Iranian EFL Learners' Realization Of Complaints In American English

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Abstract

This study aims to examine how Iranian EFL learners perceive complaining utterances produced by Americans in 4 asymmetrical situations. The main focus of the study is on perceptive data elicited from Iranian informants (male vs. female) with respect to the using of such strategies. Role-play interactions taken from 10 American speakers and a perceptive questionnaire constructed based on the interactions were used to collect the required data. Results of the questionnaire showed that more indirect complaints were perceived as more polite by EFL learners. Furthermore, social variables of power and distance made a difference in the degree of politeness perceived; Iranians (irrespective of their genders) were more concerned about the social power of the complainee than the social distance between the interlocutors. Subjects' gender did not have significant relationship with how the participants assessed the politeness degree of complaints.

Keywords: complaint, gender, perception of politeness, social power, social distance.

Introduction

A great deal of research has been done on different speech acts and has shown that there are cross-cultural differences with regards to either speech act production or the realization of various speech acts (Abdolrezapour & Eslami-Rasekh, 2010; Ahmadian & Vahid Dastjerdi, 2010; Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Blum-Kulka & House, 1989; Hiba

Qusay Abdul Sattar, Salasiah Che Lah & Raja Rozina Raja Suleiman, 2011; Wierzbicka, 1991). Different perceptions of speakers from heterogeneous backgrounds concerning the contextual appropriateness of various politeness strategies might cause communication breakdowns. This study adopts a fundamentally discursive perspective. In discursive trend, which is in contrast to Brown and Levinsonian (1987) assumptions regarding the predictable effect of an utterance on the hearer, the focus is on the contextual variation of interpretation and it considers hearer's evaluation of various utterances in various cultures.

The focus of this attempt is on complaints, which have previously appeared in the literature (Eslami-Rasekh, 2004; Murphy & Neu, 1996; Olshtain & Weinbach, 1993). Complaints are face-threatening acts (Brown & Levinson, 1987), which endanger both the complainee's- negative face and the complainer's positive face as his/her complaint might be rejected (Tamanaha, 2003). This study is the first attempt at investigating the realization of American complaints by Iranian EFL learners. Moreover, the effect of social variables of power and distance and informant's gender on this realization is scrutinized.

Literature Review

Speech act of complaint

Performance in second language is both affected by one's grammatical and linguistic competence as well as his/her communicative competence. As Hymes (1972) claims, second language learners with high-level of linguistic repertoire may fail to have successful communication if they do not understand the cultural norms of the foreign language speech community. To avoid such miscommunications, second language researchers and applied linguists have addressed the question of appropriate norms of performing speech acts in various studies.

The cross-cultural pragmatic literature has devoted special attention to complaint speech act and various strategies used to meet the acceptable norm of the society. This is because of the face-threatening nature of the complaint speech act which has been seen to be subject to cross-gender (Boxer, 1996) and cross-cultural variation (Eslami-Rasekh, 2004; Olshtain & Weinbach, 1993) in terms of use and interpretation.

Eslami-Rasekh (2004) compared Persian speakers' use of face-keeping strategies in reaction to complaints with American English speakers' performance. She found that Persian speakers are more sensitive to contextual factors and vary their face-keeping strategies accordingly whereas English speakers mostly use one apology strategy and intensify it based on contextual factors.

In another study, Murphy and Neu (1996) examined the complaining strategies of American natives and Korean non-natives of English when expressing disapproval of their grade to a professor. They found that Korean ESL speakers produced the speech act set of criticism while American native speakers of English produced the complaint

speech act set. In addition, American English native speakers perceived the criticism made by Koreans as aggressive, inappropriate and lacking respectfulness.

In a quite recent study, Chen et al. (2011) studied complaining strategies of 40 American and Taiwanese university students where they were asked them to fill out a discourse completion test (DCT) containing eight complaint-provoking scenarios. They found six complaint strategies (opting out, interrogation, accusation, request for repair, and threat). Their quantitative results pointed to similarities in both overall and combined strategy use of the American and Chinese participants. In other words, when faced with an offensive act, most competent adult members of both groups made complaints rather than opted out of the situation and both groups preferred less-direct strategies when complaining. The qualitative findings, however, showed differences in their choice of linguistic forms and expressions of semantic content. Compared to American complaints, the Chinese complaints were found to be more sensitive to social power and they varied their complaints based on the interlocutor status.

In addition to the urge to find cross-cultural differences between the speech act performance of native speakers, there is also a need to shed more light on the type of strategies used by non-native speakers in another language. In this respect, a number of studies have been conducted to find the effect of first language on EFL learners' strategies in making complaints. Park (2001) investigated the speech act set of complaint produced by Korean EFL learners and found that participants' performance of this speech act reflects their interlanguage pragmatics, which is independent of their L1. In another attempt, Moon (2001) studied the speech act of complaint as produced by native speakers (NS) and nonnative speakers (NNS) of English using DCT. The results revealed that NNS do not always make complaints following the appropriate ways of NSs'; their utterances were more direct than NSs'.

In another study, Tanck (2002) compared the pragmatic competence of ESL speakers to that of adult native English speakers when performing the speech act of complaints and refusals using DCT within familiar, equal and superior/inferior relationships. The results showed that while native and nonnative speakers often produce almost identical speech act set components, the quality of the components produced by nonnative speakers differ markedly from those made by the native speakers' sample in that they produced fewer components of the semantic formulae of complaint. It was also found that the nonnative speakers' responses, though generally linguistically correct, lack the pragmatic elements that allow these face-threatening acts to be well received by the hearer. For instance, non-native speakers tended to produce request components or add personal details that could be considered less appropriate than complaints produced by native speakers.

From the above studies it can be concluded that nonnative speakers may fail to propose their complaints in an appropriate manner due to the lack of familiarity with the norms and conventions of the second language and consequently their complaints might sound rather impolite. So, there is a need for a more careful investigation of EFL learners' judgments of native speakers' speech act production to find the areas of difficulty and avoid future communication breakdowns.

Gender differences in complaint speech act

As Mills (2003) puts it, we cannot have a general rule about the general behavior of men and women for all cultures rather "decisions about what is appropriate or not are decided upon strategically within the parameters of the community of practice" (p.235). However, considering gender as an influential factor in determining language production or perception for all women and men makes research and experimental work simpler; thus, different attempts have been made to find the effect of gender on the performance of different speech acts and most have found that female speakers do use more positive politeness strategies than males in the context under investigation (e.g. Baxter, 2000; Mikako, 2005). Herbert (1990) in his study on sex-based differences in the form of English compliments and in the frequencies of various compliment response types found several differences in the form of compliments used by women and men. In another study on complaint speech act, Boxer (1996) found that men and women behave very differently with respect to both complaining and responding to complaints. Her results showed that (a) more women participated in troubles-talk than men and (b) women were recipients of more indirect complaints because they were seen as more supportive in general than men. The gender differences emerged when dealing with responses to indirect complaints showed that men tend to offer advice while women tend to commiserate. In general she showed that women participated more in indirect complaining than men. In this study, Iranian males' perceptions of American complaints will be compared to those of females' to see whether their perceptions differ significantly or not.

Social variables and complaining strategies

A large number of empirical studies, some of which were discussed above, have provided support for the relationship between social/contextual variables and the preferred complaining strategies. In this study, social distance is regarded as how well interlocutors know each other: either close (-SD) or distant (+SD). Social power, on the other hand, refers to the "vertical disparity between the participants in a hierarchical structure" (Scollon & Scollon, 2001: 52).

Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) main argument was that there exists a direct and linear relationship among these social variables, such that the greater the hearer's power, the social distance between interlocutors and the degree of imposition of the act, the greater the face-threat will be and the greater the degree of indirectness and modification to be employed by the speaker. What Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) claimed was that indirectness was one of the several strategies available for avoiding threatening 'face', which does not hold true for all contexts. A number of other researchers (e.g. Blum-Kulka, 1987; Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Davison, 1975) reject the relationship between indirectness and politeness. Holtgraves (1986) found that indirect questions were not perceived as more polite than their direct counterparts and Hymes (1986) regards direct requests or demands as more polite than an expression that is hedged or qualified.

Previous studies conducted on perceptions of American request forms (Abdolrezapour & Eslami-Rasekh, 2010) and reprimands (Ahmadian & Vahid Dastjerdi, 2010) by Iranian EFL learners and American native speakers pointed to significant differences with regard to perceptions of the social power and social distance between the interlocutors. Iranians paid more attention to the social power of the addressee while Americans were more concerned about the social distance variable.

With regard to complaining strategies, Yue (2007) in a contrastive study between American and Chinese university students found that Chinese subjects and American ones are significantly different in the choice of complaining strategies when stating their grievances to professors, intimates, friends and strangers. The Chinese showed greater respect to professors than Americans did. As to interlocutors with equal social status, Americans' complaining degree displayed a gradually descending tendency along social distance continuum, while the Chinese had intimates and strangers at both ends with friends in the middle.

To date, to the best of our knowledge, no study has pointed to the possible cross-gender differences among Iranian EFL learners with regard to the perception of politeness of American complaining utterances. This study adds to this body of research by covering this gap. Furthermore, the effect of social variables such as social distance and social power of interlocutors were scrutinized.

Research Questions

Taking into account the contribution of previous studies, this study will address the following research questions:
  1. Is there any correlation between indirectness and the degree of politeness of American complaint utterances as perceived by Iranian EFL learners?
  2. Does the gender of Iranian EFL learners have any effect on the degree of politeness perceived?
  3. Do social/contextual variables affect the degree of politeness perceived by Iranian EFL learners?

Methodology

Participants

Sixty five Iranian EFL learners and ten American native speakers were selected based on a stratified sampling procedure. The informants were all full-time university students and they were enrolled in an undergraduate course for the 2011 academic year. The Iranian informants were EFL learners at the University of Isfahan (Iran) and American informants were students of biology, geography and history at Fresno State University (USA). In order to ensure greater internal validity, only students aged from 18 to 26 years (Mean= 21) were included in the study (approximately half of Iranians were male (32) and half female (33)). They were chosen as the target population in order to ensure as much homogeneity as possible in terms of educational background, age range, social

class and their possible future occupation. Informants were offered a small payment in compensation for the time spent.

Instrumentation

The data were collected via open role plays[1] and a politeness perception questionnaire. The role-play tasks comprised four situations differing in the degree of familiarity and the social power between the interlocutors. The situations realized in the role plays were assessed before conducting the study to make sure that they were comparable across both cultures. Initially, we had eight situations which were taken from the previous studies (Duk-Young, 2008; Tanck, 2002). Twelve informants from both cultures (i.e. Iranian and American), similar to the actual population of our study, were asked to assess the power difference and the degree of closeness between the interlocutors as well as the naturalness of the situations. To avoid any confusion regarding these terminologies (i.e. social power and distance), which might be unfamiliar to participants, some information was provided for these terms at the beginning of the questionnaire. Among these eight situations four with big status difference (S < H and S > H) and two with big distance difference (+ SD and – SD) were chosen.

The situations depicted in the role-play (see Appendix A) reflect everyday occurrences of the type expected to be familiar to university students and they vary according to the social distance between the speakers and the relative social power of the interlocutors. Table 1 presents a description of the contextual variables involved.

Table 1: Classification of situations according to contextual and social variables

Situation	Social power		Social distance
Recommendation Letter	S < H		+SD
Late Comer S > H		+ SD	
Buying Ticket	S = H		+SD
Roommate	S = H		-SD

S = Speaker, H = Hearer, SD = Social Distance

In the first situation (Recommendation letter) a student is complaining to his/her lecturer for forgetting to send a recommendation letter. Whereas in the second situation (late comer) concerns the interaction between a lecturer and his/her student where the lecturer is complaining about the student's repeated late coming. Two interlocutors of the same age are queuing to purchase bus tickets in the third situation (Buying ticket) with one complaining about the other's trial to get ahead of the queue. And the fourth situation (Roommate) concerns the interaction between two roommates; one complaining about the other's noise.

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[1] Open role plays were used to collect data for American complaint utterances as they are closer to naturally occurring speech events and they give us the opportunity to record or/and videotape them for further careful analysis. In these role plays only the complainer is aware of the communicative goal and the complainee has been informed of his/her role.

Then the questionnaire, written in English, was constructed based on the role plays and the complaining strategies used (See Appendix B for situation four). The main purpose of the questionnaire was to find the effect of complaining strategy (i.e. its level of directness) on perception of politeness and to examine the effect of social variables and informants' gender on this perception. The question options were from the most direct strategy to the most indirect forms. The reason was that we wanted to investigate what linguists such as Leech (1983) or Brown and Levinson (1987 [1978]) argue for, i.e., a strong link between indirectness and politeness, which is rejected by Blum-Kulka (1987) and Blum-Kulka et al. (1989), who assert that such relationships do not always hold true.

Data Collection and Coding Procedure

American informants participated in role plays in groups of two. All role plays were audio-recorded. The role play data were then transcribed and coded by two trained native speakers. Then, questionnaires were constructed based on complaint strategies used by Americans and Iranian informants completed the questionnaires constructed based on the role plays. We had four situations in the questionnaire and each situation was followed by four complaining utterances (see Appendix B for situation four) written from the most direct strategy to the most indirect one. The informants had to rate each case by writing next to it a figure from 1 to 5 (1= very rude to 5 = very polite). Descriptive statistics were used and the obtained scores were checked in terms of the normality of distribution using such indices as Kurtosis and Skewness. According to Kerr, Hall, and Kozub (2001, p. 51) "as long as the value of $z$skew is less than ±1.96 there is 95% confidence that the population distribution is not positively or negatively skewed". Then, the mean of politeness given by each participant for each type of strategy was calculated and a quantitative analysis based on the linear model was carried out to see if there was a significant relationship between the degree of directness and the politeness perception (i.e. to answer the first research question). Following this, a mean was calculated for each situation and participant based on the politeness score given and in the last stage, means of all informants for each situation were compared. T-tests were run to see whether the mean scores of the males and females in different situations were significantly different or not. This part provided us with the answer of the second research question. To answer the third research question, data collected from the second question of the questionnaire (see Appendix B question II) were used to find the effects of social variables on politeness perception.

Results and Discussion

This section presents results of data analysis related to each research question.

Perception of politeness and complaining strategy

To find the answer of first research question, which dealt with the relationships between the perception of politeness and indirectness, a quantitative analysis based on the linear

model was performed for the data obtained from Iranian EFL learners. Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics including the mean scores of perceived politeness and the indirectness of complaining strategy shown by a number from 1 indicating the most direct strategy to 4 indicating the most indirect strategy and Table 3 presents the correlations between the scores on the questionnaire and the type of complaining strategy. The pattern of correlations was generally consistent with our expectations. A significant difference of $p < 0.05$ was found in the degree of politeness perceived, i.e. the use of indirect strategies was perceived as more polite. In this regard, then, this study complements the existing body of evidence confirming the possible relation between indirectness and politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987 [1978]; Leech, 1983) and contradicts Blum-Kulka (1987) and Blum-Kulka et al. (1989)'s arguments.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for the perception of politeness and complaint directness measures

Complaint directness	N	Mean	SD
1	65	2.34	.26
2	65	3.34	.23
3	65	3.83	.16
4	65	4.45	.21

Table 3: The effect of the degree of complaining directness on the perceived politeness

Tests of between-subjects effects

Dependent variable: Request directness

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	η^2
Corrected Model	173.183[a]	3	57.73	542.513	.000*	0.86
Intercept	3235.599	1	3235.599	3.041E4	.000*	0.99
Complaint Directness	414.757	3	57.730	542.513	.000*	0.86
Error	27.241	256	.106			
Total	3436.030	260				
Corrected Total	200.431	259				

a. R Squared = .864 (Adjusted R Squared = .862)

Informants' gender and perception of politeness

To find the answer of the second research question, the answers provided were analyzed according to the informants' gender. Table 4 shows the results of T-tests conducted to check whether the differences between the perceptions of these groups (Males vs. Females) were significant or not.

Table 4: T-tests results and mean scores of politeness perceived by males and females

	Males	**Females**	**Result of T-test**	
Situation	Mean	Mean	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean difference
Recommendation Letter	2.50	2.55	.45	-.05
Late Comer	4.10	4.13	.77	-.03
Buying Ticket	4.00	3.89	.67	.11
Roommate	4.20	4.07	.63	.13

*Indicates that the calculated means of the two groups are significantly different (p < 0.05).

The results show that these two groups had approximately similar perceptions and the differences were not significant. Thus, contrary to our predication, the Iranian females' rating of the degree of politeness of complaints was similar to that of males. The results obtained here are contrary to previous studies regarding the difference between the speech act performance of men and women (Boxer, 1996). Though, it should be noted that here we found that their perceptive data obtained based on the questionnaire did not differ significantly not their productions.

The effect of social variables on the degree of politeness perceived

To find the answer to the third research question, the replies provided were analyzed according to social variables since it was hypothesized that these variables could be determinants with regard to the responses. Most informants chose the social power of the interlocutors as a variable that affected their perceptions and few chose the social distance variable. Moreover, the result of the ratings of politeness obtained in the previous section pointed to a large difference between ratings for the social power variable (i.e. situation one and two) and minor difference for the social distance variable (i.e. situation three and four).

This tendency of the informants to pay attention to the social power factor and to neglect the social distance is in accordance with previous studies conducted in Iranian culture on different speech acts, i.e. requests (Abdolrezapour & Eslami-Rasekh, 2010) and reprimands (Ahmadian & Vahid Dastjerdi, 2010). Moreover, Iranians' tendency to give importance to the social power of interlocutors was in line with Chinese tendency found in Yue's (2007) study.

Conclusion

The study reported in this article aimed to shed light on the politeness of different complaining strategies used by Americans as perceived and judged by Iranian EFL learners and it further investigated the effect of participants' gender on their perceptions. Results pointed to the direct link between indirectness and politeness in perception of American complaining utterances by Iranian EFL learners and revealed that gender was not a determining factor in the rating of politeness, i.e. our groups did not differ in the way they perceived the complaining strategies. In addition, we conclude that perceptions of complaint utterances are dependent upon the social power of the interlocutor in the Iranian culture and social distance between the interlocutors had no significant effect on their perceptions.

The results of this study can be useful for EFL teachers to enrich the possibilities for pragmatic development in instructed settings. They can utilize principles of speech act behavior for students in EFL classrooms in an effort to promote their communicative competence. Furthermore, those involved in the further development of a more adequate theory of differences between behaviors of genders can make use of this study. Suggestions are made to investigate the linguistic realization and social strategies of participants of different ages, educational levels, and socio-economic backgrounds. Moreover, qualitative examination of complaining strategies could be more insightful and introspective methods can be applied in future research.

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Appendix A

Role Plays

Instructions

You will be asked to read some brief situations in which there are two participants. You will role play one of the participants and another person will role play the other. You both know who you are and where you are; however, one of you does not know what the other one wants. The interaction will be recorded. You will have to act as you would in an actual situation: you will have to act the situation and interact with the other person, thus expect there could be some social chat. Do not think too much and try to be as spontaneous as possible.

Situation One (Recommendation Letter)

Informant A:

You are applying for a position with a highly reputed company. The interview committee has requested that you have your professor send letters of recommendation and your professor has agreed to send this letter directly to the company. When you call the interview committee to check the status of your application, you are told that your recommendation letter has not arrived. You go to the professor's office to find out what has happened. What do you say to him/her?

Informant B:

You are a university lecturer. You are at your office; one of your students knocks the door. Respond to him/her.

Situation Two (Late Comer)

Informant A:

You are a university professor. One of your students comes late every session. Last session you told him that he could not come late to your class any more. Today, he is 20 minutes late. What do you tell him?

Informant B:

You are a university student. You have come late again. Your professor talks to you. Respond to him/her.

Situation Three (Buying Ticket)

Informant A:
You need to buy a ticket to travel to a nearby city to visit your family over the weekend. You go to the ticket office at the bus station and you have to wait in a long line to get a ticket. The tickets are almost sold out. You have been waiting there for more than an hour. While you are standing in line, someone about your age tries to cut in line in front of you. What do you say to her/him?
Informant B:

You are in a line to get a bus ticket. One of the passengers is talking to you. Respond to him/her?

Situation Four (Roommate)

Informant A:

You go to bed around 12 o'clock at night and you want to get up at around 5 o'clock tomorrow morning. You cannot sleep because your roommate makes a lot of noise. You've put up with the noise for several days, but tonight you feel you should say something**.** What do you say to her/him?

Informant B:

You are living at the dorm. It is 12 o'clock and you have made a lot of noise. Your roommate is talking to you. Respond to him/her.

Appendix B

Questionnaire

This is a questionnaire to find out how you perceive the politeness level of complaints. Please use your intuition and answer the following question.

Example: Situation four

You go to bed around 12 o'clock at night and you want to get up at around 5 o'clock tomorrow morning. You cannot sleep because your roommate makes a lot of noise. You've put up with the noise for several days, but tonight you feel you should say something.

Please rate the politeness level of the following statements from 1 (very rude) to 5 (very polite)

1. Don't make noise!!!!! I want to sleep.
2. What are you doing right now? I can't sleep.
3. You should be more empathizing to other people. Honestly, I cannot sleep.
4. Would you possibly put on your headphones? I have a bad headache and I can't sleep.

Which of the following factors might influence your rating of politeness?

a. Social distance (i.e. how well you know each other not how long) between you and the addressee

b. Social power of the addressee
   If there are any other factors write them here

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