

## **Pragmatic Representations in Iranian High School English Textbooks**

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### **Abstract**

Owing to the growing interest in communicative, cultural and pragmatic aspects of second language learning in recent years, the present study tried to investigate representations of pragmatic aspects of English as a foreign language in Iranian high school textbooks. Using Halliday's (1978), and Searle's (1976) models, different language functions and speech acts were specifically determined and examined in high school textbooks. The results indicated that there were major insufficiencies in pragmatic representations in these books. These problems were related to inadequate coverage of different speech acts and language functions, lack of authenticity in the dialogues, inappropriate simplifications and reductions, lack of grading, unsystematic presentations, providing no meta-pragmatic information, and presenting English speech acts embedded in dialogues with Iranian culture, religion, and norms. The results indicate that material developers and textbook designers need to consider these aspects to help learners to be able to learn second language more efficiently and appropriately.

**Keywords:** Pragmatic Representation, Text Books, Speech Acts, Language Functions

### **Introduction**

Major changes have recently occurred in our understanding of second language learning and, language teaching, leading to new areas of focus in the process of learning and teaching. One of the most important motives behind these changes is the emphasis on communicative issues rather than traditional theoretical frameworks. From a communicative point of view, language is considered as something more than a set of decontextualized grammatical matters. These changes have been reflected in educational systems too. In the today's world, due to the significance of communication, second language teaching has focused on communicative aspects of second language. Traditionally, much of emphasis in second language learning and teaching was on grammatical forms and word lists, which, though seemed satisfactory for the elementary levels of language learning, led to unsatisfying results, and frustrations at more advanced levels (Moradi, Karbalaei & Afraz, 2013). The reason was the fact that through such approaches, students were able to produce completely grammatical sentences while not being able to convey what they really want to express appropriately. The appropriateness that means saying right words at the right time (Bardovi-Harlig, Hartford, Mahan-Taylor, Morgan, & Reynolds, 1991) refers to pragmatics.

Such pragmatic related problems have guided language teachers and researchers to consider and focus on both structural and pragmatic aspects of learning a second language. In this regard, second language teaching methods should increase L2 students' pragmatic competence. Edwards and Csizér(2001) define pragmatic competence as the knowledge of discourse conventions, social and cultural rules that need to be observed in different situations. They believe that developing L2 learners' pragmatic competence is very necessary. Many researchers state that the concept of pragmatics instruction and pragmatic development is essential, and should occupy a significant role in ESL/EFL curriculum (Tanaka, 1997; Olshtain& Cohen, 1991; Eslami-Rasekh,, 2005). According to Kasper and Roever (2005), developing L2 learners' pragmatic competence is a process of understanding and producing correct pragma-linguistic rules and appropriate socio-pragmatic meanings. Also, Kasper (1997) believes that although

competence cannot be instructed to the learners, we can provide the students with some opportunities to improve their pragmatic competence.

However, in spite of the growing importance of developing learners' pragmatic competence, teaching pragmatics has not been given satisfactory attention in EFL contexts. Therefore, there is a need to raise learners' awareness of target language pragmatic functions. This awareness makes learners sensitive to socio-pragmatic conventions of second language (Eslami & Noora, 2008). Teachers should provide these conditions and make learners aware of L2 socio-pragmatic norms.

In addition to teachers' help in awareness rising, material developers can also play an important role in this regard because one of the ways for providing such opportunities is through textbooks. Textbooks can be very useful in this regard, and recognizing their importance especially in EFL context such as Iran in which learners do not have exposure to L2, has led researchers to analyze textbooks' pragmatic representations; thus, some limited scope studies have been done in Iran. For example, in a study by Koosha and Dastjerdi (2012), request forms representations have been analyzed, or Razmjoo (2007) studied the principles of communicative language teaching in Iranian high school textbooks.

In the area of L2 pragmatics and its investigations, speech acts, as one of important aspects of pragmatics, should be emphasized and studied because there are variations in speech acts realizations in different languages which cause problems in some ways especially in politeness issues, or acceptability- non-acceptability of an utterance (Takahashi, 1996). Speech act theory was first introduced by John Austin in 1962. He was one of the first scholars who were not in agreement with positivism principle that if a sentence can be objectively examined as true or false, that sentence is meaningful (Thomas, 1995). Later on, speech act theory was further developed by Searle in 1950s. On the other hand, politeness, as an important social, cultural and linguistic notion in human interaction (Huang, 2007), has been given growing attention recently. In fact, politeness has a constraining function, and we, as interlocutors, subconsciously or consciously, consider some variables specifying the form of language in our interaction (Longcope, 1995). According to Goffman (1955), these variables

are related to “face” which is defined as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self in terms of approved social attributes” (Goffman, 1955, p. 213). Brown and Levinson (1987), used Goffman’s (1955) notion of face, and introduced politeness theory consisting of three aspects as face, politeness strategies, and face threatening acts. Face is a public self-image with two variations: negative and positive face. Positive face is related to the hearer’s desires to be appreciated; and negative face refers to being free from any kinds of imposition. Thus, politeness is a mechanism protecting both the hearer’s and speaker’s face. Some examples of face threatening acts are criticizing, disagreeing, complaining, and refusing.

Some researches in this area such as Kasper and Rose (2002), have shown that producing speech acts appropriately in a second language is a difficult activity because there are some differences between targets and native language cultural norms. These differences are not much tolerated, and are often considered as rudeness (Boxer & Pickering, 1995). To tackle with this problem, some researchers suggest that more focus should be made on developing pragmatic competence in classrooms through instruction (Bardovi-Harlig & Griffin 2005; Bardovi-Harlig 1996; Eslami-Rasekh, 2005). In fact, teaching sociocultural principles governing speech acts of a speech community make learners aware of valuable features in a specific culture. However, a general evaluation of textbooks indicated that many of them provide learners with very few opportunities for L2 pragmatic development (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996). This insufficiency refers to insufficient existence of required speech acts, or presenting them in unrealistic ways (Moradi, Karbalaei & Afraz, 2013). For example, in a study by Boxer and Pickering (1995), it was indicated that textbooks have insufficiencies in presenting indirect complaints in their conversations. Bouton (1994) also mentioned such a problem for “invitations”, and believed that they are not presented in a way similar to those in native speakers’ corpora.

Concerning textbook evaluation in Iran, the findings of the study done by Tavakoli (1995) showed that not all language functions are represented sufficiently in high school textbooks. Other studies by Soozandehfar and Sahragard (2011), and Koosha and Dastjerdi (2012) have also shown this

failure in presenting enough practical and functional pragmatic aspects of language.

Based on what was mentioned, this study tried to investigate *what* and *how* of speech acts and functions in high school textbooks.

Regarding this basic need to focus on second language pragmatics, especially in Iran as one of EFL contexts, and considering the fact that research on pragmatic competence has been much ignored in Iranian materials and textbooks, this study tried to evaluate how pragmatic speech acts are presented in Iranian high school textbooks. Thus, the following research questions were posed:

1. What is the range of speech acts in Iranian high school EFL learners' text books?
2. How the speech acts are presented in Iranian high school EFL learners' text books?
3. Which language functions are included in Iranian high school EFL learners' textbooks?

### **Method**

The current study was done in Iran as an EFL context in which English language is taught three hours a week. English is offered as an obligatory course in high schools along with Arabic language. Students begin learning English when they are in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, and as they reach higher levels of education, the importance of learning English becomes more and more evident (Shoarinejad, 2008). In addition to the obligatory courses offered at schools, learning English in private institutions is also very popular (Shoarinejad, 2008). The motivation behind such tendency to learn English can be related to better chances for education, employment or immigration (Vaezi, 2008).

For the purpose of this study, high school English textbooks in Iran, including the ones taught in the first, second, and third grades, were selected. On the whole, about 20 units were investigated, and the language functions and speech acts in these units were thoroughly analyzed.

This study was based on a *qualitative analysis* of speech acts with no particular statistical analyses. In this investigation, Halliday's (1974)

language functions, and Searle's (1976) speech acts were chosen as the basic models.

Searle (1976) suggests the following classification of speech acts:

*Assertives*: They commit the speaker to something being the case. The different kinds are: suggesting, putting forward, swearing, boasting, and concluding. Example: "No one makes a better cakethanme".

*Directives*: They try to make the addressee perform an action. The different kinds are: asking, ordering, requesting, inviting, advising, begging. Example: "Could you close the window?".

*Commissives*: They commit the speaker to doing something in the future. The different kinds are: promising, planning, vowing, betting, opposing. Example: "I'm going to Paris tomorrow".

*Expressives*: They express how the speaker feels about the situation. The different kinds are: thanking, apologizing, welcoming, deploring. Example: "I am sorry that I lied to you".

*Declarations*: They change the state of the world in an immediate way. Examples: "You are fired, I swear, I beg you".

According to Halliday (1978), a young child, in the early stages of language development is able to master a number of elementary functions of language. Each of these functions has a chance of meanings attached to it. He distinguishes seven initial functions:

*Instrumental* ("I want"): used for satisfying material needs

*Regulatory* ("do as I tell you"): used for controlling the behavior of others

*Interactional* ("me and you"): used for getting along with other people

*Personal* ("here I come"): used for identifying and expressing the self

*Heuristic* ("tell me why"): used for exploring the world around and inside one

*Imaginative* ("let's pretend"): used for creating a world of one's own

*Informative* ("I've got something to tell you"): used for communicating new information.

## Results

In order to answer the first and the second research questions, descriptive analyses were done, and the results of analyzing textbooks indicated that the

total number of speech acts in these textbooks was 272. The more detailed results showed that among all kinds of speech acts, representatives, and directives were the most frequent ones in high school textbooks, and other types were considered very rarely. The details related to this analysis were summarized in Table 1.

*Table 1.*

*Frequency of occurrence of speech acts in three levels of high school textbooks*

Speech acts	occurrences	Sum of occurrences
representatives	50, 43, 18	111
directives	55, 45, 28	128
expressives	12, 12, 5	29
commissives	1,2,0	3
Declarations	0, 1, 0	1
Total		272

In order to answer the third research question, language functions were also investigated. As the results indicated, although a range of language functions were included in the books, they were not presented systematically. Various but again limited number of functions such as asking some one's name, requesting politely, asking about family and jobs, and introducing someone, were found in the textbooks. However, they were presented briefly, at the end of each unit, in a very short conventional conversation, based on no regular pattern. Some language functions repeatedly occurred in some units, while many others were neglected.

Moreover, no grading, based on the difficulty level of the presented functions, was regarded. Some very simple and frequent functions were represented at the end, while those such as polite requests were introduced at first.

In the presentation of functions, the degree of frequency of specific functions in real context was not regarded. Besides, the functions were included in the conversations that were not authentic. They were written with the lowest degrees of authenticity. Perhaps, this has been done to simplify the conversations; however, there could be authentic texts for the

elementary levels without any simplification. The other important point in this regard was the fact that conversations including speech acts and functions were adapted to Iranian culture, separated from the original English culture, for example, the names used in the conversations to introduce somebody. Also, the pictures for conversations showed Iranian religious culture.

### **Discussion**

The results of this study with the aim of investigating pragmatic representations in Iranian high school text books indicated that there were some critical limitations in pragmatic representations. The first limitation was insufficient coverage of different speech acts and language functions, that is, many L2 language speech acts were ignored, and not represented at all. Number of speech acts and language functions seems very low when compared with total number of speech acts in some familiar books such as *New Interchange* that was 1100 according to a research done by Moradi, Karbalaieian and Afraz (2013). This findings, related to the lack of sufficient coverage, is in line with Bardovi-Harlig's (1996) argument that a major criticism for pragmatic representation of textbooks is the fact that they do not cover an enough range of speech acts, and adequate range of expressions for presenting those speech acts.

The second major limitation was related to inappropriate contextualization of pragmatic aspects of second language. Although in the textbooks there was an attempt to contextualize pragmatic points through some dialogues, these dialogues were attached to Iranian culture, religion, and norms rather than those of second language. Generally, it seemed that Iranian culture, life style and religion were represented in English. This result is in accordance with Wolfson's (1989) belief that textbook dialogues have a language that often diverges from how language is actually used in the second language context. The aforementioned limitations indicate "a reductionism that works against the teaching and learning of pragmatic phenomena" and in these situations, it seems very unlikely for EFL learners learn something about the pragmatics of second language, and develop their L2 pragmatic competence (McConachy & Hata, 2013, p.295).

The fourth constraint regarding pragmatic representations in textbooks was lack of authenticity. Due to providing simplified versions of dialogues, they were not authentic and really far from what L2 native speaker do and say in real context. The fifth problem was related to the lack of any systematic pattern in presenting the pragmatic aspects especially language functions and speech acts. This unsystematic presentation was related to the lack of grading from easy to difficult aspects, and repetitive, overlapping practices of a specific speech act while ignoring others. Besides, the pragmatic representation and practices were mostly included at the end of each unit in a very brief format, which implies the secondary importance of this aspect of language in comparison with vocabulary and grammar.

Concerning these findings, this research may have some implications for material developers in Iran, especially those involved in preparing high school textbooks. This work and similar studies make textbook designers aware of the fact that different dimensions of second language presentations are insufficiently regarded in the present textbooks, and that they should cover broader range of pragmatic aspects, speech acts, functions, and cultures. In addition, they would know that presenting pragmatic points in conversations needs to be systematic and authentic, based on L2 cultural norms, the two factors not yet considered at the current high school textbooks. Observing these principles would help learners to be able to communicate efficiently, correctly and appropriately in real contexts. Thus, there is a need for revising the presently taught materials. In addition, concerning the importance of explicit instructions, material developers should consider that providing meta-pragmatic information in different units can be very helpful.

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