

## Persuasive Strategies Among Iranian EFL Learners

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### Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the application of persuasive strategies among Iranian learners of English as a foreign language. To this end, 150 Iranian English learners took part in this study. The data were collected by means of a discourse completion test (DCT) consisting of 6 questions similar to real life persuasive situations. The Chi-square test was applied to compare the frequencies of persuasion strategies' application among Iranian EFL learners. Moreover, the influence of gender on the preference of persuasive strategies by respondents was discussed. Results demonstrated some differences and similarities in utilization of this speech act by male and female Iranian learners. Finally, the results were discussed in the context of language teaching and learning.

**Key words:** Interlanguage pragmatics; Speech act; Persuasion strategies; Iranian EFL learners

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### INTRODUCTION

For conducting efficient communication as Paulston and Bruder (1976) mentioned, the knowledge of linguistic forms is not sufficient. Speakers should have information about the social meaning of the linguistic forms or the

knowledge of social rules for language use. As Dell Hymes pointed out (as cited in Paulston & Bruder, 1967, p.56) "Communicative competence must include not only the linguistic forms of the language but also knowledge of when, how, and to whom it is appropriate to use these forms". In the same vein, Schmidt and Richards (1980) defined pragmatics as the study of how utterances used in interaction, particularly the relationship between sentences, the context, and the situation in which utterances are applied. Pragmatics includes the study of how the interpretation and application of utterances depends on the knowledge of actual world, how speakers use and understand speech acts and how the structure of sentences is influenced by relationship between the speaker and the hearer. In fact, pragmatics explains "the unwritten maxims of conversation that speaker follows in order to cooperate and be socially acceptable to each other" (Cutting, 2002, p.187).

Speech act has been one of the main aspects of pragmatics for a long time. This concept was introduced first by Austin (1960) in his search for finding ways of regarding language as a form of action. Speech act theory refers to functions and uses of the language or in other words, speech act includes all the acts we do while speaking as invitations, refusals, apologies, congratulations, persuasion and so on. According to Halliday (1973, p.18) such activities do not by themselves give us enough information while they reveal much about social purposes in which people use language for (as cited in Schmidt & Richards, 1980). According to Wolfson (1981, p.123) "speech acts differ cross culturally not only in the way they are realized but also in their distribution, their frequency of occurrence, and in the functions they serve" (as cited in Farnia et al, 2010).

In this regard, pragmatic competence helps students to come up with the problems of miscommunication in different cultures, and for effective communication in second language it is necessary to make students familiar

with the appropriate selection and production of different speech acts in different contexts. Usually language teachers take the communicative competence the same as the knowledge of linguistic forms or the ability to carry out linguistic interaction in the target language, but efficient communication is beyond that. It requires that speakers have at least some information about the social meaning of linguistic forms (Paulston&Bruder, 1976). Therefore, a great deal of studies have been conducted across different languages and cultures to address the universalities and variations in regard to different speech acts such as request (Tatton, 2008), Apology (Clyne, 1994), complaint (Salmani-Nodoushan, 2007), compliment (Grossi, 2009), refusal (Al-Kahtani, 2005), but unfortunately, among which the speech act of persuasion has received little attention.

Robin Lakoff (1982) defined persuasion as the “attempt or intention of one party to change the behavior, feelings, intentions, or viewpoint of another by communicative means” (as cited in Hardin, 2010, p.155). Therefore, advertising, propaganda, political oratory, court language and religious sermons are examples of persuasive discourse; however, persuasion can also be used in daily interactions. Persuasion according to Searle (1969) is regarded as a directive speech act in which the speaker’s intention is to make the hearers to commit him or herself to perform some form of action or in other words, persuasion is an attempt of speaker to match the world with his / her words (as cited in Bu, 2010 ). Persuasion according to Brown & Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory is categorized as a face threatening act (FTA), and according to Lakoff (1982) it is considered as a kind of imposition from the speaker upon the hearer or as Searle (1969) pointed out persuasion is a kind of commitment or urge for accomplishment of some actions from speaker to hearer. In this sense, Iranian might have different perceptions for how this speech act should be conducted. Iranian students like other EFL learners might have difficulty in diagnosing the appropriate patterns through which this speech act is performed. Therefore, having enough knowledge to infer the meaning and the ability to apply appropriate strategies for conducting persuasion seem crucial to hinder breakdown in intercultural communication.

## 1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to (Selinker, 1972) interlanguage is referred to “as the learners’ language system that is not consistent with the native speakers’ language system. Kasper (1998) combines the study of the two areas of pragmatics and interlanguage and describes the term interlanguage pragmatics as the study of nonnative speakers’ understanding and production linguistic performance in second language or nonnative speakers’ how to do things with words in second language (as cited in Bu,

2010). The relationship between pragmatics and second language acquisition led to emerge a new field known as interlanguage pragmatics (ILP). According to Kasper (1992) interlanguage pragmatics is defined as “the branch of second language research which studied how non-native speakers understand and carry out linguistic actions in a target language, and how they acquire L2 pragmatic knowledge”. Communicative competence definitely involves pragmatic competence (as cited by Martínez-Flor, 2005, p.140). As cited in Hardin (2010) “following Cicero’s classical oration and Aristotle’s ethos, Hugh Rank (1988, p.10) suggests a basic persuasive formula for advertisements, political speech and other types of persuasive discourse”. This formula consists of five components which are:

- a) Attention –getting
- b) Confidence-building
- c) Desire-simulating
- d) Urgency-stressing
- e) Response-seeking

Hardin (2010) based on the findings of Rank’s (1988) and Geoffrey Leech’ works finds that “memorability (making the audience remember the message), force (emotional and logical appeals and the strength of a message), and participation (the desire for a response or audience/hearer involvement) are primary persuasive goals” (as cited in Hardin, 2010, p.156).

Pragmatic research on speech act of persuasion has been conducted in several fields. One of these fields is analysis of persuasion strategies in courtroom and advertising. Barkley and Anderson (2008) studied the utilization of persuasion techniques by lawyers in the courtroom and discover that in persuasive attempts what you are saying is not the only reason which makes you successful in the argument, but how they are said and when they are said are important issues as well. In other words, when you produce an argument from a reputable source, your argument seems more persuasive. It concluded type of the language which is used, less hesitation, more confidence, persistence and clarity makes your argument more persuasive. This research suggested some new policies to be successful in persuading others such as “wear down your target” by insisting on your argument and make use of the exhaustion of the hearers.

In another study, Hardin (2010) analyzed the speech act of trying to persuade, among intermediate Spanish learners. He examined the types of speech acts produced by these learners in different persuasive situations. The student’ responses were compared with some native speakers’ responses to see their similarities and differences in producing this speech act. The results show some interesting results about which types of speech acts were mostly preferred by Spanish learners.

From the above discussions, we can conclude that there is little research literature on the use of persuasive strategies in general, and no search was performed in

EFL domain in particular. Since pragmatic transfer in persuading speech act by Iranian learners of English can cause breakdown in communication, we think it is necessary to investigate how Iranian language learners perform this speech act in order to know how learners' culture-specific background can affect their preference for application of the persuasive strategies in English.

## 2. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

It seems that most of the previous studies on speech act has been done on the different kinds of speech act such as request (e.g. Taguchi, 2006; Tatton 2008) apology (e.g. Eslami-Rasekh & Mardani 2010), refusal (Tanck, 2002), complaint (Farnia et al, 2010), compliment (Grossi, 2009), and disagreement (Jiang, 2005). Since the speech act of persuasion has received scant attention, therefore we decided to focus our study on this area to determine the areas of difficulties and the influence of culture and gender of participants in the production of speech acts. With that in mind this paper aims to promote cross-cultural understanding and pragmatic awareness in EFL learners by investigating and discovering the preferred linguistic features by Iranian English students. Therefore, this study also addresses the following questions:

Q1: Is there any significant difference among Iranian EFL learners in application of the persuasion strategies?

Q2: Is there any significant difference between Iranian male and female EFL learner in the application of persuasion strategies?

## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Setting and participants

Participants in this study consisted of 150 Iranians who were studying English in university. They involved 75 males and 75 females. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 35. They were all studying in Mashhad (a city in Iran). All of the participants were university students and since English in Iran is not used in daily conversations, for all of the respondents English is regarded as a foreign language.

### 3.2 Instrumentation

Data were collected via a discourse completion test (DCT), including 6 situations in which participants write what they think they would say in persuasive situations (see Appendix). A pilot study was administered in which 20 EFL learners took part. Some of the participants were interviewed and had to think aloud as well. A team of specialists in L2 were asked to substantiate content validity of the DCT, and consequently based on the feedback of participants; ambiguities and obstacles of DCT were discovered and eliminated. Moreover, to reach more reliable data, 2 raters corrected the

respondents' replies. The data were gathered from a variety of situations to determine how Persian speakers use persuasive language. The participants responded to 6 persuasive situations in which power relationship among them distributed differently for instance hearer was either of lower status (+power) or interlocutor were of equal status (=power) or the hearer was of higher status (-power).

### 3.3 Procedure

DCT was distributed among English university students. After giving the necessary instruction for completing the questionnaire by the researchers, participants were asked to respond to the questions. To analyze the data gathered from the Iranian students, the particular coding scheme, The Cross Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) was used, which is a universally valid scale of directness and subsequently empirically tested and vastly used by many researchers (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984, as cited in Hong, 1999).

The CCSARP was classified in three categories: directness level, internal modification and external modification. The focus of this study was on directness level of persuasive strategies which was classified as nine-point scale: Mood derivable, Performatives, Hedge performatives, Obligation statement, Want statement, Suggestory formulae, Query preparatory, Strong hints and Mild hints.

This coding scheme consists of direct level, conventionally indirect level, and non-conventionally indirect level.

#### a. Direct Level

- Mood derivable: Imperatives are the dominant forms of utterances of this type (for example: lend me the pen.).
- Performatives: are utterances which the illocutionary force is used in them explicitly (for example: leave me alone.).
- Hedge performatives: are utterances which the illocutionary force is softening by use of hedging expressions (for example: I would like to ask you to leave me alone.).
- Obligation statements: are utterances which in them obligation is imposed by the speaker to the hearer to perform the act (for example: You should come back early.).
- Want statements: are utterances which include the speaker's needs, desires, wishes, and demands (for example: If you let me do this thing, I can do it better.).

#### b. Conventionally Indirect Level

- Suggestory formulae: These utterances use the formulae to suggest the hearer to perform something (for example: How about going cinema tonight? Or let's do it in this way?).
- Query preparatory: This category includes the interrogative or an interrogative-cum-conditional form (for example: Would you mind closing the door?).

**C. Non-Conventionally Indirect Level**

- Strong hints: Utterances which make partial reference to the act or may indicate reason or support for the desired act (For example: The game is boring.).
- Mild hints: utterances which make no reference to the desired act but it inferred by the context (for Example: Are you busy?).

After collecting the data, responses were analyzed quantitatively based on the CCSARP nine-rating scale. The unit of analysis was head act of utterance or sequence of utterances. The data then were entered into SPSS (version 16.0) for analyzing the frequency of the responses. Finally, Chi-square was utilized to analyze the data.

**4. RESULTS**

This study intended to compare and contrast the persuasive strategies employed by Iranian EFL learners. Therefore, Iranian EFL responses were analyzed upon using a particular coding scheme named as CCSARP, and the results of occurrence of each category of strategies were calculated and tabulated in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
**Frequency and Percentage of Persuasion Formulas by Iranian EFL Learners**

	Iranian EFL learners	
	Frequency	Percentage
Mood	243	24.20%
Performatives	34	3.39%
Hedge	81	8.07%
Obligation	100	9.96%
Want	146	14.54%
Suggestory formulae	2	0.2%
Query	332	33.07%
Strong hint	25	2.49%
Mild hint	40	3.98%

**Table 3**  
**The Results of the Chi-square for Strategies Selected by EFL Students Considering Gender**

	Observed N		Expected		df	x <sup>2</sup>	Sig
	Male	Female	Male	Female			
Mood	145	98	121.5	121.5	1	9.091	.003*
Performatives	23	11	17.0	17.0	1	4.235	.040*
Hedge	36	45	40.5	40.5	1	1.000	.317
Obligation	45	55	50.0	50.0	1	1.000	.317
Want statement	60	86	73.0	73.0	1	4.630	.031*
Suggest	-	2	-	2.0	-	-	-
Query	165	168	166.5	166.5	1	.027	.869
Strong hint	13	12	12.5	12.5	1	.040	.841
Mild hint	15	25	20.0	20.0	1	2.500	.114

As Table 3 demonstrates, there are significant differences between males and females in their preference for strategies of Mood derivable ( $x^2=9.091$ ,  $p<.05$ ) and Performatives ( $x^2=4.235$ ,  $p<.05$ ) which were both mostly selected by men. Moreover, there is a significant difference

As Table 1 demonstrates, regarding the type of persuasion strategies utilized by Iranian EFL learners, all the strategies types employed by them although they revealed different frequencies. The results are summarized as below:

**Table 2**  
**The Results of the Chi-square for the Strategies Selected by EFL Students**

Strategies	Observed N	Expected N	Residual	df	x <sup>2</sup>	Sig
Mood	243	111.7	131.3			
Performativ	34	111.7	-77.7			
Hedge	81	111.7	-30.7			
Obligation	100	111.7	-11.7			
Want	146	111.7	34.3			
Suggestory	2	111.7	-109.7			
Query	333	111.7	221.3			
Stronghint	26	111.7	-85.7			
Mild hint	40	111.7	-71.7	8	177.417	.000

As Table 2 shows, the most dominant strategy type used by Iranian EFL learners is Query preparatory and Mood derivable. As we can see, in Query preparatory (observed N=333, expected N=111.7) frequency extremely is higher than what is expected; moreover, in Mood derivable (observed N=243, expected N=111.7) frequency is again considerably higher than what is expected. Moreover, as the result indicates the least preferred strategy type used by Iranian EFL learners is Suggestory formulae (observed N=2, expected N=111.7) and Strong hint (observed N=2, expected N=111.7) which their frequency are significantly less than what we expected.

To discover whether there is significant difference between performance of male and female Iranian EFL learners in persuasion strategies Chi-square test was also carried out. The results of the comparison between the Chi-square for the strategies selected by Iranian male and female are presented in Table 3.

( $x^2= 4.630$ ,  $p<.05$ ) in selection of Want statement strategy among men and women. As it can be seen, this strategy is used by women (N=86) more often than expected (N=73). Based on the results, it can be inferred that there are some similarities and differences between non-native male and

female in the application of persuasive strategies.

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## DISCUSSION

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This study first aimed to investigate the preference of Iranian EFL learners in employment of persuasive strategies, and in the next step it was intended to discover whether there is any significant difference between participants in their selection of persuasion strategies with respect to gender.

Regarding the first aim of the study, findings of this study revealed that generally the most dominant strategy for EFL learners is Query preparatory which is the conventionally indirect strategy type, which is represented by interrogative or an interrogative –cum-conditional form. The frequent use of Query preparatory by non-native English speakers is consistent with previous studies' results (Blum-Kalka & Olshtain, 1984; Hong, 2009; Tatton, 2008) which mentioned that mostly all languages prefer the application of conventionally indirect strategies. This fact also can be clarified by different features of high and low-context cultures. According to Allami and Naeimi (2010) in a high-context culture such as Iran, people tend to use indirect, symbolic, vague, and implicit style of communication whereas low-context culture is generally represented by direct, lucid, accurate, and explicit communication approach. This result is not consistent with Hardin's (2010) finding that, non-native speakers use explicit speech act verbs in persuasive discourse, and the use of these verbs may be less dominant among native speakers. Our findings are in line with Nelson, Carson, Al Batal, and El Bakary's (2002, as cited in Allami & Naeimi 2010) and (Jalilifar, 2009) findings indicating that there is a priority for indirect and implicit communication in Iranian culture.

Regarding the second aim of the study, the results show that men mostly prefer to use mood derivable strategy for persuasion in the form of imperatives, which is in accordance with the Lakoff's (1975) findings about men language. According to her, men tried to be more assertive in their conversation while women use hedges more than men do. She holds that women usually use certain linguistic features such as hedging devices, tag questions, intensifiers and qualifiers, so-called "trivial lexis", "empty" adjectives and rising intonation on declaratives. The link between these markers is their common function in communication: they try to weaken or mitigate the force of an utterance. The findings of this study about male and female EFL learners are consistent with this claim, for instance most of the male participants start their utterances with imperative form which is representative of Mood derivable strategy and majority of female speakers start their statements with "I would like to" or "It is better to" or "It is possible to" which are the representative of Hedged performatives, conveying a kind of uncertainty. This strategy normally preferred by women

in order to show more politeness in their communication; however, our findings are in contrast with Al-khateeb's (2009), Bryant Smith's (2009) and Allami's (2006) studies which mentioned that gender is an insignificant factor in production of speech acts.

It seems that Iranian learners of English in performing the speech act maintain some of their native culture features showing pragmatic transfer to some extent. For instance, the considerable use of Mood derivable strategy which usually is represented by imperative forms. In English it is the least preferred strategies while in Iranian culture this strategy seems to be the appropriate way of committing someone to perform the desired act. Therefore, it is fair to say that Iranian English students transfer this strategy from their first language to English language and this fact emphasizes the necessity of development of pragmatic competence among foreign language learners. In this regard, results of this study propose some implications: First, finding of this study can help teachers and test designers to write appropriate diagnostic tests in order to assess the general knowledge and understanding of language learners about speech acts and to evaluate the ability and performance of learners in production of speech acts in the specific context of persuasive discourse. Second, the results of this research help material developers and publishers to know which speech acts are basic and should be noticed in pedagogic planning for effective education and how to choose materials for the purpose of teaching speech acts. Third, the findings of this research can be used in teacher training programs to uncover these issues as to what extent realization and interpretation strategies for speech act should be taught explicitly in a language teaching program.

This study investigated the directness level of speech act of persuade and did not consider internal modification and external modification parts of CCSARP; therefore, further study is required to address these issues. More studies also can investigate the effect of social power and social distance on interlocutors' responses in the application of persuasive strategies. Finally, it is hoped this study can illustrate the significance of interlanguage pragmatic among EFL language learners and teachers in order to understand the speech act realization better, aiding EFL learners to acquire appropriate persuasive behaviors to improve their performance in intercultural communication.

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