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The Effects of Implicit and Explicit Instruction on the Academic Interlanguage Pragmatic Knowledge of Iranian EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT

Pragmatic competence, as one of the main components of communicative competence, ought to be given sufficient attention by the foreign language instructors and students. Recently, a surge of interest in interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) has been witnessed. The studies on explicit and implicit instruction on Iranian EFL students' production of two pragmatic aspects of apology and request have been few. Thus, the aim of this study was exploring the potentially facilitative impacts of explicit and implicit instruction on Iranian EFL students' production of two pragmatic aspects frequently used in daily conversations, namely the speech acts of apology and request. For this purpose, forty homogenized upper-intermediate Iranian EFL learners were randomly divided into one experimental and one control group. They took part in an English-medium conversation course which lasted for eight sessions in which ILP academic situations were presented to the students of the experimental group in the explicit way, while the control group received the same instruction and materials through the implicit method. Following the treatment, the participants received the same validated academic Multiple-Choice Discourse Completion Test (MDCT) of ILP. The results indicated that teaching pragmalinguistic features explicitly could improve the interlanguage pragmatic knowledge of the participants in the experimental group.

Keywords: *Implicit Instruction, Explicit Instruction, Interlanguage Pragmatic Knowledge*

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1. Introduction

It is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the vital role of the communicative approach and its implementation in L2 instruction. According to Cohen and Olshtain (1981), the concept of interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) has been introduced into L2 teaching and become one of the major concerns of linguistic researchers. It is no doubt that pragmatic competence, as one of the main components of communicative competence, ought to be given sufficient attention by the foreign language instructors and students. Recently, a surge of interest in interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) has been witnessed. Indeed, the escalating attention to investigating students' pragmatic knowledge development from a learning point of view has concerned many researchers about ILP (Kasper & Dahl, 1999; Trosborg, 2003).

Researchers fascinated by ILP have examined students' production and

comprehension of a wide range of pragmatic characteristics and the factors and processes that affect students' pragmatic development in both foreign and second language contexts (Alcon, 2005; Cohen, 1996; Kasper & Rose, 2002). Research findings indicate that in most cases students' pragmatic competence is imperfect in spite of having a high level of grammatical competence (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001). Hence, it is evident that pragmatics instruction is essential in order to develop students' capacity to communicate appropriately and effectively, mostly in a foreign language environment (Kasper, 2001; Kasper & Rose, 2002). Kasper (2001) discloses that in L2 situation, students enjoy rich exposure to the L2 and have wide opportunities to use it for real-life intentions, while in foreign language environments, they have limited likelihood to participate in authentic communication, leading to inadequate pragmatic knowledge. Thus, it is necessary to bring ILP research



more directly to SLA research by carrying out more acquisition-oriented research studies that examine developmental matters in ILP (Kasper, 1998, 2001; Bardovi-Harlig, 2002); therefore, a large number of researchers (e.g. Martinez-Flor, 2004) have scrutinized the impact of teaching on students' pragmatic competence in the English as a foreign language (EFL) environment. Alongside the same line of research, the examination of various educational approaches in pragmatics instruction as a significant subject has received much attention. In this regard, many researchers have focused on comparing the different impact of explicit and implicit teaching on L2 pragmatic development and awareness (Fukuya, Reeve, Gisi, & Christianson, 1998; Takahashi, 2001).

In the majority of these studies, explicit instruction provides metapragmatic information via explanation, discussion, and description following the Focus on FormS (FonFS) model. Conversely, implicit instruction just involved simple provision of input without any explanations leading a deficiency in metapragmatic clarifications. It can be claimed that a trouble with many of the studies in the past that has coped with the impacts of explicit and implicit instruction pragmatics is scarce operationalization of these two educational approaches (Kasper & Rose, 2001).

In order to make stronger connection between ILP and L2 and foreign language acquisition, the requirement of carrying out research about the impacts of type of instruction on the development of interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) was indicated by Bardovi-Harlig (1999). Experimental studies on this teaching have examined the impacts of teaching in pragmatic knowledge development dealing with a variety of characteristics. The findings of the majority of these studies are promising regarding the positive impacts of pedagogical intervention, supporting in this way the observation that pragmatic capability can be pedagogically and systematically developed via designed classroom actions.

On the other hand, investigating superficially into the English language instruction and education in Iranian universities demonstrates that English teaching in Iran is motivated by a type of curriculum that sticks exclusively to the sequential coverage of the linguistic

description of the English language but the matters about communicating with language such as socio-cultural rules of the language and pragmatic knowledge are overlooked. It is obvious that teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Iran is based on the input which is accessible in L2 classrooms. In such a poor learning setting, since the students are not probable to have a good deal of exposure to genuine input, they do not have the chance to learn pragmatics in real life situations.

The studies on explicit and implicit instruction on Iranian EFL students' production of two pragmatic aspects of apology and request have been few and far between and as far as the researcher has searched there has been no study in the literature whose focus was on this subject. If we consider communication as the main purpose of all language learning, therefore, it is mandatory to create opportunities for learners to learn such significant regulations as pragmatics and to devise ways to augment their abilities to use these rules.

No one can deny this fact that there is, in fact, still large unwillingness among English teachers in Iran to assist EFL students to develop their English pragmatic competence even though plentiful studies have been conducted to examine the link between language teaching and the development of interlanguage pragmatics. The explanations can include insufficient descriptions offered by theoretical pragmatics, the incomplete quantity of teaching resources and the hard and subtle nature of pragmatics (Thomas, 1987). In this regard, there is a great difference between Iranian EFL students' brilliant performance in a general proficiency test and their noticeable deficiency in pragmatic competence in genuine intercultural communications. This study tried to explore the potentially facilitative impacts of explicit instruction on Iranian EFL students' production of two pragmatic aspects frequently used in daily conversations, namely the speech acts of apology and request. Kasper (2001) maintains that a great deal of preceding research has only compared stipulation of metapragmatic debates with input-only circumstances. Then, operationalizing explicit and implicit instructions by only considering the provision or lack of meta-pragmatic clarification is not sufficient to demonstrate whether students enjoy benefit from these educational circumstances. Per se, adopting

methodologically sound educational treatments in ILP research by appropriately operationalizing both explicit and implicit circumstances drawing on SLA research was the major concern in this study. By investigating the efficiency and applicability of explicit and implicit instruction in an EFL context, this study will insert a new dimension to research on interlanguage pragmatics. Thus, the aim of this study is exploring the potentially facilitative impacts of explicit and implicit instruction on Iranian EFL students' production of two pragmatic aspects frequently used in daily conversations, namely the speech acts of apology and request.

2. Review of Literature

According to Kasper (1989), the significance of the interlanguage system also entails the acquisition of pragmatic aspects, resulting in a fairly fresh area of research known as interlanguage pragmatics. Kasper (1998) asserts that ILP seeks to describe and explain learners' development and utilization of pragmatic knowledge. Kasper and Blum-kulka (1993), in another definition, define interlanguage pragmatics as the study of non-native speakers' acquisition and use of linguistic action patterns in an L2. Therefore, it can be claimed that the major focus of interlanguage pragmatics is on linguistic action or speech acts, which is the matter addressed in this study as well.

A couple of decades ago, research in ILP concentrated for the most part on the connection standards representing speech in various languages and societies. Generally, such research went for looking at second language (L2) learners' speech act acknowledgment with those of local speakers (Kasper, 1989). All the discoveries show that there are impressive contrasts between L2 learners and local speakers with respect to their perception and production of speech acts (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001). Appropriately, the zone of pragmatics with regards to SLA has seen a surge of enthusiasm for studies that look at L2 learners' pragmatic capability. All the more particularly, late research has concentrated on the part of teaching in pragmatic development, and it has been found that learners who get teaching on various parts of pragmatics have better pragmatic execution (Olshtain & Cohen, 1990; Rose & Ng Kwai-Fun, 2001, Safont, 2005).

Pragmatic ability is characterized by Barron (2003) as learning of the phonetic assets accessible in a given language for

acknowledging specific illocutions, information of the successive parts of discourse acts lastly, information of the fitting relevant utilization of the specific languages' semantic assets. Keeping in mind the end goal to avoid potential slips in culturally diverse correspondence, language learners must not only enhance their general capability and exactness in utilizing a language, but also look to create pragmatic ability in the language they are learning (Canale & Swain, 1980; Gumperz, 1982).

As Nassaji (1999) asserts, with the rise of the communicative language learning and teaching, there was a strong tendency not to focus on linguistic forms and a subsequent downplaying of the position of grammar teaching. Nevertheless, the viewpoints on language learning and teaching have changed considerably. New viewpoints support a principled focus on form approach to EFL and ESL learning (Nassaji, 1999). Proposals have been made since the late 1980s, for the incorporation of pragmatic teaching as a feature of foreign and second language (L2) educational program (e.g. Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper, 1989). These instructional recommendations have been gone down by creators, for example, Kasper and Schmidt (1996) and Bardovi-Harlig (2001), who called attention to the need of directing examination about the part of teaching in ILP improvement keeping in mind the end goal to make more grounded the connection (Rose & Kwai-fun, 2001), between ILP and second language learning (SLA). Lately, there has been an expanding group of experimental reviews on the viability of teaching in the improvement of commonsense information managing talk markers (House & Kasper, 1981), pragmatic schedules (Tateyama, 2001), conversational structure and administration, conversational closings (Bardovi-Harlig, Hartford, Mahan-Taylor, Morgan, & Reynolds, 1991), pragmatic familiarity (House, 1996), demands (Hasaal, 1997), expressions of remorse (Olshtain & Cohen, 1990), compliments (Morrow, 1996). More recently, Ryan (2016) examined miscommunication in L2 pragmatic competence and concluded that explicit instruction could improve the L2 speakers' pragmatic ability. The outcomes from the vast majority of these reviews are promising with respect to the beneficial outcome of educational mediation, supporting the view that teaching of pragmatics can encourage the advancement of EFL learners' pragmatic ability (Kasper & Rose, 2002). This study,



therefore, tries to answer the following research question:

Does explicit instruction of functions, situations, and speech acts affect the development of interlanguage pragmatic knowledge among Iranian EFL learners?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants of the study in the process of running the experiment were fifty upper-intermediate learners majoring in TEFL at some English Language institutes in Gorgan, Iran. The students ranged between 15-25 years of age. They were from different cultural backgrounds who were studying English at the institutes. The participants were selected based on their performance on a language proficiency test (Oxford Quick Placement Test) which was run for the purpose of homogenizing the participants. Those students who scored 36-45 (forty students, 23 females and 17 males) were selected as the subjects of the treatment phase. Then, the participants were randomly divided into one experimental group and one control group (each containing twenty students).

Table 1: Demographic information on experimental and control groups

Groups	Gender		Age Range	Native language
	Male	Female		
Experimental	8	12	15-25	Persian
Control	9	11	15-25	Persian

3.2. Materials and Instruments

Data collection instruments employed in the present study were an Oxford Quick Placement Test (2004), and a test of ILP developed by Birjandi and Rezaei (2010), which is described in the following section.

3.3. Oxford Quick Placement Test (2004)

To homogenize the students, Oxford Quick Placement Test developed by Oxford University Press and University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate was used. This test consists of 60 items. The students were required to answer the test during a 30-minute session.

3.4. MCDT as the Pretest and the Posttest

A test of ILP (Appendix A) developed by Birjandi and Rezaei (2010) was used as the pretest in the second phase of the study. The instrument employed as a pragmatic test of academic performance was a Multiple-Choice Discourse Completion Test (MDCT) developed, modified, and validated in the research conducted by Birjandi and Rezaei (2010). It was used to assess the pragmatic knowledge of Iranian EFL students in

relation to the speech acts of request and apology in EFL classrooms. According to Birjandi and Rezaei (2010), the development process of this test involved several steps. The first step was exemplar generation. Ninety three Iranian EFL students at two universities in Tehran were asked to write, in either English or Persian, the situations in which they would request or apologize. The second step was situation likelihood investigation in which the researchers investigated how far the situations suggested by the students in step one were likely to happen in reality. The third step was scenario generation and initial piloting. For so doing, the generated open ended situations were given to a group of native speakers and nonnative intermediate and advanced students to answer the situations. The fourth step included the development of the multiple choices. The responses given in the previous step were used as distracters and correct options for the MDCT items. The fifth step was allocated to the final piloting of the MDCT which confirmed that all the native speakers chose the key as the most appropriate answer to the situations provided. The test used to collect the data for the present study was reported to enjoy alpha Cronbach's reliability of 0.72. To check validity, the test was given to four experienced language teachers who finally confirmed the validity of the test.

3.5. Data Collection Procedures

Forty upper-intermediate EFL learners at English language institutes in Iran were selected based on their performance on a language proficiency test (Oxford Quick Placement Test) which was run for the purpose of homogenizing the participants. The participants were randomly divided into one experimental group and one control group taking part in a conversation course in English in which an 8-week treatment of ILP of academic situations was presented to the students of the experimental group in the explicit way, while the control group received the same information and materials through implicit method. The pretest of ILP was administered to the participants. This showed how well they were familiar with the ILP before the treatment.

The classroom treatment followed the procedures presented by Ishihara and Cohen (2010). Making the students familiar with the concepts of speech acts, presenting cultural norms and factors related to each speech act, focusing on variations, possible selections and actions, real situation

reflections, behaving in unexpected situations, social status in the academic situations, discourse related issues, and the like were among the issues which were discussed and practiced in the experimental group through the treatment given. Following the treatment, these participants received the same validated academic Multiple-Choice Discourse Completion Test (MDCT) of ILP which had been developed by Birjandi and Rezaei (2010). The results of the test were analyzed and reported.

3.6. Design

In this research, the researcher used a quasi-experimental research method also with the pretest-post-test design. According to Bachman (1990), a quasi-experiment is an empirical study which is used to estimate the causal effect of an intervention on its target population without random assignment.

3.7. Data Analysis

SPSS (Version 21) was run to compare the experimental and control groups' means on the posttest of MDCT while controlling for possible effects of their entry MDCT knowledge as measured through the pretest.

4. Results

Before running the statistical tests for the results of pre-test and post-test, the normality of the data was checked. Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics related to the results of pre-test and post-test for both control and experimental groups.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Pre-test and Post-test Score

Test	N	Range	Mean	Std. Deviation	Kolmogorov-Smirnov	Skewness	Kurtosis
Pre-test	40	6	9.87	1.84	.12	.11	-.12
Post-test	40	10	12.17	2.22	.08	-.24	.01

The results indicate that the amount of Skewness coefficient and Kurtosis coefficient was less than 1 for both tests. In addition, the significance value for the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for pre-test and post-test is more than .05 which shows the scores were normally distributed. Therefore, the assumption of normality has been satisfied. Consequently, we could use the mean as an indicator of central tendency index, besides using the parametric statistics models.

4.1. Categorizing the Participants into Control and Experimental Groups

A pre-test was administered to homogenize the participants in the two groups. In order to ensure the homogeneity of the participants, an Independent Samples

t-test was carried out to find out whether any differences existed between the two groups.

Table 3: Independent samples t-test results for the pre-test

	Control (n = 20)		Experimental (n = 20)		F	p	t-value	df	p
	M	SD	M	SD					
Pre-test	9.60	1.90	10.15	1.78	.159	.692	-.943	38	.352

The results of independent samples t-test in Table 3 indicated that the mean difference between the control and experimental groups was not statistically significant, $t(38) = -.943, p > .05$. As a result, it can be concluded that both groups were homogeneous.

4.2. Results for Post-test

After checking the normality of the data and ensuring the homogeneity of the groups, the data obtained after administering the post-test were analyzed using parametric statistics. The research question intended to examine the effect of using explicit instruction on the academic interlanguage pragmatic knowledge of upper-intermediate Iranian EFL learners. For this purpose, the difference between the performances of the two groups on the post-test was examined through independent samples t-test.

The results of independent sample t-tests in Table 4 show that the mean difference between the control and experimental groups was statistically significant, $t(38) = 4.93, p < .001$. As a result, it can be concluded that using explicit instruction has improved the academic interlanguage pragmatic knowledge of upper-intermediate Iranian EFL learners. The results provided evidence for the positive effect of the treatment for the experimental group.

Table 4: Independent samples t-test results for the post-test

	Control (n = 20)		Experimental (n = 20)		F	p	t-value	df	p
	M	SD	M	SD					
Pre-test	10.80	1.82	13.55	1.70	.251	.619	-4.93	38	.000*

Note: * significant at .001 levels

5. Discussion

This study made an attempt to find the effect of explicit instruction on the academic interlanguage pragmatic knowledge of Iranian EFL learners. Pragmalinguistic aspects of a language, as mentioned before, have very significant effects on successful language learning and language learners cannot function and communicate well without pragmalinguistic knowledge and awareness. The results of this study indicated that teaching pragmalinguistic features explicitly could improve the



interlanguage pragmatic knowledge of the participants in the experimental group. The results of Independent samples t-test showed that the difference between the control and experimental groups was statistically significant. In other words, the treatment, which included explicit teaching of pragmalinguistic features for two different functions of apology and request, was effective.

The results confirm the suggestions of Kasper and Rose (2002) that pragmatics should be explicitly taught in the language classroom. The authors proposed that learners may also learn as a result of planned pedagogical action directed towards the acquisition of pragmatics. This way, two goals can be achieved: one addresses the development of pragmatic awareness, and one practicing target language pragmatic abilities (Kasper, 1998). The results are also in line with the findings of previous studies which found that pragmatic teaching and learning are important components of any EFL/ESL classroom (Thomas, 1995; Vellenga, 2004). For foreign language teaching and learning contexts, as the authors suggested, instruction would be made more productive and useful by learners' previous contact with pragmatic aspects that come to be reinforced through instruction.

Pragmatic and pragmalinguistic instruction take into account the target needs of the learners and this is considered a remarkable rationale for the explicit teaching of these aspects of language (Kasper, 1998). Kasper (2001) also believed that L2 teaching has the potential for improving learners' pragmatic knowledge and this lies in its ability to modify and guide learners to pragmatic features they face outside the classroom, motivate them to try new pragmatic strategies, reflect on their observations and their own language use, and obtain feedback. However, this feature of ESL is not provided for EFL students as they do not have the opportunity to talk to native speakers and improve their pragmatic competence. Consequently, the explicit teaching of pragmalinguistic features, as found in this study, should be considered a must. Rose (2000) found that the limitations of EFL classrooms make it difficult for them to develop their pragmatic competence. This study, in line with the suggestions of previous studies, found that explicit teaching of pragmatic features could be helpful and

may compensate for the limitations of the EFL setting.

6. Conclusion

The results of this study indicated that teaching pragmalinguistic features explicitly could improve the interlanguage pragmatic knowledge of the participants in the experimental group. The results of showed that the difference between the control and experimental groups was statistically significant.

The perspective of the present investigation goes beyond the focus of two pragmatic aspects frequently used in daily conversations, namely the speech acts of apology and request which have traditionally and pedagogically been ignored or neglected in curricula as one of the English skills to be taught. This study attempts to highlight the teachers' role in scaffolding for manageable pragmatics learning opportunities to EFL learners by providing more explicit support in their English learning through explicit instruction and practices in order that learners become more able and independent in their pragmatic skills for using language. In fact, the implications of this study can be considered for teachers, students and also material developers or designers.

The findings of the current study and its implications can be enriched if future studies follow some of the suggestions outlined here. This research can be replicated with other EFL students at other proficiency levels. In the present research, the researcher compared the effects of explicit instruction on Iranian EFL students' production of two pragmatic aspects frequently used in daily conversations, namely the speech acts of apology and request. Future studies can compare the effects of explicit instruction on other pragmatic aspects. This study was conducted at the EFL context of English institutes, but similar studies can be done with college level students. The participants in the present study were both males and females. Future studies can be done with male or only females. In the present research, only quantitative data were collected from pre and posttests. Future studies are recommended to collect qualitative data (e.g., interview) to find out, for instance, the students' attitudes towards different types of instruction.

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Appendix A: Sample of Pragmatics Test: Apology and Request

Please read each of the following situations. There are three responses following each situation. Please read the responses to each situation and decide which one is the BEST in each situation. Please put your answers on the ANSWER SHEET by blackening the corresponding letters.

Situation 1

Suppose you are late for an important class and the teacher is very punctual and principled. How would you express your apology in this situation?

The Teacher: This is the third time you're late for this class. Next time I won't let you in.

You:

- a. I understand. I won't be late again.
- b. Sorry, but the important thing is that I attend, right?
- c. Things happen in life, sorry.

Situation 2

You have been asked to hand in your project, and the time is due. However, you have not prepared it, and you want to make an apology for that. How would you express your apology in this situation?

The Teacher: I told you that there won't be an extension. Why didn't you prepare your term project?

You:

- a. Sorry but I had too much other homework from my other projects to finish this one on time.
- b. Well, I had some unexpected problems, so you should make an exception for me.
- c. That's true. I'm sorry. I had some unexpected obstacles, but I understand that this is the policy.

Situation 3

You are almost asleep in the class while the teacher is teaching. The teacher gets very angry when he sees you sleeping in the class. How do you express your apology?

The Teacher: Did you sleep well last night?

You:

- a. I'm sorry. I will try and not let it happen again.
- b. I'm sorry, but I didn't sleep a wink last night.
- c. Pardon me, I couldn't help it.

Situation 4

Your teacher is giving a lecture on an important topic. You have a related question to that part of this lecture. How do you attempt your teacher?

The Teacher: ...constructivist views are very important for ... (interruption)

You:

- a. I don't understand what you are talking about.
- b. Sorry but I really don't understand what are you saying!
- c. I'm sorry to ask but could you explain a little more?

Situation 5

Your cell phone suddenly starts ringing loudly amid a very serious discussion in the class. How would you apologize to the teacher?

The Teacher to the class: It is very important to respect each other's (the phone rings) views.

You:

- a. I'm sorry! This is an important call. I'll just step out for a moment.
- b. (Immediately silencing the phone, which should have been silenced or turned off before the class meeting, and speaking in a very low volume so as not to increase the interruption)—I'm sorry.
- c. Oh, no! I meant to turn my phone off at the beginning of the class!

Situation 6

You have an appointment with your family doctor and you need to leave early in order to be on time for your appointment with the doctor. How do you express your apology to your teacher when you ask for an early leave?

You: because this appointment is very important for my health.

The Teacher: No problem. But don't forget to ask your classmates about the paper we will cover next session.

- a. Excuse me. I am wondering if it would be OK for me to leave the class early for a doctor's appointment....
- b. Excuse me! I have to leave now for a doctor's appointment.
- c. I have to go now; please tell me whether I'll miss anything important.