

Interlanguage Pragmatics: A Study of Iraqi EFL Learners' Realization of Complaint Speech Acts

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Abstract

This study investigates the interlanguage pragmatic competence of Iraqi EFL learners in the performance of the speech act of complaining. The study explores the semantic components of the complaint speech act produced by Iraqi EFL learners in their interlanguage and compares their performance with that of English native speakers. Additionally, it examines the extent to which social variables such as power and distance influence the performance of the speech act of complaining by both Iraqi EFL learners and English native speakers. The study used a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data consisted of the results of a discourse completion test (DCT) that was administered to 100 Iraqi EFL learners and 11 English native speakers. The qualitative data consisted of transcripts of interviews with 20 of the DCT participants. The findings of the study showed that Iraqi EFL learners use a variety of strategies to realize complaint speech acts in English. The most frequently used strategies were criticism, demand, and complaint. Justification and request were also used with high frequency. Apology and warning were produced with a relatively low frequency. Explanation of purpose was the least used semantic component in complaining in the EFL group. There were significant differences in the mean scores of the semantic components between Iraqi EFL learners and English native speakers. Iraqi EFL learners need to be more aware of the different semantic components of complaint speech acts in English and how to use them appropriately in different contexts. Additionally, teachers should be sensitive to the cultural differences between English and Arabic when teaching Iraqi EFL learners about complaint speech acts.

Keywords: *Interlanguage Pragmatics, Complaint Speech Acts, Iraqi EFL Learners, Arabic Culture, Social Variables.*

Introduction

Interlanguage pragmatics is an important area of research in linguistics that focuses on how non-native speakers of a language use language in social contexts. One area of interest is the realization of speech acts, such as complaints, by non-native speakers. This is especially relevant in the context of English as a foreign language (EFL) learner, who may face challenges in using English appropriately in various social

situations. "Pragmatic competence is a crucial component of communication competence in a second or foreign language" (Mao, 2021) . In particular, the realization of complaint speech acts can be challenging for EFL learners, as it involves not only the linguistic form of the speech act, but also the appropriate use of social norms and conventions.

This study focuses on one aspect of pragmatic competence, namely the performance of the speech act of complaining in the interlanguage of Iraqi EFL learners. The term interlanguage refers to the intermediate stage of language development that learners go through when acquiring a second language, and it is characterized by a mixture of the learners' first language, target language, and their own created linguistic system. Complaining is a common social interaction that people engage in to express dissatisfaction or annoyance with a situation or a person . It is a complex speech act that involves linguistic and social skills, as well as cultural knowledge. Therefore, studying how Iraqi EFL learners perform the speech act of complaining can provide valuable insights into their pragmatic competence and their ability to communicate effectively in English.

This study is important because it contributes to our understanding of the interlanguage pragmatic competence of second language learners, which has important implications for language teaching and learning, as well as for cross-cultural communication. By identifying the strengths and weaknesses of Iraqi EFL learners in the performance of the speech act of complaining, this study can help language teachers develop more effective instruction and provide learners with the tools they need to communicate effectively and appropriately in English-speaking contexts.

The aim of the study is to investigate the interlanguage pragmatic competence of Iraqi EFL learners in the performance of the speech act of complaining. Specifically, the study aims to explore the semantic components of the complaint speech act produced by Iraqi EFL learners in their interlanguage and to compare their performance with that of English native speakers. Additionally, the study aims to examine the extent to which social variables such as power and distance influence the performance of the speech act of complaining by both Iraqi EFL learners and English native speakers. What are the main semantic components of the complaint speech act which the Iraqi EFL learners produce in their interlanguage? To what extent do the Iraqi EFL learners differ from the English native speakers in performing the speech act of complaining? To what extent do the social variables of power and distance influence the Iraqi EFL learners and the English native speakers' performance of the speech act of complaining?

Method

This study is an interlanguage pragmatic study that investigates one of the aspects of pragmatic competence: the performance of the speech act of complaining in the interlanguage of Iraqi EFL learners. The data is collected by means of a discourse completion task administered to both the EFL participants and native speakers. The

gathered data is analyzed according to a modified taxonomy of complaints developed by Murphy and Neu (1996) to determine the most common semantic formulas of complaints produced in the interlanguage of the Iraqi EFL learners and the native speakers.

In order to achieve the aforementioned research objectives, a total of 72 subjects are selected to take part in this study. The participants are divided into two different groups: The first group is the target group and includes 61 Iraqi learners of English. The second group is the reference group and consists of 11 English native speakers. The students are recruited from six intact classes majoring in business at the university of Baghdad. The researcher employs convenience sampling, which also involves purposefulness, in that prospective participants should “possess certain key characteristics that are related to the purpose of the investigation”. There were two main criteria for selecting the Iraqi subjects: They have to be linguistically proficient enough to be able to fully express their sentiments in English. Second, they have to be among those who had never been to English speaking countries, in order to remove any linguistic influences, the subjects might have other than their native language, which is Arabic.

They are selected among the undergraduate students who are studying at the School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies and the School of Business at Cardiff University. The ENS are all accessed through one of the researcher's friends who was a postgraduate student at the same university. Native speakers are included in this study in order to form the baseline data against which the interlanguage data of the EFL learners is compared. Corpus of the study

The subjects are requested to provide basic information such as nationality, age, gender, major of study, first language, self-rating of English proficiency, and total time spent in English-speaking countries. A DCT is defined as “a questionnaire containing a set of very briefly described situations designed to elicit a particular speech act”. A schedule was set for data collection in February and March, 2023. In order to examine the conductibility of the DCT and increase its validity and reliability, the researcher developed the test in four separate stages. The pilot study was conducted to examine the ambiguity of the content of the DCT. The responses of the pilot study revealed that the instructions are ambiguous when some of the students failed to comprehend the task. The DCT was amended after the pilot study. The final version of the test was handed out to 30 Iraqi participants, majoring in Business at the Baghdad university. The test was conducted in regular English language (ESP) classes.

In order to ensure that the results of the first administration of the DCT test are reliable and measuring the learners' pragmatic competence consistently, the same test was given to another group of Iraqi EFL learners. Finally, the scores obtained by the two groups were correlated to determine the degree to which the results of the two tests were similar and consistent and to give a reliability coefficient. Reliability that is obtained in this way is known as test– retest reliability (Weir, 2005, p. 25).

In order to investigate the realizations of complaining strategies by the Iraqi EFL learners and the English native speakers, the study adopts the semantic components analysis system proposed by Murphy and Neu (1996) , which divides the complaint speech act into six major components they divide the complaint speech act six major components as , explanation of purpose, complaint, criticism, justification, candidate solution or demand, candidate solution or request, apology, and warning or threat. These components help to provide a structured framework for analyzing the different elements of a complaint speech act, which can be useful for research and teaching purposes.

In order to examine the influence of contextual variables on the production of complaints by both groups, the researcher selects social distance and social power because they are identified as important factors that influence speech behavior in the studies of cross-cultural pragmatics (Brown & Levinson, 1987) . All the data responses are entered into the software Statistics Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for descriptive statistics. Once the descriptive statistics, including mean and standard deviation, of the data are obtained, a paired sample t-test is conducted to compare the means of the semantic components' gain scores employed by the Iraqi learners and the English native speakers.

Interlanguage Pragmatics

Interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) is a subfield of second language acquisition (SLA) that investigates how learners of a second language (L2) acquire, use, and develop the ability to perform sociocultural functions. To effectively carry out social functions in the target language, L2 learners require not only linguistic forms and skills, but also an understanding of the cultural and social norms that govern language use. The concept of interlanguage is a significant aspect of this process, as it helps to explain the cognitive mechanisms involved in acquiring a second language.

Interlanguage studies at the beginning were mainly concerned with the phonological, morphological and syntactic aspects of second language learning. Nevertheless, the focus of the interlanguage theory on the grammatical aspect of a language was not enough to solve all the contextual problems and this created the need to pay attention to the pragmatic comprehension and production of L2 learners, which is known as interlanguage pragmatics (Huang, 2010). From the cognitive perspective, interlanguage is related to the separateness of L2 learners' linguistic system, a system which occupies an intermediate structural status between the NL and TL (Brown, 2007, p.256) . It reflects the ways in which L2 learners establish a unique linguistic system peculiar to themselves during the process of learning a second language, which progressively and gradually moves towards the TL system.

Pragmatics Competence

Bachman (1990) proposed a comprehensive model of language competence, which includes five components: organizational competence, grammatical competence,

textual competence, pragmatic competence, and sociolinguistic competence. Organizational competence refers to the ability to organize language in a coherent and cohesive manner. Grammatical competence refers to the knowledge of the grammar rules of the language. Textual competence refers to the ability to produce and understand different types of texts. Pragmatic competence refers to the ability to use language appropriately in different contexts, taking into account social and cultural norms. Finally, sociolinguistic competence refers to the ability to use language effectively in different social situations.

According to Bachman (1990), pragmatic competence includes multiple subcomponents, one of which is illocutionary competence. Illocutionary competence refers to the ability to recognize and produce illocutionary acts, which are speech acts that convey a particular intention or meaning. Pragmatic competence as a sub category of language competence, subsumes two areas of knowledge: illocutionary knowledge and sociolinguistic knowledge. Illocutionary knowledge is related to pragmatic conventions which enables interlocutors to produce appropriate language functions and understand the illocutionary power of linguistic expressions.

Bachman (1990, P. 56) notes, "illocutionary force is an essential part of communicative competence", and the ability to recognize and produce illocutionary acts is crucial for effective communication in different social contexts. Whereas sociolinguistic knowledge includes using sociolinguistic rules and conventions to create and comprehend sentences which are adequate in a specific context of language use. In a word, Pragmatic competence means the ability to produce and comprehend intended meanings in any authentic discourse encounter based on the features of the situational context (Taguchi, 2017).

Result and Discussion

The data gathered from the Iraqi EFL Learners reveal that criticism is the most frequently used component across all situations. The second and third frequently used strategies by iraqi learners are demand and complaint respectively. Justification and request are also used with a high frequency. Apology and warning were produced with a relatively low frequency. Explanation of purpose was the least used semantic component in complaining in the EFL group. Although the results show that the English native speakers produce the same semantic components, there are significant differences in the mean scores of these strategies between the two groups.

Components	IEFL		ENS		t	p \leq 0.05
	N=31	%	N=11	%		
Purpose	9	29.03	8	72.73	2.234*	0.031*
Complaint	30	96.77	11	100.00	3.392*	0.002*

Criticism	29	93.55	7	63.64	2.455 *	0.019 *
Justification	29	93.55	10	90.91	0.379	0.707
Demand	25	80.65	9	81.82	1.245	0.220
Request	18	58.06	10	90.91	2.165 *	0.036 *
Warning	17	54.84	6	45.45	0.508	0.614
Apology	19	61.29	2	18.18	1.934	0.060
Total					2.035 *	0.048 *

The most notable difference between the two groups pertains to criticism and complaint components. The English native speakers tend to produce complaint, as an implicit method of expressing dissatisfaction, more frequently than the EFL learners. On the other hand, the Iraqi speakers prefer to use more criticism, as an explicit and direct way of expressing disapproval.

On the other hand, the tendency to use more criticism reveals inappropriate pragmatic behavior on the part of the Iraqi learners and could be regarded as an unacceptable, impolite and rude manner in the British context. In general, the Iraqi EFL learners complain in a direct manner, whereas the native speakers complain indirectly, so there might be a chance of miscommunication between the two groups in different complaint situations.

These failures of nonnative speakers in complaints are mainly caused by the limitation of L2 sociopragmatic knowledge. The Learners may also resort to their L1 sociopragmatic knowledge and transfer their L1 directness into the TL when choosing certain formulas to realize their complaints.

The findings reveal that contextual variables have a great influence on the native speakers' pragmatic performance of complaining. In fact, the British speakers are found to be more sensitive to the social status of their interlocutors and adjust their politeness strategies according to the social variables of the situations more than the Iraqi speakers do across different situations.

The results reveal that the Iraqi learners are more likely to provide criticisms in their complaints. They refuse to assume partial responsibility for the problem and place the blame directly on their professors. On the other hand, native speakers are found to be less direct when addressing their professor. They avoid using criticism and provide complaints much more often than the Iraqi students.

Such difference suggests that the native speakers are more conscious of the status difference between them and their professor and hence are prevented from producing a criticism as a matter of politeness. The EFL group, on the other hand, does not give more consideration to the higher-ranking factor of the interlocutor and thus their complaints

appear more direct and less appropriate to the context. Their tendency to use criticism represents a serious deviation from the speech act data produced by the native speakers.

In addition to their sociopragmatic failure, pragmalinguistic deficiency, on the part of the Iraqi learners, is reflected in their limited usage of softeners, unlike the native speakers who use more downgrading devices to reduce the force of their complaints. Also, the tendency of the native speakers to use more softeners is related to the social power of the interlocutor. It again indicates that the native speakers are more careful when confronting a professor, and hence, prefer to use downgraders before their complaints to mitigate the force of the speech act.

Examples of the criticism components produced by the IEFLLs

when complaining to a professor about an undeserved mark:

- “There was a bias as you are influenced by the way of thinking” personalization
- “it’s unfair to give me such a low mark despite my effort just for simple disagreement” refusal to accept responsibility
- “Sir, I’m sorry, but I think this is not fair, I spent weeks researching this paper, and you ignored my effort, would you please look at it again” criticism + request

The findings indicate that both the native speakers and the Iraqi EFL learners demonstrate similar complaining patterns and prefer to employ direct complaining strategies such as ‘criticism’, ‘threat/warning’ as well as ‘demand’. The preference of explicit strategies could be related to the perceived social power and social distance between the speakers and their interlocutor. Both groups consider their classmates more intimate than their professors, so they prefer to express their true feelings and opinions more explicitly

Examples of the Iraqi participants’ complaints when complaining to their classmates for their little participation in a group project includes the following components:

- “If you don’t cooperate with us, I will complain to the doctor about you” warning
- “I will not continue to work on this project by myself, you should be concerned too” criticism

The t-test results reveal significant differences between the interlanguage data provided by the Iraqi learners and the baseline data of the native speakers. Compared with the EFL learners, the English speakers display a more highly frequent use of indirect strategies such as ‘requests’ and ‘explanations of purpose’, whereas the Iraqi learners are more likely to provide explicit strategies such as ‘criticisms. Examples of the complaint components produced by the EFL Group when complaining to the customer representative about the bad quality of a new cell phone:

- “I’m so disappointed from your service as I purchased a phone that is not working. This is your fault not mine”

- “I'd like to submit a complain about my phone and about the seller you are dealing with, I think that this company should be more selective to the shops they deal with”

The tendency of the native speakers to express their displeasure more implicitly even when complaining people in lower-level positions could be related to the social distance between them and the hearer. Although the speaker in this context is socially more powerful than the hearer, the interlocutors do not personally know each other and therefore, the native speakers lean towards using indirect strategies more than the EFL learners. On the other hand, the EFL learners demonstrate much lower level of courtesy and prefer to express their annoyance more directly, which render their complaints inappropriate.

Conclusion and implicatures

The study reveals that the quality of the components produced by the Iraqi learners differs significantly from those made by the native speakers. Despite learning English for a long period of time, the Iraqi learners do not demonstrate sufficient pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic proficiency that qualify them to produce acceptable complaints in English. Also, their utterances do not conform to the native speakers' norms in terms of appropriateness to the context. Instead, they refer to their own socio-cultural background to reformulate their complaining strategies. This indicates that the Iraqi EFL learners' interlanguage pragmatic knowledge does not seem to increase substantially with their linguistic proficiency. Because their first language has a totally different system of pragmatics, the acquisition of this aspect of language is still challenging for them.

The employment of DCTs and role plays in classrooms. The inclusion of authentic audio-visual materials which enable the learners to improve not only their pragmatic competence, but also their strategic competence. Include model dialogues which present authentic situations to provide students with examples of the target speech act. Students should also be aware that L2 does not share the same linguistic forms or sociocultural components with their L1 so that they do not make any negative transfer when using the TL. Investigating pragmatic differences between the IEFLs and ENSs in other speech acts such as gratitude, compliments and disagreements. Examine the influence of other contextual variables such as gender differences, age, and degree of imposition in prospective research to determine their influence on the pragmatic behavior of the participants. Finally, a future study addressing the differences between the Iraqi EFL learners' production of complaints in both English and Arabic is strongly recommended to determine to what extent the learners make pragmatic transfer from their first language pragmatics to the foreign language.

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