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RESEARCH ARTICLES

Iranian EFL Learners' Realization of Condolence: An Interlanguage Pragmatics Study

Aprendices iraníes de inglés y la realización de la condolencia: Un estudio pragmático interlenguaje

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Abstract

This study was an attempt to examine Iranian EFL learners' realization of the condolence speech act in English and to compare their realization with English native speakers' (NSs) realization patterns. The study was further interested in investigating whether Iranian EFL learners' realization of the condolence speech act is associated with their level of L2 proficiency. To this end, a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) was administered to 82 undergraduate Iranian EFL students in English. The participants were divided into three levels of language proficiency (elementary level, intermediate level, and advanced level) based on their scores on the Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT). For baseline comparisons, the EFL learners also received the translated version of the same DCT in Persian, and the English DCT was administered to 20 NSs of American English. The data were analyzed based on Elwood's (2004) coding scheme. The results revealed that Iranian EFL learners had access to the same condolence strategies as English NSs, yet they differed in the semantic formulas, content, or forms they adopted to formulize their condolence expressions. In addition, level of L2 proficiency was found to be associated with Iranian EFL learners' realization of the condolence speech act.

Keywords: expressive speech acts, the condolence speech act, interlanguage pragmatics, speech act realization patterns

Resumen

Este estudio fue un intento de examinar la realización de los estudiantes iraníes del acto de discurso de condolencia en inglés y comparar su realización con los patrones de realización de los hablantes nativos de inglés. El estudio también se interesó en investigar si la realización por parte de los estudiantes iraníes de inglés de la ley del discurso de

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condolencia está asociada con su nivel de competencia en la segunda lengua. Con este fin, se aplicó una Prueba de Finalización del Discurso a 82 estudiantes universitarios iraníes en inglés. Los participantes fueron divididos en tres niveles de dominio del idioma (niveles elemental, intermedio y avanzado) basados en sus calificaciones en el Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT). Para las comparaciones de línea de base, los estudiantes de EFL también recibieron la versión traducida del mismo DCT en persa, y el DCT inglés se administró a 20 hablantes nativos de inglés americano. Los datos fueron analizados con base en el esquema de codificación de Elwood (2004). Los resultados revelaron que los estudiantes iraníes de inglés tenían acceso a las mismas estrategias de condolencia que los nativos ingleses, aunque diferían en las fórmulas semánticas, contenido o formas que adoptaron para formular sus expresiones de condolencia. Además, se encontró que el nivel de competencia en segunda lengua estaba asociado con la realización por parte de los estudiantes iraníes de la ley de discurso de condolencia.

Palabras clave: actos expresivos del habla , el discurso de condolencia acto, interlanguaje pragmática, patrones de realización del acto del discurso

Introduction

Bachman's (1990) model of communicative language ability has triggered a wave of interest among researchers to investigate different components of language competence including pragmatic knowledge. Meanwhile, interlanguage studies, as one of the hallmarks of SLA, have devoted the "lion's share of research" (Hult, 2010, p. 51) to the acquisition of grammatical and pragmatic competencies. The pragmatic perspective towards the learner language has led to the emergence of an interdisciplinary field known as Interlanguage Pragmatics (ILP; Liu, 2002). ILP is a subfield of both interlanguage studies and pragmatics (Schauer, 2009). Kasper (1996) defines ILP as "the study of nonnative speakers' use and acquisition of L2 pragmatic knowledge" (p. 145).

Whereas the scope of pragmatics is hard to define (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984), in the case of ILP, "the scope is relatively well-defined" (Ellis, 2008, p. 158). For some time, ILP research has been interested in investigating what speakers accomplish while performing utterances either in terms of interactional acts or speech acts (Ellis, 2008). The former involve learning how to take part in interactions in the target language and entail "topic initiation and development, conversational organization and management (for example openings and closings), repair of miscommunication, conversational strategies, narrative structure, and small talk" (Ellis, 2008, p. 192). The latter, on the other hand, can be thought of as attempts on the part of language users to perform language functions such as greetings, apologies, requests, complaints, compliments, promises, and so forth (Ellis, 2008).

A large number of studies in ILP have been conducted within the framework of speech acts (Abed, 2011). According to Searle (1969), "the reason for concentrating on the study of speech acts is simply this: all linguistic communication involves linguistic acts… and speech acts… are the basic or minimal units of linguistic communication" (p. 16). Searle (1969) further argues that speaking, as a rule-governed behavior, has formal features that can be studied independently. However, mere study of those formal features without the study of speech acts is "necessarily incomplete" (p. 17).

A review of the speech act theory would be incomplete without touching on the classification systems of speech acts (Schauer, 2009). One of the most influential classifications of speech acts and the one most constative pragmaticians adhere to (Robinson, 2006) is Searle's classificatory system. Searle (1975) has identified five classes of speech acts: representatives (e.g., asserting, boasting, claiming, concluding, deducing, describing, insisting, hypothesizing, predicting, reporting, stating, etc.), directives (e.g., begging, commanding, ordering, pleading, requesting, suggesting, etc.), commissives (e.g., offering, pledging, promising, threatening, volunteering, vowing, etc.), expressives (e.g., apologizing, condoling, congratulating, deploring, regretting, thanking, welcoming, etc.), and declarations (e.g., baptizing, christening, firing, sentencing, etc.). This study draws on Searle's classificatory scheme to investigate Iranian EFL Learners' realization of the condolence speech act, one of Searle's expressives.

Theoretical Framework

The speech act of condolence expresses the speaker's sorrow at the news of an individual's death (Lotfollahi & Eslami-Rasekh, 2011). According to Norrick (1978), the social function of condoling is "to share in the experience and feeling of the addressee" (p. 286) with the purpose of alleviating his/her sorrow. The speech act of condolence has not been extensively researched, and the few studies that have been conducted are either contrastive or cross-cultural, reporting how this speech act is realized in different language pairs. However, since ILP is "a direct off-shoot" of cross-cultural pragmatics (Barron, 2003, p. 27), a number of studies that are of special interest for the present study are briefly reviewed.

One of the earliest cross-cultural studies on the condolence speech act that has often been referred to in the literature was carried out by Elwood (2004) who administered a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) consisting of two death situations (the demise of a grandmother and the death of a pet dog) to 25 NSs of American English, 25 Japanese speakers writing in English, and 25 Japanese students writing in Japanese. Drawing upon Olshtain and Cohen's (1983) semantic formulas for apologies (cited in Elwood, 2004), Elwood classified the elicited responses for condolences. Analysis of the data revealed differences in the semantic formulas the three groups of respondents employed. In addition, each death situation elicited different responses.

The speech act of condolence has also been studied cross-culturally in other language pairs like Arabic versus English (e.g., Al-Khatib & Salem, 2011), Arabic versus Hebrew (e.g., Murad, 2013), and Persian versus English. In Persian, in a comparative study, Lotfollahi and Eslami-Rasekh (2011) focused on the realization patterns of the condolence speech act among Persian-speaking EFL learners by administering a four-item DCT to 80 Iranian EFL university students and comparing the obtained results with Elwood's (2004) findings of American English NSs. The elicited responses were then analyzed based on the modified version of Elwood's coding scheme. Analysis of the data delineated that the most frequently used condolence strategies by Iranian EFL learners were 'expression of sympathy,' followed by 'future-oriented remarks,' especially religiously-oriented ones, followed by 'seeking absolution from God,' which is exclusive to Muslims. Lotfollahi and Eslami-Rasekh (2011) came to the conclusion that the condolence strategies used by the Iranian respondents were greatly influenced by their culture and religion and thus sharply differed from the strategies adopted by the English NSs in Elwood's study.

Similarly, Samavarchi and Allami (2012), in a contrastive sociopragmatic study, compared offering condolences in Persian and English. To this end, they administered a fifteen-item DCT to 50 Persian-speaking advanced EFL learners, who also filled out the Persian translation of the same questionnaire. The English version of the test was also emailed to 10 NSs of English. The DCT items were designed based on formality, social distance, and power relations. Samavarchi and Allami (2012) devised their own coding scheme for analyzing the data. Drawing on the findings of the study, they concluded that, in comparison with English NSs, Persian NSs and Iranian EFL learners were generally more direct in their condolence expressions, and at times they showed slight pragmatic transfer from their L1.

It must be noted that Lotfollahi and Eslami-Rasekh (2011) and Samavarchi and Allami (2012) did not fully investigate the depth and breadth of Iranian EFL learners' interlanguage behavior with respect to the condolence speech act. As such, the present study aims at probing the interlanguage features of Iranian EFL learners' condolence speech act behavior.

Objectives of the Study

As Cohen (1996) puts it, "given a speech act…, the first concern of the researcher is to arrive at the set of potentially universal realization patterns, anyone of which would be recognized as the speech act in question, when uttered in the appropriate context" (p. 21). Therefore, the present study aims at providing a detailed analysis of Iranian EFL learners' realization of the condolence speech act in English, focusing on their selection of condolence strategies

and use of the semantic formulas required to perform this speech act. To this end, we first focus on Persian-speaking Iranian EFL learners' realization of the condolence speech act in English. Then, their condolence expressions are compared with condolence expressions produced by English NSs.

The second objective of the study is to determining whether there is a relationship between Iranian EFL learners' realization of the condolence speech act and their level of proficiency in English since "cross-sectional studies that compare groups of learners with different levels of general proficiency do allow researchers to describe putative growth and development" (Ellis, 2008, p. 163). To fulfill this purpose, this study will concentrate on the condolence realization strategies employed by Iranian EFL learners at three levels of language proficiency (i.e., elementary, intermediate, and advanced levels).

Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following three research questions:

1. How do Persian-speaking EFL learners realize the condolence speech act in English? What condolence strategies and semantic formulas do they use to formulate their condolence expressions in English?
2. Are there any differences between Persian-speaking EFL learners and English NSs in their realization of the condolence speech act? If so, what is distinct about Persian-speaking EFL learners' condolence realization patterns?
3. Is there any relationship between Persian-speaking EFL learners' realization of the condolence speech act in English and their level of L2 proficiency?

Method

According to Ellis (2008), the study of speech acts in learner language should involve three sets of data: (1) samples of the speech act in question produced by L2 learners in the target language, (2) samples of the same speech act as produced by NSs of the target language, and (3) samples of that speech act performed by the learners in their L1. As such, this study included two groups of participants: Iranian EFL learners responding in both English and Persian, and NSs of American English responding in English.

Participants

The first group of participants included 82 undergraduate Iranian EFL students (14 males and 68 females) studying at an institution of higher education in Shiraz, Iran, and ranging in age from 19 to 48 with the mean age of 22.08. The EFL participants were divided into three levels of language proficiency (37 elementary, 35 intermediate, and 10 advanced learners) based on the scores they obtained on the Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT; 2004). For baseline comparisons, the EFL learners first responded in English the questionnaire to be discussed in the next section, and later received the translated version of the same questionnaire in Persian. The second group of respondents included 20 NSs of American English born and raised in the U.S., ranging in age from 17 to 73 with the mean age of 38.26.

Instruments

To conduct this study, two instruments were utilized: the OQPT and a written DCT. To measure the participants' level of English Proficiency, a paper-and-pencil OQPT (2004) consisting of 60 questions in a multiple-choice format was administered. OQPT is a proficiency test "developed by Oxford University Press and Cambridge ESOL to give teachers a reliable and time-saving method of finding a student's level of English" (Geranpayeh, 2003, p. 8). Based on their test scores, the participants were divided into three groups of L2 proficiency: elementary, intermediate, and advanced-level learners. The reliability reported for the test was close to 0.9.

To elicit data from the Persian-speaking EFL participants and the American English NSs, a written DCT was designed in English as DCTs have been utilized extensively in ILP research, especially in the study of speech acts. It must be noted that the Persian-speaking EFL participants were also given the translated version of the same test in Persian. The

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DCT designed for the study consisted of six prompt situations or scenarios. The participants were asked to imagine themselves in those situations and to jot down what they think they would say in response to each situation.

The scenarios varied on two contextual factors: the interlocutors' social distance and their social status. Social distance refers to the degree of familiarity of the two interlocutors with each other and is of two types: + social distance and – social distance (Kim, 2007). Social status, on the other hand, has to do with the power relationship between the speaker and the hearer and is of three types: higher in status (+), equal in status (=), and lower in status (–) (Kim, 2007).

Data Collection and Data Analysis Procedures

To assess the participants' L2 proficiency level, the OQPT (2004) was administered to the Iranian EFL learners, and they were assigned into elementary, intermediate, and advanced groups based on their test scores. One session after the OQPT was taken, the DCT, which had been pilot-tested before, was administered to the EFL learners in English. After an interval of one week, the Persian translation of the same DCT, which had previously undergone back translation and pilot-testing procedures, was administered to the same EFL participants who had already filled in the English version of the DCT. As for the NS participants, the DCT questionnaire was emailed to them as a Microsoft Word attachment, and they returned the completed questionnaire via email.

The data elicited through the English and Persian DCTs were then analyzed based on the coding scheme developed by Elwood (2004). This coding scheme was especially selected, for it has already been replicated in a number of studies (e.g., Lotfollahi & Eslami-Rasekh, 2011; Murad, 2013) thereby enabling the researchers to compare the findings with previous research outcomes. Elwood (2004) classified the elicited responses for condolences into five types:

1. Acknowledgement of the death (e.g., 'Oh!,' 'Oh, my God!')
2. Expression of sympathy (e.g., 'I'm really sorry,' 'Accept my condolences,' 'That's terrible news')
3. Offer of assistance (e.g., 'Is there anything I can do for you?')
4. Future-oriented remark (e.g., 'Don't worry about work,' 'Take some time off to be with your family')
5. Expression of concern (e.g., 'Are you doing OK?')

In addition, Elwood (2004) also came up with responses that did not fit any of these categories. She classified these responses under a new category she dubbed 'other':

6. Other
    a. Expression of empathy (e.g., 'I can't imagine how you must be feeling')
    b. Sharing similar experience (e.g., 'My father was also in hospital for two months')
    c. Statement of not knowing (e.g., 'I really don't know what to say')
    d. Statement of lacking words (e.g., 'I don't have even words to express my sorrow')
    e. Positive statement (e.g., 'Your grandmother was very kind to us')
    f. Expression of surprise (e.g., 'Really?')
    g. Related questions (e.g., 'How old was he?')
    h. Related comments (e.g., 'You are in my prayers,' 'He is in heaven,' 'She will be missed so much').

After coding the data, descriptive statistics were used to calculate the frequency and percentage of the overall use of the condolence strategies and semantic formulas by each group of respondents. To augment the consistency of the coding procedure, 20% of the elicited responses were coded by a second coder. The inter-coder agreement indices for the English NS data, the Persian NS data, and the L2 learner data were, in turn, 93.75%, 90.41%, and 86.53%, which are above 85% and thus acceptable (Nunan & Baily, 2012). Furthermore, the first researcher coded the whole data after an interval of two weeks. The intra-coder agreement indices for the English NS data, the Persian NS data, and the L2 learner data were 96.35%, 99.53%, and 99.13%, respectively, which are above 85% and therefore acceptable (Nunan & Baily, 2012).

Findings and Discussion

Comparison of English NSs and Persian NSs

To investigate the interlanguage behavior of Persian-speaking EFL learners with respect to the realization of the condolence speech act, it is essential to first establish baseline cross-cultural norms. Therefore, at this point, the two sets of NS data are going to be compared. Table 1 summarizes the frequency of condolence strategies used by English and Persian NSs:

As represented in Table 1, English NSs and their Persian counterparts seemed to have access to the same condolence strategies. The most frequent condolence strategies in both languages were, in turn, 'other,' 'expression of sympathy,' 'offer of assistance,' and 'future-oriented remark.' However, the two languages in question differed in their least frequent condolence strategy, which was 'acknowledgement of death' in English and 'expression of concern' in Persian.

It must be noted that 'other,' as the most preferred condolence strategy among English and Persian NSs, consists of eight sub-strategies (see Table 2 for the distribution of 'other' responses among English and Persian NSs). As Table 2 illustrates, among 'other' sub-strategies, 'related comments' had the highest frequency of occurrence among English and Persian NSs, followed by 'expression of empathy.'

Further analysis of the NS data revealed that in spite of using similar condolence strategies, English and Persian NSs showed variations in the lexical items, semantic formulas, content, and forms they chose to express their condolences. These variations were basically observed in the case of strategies like 'expression of sympathy,' 'other' responses, and 'future-oriented remark.'

Table 1. Frequency of the Use of Condolence Strategies by English and Persian NSs

Condolence strategies	NSs		Total
	English NSs	Persian NSs	
Acknowledgement of death	3	9	12
Expression of sympathy	109	468	577
Offer of assistance	65	57	122
Future-oriented remark	13	20	33
Other	126	522	648
Expression of concern	9	0	9
Total		1076	1401

Table 2. Frequency of the Use of 'Other' Sub-Strategies by English and Persian NSs

Other sub-strategies	NSs		Total
	English NSs	Persian NSs	
Expression of empathy	12	47	59
Statement of not knowing	4	4	8
Statement of lacking words	2	2	4
Positive statement	7	11	18
Expression of surprise	2	4	6
Related questions	7	0	7
Related comments	92	454	546
Total	126	522	648

Results for Persian-speaking EFL Learners

To answer the first research question, the data elicited from the Persian-speaking EFL participants at three different proficiency levels are going to be compared. Table 3 illustrates the frequency of condolence strategies used by Persian-speaking EFL learners across the three proficiency levels:

As illustrated in Table 3, 'expression of sympathy' and 'other' strategies had, in turn, the highest frequency of occurrence among all the three proficiency-level groups, followed by 'offer of assistance' for the intermediate and advanced-level groups and 'future-oriented remark' for the elementary-level respondents.

As mentioned before, 'other' strategy consists of several sub-strategies. Table 4 displays the frequency of 'other' sub-strategies among the three proficiency-level groups. As Table 4 illustrates, among 'other' sub-strategies, 'related comments' had the highest frequency of occurrence. While 'expression of surprise' was the second most preferred sub-strategy among elementary-level Persian-speaking EFL learners and their advanced-level counterparts, the intermediate-level participants favored 'positive statement' as the second most frequent sub-strategy.

It is worth mentioning that, to formulate each condolence strategy, Persian-speaking EFL learners took advantage of different semantic formulas. The semantic formulas adopted by Persian-speaking EFL learners to formulate each condolence strategy are discussed below.

As mentioned above, 'expression of sympathy' was found to be the most preferred condolence strategy among the three proficiency-level groups. As Figure 1 illustrates, the majority of the EFL participants formulated their responses using

Table 3. Frequency of the Use of Condolence Strategies by Persian-Speaking EFL Learners

Condolence strategy	Proficiency			Total
	Elementary	Intermediate	Advanced	
Acknowledgement of death	17	23	8	48
Expression of sympathy	215	203	59	477
Offer of assistance	16	34	13	63
Future-oriented remark	18	11	11	40
Other	133	114	38	285
Total	399	385	129	913

Table 4. Frequency of the Use of 'Other' Sub-Strategies by Persian-Speaking EFL Learners

Other sub-strategies	Proficiency			Total
	Elementary	Intermediate	Advanced	
Expression of empathy	8	6	2	16
Statement of not knowing	0	4	1	5
Statement of lacking words	1	4	2	7
Positive statement	10	14	3	27
Expression of surprise	14	10	2	26
Related questions	0	0	1	1
Related comments	99	77	25	201
Total	132	115	36	283

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'I'm sorry to hear…,' 'I'm sorry that…,' 'sorry,' 'I'm sorry,' or 'I'm+ intensifier+ sorry' (elementary level: 46.9%, intermediate level: 52.3%, and advanced level: 42.3%). The next common semantic formula among the EFL participants was 'Please accept my condolences' (elementary level: 27.5%, intermediate level: 24.8%, and advanced level: 20.4%), followed by adjectives like 'bad,' 'terrible,' 'sad,' etc. (elementary level: 13.5%, intermediate level: 12.9%, and advanced level: 18.6%). Also, a few of the EFL learners' responses contained the word 'sympathy' (elementary level: 1.4%, intermediate level: 3.4%, and advanced level: 3.3%). Finally, a number of the EFL learners' responses were formulated by the semantic formula 'I'm sorry for your loss' (elementary level: 2.3%, intermediate level: 6.5%, and advanced level: 13.6%).

In addition to 'expression of sympathy,' 'other' strategy was a very common condolence strategy among Persian-speaking EFL learners. As mentioned before, among 'other' sub-strategies, 'related comments' had the highest frequency of occurrence among Persian-speaking EFL learners. As Figure 2 shows, the 'related comments' formulated by the EFL participants included prayers for the deceased (e.g., 'May his/her soul rest in peace'; elementary level: 49.4%, intermediate level: 57.2%, and advanced level: 36%), prayers for the bereaved (e.g., 'May God give you patience'; elementary level: 30.3%, intermediate level: 23.4%, and advanced level: 24%), statements indicating that the deceased is in heaven (e.g., 'He/She is in heaven'; elementary level: 4.1%, intermediate level: 2.6%, and advanced level: 12%), statements indicating that the deceased would be missed or would not be forgotten (e.g., 'He/She will be missed' or 'I will never forget him/her'; elementary level: 6.1%, intermediate level: 5.2%, and advanced level: 4%). There were also a range of other responses (elementary level: 10.1%, intermediate level: 11.6%, and advanced level: 24%; see Figure 2).

'Offer of assistance' had the third highest frequency of occurrence among the intermediate and advanced-level EFL learners, and it came fourth for the elementary-level learners. The semantic formulas that the EFL learners adopted to formulate this condolence strategy were of three types: offering help (e.g., 'Let me know if there is anything I can do'), offering the bereaved to take a few days off from work (e.g., 'You can take a leave'), and offering emotional help (e.g., 'Let me be with you in this difficult time').

'Future-oriented remark,' which often takes the form of practical advice or words of encouragement, included pieces of advice like 'Don't cry,' 'Be patient,' 'I hope you can stand her loss,' or 'You should be strong.' It must be noted that Persian-speaking EFL learners formulated this condolence strategy in one of the following forms: imperatives (elementary level: 83.3%, intermediate level: 54.5%, and advanced level: 36.3%), statements starting with 'I hope/ wish…' (elementary level: 11.1%, intermediate level:

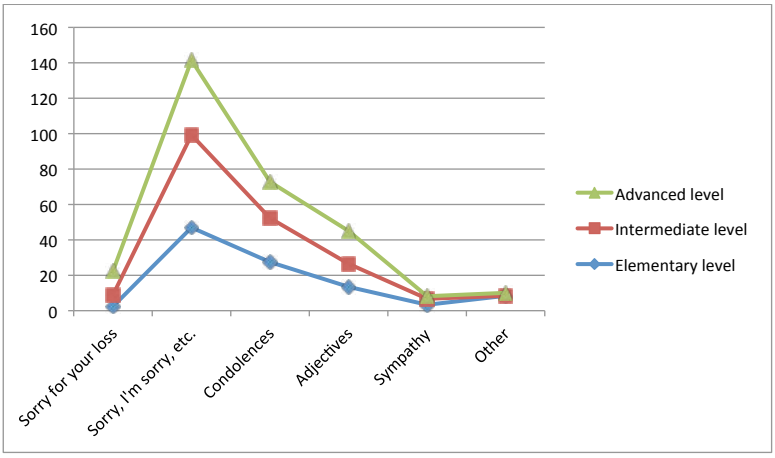

Figure 1. Percentage of semantic formulas used by Persian-speakin ELF learners to express sympathy

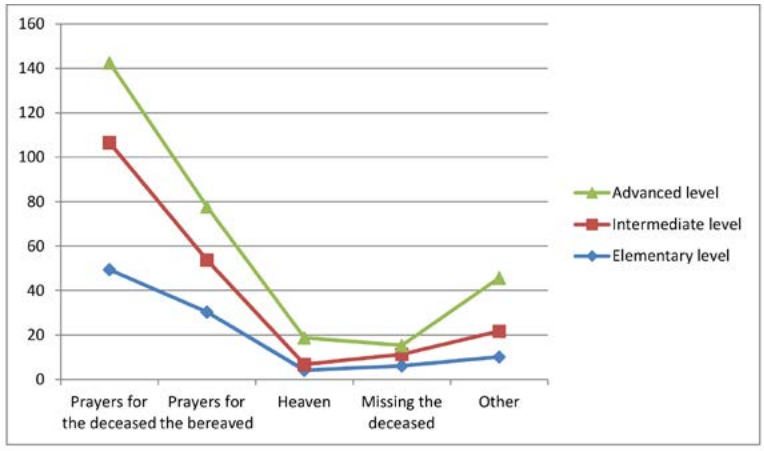

Figure 2. Percentage of semantic formulas used by Persian-speakin ELF learners to make 'related comments'

45.5%, and advanced level: 45.4%), or statements including the modal auxiliary 'should'(elementary level: 5.6%, intermediate level: 0%, and advanced level: 18.3%).

Finally, 'acknowledgement of death' was found to be the fourth condolence strategy among elementary and intermediate-level EFL learners, and the fifth condolence strategy among advanced-level learners. The semantic formulas Persian-speaking EFL learners used for 'acknowledgement of death' were, for the most part, 'Oh' (elementary level: 88.3%, intermediate level: 78.2%, and advanced level: 87.5%) or 'Oh, my God' (elementary level: 0%, intermediate level: 17.3%, and advanced level: 12.5%). Other interjections like 'Damn' (4.5%) and 'Alas' (11.7%) were also used by elementary and intermediate-level participants. Interestingly, 'expression of concern' was not used by any of the proficiency-level groups.

Comparison of Persian-speaking EFL Learners with English NSs

At this point, to provide controls, the EFL learners' data are going to be compared with the NS data in English to determine whether Iranian EFL learners have access to the same condolence realization patterns that English NSs employ. Figure 3 displays the frequency of condolences

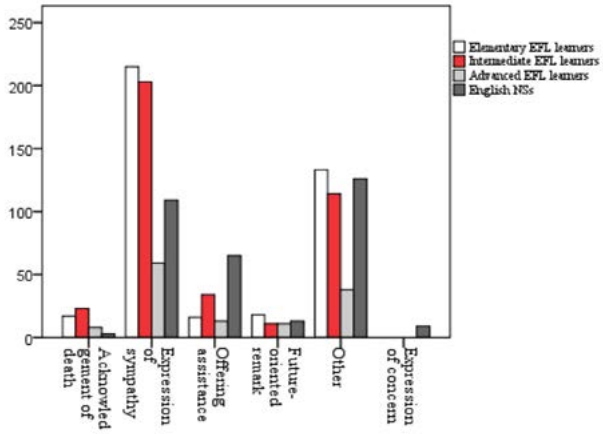

Figure 3. Frecuency of condolence strategies used by Persian-speakin ELF learners and English NSs

strategies used by the three groups of EFL learners and English NSs:

Drawing on Figure 3, it can be concluded that Iranian EFL learners and English NSs favored different condolence strategies and semantic formulas. First, the most and the least frequently used semantic formulas employed by English NSs to formulate 'expression of sympathy' were, in turn, 'I'm sorry for your loss' and 'My condolences,' whereas Persian-speaking EFL learners underused the former and overused the latter. Still another difference was the relatively high use of expressions like 'That's too bad' or 'What a pity' by Persian-speaking EFL learners, which appear to be non-native-like.

Second, with respect to the 'related comments' sub-strategy, it is noteworthy that there were no instances of prayers for the deceased in the English NSs' data, while 'prayers for the deceased' outnumbered other semantic formulas in the EFL learners' data.

Third, as for 'expression of empathy,' different forms were used by English NSs and Persian-speaking EFL learners. While English NSs formulated their empathy expressions through the negative form 'I can't imagine…,' the EFL participants employed the affirmative form 'I can imagine…'.

Fourth, despite the fact that both English NSs and Persian-speaking EFL learners showed a preference for the imperative form to formulate 'future-oriented remark' strategy, statements starting with 'I hope/wish…' were also common especially among the EFL learners. Apart from the form, the content of their utterances was also very different. Finally, 'expression of concern' strategy was adopted by the English NSs but not the Persian-speaking EFL learners.

Comparison of Persian-speaking EFL Learners across the Three Proficiency Levels

To address the third research question, a chi-square test was run to compare the three proficiency-level groups of participants and to determine whether the differences in the observed frequencies were statistically significant. The results of the chi-square test revealed that there was a statistically significant association between Persian-speaking EFL learners' proficiency level and their realization of the condolence speech act in English χ^2 *(8, N = 913) = 19.55, p = 0.01* (see Table 5).

This study was an attempt to investigate Persian-speaking EFL learners' realization of the condolence speech act in English at elementary, intermediate, and advanced proficiency levels and to compare their realization patterns with English NSs' realization patterns. To this end, three research questions were formulated (see Research Questions), which we answer below.

As far as the first research question is concerned, the results from the study revealed that Persian-speaking EFL learners, irrespective of their proficiency levels, opted for 'expression of sympathy' and 'other' strategies as their most preferred condolence strategies. However, 'expression of concern' was not adopted by any of the three groups of EFL learners. The condolence strategies and the pertinent semantic formulas that produced the most learner-specific responses within our EFL learners'

Table 5. Chi-Square Test Comparing Condolence Strategies Used by Persian-Speaking EFL Learners at Different Proficiency Levels

	Value	df	Asymp. sig. (2-sided)
Pearson chi-square	19.551*	8	.012
Likelihood ratio	19.255	8	.014
Linear-by-linear association	.160	1	.689
N of valid cases	913		

Note. *0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 5.65.

data, along with justifications for their appearance, are going to be discussed below.

There were many cases in the learners' data in which 'expression of sympathy' was used more than once. The use of multiple semantic formulas to express sympathy in the learners' data could be attributed to the fact that 'expression of sympathy' is considered as the core of condolence strategy. Iranians are emotional people, and there are situations in which more than being sorry is needed (Morady Moghaddam, 2012); therefore, in this study, Persian-speaking EFL learners often used more than a single semantic formula to sympathize with the bereaved. With respect to the semantic formulas, it must be noted that all the three groups of EFL learners showed an inclination towards 'sorry,' 'I'm sorry,' 'I'm+ intensifier+ sorry,' 'I'm sorry to hear…', and 'I'm sorry for…'. Thus, Persian-speaking EFL learners seem to have perceived the fact that the word 'sorry,' as Elwood (2004) suggests, is "a virtually obligatory response" to express sympathy in English (p. 256). The second frequently-used semantic formula by the three proficiency-level groups was 'I would like to offer my condolences.' Persian-speaking EFL learners' preference for this formal semantic formula probably stems from three facts: first of all, under the influence of their L1, Persian-speaking EFL learners literally translate the semantic formula *tæsliæt migæm* from Persian into English resulting in formal utterances like 'Please accept my condolences' or 'I would like to offer my condolences.' Second, Persian-speaking EFL learners must rely on instructional materials to receive input in the L2, as such they oftentimes interact with their textbooks (Morady Moghaddam, 2012) which prescribe the use of formal expressions, which are more appropriate for writing rather than speaking. Third, Trosborg (1995) contends that the L2 learners who have not thoroughly mastered the distinctions between written and oral language may transfer characteristics of the written medium which requires a higher level of formality into the written version of their spoken language.

The formulation of the 'other' strategy as the second highest-frequency condolence strategy among Persian-speaking EFL learners appeared to be influenced by culture-specific values, particularly religious ones. Among 'other' sub-strategies, the EFL learners showed a preference for 'related comments' which included five types: prayers for the deceased, prayers for the bereaved, statements indicating the deceased is in heaven, statements indicating the deceased will be missed or would not be forgotten, and other comments that did not fit any of these categories. The first category often included praying for God's mercy and forgiveness for the deceased perhaps due to the belief that humans are prone to committing sins, and only God can forgive them (Al-Shboul & Maros, 2013). The second category included praying for the bereaved to be patient during his/her time of grief perhaps because patience gives the bereaved strength to put up with the loss. There were also prayers for the bereaved and his/her family to have a long life. Similarly, the responses in the third category were indicative of belief in the afterlife.

Another strategy that elicited learner-specific responses was 'future-oriented remark'. Under the influence of negative transfer from their mother tongue, Persian-speaking EFL learners formulated learner-specific content for this strategy. It is also conceivable that socio-cultural values contributed to Persian-speaking EFL learners' formulation of learner-specific responses. This interpretation is in line with Lotfollahi and Eslami-Rasekh's (2011) findings that, to formulate the 'future-oriented remark' strategy, Persian-speaking EFL learners produced responses that were unique to their society.

Finally, 'expression of concern' was not common among Persian-speaking EFL learners. This fact has been confirmed by Lotfollahi and Eslami-Rasekh (2011), who reported that the use of this strategy is rare among Iranian EFL learners. Elwood (2004) justifies the absence of this condolence strategy by emphasizing the fact that asking questions may be considered more inquisitive to Asians than to Americans. Therefore, Persian learners of English might find it redundant to ask the bereaved how he/she is holding up since the answer to this question is obviously 'not well.'

To address the second research question, it must be pointed out that the Persian-speaking

EFL learners had access to the same condolence strategies that English NSs used, yet they sometimes differed from NSs due to their choices of semantic formulas, content, or forms which often resulted in the formulation of non-native-like utterances. Interestingly, Persian-speaking EFL learners produced the most non-native-like responses for 'expression of sympathy' and 'other' strategies, in particular, 'related comments.' Furthermore, baseline comparisons revealed a slight difference in the form in which 'expression of empathy' was used by English NSs on the one hand, and Persian-speaking EFL learners, on the other. Whereas English NSs preferred the negative form 'I can't imagine…', Persian-speaking EFL learners stated this sub-strategy in the affirmative form 'I can imagine…'. Additionally, despite the fact that Persian-speaking EFL learners were similar to English NSs in their preference for the imperative form to formulate 'future-oriented remark,' they sharply differed from NS norms in the sociopragmatic content they adopted for this strategy, which basically dealt with recommendation to be patient and calm or recommendation not to cry.

Nevertheless, Persian-speaking EFL learners showed no difficulty in formulating 'offer of assistance' strategy under the influence of positive transfer from Persian into English. Likewise, Iranian EFL learners seemed to have acquired appropriate condolence-related interjections; hence, they showed no difficulty in formulating 'acknowledgement of death.'

Last but not least, under the influence of socio-cultural norms, 'expression of concern' was not used by Persian-speaking EFL learners at all since, in Iran, it is not common practice to ask how the bereaved is doing when one knows he/she is not doing fine in his/her time of grief.

As for the third research question, it must be pointed out that the chi-square test of independence revealed that L2 proficiency level was associated with the realization strategies Persian-speaking EFL learners adopted. It is noteworthy that proficiency-associated effects have also been corroborated by Safont Jordà (2005) and Ellis (2008) who reported instances of proficiency-related changes in the speech act performance of EFL/ESL learners in a number of studies. The present study also yielded a number of proficiency-associated effects which are discussed below.

In the case of 'expression of sympathy,' the percentage of the Persian-speaking EFL learners' non-native-like responses decreased as their level of proficiency increased. That is to say, the percentage of non-native-like responses such as 'That's too bad,' 'What a pity,' and the like dropped from 38.6% for the elementary-level learners to 33% for the intermediate-level learners, falling to 27.1% for the advanced-level learners. On the other hand, the use of the native-like expression 'I'm sorry for your loss,' which was used by 46.7% of the English NSs, gradually increased across the three proficiency levels from 2.3% for the elementary-level learners to 7.8% for the intermediate-level learners, reaching 13.5% for the advanced-level learners.

Proficiency-related changes were also observed in the EFL learners' use of 'other' strategy. For instance, as for 'related comment,' the percentage of non-native-like responses such as 'I hope it is your last sadness,' or 'May God forgive him/her' declined from 69.6% for the elementary-level learners to 65.7% for the intermediate-level learners, falling to 56% for the advanced-level learners. Besides, Persian-speaking EFL learners showed slight progression towards the use of the native-like expression 'You are in my prayers,' which was the most frequently used semantic formula among English NSs (37%). That is to say, the use of this expression increased from 0% for the elementary-level learners to 2.5% for the intermediate-level learners, compared with 4% for the advanced-level learners. Still, slight proficiency-related progress was observed among Persian-speaking EFL learners for the 'acknowledgement of death' strategy. That is, the use of non-native-like interjections like 'ay,' 'damn,' and 'alas' decreased from 28.5% for the elementary-level learners to 4.3% for the intermediate-level learners, reaching 0% for the advanced-level learners.

However, one strategy for which no proficiency-associated effects were observed was 'expression of concern.' While 2.7% of the English NSs used

this strategy in their responses, Persian-speaking EFL learners across the three proficiency levels showed no interest in this condolence strategy, most probably under the influence of their L1, for this strategy is not common in Persian.

To sum up, it must be noted that despite the fact that the proficiency-related changes observed across the three levels under study are not considerable, they can be interpreted as hopeful indicators of a progression from L1 influence to native-like approximation.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine Persian-speaking EFL learners' realization of the condolence speech act in English and to compare their performance with the condolence realization patterns of NSs of English for baseline comparisons. This study was also interested in the comparison of condolence realization patterns across three levels of L2 proficiency. Based on the findings of the study, the following conclusions can be drawn.

First, Persian-speaking EFL learners' conceptualization and verbalization of condolence strategies might be influenced by the linguistic and cultural norms of their mother tongue. Whereas the results of the study revealed traces of positive pragmatic transfer for the realization of 'acknowledgement of death' and 'offer of assistance' strategies, evidence of negative pragmatic transfer was observed for 'expression of sympathy,' 'other,' and 'future-oriented remarks.'

Second, English NSs and Persian-speaking learners of English seem to have access to similar condolence realization strategies yet have different strategy preferences and differ in their choices of semantic formulas, sociopragmatic content, and pragmalinguistic forms verifying Bardovi-Harlig's (2001) conclusion that NSs and nonnative speakers differ in their choice, content, and form of speech acts (cited in O'Keeffe, Clancy, & Adolphs, 2011).

Third, Persian-speaking EFL learners, irrespective of their proficiency levels, were similar to English NSs in their access to a number of condolence realization strategies, and the results of the study across the three proficiency levels indicated learners' development of pragmatic competence towards the target language norms; however, at times they showed evidence of cross-linguistic influence from Persian even at the advanced level, which makes their speech act behavior learner-specific and points to potential problematic areas for EFL learners.

Finally, the results from this study could be illuminating for the growing body of ILP research in a number of ways. First, this study, as a speech act-oriented study, could benefit material developers as the materials currently taught have, for the most part, been prepared in the absence of systematic studies, and are often based on the writers' intuition (LoCastro, 2012; O'Keeffe et al., 2011; Olshtain & Cohen, 1991). Consequently, empirical research on speech acts could be illuminating for materials developers. Second, this study could have pedagogical implications for the language teachers as well and may serve to inform teachers about their students' level of awareness of the condolence speech act so that they can tailor their instruction to the needs of their students. Furthermore, the present study could serve to benefit language test designers as well since no established tests of pragmatic competence are available at present (Jianda, 2006), and speech act research could be enlightening for constructing tests that could successfully measure language learners' pragmatic knowledge.

At this point, it is noteworthy that speech act production incorporates both the spoken and the written mediums. ILP research has primarily focused on the spoken medium and has paid little, if any, attention to writing (Ellis, 2008). This might call for further studies of written production of the condolence speech act since the ability to perform different speech acts in face-to-face interaction might vary from their performance in writing (Ellis, 2008). Additionally, as Kim (2007) puts it, written DCTs might impose constraints on the study of speech acts since L2 learners' intuitions about

what they think they would say in a certain situation are not a reliable indicator of their pragmatic competence (Wolfson, 1989a, as cited in Ellis, 2008). Furthermore, Kasper and Rose (1999; 2002, as cited in Safont Jordà, 2005) argue that one of the major issues that should be addressed in further research on speech acts is that of implementing different elicitation techniques. Hence, future studies can compare data obtained from DCTs with those collected by means of other elicitation techniques such as role-plays, spontaneous conversations, self-reports, recall protocols, and the like.

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