

## The Relationship between Iranian Learners of Different Proficiency Levels and Their Use of Congratulation Strategies

Shokoufeh Basami<sup>1</sup>, Habib Soleimani<sup>2\*</sup>

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1. Department of English Language, Sanandaj Branch, Islamic Azad University, Sanandaj, Iran.

2. Department of English Language and Literature, University of Kurdistan, Sanandaj, Iran.

\* Corresponding Author's Email: h.soleimani@uok.ac.ir

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**Abstract** – This study was an attempt to investigate the relationship between Iranian learners' different proficiency levels and their use of congratulation strategies. To this end, two sets of questionnaires, Congratulation Strategies and Sub-strategies Coding by Elwood (2004) and its translated and modified version by Allami and Nekouzadeh (2011) were used to collect the required data. The participants of the present study were 60 students who were selected from among junior and senior BA students of English majoring in English teaching, English translation, and English Literature. Based on the results of a proficiency test, the participating learners were placed in two groups of low and high proficiency. Then, a week later, in two intervals, the copies of the questionnaires were distributed among the participants of study. The results of Pearson correlation indicated that there was a significant relationship between learners' different proficiency levels and their use of congratulation strategies. Also, there was a great extent of consistency between learners' L1 congratulation scheme and their use of L2 congratulation strategies. The findings of this study have pedagogical implications for language teachers, syllabus designers and material developers in that they can deal with congratulation strategies and the possible facilitating or debilitating effects that congratulation schemes between two languages could have when dealing with any certain L2.

**Keywords:** Congratulation strategies; Congratulation schemes; Proficiency levels; Iranian University English students

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Interaction is a complex phenomenon in the process of which not only external factors such as setting, culture and interlocutors but also internal factors such as personality characteristics play a great role in the realization of the communication (Byram & Feng, 2005). This is inevitable since we do not just 'live in cultures' but we also 'live culturally' that is "we are not only influenced and shaped by culture in which we are nurtured, we also actively act on and reconstruct cultural elements while we are present in the social environment in general and in locally shaped communities of practice in particular" (Atkinson, 1999, p. 632). Yet, despite the importance of communication tools and components, the extent to which we as interlocutors are aware of such cultural elements is the question that remains to be investigated empirically. Indeed it is the cultural etiquettes that make social interaction possible by helping within-the-culture interlocutors to see and make

sense of the world around them since culture as the basis of communication ingredients determines who talks with whom, about what, and how the communication continues. Furthermore, it can dictate "how people encode messages, the meanings they have for messages, and the conditions and circumstances under which various messages may or may not be sent, noticed, or interpreted" (Porter & Samovar, 1982).

However, habitually enacting the cultural etiquettes of one society makes him/her blind regarding the nuance that exists between two contrasting cultures since we internalize and act upon our own culture so unconsciously that we tend to assume similarity instead of difference while communicating by a target language emanated from a culture significantly different from the one's native culture. To put it another way, considering the part of the iceberg that is seen from our viewpoint, we think that the needs, desires, and basic assumptions of others are the same as our own (Barna, 1997). This unawareness is highly believed on part of many scholars in the field to cause misunderstanding, which in itself can be overcome or minimized by gaining awareness of cultural differences and similarities and trying to, metaphorically speaking, make the part of the iceberg below the sea visible to those not having noticed it to this moment.

In line with what discussed, Can (2011) addresses the way of reaching cultural information and conceptualization in a particular society by contributing to the development of cultural awareness and communicative competence which is in itself possible by closely studying the speech acts in a particular culture which has already been targeted and highlight and compared similar and different norms of that culture with the one's native one. The speech act theory, which has such responsibility, can be defined as "the study of the ability of language users to pair sentences with the contexts in which they would be appropriate" (Levinson, 1983, p. 24), or as defined by Farghal (1995, p. 253) it is "the study of language in use or operation". Lyons (1977, p. 730) defines speech act as "an act performed in saying something".

In this regard, Byon (2006, p. 137) claims that "speech acts reflect the fundamental values and social norms of target language and demonstrate the rules of language use in a speech community". Speech acts cover a large number of functions that are carried out linguistically. Wierzbicka (1987, p. 3) clarifies this point when she says "it would not be an exaggeration to say that public life can be conceived as a gigantic network of speech acts. History itself seems to consist largely in acts of speech" (Wierzbicka, 1987).

Marki-Tsilipakon (2001) has stated that congratulation is the expression of speaker's joy and praise on a pleasurable event. In addition, congratulation is associated with the approbation and modesty maxims proposed by Leech (1983). According to approbation maxims, the speaker should minimize dispraise and maximize the praise of the addressee while the modesty maxim requires that the speaker minimize the praise of himself and maximize the dispraise of addressee. Thus by congratulating, "the speaker maximizes the praise of the addressee which in essence is paying respect to the self" (Leech, 1983, p. 1607).

On the other hand, the speech act of congratulation can be associated with the notion of face and politeness. Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2004) argues that congratulation as an expressive speech act is directly linked to positive politeness and is a face saving act since it aims at

enhancing the addressee's positive face. In the contemporary world, given the prevalent cross-cultural communication within and beyond countries, language instruction is expected to focus on communicative use of the target language while highlighting communication differences and investing on their being noticed.

Despite being able to speak English fluently, some learners who are not aware of the differences between English and Persian in the area of speech acts may transfer their pragmatic patterns of their L1 into English, which in turn influences their communicative purposes and causes breakdowns in intercultural communication and gaining maximum efficiency and interactional encounters.

One pragmatic failure which can possibly occur in communication of Iranian learners of English and cause some conflicts between native and non-native speakers of English is congratulation speech acts. Iranian learners of English who are not aware of cross-cultural differences in their intercultural communication may be influenced by their native cultural norms and transfer their native pragmatic features unwantedly and inadvertently into their L2 productions (Dastjerdi & Nasri, 2013).

To put the issue in a simple way, Iranian EFL students, times without number, utter expressions on the face while such expressions are in essence and pragmatically impacted by pragmatic features of native language of the learners- Persian. The point is evident not only among the learners in different levels of proficiency, but it also exists to some degree in the speech of English speakers in even remarkably higher level of language proficiency.

To investigate the degree of getting afflicted to any possible cross cultural conflicts, the present interlanguage research is designed to study the language used by Iranian EFL learners in congratulation situations to achieve a better understanding of the effect of proficiency levels of the participants on their performance of congratulation speech acts. Researchers working on pragmatics have examined congratulation strategies according to different variables. In the present study, we attempt to investigate less examined variables, namely, the difference between Iranian EFL learners at three levels of proficiency regarding their pragmatic knowledge and also the difference in such pragmatic knowledge between male and female speakers. The researchers also attempted to explore the extent to which learners' L1 congratulation scheme may affect their use of EFL congratulation strategies. To achieve these purposes, the following research questions were raised:

1. Is there any relationship between learners' L2 proficiency levels and their use of congratulation strategies?
2. To what extent does learners' L1 congratulation scheme is consistent with the use of L2 congratulation strategies?

## **2. METHOD**

### **2.1. Participants**

The participants of the present study were a population of 60 Iranian students who were selected from among junior and senior BA students of English majoring in English

teaching, English translation, and English Literature. Their age range was between 20 and 23. The criterion for determining proficiency level of the students was Oxford quick placement test. According to this test, the participating students were classified into two groups, 30 as low-proficiency, and 30 as high proficiency learners, with each group consisting of 30 participants. The test consists of 60 multiple choice items which assesses' grammar, vocabulary, and collocational knowledge of the learners. Those who achieved less than 25 were regarded as low-proficiency; those who achieved more than 25 were regarded as high proficiency group of learners.

## **2.2. Instrumentation**

Two different instruments were used in this study: Oxford quick placement test to determine the proficiency level of the participants and a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) consisting of 9 situations dealing with happy news in English and their Persian translation. All these situations had been 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 encoded and analyzed based on the taxonomy of congratulation strategy proposed by Elwood (2004) and further they were analyzed according to the classification of positive politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987). In addition to a questionnaire in English, the participants were given a questionnaire in Persian at the same time. In fact, this questionnaire was a translated version of the previous one into Persian. Students' answers to this questionnaire were in Persian in order to compare the congratulation strategies the participants used for their L1 and L2 congratulation speech act strategies to see whether they were similar or different. The translated version of the questionnaire was taken from Allami and Nekouzadeh (2011).

## **2.3. Procedure**

In order to conduct the study and collect the required data related to the research questions, the following procedure was followed. Based on the results of proficiency test, the participants were placed in two groups of low and high proficiency groups according to the scores they achieved. Scores less than 25 were regarded as low proficiency, and scores more than 25 as high proficiency in the present study. Then, a week later, in two intervals, the copies of the questionnaires were distributed among the participants of study. The questionnaire sheets were filled by 60 students who had been classified as low proficiency, and high proficiency university students. Then, their answers to English questionnaire were encoded and analyzed by using Congratulation Strategies and Sub-strategies Coding in terms of the Taxonomy proposed by Elwood (2004) and positive politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987). The congratulation speech acts strategies test which consists of nine situations, namely about 1-wedding 2- grant 3- getting trophy 4- promotion 5- birthday 6- graduation 7- new year 8- arrival of a baby and 9- educational achievement, frequency and

percentage of the responses of each type regarding both gender and language proficiency will be calculated.

### 3. RESULTS

To answer the first research question, with two variables, the Pearson correlation is a suited statistical measure. The results are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Pearson Correlation between OPT and L2 Congratulation Strategies**

		L2 Congratulation Strategies
OPT		.723**
	Sig. (2- tailed)	.000
	N	50

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2- tailed).

The results of Pearson correlation ( $r = .72, p < .05$ ) indicated that there is a significant relationship between learners' L2 proficiency levels and their use of congratulation strategies. Thus, the first research question of the study was verified.

For the second research question of the study, both quantitative and qualitative analysis and interpretation of the data were taken into consideration. The second research question was to figure out whether there is consistency between use of Persian and English congratulation speech act strategies by Iranian English university students at the BA level. First, the results of Pearson correlation are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: Pearson Correlation between Farsi and L2 Congratulation Strategies**

		English Strategies
Farsi Strategies	Pearson Correlation	.560**
	Sig. (2- tailed)	.000
	N	50

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2- tailed).

The results of Pearson correlation ( $r = .56, p < .05$ ) indicated that there is a significant relationship between learners' L1 and L2 use of congratulation strategies. Thus the second research question of the study was verified.

#### **4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The mastery of English language teaching not only consists of knowledge about linguistic components such as grammar, vocabulary, and lexical items and skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), but also the ability of the learners to recognize pragmatic and paralinguistic norms of language which can help the learners in coping with communication opportunities which come about for them. Therefore, besides teaching superficial components of the language under study, conscious noticing to hidden layers of language seems necessary, especially contrastive comparison of the L1 and the L2. The present study was designed to investigate the relationship between learners' L2 proficiency levels and their use of congratulation strategies. Also, it figured out whether learners' L1 congratulation scheme is consistent with the use of L2 congratulation strategies.

The descriptive statistics revealed that Iranian EFL learners often use mediation features in the classroom so they need to have adequate knowledge of them. Most of the participating learners of both proficiency levels, used congratulation speech act strategies in their L2 quite the same as their L1. The quantitative analysis of the data showed that there was a significant relationship between both learners' L2 proficiency and their use of congratulation strategies and a consistency between use of Persian and English congratulation speech act strategies by Iranian English university students at the BA level. However, a close look at findings reveals several interesting points.

The findings of the present study were in line with a number of previous relevant studies such as Nattinger and DeCarreo (1992) who found that adult nonnative speakers of a target language get a considerable amount of L2 pragmatic knowledge for free. This is because some pragmatic knowledge is universal, and other aspects may be successfully transferred from the learners' L1. As the results of the present study indicates, Iranian BA English students use, in most cases, congratulation strategies used in their L1, Persian, as congratulation strategies for their L2. Learners, in fact, know that pragmatic intent can be indirectly conveyed, so they can use context information and various knowledge sources to understand indirectly conveyed meaning. Of course, than the transfer of pragmatic knowledge from the L1, present of so many textbooks as sources for English learning by those whose native language is English can help to the process, and to some extent, make English language a universal language hidden within the comprehension( if not production) ability of the learners.

Also, in line with the studies conducted in various sociopolitical and sociocultural contexts such as Chinese (Johnstone, Kasper & Ross, 1994), Danish (Farch, & Kasper 1989), German (House & Kasper, 1987), Hebrew (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986), Japanese (Takahashi & Du Fon, 1989), and Spanish (Rintell & Mitchel, 1989) the present study claims that some communication strategies are universal in the deep level. However, learners may not be able to use such strategies because they have not yet acquired the necessary linguistic means, but when their linguistic knowledge permits it, learners will use the main strategic components of communication in the L2 language.

Also, as Bardovi-Harlig, and Dörnyei (1997) reported, awareness of what is and what is not appropriate in a given context, or pragmatically appropriate utterance should take

precedence over grammatically correct ones. Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1997) reported that Hungarian and Italian EFL learners recognized grammatically incorrect but pragmatically appropriate utterances more readily than pragmatically inappropriate but grammatically correct utterances, and this was true for learners of all proficiency levels. In the present study also, despite grammatical inaccuracy and fallacy in the expressions of learners, mostly from the low proficiency group, the use of congratulation strategies as landmarks of pragmatic competence seemed natural in the L2 the as the L1.

Additionally, acquisition studies as one of the major research strands for pragmatics in general and interlanguage pragmatics in particular, specifically probe into pragmatic development of L2 learners (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999; Kasper, 1992; Kasper & Rose, 1999; Kasper & Schmidt, 1996; Koike, 1996). Knowing a sort of congruence between pragmatics and interlanguage pragmatics, by comparing the pragmatic performance of foreign language learners' performance in L2 with that of native speakers of the target language demonstrated that it is universal or L1 based pragmatic knowledge that adult language learners rely on (Kasper & Rose, 1999; Kasper & Schmidt, 1996). So, in line with the abovementioned studies, the findings of the present study, also, show that the pragmatic knowledge, specifically speech act strategies, can have a universally laden feature or can be subconsciously transferred in the target language under study.

It can be inferred from the results of this study that the level of proficiency is determining in the learners use of congratulation speech act strategies. This might be due to the fact that Iranian EFL learners at the BA level at university are exposed to different source materials which have been prepared by those whose naïve language is English. Since hidden layers of language is well represented in such educational books, with increase of exposure to such audio and recorded materials, the amount of pragmatic features and strategies learned subconsciously increases, and this in turn causes the learners manifest a higher level of performance on appropriate congratulation speech act strategies. However, depending on the context and purpose, one can see different congratulation speech act strategies emerging from the output of the learners.

This study also sought to discover the congratulation strategies used most often by Iranian Persian speakers who were studying English for their BA in university. As a rough estimate, five types of congratulation strategies, namely Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID), Expression of happiness, Offer of good wishes, Request for information and Expression of validation were the most frequent strategies utilized by the EFL learners. This can be because of the effect of hidden layers of cultural and historical norms of such strategies. Typically in Iran, people embrace a lot of IFID followed by good wishes when they are in situation of expressing congratulation speech act strategies, and this in turn, might have affected the use of such strategies in the L2 of the participants, too.

Expression of happiness was also seen in all the situations except the situation of birthday. Taking the present view of Iranian, especially the youth, towards having babies, this might be a new phenomenon among the Iranian people. Nowadays, Iranian do not seem to embrace having babies because of their engagement with so many issues. That is why, despite expressing speech act strategies such as congratulation, the Iranian do not express

happiness in situation of having new babies. For the other remaining situations, the results, depending on the social sates and intimacy of the participants, seems to be the same. Sociocultural factors such as social distance and intimacy, therefore, can be determining in production of congratulation strategies in both L2 and L2 of the learners.

Regarding the difference in amount of expressions used by the learners of the two groups of proficiency, one can claim that the significant difference between the two groups can refer back to the linguistic ability of the learners. It is crystal clear that Iranian EFL learners learn their English in a decontextualized condition compared to the native speakers of English. Therefore, it is not odd to see that the more a person has knowledge of linguistic components and expressions, the more he can use L2 expressions in the L2 regardless of context of use. For the difference between the participants in their degree of use of different strategies, one can claim that that is because of exposure of the learners to English expressions that they express a higher degree of output. Of interest is the point that the learners' L1 in such situations might have been affected by their degree of familiarity with the L2 which has been addressed in the limitations of the study.

Theoretically speaking, the results of the present study confirms the claims put forward by proponents of sociocultural theory, Vygotsky (1978), and his followers that language is a social phenomenon and its learning is situated. That is language is an internal tool which comes about as the result of participation in a particular community of speech (Lave & Wenger, 1998). Therefore, the idea of native speaker and communicative competence are put under question when one wants to learn an additional language. So, authorities in ELT programs in different sociocultural contexts need to regard the effect of social practices of the place where the language is being practiced.

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