Research Article

THE IMPACT OF INSTRUCTION AND ACTIVITIES ON PRAGMATIC DEVELOPMENT OF IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS

*Behnaz Pourtavakoli and Houshang Azari
Department of English language, Tonekabon Branch, Islamic Azad University, IRAN
*Author for Correspondence

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was investigating the impact of instruction through tasks on Iranian EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners, in order to determine the possible effect that it would have on their pragmatic development in general and on their production of polite requests and suggestions in particular. The participants of this study consisted of 90 intermediate learners, studying English at a private English language school in Rasht city, Iran. After administrating the pre-test, some of the internal modifications strategies for making polite request and some of the conventionalized and indirect strategies for making polite suggestion were selected to be taught to the two experimental groups under the study during ten sessions. The treatment of the first experimental group (EG1) was giving instruction in making polite request and suggestion sentences through awareness-raising tasks, while the treatment of the second experimental group (EG2) was giving instruction in making polite request and suggestion sentences through traditional drilling activities. The learners in the control group (CG) were only engaged in traditional drilling tasks without any kind of instruction. One-way ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) of the post-test scores revealed that both experimental groups outperformed the control group, indicating that pragmatic instruction appears to be effective. It was also found that there was a significant difference between EG1 and EG2, conveying that awareness-raising activities substantially enhance the effects of pragmatic instruction on the aforementioned speech acts.

Keywords: *Instruction, Awareness-Raising Activities, Pragmatic Development, Request, Suggestion*

INTRODUCTION

Learning a foreign language is considered as an important part of educational systems. The problem of many learners of English is that they cannot use their knowledge of language in real situations. This problem is even worse in EFL setting, where learners have little chance of using language outside the classroom. One of the possible solutions is to shift toward communicative methods in teaching. This change will be more effective when it characterizes pragmatics as a specific field of study. In this line Bachman (1990) says "for being successful in communication it is essential for second and foreign language learners to know not just grammar and text organization, but also pragmatic aspects of the target language". Crystal (1985) considers pragmatics as: "The study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effect their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication".

Recent research in the field of pragmatics has manifested that providing learners with instruction in pragmatics is both necessary and effective for second and foreign language learning (Alcón and Martínez-Flor, 2008). For obvious reasons, pragmatic errors bring about more negative results than grammatical errors for foreign language learners, since such errors may highlights the speaker as being offensive or rude. Instruction in pragmatics can provide learners with many advantages, such as sufficient input for pragmatic realizations, metapragmatic knowledge and opportunities for being involved in doing communicative activities for practicing linguistic knowledge that learners have acquired before. Which method is best for teaching pragmatic, is still a moot question and hence more research is needed in this era.

Some researchers (Sharwood, 1981) argue that learner's pragmatic knowledge can be improved by providing a variety of awareness-raising activities, which aim to draw learner's attention to correct forms.

Research Article

Awareness-raising (also known as consciousness-raising) originated from discontentedness with ideas that preceded it. It constitutes an approach that accords with progressive views about education as a process of discovery learning through problem-solving (Ellis, cited in Richards and Renandya, 2002). According to Ellis (2003) this approach places more responsibility on learner's shoulders, removes the central role of the teacher in the classroom, and makes no promises regarding when or whether the learners will master the content. He considers this approach as a kind of input-based instruction which consists of these features: 1) There is an attempt to isolate a specific linguistic feature for focused attention; 2) The learners are provided with data that illustrate the target feature and they may also be provided with an explicit rule describing or explaining the feature; 3) The learners are expected to utilize intellectual efforts to understand the target feature; and 4) Learners may be optionally required to verbalize a rule describing the grammatical structure. It is not claimed that awareness-raising activities will be a remedy for all the difficulties in pragmatic instruction. There is no flawless theory in the world and every theory or idea has got its own pros and cons, but assuming the important role of cognition and awareness in learning pragmatic, raising such awareness may be of great advantage for improving the results of teaching pragmatic.

Traditional drilling technique is considered by some teachers as a useful way for helping students to learn English language. But some others believe that simply getting learners to repeat words or expressions as a class can become boring and learners will lose their intrinsic motivation to learn. There is still disagreement about the efficacy of traditional drilling activities by scholars.

Speech acts are communicative activities characterized with reference to the purposes of speakers and the impacts gained on the listeners. Within the area of pragmatic competence, the ways in which people perform specific social functions in speaking such as apologizing, complaining, making requests or suggesting have been categorized as speech acts. The development of speech-act theory has given hearers a better understanding of how speakers perform various functions effectively and appropriately in the act of communication (Eslami-Rasekh and Mardani, 2010).

Searle (1976), in his theoretical study, illuminated five essential speech acts: representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. He explains that some verbs remember the category of directives, which is the most studied category. According to him these verbs are ask, order, command, request, beg, plead, pray, entreat, invite, permit, and advise. In Searle's taxonomy (1969), command and order are categorized under request. *Request* can be defined as 'attempts by the speakers to get the hearer to do something' or as an illocutionary act whereby a speaker (requester) conveys to a hearer (requestee) that he/she wants the requestee to perform an act, which is for the benefit of the speaker" (Searle 1976). Considering the fact that requests are face-threatening speech acts and they have the possibility of being interfering and demanding, it seems that the speaker needs to decrease the imposition involved in the request. There are number of taxonomy of requests in English: for example Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1984), Blum-Kulka *et al.,* (1989), Trosborg (1995). One of which is Blum-Kulka *et al.,* (1989) CCSARP (Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project) model, in which the authors classify requests strategies into internal and external modifications that speakers can apply in order to minimize the face-threatening nature of request. This model is used in current research.

Suggestions belong to the group of directive speech acts which, according to Searle (1976), are those in which the speaker's purpose is to get the hearer to commit him/herself to some future course of action. A suggestion is generally considered as a non-impositive speech act, which places the benefit to the hearer. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), in making a suggestion, several factors should be considered, such as the urgency of the suggestion, the degree of embarrassment in the situation, and the social distance and power between the speaker and the hearer. So, depending on these factors and the extent to which the situation can be more or less intimidating, the speaker might try to mitigate or soften this speech act through the use of specific politeness strategies.

Previous studies have suggested that Iranian EFL learners are likely to face with problems in making polite request and suggestion sentences (Vahid and Rezvani, 2010, for request; Salemi *et al.,* 2012, for

---

Research Article

suggestion). The problem is due to the degree of directness in making request and suggestion strategies and the influence of social variables that affect their performance. In this line, the researcher feels that there is a need to conduct a study to find out how much pragmatic instruction and learning activities can improve the production of polite requests and suggestions by Iranian intermediate EFL learners.

MATERIALS AND METHODS
The Design of the Study
The design to carry out this study was a quantitative design, since the pre-test and post-test comprise Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs). More specifically, the design was quasi-experimental because not all the factors were strictly controlled as those in a truly experimental method.
Participants
Ninety Persian female learners of English, studying at intermediate level in a private institute in Rasht city, Iran, participated in this study. The institution placement test indicated that all participants were almost intermediate learners of English. None of the participants had ever experienced life in a second language environment and their exposure to the English language was limited to academic, formal education in schools and institutes. Their age ranged from 14 to 32. This study used three groups: two experimental groups and one control group. Participants were assigned to one of the three groups and each group received treatment in a separate class. Subjects had two 90-minute English classes per week and the researcher allotted just 25 to 30 minutes of per sessions to the study, since the aim of the course was finishing the course book and the researcher was not allowed to spend too much time on the study.
Materials
This study employed a pre-test and post-test design. The pre-test of this study was administered four days prior to the instructional treatment and the post-test three days after the last treatment session. Both pre-test and post-test of this study were questionnaires in the form of Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs). According to Blum-Kulka (1982) DCT is a questionnaire containing a set of briefly described hypothetical situations in which the subjects need to read and respond to it in writing. It has been widely used in pragmatic research; for example Banerjee and Carrel (1988) for suggestions and Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) for requests.
The DCTs of this study contained two parts in which the first part consisted of ten items for making polite requests in English and the second part consisted of ten items for making polite suggestions in English. The participants could utilize Persian translation which was provided below each of the items. The descriptions of situations illustrate the relations between the participants, their dominance over each other (high, equal or low) and the difficulty of the situation.
Procedure
This research was carried out over a period of ten sessions, in which experimental groups received 10 treatment sessions, while no instructional treatment was presented to the control group and they were only engaged in doing drilling activities. In experimental groups five sessions were allotted to teaching request strategies, while the rest five sessions were allocated to teaching suggestion strategies. Prior to any treatment, all the participants took a pre-test comprising twenty DCT items, to elicit the production of polite request and suggestion speech acts in different situations (see Appendix A).
The strategies that were taught to experimental groups in each session were adopted from two taxonomies: (1) Blum-Kulka *et al.,* (1989) taxonomy of request internal modifications (i.e. Interrogative forms, Politeness devices, Past tense, Negation, Embedded if clause and Consultative devices); and (2) Martínez-Flor (2005) taxonomy of conventionalized and indirect suggestion strategies (i.e. Possibility/Probability, Interrogative forms, Conditional, Impersonal).
The treatment of the EG1 (N=30) was teaching request and suggestion strategies through awareness-raising activities. In this group, the researcher provided model conversations and grammatical explanation about rules involved, along with a series of productive (i.e. role plays) and awareness-raising activities (e.g. identifying request and suggestion parts in each conversation; answering to awareness-raising

Research Article

questions about social variables; making examples in first language and second language; rating and arranging request and suggestion sentences based on their politeness level; etc). The focuses of these activities were on the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic aspects of English. The activities provided for this group, were based on theories about awareness-raising and they were mainly devised by the researcher (see Appendix B).

The treatment of the EG2 (N=30) was none the less, teaching request and suggestion strategies through traditional drilling activities. The learners in this group received the same sample dialogues and explicit grammatical explanation about the rules involved. Sample conversations followed by some exercises (i.e. Question and answers, writing examples and substitution drills). However, no task which might contribute to the cognitive awareness of learners was done in this group (see Appendix C).

Participants who were assigned to CG (N=30), received no instructional treatment and they were just engaged in doing traditional drilling tasks. However, this group took the same pre-test and post-test and their post-test scores were used as a means to learn about the other experimental group's progress.

Data Analysis

The scores of request and suggestion speech acts in pre-tests and post-tests were separately calculated. The data were analyzed by SPSS software. The scores of three groups on their post-tests were calculated through one-way ANOVA. The aim was finding out which group had performed better.

Validity and Reliability of Tests

Since the pre-test and post-test utilized in this study were developed by researcher and the situations in the tests were all different, they were both piloted prior to use. Two raters answered the questions and test's reliability was estimated through parallel-form method. The alpha coefficient was .889, suggesting that the items have relatively high internal consistency; since a reliability coefficient of .70 or higher is considered acceptable in research situations. It was revealed that the researcher-made tests were acceptable for the purpose of the study. For boosting content validity, the present study matched test items to the theoretical framework that outlined the degree of the three social context variables; namely ranking of imposition, power and distance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Results of Hypothesis Testing

Table 1 shows the mean difference, standard deviation from mean and minimum and maximum of scores obtained by the three groups in their pre-tests of request and suggestion speech acts. The number of participants in each group is equal (N=30). This descriptive statistics reveals that there is not a significant difference in the mean scores of three groups, in their pre-tests.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of pre-tests

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
EG1 Pretest Request	30	2.00	7.50	5.4333	1.35018
EG2 Pretest Request	30	4.00	7.00	5.3833	.80605
CG Pretest Request	30	3.50	7.50	5.5167	.89523
EG1 Pretest Suggestion	30	3.00	8.00	5.3500	1.14583
EG2 Pretest Suggestion	30	4.00	7.00	5.5500	.79166
CG Pretest Suggestion	30	3.00	7.00	5.1500	.96624
Valid N (listwise)	30				

To test whether or not there is any significant difference in the production of polite requests and suggestions by Iranian EFL learners in the three groups, a one-way ANOVA was conducted on the subject's post-test scores.

Table 2: One-way ANOVA descriptive statistics of posttests

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Minimum	Maximum
Posttest Request	ofEG1	30	8.1833	1.17798	.21507	7.7435	8.6232	6.00	10.00
	EG2	30	6.7667	.90719	.16563	6.4279	7.1054	5.00	8.00
	CG	30	5.1833	.78216	.14280	4.8913	5.4754	3.50	7.00
	Total	90	6.7111	1.56143	.16459	6.3841	7.0381	3.50	10.00
Posttest Suggestion	ofEG1	30	7.9833	.98684	.18017	7.6148	8.3518	6.00	9.50
	EG2	30	6.8833	1.25040	.22829	6.4164	7.3502	4.00	9.50
	CG	30	5.1000	.86503	.15793	4.7770	5.4230	4.00	7.00
	Total	90	6.6556	1.58051	.16660	6.3245	6.9866	4.00	9.50

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of post-test scores of request and suggestion speech acts, in three groups under the study. The results are presented in two parts, since each test consisted of two separate speech acts. This table illustrates that the mean score obtained by EG1 in performing the speech act of request is μ=8.1833, which exceeds the mean score obtained by EG2 (μ=6.7667), which is, in turn, greater than the mean score belonging to CG (μ=5.1833). In the same line, the mean score obtained by EG1 in performing the speech act of suggestion is μ=7.9833 which exceeds the mean score obtained by EG2 (μ=6.8833) and both means are higher than the mean score of CG (μ=5.1000). Moreover the table indicates that in each group the performances on both speech acts are almost the same.

Table 3: The results of one-way ANOVA on posttests

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Post Request	Between Groups	135.139	2	67.569	71.821	.000
	Within Groups	81.850	87	.941		
	Total	216.989	89			
Post Suggestion	Between Groups	127.039	2	63.519	57.997	.000
	Within Groups	95.283	87	1.095		
	Total	222.322	89			

Table 3 which is the result of one-way ANOVA, shows the mean difference between the three groups. This table determines whether the observed differences in post-tests scores were significant at the critical value (Sig.) of p<0.05 or not. As shown, the between group variances and within group variances of groups for each of the speech acts are separately estimated. On the basis of the ANOVA table, it is concluded that the three groups differed significantly in their performance on both speech acts tests with respect to their mean scores on the post-test, because the significant value is observed to be 0.000 in each case. Consequently it can safely be stated that the difference between the mean scores is not haphazard and the hypothesis, that is to say, there is no significant difference in the production of requests and suggestions between the three groups is safely rejected.

Conclusion

The current study was an attempt to demonstrate: (1) whether instruction with awareness-raising activities had any impact on Iranian EFL learner's production of polite requests and suggestions; (2) whether instruction with traditional drilling activities had any impact on Iranian EFL learner's production of polite requests and suggestions; and (3) whether there was any significant difference in the production of polite

Research Article

requests and suggestions, by Iranian EFL learners in the three observed groups. In brief, it was denoted that treatment had a positive impact on the production of the two speech acts. Moreover, these findings unveiled that the production of speech acts in EG1 in which awareness-raising tasks were incorporated into the process of instruction, was significantly better than the other two groups (i.e. EG2 and CG).

In this study, it is demonstrated that pragmatic instruction has positive effects on learner's production of polite speech acts; and awareness-raising activities help to significantly improve the results of instruction of speech acts of request and suggestion strategies, which, in turn, lead to the development of pragmatic knowledge. By integrating awareness-raising activities with the instruction of speech acts, as an important part of second language learning, learners will be able to focus on both form and meaning, while motivating students to learn. Such tasks place the greater responsibilities on student's shoulders and remove the central and traditional role that SL (Second Language) and FL (Foreign Language) teachers often play in the classroom. In light of the present findings, it can be concluded that first of all, teachers should integrate pragmatics into their second and foreign language instruction to promote learner's pragmatic competence in FL and SL settings. This issue is especially relevant in FL contexts like Iran where lack of naturally occurring input on pragmatic issues and limited class time available for teaching the target language, make the act of pragmatic language learning very difficult. The second issue is the use of appropriate activities for teaching in English classrooms. Because it has been argued that learning is effective when the activities employed in the classroom provide learners with the opportunity for processing both the form and meaning of target features, thus awareness-raising activities should be operationalized and executed by language teachers to help learners gain a better knowledge of pragmatics.

REFERENCES
Alcón Soler E and Martínez-Flor A (2008). Investigating foreign language learning, teaching and testing. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
Bachman LF (1990). *Fundamental Considerations in Language Testing*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Banerjee J and Carrell PL (1988). Tuck in your shirt, you squid: Suggestions in ESL. *Language Learning* 38, 313-364.
Blum-Kulka S (1982). Performing speech acts in a second language. In: *Issues in the Study of Discourse,* edited by Blum-Kulka S, Nir R and Tobin Y, Jerusalem: Academon 144-177 (In Hebrew).
Blum-Kulka S, House J and Kasper G (1989). The CCSARP coding manual. In: *Cross-cultural pragmatics: Requests and apologies,* edited by Blum-Kulka S, House J and Kasper G, Norwood NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation 273-294.
Blum-Kulka S and Olshtain E (1984). Requests and apologies: A cross cultural study of speech act realization patterns (CCSARP). *Journal of Applied Linguistics* **5**(3) 196-214.
Brown P and Levinson S (1987). *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, First published in 1978. In: *Questions and Politeness: Strategies in Social Interaction,* edited by Esther N Goody, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 56–289.
Crystal D (1985). *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics* (2nd edition). Oxford: Blackwell.
Ellis R (2003). *Task-based Language Learning and Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Eslami-Rasekh A and Mardani M (2010). Investigating the effects of teaching apology speech act, with a focus on intensifying strategies, on pragmatic development of EFL learners: The Iranian context. *The International Journal of Language Society and Culture* **30** 96-103.
Martínez-Flor A (2005). A Theoretical Review of the Speech Act of Suggesting: Towards Taxonomy for its Use in FLT1. *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses* **18** 167-187.
Richards JC and Renandya W (2002). Methodology in language teaching: *An anthology of current practice.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Research Article

Salemi A, Rabiee M and Ketabi S (2012). The Effects of Explicit/Implicit Instruction and Feedback on the Development of Persian EFL Learner's Pragmatic Competence in Suggestion Structures. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research* **3**(1) 188-199.

Searle JR (1969). *Speech acts: Am essay in the philosophy of language.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Searle JR (1976). A classification of illocutionary acts. *Language in Society* **5**(1) 1-24.

Sharwood Smith M (1981). *Consciousness-raising and the second language acquisition theory*. *Applied Linguistics Journal* **2**(2) 159-168.

Trosborg A (1995). *Interlanguage pragmatics: Requests, complaints, and apologies*. Berlin: Mouton De Gruyter.

Vahid Dastjerdi H and Rezvani E (2010). The Impact of Instruction on Iranian Intermediate EFL Learner's Production of Requests in English. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research* **1**(6) 782-790.

Research Article

Appendix A: DCT Samples in pre-test and post-test
Request: You go to the library to return a lot of books, and your hands are full. You see your history teacher there, standing near the door of the library. How do you ask him to open the door for you?
Request: You have bought a shirt from a big store for your father, but he doesn't like its color. You decide to go back to the clothes store and ask the manager of the store _who is stranger to you_ to allow you to exchange the shirt. What would you say?
Suggestion: You're at a shopping mall resting on a bench. Your friend stops and talks to you for a few minutes. When she leaves, she forgets her package. You call to her ….
Suggestion: You're riding on a bus. The woman next to you, whom you don't know, has a large ink spot on her pocket that seems to be getting bigger. What would you suggest her?

Appendix B: Sample of procedure in EG1
Sample of Instruction of Request Speech Act: The speaker can involve the hearer in a request and uses his/her cooperation, in order to minimize the degree of imposition of request. Common forms are 'would you mind' as well as other forms. These forms are used when the hearer is superior to the speaker, and so the speaker wants to be more formal and polite and less offensive. Here two forms are recommended. Use either modals which should be followed by simple form of a verbs, or expression such as 'would you mind' which should be followed by gerunds. Pay attention to the forms of the examples on the board: - Do you think I could borrow your lecture notes from yesterday class? - Do you think I could buy Italian pizza for dinner? - Do you object to have the meeting on Friday?
Activity Sample: Write down easy/difficult and appropriate/inappropriate in each gap. Find alternative responses for inappropriate ones.
Example: I would appreciate if you gave me your phone number.
Close Friend …………
Friend …………
Parents …………
Teacher …………
Neighbor …………
Sample of Researcher Explanation about Suggestion Speech Act: Impersonal suggestion refers to sentences in which the speaker's true intentions are not clearly mentioned. So the hearer must to infer that the speaker is making a suggestion. When you want to be very polite and less authoritative, you can use this type of strategy. In other words, when speaking with someone who is superior to you or you have planned to suggest for something important, it is recommended to use impersonal strategy. You can create such a sentence by using forms such as: One thing (that you can do) would be…./ there are a number of options that you.../ it would be helpful if you.../ it might be better to .../ a good idea would be .../ it would be nice if...
Activity Sample: When you want to make an indirect suggestion sentence in your language, do you use these forms or not? Bring some examples in Farsi.

Appendix C: Sample of procedure in EG2
Sample of Researcher Explanation about rules: For making a formal and a polite request sentence, you can use the modal 'would' plus 'simple form of a verb' which is followed by 'if clause' containing past tense verb. This form can be used when the request is for something valuable or when the interlocutors are not equal or they don't know each other very well. For example: I would appreciate, if you left me alone. / Would it be ok if I borrowed your DVD player for some hours?
Activity Sample: Write request sentences with the tips in the parentheses:
1) Have a few pieces of paper. (Interrogative form)
2) Help me with this problem. (If clause sentence)
Activity Sample: Write suggestion sentences with the tips in the parentheses:
1) Continue your journey. (Conditional if clause)
2) Have dinner at the Italian restaurant. (Possibility/probability)