Investigating the Effects of Teaching Apology Speech Act, with a Focus on Intensifying strategies, on Pragmatic Development of EFL Learners: The Iranian Context

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Abstract

At the heart of cross cultural differences apology speech act varies across various socio-cultural systems. It is one the problematic aspects for most second language learners. An investigating was conducted in which, 60 subjects were homogenized, classified into two groups and were exposed to an explicit apology strategy instruction. Two questions were proposes. The first question was to examine the effect of explicit teaching of apology speech act. The Analysis revealed that the subjects in explicit teaching group gained significantly in terms of apology speech act. The second question was to measure the application of intensifying devices. To answer the second question, the results of the frequency of the occurrence of intensifiers of apologetic exchanges was calculated and compared across Iranian EFL learners. The result of the frequency of showed that learners who received explicit apology strategy instruction used intensifiers more appropriately than the other group.

Key words: *Apology Speech act, pragmatic competence, Intensifying Strategies, and awareness-raising model.*

Introduction

Recent interest towards sociolinguistics and ethnographic studies has heightened the need to incorporate pragmatic awareness in TESOL planning. The shift from grammatical to communicative competence in language learning has further reinforced the shift. Although the importance of pragmatic awareness in TESOL is fully recognized, research on the specific components that make up such awareness is limited. If the EFL learner is to acquire the rules for appropriate use of the linguistic forms, it is essential for them to know grammar, text organization rules, and the pragmatic aspects of the target language (Bachman1990). Kasper (1997) defines pragmatic competence as knowledge of communicative action, how to carry it out, and the ability to use language appropriately according to contextual factors. In order to teach pragmatic competence we adopted the *awareness-raising model* of instruction.

The development of speech-act theory (Austin 1962; Searle 1969, 1975, and 1976; Sinclair and Coulthard 1975) has given hearers a better understanding of what speakers intend to perform various functions effectively and appropriately in the act of communication. Speech act theory has stimulated research focusing on speech events and speech acts, the results of which have made the tutors more aware of the interplay of situational, sociolinguistic, and linguistic types of competency.

One type of speech act is apologizing. The act of apologizing is called for when the interlocutor's behavior violates social norms. When an action or utterance (or the lack of either one) has resulted in offense, the offender needs to apologize. As a consequence we deal with two parties: an apologizer and a recipient of apology; the act depends on whether the person who caused the infraction perceives him/herself as an apologizer. The act of apologizing requires an action or an utterance which is intended to set things right. Whether a specific discourse situation calls for an apology and whether a certain utterance qualifies as such an apology will depend on both linguistic and socio-cultural norms. Teaching speech acts enables EFL students to become aware of the sociolinguistic conventions of language use and cultural differences which constitutes appropriate use in English as opposed to their first socio-linguistic systems..

But the fact is that the pragmatic aspects of speech act sets include apologies, requests, compliments and complaints can be a negative experience for students. Trying to realize when, why, and how to make use of an appropriate realization patterns is essential. They often either fail to recognize these patterns or encounter constraints according to negative transfer in the recognition of various suitable sentences. At the same time, implicit teaching of speech acts leaves the subjects astray in choosing a right and proper reply when faced with a particular speech situation.

Unfortunately teaching speech acts as a factor of socio-cultural skill is not emphasized in our English institutes, high schools and universities. For this reason Iranian EFL learners often fail to recognize the correct function of speech acts in EFL educational settings. Helping them learn the appropriate techniques by applying comprehensive teaching methodologies is considered to be an indispensable part of any EFL teaching program. Few research studies have been planned and conducted in Iran to investigate strategies of apology. We can deal with the problems by examining a communicative method of teaching in which speech acts are explicitly taught with due attention to the cross-cultural differences which are found between Persian and English. Awareness of the intensification devices such as "*very*", "*terribly*" and "*really*" which make Persian socio-economically different from English, will help students become aware of such variation in the use of apology. A communicative approach attempts to provide insights into what form(s) of apology need to be taught to non-native learners. In an attempt to tackle the above-mentioned problems, the present study is designed to investigate the explicit teaching method of apology speech act. The present research addresses two major questions:

Does explicit teaching of apology speech act have any significant effect on EFL students' pragmatic awareness?

Are there differences between Persian EFL learners and Persian native speakers in the use of intensification as one strategy of apologizing?

Review of the literature

Speech acts are communicative activities defined with reference to the intentions of speakers and the effects achieved on the listeners. Philosophers such as Austin (1962), Searle (1969) and Grice(1975) have properly identified and classified the different types of the speech acts. Austin (1962) postulates that a speech act looks quite like an utterance as a functional unit in communication. Two kinds of meaning include the propositional meaning, and the illocutionary meaning which is the effect intended by the utterance. Both meanings illuminate how functions have become intermingled with the speech in order to guide the participants to a definite goal. Searle (1976) expands the speech act theory by stating that speech acts are performed either directly or indirectly. The indirect speech acts are commonly polite ways of performing face threatening acts. For Austin (1962) using an utterance is both saying something and doing that thing; therefore, it is observed that an utterance may reveal three types of acts; a locutionary act which is the saying of something, an illocution that stands for the use of an utterance to perform a function and a perlocution which is the results and effects of the produced utterance.

Grice (1975) argues that Searle's distinction of direct and indirect speech acts gets the interpreters of language into trouble. Often failing to differentiate between what is meant and what is implied. To find a solution to this problem' Grice introduces the conversational maxims. In a conversation, the addressee makes his best to grasp what the addressor wants him/her to understand. By uttering a statement, the speaker may mean more than the propositional message. That is, the addressor may implicate by the message form he selects to use. It is up to the addressee to derive and distinguish what the intension of the addressor is. Both of the conversation parties have to contribute co-operatively to the conversation in order to bring about mutual understanding based on their shared knowledge. The participants co-operate to operationalize the maxims in actual use. This interactive process helps the addressees to make an accurate inference of what is being hinted in a conversation.

Apologetic Strategies

Generally speaking, human beings apologize when they commit a transgression under a low or high obligation. To offer an apology one needs to use one or a combination of apology strategies in order to be impressive in a remedial exchange. They are the available devices of the apology exchangers in order to maintain the social equilibrium. Brown and Levinson (1987) imply that apologetic strategies are specific methods of approaching an offence, modes of operation for confirming or assuring of mu-

tual solidarity and "planned designs for controlling and manipulating certain" speech acts. In the course of an ongoing interaction, apology makers recognize the degree of the offence, the relative power of the addressee over the addressor, the social distance, and the relative circumstance in order to revitalize the position of the previous camaraderie. Holmes (1990) states "To apologize is to act politely. It is aimed at maintaining good relations between the participants". Owen (1983) restricts the meaning of apologizing to the expression of "sorry" and "I apologize"; Goffman (1976) looks at it as a remedy, finally Olshtain and Cohen (1983) specify the potential nature of apologizing. Holmes (1995) looked at gender differences in apologies and found both similarities and differences between males and females.

Fraser (1980) declared that apologies are rule-governed. The offender manages to correct his complainable behavior by uttering "I'm really sorry" for example. The offended person may either admit the apology or repudiate it. The denial or acceptance of excuse may involve a set of strategies. If you apologize, you are respected and answered; if you are apologized, the rule states that you respond politely. In that case, you will be reverenced. The ability to interpret, give and respond to apologizing appropriately is a social skill which can add greatly to the language learners opportunities to enter into friendly relationship with native speakers and incidentally gain needed practice in using the target language (Wolfason, 1983).

Intensifiers

Intensifiers are usually used in everyday language use. They can be used by ordinary people, suspect, in the court, advertisers, writers, and so forth; the use of intensifiers in communication has been subject to empirical studies. Olshtain (1989) stated that the common intensifiers are *very* and *really.* Sometimes it is necessary to combine a number of strategies for apologizing. One of these strategies, which varies from culture to culture, is the use of intensifiers. So, in this study an attempt was made to see whether explicit teaching of apology speech act has any significant effect on the rate of application of intensifications by Iranian EFL learners.

Methodology

Participants

A population of 90, female and male seventh term Persian B.A students of English, majoring in the course of English translation participated voluntarily. Their age ranged differently from 21 to 24 and sex was not considered to be a determining factor. From that population, 60 subjects, representing two homogeneous groups, were selected through calculating the means and SD of their TOEFL scores. They were randomly assigned to the explicit and the implicit teaching groups.

Materials, instruments and procedures

Five types of materials and instrument were used in this study: 1. A version of TOEFL test, 2. A series of small data cards which included various apology situations, 3. Model dialogue for role play activities, 4. questionnaire for diagnostic assessment (A collection of different apologetic situations in a mode of random order based on Cohen and Olshtain (1983) study.). 5. Feed back and discussion. They are discussed below in more details.

The TOEFL test consisted of 60 Tests which were extracted from Barron's TOEFL sixth edition. 20 of the tests were intended to examine formal structures. The other 20 tests were assigned to measure vocabulary knowledge, and the last 20 were designed to determine the level of reading comprehension skill.

A series of small cards in the size of 10×10 were designed based on different apology situations. These apology situations were written in accordance with an archetypal apology situation applied in Cohen and Olshtain (1981). They were as follow: 1. Insulting someone at a meeting. 2. Forgetting to take your son shopping. 3. Forgetting a meeting with your boss. 4. Forgetting a meeting with a friend. 5. Backing into a car. 6. Bumping a lady, spilling package and hurting her. 7. Bumping a lady, shaking her up. 8. Bumping a lady, because she is in the way. 9. Damaging a beautiful dress and make it dirty. 10. Damaging a beautiful dress and make it torn. 11. Damaging a beautiful dress and make it dis-

appears. 12. Not having brought your reading data for your professor. 13. Taking a wrong umbrella. 14. Spilling coffee on a customer. 15. Giving the wrong change to a customer.

In each situation the small cards were taught one by one explicitly for the experimental group and comprehensive explanations which demonstrate strategies of apology in English are presented. The required output was role-played by students or teacher for each situation on the card to reinforce the material.

The teacher as well as the students role played the dialogues to elaborate the situation based on the above apology situations. At the first stage of using dialogues, students listened to and identified the apology. Then they were given the dialogues without the information concerning the particular situation, and they had to try and guess if the people speaking know each other, if they are of the same age, and whether they were apologizing for some serious offense. These considerations, which could be discussed in groups, helped students become sensitive to social and pragmatic factors that affect speech acts. Such model dialogues could focus on the distinction between "*I'm sorry*" and "*Excuse me*" or other appropriate choices of a strategies or any other element of the apology act.

The dialogues were read by the teacher (researcher) two or three times. In some instances a tape recorder was used to present the dialogues. Then the teacher or the students role played the dialogues. The model dialogues and role play activities were directed only to the explicit teaching group to reinforce the replies and situations. Thus, for an apology situation, the students in explicit teaching group received cards, with a picture on some of them and some notes mentioned about an offensive apology realization. The students were directed to think of a potential violation that might have been occurred, in the sense that, first, one student is the offender/apologizer and then the other is placed in the same role. In this way, each student has been in the both roles.

The questionnaire which was used in this study was composed of a set of apology situations based on the questionnaire and the archetypal apologies in Cohen and Olshtain (1981), along with four multiple choice answers with the intensifiers being the major strategy in focus. A few distracter situations were addend, to offset the carry over effect from one response to another. Adding distracter situations lengthened the elicitation session. Next to each question was a four-point scale ranging from, "sorry" , "I'm so(very) sorry", "I'm terribly/extremely sorry", "excuse me very much", pardon", or other possible appropriate choices instead of one of them. They were asked to indicate the appropriate level of agreement with regard to each question by marking the answers on the paper.

Intensifiers used in some choices were acceptable in Persian but not prevalent in English culture. For example "you have accidentally bumped into an older lady at the supermarket and caused her to drop some packages, which of the following apologies would be the most appropriate: (a). Forgive me. Please. (b) I'm terribly sorry. I am very very sorry. (c). Lady, excuse me very very much. The subjects were obliged to check one of these options. The two groups were given these questionnaires at the end of the instruction period. The questionnaire contained 15 items. This questionnaire was used as posttest for both groups. The items in the questionnaire were in English but the Persian version was available too. The rationale behind this was to minimize the misunderstanding and maximize the reliability as well as the validity problems caused by the language factor (Geisinger, 1994). Before carrying out the treatment students were given the apology situations. The data were collected and the frequency and percentage of the occurrence of intensifiers and different types of semantic formulas were computed.

Feedback and discussion were the last activity used for explicit group. The nature of these discussions was mostly a dialogic one, between the teacher and students. Sometimes, for better understanding L1 was used to get the intended meaning across.

Results and discussion

As it was stated a TOEFL test was administered to examine the level of language proficiency of the subjects in order to be located into two different groups. The results show that the difference between the two means isn't significant; it could be assumed that the two groups were homogeneous in terms of language proficiency.

Table 4.1. Analysis of the results on TOEFL test

Subjects	Mean	Total mean	S D
30	23.93	23.966	2.34
30	23.33		

After assigning the subjects into two groups a pretest (the questionnaire of different apology situations) was administered. A comparison of the pretest means revealed no significant difference between the two groups on the 15 multiple choice questions. See Table 4.2

Table 4.2. Pretest means and SD of two groups

Group	N	Mean	SD
Experimental	30	11.96	3.49
Control	30	11.1	2.85

After undergoing the treatment both experimental and control groups took a posttest (15 apology situations based on Cohen and Olshtain (1896) on a multiple choice questionnaire). The descriptive statistic of results are presented in table 4.3.

Table 4.3 The descriptive statistics for the posttest

Group	Number	Mean	SD
Experimental	30	13.36	1.75
Control	30	13.73	2.25

To answer the first and second questions a T-test was applied to the means of both groups. The results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4.4. the result of t-test

Group	N	Mean	SD	DF	T Obs.	P	t- critical
Experimental	30	1 6.39	1 .75	58	51 2	0/05	1.671
Control	30	1 3.73	2 .25				

DF=(N-1)+(N-1)=(30-1)+(30-1) = 29+29=58

As it can be seen in the above table, the mean score for the experimental group is high enough to claim that explicit teaching of strategies of apology has a significant effect on the student's pragmatic awareness. That is, they outperformed the subjects in control group.

To answer the second question a series of multiple choice items along with the various apology situations were prepared on a questionnaire and were given to the subjects. In a review data were elicited and it was revealed that variation exists between intensified responses as used by L2 learners of explicit and implicit group. The frequency of the occurrence of intensification of apologetic exchanges was calculated (Table 4.5.).

Table 4.5: The frequency of intensification used in apologetic exchanges

Question	Number of intensification	%	%	Total number of subjects
1	34	56.66	100	60
2	15	25	100	60
3	12	20	100	60
4	2	3.33	100	60
5	21	35	100	60
6	23	38.33	100	60
7	33	55	100	60
8	28	46.66	100	60
9	22	36.66	100	60
10	19	31.66	100	60
11	17	28.33	100	60
12	20	33.33	100	60
13	30	50	100	60
14	22	36.66	100	60
15	27	45	100	60

Intensification Markers: "very", "terribly", "so", really".

Frequency of the occurrence showed that learners under instruction of apology speech act gained a sufficient knowledge of appropriate intensification needed in English apologizing. However, students who were not aware of the appropriate degree of intensification tended to use "thank you very vey much" and "really really sorry", "forgive me for the sake of God" more often and sometimes in contexts where this realization was not appropriate. In other words, exaggeration which is a norm in apology situation in Persian was used in English by EFL students more than required in the English cultural system.

The result of the study revealed that explicit, short, and interesting written dialogues with various illustrations could be used for teaching apology speech act in our classes. This aim can be attained through drawing interesting pictures on cards and writhing coherent and meaningful dialogues on appropriate level of difficulty.

In sum, explicit teaching of apology speech act assures that (a) pragmatic awareness will be attained; (b) explicit teaching of pragmatic aspects of apology was successful in a communicative teaching design using discussion, explanations, descriptions, and role play to match the particular objectives of a communicative language teaching program.

EFL learners tend to transfer their socioparagmatic strategies of intensifiers from their first language to make exaggeration in the context of second language use. This is a usual practice especially for Iranian EFL learners. Moreover, EFL learners tend to apologize differently in their target languages. In Iran people wish to present a positive self-image of themselves through an overuse of intensifiers in their apology. In other words, they apologize strongly in contexts where there is little need to apologize. Finally, to conclude the discussion part we can say that given the same level of offence or mistake in the same social context Iranian people tend to apologize more frequently than a native speaker with frequent use of intensifiers.

Conclusion

This research project was an attempt to investigate the effects of using explicit teaching of apology speech act with a major focus on intensifiers. The findings of the study indicated that explicit teaching of apology speech act was useful. A second finding was that students lacked sociopragmatics proficiency in English and as a result make extensive use of intensifiers

A major finding of this research is the fact that, speech act is a language area in which performance is not absolute; therefore, we can't expect all learners to acquire perfect native like performance. What instruction aims to achieve is the development of an awareness of socio-cultural and sociolinguistic differences which are subsumed under cross-cultural differences. Such awareness will often help explain to both teachers and learners why sometimes there is unintended pragmatic failure and breakdown in communication.

A tentative list of apology strategies, situations, syntactic and semantic formulas, keywords of apologetic expressions and their sequence will enable syllabus designers to meet the immediate needs of L2 learners for apologizing. The syllabus designers need to expose the learners to the patterns used most commonly by English native speakers. In this way the L2 learners avoid using repetitive use Persian apology "*excuse me*" which is a result of negative transfer. Material developers need to consider intensification of the apology speech act in the teaching materials.

Many modern language textbooks, especially those which have appeared and are taught in Iranian language institutes have attempted to incorporate sociocultural information as an integral part of language use. They have often suffered, however, from lack of explicit instruction. It is necessary, therefore for textbooks writer to reflect the constantly widening scope of sociocultural research related to apology speech act. So, material developers, and teachers need to focus on explicit incorporation of apology speech act in the communicative language teaching design.

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