

# A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF REQUESTS AMONG L2 ENGLISH, L1 PERSIAN, AND L1 ENGLISH SPEAKERS

MAEDEH GHAVAMNIA, MANSOOR TAVAKOLI AND MOHSEN REZAZADEH  
UNIVERSITY OF ISFAHAN

**Abstract:** The present study aimed to examine the issue of production of requests by Iranian EFL learners, native speakers of Persian, and native speakers of English; exploring the type, frequency, and the content of semantic formulae with regards to the status of the interlocutors (higher or of equal power). For the purpose of this study, 30 Persian speaking learners of English were asked to fill out a Discourse Completion Test (DCT), consisting of 12 situations regarding the speech act of request. In addition, 30 native speakers of Persian were also asked to fill out the same DCT, rendered into Persian, for the purpose of investigating L1 transfer. For a cross-linguistic comparison the DCTs were sent to 30 Canadian native speakers of English through e-mail for completion and were then sent back to the researchers after completion. All 90 participants were female ranging between the ages of 20 to 23. The EFL learners were seniors majoring in English. However, the native speakers of Persian were from different majors excluding English. All data were coded and analyzed based on Hudson *et al.*'s (1995) model. The results revealed that there were differences in the frequency and type of strategies used in requests made by the three groups. For instance, while all three groups used opener (RSM strategy) such as hello, hi, excuse me, and sorry, the native speakers of English used it the most. On the other hand, some strategies were only used by the native speakers of English such as introducing themselves categorized under RSM strategies. In line with Eslamirasekh's (1993) findings, the results revealed the Persian speakers to make requests with less use of supporting strategies (direct strategies) whereas the English speakers produced more supportive strategies (indirect strategies). Overall, the results of this study indicate that making requests is a complex, multi-causal task as it requires the acquisition of the socio-cultural values of the L2 culture.

**Key words:** *Pragmatics, speech act of request, semantic formula, status of interlocutor.*

## 1. Introduction

This study examined how Persian learners of English make requests in EFL situations. While requests by second language (L2) learners have often been studied (e.g. House and Kasper 1987; Be'al 1990; Bilbow 1995) the ones made by Persian learners have not been investigated thoroughly to this point. Since empirical work examining speech acts across different cultures requires further research (Blum-kulka *et al.* 1989) this study was a response to broaden the focus of research on requests to include a population of Persian learners of English. First of all, this study investigated how the speech act of request varies cross-linguistically among native speakers of Persian, English, and EFL learners. Secondly, the effect of Persian (L1) on the act of making requests in English (L2) is investigated. Empirical descriptions of how learners perform requests in English can be of help to EFL teachers in order to guide students towards more native-like pragmatic behavior and increased cultural competence. This is a must since English is studied at schools and universities in Iran. It is crucial for Persian students not only to improve their linguistic competence but also their pragmatic competence. This study was a response to the need to move away from Anglo-cultural ethnocentricity as cited in Eslamirasekh's (1993) study by widening the studies conducted on speech acts and taking into consideration different languages and cultures.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Interlanguage Pragmatics

The purpose of this study was the investigation of requests made by L2 learners which falls under the “relatively new field” (Hassall 2003: 1904) of second language research known as interlanguage pragmatics (ILP). ILP is a branch of second language acquisition research. Interlanguage pragmatics studies learner-specific pragmatic performance and its relationship to learners’ L1 and L2. These studies show that advanced learners’ communicative behavior may often move away from L2 conventions and thus cause many cross-cultural misunderstandings (Cohen and Olshtain 1980; Takahashi and Beebe 1987; Wolfson 1989; Kim 1995).

As thus, one of its aims is to examine how non-native speakers comprehend and perform a particular speech act in a target language and how they gain pragmatic competence in it (Kasper 1992). Research in interlanguage pragmatics has shown that ESL learners’ performance of speech acts is often different from that of native speakers because of limited knowledge of L2’s sociolinguistic rules (Kwon 2003). To give an example, in Byon’s (2004) study the results supported the view that advanced learners appear to develop a greater sensitivity to the use of politeness strategies in requesting than is seen in native speakers. And also (a) that even advanced learners do not acquire fully native-like ways of requesting, and (b) that they tend to produce longer requests than native speakers do. Because of this communication breakdown will probably occur. One speech act in which communication breakdowns can possibly occur in and is no exception from the others is the speech act of making requests.

### 2.2. Requests

According to Searle (1969: 66) a request is “a directive speech act which counts as an attempt to get H (hearer) to do an act which S (speaker) wants H to do, and which S believes that H is able to do; and which it is not obvious that H will do in the normal course of events or of H’s own accord”. A request may vary in strategy type and level of directness. In terms of level of directness Eslamirasekh (1993) conducted a cross-cultural comparison of requests of Persian and American English. This study will focus on the requesting strategies based on Hudson *et al.*’s (1995) model.

A successful request requires some degree of linguistic perception that often varies across languages, thus the transfer of strategies from one language to another may result in inappropriate or nonconventional speech. From a structural perspective, requests may vary in terms of the number of utterances they have. Where there are several utterances, one of them is usually known as the nucleus of the speech act, referred to as the head act. The head act is the unit that can make up the speech act on its own, while the other elements are supportive.

The speech act of request is a directive in which the speaker wants to make the hearer do something. In addition, requests are face-threatening acts (FTAs) (Brown and Levinson 1987) which requires both linguistic and cultural knowledge on the part of the request maker. Moreover, requests differ cross culturally and linguistically. Thus, a speech act made in one culture using linguistic cues suitable for that particular context might be perceived as inappropriate in another situation.

Many cross-cultural studies have indicated that variation exists in the speech-act performance of different speech communities, especially in relation to the level of directness of their request realization. For instance, many investigations (e.g. Blum-Kulka 1989; Garcia 1989; Marquez Reiter 2002; Pinto 2005) found English speakers to show a preference for a

higher number of indirect strategies which contain a wider variety and higher frequency of downgrading. Eslamirasekh's (1993) findings also indicated a favor of English speakers for more indirect requesting strategies in comparison to Persian speakers.

Numerous cross-cultural studies have indicated that there is variation in the speech-act performance between two different speech communities, especially in relation to the level of directness of their request realization.

In Pinto and Raschio's (2011) study, they set out to investigate sources of variation or similarity in the request production of heritage speakers of Spanish, L1 speakers of Spanish, and L1 speakers of English. The native speakers of Spanish and English groups demonstrated statistically significant differences in their level of directness and frequency of downgrading. As thus, the latter group produced requests that were less direct and more tentative.

In another study conducted by Economidou-Kogetsidis (2010), her findings showed that participants' variation of requesting in regards to power, familiarity and imposition interact with cultural and other situational factors. Her findings agreed with Blum-Kulka and House's (1989) finding whose study of Australian English, German, French, Hebrew and Argentinian Spanish speakers' requests showed that "while the overall distribution along the scale of indirectness follows similar patterns in all languages, the specific proportions in the choices between the more direct and less direct strategies are culture-specific" (Blum-Kulka and House 1989:133).

Yet in a more recent study, Yu (2011) believes that there exists a great divergence between Chinese and American rules of speaking and that speech act behavior is closely related to speakers' linguistic and socio-cultural norms (e.g., Blum-Kulka *et al.* 1989; Brown and Levinson 1987). Yu (2011) believes it could be hypothesized that Chinese L2 learners' behavior may be affected by their native culture and thus differ substantially from that of native English speakers.

### 2.3. *Transfer*

A number of specific processes play an important role in a learner's pragmatic behavior. One which was investigated in this study is transfer of first language (L1) pragmatic knowledge. A useful distinction can be made between 'positive' and 'negative' transfer. When a learner uses an L2 pragmatic feature with native form, function, and distribution because of influence from the L1, this is positive transfer from the L1. However, when a learner uses an L2 pragmatic feature with non-native form, function or distribution because of L1 influence, this is negative transfer (Kasper 1995: 15).

Pragmatic transfer, also referred to as sociocultural transfer by Wolfson (1989), is one potential cause of inappropriate performance in a second or foreign language. It occurs when speakers borrow rules from the L1 culture to a second or a foreign language. The phenomenon of pragmatic transfer has been investigated in different speech acts in many languages and it has been found that pragmatic transfer is evident in L2 speech performance (Jaworski 1994; Hassall 2003; Byon 2004; Huth 2006).

Studies have shown that miscommunication occurs because learners of a second language need to pay close attention to its pragmatic aspects, not only to its formal aspects, such as grammar and vocabulary; however, it is the former aspect that learners frequently seem to ignore in their L2 acquisition process (Yu 2011).

Existing reviews of research on L2 pragmatic development (Kasper and Schmidt 1996; Bardovi-Harlig 1999; Kasper and Rose 1999; Kasper 2000) illustrate the increasing interest by interlanguage pragmatics on second language pragmatic development and the growing body of studies that focus on this issue.

## 2.4. Power

According to Brown and Levinson (1978), the bigger the face threat (distance, power, and imposition) the higher the number of the strategy to be used in the use of different speech acts.

In concern to this study, student–professor relationship is clearly one of unequal power. In this relationship, the professor has power of control (Brown and Levinson 1978) over the student and the justifiable right to use influence (Leichty and Applegate 1991) by virtue of his/her institutionalized role. In this institutionally unequal relationship, students are therefore expected to use language that properly acknowledges their own lower institutional status and their professors' higher institutional status (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007).

Brown and Levinson's predictions have been both confirmed and rejected by various studies concerned either with requests or with other speech acts (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2010). Cherry (1988), for instance, examined a number of letters written by academics to the president of a university in America and found that in contrast to what one might expect power did not affect the subjects' requesting strategies. In contrast, Fukushima's study (2000), on requests in English and Japanese revealed positive correlations between the variable of power and choice of requesting strategies. Similarly, Trosborg (1995) who analyzed aspects of interlanguage pragmatics in Danish learners of English found that native speakers of English used significantly more indirect strategies (hints) when interacting with authority figures.

Requests, along with the speech acts of apology and refusal, have received substantial attention in second language acquisition research (Ellis 1994). However, to the best of the authors' knowledge, there have been a few articles (e.g. Eslamirasekh 1993; Jalilifar, Hashemian, and Tabatabaee 2011) investigating the Persian speech act of request. As for our investigation, this study set out to discover the following phenomenon. First, it investigated the semantic formulae of Persian, English, and EFL learners' requests. Second, it examined the existence of any difference in the type and frequency of requesting strategies among the participants. Third, it studied whether pragmatic transfer from Persian (L1) to English (L2) was present in the requests made by the EFL learners. Last but not least, the social variable of power was examined in regards to the type of requests made. All in all, these will foster a better understanding of the strategies (whether appropriate or inappropriate) EFL students use to make requests and also help teachers improve their learners' pragmatic competence through instruction in the pedagogical settings.

To investigate the issues discussed above in an EFL context, the following research questions were addressed in this study:

- i) What are the types and frequencies of the request strategies used by the native speakers of Persian, Persian EFL learners, and native speakers of English?
- ii) Are there differences in the types and frequency of the request head act (RHA) and request supportive move (RSM) formulae, used by the native speakers of Persian, the EFL learners, and the native speakers of English?
- iii) Are there any traces of L1 transfer evident in the socio-pragmatic features of the Persian EFL learners?
- iv) Is there any change in the request head act and request supportive move formulae used by the three groups when the social variable of power varies?

### **3. Method**

#### *3.1. Participants*

30 Persian-speaking learners of English, 30 native speakers of Persian, and 30 native speakers of English took part in this study. The three groups were matched in terms of gender and age. That is, they were all female and their age ranged from 20-23. To start off, 50 native speakers of Persian undergraduate seniors majoring in different majors except for English at a university in Iran were selected to complete an Oxford Placement Test (OPT). From among the aforementioned students, 30 of them who scored 2 standard deviations below the mean were chosen for the study. The reason for this selection was to choose Persian native speakers with as little prior English knowledge as possible. The rationale for choosing native speakers of Persian was twofold: a) to identify the requests they used and b) to examine the effect of L1 transfer by comparing the request strategies of these and the EFL learners. The EFL learners were undergraduate seniors who were selected randomly from among the senior students majoring in English. They were of intermediate level. They were majoring in English and had passed a considerable amount of time in courses run in English (L2). The native speakers of English were seniors as well majoring in different fields in Canada. As for the number of participants used in this study, it is justified by Kasper and Dahl's (1991) claim that in using DCT for interlanguage speech act studies, having 30 subjects will serve as an appropriate guide.

#### *3.2. Instruments*

Research data were gathered through a written Discourse Completion Test (DCT) which was presented in an open-ended format introducing some natural situations to which the respondents were expected to respond through making requests. In order to decide on the selection of the situations present on the DCT 10 native Persian speakers, not the ones in the actual study, volunteered to help. They were asked to write the 10 most frequently used/heard requests which were made among students and/or among professors and students on campus. From among the total number of 100 situations collected, 12 were chosen to be the best representative of the other situations suggested by the 10 volunteers. In 6 of the situations the interlocutors were students and in the other 6 situations they were professors and students with the latter making some sort of request from the former.

DCT is one of the few measures used to assess functional features. Known as production questionnaires, they have been developed to measure L2 learners' production ability of speech acts. Production questionnaires or DCTs present a situation where a certain kind of speech act is expected, and the respondents are asked to provide what they think would be appropriate in that situation. They can be open-ended or they can be accompanied by a reply. Production questionnaires which have traditionally been called DCTs have been used in many cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatic studies (Kasper and Dahl 1991). The advantage of DCTs is that the researcher can control variables related to a given context. They have also provided the opportunity to compare the responses of native speakers and non-native speakers across different cultures.

#### *3.3. Data collection*

The DCTs were distributed among the native speakers of Persian and the EFL learners during one of their classroom sessions. It took the participants about half an hour to complete. As for the native speakers of English, the DCTs were sent to them via e-mail and sent back to the

researchers. The instrument aimed to investigate the variation of requests in relation to the social variable of power, which had been shown to be a significant variable in determining speech performance (Brown and Levinson 1987; Blum-Kulka *et al.* 1989). The data, collected using DCTs, were analyzed descriptively by two English teachers using Hudson *et al.*'s (1995) model. The inter-rater reliability was 0.87. The data were separated into two parts: request head acts and peripheral elements. A request head act is the main utterance that functions as a request and can stand by itself without any supportive move, required to convey the request. In many cases, the request head act is either followed and/or preceded by peripheral elements, such as hedges, boosters, address forms, downgrades, and upgrades. These request head acts and peripheral elements were examined to see how similar or different the performances of the Persian learners of English were, compared to the English native speakers' language use, and to identify aspects of the English learners' performances that were influenced by their native language.

### 3.4. Data analysis

For this study, the researchers adopted the previously established categories: 'request head act strategies' and 'request supportive move strategies' developed by Hudson *et al.* (1995: 79–80) as two major components of semantic formulae for request behavior.

#### 3.4.1. Request head act strategies

1. Preparatory: Reference to preparatory conditions for feasibility of the request (Could I borrow . . .?).
2. Strong Hint: Similar to preparatory, but not conventionalized, requires more inferencing (Will you be going home now?).
3. Want Statement: Expresses the speakers' desire that the request action be carried out
4. (I'd like to borrow . . .).
5. Hedged Performative: Illocutionary force modified by modals or verbs expressing intention (I have to ask you . . .).
6. Statement of facts: Statement that leaves the hearer no choice (I have to cancel the meeting).

#### 3.4.2. Request supportive move strategies

1. Grounder: Reasons, justifications (I forgot my notebook).
2. Disarmer: Remove potential objections (I know you are very busy . . .?).
3. Imposition minimizer: Reduce imposition (It shouldn't take long).
4. Preparator: Announcement of request, asking about the availability of something, permission of hearer (I'd like to ask you something).
5. Getting a pre-commitment (Would you do me a favor?).
6. Apology: (I'm sorry to bother you).
7. Gratitude: (Thanks for your work last week).

After analysing the information on the DCTs, the second step was to code the subjects' responses according to the categories presented above. Third, comparison of the data gathered from the EFL learners, the native speakers of English, and the native speakers of Persian were conducted.

## 4. Results and Discussion

The purpose of the DCT analysis was four fold 1) to identify the RHA and RSM strategies made by the native speakers of Persian, the EFL learners, and the native speakers of English, 2) to spot the existence of any difference among the requests made by the three groups, 3) to investigate whether transfer was a factor affecting the requests made by the EFL learners, and 4) whether power as a social variable made a difference in the type and frequency of the request strategies.

### 4.1. Research question 1

In order to answer the first research question the Persian and English versions of the DCTs completed by the native speakers of Persian, EFL learners, and native speakers of English were coded and analyzed based on the categories previously developed by Hudson *et al.* (1995). The data obtained from the analysis of the DCTs are provided in the table below.

Groups	Native speakers of Persian	EFL learners	Native speakers of English
RHA strategies	494	340	372
RSM strategies	587	381	736
Total	1081	721	1108

Table 1: Frequency of request strategies.

According to the information obtained from the above table, the native speakers of Persian and the native speakers of English almost used an equal number of request strategies in total. However, the major difference was present in the frequency of RHA and RSM strategies used; the RSM strategies were used most frequently by the native speakers of English. This finding supports previous studies that have found native speakers of English to use more downgrading devices. The RHA strategies were used the most among the native speakers of Persian (494 times). This implies that, supported by Eslamirasekh's (1993) finding, native speakers of Persian are more direct in making requests than native speakers of English.

The interesting part is related to the total number of strategies used by the EFL learners. Under both the RHA and RSM strategies the total number of times the strategies were used ranged in between the other two groups. In other words, they used the least number of strategies. This could be explained by the EFL learners desire to provide simple and short requesting strategies.

As for the type of request strategies used they matched the previously established category by Hudson *et al.* (1995). However, in addition to those categories, a number of categories were coined while coming across some request strategies used by the participants in this study which were not found in the adopted model. They were categorized under the RSM strategies and were: opener (hey, hi, excuse me, I'm sorry) as ways of getting the hearer's attention, introducing themselves (I'm your student, I'm X), Thanking in advance (I appreciate it, I will be thankful), addressing the hearer by his/her name (hey Billy, hi Tom), and reward/compensation (I will make it up to you, lunch is on me). Some examples of the request strategies made by the participants in one of the situations on the DCT are provided below.

*Situation:* You have made an appointment with the head of the department, in order to issue a problem you were having. You want to reschedule the appointment for another time since something has come up for you and you can't make it. (+Power)

*Reply:*

- (1) Excuse me, I'm really sorry to bother you, but I can't come to your office today since I have something to do. Would you please change it to another day? I would be very thankful.

This was the reply given by one of the EFL learners. The strategies used were (in order): opener (RSM), apology (RSM), grounder (RSM), preparatory (RHM), and gratitude (RSM).

The reply to the same situation by one of the native speakers of Persian was:

خیلی ببخشید. اما من امروز امتحان دارم و نمی تونم مزاحمتون بشم. میشه زمان ملاقاتمون را بذارین یه موقع دیگه؟ می دونم سرتون شلوغه ولی ممنونتون می شم.

[I'm so sorry, today I have an exam and I can't come by. I know you are busy, I would be grateful if you could possibly put off our appointment for another time?]

The strategies used to present this request were: opener (RSM), grounder (RSM), statement of facts (RHA), preparatory (RHA), disarmer (RSM), gratitude (RSM).

As for the native speaker of English:

- (2) Good morning, I was calling to reschedule my appointment for an interview. I am sorry for the inconvenience but one of my final term exams is on Wednesday afternoon, is it possible to meet for an interview on another day?

The strategies used were: opener (RSM), hedged performative (RHA), apology (RSM), Grounder (RSM), hedged performative (RHA).

The first research question investigated the types and frequency of request strategies used by native speakers of Persian and EFL learners. In addition to that, data were collected from native speakers of English to compare and contrast requests made among this group and the previous groups. The requests made by the groups under investigation were coded and analyzed based on the request strategies developed by Hudson *et al.* (1995). The findings showed that with the exception of five strategies, only used by the native English speakers and categorized under the RSM category, the rest of the strategies were more or less used by the three groups. The difference was in the frequency of use. As shown in table 1, the native speakers of English used RSM strategies the most whereas the native speakers of Persian used RHA strategies the most. As for the EFL learners they used the strategies the least.

#### 4.2. Research question 2

In order to answer the second research question the DCTs of the native speakers of Persian, EFL learners, and the native speakers of English were analyzed and compared.

RHA Strategies	Native speakers of Persian	EFL learners	Native speakers of English
1.Preparatory	266	215	189
2.Strong Hint	22	18	7
3.Want Statement	38	13	43
4.Hedged Performative	58	29	123
5.Statement of Facts	110	65	15
Total	494	340	372

Table 2: Comparison of strategy use.



As the above table shows, all the participants in the three groups used RHA strategies. The preparatory strategy was the most frequently used among the participants. Some examples of the preparatory strategy, extracted from the DCTs, are provided below:

- (3) Sorry but your speaking a little too fast for me, could you please repeat what you just said. (native speaker of English)
- (4) Sorry, I didn't get that. Would you please speak a little slower? (EFL learner)
- (5) Sorry, but could you repeat that and speak a bit slower? I'm having a hard time following along. (native speaker of English)
- (6) Could you please say that again, I didn't get that? (EFL learner)

The second most frequently used strategy for the native speakers of English was the hedged performative strategy. As for the native speakers of Persian and the EFL learners, the second most frequently used strategy was the statement of facts. This strategy was only used 15 times (Table 2) by the native speakers of English. Through coding and analyzing the DCTs completed by the native speakers of English it was quite clear that they were very careful not to put the hearer in an uncomfortable situation and formed their request in the least threatening way possible. In contrast, the participants in the other two groups were very direct and used less mitigating devices. Some examples of the requests made by the native speakers of English and the EFL learners are provided below:

- (7) Hi Karen, sorry to bother you but I was wondering if you would be willing to help me study for the upcoming test. I'm having a hard time with this course and have noticed that you seem to be doing quite well. (native speaker of English)

As compared to a request made by an EFL learner answering the same situation on the DCT:

- (8) I'm not good enough in this course. I know you're perfect. Can I study with you?

Example 8 shows the use of hedged performative strategy by an English speaker.

A request made by one of the EFL learners using the statement of fact is provided below:

- (9) Let me use your PC to finish my homework, man. It won't take long.

In addition to the difference in the request strategies used, the native English and Persian speakers' requests were much longer than the EFL learners' requests. The reply of one of the native speakers to the same situation as example 10 is provided below:

- (10) Hey John, do you mind if I use your computer to finish my assignment that is due tomorrow. My computer died on me and I don't have time to get it fixed. It shouldn't take me too long so you can get back to your assignment as soon as I'm finished.

As for the two other strategies, the strong hint strategy and the want statement strategy, they were also used by the participants. The use of these two strategies among the native speakers of English and the EFL participants are provided in the examples below.

- (11) Hi Heather, I was in a rush to get to the meeting today and forgot to bring some paper. (native speaker of English)
- (12) Sorry, but I didn't understand the last point you said. (EFL learner)
- (13) I would like to study with you for the exam if that is possible? (native speaker of English)
- (14) I want a piece of paper, please. (EFL learner)

The participants also used RSM strategies when making requests. Table 3 below shows the number of times the strategies under the RSM category were used by each group.

RSM Strategies	Native speakers of Persian	EFL learners	Native speakers of English
1. Grounder	136	105	244
2. Disarmer	55	39	45
3. Imposition minimizer	51	40	22
4. Preparator	49	35	49
5. Getting pre-commitment	33	31	14
6. Apology	53	34	14
7. Gratitude	52	27	23
8. Opener	130	65	144
9. Reward/compensation	18	5	14
10. Introducing themselves	0	0	35
11. Thanking	0	0	46
12. Interlocutor's name	0	0	84
<b>Total</b>	<b>587</b>	<b>381</b>	<b>736</b>

Table 3: Comparison of strategy use.

The native speakers of English used the RSM strategies nearly twice as much as the EFL learners did with a total number of 736 as compared to a total of 381. The native speakers of Persian used them 587 times. This supports the findings of other studies implying the use of more downgrades and mitigating devices by native speakers of English.

Three of the strategies (introducing themselves, thanking, and using the interlocutor's name) were only used by the native speakers of English (165 times). The grounder and the opener were the two most frequently used strategies by the participants. Some examples of the use of the grounder and the opener by the EFL and English participants are provided in the following section.

- (15) Hi, Sarah. I've noticed you seem to be catching on to this stuff really well. I'm struggling with this material. Would it be possible for you to help me out and tutor me before next week's test? (native speaker of English)
- (16) I'm not good at the content of this course but I hear you're good at it. Could you help me get better at it until the test? (EFL learner)
- (17) Excuse me, but could you sit somewhere else so that you don't block my view? Thank you. (native speaker of English)
- (18) Sorry, please go aside. You're blocking my view. (EFL learner)

The disarmer was used in the following way with the application of the expressions ‘I know you are busy’ or ‘sorry to bother you’.

- (19) Sorry to bother you, but you’re a whiz in writing notes so I’m wondering if you could give me a copy of them – I didn’t take notes in class – feel free to say no! (native speakers of English)
- (20) Sorry, I know you have had a busy day but I was wondering if I could speak to you about the date of the exam, since I have a problem with the assigned date. (EFL learner)

The imposition minimizer was used almost twice as much by the native speakers of Persian and the EFL learners in comparison to the native speakers of English.

- (21) When will you be taking a break? My computer is on the fritz and I have a paper due tomorrow. I was wondering if I could use your computer to finish it while you’re taking a break. I promise it won’t take long. (native speaker of English)
- (22) Something is wrong with my computer, but I have to finish some homework for tomorrow. Can you stop your work? I know you yourself need it, but I will try to do it soon. (EFL learners)

The use of the preparator and getting pre-commitment can be seen in the examples below:

- (23) I’m preparing a thesis and would really like to have your input. I know you’re very busy – nevertheless, I was wondering if I could interview you for 2 hours, at the most. I will work around your schedule. (native speaker of English)
- (24) Hi, can I ask you a favor. Could you please read to yourself, I am trying to concentrate? (native speaker of English)
- (25) Hi Karen, sorry to bother you but I was wondering if you would be willing to help me study for the upcoming test. (native speaker of English)
- (26) Would you mind doing me a favor and change your seat since I can’t see the board. (EFL learners)
- (27) I wanted to borrow your notes. Would that be okay with you? (EFL learners)

Apology and gratitude were also used in this study. The examples below show the use of these strategies by the native speakers of English and the EFL learners.

- (28) Sorry to interrupt, but could you repeat that and speak a bit slower? I’m having a hard time following along. (native speaker of English)
- (29) I’m very very sorry but something has come up and I was wondering if you could set an interview for another day. (EFL learner)
- (30) Thank you for your comprehensive lecture, but I was wondering if you could kindly repeat the last part. (native speaker of English)
- (31) I should first of all thank you for all your previous help, and ask if could borrow your notes again since we have a test next week. (EFL learner)

The openers used by the native speakers of English were: hey, hi, hello, excuse me, and sorry. The ones used by the EFL learners were: excuse me and sorry. As for the three RSM strategies we came across while coding and analyzing the native English speakers DCTs, their use can be seen in the examples below:

- (32) Hi Mr. Smith, would you have .....Thank you.  
 (33) Hey Mike, do you mind speaking .....Thank you.  
 (34) Hey Bill, do you mind moving.....Thanks.

Overall, the data supported previous studies with regard to a preference in English for multiple downgrading for an attempt to mitigate their speech (Blum-Kulka 1989, Garcia 1989, Pinto 2005).

Regarding the second research question, the request strategies used by the three groups were compared. As for the RHA strategies, all three groups used the five strategies categorized under the RHA strategies as shown in table 2. The preparatory strategy was the most frequently used. However, the difference was noticed in the second most frequently used strategy. For the EFL learners and the native speakers of Persian it was the statement of fact whereas for the native speakers of English it was the hedged performative. As for RSM strategies the two most frequently used strategies were the grounder and the opener among all the participants. Overall, taking into consideration table 2 and 3, we can claim that the native English speakers were more careful and precautionary in making requests as to prevent a face-threatening act or an offensive move. In contrast, the Persian learners were more upfront and direct. Our finding supports Eslamirasekh's (1993) study in that Persian speaking students use significantly more direct strategies compared to English speakers. As for the EFL learners, they may have resorted to the most simple and easy way possible.

#### 4.3. Research question 3

In order to see if any trace of L1 transfer existed in the requests of the EFL learners, we compared and contrasted the type of RHA and RSM strategies among the EFL learners and the native speakers of Persian (Table 2 and 3).

By examining table 2 and 3, we came across some patterns. In other words, the EFL learners were using requesting strategies in two patterns. They were either using the strategies less frequently than the Persian speakers and the English speakers (e.g. want statement, hedged performative, grounder, disarmer, preparatory, opener, and reward) or they were using the strategies less frequently than the Persian speakers (e.g. preparatory, strong hint, statement of facts, imposition minimizer, getting a pre-commitment, apology, and gratitude). That is to say, the frequency of those strategies used were decreasing and reaching the English speakers. In either case, the aforementioned strategies used by the EFL learners cannot be a result of L1 transfer. We only saw L1 transfer in three requesting strategies (e.g. introducing themselves, thanking/showing appreciation, and using interlocutor's name).

This study also examined any effect of transfer from the L1 to the L2 in the EFL learners. In this investigation, the EFL learners' requests did not acquaint well with the data obtained from the native speakers of either language in terms of frequency. That is, some request strategies were used in a U-shaped form with the EFL learners using the request strategies with a lower frequency compared to the other two groups. Those strategies were: want statement, hedged performative, grounder, disarmer, preparator, opener, and reward strategies. As the tables in the result section clearly showed (e.g. table 1), the native speakers of English and Persian, used the aforementioned strategies more frequently than the EFL learners. Thus, the EFL learners were neither applying the strategy in accordance to their L1 nor to their L2. Perhaps, as the level of the EFL learners' proficiency increases their request strategies become similar to the natives. If this is the case, it can be supported by Hassall's (2003) statement that "a U-shaped curve of development is likely in the acquisition of request strategies" (Hassal 2004: 1923). As for the preparatory, strong hint, statement of facts, imposition minimizer, pre-commitment, apology, and gratitude strategies the EFL learners

were using them less frequently than the native speakers of Persian. Thus, we could predict that they are becoming more similar to the English native speakers' strategy formulae.

The findings of the third research question could also be supported by Kasper's (1995: 19–20) claim that actual transfer appears to correlate with language proficiency in certain ways. Low-level learners sometimes do not transfer L1 pragmatic features to the L2 because they lack the linguistic competence to do so. And learners at higher levels of proficiency sometimes do not transfer L1 pragmatic features to the L2 because they believe, rightly or wrongly, that such transfer would be unsuccessful. This kind of 'avoidance' of pragmatic transfer has been observed in a number of studies (House and Kasper 1987; Bergman and Kasper 1993; House 1996) including ours. The EFL learners in this study are not transferring L1 pragmatic features because of either reason presented by Kasper (1995).

#### 4.4. Research question 4

As mentioned before, the DCTs consisted of a total number of 12 situations, with 6 of the situations implying a +power condition in which the hearer was of higher status. The other 6 situations, however, implied a =power condition in which the speaker and the hearer were of equal power. Tables 4 and 5 show the semantic formulae of requests by the three groups in the +Power situations. Tables 6 and 7 present the semantic formulae of requests in the =Power situations.

RHA Strategies	Native Speakers of Persian	EFL Learners	Native Speakers of English
1.Preparatory	140	123	95
2.Strong Hint	15	12	7
3.Want Statement	25	10	25
4.Hedged Performative	55	15	65
5.Statement of Facts	75	45	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>310</b>	<b>205</b>	<b>192</b>

Table 4: +Power Situations.

RSM Strategies	Native Speakers of Persian	EFL Learners	Native Speakers of English
1.Grounder	85	52	144
2. Disarmer	35	20	30
3. Imposition Minimizer	43	35	7
4. Preparator	34	25	35
5. Getting a pre-commitment	15	14	0
6.Apology	44	26	14
7.Gratitude	45	21	8
8.Opener	72	40	86
9.Reward/Compensation	12	3	0
10. Introducing themselves	0	0	35
11. Thanking	0	0	16
12. Interlocutor's name	0	0	42
<b>Total</b>	<b>385</b>	<b>236</b>	<b>419</b>

Table 5: +Power Situations.

RHA Strategies	Native Speakers of Persian	EFL Learners	Native Speakers of English
1.Preparatory	126	92	94
2.Strong Hint	7	6	0
3.Want Statement	13	3	18
4.Hedged Performative	3	14	58
5.Statement of Facts	35	20	15
<b>Total</b>	<b>184</b>	<b>135</b>	<b>180</b>

Table 6: =Power Situations.

RSM Strategies	Native Speakers of Persian	EFL Learners	Native Speakers of English
1.Grounder	64	53	100
2.Disarmer	20	19	15
3.Imposition Minimizer	8	5	15
4.Preparator	15	10	14
5.Getting a pre-commitment	18	17	14
6.Apology	9	8	0
7.Gratitude	7	6	15
8.Opener	55	25	58
9.Reward/Compensation	6	2	14
10. Introducing themselves	0	0	0
11. Thanking	0	0	30
12. Interlocutor's name	0	0	42
<b>Total</b>	<b>202</b>	<b>145</b>	<b>317</b>

Table 7: =Power Situations.

Tables 4 through 7 show greater use of RHA and RSM strategies in the +power situations by the three groups as compared to the =power situations. The former situations were between a professor at the university and a student. The latter situations on the DCT, however, were between two classmates. In both situations the preparatory and grounder were the two most frequently used strategies. In other words, the speech act of request was made up of a combination of a reason (grounder) and a preparatory (request head). The results turned out as expected with the three groups using more strategies in the +power situations than in the =power situations, that is a preference for more strategy use among all three groups in the +power situations when making requests. In other words the number of times the RHA and RSM strategies were used, was more frequent in comparison to the =power situations.

## 5. Conclusion

This study intended to investigate how the speech act of request was performed in two culturally and linguistically diverse groups (Canadians and Iranians) and how the language use of these learners was affected by this. The purpose of this study was to contribute to the existing literature on cross-linguistic speech act research by questioning the sociolinguistic variations in the production of requests among Persian and Canadian speakers with respect to the status of the interlocutors. That is to examine the request strategies made by native speakers of Persian, EFL learners, and native speakers of English. The main reason for selecting Persian “lies in the fact that so little has been known about the Iranian EFL learners’ pragmatic difficulties and needs, and their pragmatic knowledge of the sociocultural rules of speaking has remained underdeveloped” (Allami and Naeimi 2011). Our findings showed

that both languages under investigation have a rich repertoire of requesting strategies. However, differences exist in the frequency of strategies used in that native speakers of English were found to use more of and also they used more RSM in comparison to the native speakers of Persian who used more RHA strategies (Table 1). In Eslamirasekh's (1993: 14) words "from a cross-cultural perspective, the general level of directness in Persian speaking society is relatively high". As for the length of the requests the ones made by the native speakers of English and Persian were just as long. However, the ones made by the EFL learners were much shorter. This finding requires in depth retrospective analysis to see why this is the case. In terms of the overall frequency of requesting strategies (Table 1) used by the two native groups, they were found to be more or less equal.

To this point, little is known about how learners develop and improve their pragmatic competence. Bialystok (1993) theorizes that the process entails two separate cognitive components: that of acquiring knowledge, in the form of an increasingly explicit understanding of L2 pragmatic features, and that of acquiring control over attention to this knowledge; that is, automaticity in use of this knowledge. Bialystok (1993) believes that the second component is a crucial process for L2 learners. They generally produce pragmatically inappropriate L2 utterances not because of deviant pragmatic knowledge but because they are unable to draw on their pragmatic knowledge when they need it, to access it quickly enough to produce appropriate utterances in real time.

Another reason for inappropriate utterances might relate to psychological matters. A critical and influential factor in the process of pragmatics and its production is self-confidence. An L2 learner, especially in a foreign language must be reassured that he/she is capable of producing native-like speech acts even though that person has never been to a native speaking country. Thus encouragement on the part of the teacher might be a crucial factor playing a positive role in the production of speech acts by L2 learners.

As for the Iranian context, material developers might also be guilty in that they do not put much thought and attention in creating culturally and pragmatically authentic material. In addition, instruction of native-like speech acts is not given much attention in this context. Moreover, the non-native English teachers themselves might not be completely confident in their own L2 speech acts, let alone having the capability of teaching them. Thus, a factor which might play a role in the interpretation of our findings is a lack of pragmatic instruction present in the Iranian EFL context. Instruction seems to have a strong positive role in helping L2 learners acquire and perform L2 pragmatics (Kasper and Schmidt 1996: 160).

Processes such as speech act production are thought to be made up of several processes operating together (either simultaneously or consecutively) to produce a given instance of IL pragmatic behaviour, so that ILP phenomena typically have a number of explanations (Kasper 1982). As thus, further developmental and longitudinal studies of acquisition of L2 pragmatic competence are required in order for researchers to make strong claims in terms of ILP development. Findings by some including Ellis (1992) suggest that learners start to perform L2 speech acts by means of a few formulaic routines, and later begin to modify these initial routines, and to increase their range of strategy types.

This study has a number of implications for the causes of ILP behavior. Most obviously, it confirms the contention (Kasper 1992; Takahashi 1996) that a pluricausal explanation for ILP phenomena is the most convincing one. More than one causal factor can regularly be assigned to features of these learners' requests. Factors such as pragmatic instruction, L1 transfer, proficiency level, and other variables work hand in hand to make up the ILP knowledge of an L2 learner.

This study can have pedagogical implications for EFL teachers. Persian students learning English as a foreign language are in urgent need of explicit pragmatic instruction. We, as EFL teachers must supplement their English courses with authentic material showing

how speech acts, in this case requests, are used among native speakers. We must explicitly or implicitly draw their attention to the different strategies used by native speakers of English and compare and contrast them with the way they, as EFL learners are producing different speech acts.

Future studies of a cross-sectional nature could provide more insight into the reasons behind the lack of L1 transfer. As thus, in upcoming studies researchers should take into consideration beginner, intermediate, and advanced learners to reach a comprehensive understanding of L1 transfer.

Some limitations are directed towards this study. The first was that the EFL participants were not heterogeneous in terms of language proficiency, to have a better understanding of strategies made by different proficiency levels. In our study we assumed homogeneity regarding the proficiency level of the EFL learners since they were seniors taking the same English courses at a university in Iran. Another limitation was the absence of male informants. Future research can compare request strategies made by male participants and compare them to our findings for a contrastive analysis. As for studies investigating ILPs it is better to run longitudinal or cross-sectional research, so that we have access to students at varying proficiencies. Future studies should use instruments that can examine speech acts in the context of discourse and interaction in addition to the use of DCTs.

## **Bibliographical references**

- Allami, H. and A. Naeimi. 2011. A cross-linguistic study of refusals: An analysis of pragmatic competence development in Iranian EFL learners. *Journal of Pragmatics* 43: 385-406.
- Bardovi-Harlig, K. 1999. Researching method. In L. Bouton (ed.), *Pragmatics and language learning*. 237-264. University of Illinois.
- Be'al, C. 1990. 'It's all in the asking': a perspective on problems of cross cultural communication between native speakers of French and native speakers of English in the workplace. *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics Series 7*: 16-32.
- Bergman, M. and G. Kasper. 1993. Perception and performance in native and non-native apology. In G. Kasper and S. Blum-Kulka (eds.), *Interlanguage Pragmatics*. 82-107. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bialystok, E. 1993. Symbolic representation and attentional control in pragmatic competence. In G. Kasper and S. Blum-Kulka (eds.), *Pragmatic Interlanguage*. 43-57. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Biesenbach-Lucas, S. 2007. Students writing e-mails to faculty: an examination of e-politeness among native and non-native speakers of English. *Language Learning and Technology* 11/2: 59-81.
- Billow, G. 1995. Requesting strategies in the cross-cultural business meeting. *Pragmatics* 5/1: 45-55.
- Blum-Kulka, S. and H. Juliane. 1989. Cross-cultural and situational variation in requesting behavior. In Blum-Kulka, S., J. House and G. Kasper (eds.), *Cross-cultural Pragmatics: Requests and Apologies*. 123-154. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Blum-Kulka, S. 1989. Playing it safe: The role of conventionality in indirectness. In S. Blum-Kulka, J. House, and G. Kasper (eds.), *Cross-cultural pragmatics: Requests and apologies*. 37-70..
- Blum-Kulka, S., J. House, and G. Kasper. 1989. Investigating cross-cultural pragmatics: an introductory overview. In S. Blum-Kulka, J. House, and G. Kasper (eds.), *Cross-cultural pragmatics: Requests and apologies*. 1-36. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.



- Brown, P. and S. Levinson. 1987. *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Byon, A.S. 2004. Sociopragmatic analysis of Korean requests: Pedagogical settings. *Journal of Pragmatics* 36: 1673-1704.
- Cherry, R.D. 1988. Politeness in written persuasion. *Journal of Pragmatics* 12: 63-81.
- Cohen, A.D. and E. Olshtain. 1980. Politeness: Comparing native and nonnative judgments. *Language Learning* 31: 113-134.
- Economidou-Kogetsidis, M. 2010. Cross-cultural and situational variation in requesting behavior: Perceptions of social situations and strategic usage of request patterns. *Journal of Pragmatics* 42: 2262-2281.
- Ellis, R. 1992. Learning to communicate in the classroom: A study of two language learners' requests. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 14: 1-23.
- Ellis, R. 1994. *The Studies of Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Eslamirasekh, Z. 1993. A cross-cultural comparison of requestive speech act realization patterns in Persian and American English. *Pragmatic and Language Learning* 4: 85-103.
- Fukushima, S. 2000. *Requests and Culture: Politeness in British English and Japanese*. Berlin: Peter Lang.
- Garcia, C. 1989. Disagreeing and requesting by Americans and Venezuelans. *Linguistics and Education* 1: 299-322.
- Hassall, T. 2003. Request by Australian learners of English. *Journal of Pragmatics* 35: 1903-1928.
- House, J. and G. Kasper. 1987. Interlanguage pragmatics: Requesting in a foreign language. In: L. Wolfgang and R. Schulze (eds.), *Perspectives on Language in Performance* 1250-1288. Tübingen: Narr.
- House, J. 1996. Developing pragmatic fluency in English as a second language. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 18: 225-252.
- Hudson, T., E. Detmer, and J. Brown. 1995. *Developing Prototypic Measures of Cross-Cultural Pragmatics*. Second Language Teaching and Curriculum Center, University of Hawai'i. Honolulu.
- Huth, T. 2006. Negotiating structure and culture: L2 learners' realization of L2 compliment-response sequences in talk-in-interaction. *Journal of Pragmatics* 38: 2025-2050.
- Jaworski, A. 1994. Pragmatic failure in a second language: Greeting responses in English by Polish students. *IRAL* 1: 41-55.
- Kasper, G. and K. Rose. 1999. Pragmatics and SLA. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 19: 81-104.
- Kasper, G. and M. Dahl. 1991. Research methods in interlanguage pragmatics. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 13: 215-247.
- Kasper, G. and R. Schmidt. 1996. Developmental issues in interlanguage pragmatics. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 18: 149-169.
- Kasper, G. 1982. Teaching-induced aspects of interlanguage discourse. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 4: 99-113.
- Kasper, G. 1992. Pragmatic transfer. *Second Language Research* 8: 203-231.
- Kasper, G. 2000. Data collection in pragmatics research. In H. Spencer-Oatey (ed.), *Culturally speaking: Managing rapport through talk across cultures* 316-341. London/New York: Continuum.
- Kim, J. 1995. "Could you calm down more?": Requests and Korean ESL learners. *Working Papers in Educational Linguistics* 11: 67-82.

- Kwon, J. 2003. *Pragmatic Transfer and Proficiency in Refusals of Korean EFL learners*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Boston University.
- Márquez Reiter, R. 2002. A contrastive study of conventional indirectness in Spanish: Evidence from Peninsular and Uruguayan Spanish. *Pragmatics* 12: 135-151.
- Pinto, D. 2005. The acquisition of requests by second language learners of Spanish. *Spanish in Context* 2: 1-27.
- Pinto, D. and R. Raschio. 2007. A comparative study of requests in heritage speaker Spanish, L1 Spanish, and L1 English. *International Journal of Bilingualism* 11: 135-155.
- Searle, J. 1969. *Speech acts: An essay in the philosophy of language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Takahashi, S. 1996. Pragmatic transferability. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 18: 189-223.
- Takahashi, T. and L.M. Beebe. 1987. The development of pragmatic competence by Japanese learners of English. *JALT Journal* 8: 131-155.
- Trosborg, A. 1995. *Interlanguage Pragmatics*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Wolfson, N. 1989. *Perspectives: Sociolinguistics and TESOL*. New York: Newbury House.
- Yu, M.C. 2011. Learning how to read situations and know what is the right thing to say or do in an L2: A study of socio-cultural competence and language transfer. *Journal of Pragmatics* 43: 1127-1147.

### **Appendix: The English version of the DCT**

Please read the 12 situations carefully. In the space provided please write your response. Please respond as naturally as possible and try to write your response as you feel you would say it in the situation. The data will be used for research purposes only. Thank you for your contribution.

#### **Situations:**

1. One of your classmates is an expert in writing neat notes. You have a test from that course the upcoming week and want to ask your classmate to lend you her notes so that you can get a copy from them.
2. You are working on your final project and want to make an appointment for an interview with your supervisor. You know that your supervisor is very busy and only schedules interviews in the afternoon from one to four o'clock on Wednesday. However, you have to take the final-term exam this Wednesday. You want to schedule an interview on Thursday.
3. You are in class with all your other classmates. You need to write some notes, but realize you do not have any paper. You turn to the person sitting next to you.
4. You have a dentist appointment at 3 o'clock in the afternoon. However, you have class with one of your professors from 2 to 3:30. So you want to go to his office prior to class and ask if you could leave his class early since you have an appointment with a doctor.
5. Something is wrong with the computer you are working on in the site and there are no other available computers and you have to finish some homework which is due tomorrow. Your classmate is at one of the computers, but he is also writing a course paper on his computer. His homework is due the day after tomorrow. You want to ask her to stop her work and let you use her computer to finish your homework first.
6. You are now discussing your project with your professor. Your professor speaks very fast. You do not follow what he is saying, so you want to ask your professor to say it again.
7. You are trying to study in the library and you see two students who are coincidentally your classmates. They are talking to each other and you can't concentrate on what you are studying. You want to ask them to stop speaking.

8. Your professor has set a date for a quiz prior to the mid-term exam. However, you cannot attend class on the date of the exam since you will be out of town. You would like to ask the professor to change the date of the exam.
9. You have set a time to meet with your supervisor to discuss some matters in regards to your final term project. However, something has come up just before the appointment and you want to call your professor at the last minute and cancel your appointment.
10. This semester, you are taking a difficult course. You have had a hard time following lectures and understanding the textbook. A test is scheduled to be held next week. You notice that one of your classmates sitting next to you seems to have good knowledge on that course and is doing well. You want to ask her to study together for the upcoming test.
11. The professor has introduced the syllabus for a specific course but you think they are too much and the books cannot all be covered in one semester. You would like to ask the professor to reduce the resources for the course.
12. You are sitting in class and listening to your classmate's presentation. However, a student who is very tall is sitting in front of you and blocking your view. You want to ask the student not to block your view.

*[This DCT was distributed among the EFL learners and sent by e-mail to the native speakers of English living in Canada. The Persian translation of this DCT was contributed among the native speakers of Persian.]*