

A Cross-Cultural Study of Iranians' and Malays' Expressions of Gratitude

Maryam Farnia & Hiba Qusay Abdul Sattar

Payame Noor University, Iran - Australian Technical Management College, Australia

Abstract

The present study is an attempt to examine how Iranian international students in Malaysia and Malay university students express gratitude. To this end, the data were collected from Iranian and Malay university students in Malaysia through an open-ended questionnaire in the form of a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) and a follow-up semi-structured interview. Data were then analyzed based on a modified version of Cheng's (2005) classification of expressions of gratitude. The findings showed that the two groups used *thanking* as the most frequent strategy. However, there were differences in the use of strategies such as *positive feelings*, *apology*, and *altermers* between Malay and Iranian respondents. Finally, the present study emphasizes the importance of understanding of the communicative needs of the learner and teaching the cultural aspects of language.

Keywords: *Intercultural communication, speech act, expressions of gratitude, strategy*

Introduction

People have come into more face-to-face intercultural and cross-cultural contact due to the increased number of migrations, businesses, travels and international education, as a result of which, studies on intercultural interaction have attracted the attention of scholars from different disciplines, e.g. applied linguistics, language, and sociology (Jakson, 2012). One of the challenges brought about by intercultural communication was the need to create awareness about the importance of understanding speech acts cross-culturally. Although speech acts are identified as universal phenomena, they manifest themselves differently across languages and cultures. This cross-cultural difference in language use can lead to a failure in interaction or to misunderstanding across cultures. However, while the focus of cross-cultural communication studies is on a single communicative feature within and across cultures, studies on intercultural communication address a number of features between two cultural systems in a particular intercultural encounter (Carbaugh, 1990; cited in Chick, 2009, p.331).

We have witnessed a great deal of research in cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics during the last two decades. Cross-cultural studies, as a subfield of pragmatics, examine similarities and differences of pragmatic strategies between at least two languages and cultures (Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper, 1989; Oatey, 2000). In other words, as Kasper and Schmidt (1996) put it, cross-cultural studies take a comparative approach focusing on the cross-cultural similarities and differences in linguistic realization and the sociopragmatic judgment in different contexts.

Within the scope of gratitude, it is very common to express gratitude for any type of help or verbal gifts (advice, compliments, offers, etc.). However, the strategies used to express appreciation are language and cultural specific. Even within the same language or cultural system some differences emerge due to factors like region, age, gender, social status, ethnicity, etc. The present study examines strategies used by Iranians and Malays when expressing gratitude.

Expressing gratitude and saving face

The theoretical framework of the present study is based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) work. The central concept of Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness is face. 'Face', according to Brown and Levinson (1978, p.66), is 'something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction'. This means that one's own face can be sustained by only the actions of others, thus they assume that all members of a society would co-operate in order to maintain each other's face. In other words, they claim that all members of a society are concerned about their 'face', the self-image they present to others and the fact that they assume other people have similar 'face' wants. Brown and Levinson provide "a tool kit to compare and interpret the ways in which speakers handle a range of different speech events across a range of different cultures" (Watts, 2003, p.112).

Similarly, Song (2012) indicated that Brown and Levinson's theory is basically based on three universal claims of politeness in communicative acts. First, in their view, Brown and Levinson (1978) believe that all individuals in any society have face as self-esteem. Second, they consider all communicative acts to have the potential to threaten a speaker's face. Finally, members of a society would use various linguistic strategies in order to reduce the impact of these threats. The main function of politeness is the use of a variety of strategies to weaken or balance face-threatening acts which may affect the public image and ensuring smooth and harmonious communication. Brown and Levinson (1978) identified those politeness strategies which are toward positive face which evince attentiveness and solidarity and those which are towards negative face and maintain a respectful distance.

Expressions of gratitude are used "when a speaker wants the addressee to know that s/he is grateful for what the addressee has said or done" (Jautz, 2008, p.142, cited in Farenkia (2012)). By expressing appreciation, the speaker enhances the positive face of the addressee. The positive face is defined as "the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others" (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p.62). Gratitude expressions are used to indicate that the speaker is appreciative for and approves of what the addressee has done. Although thanking is described as "a face-enhancing, a convivial or a positively affective speech act" (Leech, 1983, p. 104), it is presented in Brown and Levinson's theory of face as a face-threatening act. One may wonder how expressing gratitude can be viewed as a face-threatening act. Brown and Levinson (1987, p.67) described the speech act of gratitude as being a threat to the speakers negative face as the latter "accepts a debt, humbles his own face". Other studies following the face-saving approach looked at gratitude as recognition of the hearer's image and enhancement of his negative face. For example, Okamoto and Robinson (1997) argued that the expression of gratitude varies depending on the extent of imposition on the hearer. In this sense, "the greater the imposition there is on the giver, the more polite gratitude forms will be used" (Okamoto and Robinson, 1997, p.412).

Brown and Levinson (1987) regarded these politeness strategies as being universal entities which have similar meanings across different cultures. Yet, they also acknowledge the possibilities that their theory can represent in different ways in various cultures. This study is in line with Brown and Levinson's argument that, according to Siebold (2012), such politeness strategies are subject to cultural diversity in any particular society. This argument is also supported by the many qualities which have been attributed to 'face' which give the impression of great cultural variability among different speech communities. For example, Malays value indirectness in speaking in order to save the face of others and maintain good relationships between interlocutors and within society as a whole (Maros, 2006). Face is linked to good manners, being cultured and refined, all of which can be part of Malays' effort to preserve face, which is important in establishing good relationships and maintaining the social harmony. In the Malay context, "face" means maintaining a person's dignity by not embarrassing him or her as an individual (Asma Abullah, 1996, p.30, cited in Moras, 2006). Maros (2006) reported that Malays are very cautious about the arrangement of words, as well as not hurting their friends' feelings or making them sad. The friends' responses and reactions were described as also being important to them.

As for Persians, Koutlaki (2002, p. 1742) found 'pride' and 'honor' (*šaxsiat and ehteram*) as its two basic components, including personality, character, self-respect and social standing as well as esteem and dignity. Both *šaxsiat* and *ehteram* are evident in the communication styles within the Iranian society and thus are linked to the way Iranians treat and consider each other's face. In this sense, Iranians tend to

employ more implicit ways of communication. Pishghadam and Sharafadini (2011, p. 157) indicated that “Iranian tend to use a more implicit communication style”. This is also in line with Allami and Naeimi (2010) who claimed that people of high-context culture like Iran use more implicit strategies than explicit ones which proves the importance of the concept of face in Iranian culture.

Gratitude is realized in the speech of nearly anybody who speaks any language in the world and due to its importance, it is explicitly taught at an early age (Eisenstein and Bodman, 1986, 1993; Chang, 2008). In other words, expression of gratitude is one of the few functions that is explicitly taught to children (Clankie, 1993) and arises in the speech of nearly everyone who speaks any language in the world. Due to its importance, gratitude is explicitly taught at an early age (Eisenstein and Bodman, 1986, 1993; Chang, 2008) unlike other language functions such as complaining, requesting or refusing which are taught implicitly (i.e. through observation and interaction with others). Studies have shown that even advanced learners have difficulty in expressing gratitude in an adequate manner (Eisenstein and Bodman, 1986, 1993; Hinkel, 1994). One of the difficulties in thanking in a second or foreign language context lies in the fact that politeness conventions vary across cultures and, therefore, are subject to cultural variation. Thus, this study explores the ways gratitude is expressed in two different cultures, i.e. Iranian and Malay.

Selected studies on expressions of gratitude

Although the realization of gratitude in English has received considerable attention, there is scanty literature available on the speech act of gratitude among Malays and Iranians. The focus on English in speech act research is partly related to the Anglo-Saxon theoretical background of cross-cultural pragmatics. Most of the conducted studies can be classified into those which examine the realization of the expression of gratitude by one or two groups of native speakers (e.g. Ahar and Eslami-Rasek, 2011; Pham, 2013), and those which compare native speakers' and language learners' realization of expressions of gratitude (e.g. Farnia and Raja Rozina, 2009; Al-Khawaldeh and Žegarac, 2013).

One of the recent studies conducted on gratitude is the one by Pham (2013) who investigated the effects of social distance on the act of expressing gratitude in Vietnamese. The data of the study were collected through a 12 situations in the form of an open-ended questionnaire in the form of Discourse Completion Task (hence DCT) situations. Of the 12 DCT situations, there were four in which interlocutors were intimates (e.g. close friends or family members), four in which interlocutors were friends (e.g. classmates, neighbors), and four in which interlocutors did not know each other (e.g. strangers). The subjects were given the choice of opting out; that is, they were instructed to mark a cross on the space provided after each of the situations if they decided that they would say nothing in that situation. The respondents were all Vietnamese undergraduate students with an age range of 18 to 27 at universities in Vietnam. They had come from different parts of the country and spoke Vietnamese as their mother tongue. They had never travelled to or lived in any foreign country. Results showed that social distance has a great influence on how gratitude is expressed in different interpersonal relationships. In general, Vietnamese native speakers used thanking expressions for distant interlocutors more frequently than for closer interlocutors. Results also showed that Vietnamese native speakers appear to do more interactional work in their thanking expressions to friends than to intimates and strangers.

In another study, Siebold (2012) examined the differences in expressing explicit and implicit thanking in Spanish and German. Siebold's assumption was that Spanish and German cultures are both different in terms of communicative behaviors and particularly in the expression of verbal gratitude. Data were collected using eight open role-play situations designed to produce an expression of thanks. Subjects were 14 Spanish and 14 Germans aged 20 to 67 who participated in these open role-plays over several days tested by using a range of different instruments. Findings indicated that the norms of politeness differ markedly across the two cultures. Results also were in line with previous studies which had pointed to the low occurrence of thanking formula and the rather implicit way of thanking in certain Spanish conversations compared to German expression of thanks which was characterized by a wide variety of explicit thanking formulae.

Al-Khawaldeh and Žegarac (2013) examined Jordanians' perceptions of the ways and the extent to which gender influences the communication of gratitude in some everyday situations. The participants were 10

female and 10 male postgraduate Jordanian students aged between 28 and 33. The participants were interviewed about their perceptions and opinions about gender-related behavioral differences in eight social situations, focusing on the ways they would express gratitude to same and opposite gender interlocutors in each of the eight situations and why they would choose some ways of expressing gratitude in preference to others. Findings indicated that Jordanian women appear to value expressing gratitude more than what Jordanian men do. In other words, women tend to communicate gratitude to women more than what men do to men, whereas men are particularly aware of the need to be polite when relating to women (especially in unfamiliar and high imposition contexts).

Some investigations have been conducted on Persians. For example, Farnia and Raja Rozina (2009) examined the speech act of expressing gratitude among Iranian EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners. Their data were collected from 2 groups of Iranian EFL learners, i.e. at intermediate and advanced levels of language proficiency, using a written Discourse Completion Task (DCT). As for the L1 and L2 baseline data, they were also collected from 10 native speakers of Farsi being selected from university students in Iran, and 10 American native speakers of English who were selected from American students being either exchange students or tourists travelling to Malaysia. Their aim was to compare and contrast the strategies used by Iranians and Americans in expressing gratitude and to study the extent to which Iranian EFL learners' pragmatic competence is toward or away from the target language as the level of proficiency increases. Results indicated that Iranian and American respondents use the same type of strategies in responding to the DCT situations; however, they differ in the frequency of use of these strategies. In other words, the American respondents resort to fewer strategies in expressing gratitude in comparison with Iranian respondents. The use of *thanking* and *appreciation* as the first and second most frequently used strategies respectively, by native speakers of English can be attributed to respondents' cultural values. Findings also indicated that there are no statistically significant differences in type or use of strategies used by Iranian intermediate and advanced EFL learners. Therefore, it can be assumed that there is no correlation between language proficiency and use of strategies. Besides, there are no statistically significant differences between EFL learners' and Americans' responses and this can mean that EFL learners' pragmatic competence is toward L2 norms.

Similarly, Ahar and Eslami-Rasekh (2011) investigated the use of gratitude strategies by native English speakers, Persian native speakers and Persian EFL learners. The aim was to find the differences that may exist between these two languages and cultures in relation to social status and the size of imposition. Two instruments were used in their study including Nelson English Language Proficiency Test and a DCT. First, Nelson test was administered to their 134 participants, and then 75 students were selected for the main study. The DCT included 10 situations which were designed to reflect combinations of different degrees of power and size of imposition. As power difference could imply differences in both age and status, the addressees in the situations were designed to be equal or higher in both age and status compared to undergraduate and graduate students. Regarding the social distance between the interlocutors, the study included interaction with people who were familiar with each other in all situations. The questionnaire was given to 24 native English speakers in order that it would be possible to compare Persian students' responses with those of native English speakers. The data collected for this study were analyzed according to the two major contextual factors, namely, the size of imposition or the magnitude of favor and social status. Results indicated that Persian EFL learners transfer their first language pragmatic norms to the target language to some extent due to their perception of the universality of these norms. It was also found that the Persian native speakers reacted more sensitively both to social status differences and to the size of imposition because they used more thanking expressions for a big favor compared to situations representing small favor.

Another study conducted by Farashaiyan and Tan Kim Hua (2012) addressed the fact that compared to other speech acts such as request, apologies and refusals, the speech or communicative act of gratitude has not been significantly touched upon. The study aimed to compare the frequency and type of the gratitude strategies utilized by Iranian and Malay postgraduate students to express thanking or gratitude and to study the difference in expressing gratitude between males and females. Data were collected through a DCT from 20 Iranian and 20 Malay postgraduate university students having the same language proficiency. Results of the study illustrated some similarities and differences in terms of the strategies and type of gratitude used by Iranian and Malay students. Findings also revealed significant differences in communicative ways of Iranian and Malay postgraduate students reflecting insights into understanding

the differences in cultural values and norms in two non-western cultures. The results also illustrated that the two contextual factors (i.e. social status and social distance) and gender significantly affect the type and frequency of the strategies. However, that study suffered from some limitations such as the fact that Malay participants came from various cultural backgrounds (Malays, Indians and Chinese). Clearly, there should be a more accurate specification of the Malay population sample used in cross-cultural pragmatic studies; otherwise, findings may be misleading and their generalizability may be questioned. Moreover, that study assessed the pragmatic knowledge of Iranians and Malays by using one pragmatic instrument, i.e. a DCT.

However, the researchers of the present study believe that there is a need to explore more about the cultural values and norms among Iranians and Malays. When comparing the extensive research conducted on requests by speakers of other languages, it is clear that research on sample under study failed to fill the gap in pragmatic research within the area of expressing gratitude. More research is needed, as indicated before, since it can be extensively beneficial to understanding this speech community culture. The lack of knowledge of speech act realization patterns and strategies across cultures can lead to breakdowns in intercultural and inter-ethnic communication.

The objectives of the study

The present study examines how Iranian international students in Malaysia and Malay university students express gratitude. The objectives of this study are two-fold: First, it is attempted to investigate the pragmatic behavior of Iranian and Malay university students' realization of the expressions of gratitude speech act. In other words, it examines how Iranian international students realize the expression of gratitude in Malaysia where English is used as second language in major cities. English is taught as a foreign language in Iran and the language classroom is one of the important sources of input for language learners. On the other hand, English is used as a second language in major states of Malaysia and is the means of interaction and communication among Malay and Iranian university students. Second, it aims to examine the respondents' perception in the process of expressing gratitude with regard to their cognition, language of thought, and their perception of gratitude.

Methodology

The following sections explain the methodology of this study.

Subjects

The researchers used a random sampling method for selecting the 60 respondents of this study. The subjects were first given a background questionnaire. This instrument was addressed to all participants in the form of a questionnaire written in English. The purpose of this questionnaire was to record data about their personal information like gender, age, etc. (See Table 1).

Table 1: *Iranian and Malay subjects' biodata*

	Iranians	Malays
Gender	6 males, 19 females	5 males, 23 females
Average age	30.5	28.5
1 am currently enrolled in:	Masters/PhD	Degree/ Masters

Area of study	Humanities and sciences such as Physics, Pharmacy and Computer Science	Humanities and Education such as English Language and Literature Study
Native language	Farsi	Bahasa Malay
How long have you been in Malaysia? (Iranians only)	6 month to one year	-

According to Table 1, the study involved 28 Malays and 25 Iranians international students enrolled in various postgraduate programs at Universiti Sains Malaysia (hence USM), Penang, Malaysia. The Malay respondents were 5 males and 23 females and average age of respondents was 28.5 majoring in humanities and education. The Iranian respondents were 6 males and 19 females with an average age of 30.5 majoring in humanities and sciences. It should be noted that age and gender effects were not considered in this study. Each group was met individually by the researchers at USM. Researchers provided the subjects with detailed instructions about the tasks. Each subject was given 30 minutes to complete the provided task in English. Subjects were presented with the written situations and were asked to write down what they would say under each situation. It should be noted that some questionnaires, however, were discarded due to incomplete answers or because the questionnaires were not completed based on the instructions.

Instruments

The study employed an open-ended questionnaire in the form of a DCT which was adopted and developed from Cheng (2005). The DCT included ten situations (see sample DCT in Appendix one). It was administered to two groups of participants: Malay graduate students and Iranian graduate students. Each situation was based on two social variables: "relative power" and "social distance" between the interlocutors. In other words, each situation consisted of variation in social factors: an equal status (=P) and high status (+P). It also looked at the gratitude realization between familiar interlocutors (-D) and strangers (+D).

Table 2: Description of the DCT situations

Situations	Social distance	Social status	Description of the situation and favor done
S1	D+	P=	<i>Student- classmate</i> A classmate helps you pick up your papers and notes
S2	D-	P+	<i>Student – professor</i> keep the book for a few more days
S3	D-	P=	<i>Student- friend</i> friend help you study for the test
S4	D-	P=	<i>Student- close friend</i> lend the notes from last week to make copies
S5	D+	P+	<i>Student- professor</i> Ask for an extension

S6	D+	P+	<i>Student- professor</i> Write a recommendation letter
S7	D+	P=	<i>Student-student</i> Ask for help with computer
S8	D+	P+	<i>Student – professor</i> if you can take the exam on a different day
S9	D-	P=	<i>Student- close friend</i> lend a book
S10	D-	P+	<i>Student- professor</i> take the exam on a different day

Ogiermann (2009) reported that this experimental data collection instrument, i.e. DCT, can be used to elicit speech acts in a variety of situations, thus covering a wide range of semantic formulae by which a given speech act can be implemented (Beebe and Cummings 1996, p.80, Johnston et al. 1998, p.158, Kasper 2000, p.325, Barron 2003, p.84). Despite the advantages of this instrument, there has always been a concern whether written data collection instruments can be regarded as representative of a naturally occurring talk. Accordingly, responses to hypothetical situations do not necessarily reflect what the speakers would say if they found themselves in these situations, but rather what they *think* they would say (Aston 1995, p. 62). Clearly, it is unlikely that a speaker would react in exactly the same way every time he or she participates in a recurrent speech event, but the practice gained in these situations enables them to react in a socially and culturally appropriate manner (Barron 2003, p.92). DCT data can, therefore, be regarded as indirectly representing “a participant’s accumulated experience within a given setting” (Golato 2003, p.92).

Responses to written questionnaires have been shown to “reflect the values of the native culture” (Beebe and Cummings 1996, p.75), and defined as metapragmatic perception on the grounds that they represent culture-specific beliefs about what constitutes appropriate behavior (Golato, 2003). Hence, DCTs have been proved useful in establishing what is perceived as socially appropriate in a given language (Barron 2003, p.92); and “what strategic and linguistic options are consonant with pragmatic norms and what contextual factors influence their choice” (Kasper 2000, pp. 329–330). In this sense, the present study aims to examine the subjects’ ability to use a socially appropriate language when expressing gratitude in English. The purpose of the DCT is to examine the respondents’ perception in the process of expressing gratitude with regard to their cognition, language of thought, and their perception of gratitude.

The second part of the questionnaire was a structured-interview which was conducted immediately after completion of DCT (see Appendix Two). It aimed at exploring the respondents’ perception of politeness and language of thought, i.e. the language the participant thinks in when producing response. The participants were asked what they had been exactly paying attention to when they expressed gratitude with regard to variation in contextual variables (i.e. social status and social distance). The factor of age was also addressed when they thanked the favor giver in each situation. The other questions addressed the participants’ language of thought. They were asked what language (e.g. English, Malay, etc.) they had been thinking in when expressing the gratitude, and whether they had switched their language of thought at some point during their responses. Moreover, there were questions addressing the cultural differences with respect to the notion of thanking between the Malays and international students, especially Iranians, and whether they had considered the lengthy thanking acceptable in their culture.

Data Analysis

Upon the completion of data collection, the respondents' replies were coded following a coding scheme proposed by Cheng (2005) which is based on 8 strategies for expressions of gratitude as follows:

1. Thanking participants say "thank you" in three ways:
 - a. Thanking only by only using the word "thank you" (e.g. Thanks a lot! Thank you very much!)
 - b. Thanking by stating the favor (e.g. Thank you for your help.)
 - c. Thanking and mentioning the imposition caused by the favor (e.g. Thank you for helping me collect the papers.)

2. Appreciation
 - a. Using the word "appreciate" (e.g., I appreciate it!)
 - b. Using the word "appreciate" and mentioning the imposition caused by the favor (e.g. I appreciate the time you spent to me.)

3. Positive feelings
 - a. By expressing a positive reaction to the favor giver (hearer) (e.g. You are a life savior!)
 - b. By expressing a positive reaction to the object of the favor (e.g. This book was really helpful!)

4. Apology
 - a. Using only apologizing words (e.g. I'm sorry)
 - b. Using apologizing words and stating the favor or the fact (e.g. I'm sorry for the problem I made!)
 - c. Criticizing or blaming oneself (e.g. I'm such a fool!)
 - d. Expressing embarrassment (e.g. It's so embarrassing!)

5. Recognition of imposition
 - a. Acknowledging the imposition (e.g. I know that you were not allowed to give me extra time!)
 - b. Stating the need for the favor (e.g. I try not to ask for extra time, but this time I need it!)
 - c. Diminishing the need for the favor (e.g. you didn't have to do that!)

6. Repayment
 - a. Offering or promising service, money, food or goods (e.g. next time it's my turn to pay!)
 - b. Indicating indebtedness (e.g. I owe you one!)
 - c. Promising future self-restraint or self-improvement (e.g. it won't happen again!)

7. Others expressions that do not belong to the above strategies are categorized as other strategies. There are four sub-strategies:
 - a. Here statement (e.g. Here you are!)
 - b. Small talk (e.g. my name is john, what's your name?)
 - c. Leave-taking (e.g. Have a nice day!)
 - d. Joking (e.g. don't forget to pay again next time.)

8. Alerters in the thanking situations, alerters and address terms are likely to occur in the same utterance. The alerters include:

- a. Attention getter (e.g. hey, hi, well)
- b. Title (e.g. Dr., Professor! Sir!)
- c. Name (e.g. John, Mary)

Results and discussion

An examination of the Malays' and Iranians' DCT data demonstrated that the two groups used *thanking* (n= 257 and 210) as the most frequently used strategy (See Table 3). Examples of thanking strategies as used by both respondents:

1. **“Thank you so much** Prof. for letting me borrow the book and I’m sorry for returning it so late.”
2. **“Thank you so much** Prof. I really appreciate your understanding.”
3. **“Thank you so much.** You are a great help to me. I really appreciate it.”
4. **“Thank you so much for helping me.** I really appreciate it. In return, if you have any problem with anything next time, tell me. I can help you in return.”
5. “I’m very sorry for taking your time. I appreciate what you did for me. **Thank you so much.**”

Table 3: Frequency of strategies by Iranians and Malays

Strategy	Malays		Iranians	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Thanking	257	42.75 %	210	41.50 %
Appreciation	44	7.35 %	26	5.15 %
Positive feeling	67	11.15 %	103	20.35 %
Apology	42	7 %	16	3.15 %
Imposition	20	3.30 %	35	6.90 %
Repayment	28	4.65 %	31	6.15 %
Other	12	2 %	9	1.80 %
Alerter	131	21.80 %	76	15 %
Total	601	100	506	100

Table 3 displays the frequency pattern of strategies use by Malay respondents which were *thanking* (n=257) followed by *alerters* (n=131), *positive feelings* (n= 67), *appreciation* (n=44), *apology* (n=42), *repayment* (n=28), *imposition* (n=20) and *other* (n=12). On the other hand, an examination of Iranian respondents of English DCT demonstrated the frequency pattern as follows: *thanking* (n= 210) followed by *positive feelings* (n=103), *alerters* (n=76), *imposition* (n=35), *repayment* (n=31), *appreciation* (n=26), *apology* (n=16) and *other* (n=9). Moreover, results of the chi-square test between Malay and Iranian

respondents indicated that there are statistically significant differences in the use of *positive feelings*, *apology*, and *alrterers*. See table 4 below:

Table 4: Results of chi-square

Strategy	Df	Sig.	Strategy	Df	Sig.
Thanking	1	.03	Imposition	1	.04
Appreciation	1	.03	Repayment	1	.69
Positive feeling	1	.00	Other	1	.51
Apology	1	.00	Alerter	1	.00

As indicated above, results showed that Malays used *apology* and *alrterers* more than their Iranian counterparts. Malays' examples of such realization can be seen below:

1. Professor E, thank you so very much for giving this chance to me. **I am really sorry for making you in this difficult situation.** Thank you so much again. [-D +P situations]
2. Hey [friend], thanks again for looking at my computer. I know you busy and all. **I am seriously sorry to disturb your time.** I really appreciate on the effort you gave me. Thank you so very much. [+D =P situations]
3. Professor D, thank you so much for changing your mind about it. If not, I am not sure what I would do. **I really am sorry to trouble you in any way.** Thank you so much for giving me the opportunity. Really, thank you. [+D +P situations]
4. Professor C, thank you so much for giving me extension. **I am really sorry because have to send it a bit later than the other student.** I hope it does not trouble you in any way. [+D +P situations]
5. **I'm sorry Prof if I'm causing you trouble for handing in late.** Thank you so much for letting me. I really, really appreciate it. [+D +P situations]

A possible explanation for the use of this strategy is that in Malay culture, it is a norm to show politeness when speaking; thus the Malay subjects, when speaking in English, used their own cultural norms of speaking indirectly, mitigating their thanking expressions using an apology "sorry" which is equivalent to "maaf" in their native tongue. Basically, these expressions are lexical markers of politeness which speakers usually use to show their awareness that something wrong has happened and it has to be amended. An apology is used as a way of redressing the face-threatening act of thanking especially when interacting with a speaker of high authority or when interacting with strangers. "Face" means maintaining a person's dignity by not embarrassing him or her as an individual (AsmaAbullah, 1996, p.30, cited in Maros, 2006). Thus, Malays value indirectness in speaking by using an apology, as indicated before, in order to save the face of others and maintain good relationships between interlocutors and within the society as a whole (Maros, 2006). This is also in line with interview findings as Malay respondents reported that they would behave more formally if the favor giver is older or a stranger and they would respond more informally and in a friendly way if the favor giver is the same age as they are or s/he is somebody who is familiar. Malays reported that they use more apology words in such situations in an interaction with a favor giver from a high social status.

Results of the structured interviews showed that with regard to the question which addresses the subjects' perception of politeness and pragmatic knowledge in the target community, both Iranian and Malay respondents asserted that the degree of social status and social distance relative to favor receiver are important. This is in line with Eelen (2001), who indicated that Brown and Levinson's (1987) distance

and power ratio are the differentiation parameters, meaning that different power or relationship may lead to a different level of politeness expression. In other words, social perceptions of distance and power ratio between the communicators may change according to the cultural variation. This argument also supports Koutlaki's (2002) claim that '*Ehteram* (near equivalents 'honor', 'respect', 'esteem', 'dignity') establishes the positions and statuses of the interactants with respect to one another and is shown through adherence to the established norms of behavior according to the addressee's position, age, status and interlocutors' relationship.

The subjects also softened their responses by the use of address terms in some situations such as S2, S5, S6 and S8 in which the interaction was between a student and a professor. Since the person being thanked was a professor, the use of "Prof." was usual for both Iranian and Malay subjects. This is a cultural specific strategy where the respondents attempt to emphasize, and even exaggerate their recognition of the higher social rank of their interlocutors as a way of showing respect. Therefore, the use of forms like 'professor', 'Dr.' or 'sir' was evident in the data. This is in line with the interview findings as Iranian respondents also reported that age, social status and degree of familiarity are counted in choosing the appropriate pragmatic behavior as they behave more formally and especially politely if the social status relative to the favor receiver is high and if the favor giver is a stranger. Iranian respondents also asserted that they used a more informal language when responding to a favor giver of equal and low social distance (e.g. friend) status.

Within the Malay culture, students tend to behave respectfully when talking to their teachers. It should be noted that college professors and school teachers are highly respected in East Asia because of the influence of Confucianism. As a result, students accept teacher's disciplinary acts. Similarly, the use of address terms can be explained by the fact that both *šaxsiat* and *ehteram* are evident in the communication style of the Iranian society and thus are linked to the way Iranians treat and consider each other's faces. In other words, *ehteram* is shown among others through the use of appropriate address terms, conformity to the rules of ritual politeness (*ta'arof*) and other conventions" (Koutlaki, 2002).

On the other hand, Iranian respondents used *positive feelings* more than their Malays counterpart. Iranians' examples of such realization:

1. Thank you Professor. **You know how much of help the book was to me.** I hope I have put it to good use.
2. **You're a life savior man**, what would I do without your help?
3. Boy, **you're great!** I won't forget your help. **I feel like I'm bursting with knowledge now!**
4. You're an angel, boy! **Without your book my whole career could be on the line!**
5. To tell the truth sir, **without your help I could lose a one-in-a-million chance in my educational career.** I don't know how to thank you.
6. **Your kind extension saved my life for sure!** Thank you very much sir!

A possible reason for the use of this strategy is due to the cultural values of Iran as a 'super-nonegalitarian' society (Beeman, 1988) which considers the notion of imposition as an important element in daily interaction where "everybody occasionally depends upon other people for their help and services and thus the Persian community is perceived as a *debt-sensitive culture*" (Koutlaki, 2002, p. 1740). In this sense, the speech act of gratitude might be perceived as being a threat to the speaker's negative face as the latter "accepts a debt, humbles his own face". Other studies following the face saving approach looked at gratitude as recognition of the hearer's image and enhancement of his negative face. This is in line with Okamoto and Robinson (1997) who argued that the expression of gratitude varies depending on the extent of the imposition on the hearer. In this sense, "the greater the imposition there is on the giver, the more polite gratitude forms will be used (ibid p.412). Thus, the use of implicit strategies such as positive feeling can be helpful in mitigating the imposition on the favor receiver. In other words, it means that Iranians use this expression to express their positive feeling, when they feel extremely grateful and have received a favor they have asked for. In fact, by using this expression, speakers possibly show their awareness of the trouble into which another person may have fallen by doing the favor.

Findings also reveal another similarity in the use of gratitude among Iranians and Malays reflected in the use of a strategy which involves reference to religious faith and is used to express gratitude to God (usually for allowing the speaker to be in a favorable situation with respect to the event described). The religious reference seems to act as a positively oriented means of maintaining concord between interlocutors. For example, few respondents used the expression “I hope God pays you back” in response to the favor they received. This is in line with (*Allaha*) *Üükiir* ‘thanks (to God)’ (Zeyrek, 2012).

The existence of strategies such as apology and positive feeling in both Iranian and Malay data poses the quest that the subjects are following their understanding of the notion of face based on the value of their own cultural background. That is why the subjects were asked other questions in the interview to discover whether speakers began thinking in their native language, and whether they switched to another language during the task, respectively. It should be noted that the majority of Malay participants reported that they thought in English rather than Malay before making expressions of gratitude. However, they also reported that they sometimes switched their language of thought into Malay when expressing gratitude. On the other hand, Iranians reported that they thought in English and there was no report of switching into Farsi when interacting in English.

Moreover, the two groups in the study were also asked about their perceptions of politeness between the pragmatic behaviors of the groups with regards to thanking. The majority of Malays participants did not recognize any differences in terms of pragmatic behavior between Iranians and Malays in expressing gratitude. However, Iranians believe that Malays use more informal language in their interaction with a favor giver of higher social status relative to the favor receiver, especially in academic contexts. Moreover, Iranians use lengthy thanking strategies when expressing gratitude to people of higher social status (e.g. professors).

With regard to the respondents’ perception of cultural differences in the community, few Malay participants were either familiar with or noticed any differences between Iranian and Malay pragmatic behavior in expressing gratitude; however, Iranian respondents reported that Malays use expressions of thanking least frequently compared to Iranians. Iranians also reported that they use more elaborated and extended thanking strategies compared to Malays.

Conclusion

The present study was an attempt to examine the similarities and differences of expressions of gratitude among Malay and Iranian students, especially after receiving a favor. The findings demonstrated that the Malay students and Iranian students produced the same type of thanking strategies; however, they differ in terms of the frequency of strategies they used. The findings showed that Iranian and Malay respondents used the same types of strategies in expressing gratitude (e.g. thanking, appreciation, repayment, etc.); however, they were different in terms of the use (e.g. frequency) of strategies. *Thanking*, *alerters* and *positive feelings* were the three most frequently used strategies for the two groups of respondents.

The results of the DCT by Malay respondents are in line with the findings of the structured interview. Malays reported that they used the *apology* strategy very frequently in expressing gratitude. The findings displayed that Malay used the *apology* strategy more than their Iranian counterparts. The perception of Iranian respondents about Malays’ pragmatic behavior in expressing gratitude in which Iranian participants believe that their Malay counterparts do not use elaborated and extended thanking strategies does not match with the findings of DCT. The findings show that Malays’ use of strategies is similar to that of Iranians.

Overall, the findings show more similarities than differences in expressing gratitude among Iranian and Malay respondents. In case of misunderstanding, it can be due to the level of language proficiency or level of interaction among the two groups of native speakers. Further research may provide us with a more global view of the cultural tendencies in expressing gratitude among Iranians and Malays. Ongoing research on the study of expressing gratitude in real life encounters would give more insight into the cultural tendencies, and might be more authentic if the responses were verbal rather than written.

Finally, the present study supports Richards' (1983) emphasis on understanding of the communicative needs of learners, and teaching of other components of language ability; especially those interactional and social aspects of language ability which should not be overlooked by ESL and EFL teachers and material developers. Therefore, teaching the cultural aspects of language is a vital part of teachers' duty to aid their students in becoming successful second language speakers. Accordingly, "explicit teaching appears to be more effective than implicit teaching in facilitating the acquisition of L2 pragmatic routines", (Tateyama, 2001, p. 220). As House (1996, p. 247) points out, explicit instruction enabled the learners in the explicit group to develop an awareness and understanding of the differences between L1 and L2 pragmatic preferences, and thereby "counteract negative L1 transfer through 'noticing' (Schmidts, 1993) and through making attempts to use alternative, more L2 norm-oriented expressions". Accordingly, ESL and EFL teachers should design contextualized, task-based activities that expose learners to different types of pragmatic information along with the linguistic means needed to perform a particular speech act.

References

- Ahar, M., & Eslami-Rasekh, A. (2011). The Effect of Social Status and Size of Imposition on the Gratitude Strategies of Persian and English Speakers. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 2(1), 120-128.
- Al-Khawaldeh, N. and Žegarac, V. (2013). Gender and the Communication of Gratitude in Jordan. *Open Journal of Modern Linguistics*, 3 (3), 268-287.
- Allami, H., & Naeimi, A. (2010). A cross-linguistic study of refusals: An analysis of pragmatic competence development in Iranian EFL learners. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 43(1), 385-406.
- Asma Abdullah. (1996). Going global: cultural dimensions in Malaysian management. Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Institute of Management.
- Aston, G. (1995). Say Thank You: some pragmatic constraints in conversational closings. *Applied linguistics*, 16, 57-86.
- Barron, A. (2003). Acquisition in interlanguage pragmatics. *Learning how to do things with words in a study abroad context*. Philadelphia, PA, USA: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Beebe, L. M. & Cummings, M. C. (1996). Natural speech act data versus written questionnaire data: How data collection method affects speech act performance. In S. M. Gass & J. Neu (Eds.), *Speech acts across cultures* (pp. 65-86). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Beeman, W. O. (1988). Affectivity in Persian language use. *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*, 12, 9-30.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. (1978). Universals in language usage: politeness phenomena. In E. Goody (Ed.), *Questions on politeness: strategies in social interaction* (pp. 56-289): Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brown, P., Levinson, S., (1987). *Politeness: some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge: University Press.
- Clankie, S. M. (1993). The use of expressions of gratitude in English by Japanese and American university students. *The review of Inquiry and Research*, 58, 37-71.
- Chang, C.-y., 2008. An interlanguage study of Chinese EFL students' expressions of gratitude. Unpublished Master's Thesis. National Sun Yat-sen University.
- Eelen, G. (2001). *A critique of politeness theories*. Manchester, UK, and Northampton, MA: St. Jerome Publishing.

Eisenstein, M., & Bodman, J. W. (1986). "I very appreciate": expressions of gratitude by native and nonnative speakers of American English. *Applied Linguistics*, 7(2), 167-185.

Eisenstein, M., & Bodman, J. W. (1993). Expressing gratitude in American English. In G. Kasper & S. Blum-Kulka (Eds.), *Interlanguage pragmatics* (pp. 64-81): New York: Oxford University Press.

Farashaiyan, A. & Tan Kim Hua (2012). A cross-cultural comparative study of gratitude strategies between Iranian and Malaysian postgraduate students. *Asian Social Science*, 8 (7),139-148.

Farnia, M. & Raja Rozina, (2009). An interlanguage pragmatic study of expressions of gratitude by Iranian EFL learners: a pilot study. *Malaysian Journal of ELT Research*, 5, 108-140.

Golato, A. (2003). Studying compliment responses: A comparison of DCTs and recordings of naturally occurring talk. *Applied Linguistics*, 24(1): 90-121.

Hinkel, E. (1994). Pragmatics of interaction: Expressing thanks in a second language. *Applied Language Learning*, 5(1), 73-91.

House, J. (1996). Developing pragmatic fluency in English as a foreign language: routines and metapragmatic awareness. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 18 (2), 225-252

Johnston, B., Kasper, G. and Ross, S. (1998) Effect of rejoinders in production questionnaires. *Applied Linguistics*, 19: 157-182.

Kasper, G. (2000). Data collection in pragmatics research. In H. Spencer-Oatey (Ed.), *Culturally speaking* (pp. 316-341). London and New York: Continuum.

Koutlaki, S. A. (2002). Offers and expressions of thanks as face enhancing acts: ta'arof in Persian. *Journal of pragmatics*, 34, 1733-1756.

Leech, G. (1983). *Principles of pragmatic*. London: Longman.

Maros, M. (2006). Apologies in English by adult Malay speakers: Patterns and competence. *The International Journal of Language, Society and Culture*, 19, 1-14.

Ogiermann, E.(2009). *On Apologizing in negative and positive politeness cultures*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Okamoto, S., Robinson, W.P. (1997). Determinants of gratitude expression in England. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 16, 411-433.

Pishghadam, R., & Sharafadini, M. (2011). A contrastive study into the realization of suggestion speech act: Persian vs. English. *Canadian Social Science*, 7(4), 230-239.

Pham, T. A. (2013). The Influence of social distance on expressions of gratitude in Vietnamese. *The Internet Journal Language, Culture and Society*, 36, 88-101.

Richards, Jack C., (1983). Communicative needs in foreign language learning. *Issues in Second Language Research*. Newbury House Publishers, New York, pp. 242-252.

Schmidts, R., (1993). Consciousness, learning and interlanguage pragmatics. In: Kasper, G., Blum-Kulka, S. (Eds.), *Interlanguage Pragmatics*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 21-42.

Siebold, K. (2012). Implicit and explicit thanking in Spanish and German. Ruiz de Zarobe, Leyre /Ruiz de Zarobe, Yolanda (eds). *Speech acts and politeness across languages and cultures (pp.155-171)*. New York: Peter Lang.

Song, S. (2012). *Politeness and culture in second language acquisition*. Great Britain: Palgrave Macmillan.

Spencer-Oatey, H. (2000). Rapport management: A framework for analysis. In H.

Spencer-Oatey (Ed.), *Culturally speaking: Managing rapport through talk across cultures* (pp. 11-46). London and New York: Continuum.

Tateyama, Y.(2001). Explicit and implicit teaching of pragmatic routines: Japanese sumimasen. In: Rose, G., Kasper, G. (Eds.), *Pragmatics in Language Teaching*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 200–222.

Watts, (2003). *Politeness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Zeyrek, D. (2012). Thanking in Turkish: A corpus – based study. In Leyre Ruiz de Zarobe & Yolanda Ruiz de Zarobe (eds), *Speech acts and politeness across languages and cultures* (pp.53-88). New York: Peter Lang.

About the Authors

Maryam Farnia is an assistant professor of Applied Linguistics at the department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics, Payame Noor Univerasity, Najafabad, Iran. Her areas of research are intercultural pragmatics, interlanguage pragmatics, discourse analysis and im/politnness.

Hiba Qusay Abdul Sattar is an adult EAL trainer, assessor, and IELTS tutor at Australian Technical and Management College (ATMC), Australia. She received her PhD in Applied Linguistics from Universiti Sains Malaysia in 2011. Her research areas are TESOL, cross-cultural pragmatics, politeness and speech act studies.

Authors' Address

Maryam Farnia
Assistant Professor
Payame Noor University
PO BOX 19395-3697
Tehran, Iran
Email: mfarniair@gmail.com

Hiba Qusay Abdul Sattar
Australian Technical Management College (ATMC)
123 Lonsdale Street
Melbourne 3000 Victoria
Australia
Email: hibaqusay@yahoo.com