

Learner's English Proficiency and their Pragmatic Competence of Refusal Speech Acts

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Abstract

The present study is an attempt to investigate the relationship between language proficiency and pragmatic comprehension of the refusal speech act among Iranian EFL learners. To this end, the Oxford Placement Test (OPT), as a proficiency test, was given to participants and they were divided into high and low level groups based on their proficiency scores. Then, a multiple-choice discourse completion task (MDCT) was given to both groups to elicit their pragmatic knowledge. The findings indicated that there was no significant difference between high and low groups in pragmatic comprehension. In other words, language proficiency was not the determining factor in the degree of pragmatic comprehension. Moreover, the results indicated that there was no correlation between learners' language proficiency and pragmatic knowledge. Therefore, in order to have pragmatically competent EFL learners, they should be taught pragmatic functions and language norms of the target language in the language classrooms.

Keywords: Pragmatic comprehension, Speech acts, Refusal speech act, MDCT.

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During the last few decades, a major change has occurred in second or foreign language teaching from focusing on language forms to focusing on both language forms and language functions. These changes have led to underscore the importance of communicative activities rather than emphasizing only on grammatical rules and resulted in the emergence of communicative language teaching which is based on the theory that the main aim of language use is communication. Its main goal is to develop learners' communicative competence (Hymes 1971). Communicative competence emphasizes that teaching and learning a language are not only teaching and learning its grammatical points, but also, teaching and learning how to use language appropriately for communicative purposes in real-life situations. In fact, pragmatic competence is one of the major components in a number of models of communicative competence (Canale 1983, Bachman 1990, and Bachman & Palmer 1996).

In the literature, various definitions have been offered of pragmatics. What all those definitions have in common is that it involves social and contextual norms underlying languages and refers to those norms of interaction that are shared within a speech community in order to establish and maintain successful communication among language users (Uso-Juan & Martinez-Flor, 2008). In specific situations, language learners should know what to say to whom, when, why and how to say it appropriately (Saville-Troike, 1982; Thomas, 1983). They also need a good command of communicative competence. In fact, the act of learning a second language (L2) is a difficult and demanding process. Most language learners assume that they will become competent language learners by learning grammar and vocabulary of the target language. Nevertheless, successful communication in a target language needs not only grammatical and

vocabulary knowledge but also pragmatic knowledge about socio-cultural norms of that language.

In EFL classrooms, teachers mostly focus on linguistic competence (the grammar and vocabulary) and they do not pay enough attention to the pragmatic competence (the ability to use language appropriately according to given situations); something which is often disregarded despite its importance. Therefore, EFL learners may produce grammatically correct but socially inappropriate utterances according to the norms of the target language and they may lack pragmatic knowledge in communication with English native speakers due to lack of opportunities to speak English outside the classroom. Most people believe that more proficient learners have better pragmatic knowledge than less proficient learners. Although only a limited number of researches have been conducted in this area, some studies (e.g. Garcia, 2004, Jianda, 2007, Xu, Case, Wang, 2009) have shown that advanced learners are more proficient in performing a speech act in a specific situation. However, some other researches (e.g. Arghamiri & Sadighi, 2013, Farashaiyan & Hua, 2011, Jie, 2005) have shown there is no relationship between language proficiency and pragmatic knowledge of language learners and even learners with a high level of language proficiency do not perform speech acts appropriately in a target language. The inappropriate use of language by proficient learners may show that it is difficult for nonnative speakers to acquire appropriate ways to communicate language functions in a target language and may show the necessity of teaching pragmatics in EFL classrooms. This study is an attempt to explore the effect of language proficiency on pragmatic knowledge of Iranian EFL learners on MDCT to see whether more proficient language learners perform better than less proficient learners on pragmatic knowledge.

Review of literature

Pragmatic Competence

Pragmatic competence, being one of the important building blocks of communicative competence, contains “grammatical and lexical systems” along with “social and contextual factors” underlying the English language and these elements are “shared by members of a given speech community in order to establish and maintain successful communication” (Uso-Juan & Martinez-Flor, 2008, p. 349). In other words, “most people within a linguistic community have similar basic experience of the world and share a lot of non-linguistic knowledge” (Yule, 1996, p. 5), which enables them to “employ different linguistic formulae in an appropriate way when interacting in a particular social and cultural context”(Uso-Juan & Martinez-Flor, 2008, p. 349). Crystal (1985, p.240) defines 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 effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication.”

In relation to this, Chomsky (1980) defined pragmatic competence as the “knowledge of conditions and manner of appropriate use of the language, in conformity with various purposes” (p.224). This seems to be in opposition to grammatical competence, which he defined as “the knowledge of form and meaning” (p.224). Pragmatic competence generally deals with the knowledge of the socio-cultural rules that govern language use. One of the most important aspects of pragmatics is speech acts. Over the past twenty five years, linguists have investigated the realization strategies of speech acts in different languages and cultures. The concept of the speech act was first introduced by Austin (1962) and then it was developed by Searle (1975). According to this concept, saying something involves doing something. Searle (1990) asserts that

speaking a language includes performing speech acts. For example, when a speaker says “I am sorry”, he is not only uttering an English phrase but is also performing an action, that of apologizing. By performing a speech act, the speaker produces certain actions such as requesting, apologizing and complaining, refusing, thanking.

Refusal Speech Act

Refusals are defined as ‘responding speech acts through which the speaker denies to engage [sic.] in an activity proposed by the interlocutor’ (Chen, Ye & Zhang 1995, p. 121). Refusals are offensive acts that threaten the hearer’s face and generally are produced as a response to an initiating act like a request, a suggestion, an invitation or an offer rather than being uttered as an initiating turn on the part of the speaker (Gass & Houck 1999). To date, different classifications of refusal strategies have been suggested in the literature (e.g. Rubin, 1983, Beebe, Takahashi & Uliss-Weltz, 1990; Turnbull, 2001) among which the most significant one was proposed by Beebe et al. (1990). The basis of their classification was the notion of the semantic formula, which the researchers defined as a word, a phrase, or a sentence used to perform refusals (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1993b; Cohen, 1996).

In their taxonomy, semantic formulas were divided into two categories: direct and indirect refusals. In addition to these, there were adjuncts to refusals or expressions that co-occur with refusals but cannot stand alone to perform a refusal. In direct refusal, the refuser rejects a request, an offer, an invitation or a suggestion either by performative utterances such as “I decline” or non-performative utterances like “I can’t” or “no”. In indirect refusals, however, the refuser rejects indirectly a request, an offer, an invitation or a suggestion to soften the face-threatening act and negative effect on the hearer. This is performed through the use of some strategies such as *reason*, *wish statement*, *regret*, *alternative*, *set condition for future acceptance*

and so on. Adjuncts cannot be used alone to perform a refusal act. As Felix-Brasdefer (2004) mentions, they may function as a pre-refusal appearing just before semantic formulas or as a post-refusal appearing after semantic formulas. Hassani, Mardani, and Dastjerdi (2011) have mentioned that the refusal sequence involves three phases:

1. Pre-refusal strategies: preparing the addressee for an upcoming refusal;
2. Main refusal (Head Act): bearing the main refusal;
3. Post-refusal strategies: functioning as emphasize, mitigator or concluder of the main refusal.

For example, a refusal sequence of someone to his friend's invitation to a birthday party would be: I'd like to (pre-refusal), but I can't (main refusal). I have a final exam tomorrow (post-refusal).

Interlanguage pragmatics and refusal speech act

Generally speaking, pragmatics within a second language acquisition is usually called as interlanguage pragmatics. Kasper and Blum-Kulka (1993, p.3) defined the term interlanguage pragmatics as "the study of nonnative speakers' use and acquisition of linguistic action pattern in a second language". Bardovi-Harlig (1998) mentioned that the following factors have a direct influence on the acquisition of pragmatic competence of L2 learners, i.e. input, instruction, level of proficiency, length of stay in the L2 culture and the L1 culture. There are still contradictory views regarding the effect of language proficiency on pragmatic knowledge of language learners. Many studies have been conducted to determine the effectiveness of language proficiency on pragmatic development of learners in different languages. While some studies support the positive effect of language proficiency on pragmatic competence of language learners (e.g. Garcia, 2004, Jianda, 2007, Xu, Case, Wang, 2009), some indicate that there is no relationship

between language proficiency and pragmatic knowledge (e.g. Arghamiri & Sadighi, 2013, Farashaiyan & Hua, 2011, Jie, 2005).

Garcia (2004) compared the performance of advanced and beginning language learners on a listening comprehension task and focused on linguistic and pragmatic processing. The results showed that advanced learners outperformed beginners in linguistic and pragmatic comprehension, comprehension of speech acts and the comprehension of implicatures. However, Pearson correlation showed that there was a low correlation between linguistic and pragmatic subparts, and between speech act and conversational implicatures subparts supporting construct differences between linguistic and pragmatic comprehension, and between the comprehension of speech acts and the comprehension of implicatures.

In another study, Jie (2005) investigated the performance of Chinese university EFL learners in production and comprehension of refusal and request speech acts. To this end, 66 university students at two levels of language proficiency (high and low) participated in the study. Data were collected through WDCT, MDCT and retrospective interview. The results of the study showed that language proficiency had little effect on the performance of the two groups and there was no significant difference between two groups in their overall use of politeness strategies in both WDCT and MDCT. Moreover, the findings indicated that contextual variables did not affect the strategy choice by the two groups.

Further, Xu, Case, and Wang (2009) conducted a research to find out the effect of length of residence in the target language community and language proficiency on L2 pragmatic knowledge with regard to L2 grammatical competence. 126 international students in the US at two different levels of language proficiency participated in the study. Data were collected through a questionnaire consisting of 20 scenarios measuring their pragmatic and grammatical

knowledge. The results indicated that both length of residence in the target language community and overall language proficiency influenced pragmatic knowledge of L2 learners considerably with overall language proficiency indicating a stronger influence. Findings indicated that there was a strong and positive correlation between grammatical competence and pragmatic competence of L2 learners.

Farashiyan and Hua (2011) conducted a study investigating the relationship between gender, pragmatic knowledge and language proficiency of Iranian EFL learners. To this end, 120 university students participated in the study and were divided into three levels of elementary, intermediate and advanced levels based on their scores on proficiency test. Then, a MDCT was given to them to evaluate their pragmatic knowledge. The results of the study indicated that there was no significant relationship between pragmatic knowledge and language proficiency of learners. Moreover, the findings showed that female participants outperformed males on pragmatic and proficiency tests.

In a study by Mirzaei and Esmaeili (2013), the effect of explicit instruction on Iranian EFL learners' interlanguage pragmatic development was examined. To conduct this research, a sample comprised of 210 Iranian non-native EFL learners and 60 English native speakers participated in the study. 90 out of 210 non-native speakers participated in pre-test and post-test phase of the study and were divided into two main groups: an experimental group receiving explicit instruction and a control group. The instruments employed in the study were MDCT, written discourse completion test (WDCT) and scoring-scale improvement. The researchers administered MDCT to measure learners' comprehension ability in experimental group before instruction. They concluded that high and low EFL learners performed almost similarly before explicit metapragmatic instruction in recognition test of MDCT in the sense that language

proficiency did not affect learners' pragmatic knowledge. The results also indicated that explicit instruction improved the development of pragmatically appropriate use of language.

Barron (2003) collected data from study abroad learners before they leave their home country and start their study abroad sojourn. He investigated the pragmatic development of 33 Irish learners of German over a 14-months period. She collected the first data in Ireland and the next two in Germany, one in the middle of the L2 learners' sojourn and one towards the end of their stay in Germany. She collected the data through DCT and compared learners' performance with native speaker groups. She concluded that although the study abroad context can improve L2 learners' use of certain pragmatic features in some contexts (e.g. use of upgraders in initial refusals with foreigners), but a 10-month stay in the L2 country may not be enough for all L2 learners to constantly produce pragmatic features like native speakers in all contexts (e.g. use of upgraders with friends).

In 2004, Felix-Brasdefer investigated the effect of different lengths of sojourn in the target environment on learners' pragmatic knowledge *after* the learners have returned to their home country. 24 advanced learners of Spanish participated in this study. They were divided into four different groups on the basis of their length of stay in the target environment (group 1: 1–1.5 months; group 2: 3–5 months; group 3: 9–13 months; group 4: 18–30 months). He concluded that although the learners who lived in the L2 context for 9 months or more produced refusals that are generally similar to those produced by Spanish native speaker in a variety of aspects, the learners still deviated in some aspects of their pragmatic choice from Spanish native speakers (e.g. the content and form of two indirect apology strategies).

Purpose of the Study

Over the last few decades, research on interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) has shown a salient development in the realm of L2 pragmatics. To date, a few longitudinal and cross-sectional studies have investigated the development of language learners' pragmatic knowledge. These studies showed that the development of pragmatic competence is very complex and differs greatly from individual to individual depending on learner-related factors such as motivation, language proficiency, learning context, and length of residence in the target community (Kasper & Schmidt, 1996). This cross-sectional study explores how Iranian EFL learners at two levels of language proficiency perform the refusal speech act in different situations. Through making comparison between high and low proficient language learners, this study aims to find out whether there is any significant difference between these two groups in recognition of the refusal speech act. In other words, this study aims to find out whether more proficient language learners perform better than less proficient ones in pragmatic tests of multiple-choice discourse completion task (MDCT).

Research Questions

The present study investigates the performance of Iranian EFL learners in pragmatic recognition of the refusal speech act. The study aims to answer the following questions:

- 1. Is there any significant difference between high and low EFL learners in recognition of refusal speech act?"*
- 2. Is there any correlation between language proficiency and performance of Iranian EFL learners in recognition of refusal speech acts?*

Methods

Participants

A total number of 95 Iranian students with different majors, such as Law, Commerce, Physics, Computer Sciences and Psychology, studying at University of Mysore participated in this study in the 2013-2014 academic years. The length of their stay in India varied from 3 to 9 months. A standardized proficiency test, Oxford Placement test (OPT), was given to Iranian EFL learners in order to measure their general language ability. After scoring the test, a number of outliers whose proficiency scores were too high or too low were identified and removed from the study. Based on learners' scores on the proficiency test, 30 were considered as high proficiency group and 30 as low proficiency group. In other words, those who scored one standard deviation above the mean were considered as high group, those scored one standard deviation below the mean as low group and those whose scores fell between were excluded from the study. The participants consist of 42 female and 18 male learners. They included 26 MA and 34 PhD students with different majors. Their ages ranged between 23 to 40 years. They received small remuneration for their participation.

The English native speakers were university students (17 females and 13 males) selected through stratified random sampling. Thirty English native speakers and 30 Iranian EFL learners were participated in the phase of MDCT construction.

Materials and Instruments

Three types of tests were employed in this study (a language proficiency test, a written discourse completion task (WDCT) and an MDCT). First, the proficiency test (OPT) was administered to Iranian language learners to determine their proficiency levels. The main instrument employed for the purpose of the present study is the MDCT as a pragmatic

comprehension test which involved 12 items to elicit refusals. In this test, participants were asked to read the description of a situation requiring a refusal and choose the most appropriate response for each item among four options (one correct answer and three distracters). The specified time for performing the test was 20 minutes.

Procedures:

The following steps were performed to develop MDCT: First, a pilot written discourse completion task (WDCT) involving 12 situations adapted from a study by Lingli and Wannaruk (2010) was administered to 30 English native speakers and 30 Iranian EFL learners (those received WDCT were not the main participants of the study). The questionnaire involved four types of initiating acts, i.e., refusal to an invitation, a suggestion, an offer and a request differing in the social power between the interlocutors (high, equal, low). Participants were asked to write what they would say in each situation. Then, the data collected from the pilot WDCT was considered in developing the MDCT. Following Birjandi and Rezaei's (2010) suggestion on developing the MDCT, the most frequent responses provided by the English native speakers were considered as the accurate as well as appropriate option for the pragmatic recognition test and the inaccurate responses given by Iranian EFL learners to each item in the WDCT were considered as the other alternatives for each item. Inaccuracy of Iranian responses was identified by two English native teachers as the raters who were aware of the purpose of the research. It is worthy to mention that the steps followed in developing the MDCT are similar to Birjandi and Rezaei's (2010) study of assessing the pragmatic knowledge of Iranian EFL learners in relation to the speech acts of request and apology. Unlike their study in which the questionnaire was developed by the researchers, the questionnaire of the present study was adopted from Lingli and Wannaruk (2010).

The developed MDCT (see Appendix A) was given to two English native speakers and two Iranian English teachers to check the inappropriateness and inaccurateness of the distracters. Their suggestions were taken into account in developing the final version of the MDCT and necessary amendments were applied in the test construction.

In order to identify the appropriateness of the MDCT, it was administered to ten English native speakers to ensure that there is an agreement in the selection of keys and distracters by all English native speakers. To evaluate the reliability of this MDCT test, Cronbach's Alpha was used. The reliability index was .77, which is a high reliability. Among several ways of evaluating validity of a test, content validity was considered in test construction. In fact, it refers to the degree to which a test is a representative sample of the content of what the test was supposed to measure (Brown, 1996). To check the content validity of the test, it was given to two experts in pragmatics field to verify the validity of the contents and there was a consensus among them about the content validity of the test.

Results

This section presents the results of data analysis related to each research question. The analysis of the data was carried out through statistical procedures of T-test and Pearson correlation analysis.

RQ1: "Is there any significant difference between high and low EFL learners in recognition of refusal speech act?"

To answer the first research question regarding the difference between high and low EFL learners in recognition of the refusal speech act, the learners' performance on MDCT was compared in two groups. The descriptive statistics and the results of data analysis are presented in the following table.

Table 1.**Descriptive statistics for performance of EFL learners on refusal test**

| Group | N | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|-------|----|-------|----------------|
| High | 30 | 34.33 | 7.15 |
| Low | 30 | 33.83 | 9.34 |

As Table 1 shows the mean score of refusal test in high EFL learners was 34.33 whereas, the mean of low EFL learners was to 33.83. The results indicate that participants in the high group performed better than their low counterparts. The t-test was run out to see whether there was a significant difference in performance of these two groups with regard to refusal test (Table 2).

Table 2:**Independent Samples t-test between high and low EFL Learners on refusal test**

| | | Leven's test for Equality of Variances | | t-test for Equality of Means | | |
|--------------|-----------------------------|--|------|------------------------------|-------|----------------|
| | | F | Sig. | t | df | Sig.(2-tailed) |
| Refusal Test | Equal variances assumed | 1.60 | .21 | .23 | 58 | .81 |
| | Equal variances not assumed | | | .23 | 54.13 | .81 |

According to the statistic of an independent sample t-test (see table 2), the calculated Sig. (.81) was more than alpha level of .05. Therefore, there was no significant difference between high EFL learners and low EFL learners on refusal test ($t=.23$, $p=.81>.05$). In other words, learners with higher language proficiency did not perform better than lower proficiency group on refusal MDCT as a recognition test.

RQ2: “Is there any correlation between language proficiency and performance of Iranian EFL learners on recognition of refusal speech act?”

To answer this research question, the correlational analysis was employed to examine the relationship between proficiency test and refusal test in MDCT format. First, the relationship between the language proficiency and refusal tests at two different levels of high and low is examined separately. Then, the relationship between learners’ performance on language proficiency test and refusal test of entire learners in general is investigated (without dividing them into different levels). The interpretation of correlation strength is based on Guilford’s rule of the thumb (1956); there is a weak correlation between variables when correlation coefficient (r) is between .20 to .40, a moderate correlation when correlation coefficient is between .40 to .70, a strong correlation when the correlation coefficient is between .70 to .90 and a very strong correlation when the value is above .90.

Table 3 shows the correlation between two tests for high EFL learners. The findings show that there was no correlation between the proficiency test and refusal test ($r = .18$, $N = 30$, $p > .05$).

Table 3:

Correlation between language proficiency test and refusal test for high EFL learners

| | | Proficiency test | Refusal test |
|------------------|---------------------|------------------|--------------|
| Proficiency test | Pearson Correlation | 1 | .18 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | | .32 |
| | N | 30 | 30 |
| Refusal test | Pearson Correlation | .18 | 1 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .32 | |
| | N | 30 | 30 |

Regarding the correlation between two tests for low EFL learners, results (Table 4) shows that there was no correlation between proficiency test and refusal test ($r = -.09$, $N=30$, $p > .05$).

Table 4:

Correlation between language proficiency test and refusal test for low EFL learners

| | | Proficiency test | Refusal test |
|------------------|---------------------|------------------|--------------|
| Proficiency test | Pearson Correlation | 1 | -.09 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | | .62 |
| | N | 30 | 30 |
| Refusal test | Pearson Correlation | -.09 | 1 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .62 | |
| | N | 30 | 30 |

To see whether there is a correlation between language proficiency and refusal test of entire sample in general, another Pearson correlation was conducted. Results (see Table 5) show that there was no correlation between EFL learners' performance on the proficiency test and refusal test ($r = .03$, $N=30$, $p > .05$).

Table 5:

Correlations between language proficiency and refusal tests for the whole sample

| | | Proficiency test | Refusal test |
|------------------|---------------------|------------------|--------------|
| Proficiency test | Proficiency test | 1 | .03 |
| | Pearson Correlation | | .78 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | 60 | 60 |
| Refusal test | N | .03 | 1 |
| | Pearson Correlation | .78 | |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | 60 | 60 |

The results indicated that there was no relationship between learners' scores on the language proficiency test and refusal tests of MDCT. In other words, by knowing the learner's score in one test we cannot predict his score on another test. Therefore, the proficiency test and pragmatic test may have measured different constructs which are fundamentally distinct.

Discussion

This study investigated L2 recognition of refusal speech act by Iranian EFL learners at high and low levels of language proficiency. The results indicated that there was no significant difference between high and low level groups' performance in refusal MDCT. In other words, learners with higher language proficiency did not perform better than lower proficiency group on refusal MDCT as a recognition test. Moreover, the results showed that there was no correlation between performance of learners on language proficiency test and refusal test. The results of this study are in line with Farashiyan and Hua's (2011) study which compared performance of Iranian EFL learners at different proficiency levels on pragmatic test. They used MDCT to draw a comparison between learners of three groups (elementary, intermediate and advanced). The results indicated that there was no significant difference between these three groups in terms of their pragmatic competence. The finding of this study is also more or less congruent with the findings of Mirzaei and Esmaili (2013) which examined the effectiveness of metapragmatic instruction on Iranian EFL learners. They administered MDCT to measure learners' comprehension ability in pragmatic test before instruction. They concluded that high and low EFL learners performed almost similar before explicit metapragmatic instruction in recognition test (MDCT) in the sense that language proficiency did not affect learners' pragmatic knowledge. The findings also lend support to the study by Jie (2005) which used MDCT to measure receptive knowledge of Chinese learners at high and low levels of language proficiency. The researcher concluded that high and low groups did not show any significant differences in their overall use of politeness strategies on MDCT. The result of this study is against Jianda's (2007) study in which high proficiency group performed better than low proficiency group on MDCT.

The findings lend support to Arghamiri and Sadighi's (2013) study which demonstrated there was no correlation between the learners' proficiency level and their pragmatic comprehension. In another study by Rattanaprasert and Aksornjarung (2011), the findings showed that the learners who gained high score in vocabulary and grammar test did not perform well in the pragmatic test, and vice versa. These results indicated there is a negative relationship between the grammar and vocabulary knowledge and the pragmatic knowledge of the learners. The results contradict with Kratza's (2007) findings in which positive correlation was detected between language performance scores and pragmatic performance scores.

Conclusion

Bearing in mind that learners of this study have lived in India, that English is their second language, between 3 to 9 months but they did not approximate to native norms indicate that mere living in the second language context does not guarantee learners to perform well in L2 speech acts. A possible explanation might be that the learners have not been taught how to perform L2 pragmatic functions in their educational system in Iran or they are influenced by the Indian culture. The fact that learners with higher proficiency level did not perform significantly better than those with lower proficiency level, even with living in the second language context, with more opportunities to interact in English either by English native speakers or Indians, indicates that another important factor, i.e. metapragmatic awareness might influence pragmatic acquisition of learners.

The result of this study supports Eslami-Rasekh's (2004) findings that even advanced learners are deficient in pragmatic knowledge before receiving instruction. As she claims some sort of metapragmatic instruction in the form of deductive, inductive, implicit, or explicit is necessary for pragmatic awareness of language learners.

All in all, the insignificant differences between the performances of high and low proficiency learners on MDCT indicate that even high proficient learners lack pragmatic knowledge. Therefore, to help the learners become a proficient communicator in an L2, language teachers should make the learners aware of existing differences in speech act production and comprehension in Persian and English. In fact, building up pragmatic competence of language learners has a paramount importance in their ability to become a proficient language communicator in a target language. On this account, material developers and syllabus designers should design more communicative activities for language learners especially in the EFL context in which learners have scarce opportunities to interact English outside the classroom. Syllabus designers should consider that the learners need to know how to produce and interpret speech acts in different discourse situations in the target language and should incorporate language functions that learners are likely to encounter in their textbooks. Moreover, syllabus designers and material developers should design curricula such that they cover the importance of contextual factors in interaction in the sense that they familiarize learners to know how to perform appropriately in different contexts according to contextual factors such as social status, social relation and gender of interlocutor. Learners should be aware of the ways the native speakers realize a certain function in order to enhance their communicative abilities. This could be done by eliciting pragmatic behaviors from L1 and comparing them with those from L2 to raise learners' awareness. So, future research is needed to investigate the pragmatic aspects of the refusal speech act between English and Iranian native speakers. Moreover, other research tools such as DCT and role plays should be performed to compare the performance of learners with different language proficiency levels.

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Appendix A: Sample Questionnaire

1. You are in your professor's office talking about your final paper which is due in two weeks. Your professor indicates that he has a guest speaker coming to his next class and invites you to attend that lecture but you cannot.

Your professor: By the way, I have a guest speaker in my next class who will be discussing issues which are relevant to your paper. Would you like to attend?

You refuse by saying:

- a) Sorry, not this time.
- b) No, I want to go to the doctor with my mother.
- c) I'd like to but I'm a little busy. I'm sorry sir.
- d) I'm really busy. I can't come.

2. A friend invites you to dinner, but you really can't stand this friend's husband/wife.

Friend: How about coming over for dinner Sunday night? We're having a small dinner party. You refuse by saying:

- a) Oh, I'd love to but I already have other plans. May be another time.
- b) I'll try but I can't guarantee anything.
- c) Will your husband be there? If your husband is there, I'm not coming.
- d) No thanks, not after last time.