

# Politeness Strategies in Reminders

## A Cross-cultural Study of Iranian EFL learners and Americans

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### Abstract

This cross-cultural study examines the speech act of reminding by Iranian English learners and American English native speakers. The primary objective is to study how Iranian EFL learners perform much understudied speech act of reminding in English. To this end, the participants are selected from Iranian learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and American English native speakers through an open-ended questionnaire in the form of a Discourse Completion Task (DCT). The collected data are then analyzed based on a framework adopted from Peterson's (2012) study of speech act of reminding. The findings show that whereas English native speakers utilize more indirect strategies in reminding their interlocutors to cope with the required activity, EFL learners tend to use direct strategies more frequently.

**Keywords:** *Iranian EFL learners, pragmatic competence, politeness, speech act of reminding*

### 1. Introduction

There are several definitions for the term *pragmatics* in the academic literature (e.g. Crystal, 2003; Mey, 1993; Thomas, 1995; Yule, 1996), however, the most recent definition of pragmatics has been put forward by LoCastro (2003) as "the study of speaker and hearer meaning created in their joint actions that include both linguistic and non-linguistic signals in the context of socioculturally organized activities" (p. 15), a definition which encompasses speakers' and hearers' knowledge about the norms and practices of the given language and culture (Ishihara, 2010). Such a conceptualization of pragmatics underscores the fact that along with linguistic competence featuring grammatical structures and vocabulary items, language learners need to develop pragmatic competence involving appropriate language use to in authentic situations. In this connection, Alcón (2001) stated that learning the mechanical features of a language that result in correct production of that language is certainly a part of learners' pragmatic and sociocultural abilities and is essential for suitable usage of the language.

Available research evidence also confirms that having grammatical competence or knowledge of linguistics forms does not guarantee pragmatic competence, or the knowledge of how to use language appropriately (Rose and Kasper, 2001; Barron, 2003, cited in Linde, 2009). In other words, being grammatically advanced learners of a language does not assure that the learner is pragmatically competent. Language learners require the knowledge of pragmatic competence as a way of knowing how to connect utterances to express their meaning in various circumstances (Kim and Hall, 2002). Thus, learners must have the knowledge of pragmatic competence in order to comprehend and communicate meaningfully and perceive concepts correctly in the use of an L2 (Li, 2010).

After Austin's (1962) theory of speech act, a great number of cross-cultural studies have employed a central component of pragmatic competence, namely, speech acts, as a unit of analysis. The main part of pragmatic competence is learners' ability to use proper speech acts in target situations and to use

appropriate linguistic forms in communication. Along these lines, Gumperz (1990) makes the point that insufficient knowledge of pragmatic competence causes miscommunication between two speakers. In other words, to be able to use speech acts appropriately, EFL learners should have sufficient knowledge underlying the social and cultural components of a target language. To achieve this, L2 speakers employ certain linguistic and pragmatic strategies. These strategies, however, are distinct from those of native speakers.

Taking the crucial role of pragmatics in meaningful communication into account, Eslami and Mardani (2010) reported Iranian EFL learners' difficulty here of and stated that EFL learners cannot use pragmatic rules and strategies appropriately to express their intentions in communication. Moreover, these learners have problems selecting the right patterns and correct speech acts in target situations which can be attributed to their inadequate knowledge of pragmatic competence. Accordingly, due to their imperfect pragmatic competence, EFL learners may be unable to effectively communicate with native speakers in social interactions, which prevent them from access to certain educational or professional positions (Tanaka, 1997).

Although pragmatics is considered a broad area in linguistic studies, research on learners' performance of speech acts and their linguistic and strategic choices has contributed a great number of studies to pragmatics (Mitchell, Myles, and Marsden, 2013). Speech acts explain "what speakers are doing with language and thus, examinations of speech acts have been valuable in identifying and differentiating the steps and stages of functional communication" (Siegel, 2015, p.4).

Over the last decade, a growing number of studies have investigated Iranian EFL learners' realization of speech acts and have assessed, inter alia, their knowledge of pragmatic competence in a second language. Most of these studies have been carried out to compare Iranian EFL learners and English native speakers' perception or production of the speech acts of request (e.g. Jalilifar, 2009; Hashemian, 2014), apology (e.g. Eslami-Rasekh and Mardani, 2010; Mirzaei, Roohani, and Esmaili, 2012), compliment (e.g. Sharifian, 2008), refusals (e.g. Allami and Naeimi, 2010; Sahragard and Javanmardi, 2011; Tabatabaei and Farnia, 2015), suggestion (e.g. Pishghadam and Sharafadini, 2011), and thanking (Farnia and Raja Rozina, 2009; Farnia and Abdulsattar, 2015). Although there are ample studies on some speech acts (e.g. refusal, apology, request, etc.), few researchers have examined the speech act of reminding. More precisely, there has been no previously published work on Iranian EFL learners' realization of speech act of reminding to date. Reminding is a language function used in daily conversations in different forms and for different purposes. People often remind each other of the commitment they have promised to care about the deadline they require to meet, the appointment they have arranged to attend, etc. Using an appropriate strategy to express reminding is an intricate language function in speaker's first language, let alone their L2. In the light of what was alluded to above, the present study is an attempt geared toward arriving at a more empirically grounded understanding of how speech acts of reminding are realized by Iranian EFL learners and native speakers of English with an eye to find evidence of transfer from L1 Persian into EFL learners' output.

## 2. Review of the literature

Politeness can be regarded as one of the key elements determining the success or failure of any communicative event. In fact, although its presence is sometimes ignored, its absence could lead to miscommunication (Kumar, 2014). The most influential theory of politeness in interlanguage pragmatic research is that of Brown and Levinson (1987, 1987, 2009; Matínez-Flor, 2004; Rakowics, 2009). Despite its popularity, however, much criticism has been leveled at this theory. For example, the traditional concept of politeness upon which the theory is premised, i.e., all languages follow virtually the same structural features and system of politeness, has been challenged by some studies on the grounds that it fails to account for politeness in such languages as the East Asians or Arabic (Matsumoto, 1989; Kadar and Mills, 2011, Grainger et al., 2015, cited in Grainger and Mills, 2016). Although Brown and Levinson's model has been constantly subjected to analyses and revisions, it has been built upon and referred to by several researchers as a prevailing theoretical framework since its introduction in 1978 (see Yuan, 2012).

Brown and Levinson's politeness theory explains which acts or speech acts save face, that is a public self-image everyone wants to maintain, which acts or speech acts threaten face, hence become face-threatening acts. The model also characterizes politeness in terms of negative politeness and positive politeness. While the former pertains to the need not to be imposed by others and have freedom of action, the latter has to do with the need to be accepted or liked by others.

The speech act of reminding falls in Searle's (1969) directive category and, as such, is similar to the speech act of request (Peterson, 2012). Brown and Levinson (1999) define reminders as those acts that predicate some future act A of the hearer, and in so doing put some pressure on the hearer to do (or refrain from doing) act A. Put differently, the speaker indicates that the hearer should remember to do some A (p. 324). Reminders are similar to requests (Trosborg, 1995) in that they are mainly imposed on the hearer whose personal space is put at risk. Pragmatic politeness posits that a speaker's successful relaying of speech acts hinges upon his or her perception of the politeness rules of the language and culture. In addition to the degree of imposition by the illocution in speech act production, speakers figure out their relationship with hearers to make sure that the harmonious social relations between them and hearers are not put at risk (Ellis, 2008). Not only can 'reminders' be applied to refer to different varieties of illocutionary forces, some of which are helpful to both the speaker and the hearer, they can also be induced as acts that are intrinsically imposing on the hearer and thus produced for the benefit of the speaker only. Reminders can also be conceived of as what Ellis (2008) terms 'inherently imposing' speech acts (Ellis, 2008, p. 172).

One of the challenges EFL learners face is the appropriate realization of speech acts with regard to the norms and practices of the target language in a given context or situation. Studies on cross-cultural pragmatics introduce differences and similarities through comparing perceptions and productions of first language speakers of various languages. While it is believed that native-like pragmatic competence may well develop over an extended span of time in uninstructed contexts (Bouton 1994; Olshtain and Blum-Kulka 1985), studies show that the development of pragmatic competence can benefit from formal instruction (Ishihara, 2009). Therefore, analyzing how native and non-native speakers perceive and perform a specific speech act in an L2 context and how they obtain pragmatic competence or interlanguage pragmatics (Kasper, 1992) is of pedagogic importance as the findings would help language learners develop adequate pragmatic competence.

Comparing native and non-native speakers' realization of speech acts has been an extensively researched line of work. For example, in a cross-sectional study of Iranian EFL learners and Australian native speakers' use of request strategies, Jalilifar (2009) investigated a sample of 96 undergraduate and postgraduate EFL students and 10 English native speakers by means of a discourse completion task comprised of twenty situations. The results revealed some pragmatic development, particularly in moving from direct to conventionally indirect strategies on the part of EFL learners. More specifically, it was observed that although more proficient language learners overused indirect types of requesting, native speakers of English were characterized by more balanced use of this strategy. By contrast, the lower proficiency learners were found to overuse the most direct strategy types.

Elsewhere, Petersen (2012) studied the speech act of reminding among Danish native speakers and American English speakers. The data were collected from 29 Danish native speakers and EFL learners and 21 American English speakers through a discourse completion task featuring 12 situations. The data were analyzed in the light of a modified classification of Trosborg's (1995) study of the request speech act. The outcome revealed that English and Danish native speakers produced a similar level of directness. Nevertheless, they were different in "the overall distribution of opt-outs, particularities of conventionally indirect sub-categories in addition to modificational patterns which suggest differences in underlying politeness systems respectively" (Peterson: 2012, p. 141). All in all, the findings spoke to the Danish advanced English learners' insufficient pragmatic competence and evidence of negative pragmatic transfer.

Despite the huge bulk of research done in the pragmatics field in general and speech acts in particular, this strand of research is still lively as speech acts possess dynamic features particularly in the field of language pedagogy. This issue is also echoed by Delen (2010) who argued that "Speech acts are not a new topic for researchers; on the contrary, they have been very popular since their emergence in the late

1960s” (p.692). Furthermore, although several researchers have drawn upon the contention that “research concerning L2 pragmatic competence often focuses on learners’ speech act behavior, primarily by contrasting nonnative with native performance” (Yu, 2011, p.1128) and studied the problems associated with various kinds of speech acts, to date, as of writing this paper, no previous investigative attempt in the context of Iran has addressed the speech act of reminding among non-native speakers. As reminders are inherently imposed on the hearer and invade their face, performing a successful language function entails having knowledge of politeness norms and culture of the spoken language. The findings of the present study would consequently add to our understanding of how this speech act is realized in English by native speakers and EFL learners and would enable us to capture the extent to which EFL learners are able to gear their responses toward the target language cultural norms and politeness routines.

### **3. The present study**

According to Uso-Juan (2007), teaching pragmatic rules and being in authentic settings are limited to the classroom context and there is virtually no opportunity for EFL learners to use language authentically in real life situations. Thus, the present cross-cultural study was designed to examine the pragmatic competence of Iranian EFL learners in realizing speech acts of reminding. In other words, this comparative study was aimed at probing the conventional ways through which native speakers of English and Iranian EFL learners would effectuate the speech act of reminding in English.

## **4. Methodology**

### **4.1. Participants**

The participants of this study consisted of two groups: the first group included 50 Iranian MA candidates of English Language Teaching (ELT) at Azad University, Esfahan, Iran. The second group comprised 50 Iranian non-English university students. A descriptive demography of the participants shows that 22% (n=22) of the respondents were male and 78% (n=78) were female with an age range of 20 to 35. The native speakers’ corpus was adopted from Peterson’s (2012) study of speech act of reminding. The corpus consisted of 21 American English native speakers consisting of 9 males and 15 females.

### **4.2. Instrument**

The data were collected through an open-ended questionnaire in the form of a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) with twelve situations with variations in contextual factors, i.e., social status and social distance. It should be noted that from among different questionnaires used to examine learners’ pragmatic competence, DCT questionnaires are the most widely used instruments to collect pragmatic production of speech act strategies. Such instruments involve a description of a situation and require the participants to read each situation, imagine themselves in that situation and write down in the space provided what they would say in a real conversation. According to Kasper (2000), when designed carefully, DCTs “are useful to inform about speakers’ pragmalinguistic knowledge of the strategies and linguistic forms by which communicative acts can be implemented, and about their sociopragmatic knowledge under which particular strategic and linguistic choices are appropriate” (p. 329). Nonetheless, data obtained through DCT questionnaires “can never be the same as authentic conversation” (Kasper: 2000, p. 318). Therefore, the findings of the study should be perceived in light of the application of DCT for the present research purposes and due to their limitations they “cannot be expected to precisely reflect natural speech” (Ogiermann 2009a, p. 68).

According to Nelson, Carson, Al Batal, and El Bakary (2002), DCT is a suitable and useful instrument to analyze data in interlanguage pragmatic researches. It can be used for all participants from various cultures and background knowledge whilst natural data cannot provide such facility because in natural data collection, participants’ variables such as status and ethnic backgrounds are difficult to control. It needs to be pointed out that for the purpose of the present study the researchers modified the specified

situations in order to attune them to Iranian participants' culture. By way of illustration, the word 'wine' was replaced with 'coffee' or 'tea'.

### **4.3. Procedure**

The data collection procedure involved two stages: First, EFL learners were given a placement test in order to recruit only those whose level was upper intermediate. Second, the DCT was administered to the EFL group in English. The respondents were required to complete a 12-situation-DCT questionnaire. The data were then analyzed and coded based on Peterson's coding schemes for the speech act of reminding. Besides, Peterson's (2012) framework was adopted to analyze DCT responses. To make sure of the reliability of the responses, they were double-checked and coded by two experienced experts in the field. If any discrepancies were found between the experts' codings, the issue was taken up and discussed with the researchers until an agreement was reached. Cohen's Kappa was run to check the reliability of the coded data and an inter-rater reliability coefficient of 80% was reached.

### **4.4. Coding scheme**

The framework used consisted of five main strategies and their sub-types: opting out, hints, indirect strategies, conventionally indirect, and direct requests. A description of strategies with demonstrative examples extracted from the research corpus is as follows:

#### **4.4.1. Category. 0 No performance of FTA ('opting out')**

The clearest cases of opt-outs were when the respondent had just left a blank. However, in some cases the respondents had explained why they would not say or prefer to opt out in those situations.

#### **4.4.2. Category I Indirect reminders ('off-record' strategies)**

In this type of reminding, a speaker makes a request in an indirect manner to express what s/he needs or wants.

#### **4.4.3. Strategy 1. Hints**

This strategy refers to the use of utterances containing partial reference to an object or element needed for the implementation of the act and utterances that make no reference to the request properly (or any of its elements).

Examples:

*"No problem dear, but your debt is increasing." (EFL response, situation 1)*

*"It would be nice to get my paper back." (English native speakers, Situation 7)*

#### **4.4.4. Category II Conventionally indirect reminders ('on-record with redress')**

This category consists of three strategies. These strategies are as follows:

#### **4.4.4.1. Strategy2: Reiteration of the original request/request for what had already been agreed**

This strategy consists of four sub-strategies:

#### **4.4.4.1.1. Strategy2.1: Ability/Availability/Possibility**

This depends on the hearer's capacity in performing the act.

Examples:

*“Could you bring my shirt back?” (EFL response, situation 10)*

*“Hey, can I get the 40 dollars back I lent you? I don’t want to forget it before I go home. ”*  
(English native speakers, Situation 6)

#### **4.4.4.1.2. Strategy 2.2 Willingness**

This depends on the hearer’s willingness in performing the act.

Examples:

*“Would you help me with mathematics?” (EFL response, situation 9)*

*“Will you give me my essay back?” (English native speakers, Situation 7)*

#### **4.4.4.1.3. Strategy 2.3 Permission**

Examples:

*“Can I stay out until 3 a.m.?” (EFL response, situation 12)*

*“Is it still okay if I leave in 5 min?” (English native speakers, Situation 4)*

#### **4.4.4.2. Strategy 3: Questions of whether the hearer has done what was agreed**

Examples:

*“You are here to help me with my homework? Aren’t you?” (EFL response, situation 9)*

*“Hey, have you corrected my paper? I noticed you didn’t mention it and I wanted to check with you.” (English native speakers, Situation 7)*

#### **4.4.4.3. Strategy 4: Needs/wishes/desires**

This strategy is the statements of speaker’s needs and demands. The speaker uses his/her own authority in stating his/her desires.

Examples:

*“I want to participate in the excursion I said about.” (EFL response, situation 5)*

*“I really need my shirt back, and I will drive to your house to get it if I need to.” (English native speakers, Situation 10)*

### **4.4.5. Category III Direct reminders**

In this type of request a speaker makes his or her request in an explicit way. Direct requests have three strategies as follows:

#### **4.4.5.1. Strategy 5: Performatives**

It refers to utterances in which the illocutionary force is explicitly named. Performative verbs are considered more or less polite (ask vs. command)

Examples:

*“Hi I call you to remind our today’s appointment that you were supposed to get back my cell phone.” (EFL response, situation 11)*

*“I just want to remind you that I am leaving to catch my bus in 5 min.”(English native speakers, Situation 4)*

#### 4.4.5.2. Strategy 6: Utterances with ‘remember’/‘forget’ etc.

Examples:

*“I think you forgot to cover my shift?”(EFL response, situation 5)*

*“Hi Uncle, I am is still my curfew, right? You promised, remember?”(English native speakers, Situation 12)*

#### 4.4.5.3. Strategy 7: Questions to the agreement/debt

Examples:

*“Have you done what you agreed Thursday, about my schedule?”(EFL response, situation 8)*

*“Didn’t we agree that I would get my essay back today?” (English native speakers, Situation 9)*

#### 4.4.5.4. Strategy 8: Statements about the agreement/debt

Examples:

*“You promised to help me with my homework.”(EFL response, situation 9)*

*“I thought you were going to help me with the paper like you said”(English native speakers, Situation 9)*

## 5. Analysis

### 5.1. Use of Strategies across Situations

Table 1 shows the frequency of strategies used by EFL learners and native speakers of English (henceforth NSE) across the specified L2 situations.

As displayed in the table, findings indicate that *direct* strategy followed by *conventionally indirect*, *hints* and *opt-outs* were the most to least frequently used strategies for EFL learners; however, the *conventionally indirect* strategy was the first and the *direct* strategy was the second most frequently used strategy for NSE. Yet, the two groups were similar in the sequence of strategy use for *hints* and *opt-outs*.

**Table 1:** *Frequency of Strategies across Situations*

Category	EFL Learners		Native English	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
0 Opt-Outs	85	10%	29	11.5%
I Hints	204	23.5%	44	17.5%
II Conventionally indirect	256	29.5%	136	54.5%

III Direct	318	37%	40	16.5%
Total	863	100%	249	100%

Note: F: Frequency; P: Percentage

## 5.2. Use of Strategies and Sub-strategies across Situations

The frequency of the use of reminding sub-strategies across the 12 situations is sorted out in Table 2. The results reveal that whereas *statement about the agreement/debt* was the most frequently used *direct* sub-strategies for EFL learners, *utterances with remember/forget* were the most frequently used *direct* strategies by NSE.

**Table 2:** Frequency of strategies and sub-strategies across Situations

Groups / Strategy		EFL Learners		NSE	
		F	P	F	P
0 Opt-Outs		85	10%	29	11.5%
I Hints		204	23.5%	44	17.5%
II Conventionally indirect	Str.2.1 Ability/Availability/	61	7%	30	12%
	Str.2.2 Willingness	0	0%	10	4%
	Str.2.3 Permission	49	5.5%	29	11.5%
	Str.3 Questions of whether the hearer has done what was agreed	69	8%	43	17.5%
	Str.4 Needs/wishes/desires	77	9%	24	9.5%
III Direct	Str.5 Performatives	81	9.5%	6	2.5%
	Str.6 Utterances with 'remember'/'forget'	96	11%	24	9.5%
	Str.7 Questions to the agreement/debt	7	1%	4	2%
	Str.8 Statements about the agreement/debt	134	15.5%	6	2.5%
Total		863	100%	249	100%

Note: F: Frequency, P: Percentage, NSE: Native speakers of English, NSP: Native speakers of Persian

As it can be seen in Table 2, the sequence of *direct* strategy use for EFL learners was *utterances with remember/forget*, *performatives*, and *questions to the agreement/debt*, while *performative*, *utterances with remember/forget* and *questions to the agreement/debt* were the next frequently used strategies in sequence of the strategy use. Other direct strategies in sequence of the strategy use for NSE were *Utterances with 'remember'/'forget'*, *statements about the agreement/debt*, *performatives* and *questions to the agreement/debt*.

It was also observed that the sequence of indirect sub-strategy use by NSE was *questions of whether the hearer has done what was agreed* as the most frequently used strategy, followed by *ability/availability/possibility*, *permission*, *needs/wishes/desires*, and *willingness*. As shown in Table 2, EFL learners most frequently employed the indirect sub-category of expressing *needs/wishes/desires*. Other indirect sub-strategies in terms of frequency of strategy use included *questions of whether the hearer has done what was agreed*, *permission*, and *ability/availability/possibility*. Interestingly, expressing *willingness* was absent in the EFL learners' corpus.

### 5.3. Inferential statistics

In order to examine the differences between the EFL learners and native speakers of English realization of speech of reminders, a chi-square test was conducted. The outcomes suggested that although native speakers of English used *opt out*, *needs/wishes/desires* and *questions to the agreement/debt* strategies more significantly than EFL learners, there were no statistically significant differences in the use of these strategies between EFL learners and English native speakers (see Table 3).

Table 3, however, shows that there were statistically significant differences for *hints*, *performatives* and *statements about the agreement/debt* strategies between English EFL learners and English native speakers. Put differently, EFL learners used these strategies significantly more frequently than native speakers. Moreover, there were statistically significant differences for *ability/availability/possibility*, *willingness*, *permission*, and *questions of whether the hearer has done what was agreed* between native speakers of English and EFL learners. In general terms, native speakers of English used these strategies more significantly than EFL learners.

**Table 3** Chi-square Output for EFL Learners and native speakers of English (NSE)

Groups / Strategy		EFL Learners	NSE	$\chi^2$	Sig.
0 Opt-Outs		10%	11.5%	1.679	.195
I Hints		23.5%	17.5%	8.429	.004**
II Conventionally indirect	Str.2.1 Ability/Availability/Possibility	7%	12%	38.288	<.001**
	Str.2.2 Willingness	0%	4%	34.381	<.001**
	Str.2.3 Permission	5.5%	11.5%	20.930	<.001**
	Str.3 Questions of whether the hearer has done what was agreed	8%	17.5%	34.186	<.001**
	Str.4 Needs/ wishes/ desires	9%	9.5%	0.265	.607
III Direct	Str.5 Performatives	9.5%	2.5%	41.525	<.001**
	Str.6 Utterances with remember/ forget	11%	9.5%	1.087	.297
	Str.7 Questions to the agreement/debt	1%	2%	2.667	.102
	Str.8 Statements about the agreement/debt	15.5%	2.5%	95.872	<.001**

Total	100%	100%	
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Lastly, the results of analyses displayed that the differences for opt-outs, expressing *needs/ wishes/ desires, utterances with 'remember'/'forget'*, and *questions to the agreement/debt* strategies between EFL learners and English native speakers failed to reach statistical significance.

## 6. Discussion

With regard to the first objective of the study, that is, how Iranian EFL learners and native speakers of English differ in realizing speech act of reminding, it was observed that the frequency and use of the strategies among these two groups were not equally distributed. More precisely, there is variation in strategy use between English native speakers and EFL learners with regard to the realization of the speech act of reminding.

The aforementioned findings lay bare the fact that while EFL learners used direct strategies more frequently (in as many as six situations), indirect strategies in most cases (in as many as two situations) and *hints* and *opt out* strategies as the least frequently used strategies, English native speakers tended to apply *indirect strategies* in most situations. Unlike English native speakers, however, EFL learners utilized a variety of strategies across the situations. Irrespective of the number of strategies applied, the sequence of strategies used from the most to the least for these two groups are as follows:

*NSE: Indirect > Hint > Direct > Opt out*

*EFL Learners: Direct > Indirect > Hint > Opt out*

In effect, in the present study NSEs acted similarly to those of Trosbog's (1995) study of speech act of request in which NSEs were reported to use *questioning whether the hearer has done what was agreed* as the most frequently used conventional strategy to express reminding. The findings of this study are also in line with Tawalbeh and Al-Oqaily's (2012) study of speech act of request in which conventional indirectness was the most frequently used strategy by NSEs. Studies on indirectness within politeness and pragmatic research reported indirectness in relation to request which is realized as the conventional means within English that allows speakers to express request while enabling the hearers to refuse the request politely. Therefore, according to Grainger and Mills (2016), traditionally, with Levinson (1983) and Leech (1983), indirectness could predominantly be realized as politeness strategy within speech act of requesting. However, it is only one element of speech acts and should not be associated with speech act of request (Grainger and Mills, 2016). As Silverstein (2010, p.15) asserts, notions of directness and indirectness are "descriptive and theoretical dead ends", specifically in cross-cultural date where there is cultural variation.

The researchers also observed that the direct and indirect strategies are realized quite conversely by NSE and EFL learners. Based on Brown and Levinson (1987), a speaker's direct and frank manner of doing the Face-Threatening Acts (FTA) without any redressive action can be interpreted as an attempt to "counteract the potential face damage of the FTA" (p. 69). It happens in situations where the social distance between interlocutors is wide. EFL learners in this investigation were found to use more imperative forms in situations where the speakers' status was higher than that of the hearer. In such contexts FTA is "in the most direct, clear, unambiguous and concise way possible" (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p. 69). This finding runs counter to the characterization of Iran as a 'super-nonegalitarian' society (Beeman, 1988), according to which the notion of imposition is conceived of as a critical value in Iranians' daily interactions 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) Although imperatives are associated with orders in some languages like Russian or Polish, they can also function as polite requests specifically if softeners or modifiers are used to modify the illocutionary force (Marcjanik, 1997, cited in Ogiermann, 2009b). Hence, it could be inferred that although EFL learners used direct strategies more frequently than native speakers, the frequent use of modifiers can be

interpreted as a softener to reduce the illocutionary force of their request and be less face-threatening to the interlocutors.

This observation is in line with Eslami-Rasekh's (1993) cross-cultural study of request speech act in which Persian native speakers used direct strategies more frequently than American respondents. Also, Zarei and Mahmoodi (2012) reported that Iranian non-native speakers resorted largely to direct strategies by using imperatives when placing a request in emails to a faculty member. Indirect speech acts are used to convey the literal meaning of speech acts beyond their illocutionary meaning, the intention of which is to prevent any offensive interpretation by the hearer. According to Blum-Kulka (1987), although applying direct strategies depicts speakers as impolite due to their insufficient pragmatic clarity over those of face-saving acts, their use of highly indirect strategies might also be considered as impolite for the inadequate pragmatic clarity. In other words, indirect utterances are not universally more polite than direct utterances (Wierzbicka, 1991). For examples, in some cultures, placing a direct request is not less polite or less appropriate than indirect requests in other cultures (Le Pair, 1996; Marquez-Reiter, 2000; Mir, 1993; cited in Shively, 2008). Thus, EFL learners' overuse of direct strategies in this study should be not evaluated as less polite compared to native speakers; but rather evidence of pragmatic transfer from L1 Persian as found in studies of speech act on L1 Persian (Eslami-Rasekh, 1993; Farnia, Sohrabie, and Abdul Sattar, 2014; Zarei and Mahmoodi, 2012).

Positive politeness has to do with an attempt at maintaining the positive self-image that the hearer claims for himself (i.e., to maintain the hearer's positive face). In point of fact, it is in everyone's wants to save the other's face. Persian is known as a face-saving culture where 'pride' and 'honor' (shaxsiat and eheteram) are its two basic components (Koutlaki, 2002). Interestingly, the findings of this study are in contrast with previous studies whose Persian respondents used more indirect/implicit strategies when realizing a given speech act (see Allami and Naeimi, 2010; Pishghadam and Sharafadini, 2011; Farnia and Abdul Sattar, 2015). These findings, however, are in line with Eslami-Rasekh (1993) who reported that Persian respondents used *direct* strategies in placing request. These outcomes notwithstanding, Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989) claimed that the degree of directness does not essentially suggest that speakers of one language are more polite than speakers of another language. Indeed, directness is only one aspect of the sequences related to politeness and other elements also play important roles in this respect (Blum-Kulka, et al., 1989). Likewise, Kerkam (forthcoming) reported that while in some languages like English indirectness is considered polite, in other languages it could be considered impolite. Kerkam pointed out that in Arabic language directness is appraised as more appropriate and expected form of requests and excuses. Use of indirect forms would display a social or affective distance between interlocutors.

On the whole, the outcomes indicated that compared with NSE, EFL learners produce fewer *indirect strategies* and *opt-outs*. The participants' use of modification strongly contradicts this, since EFL learners used *hints strategy* more significantly than NSE. The findings do not suggest that EFL learners did not care about the imposition they left on the interlocutor; rather, their tendency to remind something through *hints* could be regarded as a means of minimizing the force of an FTA. This argument highlights the importance of seeking alternative explanations in the future research. As a directive speech act, this finding is consistent with Trosborg who observed that NSE '...performed higher on indirect requests than on any of the other major categories of request strategies (Trosborg, 1995, p. 240). Thus, one may posit that depending on the level of directness of an act, these two groups did not treat reminders similarly. As put by Grainger and Mills (2016), indirectness and politeness have a complex relationship and some languages like Arabic (Kerkam, forthcoming) do not interpret the use of indirectness the same way as native speakers do in English.

Since pragmatics plays a very central role in the process of communication and the action of reminding is performed in our daily lives and in a variety of situations, this speech act has become the subject of a growing number of studies over the past few years. The findings of the present study are of pedagogical significance as they can be applied to teaching those who wish to become pragmatically competent learners of English. Hopefully, these would provide a new avenue of research for those researchers interested in discourse pragmatic studies as well. Hence, it is plausible to say that EFL learners transfer this strategy from their first language to the English language as found in (Farnia, Sohrabie, and Abdul

Sattar, 2014)'study of speech act of suggestions by Iranian native speakers of Persian where the respondents use directive strategies more significantly than conventionalized form and indirect strategies.

This fact emphasizes the necessity of developing pragmatic competence among foreign language learners. In addition, based on the findings, one may ascribe the application of direct strategies to Iranian EFL learners' lack of knowledge or their lack of face to face communications with English native speakers. The problem might possibly stem from their inadequate knowledge regulating their appropriate strategy use. As a result, they could have avoided strategies for which they did not have enough knowledge and, as a result, opted for more direct ones since they knew how to utilize them effectively in their L1. In Iran, formal English language instruction starts at the secondary school. English is taught as a foreign language in this country and except for some limited exposure to the instructed input and textbooks, there are few opportunities to use English outside the classroom. Consequently, as Flowerdew (2011) states, developing awareness of the effect of context in sociopragmatic and linguistic choice and meaning is pivotal. In other words, "a more consciousness-raising approach rather than memorization of sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic norms" should be applied to teaching the target language. It is, therefore, suggested that Iranian language instructors and learners set up and engage in doing L2 learning tasks which are more likely to raise language learners' awareness of sociopragmatic norms governing authentic language use. In this connection, Murray (2012) reported a number of awareness-raising activities which might be of use:

*focusing on speech acts in the performance of which deviation from the L1 norm is most critical to meaning and interpersonal relations; engaging learners in discourse completion tasks; using authentic materials; encouraging learners to become their own ethnographers and observe how speech acts are realized in the L2 in particular contexts of use and to contrast this with the L1; and incorporating native-speaker role plays into classroom activities as a focus of student observation.*

Moreover, in light of the present findings, it is suggested that second/foreign language educators apply techniques and activities to raise EFL learners' pragmatic awareness of the appropriate use of speech act of reminding and provide ample opportunities for speech act performance. With regard to the impoverished environment of the language classrooms where there is a paucity of appropriate input, feedback and insufficient contextualized language practices (Kasper & Roever, 2005), there seems to be a definite need to raise EFL learners' awareness of the rules and conventions of language in classroom context.

## 7. Conclusion

The findings of the present study bear theoretical as well as pedagogical implications for cross-cultural and EFL interlanguage research and may be applied to different aspects of English learning and teaching. The results revealed that the speech act of reminding does present a challenge to Iranian EFL learners. Thus, it could be recommended that the notion of politeness needs to be presented to Iranian EFL learners intensively to make them familiar with cultural differences and the norms of L2 and thereby streamline their realization of speech act of reminding. Moreover, the strategies native speakers of English use to realize reminders are important for Iranian EFL learners since being aware of differences in reminders used in Persian and English can facilitate communication and prevent possible misunderstandings. For language teachers, students' awareness of such differences will promote the teaching of the type of strategies appropriate for certain types of situations. Finally, much attention should be paid to recent findings of pragmatics studies which can influence the present state of language learning in Iran.

There were, nonetheless, some limitations in the present study that confined the generalizations of the findings. Therefore, it is hoped that further future studies will use other methods of data collection, e.g. role plays, to alleviate these shortcomings and shed more light on the process of doing the speech act of reminding. It is also recommended that a research allowing for participants' proficiency level be conducted. Lastly, it would be more informative to know whether or not the realizations of strategies of a given speech act (i.e. reminders) are mediated through the speaker or hearer's gender.

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