ ). The higher standard deviation of the After-Formal-Instruction group indicates more variety among the scores intervals from the mean. Finally, the amount of standard error is lower in the Before-Formal-Instruction group scores.

### Inferential Analysis of the Data

The inferential analysis of the data of this study was done through calculating the Analysis of paired sample T-test between the pretest and the posttest of each participant group separately. The summary of findings here has been presented in tables 3 and 4 below:

The second question of this study targeted the enhancement of Iranian advanced L2 learners' use of speech act of apology as not to be affected by formal instruction of pragmatic knowledge. The inferential analysis of the data for this hypothesis has been summarised in table (3) below:

**Table 3. Paired-sample t value for H19**

Pair 1	<i>Paired Differences</i>					
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>	<i>Std. Error Mean</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig. (2-tailed)</i>
Advanced Use Apology After Formal Instruction - Use Apology Before Formal Instruction	3.10000	1.34805	.24612	<b>12.596</b>	29	.000

As table (3.) indicates, the observed t value for the first hypothesis of the study is 12.596 (tobs= 12.596) which is much higher than the critical t value (tcrit=2.045 with the level of significance of 0.05 and degree of freedom of 29 df= 29). This rejected the null hypothesis of the study which meant that the enhancement of Iranian advanced L2 learners' use of speech act of apology was affected by formal instruction of pragmatic knowledge.

The second hypothesis of this study targeted the enhancement of Iranian advanced L2 learners' interpretation of speech act of apology as not to be affected by formal instruction of pragmatic knowledge. The inferential analysis of the data for this hypothesis has been summarised in table (4.31) below:

**Table 4. Paired-sample t value for H23**

Pair 1	<i>Paired Differences</i>					
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>	<i>Std. Error Mean</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig. (2-tailed)</i>
Advanced Interpretation Apology After Formal Instruction - Interpretation Apology Before Formal Instruction	3.103333	0.49013	0.08949	<b>33.897</b>	29	.000

As table (4.) indicates, the observed t value for the second hypothesis of the study is 33.897 ( $t_{obs}=33.897$ ) which is much higher than the critical t value ( $t_{crit}=2.045$  with the level of significance of 0.05 and degree of freedom of 29  $df=29$ ). This rejected the second null hypothesis of the study which meant that the enhancement of Iranian advanced L2 learners' interpretation of speech act of apology was affected by formal instruction of pragmatic knowledge.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study as a result of descriptive and inferential analyses of the data contribute to final comments on the hypotheses of the study. Accordingly, the first hypothesis of the study i.e. 'Formal instruction of pragmatic knowledge does not play any role in the enhancement of Iranian advanced L2 learners' use of speech act of apology was rejected. The rationale behind such a rejection comes from the evidence in tables 1 and 3. Further, the second hypothesis of the study i.e. 'Formal instruction of pragmatic knowledge does not play any role in the enhancement of Iranian advanced EFL learners' interpretation of speech act of apology' was rejected, too. Tables 2 and 4 provide the data necessary to show the rejection of the hypothesis. The results of this study may bring the research to the point that Iranian EFL learners face the production (use) of speech acts as commonly as the comprehension (interpretation) of them. As a result, the findings of the current study are expected to lead to devising new teaching materials that enhance language production (use) and interpretation (comprehension). They are also expected to result in devising new teaching methods that include techniques to teach learners how to work to produce and use English as a foreign language. Finally, the findings of the current study should contribute to using new testing approaches that will enable language teachers to direct their language testing techniques towards the use of language attributes that testing them through their interpretation.

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