

Pragmatic Failure Of Iranian Language Learners in Expressing Gratitude

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چکیده

این مقاله ناتوانی دانشجویان ایرانی را در استفاده از بیان تشکروامتنان در گفتگوهای انگلیسی بررسی می‌کند. برای مشخص کردن این ناتوانی‌ها یک آزمون گفتمان (پرسشنامه) به ۶۰ نفر انگلیسی زبان در لندن و ۶۰ نفر دانشجوی سال آخر زبان انگلیسی در ایران داده شده است. از آزمودنیها خواسته شد که بنویسند اگر در شرایط خاص آن پرسشنامه قرار گیرند چه خواهند گفت. نتایج به وضوح نشان داد که زبان آموزان ایرانی در بیان تشکروامتنان از جملاتی استفاده می‌کردند که دارای مشخصه های زبان فارسی بود و با گفته های انگلیسی زبانها تفاوت داشت. ولی نتایج نشان داد که تفاوت بین این دو گروه از نظر آماری چندان مهم نبود.

ABSTRACT

The study reported in this article investigated the pragmatic failure of Iranian EFL students in expressing gratitude when interacting in English. A discourse completion test (a written questionnaire) was given to 60 native speakers of English in London and 60 Iranian senior students of English representing two proficiency groups. Participants were

asked to respond in writing by indicating what they would say if they were in similar situations of the questionnaire. The results clearly indicated that Iranian EFL learners used expressions of gratitude which resembled those of the Iranians speaking in Farsi, and differed from those of the native speakers of English. Furthermore, it was found that the difference between the two proficiency groups was not statistically significant in the majority of the situations.

BACKGROUND

It is well known that languages are different from one another in areas such as phonology, syntax, and lexicon. When people learn a new language, they expect to learn new rules of pronunciation and grammar, and to memorize some new words. What is often not taken into account is that a language learner who wishes to communicate effectively with native speakers of the target language must also learn the sociolinguistic rules of speaking of the speech community which uses it. People coming from different sociocultural backgrounds have different value systems. Some of these values are manifested in speech. When interacting people tend to judge each other's speech according to their own value systems, and this often leads to

misunderstanding.

When a language learner mispronounces a word, or when s/he makes grammatical errors, the native speaker does not make negative judgment because these errors are easily seen in the surface structure; and the hearer or addressee is aware that an error has occurred. Once alerted to the fact that the speaker is not grammatically competent, native speakers have little difficulty in taking it into account. Errors in pragmatic rules of speaking, on the other hand, are rarely recognized and the native speaker attributes them to impoliteness or unfriendliness of the language learner, not to any linguistic deficiency.

Ability to interact successfully in a foreign language speech community depends on communicative competence, of which sociolinguistic rules are an important aspect. Most language teaching specialists agree that the aim of foreign language instruction should be to facilitate learners' acquisition of communicative competence, the ability to speak both accurately and appropriately (Munby 1978; Littlewood 1981; Hymes 1972; Canale and Swain 1980). That is, successful language acquisition involves learning what to say, to whom and in which circumstances, as well as the ability to follow the rules of grammar and pronunciation.

One example of the way in which differences in sociolinguistic rules may have serious problems involves the expression of gratitude. This speech act is used frequently in interpersonal relationships among people. When this language function is performed successfully, it can lead to feeling of warmth. Failure to express gratitude, on the other hand, can have negative consequences.

Some studies have been made on comparisons of languages from the point of view of speech acts such as request, apology, refusal, compliment and gratitude (House and Kasper 1987; Takahashi 1933; Blum Kulka 1983a; Olshtain and Cohen 1983; Beed, Takahashi, and Uliss Weltz 1990; Eisenstein and Bodman 1986).

Studies on the expression of gratitude can be classified into two categories. Studies that are about the way gratitude is expressed and responded to by native speakers of English, and studies which aim to investigate the expression of gratitude by English language learners. Leech (1983) describes thanking as a function whose illocutionary goal coincides with the social goal of establishing and maintaining a polite and friendly social atmosphere. Eisenstein and Bodman (1986) found that the expression of gratitude requires that both the thanker and receiver

interact together to create a mutually satisfactory speech event and the length of the thanking is influenced by the degree to which the thanker felt indebted. Hymes(1971) suggests that thanking may function as a formal markers of discourse structure than as an indication of gratitude; similarly Rubin(1983) assigns it as "ritual" role in closing service encounters.

The above mentioned studies provide us with useful information about this speech act. However, it was useful and necessary for us to examine the abilities of Iranian EFL learners to express gratitude in English. The main factor promoting this research was the fact that few investigators in our country concerned themselves seriously with the sociocultural aspects of language learning and few studies have been done on speech acts such as the expression of gratitude.

HYPOTHESES

This research was designed to investigate interference problems of Iranian EFL students in expressing gratitude when interacting in English; and to examine the effects of language proficiency in this speech act.

To come up with reasonable results on the basis of

foregoing problems, the following hypotheses were formulated:

- 1) Iranian EFL learners use expressions of gratitude which resemble those of the Iranian speaking in Farsi and different from those of the native speakers of English.
- 2) There is a difference between Low EFL and High EFL learners in expressing gratitude.

SUBJECTS

In the study, the researcher collected data from 120 participants, divided into two groups: 60 native speakers of English in England, and 60 Iranian senior students of English as a foreign language at Islamic Azad University (Arak and Ghuchan Branch), and at the University for Teacher Education in Arak. Native speakers of English were the students of B.A. in London, majoring in graphic design. for the purpose of investigating the proficiency effect, the Iranian subjects were divided into two groups based on their scores on a released version of a Michigan test. 30 subjects belonged to High EFL group (Michigan scores 27-40; mean=32) and 30 subjects were in Low EFL group (Michigan scores 20-25; mean=22.66). The difference in the mean of Michigan scores between the two proficiency

groups was found to be significant ($t=12.16, p=.000$). Therefore, it can be claimed that the cut-off point for the Michigan scores in creating the two groups in this study marked a real difference between the groups.

MATERIALS AND PROCEDURES

The data for this study was collected by means of a discourse completion test. The discourse completion test, a written questionnaire, was used in this study because it had definite advantages. First, since non-native speakers often become anxious when tested orally, this method would allow them a special opportunity to respond well. If learners were not able to provide native-like responses in a relatively unpressured situations, it would be unlikely that they would be able to function more effectively in face-to-face interactions. Second, this approach allowed the investigator to collect a considerable amount of data within a relatively short time. Finally, since there was no access to native speakers for collecting baseline data, a written questionnaire was used and posted to England. The questionnaire was made open-ended so that the informants could respond in any way that they wished, To ensure the clarity of the

provided situations, first a questionnaire which described 18 situations were developed. The situations were given to some professors for comments and were presented to 30 M.A and B.A students. After modifications, 10 situations were chosen for the final questionnaire and it was administered to the subjects.

Subjects were asked to imagine that they were in similar situations, and to respond in writing by indicating what they would say in oral communication. They were also asked not to edit their oral responses by writing them down in style they felt would be more appropriate in the written mode.

DATA ANALYSSIS

After collecting data, a situation-based data analysis was conducted. For each situation, the following procedures were taken to test hypotheses 1 and 2: first, different expressions of gratitude elicited from native and non-native subjects was classified into categories based on their similarities. For example, "Thank" "Thank you", and "thanks a lot" were fallen into "Thanking" category. Second, each category was illustrated by its frequency and its percentage. Third, the Chi-Square was used to determine whether the difference observed between native and non-native subjects

and the difference observed between High EFL and Low EFL learners were statistically meaningful.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

NATIVE SPEAKERS' RESPONSES

After completing the analysis of data collected from native speakers, an attempt was made to look in depth at questionnaire situations 1,3,5, and8, since these produced the most detailed, varied, and interesting responses. In looking at these situations. we noted that the expression of gratitude could appropriately be thought of as a speech act set, rather than a single speech act. In addition to expressing the simple function of thanking , native-English-Speaking subjects expressed other functions such as complementing (That was really nice), promising to repay (I'll pay back very soon), expressing surprise and delight(oh,wow) and so no. It was found that situations which made the subjects feel specifically indebted or surprised produced a longer speech act set. For example, natives produced longer utterances in situation 3 than they did in situation 8.

Another item of interest in native data was the appearance of routines and inclusion of certain semantic information.

For example, in situation 5, in responding to the offer of money, many participants used exaggerations to emphasize the depth of their gratitude (you are a lifesaver).

Situation 2 usually produced an expression of thanks, followed by either a redundant question or by expressing pleasure. Some natives downgraded the compliment by praising the same referent in weaker terms or by shifting the credit away from themselves (It's my girl friend's)(My mother gave it to me) (I pay for it very little money). Situation 10 produced phatic responses. Natives indicated that they made these statements automatically -almost without thinking. The expressions of thanks in this situation seems to pass without much attention being given to it by either the speaker or the hearer.

Other important finding in native data is discussed in the following part.

NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS' RESPONSES

Unlike native responses, "Thanking" comprised the majority of responses given by non-natives and only a few individuals produced responses similar to those of natives. 10% of non-native subjects produced expressions which were word for word translation from Farsi (your hand not to pain),

(you caused me to blush). For situation 2 (to a friend who compliments the subject on a new sweater), the majority of non-natives' responses fell into "Thanking" and "Transferring/Denying" categories (71.6%). Only one non-native participant produced an expression which fell into "downgrading" category (I bought it on a sale), whereas this category comprised 35% of natives' responses. When natives were complimented on the new sweater in situation 2, they did not deny that it was not attractive. In contrast, non-natives produced expressions such as "It is not as good as you say".

Non-natives' responses in situation 3 were shorter than those of natives and 23.3% of their responses fell into "transferring expression from Farsi" (Excuse me for bothering you). In looking at responses in situation 4 it was noted that unlike natives "Thanking" and "Transferring expressions from Farsi" comprised the majority of non-natives' responses whereas "expressing Surprise & Thanking" and "Stating a reason/expressing relief" comprised 81.6% of natives' responses.

With regard to situation 5, it was found that 38.3% of responses fell into "Thanking" category, 20% into "(Thanking+complimenting the person/action)" and 25% into

"Transferring Expressions" and "No response". "Thanking & promising to repay", "Expressing surprise & Expressing appreciation/ Thanking ",and "(Thanking) & complementing the person/action" comprised the great majority of native participants' responses(90%), whereas only 36.6% of non-natives' responses fell into these three categories. In situation six responses provided by non-natives, almost resembled those of natives. It seems that their success in this situation is due to transferring "Complementing" as an expression of gratitude from English to Farsi.

In situation 7 the great majority of non-native responses were found to reflect the subject's first language. With regard to situation 8 more than half of the non-native responses fell into "Thanking" category, whereas the majority of native responses comprised "Thanking" & "complementing the action" or "Promising to repay".

The results of situation 9 indicated that Iranian subjects were not consistent in their choice of expressions of gratitude. Their responses were classified into seven categories, but natives were remarkably consistent in their choice. In situation 10, similar expressions were found in the responses of native and non-native participants. This similarity may be due to the fact that the statement "Thank

you" in such situations for both natives and non-natives serves as a phatic response rather than an expression of gratitude.

The first hypothesis of the present study was fully proved by the evidence from this study. Using the chi-square indicated that the difference between native and non-native responses is significant in the majority of the situations.

Situation	Chi-Square	
	Value	Significance
1	28.82	.000
2	78.72	.000
3	90.81	.000
4	84.74	.000
5	42.33	.000
*6	12.95	.000
7	55.99	.000
8	43.38	.000
9	105.82	.000
*10	8.57	.013

The performance of Iranian EFL learners comes closest to natives' responses when the rules are shared across the two cultures' otherwise, the most deviation from native speakers' responses occurs.

In analysing Iranian EFL learners' responses, it was found that there was a difference between Low EFL and High

EFL groups, but this difference was statistically significant only for situations 1, 5, and 7.

Situation	Chi-Square	
	Value	Significance
*1	9.73	.02
2	4.31	.36
3	3.54	.32
4	1.96	.58
*5	12.35	.03
6	2.43	.48
*7	13.80	.00
9	3.38	.33
10	--	--

responses on the questionnaire manifested some cases in which the two proficiency groups conflicted with each other. For instance, in analysing responses it was found that those of the Low EFL group which fell into "No response" categories were more than those of the High EFL group. The proportion of "Transferring Expressions from Farsi" for the low EFL group was also larger than that observed for the high EFL group. This indicates that to some extent subjects of the High EFL group knew that they must avoid direct translation of the corresponding responses from their own first language.

However, since the difference between the two language

proficiency groups was not statistically significant for the majority of situations, the second hypothesis was not supported by the outcomes of this research.

CONCLUSION

The surprisingly poor performance of learners who were in the end of their B.A. indicates a need for functions such as expressing gratitude to be introduced into curricula for English as a foreign language. It is certainly clear that although many of the learners tested, had studied English at least for six years, they had not acquired the ability to express gratitude appropriately. Given that this knowledge may not be acquired after a few years of studying English, the question is how the classroom teacher can facilitate the acquisition of this and other functions for the learners. Hymes (1972) have called for the introduction of linguistic rules of use as a regular part of the language learning curriculum. One option is to present this type of information directly in the classroom. Another is to give learners supervised activities in the classroom that promote the use of language functions. Yet another is to provide students with greater opportunities outside the classroom to experience or overhear native speakers in real interactions

through a program promoting native/non-native contact.

The teacher can reproduce or simulate real situations and provide information describing the situations, the relationships of the speakers, and the setting which is sufficiently detailed that the students will be able to respond adequately. Ideally, the teacher should observe the students around the school and community to find other settings and situations for practice. It may be helpful for students to record their interactions in the target language, so that they may listen to them again in order to examine the language they use. The teacher may choose to provide models which the students can compare with their own utterances. In cases of pragmatic failure, the teacher can initiate a discussion to compare the underlying values and beliefs in the students' native culture with those of the target culture so that students become aware of the differences.

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The questionnaire

This questionnaire contains 10 situations.Please read the following descriptions of situations and think of what you might say in response to each situation. Write your response in the provided space.

1. It is your birthday , and you have a party. One of your friends gives you a pull-over as a present .

2. you have put on a new sweater. You run into your fellow student on the street. He says:"What a pretty Sweater you

have".

3. your friend invites you and your wife to his house. you have dinner with him and his wife, You had a good time there. As you leave they accompany you to the door.

4. You've got an a grade on your exam. Your professor says: "Congratulations, you did a great job".

5. You are in sudden need of money for your next term tuition. Your friend notices this and offers to lend it to you .

6. You,ve been at the dinner table with your family. Your mother has cooked the food. You have the dinner. The food was delicious .

7. You are a student. Your professor gives a lecture. The time is over and he is finished. You want to leave.

8.You are in a restaurant with your frien. You have a wonderful meal. Your friend pays for the meal.

9. You,ve bought a new house. One of your old friends comes to see you. When he enters the house, he says:"That,s a beautiful house".

10. You go to University by bus. You take a seat near the front door. Before your stop,you signal the driver to stop. The bus comes to a stop and the door opens.