

Journal of English Language
Teaching and Learning
No. 14, 2014

Perceived Pragmatic Transferability of Persian L1 Refusal Strategies

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Abstract

Investigating transfer of one's pragmatic knowledge of first language to his second or foreign language has been one of the areas of interest for researchers. However, there are contradictory results even within the scarce studies which have addressed transferability. This study was an attempt to investigate perceived pragmatic transferability of L1 refusal strategies by Persian EFL learners. Specifically, the effect of degree of imposition of the context and eliciting act type on transferability rate was investigated. To this end, a DCT was developed with the help of 60 (male & female) Persian EFL learners. This DCT was then administered to 74 Persian EFL learners as the main participants of the study. The results showed the existence of the interactional effect of both degree of imposition and type of eliciting act on the learners' transferability rate. This suggests that learners' perception of the differences in conditions under which they refuse has an effect on their choices of the pragmatic aspects to be transferred to English.

Keywords: Pragmatics, Transferability, Refusals, Transferability Rate, Degree of Imposition.

تأیید نهایی: ۹۳/۱۱/۵

تاریخ وصول: ۹۳/۹/۱

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Introduction

In the process of learning a second or a foreign language one faces two challenges: learning the system of the target language and learning how to use that system in everyday language use (Geis & Harlow, 1995). The framework for pragmatics or additional meaning which deals with the second challenge has come into existence over the past forty years or so based mainly on proposals by three philosophers: J.L. Austin, H.P. Grice and J.R. Searle (Griffiths, 2006).

Unlike linguistics, pragmatics is not concerned with language as a system to produce correct grammatical sentences; rather it deals with the interrelationship between language form, the message that is communicated and the people using the language (Spencer-Oatey & Žegarac, 2002). Interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) as a subfield is concerned with how people use language within a social context (Gass & Selinker, 2008).

Much of the studies in interlanguage pragmatics have been done within the framework of speech acts which are also considered as functions of language (Gass & Selinker, 2008). It is because of the fact that control over speech acts needs the use of both socio-culturally and socio-linguistically appropriate behavior (Cohen, 1995).

Performing refusals as one of the speech acts needs a high level of pragmatic competence due to the fact that they constitute a face-threatening act the effect of which needs to be lessened by the speaker (Ellis, 2008). Refusals are used in the form of response to a variety of speech acts such as offers, invitations, requests and suggestions in different cross-cultural ways (Gass & Selinker, 2008).

In the process of learning and using a new language learners use their previous linguistic and pragmatic knowledge. This process is referred to as language transfer (Gass & Selinker, 1993). Although, the term “crosslinguistic influence” as a theory-neutral term has been proposed by researchers to replace “transfer” and to refer to the full range of ways in which a person’s knowledge of one language can affect that person’s knowledge and use of another language, the term “transfer” has also continued to be used interchangeably alongside it (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008).

Since the late 1970s, researchers criticized the assumption that language transfer has to be part of behaviorism. The rationale behind

this view was that there was “selectivity” in learners in what to transfer and what not to transfer. So the researchers did not accept or reject the phenomenon completely, rather emphasized the determination of how and when this transfer occurs and the explanations for that and the emphasis changed from transfer to transferability, i.e. the conditions under which transfer occurs (Gass & Selinker, 2008).

Researchers have sought to identify constraints on transfer, i.e. the conditions that promote and inhibit transfer (Ellis, 2008). These constraints can be social factors. The social constraints affecting transfer can be external or internal. External factors usually involve the status of the participants and are established prior to an interaction. The amount of imposition or degree of friendliness as an internal factor, however, is negotiated during an interaction (Yule, 1996).

Transferability studies, like the present one, explore the conditions under which transfer occurs, trying to determine how, why and when L1 features are more likely to be transferred to L2 context (Takahashi, 1993). Work by Kellerman (1983, cited in Gass & Selinker, 1993) has been prominent in the development of the transferability studies. Kellerman believed in the existence of constraints on transfer which go beyond mere similarities and dissimilarities of the languages. He synthesized the works of other researchers into two general constraints which govern the occurrence of language transfer: psychotypology and transferability. According to the psychotypology constraint transfer is more likely to occur when the L2 user perceives the L1 and L2 as being similar. Based on transferability constraint, structures perceived by the L2 user as marked (language-specific) are less likely to be transferred (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008).

Some researchers have suggested that it is the learners’ perception of similarities between L1 and L2, not presumed similarities of the researchers which determines the transferability rate. For example, Ringbom (2007) suggested that although transfer occurs between the languages that are quite different from the researchers’ perspective, the extent of transfer is highest when the source and recipient languages are perceived to be similar by the L2 user. To complicate this a little further, Kellerman (1978, cited in Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008), argued that learners are sensitive to only certain types of

objective similarities between the two languages, and it is their objective judgments that determine the transferability degree.

The study of Takahashi (1993) can be considered as the first study designed specifically for the purpose of investigating transferability at pragmatic level. By making use of Kellerman's (1986, p. 36) definition of the transferability of a structure as "the probability with which it will be transferred to an L2 compared to some other structure or structures", in her (1993, 1996) studies Takahashi defined pragmatic transferability as "the probability with which a given L1 indirect request strategy will be transferred relative to other L1 indirect request strategies" (1996, p. 95).

However, in her own study of pragmatic transferability, Takahashi (1996) criticized the design of her already mentioned study stating that:

Although Takahashi (1992, 1993) were the only ones designed specifically for the purpose of investigating pragmatic transferability, its operationalization was not convincing. Pragmatic transferability was operationally defined as the transferability rate obtained by subtracting the acceptability rate of the English indirect request from that of the corresponding Japanese indirect request. However, the basis for equating transferability with a simple subtraction as such was not well explored, nor was it clarified whether such an equation represents learners' psychologically real perception (p. 190).

Trying to compensate for this methodological problem in her previous studies, Takahashi (1996) tried to formulate an operational definition of pragmatic transferability that is well grounded in theories of language transfer. To this end, she proposed two criteria for the concept of pragmatic transferability: 1) how L2 learners assess the contextual appropriateness of an L1 pragmatic strategy and 2) how they assess the equivalence of the L1 and L2 strategies in terms of contextual appropriateness. Then, she constructed a two section questionnaire, each section accounting for one criterion. Here, the transferability of a given request strategy was operationally defined as transferability rate which is obtained by perception rate of the contextual appropriateness of the L1 request strategy plus perception

rate of the equivalence in contextual appropriateness between the L1 strategy and its L2 equivalence multiplied in 0.54. This value (0.54) is equivalence weight value for possible variation in participants' equivalence representation (for more information see Takahashi, 1996).

Following that, she concluded that learners' transferability perception was influenced by their L2 proficiency with no definite tendency for a positive or negative correlation between L1 transfer and L2 proficiency. In addition, the learners were found to be sensitive to the varying degrees of imposition in their transferability judgments.

By replicating Takahashi's (1996) study, Eslami and Noora (2008) tried to investigate pragmatic transferability of L1 request strategies by Persian EFL learners. They investigated the effects of the learners' L2 proficiency level and the degree of imposition of the situation on the learners' transferability judgment using a pragmatic transferability judgment questionnaire. It was found that the strategies used and the degree of transferability is influenced by the learners' proficiency level and the level of imposition in the requestive goals. In spite of the existence of the relationship between proficiency level and transferability rate, here again there was no definite positive or negative correlation between the two.

Due to the fact that so far no study of pragmatic transferability of the speech act of refusal has been conducted, the present study aimed at addressing this speech act. The effect of degree of imposition of the situation in which something is being refused on transferability rate was measured.

The speech act of refusal, as the focus of the present study, is a high-risk face-threatening act which occurs when a speaker directly or indirectly says 'no' to a request, invitation, suggestion or offer (Allami & Naeimi, 2011). In an attempt to avoid the inherent risk of offending one's interlocutor, speakers use various strategies which may vary cross-culturally (Al-Eryani, 2007). Moreover, in many societies and cultures, how one says 'no' is more important than the answer itself and lack of enough pragmatic knowledge may cause serious misunderstandings (Al-Kahtani, 2005, cited in Allami & Naeimi,

2011). Being aware of these facts has made researchers interested in investigating refusals.

A major study of refusals was carried out by Beebe et al. (1990), in which the refusals produced by native Japanese speakers and native English speakers were compared. The authors made use of a DCT, investigating pragmatic transfer in refusals directed at higher, equal and lower status interlocutors. The findings demonstrated the importance of the status of the interlocutors in respondents' chosen refusal strategies.

In a recent study, Keshavarz, M., Eslami, Z. and Ghahraman, V. (2006) investigated the pragmatic transfer of refusal strategies by Iranian EFL learners, without paying attention to the conditions under which this transfer occurs. The findings demonstrated that even the speech act of language learners with fairly advanced level of English proficiency contain non-native pragmatic features which are the result of pragmatic transfer. The study also showed the effect of factors such as eliciting speech act and the importance of L1 cultural values on pragmatic transfer.

In a cross-linguistic study, Allami and Naeimi (2011), examined Iranian EFL learners' refusal strategies. Looking at these strategies simply from contrastive perspective they compared Persian and English refusal, exploring the frequency, shift and content of semantic formulas with regard to the language learners' proficiency level (lower-intermediate, intermediate and upper-intermediate) and types of eliciting acts (requests, invitations, offers and suggestions). They reported the existence of differences in the frequency, shift and content of semantic formulas between Iranians and Americans when responding to a higher, equal and lower status interlocutor.

Very briefly put, the above mentioned studies investigated pragmatic transfer rather than pragmatic transferability of refusal strategies. There has not been study investigating pragmatic transferability of refusal strategies in Iranian context, the need for which is ascertained by Eslami and Noora (2008).

Research Question

RQ: Does the degree of imposition of the situation in which a request, an offer, an invitation or a suggestion is being refused affect the learners' transferability judgment? In what way?

Method

The present study is a mixed methods approach. Due to the fact that there were no ready made questionnaires designed specifically for the purpose of this study, three preliminary studies were conducted in order to construct a suitable transferability judgment questionnaire, addressing the effect of degree of imposition and the type of eliciting act on transferability rate by Iranian EFL learners.

Dependent and Independent Variables

Transferability rate is the dependent variable. Degree of imposition and the type of eliciting act are the independent variables.

Participants

Two different groups of participants took part in this study. The main group consisted of 29 male and 45 female (totaling 74) Persian undergraduate university students majoring in English who had studied English as a foreign language. Their age ranged from 18 to 30. Those participants who had any amount of residency in an English speaking country were not included in the study.

Another group of participants consisting of 30 male and 30 female (totaling 60) people with similar characteristics to the main participants in terms of age and language background took part in the preliminary studies in order to construct the final questionnaire. Three bilingual judges also helped the researchers in the translation process and the process of making the questionnaire.

Context of the study

The preliminary studies were conducted at the universities of Tabriz and Tehran by collecting data from the Persian learners of English studying in these universities. The main data was collected from the universities of Tehran and Qazvin.

Procedures

Following the design of the study conducted by Takahashi (1996) and Eslami and Noora (2008) the first step to be taken was to measure the degree of imposition of the situation in which a refusal was being used by the participants. This was done by asking the participants to rate each situation in terms of difficulty of refusing on a 7 point Lickert scale (1= least difficult to 7= most difficult). The Persian format of a discourse completion task (DCT) including 12 situations in which a refusal was used in response to the eliciting acts of offer, suggestion, request and invitation to three different interlocutors of high, equal and low status to that of the learner was used. The English format of the DCT was a modified version of the 12-item DCT developed by Beebe et al. in 1990. This test was modified and also translated into Persian by Allami and Naeimi (2011) in order to be used in Iranian context. From among the 12 situations eight situations were chosen based on their degree of imposition, four having the high and four having the low imposition based on what the participants had chosen. For each eliciting act one high and one low imposition situation was selected. The situations in which a higher status interlocutor (i.e. the boss) was refused were all treated as high imposition by the participants as expected, but unlike what was expected by the researcher the situations selected as low impositions were those in which a person with an equal status was being refused rather than the one in which a lower status interlocutor was refused. Therefore, the four high imposition situations were the ones with the high status interlocutor and the four low imposition situations were the ones with the equal status interlocutor with the lower status interlocutors being deleted.

In the second preliminary study the participants were asked to write down what they would actually utter in these situations in Persian. The above mentioned 12-item Persian DCT questionnaire was used. The elicited Persian sentences were analyzed and coded by the researchers according to the classification of the refusal strategies by Beebe et al. (1990). Based on the analysis of native speaker refusals they showed that refusals are performed by means of a fairly limited set of direct and indirect strategies and that, individual refusals consist of different selections from these strategies in accordance with

the context (Ellis, 2008). So, for example, if a respondent refused an invitation by saying: "*I'm sorry, I already have plans. Maybe next time*", this was coded as: [statement of regret] [excuse] [offer]. After analysis, the most common strategies used in each situation were selected to be used as the final questionnaire items.

The third step of the study was concerned with the establishment of the English equivalents of the Persian answers, already elicited from learners and analyzed by the researcher, by three bilingual judges. The judges translated the Persian sentences to their functional English equivalents to be used in the second section of the final questionnaire.

Finally, the DCT questionnaire, as the main data collection tool, was constructed based on the data obtained through the previous steps in two sections.. The rationale behind dividing the questionnaire into two sections was Takahashi's (1996) notion of dependence of pragmatic transferability on two criteria. The first one being the learners' assessment of the contextual appropriateness of a given strategy in their L1 and the second one their assessment of the equivalence of strategies in the first language and the target language in terms of contextual appropriateness.

In section one of the questionnaire, the participants' perception of the contextual appropriateness of the Persian refusal strategies was assessed on a 7-point rating scale (1=definitely inappropriate, 7=definitely appropriate). The eight selected situations based on the degree of imposition were presented in a random order with each having two utterances which refused the request, invitation, offer or suggestion. These were presented in Persian and the participants were told to put themselves in an Iranian context while they were judging the appropriateness of the utterances.

The second criterion for transferability judgment was dealt with in section two. This section included the eight pairs of Persian and English refusal strategies established as equivalents. The above mentioned 7-point rating scale was used in this section as well. However, in this part the participants were asked to judge the utterances with regard to their equivalence (1= the least equivalent and 7= the most equivalent).

The constructed questionnaire was administered to the participants. Although the process of answering was explained at the top of the questionnaire, oral explanations were also given when necessary. No time limits were set.

Pragmatic transferability rate, then, as suggested by Takahashi (1996) and done by Eslami and Noora (2008) was obtained according to the following formula: pragmatic transferability rate= perception rate of the contextual appropriateness of the L1 refusal strategy + perception rate of the equivalence in contextual appropriateness between the L1 strategy and its L2 equivalent * 0.48.

The value of 0.48 is an equivalence weight value for possible variation in participants' equivalence representation, computed by using the data obtained from the bilingual judges who established the English equivalents.

Operational Definition of Pragmatic Transferability

Based on Takahashi (1996), pragmatic transferability is operationally defined as transferability rate which is established through the summation of the perceived L1 contextual appropriateness of a Persian refusal strategy and the perceived similarity in contextual appropriateness between a Persian refusal and its English equivalent.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed by SPSS statistics pack version 20. Repeated Measures Multivariate analysis was used with imposition and eliciting act as within subjects and gender as between subjects as independent variables. Transferability rate also was the dependent variable.

Results

The results of the repeated measures analysis on the effect of the degree of imposition of the situations and eliciting act type on transferability rate are presented in Tables 1 through 4, as well as figure 1.

Table 1
Means of the Effect of Degree of Imposition on Transferability Rate

Imposition	Mean	Std. Error
Low	7.381	.139
High	7.076	.150

As shown in Table 1 the means for the degree of imposition on transferability rate in low and high impositions are not different.

Table 2 presents means of the four eliciting acts (i.e. request, invitation, suggestion and offer) as the independent variable. Here again the means are different from one another, but as it is seen the difference is not much significant.

Table 2
Means of the Effect of the Type of the Eliciting Act on Transferability Rate

Eliciting Act	Mean	Std. Error
Request	7.638	.167
Invitation	7.357	.174
Suggestion	6.558	.170
Offer	7.362	.168

The descriptive statistics of the interactional effect of the degree of imposition and the type of eliciting act on transferability rate are presented in Table 3. Generally speaking, the means for low imposition situations are higher than the high imposition situations.

Table 3
Means of the Interactional Effects of the Degree of Imposition and Eliciting Act Type on Transferability Rate

Imposition	Eliciting Act	Mean	Std. Error
Low	Request	7.530	.206
	Invitation	7.671	.193
	Suggestion	7.016	.189
	Offer	7.306	.213
High	Request	7.746	.201
	Invitation	7.042	.229
	Suggestion	6.100	.207
	Offer	7.417	.196

Table 4
Tests of the Effect of Imposition Degree and Eliciting Act type on Transferability Rate

Source	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Imposition	1	13.058	6.626	.012
Imposition*Gender	1	1.694	.859	.357
Eliciting Act	3	30.635	14.301	.000
Eliciting Act * Gender	3	2.719	1.269	.286
Imposition * Eliciting Act	3	10.860	6.092	.001
Imposition * Eliciting Act * Gender	3	2.075	1.164	.324

The results of the effects of degree of imposition and type of eliciting act as within subjects factor and gender as the between subjects factor on transferability rate are presented in Table 4. As it is shown in the table, the p value for the effect of imposition on transferability rate is $p < 0.05$, hence being significant. This suggests the participants' awareness of differing imposition degrees in transferring refusal strategies. The effect of eliciting act on

transferability is also significant ($p < 0.01$), suggesting the possibility that the type of eliciting act to which one refuses has an effect on his perceived pragmatic transferability rate. Consequently, the interactional effect of imposition degree and eliciting act type on transferability rate is significant ($p < 0.01$), showing the simultaneous effect of the two independent variables namely the degree of imposition and type of eliciting act on the dependent variable, i.e. transferability rate. However, the interactional effects of gender and imposition degree, eliciting act type and gender, and imposition degree, eliciting act type and gender on transferability rate are not significant, thus excluding the possibility of gender to exert any effect on transferability rate.

Figure 1 presents a schematic view of the results of the analysis. The vertical axis shows the transferability rate, and the horizontal axis shows the two imposition situations: low and high. And, finally each of the four lines represents one of the four eliciting act types.

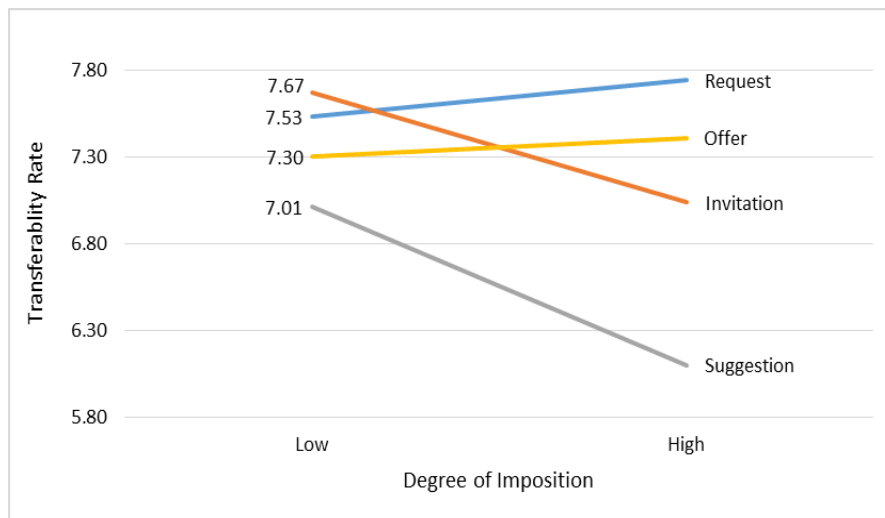


Figure 1. The Schematic View of the Interactional Effect of Imposition Degree and Eliciting Act Type on Transferability Rate

The transferability rate of the situations, low and high, in which the participants refused a request is 7.53 in the low imposition

situation with an increase in amount in the higher imposition situation. This suggests the participants' awareness of the differing imposition situations and consequently differing transferability rate which is higher in the case of refusing a high status interlocutor.

The other eliciting act i.e. invitation, shows a completely different pattern. Unlike what is the case for the request, here the transferability rate is higher in low imposition situation with a decrease in the high imposition amounting to 7.0.

Looking at the eliciting act of suggestion, one sees the same decreasing pattern as in the case of invitation. However, here the highest amount is 7.0 in the low imposition situation and the transferability rate decreases more than in number 2 and to the amount of almost 6.0 which is the lowest.

Finally, the transferability rate of the eliciting act of offer shows an increasing pattern more or less like the one in the case of request. However, here both the lowest amount in low imposition and highest amount in the high imposition situation is lower than the same amounts in the case of the request.

Comparing the transferability rates of the four eliciting act types with one another, we noticed that two of them, i.e. request and offer, more or less follow the same pattern in the low and high imposition situations. In both the transferability rate is lower in low imposition than in high imposition situation. The other two, i.e. suggestion and invitation follow an opposite pattern in that in these two situations the transferability rate is higher in low imposition than in high imposition situation.

Comparing the two imposition situations too, we noticed the same two patterns among the four situations, i.e. lower rate in low imposition for two of them and higher one for the other two and the other way around in the high imposition one. Interestingly enough, both the highest and lowest amount of the transferability rate belong to the high imposition situation suggesting that the degree of imposition alone is not enough in talking about the transferability rate and it is the multiple effect of the type of eliciting act and degree of imposition that, other things being equal, more or less determines transferability rate.

Discussion

The findings of the study showed the existence of the effect of the imposition degree on transferability rate. However, this effect was a two way effect of both degree of imposition and the type of the eliciting act. That is, the participants were not only aware of the degree of imposition of the situation, but also to the type of the act to which they were refusing. Unlike Americans, Allami and Naeimi (2011), who have shown to be insensitive to status differences among their interlocutors, Persian EFL learners, like Japanese, showed to be aware of these differences.

In the present study the refusal strategies were found to be transferred differently. Degree of imposition and eliciting act type were the two contextual factors that played an interactional role in determining pragmatic transferability. The relationship between these factors and transferability, however, was found to be a complex one and more than a simple association. In fact, the multiple effects of imposition degree and eliciting act type on transferability seem to be the reason for the differing and unpredictable change patterns of transferability rate in the four contexts.

Contradicting the results of the study by Koike (1989) in which the effect of degree of imposition was ignored, the findings of this study are in line with the studies of Shimamura (1993, cited in Takahashi, 1996) and Niki and Tajika (1994, cited in Takahashi, 1996) who suggested that degree of imposition can be an important and somehow determining factor in the learners' pragmatic choices. The findings also support the idea suggested by Takahashi (1996) that Japanese learners of English are sensitive to the differing imposition degrees and act accordingly. The study conducted by Eslami and Noora (2008) also found the significant effect of the degree of imposition on Iranian EFL learners' transferability judgments with respect to the speech act of request. The results of the present study show the same findings but with a difference in the chosen speech act, that is, refusal rather than request.

Although an attempt was made to conduct a completely reliable research, like most of other studies in this area, the present study had a number of limitations. The first limitation was related to the number of the people who participated in the study. The number of the

participants was limited to 74. In addition, the researchers could not have equal number of males and females as the participants. However, based on the analysis this did not have any effect on the main findings.

Finally, it could be concluded that learners are sensitive to and aware of the pragmatic aspects of the context in which they are conversing, for example, the social status of their interlocutor and consequently the degree of the imposition of their context. However, this awareness alone is not enough and due to the lack of enough sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic knowledge of the target language by the learners, this awareness does not always lead into successful cross-cultural communication and may even cause miscommunication. Therefore, it is the responsibility of language educators to make the learners aware of the existing cross-cultural differences and equip them with appropriate sociolinguistic and sociopragmatic rules, teaching them to pay attention to what is considered to be generally appropriate in the target culture and avoid negative transfer.

Investigating the relationship between different proficiency levels and transferability rate can be a topic for further research. Also, the research can be expanded to other speech acts such as requests, suggestions, invitations, complimenting, etc. In addition, the study can be conducted in areas where English is a second rather than a foreign language. Similar studies can also be conducted concerning participants with different native languages rather than Persian.

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