Investigating Iranian EFL Learners' Congratulation Speech Act Strategies and their L2 Productions

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the present research was to find out the congratulation speech act strategies selected by Iranian EFL students at three levels of language proficiency. The participants of the present study were 60 (30 males and 30 females) Iranian students at Faramehr language institute, Esfahan, Iran. The data collection instruments used in the present study were the Oxford quick placement test to determine the proficiency level of the participants and a version of Discourse Completion Test (DCT) used in Allami and Nekouzadeh’s (2011) study. To reach the objectives of the present research, the learners took the proficiency test in order to place them in three groups of low, intermediate, and advanced levels. Then all subjects were asked to fill out congratulation Discourse Completion Test (DCT) in which all situations were designed based on the combination of two variables: social status with three levels: low (L), high (H), and equal (E), and social distance with three levels: intimate (I), acquaintance (A) and stranger (S). After coding the data, the percentages of congratulation speech act strategies were calculated. The results indicated that ‘IFID’ was the most frequent congratulation formula used by Iranian EFL students at three levels of language proficiency.

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1. Introduction

Interacting with speakers of other languages and cultures needs linguistic or grammatical competence as well as pragmatic competence or knowledge, this is considered as one of the indispensable parts of language competence. Sociocultural norms and constraints influence individuals’ speaking in their first or second language as well as the way of interaction with others. Rizk (2003) cautions the issue of appropriateness of the utterances and asserts that what is perceived as an appropriate utterance or response in one language or culture may not be the exact case in another culture or vice versa. This highlights the pragmatic dimension of the language competence which is perceived as an essential element of communicative competence (Farashaiyan & Hua, 2012). This study investigates the pragmatic competence of Iranian EFL learners in performing speech act of congratulation. Searle (1969) presents a theory which is a development of the account presented in Austin (1962). Searle claims that four acts are characteristically performed in the utterance of a sentence (p. 24):

a. Uttering words (morphemes, sentences) = performing utterance acts
b. Referring and predicating = performing propositional acts
c. Stating, questioning, commanding, promising etc. = performing illocutionary acts
d. Perlocutionary act

Correlated with the notion of illocutionary act is the notion of the consequences or effects such acts have on the actions, thoughts or beliefs of hearers. For example, by arguing I may persuade or convince someone; by warning him I may scare or alarm him; by making a request I may get him to do something; by informing him I may convince him, or inspire him. Today, successful presentation of the speech acts, as an
important part of pragmatic competence, in a language demands not only the speaker's linguistic proficiency, but also his/her socio-pragmatic perception of speech acts. However, to perform the speech acts appropriately in both first and second language is very challenging, and the challenges not only stem from the linguistics variations between the languages, but also the variations between cultures (Hassani, Mardani, & Vahid Dastjerdi, 2011). In intercultural communication, foreign language speakers not only should acquire grammatical competence to achieve linguistic accuracy, but also need to internalize sociolinguistic rules to help them use appropriate linguistic forms (Yi Shih, 2006). Students, as foreign language speakers, must be able to carry out some communicative tasks to progressively develop their communicative competence. These form a set of actions that have a concrete communicative purpose within a specific scope. For their accomplishment, different linguistic and discursive skills are used in contexts. In this sense, Thomas (1995) sets out a two-part definition of linguistic competence, consisting of grammatical competence and pragmatic competence. The former refers to 'abstract' knowledge of phonology, syntax, semantics, intonation; the latter refers to the capacity to use a language effectively in order to fulfill a certain goal and to understand language in context. Therefore, the linguistic knowledge of a second language learner must be composed of both competences. Thus, pragmatics constitutes a fundamental element of language ability for L2 Learners (Amaya, 2008). Given this background, the present study is designed to discover the pragmatic knowledge of congratulation speech act of Iranian EFL learners to see if they use this speech act in the same way at three levels of language proficiency.

2. Review of the Literature

2.1. Communicative Competence

The concept of communicative competence was proposed by Hymes (1972) as a reaction to Chomsky’s (1965) concept of linguistic competence and included not only referential elements of language but also social aspects related to language use. Recent models of communicative competence add a further component, called illocutionary or actional competence that refers to the pragmatic aspects of language competence, which are associated with language use, aspects that had also been recognized by Chomsky (1980, cited in Iragui, 1996). Since the definition of communicative competence was introduced in opposition, or rather as complementary, to Noam Chomsky’s theory of language (or linguistic) competence, let us introduce two other related terms: language competence and Universal Grammar. Language competence (LC) in Chomsky’s terms (1965) is an ideal speaker/listener’s tacit knowledge of language structure which enables him/her to generate and understand the sentences of a given language. The term language competence has been replaced in Chomsky’s writings since the 1980s with the term Universal Grammar. Universal Grammar (UG) is understood in most writings on this topic as the general rules of language grammatical structure common to all natural languages and innate to the human mind. In particular, UG is realized through the application of some universal linguistic principles which are differently arranged on a set of parameters. These parameters are called by Baker (2001) the atoms of language (Kurcz, 2004).

2.2. Pragmatic Competence

For learners to become communicatively competent, they need to possess not only knowledge of the grammatical and lexical systems but also of the social and contextual factors underlying the English language. These factors refer to those norms of interaction that are shared by members of a given speech community in order to establish and maintain successful communication. They are related to one of the vital components of the construct of communicative competence that is pragmatic competence (Bachman 1990). Pragmatic competence involves speakers’ ability to employ different linguistic formulae in an appropriate way when interacting in a particular social and cultural context (Usó-Juan & Martinez-Flor, 2006). Usó-Juan and Martinez-Flor (2006) regarded pragmatics as a linguistic concept related to language use and considered notion of pragmatics as a reaction to Chomsky’s abstract construct of language in which grammar played a predominant role. Pragmatics has also been implemented in the field of second language acquisition and more specifically in the construction of SLA models. Pragmatic speech acts such as requests, apologies, compliments and suggestions are significant components of communicative competence. Therefore, learners to be communicatively competent in a second or foreign language demand not only to promote their grammatical knowledge but also to improve their pragmatic competence. To perform speech acts appropriately, two types of knowledge are required: socio-pragmatics and socio-linguistics (Usó-Juan & Martinez-Flor, 2008). Kasper (1996) listed three conditions for the acquisition of pragmatic knowledge. First, “there must be pertinent input, and learners need ample opportunities to develop a high level of control” (p. 148). In other words, to develop pragmatic competence, the learner has to notice the pragmatic information in the input and understand its function in the surrounding context (Tagashira, Yamato, & Isoda, 2011).

2.2.1. How to Achieve Pragmatic Competence

Jung (2005, p.2) numbered the essential constituents of pragmatic competence which learners have to acquire as follow:
The ability to perform speech acts: Numerous studies have recognized that the ability of learners to use appropriate speech acts in a given speech event and to select appropriate linguistic forms to realize this speech act is a major component of pragmatic competence.

The ability to perform politeness functions: Brown and Levinson (1992) posit universal principles for linguistic politeness based on a social rationale. As Thomas (1995) note, indirectness increases the degree of optionality and negotiability on the part of hearer and thereby reduces the imposition on the hearer. However, as a number of cross-cultural pragmatic studies on politeness point out, the application of this principle differs systematically across cultures and languages.

The ability to perform discourse functions: Most of the time, the achievement of communicative intent in naturally occurring conversation requires a number of turns at talk between two interlocutors. Accordingly, as Blum-Kulka (1997) points out, “a full pragmatic account would need to consider the various linguistic and paralinguistic signals by which both participants encode and interpret each other’s utterances” (p. 49). Van Dijk (1981) also extends the notion of speech act to apply to a sequence of utterances constituting a stretch of discourse, that is, the “macro speech act” (p. 195).

The ability to use cultural knowledge: More importantly, specific L2 culture-bound knowledge has been discussed as a deciding factor that underlies different aspects of pragmatic ability. This places culture at the heart of L2 pragmatic competence.

2.3. Related Studies on Topic

One study was conducted by Emery (2000) on greeting, congratulation and commiserating in Omani Arabic. The study investigated only the congratulation expressions which old and young people use on the occasions of wedding, the birth of a baby and religious Eves. The findings revealed that for congratulation at the wedding, there were some differences between older women’s and older men’s congratulation and that of younger people. For instance, on the occasion of wedding, younger people used the term "Mabruuk" or "mbaarak" (May you be blessed), while older people favored the expression "allah ybaarak fil- amaar" (May God bless your lives). Moreover, older women wished the couple to have a boy as their first child by saying 'ishallaah bikurkum wild” (God willing your first-born child be a boy). They also wished them a long life and fertility. But younger people did not follow the wishing custom. On the occasion of childbirth, women congratulated the mother by giving her money as a present and while visiting the baby, they use sympathetic expressions such as “ahwan anshaallaah” (get better soon God willing). The study of Can (2011) aimed to find out the culturally-different conceptualizations of congratulation in British culture and tebrik in Turkish culture using a corpus approach and to formulate cultural scripts for these three performative verbs using the Natural Semantic Metalanguage Approach. More specifically, the study aimed to reveal the contexts where the target speech act is used and to uncover the kinds of strategies/components employed in these situations. The study began with the monolingual and bilingual dictionary definitions of the performative verbs (i.e., congratulate, and tebrik) and then followed a corpus approach whereby the performative verbs and their various lexical forms were searched for in various corpora (i.e., BYU-BNC, MTC, Google). In total, 47 dictionaries were looked up and 442 contexts of congratulation, 339 contexts of tebrik were collected from the newspaper and blog genres in the three corpora. The analyses of the data aimed to uncover the qualitative and quantitative features of congratulation, tebrik and kutlama in British and Turkish cultures. The results of the study showed that there were some cultural differences as well as similarities in the conceptualization of the speech act of congratulation in terms of its contexts of use and strategies.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants in this study were 60 (30 males and 30 females) Iranian students at Faramehr language institute. The mean age was 24 for the male and 23 for the female students. In this study, the gender of the participants was not taken into consideration but the participants’ proficiency level was a variable, the role of which was to be examined.

3.2. Instruments

The data collection instruments which were used in the present study were the Oxford quick placement test to determine the proficiency level of the participants and a version of Discourse Completion Test (DCT) used in Allami and Nekouzadeh’s (2011) study.

3.3. Procedures

To reach the objectives of the present research, the learners took the proficiency test in order to place them in three groups of low, intermediate, and advanced. Then all subjects were asked to fill out congratulation Discourse Completion Test (DCT) in which all situations were designed based on the combination of two variables: social status with three levels: low (L), high (H), and equal (E), and social distance with three levels: intimate (I), acquaintance (A) and stranger (S). Samples of congratulation expressions were analyzed...
based on the taxonomy of congratulation strategy proposed by Elwood (2004, cited in Allami & Nekouzadeh, 2011). Congratulations Strategies and Sub-strategies Coding was done as follows:

1) *Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID)*
   - e.g. Congratulation

2) *Expression of happiness*
   - a) Expression of personal happiness
     - e.g. I’m so glad
   - b) Statement assessing the situation positively
     - e.g. That’s great

3) *Request for information*
   - a) Specific question
     - e.g. Who’s that guy/ girl?
   - b) General request for information
     - e.g. Now are you satisfied with your marriage?

4) *Expression of validation*
   - a) Statement indicating the situation was warranted
     - e.g. You deserve it
   - b) Praise
     - e.g. Great job
   - c) Statement of prior certainty
     - e.g. I knew you would succeed

5) *Self-related comments*
   - a) An expression of longing
     - e.g. I also longed to be a doctor, but I could not
   - b) An expression of envy
     - e.g. You’ve got this by chance
   - c) A prediction of one’s own future success
     - e.g. God willing, I would be a successful person like you

6) *Exclamation/Expression of surprise*
   - e.g. Wow, are you kidding?

7) *Offer of good wishes*
   - e.g. I wish you a happy new year

8) *Encouragement*
   - e.g. You should do your best for higher achievement

9) *Joking*

10) *Affection expression*
    - e.g. I love you

11) *A suggestion to celebrate*
    - e.g. Let’s go out for dinner

12) *Thanking God*
    - e.g. Thanks God

13) *Offer of help*
    - e.g. I hope I can help you

14) *Statement assessing the situation negatively*
    - e.g. Why did you get married

3.3. Design

The results of the proficiency test were used to put the participants into three distinct groups. Then the written results of the DCT were codified and analyzed based on the available framework for English congratulation speech act. To answer the research question, the frequencies and percentages of congratulation strategies produced by participants in three levels of proficiency were computed.

4. Results and Discussions

In order to place the participants in three groups of low, intermediate and advanced, descriptive statistics was used on the participant’s proficiency test scores.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Descriptive Statistics on the Participants’ Proficiency Test Scores</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LEL</td>
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Taking each participant’s score, the researcher classified the students into three groups of low (15), intermediate (38), and advanced (7) by considering one standard deviation above and below the mean. Those who scored 50 or higher were considered as advanced; those whose scores were 40 or lower were in the low group, and the students whose scores were between 50 and 60 were put in the mid group.

The research question was to investigate the congratulation strategies are used by EFL learners at three levels of proficiency. After computing frequencies, the results were presented in percentages. Table 2 shows percentages of congratulation speech act formulas produced by low level participants in their English productions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Congratulation sub-formulas</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IFID</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exclamation/Expression of surprise</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expression of validation</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouragement</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affection expression</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thanking God</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Request for information</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expression of happiness</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to Table 2, the most frequent used congratulation formula by low level participants was an IFID formula. 29% of low level participants selected IFID to express their congratulation and 22% of them used Exclamation/Expression of surprise as the second most frequent formula. The other strategies were Expression of validation (17%), Encouragement (12%), Affection expression (9%), Thanking God (6%) and Request for information (3%). Expression of happiness with a percentage of 2% was the least common used formula by low level participants.

Table 3 shows percentages of congratulation speech act formulas produced by mid-level participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Congratulation sub-formulas</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IFID</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expression of validation</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self related comments</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Request for information</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thanking God</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offer of help</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offer of good wishes</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 3 shows, EFL learners at intermediate level of proficiency used IFID with a percentage of 41% as the most common formula. Expression of validation was selected by 22% of participants as the second frequent formula. The other strategies were Self related comments (14%), Request for information (11%), Thanking God (7%) and Offer of help (4%). The least common used formula by intermediate level participants was Offer of good wishes with a percentage of 1%. Table 4 shows percentages of congratulation speech act formulas produced by advanced level participants.

Table 4 shows percentages of congratulation speech act formulas produced by advanced level participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Congratulation sub-formulas</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IFID</td>
<td>34.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expression of surprise</td>
<td>45.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expression of validation</td>
<td>2.016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouragement</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affection expression</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thanking God</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Request for information</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expression of happiness</td>
<td>8.089</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 3 shows, EFL learners at advanced level of proficiency used IFID with a percentage of 34.70% as the most common formula. Expression of validation was selected by 45.94% of participants as the second frequent formula. The other strategies were Encouragement (2.016), Affection expression (41), Thanking God (49) and Request for information (60). The least common used formula by advanced level participants was Expression of happiness with a percentage of 8.089%. The least common used formula by intermediate level participants was Offer of good wishes with a percentage of 1%.
According to Table 4, advanced level participants utilized IFID as the most frequent formula in their English productions. 37% of participants selected this strategy to express their congratulation. Expression of happiness was selected by 22% of participants as the second most common strategy. The other strategies were Offer of good wishes (14%), Expression of validation (11%), A suggestion to celebrate (8%) and Self related comments (5%). Thanking God with a percentage of 3% was the least common formula selected by advanced learners. Generally speaking, Iranian EFL learners at three levels of language proficiency used IFID formula in congratulation situations. The result of the present research was in line with the study of Afghari (2007). He revealed that IFID was the most frequent apology formula in Persian as well as in English. The prime findings of the study of Alfattah (2010) also revealed that the subjects intended to use IFID formula which was found in every response in the data. It seemed that the subjects believed that speech act should consist of this expression as a compulsory component accompanied by any one of the other strategies. The study of Awedyk (2011) aimed at investigating the prevailing tendencies in the choice of apology strategies applied by the native speakers of Norwegian. The findings showed that Norwegian demonstrated a pronounced tendency to use IFID formula in the realization of an apology.

### 5. Conclusion

As a conclusion, this study focused on the most common English congratulation speech act formulas used by Iranian EFL students at three levels of language proficiency. It was found that all participants at three levels of proficiency used IFID formula as the most frequent strategy in their English production. In the pedagogical field, it can be suggested that language and culture should not be taught separately. The necessary condition for pragmatic learning to take place is conscious attention to the pragmatic information to be acquired. As a result, a direct approach to teaching the pragmatics of the second language is in order. As Kasper (1995, p. 160) put it: "pragmatic knowledge should be teachable". The idea seems to be that if the non-native student is consciously aware of the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic similarities and differences between his or her native and target languages, then negative outcomes of transfer will most probably be inhibited. Teachers should develop learner understanding of the frames of interaction and rules of politeness within the target culture. It is also important to provide learners with knowledge of the linguistic forms or stylistic strategies appropriate to convey the intended meaning in different contexts or situations. Teachers have the responsibility of providing the student with the necessary tools to make the appropriate pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic decisions in the target language (Yousefvand, 2010).

### REFERENCES


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