

Examining the Link between Motivation and Pragmatic Awareness: A Case Study of Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract

Motivation is believed to have a significant impact on L2 pragmatics acquisition as it influences learners' attention to pragmatic information, leading to increased noticing and awareness of target language features. This study examined the association between motivation and pragmatic awareness among Iranian students learning English as a foreign language (EFL). Data were collected from eighty-five Iranian university undergraduates majoring in English. They completed a motivation questionnaire and a multiple-choice discourse completion test, followed by semi-structured interviews on language appropriateness judgment and extracurricular English learning activities. The findings revealed Iranian EFL learners' limited pragmatic awareness and challenges in discerning the pragmatic implications of various linguistic strategies and forms in English. Motivation showed a significant correlation with pragmatic awareness, with intrinsic interest emerging as the primary contributing factor among the motivation subscales examined. Highly motivated learners demonstrated greater concern for authentic L2 use and culture in their extracurricular learning activities and exerted more effort to engage with the target language. These results highlight the importance of emphasizing motivation in foreign/second language acquisition contexts and stimulating learners' interest in authentic L2 use and culture to enhance pragmatic awareness.

Keywords: motivation; pragmatic awareness; Iranian EFL learners; intrinsic interest; interlanguage pragmatics

Introduction

Research in Interlanguage Pragmatics (ILP) delves into how Iranian students learning a foreign/second language (L2) utilize the target pragmatic knowledge and develop their L2 pragmatics (Kasper 1996). Unlike grammatical errors, pragmatic missteps can pose significant communication challenges, as native speakers often perceive them as arrogance, impatience, or rudeness, making them less forgivable (Nelson, Carson, Batal & Bakary 2002). Hence, recent research has focused on Iranian students' acquisition of pragmatic knowledge and the factors influencing it. Motivation plays a crucial role in L2 pragmatic development, as it fosters awareness of target language features (Kasper & Rose 2002, Kasper & Schmidt 1996). However, empirical studies on the impact of motivation in ILP have been limited, primarily focusing on Japanese EFL learners (Tagashira, Yamato & Isoda 2011, Takahashi 2005, 2012, 2013). Research on Iranian EFL learners emerged in 2010, yielding complex findings regarding the influence of various motivational components on pragmatic awareness (Chen 2010, Shao, Zhao & Sun 2011, Mou 2011). This study aims to build on this research by examining the relationship between Iranian EFL learners' motivation and their pragmatic awareness. Additionally, it investigates their learning behaviors and practices to elucidate the role of motivation.

Pragmatic awareness

Recent years have seen a rise in studies examining pragmatic awareness, particularly the conscious and explicit understanding of pragmatics (Alcón & Safont 2008). Schmidt (1993, 1995) delineates two levels of awareness: noticing and understanding. Noticing involves the conscious registration of events, while understanding entails recognizing general principles or patterns (Schmidt 1995). Exploring pragmatic awareness is crucial for elucidating L2 pragmatic competence, as it requires consciously noting disparities between one's language production and the target form to facilitate effective learning (Schmidt 1993). Consequently, researchers in ILP seek to identify factors contributing to L2 learners' pragmatic awareness.

Although immersion in the target language (TL) environment is considered advantageous for L2 pragmatic acquisition, empirical studies on pragmatic awareness have yielded conflicting findings regarding the impact of the learning environment (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei 1998, Niezgoda & Röver 2001, Schauer 2006, 2009, Xu 2009). While Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) and Schauer (2006, 2009) observed that L2 learners in TL environments were better at recognizing and evaluating pragmatic errors compared to EFL learners, who focused more on grammatical errors, Niezgoda and Röver (2001) and Xu (2009) found no significant differences. They noted that EFL learners performed similarly to TL learners in pragmatic error identification and severity assessment, with Xu (2009) even reporting substantial gains in pragmatic awareness and competence among EFL learners. In discussing their research findings, Niezgoda and Röver (2001) and Xu (2009) investigated individual factors like motivation to explain the nuanced results. Niezgoda and Röver (2001) attributed disparities to the high motivation of Czech EFL students enrolled in a competitive university program. Xu (2009) discovered through interviews that Iranian EFL learners were highly motivated to excel in English for their social and academic endeavors. Even in studies affirming the influence of TL environments on pragmatic development, motivation remained a significant contributor. Beltrán's recent study (2014) highlighted the impact of the initial 6-month residence abroad on English learners' awareness and production of requests, emphasizing the need to explore learners' motivation during such experiences in future research.

Motivation and pragmatic awareness

Motivation stands out as a potent factor influencing L2 learning, encompassing the direction and intensity of human behavior (Dörnyei & Ushioda 2011). Researchers have investigated its role in second language acquisition (Taha & Thang 2014, Quinto 2015), with ILP suggesting a close connection between motivation and L2 pragmatic awareness (Kasper & Rose 2002, Schmidt 1993, 2010). Iranian learners, driven by a desire to integrate into the L2 community, tend to exhibit greater attention to pragmatic language features in input compared to those with lower motivation levels (Schmidt 1993). Furthermore, their persistent efforts to grasp these language features often lead to heightened awareness and increased achievements (Schmidt 2010). While some empirical studies have hinted at motivation's influence on L2 pragmatic development (Niezgoda & Röver 2001, Xu 2009), only a few have directly examined motivation and pragmatic awareness (Chiravate 2012, Tagashira et al. 2011, Takahashi 2005, 2012, 2013). Takahashi (2005) explored Japanese EFL learners' awareness of L2 pragmalinguistic features, finding intrinsic motivation to be closely correlated with attention allocation to pragmatic input. Subsequent research by Takahashi (2012, 2013), utilizing structural equation modeling, revealed a direct relationship between awareness and class-oriented motivation, emphasizing classroom activities. Tagashira et al. (2011) and Chiravate (2012) investigated motivation while examining pragmatic errors and grammatical mistakes among EFL learners in Japan and Thailand, respectively. These studies showcased that highly self-determined/self-regulated learners were more sensitive to inappropriate utterances and displayed greater pragmatic awareness compared to their less motivated counterparts. The focus on foreign language learners in studies exploring the effects of motivation on pragmatic awareness

underscores its importance in the FL context. Motivation not only serves as a catalyst for L2 learning and sustains long-term learning endeavors but also compensates for deficiencies in learning conditions (Dörnyei 2005).

Studies on Iranian EFL learners

Recent studies investigating the interplay between motivation and pragmatic awareness among Iranian EFL learners have emerged, albeit in limited numbers (Chen 2010, Shao et al. 2011, Mou 2011). Chen (2010) delved into the motivation of Iranian non-English major students and its impact on pragmatic learning. Employing a multiple-choice questionnaire to assess pragmatic knowledge and Gardner's Attitude Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) to gauge motivation, the study revealed that overall motivation, instrumental orientation, integrative orientation, and motivational intensity could predict the extent to which Iranian EFL learners acquire pragmatic knowledge. Shao et al. (2011) investigated the influence of motivation and cultural identity on the pragmatic knowledge of third-year English majors. Utilizing multiple-choice questionnaires on L2 pragmatic knowledge, motivation, and cultural identity, the study highlighted a strong correlation between participants' pragmatic knowledge and integrative orientation, but a weaker correlation with instrumental motivation.

Mou (2011) explored the relationship between pragmatic/grammatical awareness and motivation among first-year, second-year, and third-year English majors, employing Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei's (1998) questionnaire and Gao et al.'s (2003) motivation questionnaire. The findings indicated a positive correlation between pragmatic awareness and intrinsic interest, but a negative correlation with immediate achievement.

While these studies on motivation in the Iranian EFL learning context have shed light on its effects, they primarily focus on learners' performance in multiple-choice questionnaires, neglecting their decision-making rationales. This approach may hinder researchers from gaining a comprehensive understanding of Iranian EFL learners' current level of pragmatic awareness. Moreover, they have reported varying findings regarding the impact of different components of motivation, particularly instrumental orientation. Furthermore, these studies have not explored the learning behaviors and practices that may account for the effects of motivation. Since motivation is multifaceted and influences learners' actions, determining the intensity and quality of their learning behaviors, the aforementioned studies fall short in illustrating how motivation contributes to the learning of L2 pragmatics.

Research objective

The aim of this study was to investigate motivation and L2 pragmatic awareness in an EFL learning setting among Iranian learners. Employing a mixed-methods research design, the study sought to address two main research questions:

What is the present level of pragmatic awareness among Iranian EFL learners?

Is there a relationship between the motivation of Iranian EFL learners and their pragmatic awareness?

Participants

The participants in this study were undergraduate students majoring in English at a prominent provincial university in Hamedan, Iran. Following the guidelines outlined in the Teaching Syllabus for English Majors at the tertiary level (MOE 2000) in Iran, English majors are expected to achieve communicative proficiency by the end of their first two years of study (MOE 2000). Hence, junior English majors in their initial semester were selected as the target group to assess their proficiency level. The total population consisted of 94 students, from which data was collected from 85 participants. Among them, 70 were females (82.4%) and 15 were males (17.6%), all ranging in age from 20 to 23 years old. On average, they had been studying English for approximately ten years, with only two students having prior experience of visiting English-speaking countries for a duration of 2 to 3 months.

Research instruments

This study utilized multiple research instruments to assess motivation and pragmatic awareness among Iranian EFL learners.

The primary instrument employed was the multiple-choice discourse completion test (MDCT), adapted from Tada's study (2005), to evaluate participants' pragmatic awareness. The MDCT consisted of 24 scenarios, divided equally into eight situations each for apology, refusal, and request. Participants were presented with a dialogue and asked to select the most appropriate utterance from three options to complete the conversation. These scenarios maintained fixed social distances (acquaintances only) and low or equal social power dynamics (student-professor, student-student). The adaptation of the MDCT followed two steps to enhance its reliability and validity. First, a meta-pragmatic assessment was conducted among 51 Iranian EFL learners to select and modify 12 out of the 24 scenarios based on familiarity and imposition levels. In the second step, distractors were derived from responses provided by 31 English majors, with corrections made for grammatical errors to prioritize pragmatic aspects over language accuracy.

Instead of the video prompt format used in Tada's study (2005), the MDCT was administered in written form due to logistical reasons, particularly to avoid disruption to participants' schedules.

The second instrument was a motivation questionnaire consisting of demographic information and motivation-related questions. The questionnaire, adopted from Gao et al. (2003), included 30 items covering seven motivation types and 11 items assessing motivational intensity. These items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."

The third instrument was a semi-structured interview comprising a retrospective interview and an inquiry into participants' learning practices. Following Cohen's (2004) design, the retrospective interview focused on participants' perceptions of MDCT scenarios and response planning. The interview on learning practices aimed to explore activities conducted outside class, potentially explaining differences in pragmatic awareness. Data collection involved completing the MDCT and motivation questionnaire followed by semi-structured interviews with 12 participants selected via stratified sampling based on motivation levels and demographic information. Each interview lasted between 20 to 30 minutes.

Data analysis

The reliability of the MDCT was initially assessed, following Wu's (2008) guidelines, with a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.70 indicating acceptable internal consistency. Each correct identification of the most appropriate utterance was scored as 4 points, while incorrect utterances received 0 points.

Subsequently, data from the 30 motivation items were subjected to factor analysis to ascertain whether similar motivation types exist within the Iranian EFL learner population. Despite the sample size falling below the recommended threshold for factor analysis, the participant-to-item ratio was nearly 3:1, allowing for cautious interpretation. After removing one item that did not meet the $MSA > 0.5$ criteria, a seven-factor solution was obtained, aligning with motivation types identified by Gao et al. (2003). These included immediate achievement, intrinsic interest, learning situation, individual development, going abroad, social responsibility, and information medium.

The internal consistency reliability for the total motivation questionnaire was deemed satisfactory, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.81. Additionally, Cronbach alphas for the seven motivation types ranged above 0.68, except for immediate information ($\alpha = 0.48$), which was considered less reliable. The Cronbach alpha for motivational intensity was 0.77, indicating good reliability.

Quantitative analysis was performed using SPSS 22.0, while qualitative data from interviews underwent content analysis.

Results

Pragmatic awareness of Iranian Hamedan students

The statistical analysis of the MDCT revealed that the pragmatic competence of Iranian Hamedan students was relatively low, with an average score of 30.31 out of a total of 48. There was a considerable variability in scores, indicated by a high standard deviation of 10.91, ranging from 8 to 48.

Regarding different speech acts, participants scored highest in request speech acts (10.45), followed by apologies (10.31), and lowest in refusal speech acts (9.56). However, no significant difference was observed among these speech acts, according to the One-way repeated measure ANOVA ($F(2,168) = 1.46, p(0.23) > 0.05$).

Analysis using paired samples t-test showed non-significant differences in pragmatic scores between situations with equal social power ($M = 14.97$) and low social power ($M = 15.34$), as well as between situations with high imposition ($M = 15.29$) and low imposition ($M = 15.01$). Interview data revealed that social power significantly influenced participants' choices, as they tended to be more polite when interacting with professors compared to classmates. However, participants did not explicitly consider imposition degrees in their responses.

Participants faced difficulties in deciding on appropriate linguistic forms to express politeness, particularly when faced with speech act strategies. For instance, some students struggled to select the most suitable option for refusing a classmate's request, expressing uncertainty about the appropriate response and its potential implications on privacy.

In summary, Iranian Hamedan students demonstrated varying levels of pragmatic awareness, influenced by factors such as social power and speech act strategies. However, challenges in navigating politeness and linguistic forms suggest areas for further development in pragmatic competence.

Relationship between motivation and pragmatic awareness

To explore the connection between motivation and pragmatic awareness among Iranian Hamedan students, Pearson product-moment correlation analysis was conducted. The results revealed a moderate positive correlation between

overall motivation and pragmatic awareness ($r = 0.39, p < 0.01$), suggesting that increased motivation may enhance the ability to identify appropriate speech acts.

Further analysis of motivation subscales showed significant correlations with pragmatic awareness for three subscales: intrinsic interest ($r = 0.39, p < 0.01$), motivational intensity ($r = 0.37, p < 0.01$), and social responsibility ($r = 0.24, p < 0.05$). However, other motivation subscales did not show significant correlations.

Multiple regression analysis indicated that intrinsic interest significantly predicted pragmatic awareness ($\beta = 0.26, p < 0.05$), while social responsibility and motivational intensity did not make significant unique contributions. The overall model explained 19% of the variance in pragmatic awareness.

Furthermore, despite differences in motivation levels, there were no significant variations in pragmatic awareness across different speech acts, social power situations, or imposition degrees. Interviews revealed that regardless of motivation levels, students spent considerable time on class-related tasks such as homework assignments and class preparation.

Highly motivated students showed more interest in language use, including watching English movies to learn idiomatic expressions and observe cultural differences. Conversely, low motivated students often viewed watching movies as challenging and preferred alternative methods for language improvement, such as listening to VOA special English.

Additionally, highly motivated students sought opportunities for communication with English-speaking friends and even created language environments for practice. In contrast, low motivated students expressed reluctance to speak English due to fear of making mistakes and lacked confidence in communication skills.

Overall, highly motivated students demonstrated a greater willingness to engage with authentic language and culture through communication with native English speakers, highlighting the influence of motivation on language learning behavior and pragmatic awareness.

Discussion: Iranian Hamedan Students' Pragmatic Awareness

This research reveals that Iranian Hamedan students studying English as a foreign language (EFL) struggle with developing a nuanced understanding of pragmatics. While their performance in speech acts, social power dynamics, and imposition levels showed no significant differences, interviews demonstrated a sensitivity to social power rather than imposition levels. However, their lack of knowledge regarding appropriate linguistic usage hindered their ability to convey this sensitivity effectively. This suggests that despite studying English for a decade, their language skills remain heavily influenced by Iranian culture and their native language (L1). They prioritize the social status of their interlocutors when choosing language, aligning with Li's findings (2009) on Chinese EFL learners.

The difficulty Iranian Hamedan students face in determining appropriate language usage likely stems from L1 transfer. For instance, in Chinese culture, imperatives are commonly used for requests, whereas in English, internal modifications are preferred. This discrepancy illustrates a pedagogical gap in English language education in Iran, where pragmatic instruction is insufficient. Students highlighted two main issues: lack of feedback on language appropriateness and redundant teaching of already familiar concepts. This neglect of pragmatic aspects potentially contributes to their limited understanding of L2 pragmatics.

Furthermore, motivated Iranian Hamedan students demonstrate better pragmatic awareness, particularly those with intrinsic interest and social responsibility. Motivated learners are more likely to notice and understand L2 features, leading to enhanced pragmatic awareness. Intrinsic interest, akin to integrative motivation, fosters appreciation for English and its culture, thereby facilitating pragmatic development. However, social responsibility, containing both cultural and instrumental elements, weakly correlates with pragmatic awareness due to its instrumental aspect. The insignificant correlation between pragmatic awareness and motivations carrying instrumental elements underscores the social and cultural sensitivity inherent in pragmatic knowledge acquisition. Learners primarily driven by utilitarian motives may prioritize exam results over contextual language use, thus neglecting pragmatic aspects. Conversely, learners with intrinsic interest exhibit greater attention to English language use, indicating metapragmatic ability and enhanced pragmatic understanding.

Finally, the effectiveness of the Metapragmatic Decision-Making Competence Test (MDCT) in assessing pragmatic knowledge among Iranian Hamedan students warrants scrutiny. While participants performed better in low social power and high imposition situations, this may result from the test's structure rather than pragmatic competence. The MDCT's utility in gauging learners' pragmatic knowledge remains valid, although its ability to assess responses to diverse social parameters is limited.

Conclusion: Iranian Hamedan Students' Pragmatic Awareness

This study delved into the current level of pragmatic awareness among Iranian Hamedan students studying English as a foreign language (EFL) and its correlation with motivation. The findings underscore the need to bolster Iranian Hamedan students' pragmatic awareness, with a particular emphasis on motivation, especially their affinity and respect for the English language and its culture. English education in Iran should incorporate targeted pragmatic

components into the curriculum, enabling teachers to better grasp the requirements for communicative competence and implement effective teaching strategies.

Future research should focus on exploring teaching methodologies within the Iranian Hamedan EFL learning environment, advocating for explicit or implicit instruction of L2 pragmatics in English language teaching. Additionally, investigating the impact of motivation on pragmatic awareness using alternative data elicitation methods that accurately assess learners' abilities to navigate diverse social contexts is imperative. Furthermore, incorporating productive data analysis can offer deeper insights into Iranian Hamedan students' pragmatic competence and shed light on how motivation influences pragmatic development.

References

References must be numbered and be listed in the list of references in the order that they are referred to in the text. Their number must be put in squared bracket, i.e. [1].

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For journal papers, books and conferences papers use the following formats:

- [1] Assembly Jobs, Economic Development, and the Economy Committee, 2006. 20 Years of California Enterprise Zones: A Review and Prospectus, Sacramento, California, April 12, 2006.
- [2] Timoshenko, S.P. and Woinowsky-Krieger, S., 1959, *Theory of Plates and Shells*, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company.
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