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Interlanguage Pragmatic Learning Strategies (IPLS) as Predictors of L2 Speech Act Knowledge: A Case of Iranian EFL Learners

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Introduction

Pragmatic competence has progressively entered the limelight of research interest since it premiered in Bachman's (1990) model of communicative competence, underscoring the indispensable role of the relationship between "language users and the context of communication" (p. 89). Therefore, it stands to reason that for effective communication in the EFL/ESL contexts to take place, pragmatic competence is a crucial determinant. Yet, the development of an efficient pragmatic competence depends on many important internal and external learner variables (e.g., Cohen, 2019; Kasper & Rose, 2002; Mohammad Hosseinpur & Bagheri Nevisi, 2018; Taguchi, 2019; Taguchi & Roever, 2017; Tajeddin & Dabbagh, 2015; Takimoto, 2010, 2013). One prominent individual difference (ID) that exerts influence over the acquisition of pragmatic knowledge is pragmatic learning strategies (Cohen, 2005, 2010, 2019), or interlanguage pragmatic learning strategies (IPLS) (Tajeddin & Malmir, 2015). Interlanguage pragmatic learning strategies include memory, cognitive, metacognitive, social, and affective variables, as well as compensatory techniques and procedures that are specifically responsible for gaining, retaining, managing, organizing, and seeking pragmatic knowledge in the target language. Since this neologism is new to the field of pragmatics, very few studies to date have been conducted to scrutinize how IPLS contribute to various forms of pragmatic knowledge such as speech acts, implicatures, and conversational routines. Moreover, how L2 learners can develop the IPLS and their sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic knowledge which can directly affect L2 speech-act knowledge is in its nascent stages of research interest. Because of the importance of these research lacunas in the current pragmatics literature and the scarcity of research in this regard, the present study was undertaken to fill this gap by scrutinizing the relationship between EFL learners' IPLS and their speech-act pragmatic knowledge of common English speech acts (requests, apologies, refusals, compliment/ compliment responses, and complaints).



Literature Review

The longstanding pioneering taxonomy of IPLS was conceptualized by Cohen (2005), with the prime focus on speech acts. Cohen (2010) posited that the sources for IPLS taxonomy are enlightened by the general language learning strategy literature (Chamot, 2004; Cohen & Weaver, 2006), speech act literature (Cohen & Olshtain, 1993; Cohen & Shively, 2007), insights from LLS research conducted to enhance college students' learning of Japanese L2 speech acts through a strategies-based online curriculum (Ishihara, 2008), and insights from language and culture study abroad projects (Cohen, 1998). Informed by the current trends in the literature, Cohen (2005) took the initiative to devise a taxonomy of learner strategies for acquiring speech acts.

Cohen (2010) cogently argued that three classes of strategies make the cornerstone of his taxonomy, which are classified as: the strategies which are germane to the initial learning of speech acts; the strategies related to the use of the speech act material that has already been learned to some extent; and learners' strategies which deal with planning, monitoring, and evaluating their pragmatic strategy choices. Cohen (2010) also argued that three groups of factors impact the successful use of speech acts learning strategies, including characteristics of the learners, the nature of the task, and the contexts for language use. Learner characteristics such as age, gender, language aptitude, language learning styles, and personality factors affect the use of interlanguage pragmatic learning strategies and pragmatic performance strategies. Factors such as similarities and differences between L1 and L2, differences between the sociopragmatic norms and pragmalinguistic forms of the two languages, differences in politeness considerations, and other aspects of the attended speech act are very decisive in the choice of IPLS and pragmatic performance strategies.

Although the field of language learner strategies (LLS) has gained considerable momentum in the research literature for more than four decades (Cohen & Wang, 2018; Oxford, 2017), the literature on IPLS is limited in both breadth and scope. Regarding these strategies, Cohen (2005) made a demarcation between interlanguage pragmatic learning strategies and pragmatic performance strategies (PPS). On the one hand, IPLS strategies pertain to those strategies that can be utilized by L2 learners in their past language learning experience or are currently used to acquire L2 pragmatic knowledge (Cohen, 2019). On the other hand, PPSs refer to those moment-by-moment performance strategies utilized by L2 learners to produce and comprehend the required speech acts socially, linguistically, and culturally appropriate. PPSs encompass choices such as politeness aspects, decisions related to the proper choice of vocabulary and structures, and choices relating to the power relations between speaker and hearer during the interactions in which the speakers are engaged. Furthermore, Cohen (2019) has submitted that strategies for pragmatics fall within the broad category of communication strategies. Nonetheless, while communication strategies aim to help interlocutors convey their messages straightforwardly and transparently, pragmatics strategies "may call for avoiding transparency" (p. 142). Essentially, pragmatics strategies "deal specifically with the comprehension and production of language when the underlying sociocultural intentions are not necessarily straightforward, especially not to learners of that language" (p. 142).

Like general language learning strategies, the main objective of research on IPLS is to help learners "be more effective pragmatically in L2" (Cohen, 2010, p. 227). Some studies have investigated this issue, documenting that explicit strategy instruction is very influential in the development of L2 sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic knowledge related to different speech acts (Cohen & Sykes, 2013; Félix-Brasdefer & Cohen, 2012). Cohen (2010) has supported the instruction of interlanguage pragmatic learning strategies, explicating that "given the challenges associated with learning L2 pragmatics, it makes sense for learners to develop their own repertoire of strategies for both learning and performing pragmatics" (p. 277).

It is also postulated that there is a reciprocal interplay between IPLS and PPS in that embarking on more IPLS will facilitate the use of PPS, and more use of PPS in real-world interactions can augment the use of IPLS and facilitate L2 learners' control over the previously acquired IPLS (Cohen, 2010; Cohen &

Sykes, 2013). It is substantiated that LPLS and PPS can construct the strategy module of interlanguage pragmatic competence. Subsequently, if IPLS and PPS are taken together, more insightful information can be achieved about the reciprocal interplay and mechanisms of their joint cooperative function within ILP competence.

Cohen (2019) reiterated that literature on IPLS has illuminated two kinds of research. One approach descriptively views the awareness for learning and performing target language pragmatics as can be seen in Tajeddin and Malmir's (2015) study. Using semi-structured interviews with 80 high pragmatic achievers and filling the required pragmatics strategies inventory in a sample of 500 Iranian EFL learners, they found that the use of more pragmatic strategies was related to a better knowledge of speech acts among the highest and lowest performers. They extracted six types of strategies, including memory, cognitive, metacognitive, social, compensatory, and affective. Another line of research on IPLS has concentrated on speech acts. For instance, Li (2013) investigated request-making forms in L2 Chinese on 49 learners to find out the effects of the amount of pragmatics practice for facilitating accurate and speedy recognition and production of this speech act. The results revealed that four instances of processing target pragmatic features were enough to promote pragmatic performance accuracy, but more than eight instances were required for the development of performance speed.

Recent research has empirically documented the notion that the use of IPLS is not monolithic, but rather dynamic, interactive, and reciprocal in that learners may simultaneously capitalize on a cognitive, social, affective or metacognitive function from one moment to the next, which is highly contingent upon the nature of the interaction (Cohen & Wang, 2018; Malmir & Derakhshan, 2020; Tajeddin & Malmir, 2015; Youn & Bi, 2019). For instance, Cohen and Wang (2018) conducted a study on three ESL and three EFL Chinese-speaking university students who were required to individually perform an English vocabulary task to unveil the extent to which the use of a strategy involves more than one function. Their results indicated fluctuation in strategy functions across metacognitive, cognitive, social, and affective strategies, corroborating the use of a reciprocal micro-fluctuation for both the same strategy and across strategies. Alternatively, Youn and Bi's (2019) main focus was conducted on 30 university-level ESL learners to find out how they utilize task-based pragmatic strategies. The findings revealed that test takers drew on distinct types of strategies, including metacognitive, cognitive, situation-related sociopragmatic, pragmalinguistic, and interactional strategies.

The present study differs from previous studies in that it has used a rather comprehensive inventory for eliciting EFL learners' use of pragmatic learning strategies. Previous studies have focused on a limited number of general language learning strategies (LLS) or pragmatic learning/performing strategies as a whole and have not examined the effect of each type of particular IPLS. Because interlanguage pragmatic development demands intensive scrutiny and meticulous speculation on the nature of the involved learning strategies which are specifically responsible and determinant, the present study sought to investigate the contributions of the main IPLS to L2 learners' speech act knowledge. Specifically, the present study aimed to answer the following two research questions:

- 1) How well do IPLS contribute to Iranian EFL learners' speech-act pragmatic knowledge?
- 2) Which type of IPLS is a stronger predictor of pragmatic knowledge?

Method

Participants

A total of 361 intermediate to advanced EFL learners, selected from among 406 students, took part in the present investigation. These participants were selected from two state universities: 185 learners studying either English language teaching or translation at Imam Khomeini International University (IKIU) of Qazvin (selected from an initial sample of 205), and 176 EFL learners majoring in either

English language teaching or literature at Golestan University, Gorgan (chosen from among 201). These learners were selected based on their performances on the Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency (MTELP). Their age ranged from 18 to 31 ($M = 20.60$, $SD = 1.68$). In terms of their English language learning experience, the selected participants were seniors ($n = 118$), juniors ($n = 112$), sophomores ($n = 87$), and freshman ($n = 44$).

Instruments

This study employed three major data collection instruments: The Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency (MTELP) as a homogeneity test, a multiple-choice discourse completion test (MDCT), and the interlanguage pragmatic learning strategies (IPLS) inventory.

The Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency (MTELP)

The (MTELP) was employed to select a homogeneous group of participants concerning their general language proficiency. The test consisted of 100 multiple-choice items and had three sections, grammar (40 items), vocabulary (40 items), and reading comprehension (20 items based on four reading passages). The test has shown its high reliability and validity in many studies conducted in various EFL and ESL contexts based on the reports released from the publisher in 2016 and some other studies (see e.g., Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010; Shohamy, Iair, & May, 2017). The reliability of the MTELP turned out to be .82 in the current investigation.

Multiple-choice discourse completion test (MDCTs)

A 35-item multiple-choice discourse completion test (MDCT), originally developed and validated by Tajeddin and Malmir (2015), was used to measure EFL learners' speech-act knowledge. The test included seven requests, nine apologies, eight refusals, seven compliment/ compliment responses, and four complaints. Each item encompassed a pragmatic context, a three to eight-line conversation, and three choices, one of which one was the most appropriate based on pragmatic criteria and the situation. The content of the pragmatic test was developed using famous American English conversation books and included requests, apologies, refusals, compliment/compliment responses, and complaints. The test developers reported Cronbach's alpha reliability indices of .89, and .75 at the pilot and the main study administrations, respectively.

Interlanguage pragmatic learning strategies (IPLS) inventory

A 6-point Likert-scale inventory, including 58 items developed and validated by Tajeddin and Malmir (2015) was used for determining participants' use of IPLS. The inventory included nine memory, 19 cognitive, eight metacognitive, eight social, eight compensatory, and six affective IPLS items, sequentially. The students were required to choose among *Strongly Disagree* (0), *Disagree* (1), *Slightly Disagree* (2), *Agree* (3), *Slightly Agree* (4), and *Strongly Agree* (5). The developers reported a Cronbach's reliability index .82 for the whole inventory. See appendix B for this inventory. Malmir (2015) also reported Cronbach alpha reliability indices of .83, .80, .79, .78, .82, and .79. for the six sections of the inventory, respectively. This inventory needed about 40 minutes to be completed by the students.

Data Collection Procedure

The current study was carried out in some consecutive steps. First, MTELP as a homogeneity test was administered to 406 Iranian EFL learners at two state universities. A sample of 372 students whose scores

fell at or beyond the mean ($M = 54.22$, $SD = 11.68$) and based on the rubrics of the tests could be considered an intermediate to advanced learners were selected for the current study. Then, Tajeddin and Malmir's (2015) MDCT of common English speech acts was answered by the participants in a separate session. A week later, the IPLS inventory was distributed among the learners. Elven participants had not completed one or two of the used instruments as asked by the researchers and accordingly, they were excluded, and the total number of the study sample was reduced to 361 learners.

Data Analysis

Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used for data analysis. Mean, standard deviation, Cronbach's alpha reliability indices, skewness, kurtosis, and normality figures and plots were calculated and drawn using the SPSS program (version 23). Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilkes normality tests and Levene's homogeneity test were also employed. The multiple regression was employed twice to examine the contribution of different types of interlanguage pragmatic learning strategies to Iranian EFL learners' speech act pragmatic knowledge.

Results

Descriptive statistics for the performances of the study participants on the MDCT and the IPLS inventory and its subsections are given in Table 1.

TABLE 1

Descriptive Statistics of Learners' Scores on MDCT and IPLS Inventory

	<i>N</i>	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>
MDCT	361	14	35	21.96	5.27
Total IPLS	361	121	213	167.97	14.92
Memory IPLS	361	15	33	23.55	3.73
Cognitive IPLS	361	34	77	58.19	7.41
Metacognitive IPLS	361	13	36	24.36	3.79
Social IPLS	361	15	36	24.73	3.84
Compensatory IPLS	361	9	32	20.06	3.75
Affective IPLS	361	10	24	17.08	2.78

Participants obtained a mean score of 21.96 with a standard deviation of 5.27 on the MDCT. The mean scores on different sections of the IPLS inventory varied partly due to the unequal numbers in each section of this inventory. Before answering the research question, the general requirements of parametric tests including normality of the distributions for the three main tests and the sections of the IPL inventory, absence of outliers, acceptable skewness and kurtosis ratios, and homogeneity of variances were established using the normal probability plots, Normal Q-Q Plots, and Kolmogorov-Smirnov ($n > 50$) tests. No critical violations were witnessed. Moreover, before the application of regression analysis, its distinctive assumptions such as multicollinearity, linearity, homoscedasticity, the independence of residuals, the linear relation between each pair of variables, and homoscedasticity were checked (based on Pallant, 2016), and no critical deviations were seen.

The six types of IPLS as the predictor variables and learners are scores on the MCDT as the predicted variables were fed to the multiple regression analysis using the Enter method. The calculated R and R^2 values in the constructed model were 0.807 and 0.651, respectively, suggesting that the produced model could explain about 65.1% of the total variation in learner's scores on the MDCT of common English speech acts. According to Table 2, the ANOVA test results showed that the constructed model could significantly predict participants' speech-act pragmatic knowledge ($F(6, 354) = 110.083$, $p = 0.000$).

TABLE 2
ANOVA Test for the Contributions Six Types of IPLS to L2 Speech-act Knowledge

	<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Regression	6525.861	6	1087.644	110.083	.000
Residual	3497.596	354	9.880		
Total	10023.457	360			

To obtain a more accurate index for the contribution of the six types of IPLS to L2 learners' knowledge of common English speech acts, the standardized β coefficient values were calculated. As seen in Table 3, all the six types of interlanguage pragmatic learning strategies were significant predictors of L2 learners' knowledge of common English speech acts ($p < .05$ in all cases).

TABLE 3
Coefficients for the Contribution of Six Types of IPLS to L2 Speech-act Knowledge

<i>Predictor Variable</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Memory IPLS	.212	6.392	.000
Cognitive IPLS	.309	8.910	.000
Metacognitive IPLS	.271	7.761	.000
Social IPLS	.324	9.839	.000
Compensatory IPLS	.133	4.096	.000
Affective IPLS	.103	3.189	.002

Social ($\beta = .324, t = 9.839, p < .05$) and cognitive ($\beta = .309, t = 8.910, p < .05$) IPLS had the greatest β coefficients, suggesting that they were significant moderate contributors to L2 speech-act pragmatic knowledge; followed by metacognitive ($\beta = .271, t = 7.761, p < .05$) and memory ($\beta = .212, t = 6.392, p < .05$) IPLS that were significant but fair predictors of speech-act knowledge; however, compensatory ($\beta = .133, t = 4.096, p < .05$) and affective ($\beta = .103, t = 3.189, p = .002 < .05$) ILPS were significant albeit weak predictors.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study revealed two important findings. First, all six types of interlanguage pragmatic learning strategies were significant contributors to L2 speech act pragmatic knowledge, with social and cognitive IPLS proving to be moderate contributors. Second, the metacognitive and memory IPLS were fair predictors of L2 speech-act pragmatic knowledge; however, compensatory and affective IPLS were very weak predictors. The argument that can be advanced for the role of social and cognitive IPLS is that pragmatic knowledge, the speech-act knowledge in this study, is constructed, reconstructed, and constantly revised through social interactions based on the latest theories of pragmatic development (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig, 2013). Accordingly, social IPLS play a crucial part in acquiring the speech-act pragmatic knowledge. This decisive part is amplified, considering the sociocultural nature of most speech acts that are used in authentic conversations. The significant contribution of cognitive strategies is in line with the contribution to language learning in general and communicative competence in particular. As mentioned by Cohen (2019), the significant role of metacognitive and memory IPLS can be accounted for by the involvement in managing, organizing, storing, recalling, and planning future pragmatic knowledge acquisition.

Results of this study are consistent with the results of some earlier studies that have reported a significant association between L2 pragmatic performance across various speech acts and the use of specifically tailored strategies for acquiring pragmatic knowledge (e.g., Cohen, 2005, 2010; Cohen & Sykes, 2013; Li, 2013; Youn & Bi, 2019). Youn and Bi (2019), for example, reported a positive relationship between cognitive, metacognitive, and specific pragmatic strategies and L2 learners' pragmatic performance. They also found that higher ability test-takers used a larger range of both specific

pragmatic learning strategies and general cognitive and metacognitive task-dependent strategies significantly more than lower ability test-takers. Li's study (2013) also revealed a significant contribution of special pragmatic-oriented learning strategies and L2 Chinese learners' performance on a test of English requests. Tajeddin and Malmir (2015) also reported that there is a high go-togetherness between the use of IPLS and pragmatic performance; however, they did not scrutinize the contribution of various types of IPLS.

The findings of the present study are particularly in line with the results of Cohen's studies (2005, 2010). Although the exact terms have not been used in Cohen's studies (2005, 2019). Rather, he has demonstrated that cognitive and metacognitive IPLS are important for the initial learning of pragmatic knowledge, including various speech acts; memory strategies are significant for the solidification of the previously acquired pragmatic knowledge; social and affective IPLS are particularly significant when performing various speech acts and engaging in the exchange of socio-pragmatic knowledge. Cohen did not make any statistical comparisons between the contributions of various forms of initial pragmatic learning, consolidating, or performing strategies; therefore, no one-to-one comparison can be made among the effect size for various IPLS obtained in the current study and the results of Cohen's studies.

The present study concludes that interlanguage pragmatic learning strategies can significantly contribute to EFL learners' knowledge of the common L2 speech acts and that the metacognitive and memory IPLS were poor predictors of L2 speech-act pragmatic knowledge; nonetheless, compensatory and affective were very weak predictors. The findings of the current study have some pedagogical implications for EFL teachers, EFL learners, and SLA researchers in the field of pragmatics. Language teachers, for example, can help L2 learners develop better speech-act knowledge by learning and implementing more IPLS and classroom activities and focusing on integrating this knowledge into the overall learning experience. Finally, because of their recent introduction in L2 pragmatics, inter-language pragmatic learning strategies (IPLS) provide a large range of topics for further investigation, given the multi-dimensionality and complexities of L2 pragmatic competence.

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