



The Effect of Strategy Training of Speech Acts of Request and Apology on Developing Iranian EFL Learners “Pragmatic Performance and Critical Thinking”

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ABSTRACT

Requesting occurs in a situation of inequality, so the speaker should always regard the principles of politeness without attention to the object of their request. This study investigated the effect of strategy training of speech acts of request and apology on developing Iranian EFL learners' pragmatic performance and critical thinking. Based on the nature of the treatment, it was decided to select the participants who had not had enough language exposure at the language institute before the study. For this, before conducting an Oxford English Test (OPT), it was expected to select those whose scores would fall between one standard deviation (+1SD) above the mean and one standard deviation (-1SD) below the mean as the cut-off criterion. Finally, 80 out of 114 Iranian EFL male and female learners from six language classes with intermediate levels of proficiency were chosen. Next, they were divided randomly into two experimental and control groups (20 males and 20 females, for each group). A mixed-method design was utilized; the qualitative data collected via interview was used to triangulate the quantitative data collected. The data were analyzed by two trained raters specialized in applied linguistics to identify the effectiveness of strategy training of request and apology speech acts. The data were keyed into the SPSS. 22. The finding revealed that there was a significant positive effect of strategy training of speech act of request on developing Iranian EFL learners' pragmatic performance. A meaningful relationship was found between critical thinking and pragmatic performance.

Keywords: Critical Thinking; EFL Learners; Pragmatic Performance

INTRODUCTION

Second language pragmatics is defined by LoCastro (2003) as the study of meaning jointly created by the speaker and hearer taking into account both linguistic and non-linguistic signals in the context of socio-culturally organized activities. Crystal's (1997) definition puts social interaction at the heart of com-

munication and as the defining feature of pragmatics, in that pragmatics is considered the study of language from the point of view of the communicators, especially regarding the choices they have to make based on the constraints they face in using language in social interaction, and the effects their use of language can have or expected to have on other participants in the act of communication. According to Leech (1983) and Thomas

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(1983), the two factors of choice and constraints are related to pragma-linguistic and socio-pragmatic aspects of pragmatics respectively. Pragma-linguistics refers to the particular and specific linguistic choices that a certain language provides the communicators; by means of which they can convey certain illocutions (Leech, 1983). In other words, it refers to the knowledge of linguistic resources available and the choices made to convey messages. On the other hand, according to Leech, socio-pragmatics constitutes the sociological aspects and interface related to pragmatics. It is primarily concerned with the potential effect constraints such as social distance and status can be expected to have when realizing a communicative act.

This distinction in assessing the linguistic choices that non-native speakers (NNS) have in each language, and their relative awareness of the socio-cultural environment within which they operate has been the focus of much research in second language pragmatics. Second language pragmatics also referred to as interlanguage pragmatics (ILP), is a sub-field of SLA and is defined as “the study of NNS’ use and acquisition of second language pragmatic knowledge (Kasper & Rose, 1999).

For the last two decades, pragmatic competence has been the focal point in EFL studies. According to Crystal (1997) and Ifantidou (2013), pragmatic competence is considered from communicators’ perspectives, especially of the linguistic choices they have to make and the constraints they face in using language in social interaction, and the effects their use of language can have on other participants in the act of communication. A lack of pragmatic competence may lead to a breakdown in communication for an L2 speaker attempting to perform particular speech acts (Neu, 1996). Each discrete speech act has a certain communicative purpose, such as ‘asking for the time,’ ‘apologizing,’ and ‘refusing,’ which itself can involve a variety of different speech acts.

Austin (1962) considered speech acts as acts that are performed by utterances such as giving orders, making promises, complaining, and requesting. As requesting occurs in a situation of inequality, the speaker should always

regard the principles of politeness no matter what the object of their request is (Erving, 1967).

On producing the speech act of refusal, a speaker is expected to say ‘no’ to a request or invitation directly or indirectly by inevitably creating a face-threatening act to the interlocutor; however with the minimum amount of discomfort ensued, and this social, as well as linguistic maneuver, requires pragmatic competence (Chen, 1996) because depending on the amount and degree of pragmatic competence and a host of socio-cultural variables, the speaker might opt for either bluntly saying ‘no’ or communicate refusal through a more tactful facial expression.

One of the viable means of quipping EFL learners with the necessary communicative competence to handle the communicative events appropriately is a speech act which can be achieved through strategy training. The effect of strategy training on different areas of EFL has been investigated in different studies (Yuan & Lyu, 2022). Strategy training is an approach teachers can use to help language students more efficiently deal with different aspects of a language (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). For example, in reading comprehension, teaching strategies such as scanning, skimming, and inferencing can prove useful for students especially if they were not exposed to such strategies in their L1. In psycholinguistics, training mnemonics such as Method of loci, chunking, acronyms, and Rhyming (Nation, 2010) mnemonics, can be useful for EFL learners (Grabe, 2009) in reading, inferencing. The other strategy can be a series of speech acts (such as requests, refusals, compliments, responses to compliments, apologies, and thanks) that have been investigated and have highlighted the effects of strategy training (Cohen & Ishihara, 2005).

Strategy training incorporates cognitive methodologies for recognizing, recognizing, gathering, practicing, and committing fabric to memory. So, for illustration, within the case of the discourse act of asking, learners ought to recognize those dialect structures that make demands more courteous and maybe bunch them appropriately in terms of the utilize of modular assistants, the utilize of the past

dynamic (e.g., “I was pondering in case ...”), and the like. Moreover, dialect learning techniques incorporate the metacognitive strategies for arranging what to do, checking how it is going, and after that assessing how it went; the full of feeling techniques for directing states of mind, inspiration, and passionate responses to L2 learning, such as through self-encouragement and diminishment of uneasiness; and the social techniques for upgrading learning, such as participating with other learners and looking for openings to associated with local speakers. Advocates of strategy structures for learners would set that in the event that learners have a well-functioning technique collection, these procedures will improve the learning of an L2, whether in teacher-led guidelines settings, or one of the elective alternatives, such as self-access, web-based directions settings, and other shapes of autonomous dialect learning (Cohen, 2005).

Due to the usefulness of strategy training which is backed by learning theories and renders classroom management more fruitful, there is always a pursuit in this regard in the field of EFL. The rationale for opting for strategy training of the variable of interest in the current study is Inbar, Donitsa-Schmidt and Shohamy (2001) pragmatic noticing hypothesis according to which high attention-drawing activities are more helpful for pragmatic learning than mere exposure to positive evidence. Accordingly, strategy training can serve as a rich variable for testing this concept within the EFL setting where the gradual exposure to pragmatic constraints is highly unlikely if not impractical for most EFL learners.

From another equally important perspective, it can be posited that appropriate and successful handling of speech acts requires some degree of critical thinking on the part of the EFL learners due to some differences between the speech acts in their native language (Persian) and those in English, i.e., through the critical observation, evaluation, comparison and contrast, they can work out the existing similarities and differences in culturally-determined norms between two languages. The concept of critical thinking has attracted attention in the field of EFL in recent years. Wag (2009)

considers critical thinking as a reflective and reasonable thinking device. Davidson (1998) claims critical thinkers interpret, analyze, evaluate and infer whatever learners encounter. For Facione (2011) critical thinking involves a purposeful, self-regulatory judgment that results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, and explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, soteriological, or contextual considerations upon which that judgment is based. In the current study, this can be taken as a significant factor in interpreting, analyzing, and evaluating the speech acts presented to the learners via strategy training. The relevance of critical thinking to the variables in the current study can be the presence of a plethora of factors which must be taken into account and assessed or evaluated critically for the successful accomplishment of the required speech acts.

Taking into account what aforementioned, the current study intends to examine the applicability of the idea in developing Iranian EFL learners' pragmatic performance and critical thinking via strategy training of speech acts. The rationale is that strategy training can reinforce the recognition of the speaker's intended meaning (in this study in terms of speech acts of apology and request) and accomplish the goal of communication in keeping with the concept originally put forward by Grice (1975). In this line the following research questions are posited:

RQ1: *Is there any statistically significant difference between the control and the experimental group on the effect of strategy training of speech acts of request and apology on developing Iranian EFL learners' pragmatic performance?*

RQ2: *Is there any statistically significant difference between the control and the experimental group on the effect of strategy training of speech acts of request and apology on developing Iranian EFL learners' critical thinking?*

RQ3: *Is there any statistically significant difference between male and female EFL learners' developing their critical thinking*

via strategy training of speech acts of requests and apology?

RQ4: *Is there any statistically significant difference between male and female EFL learners' developing their pragmatics via strategy training of speech acts of requests and apology?*

RQ5: *What relationship can be seen between critical thinking and pragmatics performance for the gender?*

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Before the testament, the researchers obtained the consent forms from the participants and their instructors to ensure their agreement to participate in the present study. The targeted institute had elementary, intermediate, and advanced language classes. Based on the nature of the treatment, it was decided to select the participants who had not had enough language exposure at the language institute before the study. In doing so, before conducting an Oxford English Test (OPT), it was expected to select those whose score would fall between one standard deviation (+1SD) above the mean and one standard deviation (-1SD) below the mean as the cut-off criterion. As a result, 80 out of 114 Iranian EFL male and female learners from six language classes at the English language institute were selected as the main participants of the current study and considered to be intermediate in their language proficiency. Next, the selected participants were divided randomly into two experimental (20 males and 20 females) and two control groups (20 males and 20 females). Their age ranged from 19 to 24 years old. All of the participants were supposed to take a pretest and a posttest. All of the participants had attended English classes for five consecutive terms in the institute. It was assumed that nearly all the participants had a similar foreign language learning experience. In addition, all of them were native Persian speakers, and the only language learning experience they had was the one they had in the institute.

Instruments

The current study utilized the following instruments to meet the goals.

Oxford Placement Test

To ensure the homogeneity of the participants, Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was administered even though all participants were in the middle of the same language course. OPT is one of the famous and standard tests for specifying ESL or EFL learners' level of language proficiency. The sample of the OPT used in this study was divided into two parts: part A which included 60 items and part B which included 20 items. Part A contained 25 multiple-choice pictorial items, 15 questions in the format of multiple-choice cloze text, and 20 grammatical multiple-choice items (30 minutes). Part B contained 10 multiple-choice cloze text items and 10 multiple-choice vocabulary items (20 minutes).

Pragmatic Performance Questionnaire

As the second instrument, the data about the pragmatic performance were elicited using a purpose-made discourse completion task (DCT). As a type of questionnaire, a DCT includes a set of scenarios that describe certain situations. A blank space follows each situation that the respondent must fill out (Gass, Mackey & Ross-Feldman, 2005). DCTs have been used extensively in research on the pragmatic aspects of L2 learning in general and on politeness conventions in particular (e.g., Al-Shboul et al., 2012; Kasper & Dahl, 1991; Wannaruk, 2008; Zhang & Koda, 2012). As a viable tool, DCTs have numerous advantages for generating data on pragmatic competence, including ease of administration and the feasibility to manipulate factors like age and status differences between interlocutors (Gass, Mackey & Ross-Feldman, 2005). After the DCT was prepared and before being used to gather the data, two experts were asked to review and validate the DCT. Based on the comments received from the experts, the initial DCT was examined in content and face validity and underwent the necessary modifications. In addition, to ensure the reliability of the questionnaire, KR21 was run and reported a reliability coefficient of 0.77 which was satisfactory for the current study.

The California Critical Thinking Skills Test (CCTST)

The California Critical Thinking Skills Test (CCTST) form B developed by Facione, et al. (1993) was used to assess the critical thinking among the participants. There were 34 multiple choice questions, each with one correct answer. There were 34 multiple choice questions; each with one correct answer. The CCTST included five areas of evaluation, inference, analysis, inductive reasoning, and deductive reasoning. Facione, et al. found this test and its subscales enjoyed acceptable reliability of 0.78 (calculated through KR20). Furthermore, they found that the test measured precisely what it purported to measure (i.e., construct validity). Facione, et al. constructed the CCTST using a bank of 200 previously piloted multiple-choice items. They selected 35 items based on their apparent clarity, difficulty level, and discrimination. According to their result of data analysis, the CCTST items 1-5 targeted interpretation, 6-9 analysis, 10-13 evaluation, 14-24 inference, and 25-35 explanation. After examining item analysis for the CCTST based on its first administration to 480 pretest participants and the initial 465 posttest participants, they dropped item 26 for lack of discrimination using the biserial point method. For the current research, the final 34 items confirmed by them were utilized. The CCTST is designed to offer several sub-scores of interests. One set of three sub-scores includes sub-scores in 'Analysis', 'Evaluation' and 'Inference.' All 34 items are used, with each being assigned to one and only one of the three sub-categories.

English Discourse Completion Test (EDCT)

As the fourth instrument, The English Discourse Completion Test (EDCT) adopted from Rose (1994) was utilized to assess the request and apology speech acts (i.e., direct and indirect) from the participants. There were eight situations described in the test. The learners were asked to read the description of each situation and write down what they would say in each situation. It was piloted on 20 EFL learners of the same language proficiency level to ensure the validity of the EDCT. Furthermore,

Cronbach's Alpha consistency index was estimated to find out about the reliability index of the EDCT.

Interview

The last instrument was an interview with 15 questions designed and validated by the researchers and five experienced TEFL instructors at the university through a pilot study. According to Dornyei (2007), in the semi-structured interview, there's a set of pre-prepared guiding questions and prompts, and the interviewer is also keen to follow up on interesting developments and let the interviewee elaborate on certain issues. It was conducted in focus group sessions to determine the learners' pragmatic development. In these sessions, the interviewer explained the purpose of the study and asked the interviewees to elaborate on pragmatic development during the treatment. The interview questions were taken from the literature on pragmatic performance in EFL contexts. Next, the items were reviewed by five experienced TEFL instructors at the university. In addition, utilizing Cronbach Alpha, the reliability of the interview was evaluated and reported.

Procedure

One of the most important parts of the research was "piloting" because it was possible to detect the unforeseeable minute points and problems with the instruments in the main phase of the study. This way prevented a great deal of frustration and possibly extra work later on (Dornyei, 2007, p. 75). Regarding this point, the researchers designed a pilot study. The most important purpose was to allocate the time limit and find out the weaknesses of the research instruments to be eradicated in their final versions. In the pilot study, 20 participants with similar characteristics did the tests. The result was analyzed to ensure that the questionnaire or the other related tests were optimal for the current study. The following procedures were followed to meet the goals of the current study:

First, to ensure the homogeneity of the participants, Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was administered even though all of the partic-

ipants were in the middle of the same language course. Second, the data about the pragmatic performance were elicited using a purpose-made Discourse Completion Task (DCT). The researchers distributed the DCT among the participants and were present to provide the necessary explanations of the ambiguous situations of the DCT. In the third phase, 'The California Critical Thinking Skills Test (CCTST) form B', developed by Facione, et al. (1993), was used to assess the critical thinking among the participants.

Fourth, The English Discourse Completion Test (EDCT) adopted from Rose (1994) was used to assess the request and apology speech acts (i.e., direct and indirect) of the participants. There were eight situations described in the test. The learners were required to read the description of each situation and write down what they would say in each situation. As stated, to ensure the validity of the EDCT, it was pilot tested with 20 EFL learners of similar language proficiency levels. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) index was 0.85, which was adequate. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was also significant, which revealed a significant correlation among the items of the EDCT. Furthermore, the EDCT was shown to enjoy a reliability index of 0.84 (calculated through Cronbach's Alpha consistency index). Most of the instruction focused on the most frequently used strategies for request speech act; the researchers had already specified some instructional targets before the pretest. The classroom techniques consisted of role-plays, elicitation of examples from the participants, and the joint discussion of speech acts of request and apology while the teacher and students gave the examples. To solidify the points of interest and to have tangible examples of the respective speech acts in a real-life context, the participants were shown the related video clips from YouTube which was followed by a group discussion. Finally, five participants were selected and interviewed. Each interview lasted five minutes.

Design of the Study

For the current study, a mixed-method design was utilized. An interview followed the quan-

titative phase of the research as the qualitative part of the study. Thus, this study enjoyed a mixed-methods design to comprehensively answer the posited research questions. According to Dornyei (2007, p. 163), a mixed-method study involves the collection or analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study with some attempts to integrate two approaches at one or more stages of the research process. The type of mixed method in the present study was a sequential mixed method in that the qualitative phase followed the quantitative phase. Both were of paramount importance, and neither of the phases had more priority over the other. Hence, the current study's design was a sequential explanatory mixed-method, using qualitative results to assist in explaining and interpreting the findings in the quantitative phase.

In line with Ary, Jacobs, Sorenson, and Razavieh (2006) in a sequential mixed-methods approach, as in the current study, the qualitative and quantitative data were analyzed separately, and each data set led to its inferences. It was also non-experimental, which means the researchers observed the phenomenon naturally, and no external variables were introduced. The setting of the study was not controlled, and the researchers collected the data without changing the situation. Its advantages were considered closeness to real-life situations; hence, suitable for studying inherent human characteristics. The qualitative phase was conducted using a semi-structured interview.

Data Collection and Analysis

The collected data were analyzed by two trained raters specialized in applied linguistics to identify the effectiveness of strategy training of request and apology speech acts. The data were keyed into the Statistic Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS. 22). Descriptive statistics and frequency counts were presented, and paired samples t-tests and independent samples t-test was run to examine if there were any significant differences between the pretest and post-test in the use of speech acts of request and apology. The interview data were analyzed qualitatively to evaluate the effectiveness of strategy training of speech acts of request and

apology in developing Iranian EFL learners' pragmatic performance and critical thinking.

RESULTS

Estimating Reliability Indices of Research Instruments

Before utilizing research instruments, their reliability indices were estimated through a pilot study.

Table 1
Reliability Indexes of the Research Instruments

	Items	Index
OPT	100	(0.86)
Pragmatic Performance Questionnaire	15	(0.77)
The California Critical Thinking Skills Test (CCTST)	34	(0.78)
English Discourse Completion Test (EDCT)	8	(0.82)
Interview	15	(0.79)

Descriptive Analysis

Descriptive Analysis of Oxford Placement Test (OPT)

Descriptive statistics of the OPT were analyzed to answer the research questions. According to the results, OPT scores' mean and standard deviation were 78.8 and 1.708, respectively. Based on the OPT results, 80 out of 114 Iranian EFL learners whose scores were between 73 and 81 were selected. Next, the selected

Twenty EFL learners who shared similar characteristics with the main participants in the study were randomly selected and piloted. As shown in Table 1, the reliability of the research instruments, namely OPT, Pragmatic performance questionnaire, the California Critical Thinking Skills Test (CCTST), English Discourse Completion Test (EDCT), and interview, has been presented.

participants were randomly divided into four main groups, i.e., two experimental groups and two control groups. Next, the experimental and the control groups were also divided into female and male groups.

Descriptive Analysis of Four Groups in Tests

The descriptive analysis of the pretest and posttest of the female experimental group (FEG) is presented in Table 2.

Table 2
The Descriptive Analysis of Results for Female Experimental Group

	N	Min.	Max.	M	SD
Pretest	20	73	84	78.5	1.233
Posttest	20	72	90	81	2.715
Valid N					

As shown in Table 2, the pre-test means a score of FEG is 78.5 and SD= 1.233, whereas the post-test mean score of FEG is 81 and SD=

2.715. The pre-test and post-test results of the male experimental group (MEG) were presented in Table 3.

Table 3
The Descriptive Analysis of Results of Male Experimental Group

	N	Min.	Max.	M	SD.
Pretest	20	72	83	77.5	1.212
Posttest	20	79	82	80.5	2.305
Valid N	20				

As shown in Table 3, the mean of MEG in the pre-test is 77.5 with a standard deviation of 1.212; this experimental group indicates a mean score of 80.5 with a standard deviation

of 2.305. The descriptive analysis of the female control group (FCG) in tests was calculated. Table 4 presents the descriptive analysis of the control group (CG).

Table 4
The Descriptive Analysis of Pretest and Posttest Female Control Group in Tests

	N	Min.	Max.	M	SD.
Pretest	20	71	83	77	1.455
Posttest	20	73	82	77.5	2.007
Valid N	20				

As shown in Table 4, the mean of FCG in the pre-test is 77 with a standard deviation of 1.455, while the post-test of this group indicates a mean score of 77.5 with a standard

deviation of 2.007. Finally, the descriptive analysis of the pretest and posttest of the male control group (MCG) in tests are presented in Table 5.

Table 5
Descriptive Analysis of Pretest and Posttest of Male Control Group

	N	Min.	Max.	M	SD.
Pre-Test	20	73	83	77.5	1.233
Post-Test	20	72	82	77	1.705
Valid N	20				

As shown in Table 5, the male control group's mean in the pre-test is 77.5 with a standard deviation of 1.233, while in the post-test, this group indicated a mean score of 77 with a standard deviation of 1.705.

Examining the Normality Distribution of Data Set

The Normal Probability Plot was conducted to examine the normality of distribution. The data were sorted and then computed evenly spaced percentiles from a normal distribution to determine the normal probability plot.

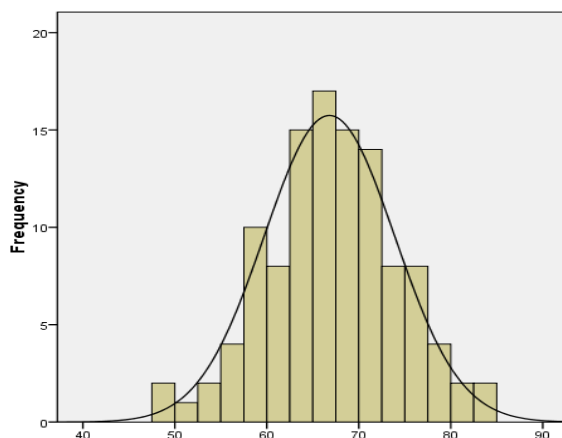


Figure 1
Normality of the Data Distribution

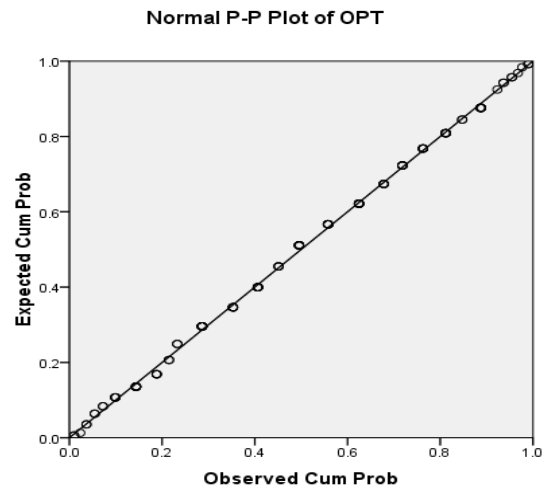


Figure 2
Normal Probability Plot

Evenly distributed data can be seen both in Figures 1 and 2. The closeness of attributes to the standard line confirmed the normal distribution of the data. As the distribution of indexes confirmed the normality of the data, the research was followed by inferential analysis to answer the research questions.

In fact, before comparing the performance of the experimental and control groups, it is essential to check the assumptions of parametric tests before selecting an appropriate statistical test. According to Field (2013), assumptions of using parametric statistical tests include normality of distribution, homogeneity of variances, having at least interval variables, and independence of measurements. The val-

ues of kurtosis and skewness and their corresponding z-scores for both experimental and control groups were calculated to test the first assumption.

Regarding the experimental groups, the z-score of skewness was $Z_{skewness} = 0.352$, and the kurtosis z-score was $Z_{kurtosis} = 0.909$. The control group's z-score of skewness was $Z_{skewness} = 0.469$, and their kurtosis z-score

was $Z_{kurtosis} = 1.009$. Comparing the z-scores against the known values for the normal distribution indicates that a value greater than 1.86 is significant at $p < .05$. As it is evident, none of the z-scores is higher than 1.86, which indicates a normal distribution of the scores. Furthermore, Levene's test was run to examine the second assumption, namely, the homogeneity of variances. Table 6 presents the results.

Table 6
Levene's Test Results

	Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
Based on Mean	.084	1	79	.722
Based on Median	.078	1	79	.719
Based on Median and with adjusted df	.078	1	33.02	.719
Based on trimmed mean	.082	1	78	.720

According to Table 6, Levene's test is non-significant at $p \leq .05$. Thus, it is concluded that the difference between the groups' variances is not significant and roughly equal, and therefore the assumption of homogeneity of variances is met. Since the main assumptions of the parametric test were met, the independent samples t-test and paired-samples t-test were run to answer the research questions.

Answer to the Research Questions

Answer to the First Research Question

The first research question stated whether there was any statistically significant difference between the control and the experimental group on strategy training of speech acts of request and apology on developing Iranian

EFL learners' pragmatic performance. To this end, an independent samples t-test of the pretest and posttest between the experimental and control groups was conducted.

Since Levene's Test result had not been significant, that is, we had observed $p > 0.05$, then we would use the "Equal variances assumed" output. In the t-test for Equality of Means, since $p < 0.15$ is more than our chosen significance level $\alpha = 0.05$, we conclude that the mean of pretest scores for experimental groups and control groups is not significantly different, and the difference in the performance of the participants after treatment would not be due to preexisting differences. Then, the independent samples t-test for the groups' posttest was calculated.

Table 7
Independent Samples T-test Results of Two Groups' Post-test

Groups	N	Mean	SD	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
				F	Sig.	t	df.	Sig. (2-tailed)
FG	40	81.5	1.72	11.00	0.001	2.49	79	0.014
CG	40	78.5						

According to Table 7, the mean score of the experimental groups was 81.5, and that of the control group is 78.5, with a level of significance of .001. Because the level of Sig. is less than 0.05 set for the study, $F(3, 79) = 11.00$, $p < .05$, the finding revealed that there was a meaningful difference between the experimental and control groups' performance in the posttest, verifying that

there was a significantly positive effect of strategy training of speech act of request on developing Iranian EFL learners' pragmatic performance.

Answer to the Second Research Question

The second research question explored whether there was any statistically significant difference between the control and the experimental

group on the effect of strategy training of speech acts of request and apology on developing Iranian EFL learners' critical thinking. The pretest and posttest results between the experimental and control groups were compared to answer this question.

Based on the results, since Levene's Test result had not been significant, that is, we had ob-

served $p > 0.05$, then we would use the "Equal variances assumed" output. In the t-test for Equality of Means, $p < .93$ is more than our chosen significance level $\alpha = 0.05$. Therefore, the mean of pretest scores for the experimental and control group learners is not significantly different. Then, the posttest of these groups was calculated through another independent samples t-test.

Table 8

Independent Samples T-test Results of Post-test

Groups	N	Mean	SD	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
				F	Sig.	t	df.	Sig. (2-tailed)
EG	40	81.00	1.58	8.11	0.001	3.49	79	0.000
FG	40	80.05						

The mean of the experimental groups was 81.00 (SD=1.58), and that of the control group is 80.05 with a level of significance of .000 (Table 8). Since the level of Sig. is less than 0.05 set for the study, $F(32, 79) = 8.11, p > .05$, it can be concluded that generally, there is no significant difference between the experimental and control groups in terms of the strategy training of speech acts of request and apology on developing Iranian EFL learners' critical thinking.

Answer to the Third Research Question

The third research question explored whether there was any significant difference between male and female EFL learners in developing their critical thinking via strategy training of speech acts of request and apology. The performance of the male and female EFL learners was compared to answer this question.

Table 9

Independent Samples t-test for Male and Female Groups on Critical Thinking

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Dif.	Std. Error Diff.	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.22	.63	.231	39	.818	.200	.866	-1.51	1.91
Equal variances not assumed			.231	96.8	.818	.200	.866	-1.51	1.91

According to Table 9, Since Levene's test result had not been significant, that is, we had observed $p > 0.05$, then we would use the "Equal variances assumed" output. In the t-test for Equality of Means, since $p < 0.818$ is more than the chosen significance level $\alpha = 0.05$; therefore, we conclude that the mean scores for both groups are not significantly different. Hence, there was not a significant difference in critical

thinking between male and female participants.

Answer to the Fourth Research Question

The fourth research question found out whether there was any significant difference between male and female EFL learners in developing their pragmatic performance via strategy training of speech acts of request and apology. To this end, an independent samples t-test was run.

Table 10
Independent Samples t-test for Male and Female Groups on Pragmatic Performance

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Diff.	Std. Error Diff.	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	1.20	.147	-2.6	39	.40	-2.6	1.09	-4.00	-.52
Equal variances not assumed			-2.6	96.61	.40	-2.6	1.09	-4.00	-.52

Answer to the Fifth Research Question

The final research question explored any relationship between critical thinking (CT) and pragmatic performance (PP) concerning gender. According to Pallant and Tennant (2007), ANCOVA can be used when you have a pre-test/post-test design (e.g., comparing the two different variables, taking before and after measures for each group, while controlling another variable, i.e.,

gender). ANCOVA was conducted to answer this question. As presented in Table 10, because Levene's Test result was not significant, that is, $p > 0.05$, the "Equal variances assumed" output is seen. In the t-test for Equality of Means, since $p < 0.402$ is less than the chosen significance level $\alpha = 0.05$, it is concluded that there was a statistically significant difference between the two groups. The female group is higher.

Table 11
Comparisons of Mean Differences

Achievement Comparison by Study Condition for Levels of Performance	Estimated Mean Difference	Standard Error of Difference	90% CI
Pretest = 71.94 PP vs. CT.	0.21	7.03	-12.07, 13.84
Pretest = 58.02 PP vs. CT.	-9.24	4.28	-18.58, -1.25
Pretest = 44.11 PP vs. CT.	-19.14	6.00	-30.77, -8.69

Note. Comparisons based upon ANCOVA adjusted means controlling for Pretest with the scores specified within the table. * $p < 0.10$

As seen in Table 11, the mean differences between CT and PP groups are not significant in the pretest in terms of gender. Still, the mean differences between the CT and PP groups regarding gender are significant ($p < .01$). In other words, there was a meaningful relationship between critical thinking (CT) and pragmatic performance (PP) concerning gender. Both of them are higher in the male group.

Results of Interview

To consolidate the quantitative data analysis, the result of the interview as the qualitative

data will be presented to comply with the requirement of the mixed method. According to the collected data, some factors might be hypothesized to affect the implementation of strategy training of speech acts partially. Considering these factors, the findings can be related to teachers, students, as well as factors related to the educational system. Based on the interviewees' responses, these factors were similar to themes from the related literature. For example, 'teacher factors' turned out to be a theme that could promote strategy training of speech acts. By careful examination of the

interview transcripts, the researchers identified two sub-themes: teachers' professional training and teachers' willingness for the successful accomplishment of the task. The sub-themes for the other themes such as students and the educational system were identified in the same way. In the following section, the factors affecting strategy training practice are presented and supported by specific quotes from the interviewees.

All five interviewees addressed teachers' professional training as an important factor in promoting the implementation of strategy training. They claimed that teachers' professional training helped them understand speech acts' theoretical bases through applying appropriate teaching practices. In addition to being familiar with the theory of speech act, how to teach them can be considered equally important in successful strategy training. In this case, the interviewees stated that teachers could improve their methodological knowledge by learning from other teachers. In terms of the teachers' willingness, two interviewees pointed out that the teachers' willingness to practice speech acts positively affected implementing them in the class. Trying the new teaching method highly depends on the teachers' willingness to do their best and be willing enough to take the risk, to embark on teaching a point that is usually swept under the carpet by the educational system.

In addition to the teacher factors, student factors were considered important in the implementation of strategy training, specifically, students' motivation to communicate in English, and students' needs. Most of the teachers interviewed stated that the two major learning outcomes that every student hopes to gain at the end of the semester are good grades and the knowledge they think they need, their perceived needs. One of the teachers also stated that assigning some scores for classroom activities was the most motivating factor and the best encouragement for their students to participate in class activities in general and learn the points of interest in the current research. While other teachers stated that scores or grades did not evaluate their speech acts learning, some students considered grades more important an incentive than learning English peers.

One interviewee reported that students' need to use English speech acts can be an encouraging variable for teachers to allocate some of their class time to strategy training. She stated that students' need to use English speech acts in real life increases their motivation to develop communicative competence, appoint that in the EFL condition of English in Iran seems to be highly unlikely.

The third factor which can affect the teachers' implementation of strategy training comes from the educational system such as systematic support and an appropriate curriculum. All interviewees suggested that the ministry of education should come up with a curriculum that includes communicative competence besides mere linguistic competence from the elementary levels. This could facilitate the implementation of strategy training. In this line, three interviewees indicated that developing a teaching curriculum appropriate for strategy training was a prerequisite to implementing it. To help strategy training practice, the English curriculum should emphasize not only speech acts in reading and grammar but also in listening, speaking, as well as writing. Providing practical resources was the last host of factors considered important in promoting the implementation of strategy training in EFL settings where English speech acts are not commonly used outside the classrooms. Interviewees suggested two conditions to promote strategy training: a) sufficient teaching resources and b) modified assessments. Moreover, teaching aids such as authentic materials and language learning equipment in the classrooms should be provided to expose the students to English speech act examples in the respective real-life situations. According to some students, speech acts could be part of the exam and in this way, students would have more motivation to study (positive washback effect).

CONCLUSION

In summary, the results of this study echo the results of previous studies on the effect of explicit instruction on developing pragmatic competence. In other words, target pragmatic features were found to be most effective when learners were in conditions of achieving a relatively high degree of pragmatic instruction

with clear pragmatic information. Therefore, this study suggests that providing realistic information about target characteristics can improve learners' L2 pragmatic ability. The results obtained from explicit teaching of pragmatics for therapeutic students also prompted us to further explore the role of strategic training on developing language learners' L2 pragmatic competence. As experts have suggested, learning requires cognition at the time of learning, and the results of this study support this argument, especially in terms of learners' DCT post-test performance of participants.

Implication of the study

English is taught in Iran in educational institutions and seminaries. Therefore, it is very important that teachers and school administrators can teach English in the best possible way. What can be imagined from the applications of this research is as follows:

- Helping teachers to choose the appropriate teaching method to strengthen critical thinking in students.
- Increasing the skill and innovation in teachers.
- Guidance to textbook designers to use resources that can increase the speech act in students' pragmatic competence.
- Helping teachers to choose suitable educational materials with gender as an important variable in some relevant cases.
- Creating conditions in the educational environment conducive for learning the needed speech acts such as apologizing and requesting as important elements in pragmatic competence.

DISCUSSION

The present study explored whether there was any statistically significant difference between the control and the experimental group on the effect of strategy training of speech acts of request and apology on developing Iranian EFL learners' pragmatic performance. The findings revealed that there was a significantly positive effect on the variables of interest. In addition, the research investigated whether there was any statistically significant difference between the control and the experimental group on the effect of strategy training of speech acts of request and apology on devel-

oping Iranian EFL learners' critical thinking. The results showed that no significant difference was found.

Overall, the analysis of the qualitative data collected via the interviews showed that considering the factors that enhance the implementation of strategy training of speech acts, the findings can be related to teachers, students and educational system factors. When considering the reasons behind the experimental groups' developing pragmatic performance, it was found that raising awareness of the local cultural expectations for what constitutes successful and appropriate language seemed highly effective. The idea that politeness was realized in different ways in different cultures (e.g., Leech, 2014; Ogiemann, 2009), and that the misapplication of L1 rules to L2 language use could be the main source of pragmatic miscommunication (e.g., Dalmau & Gotor, 2007; Sifianou, 1992), appeared to hold true in the present study; and that in turn made strategy training a worthwhile attempt. For instance, whereas politeness is said to be marked by indirectness in Western cultures (Leech, 2014), Iranian speakers appeared to value directness as a key politeness principle, which was evident in many of the pretest request responses and in the treatment of the current study. Furthermore, the request responses revealed substantial negative L1 transfer, most likely influenced by positive politeness in the respective culture where group values dominate (Dalmau & Gotor, 2007). Despite these, the findings of the current study were in line with Hassal, Sullivan and Rowlands (2008) arguing that the strategy training appears to have enhanced L2 socio-pragmatic awareness, and reduced evidence of negative L1 transfer which is in accordance with the literature on pragmatic performance revealing a clear-cut quantitative improvement of the learners' speech act behavior after the given training program. The significant difference found between the experimental and the control group on the effect of strategy training on the speech acts of interest in the current study gains support from Tateyama et al. (1997) proposing that while pragmatic competence cannot be taught, learners should be provided with opportunities to develop their

pragmatic competence. According to Tateyama et al., the challenge for foreign or second language teaching is whether we can arrange learning opportunities in such a way that they benefit the development of pragmatic competence in L2. It should be added that previous studies on pragmatics and strategy training showed that other affective factors such as teachers' humor (joke of the day, entertaining videos, humorous quotes), music (weekly songs, gestures, and music to reinforce vocabulary), encouragement, positive self-talk, empathy, and the development of strong group cohesion might enhance the degree of effectiveness of treatment in ESL classes during the strategy training.

Moreover, in line with Kutnick, and Blatchford (2014) an effective factor that might have played a role in the successful implementation of speech act training in the current study, could be the communicative nature of the variables of interest, which might have encouraged cooperation and the development of a sense of community that probably contributed further to a positive learning setting. It is likely that the relaxed and encouraging atmosphere established in some contexts provided an optimal effective environment for learning (Jaffe et al, 2019). The effective strategies (e.g., relaxation, risk-taking, self-rewards) introduced in other studies may have served to raise learners' consciousness and to reinforce the positive affective threshold that already existed in that class, but they did not appear to have offered significant additional benefits to learners in terms of second language speaking performance or self-efficacy (Zarei & Rezadoust, 2020). The regularity of the cross-cultural discussions included in the strategy training in the current study may have heightened the participants' cross-cultural sensitivity, whilst the introduction of a formulaic-based approach for request and apology language appears to have been a highly effective language learning strategy to increase the learners' range of expressions, a finding which gains support from Prachanant and Nwamin, (2016).

The findings of this study also seem to gain support from Schmidt et al have (1993) no-

ticed hypothesis that by providing sufficient input and raising learners' awareness to notice the difference between their L1 and L2 norms on the related speech acts concepts and forms through explicit instruction, they can be expected to gain success. The fact that participants performed particularly well in this area may indicate that pragmatic features have to be noticed continually to be integrated successfully into the learners' development of L2 pragmatic infrastructure. The finding also supports Gass and Varonis' claims (1994) that because constant repetition may facilitate integration, attention must be focused on both form and production; hence, this study used explicit approach strategy training to teaching speech acts to examine the influence of pragmatic instruction.

The reason for the significant differences between male and female learners in the current study on the speech acts of interest comes from Lakoff (1973) in that female are postulated to be less sure about themselves and their opinions than are males which are reflected in their attention to speech acts to hedge their request or apology. There is also some evidence that in cross-gender communications, females tend to ask more questions than males and encourage others to speak (Wardaugh, 1986). However, males tend to interrupt more, challenge, and take control of the conversation. Wardaugh believes that it reflects the normal power relation, which exists in societies with men being more dominant. He believes that since males and females come from different sociolinguistic subcultures, they have learned to do different things with language, a point which was reflected in the result of the current study. Based on this view males and females have been brought up to behave differently concerning the language they use. Lakoff (1973) believes that this is a reflection of a cultural problem rather than a linguistic one. It reflects the fact that men and females are expected to have different interests and roles, and use language differently in conversations.

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