The Socio-Pragmatic, Lexico-Grammatical, and Cognitive Strategies in L2 Pragmatic Comprehension: The Case of Iranian Male vs. Female EFL Learners

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A B S T R A C T

Since its inception, pragmatic competence has been studied vastly; the majority of these studies, however, have examined pragmatic production, and pragmatic comprehension is chiefly under-researched. This lack of adequate research also stands true for the underlying pragmatic comprehension processes and strategies. Therefore, the present investigation aimed to find out L2 pragmatic comprehension strategies used by 40 (F=20, M=20) Iranian EFL learners and to discover whether there would be any differences between interlanguage pragmatic comprehension strategies used by male and female learners. Participants, selected based on stratified random sampling, were chosen on the basis of their performance on a paper-based TOEFL out of the initial sample of 90 students. Three data collection instruments were employed: a validated pragmatic test (Tajeddin & Ahmadi Safa, 2010), concurrent verbal think-aloud protocols, and retrospective verbal think-aloud protocols. Data analysis revealed three classes of pragmatic comprehension strategies. First, socio-pragmatic strategies that included politeness, formality, indirectness, and distance/power influences. Second, lexico-pragmatic strategies which were more frequent than grammatical strategies in the second category. Third, the cognitive strategies that comprised both top-down and bottom-up processing strategies in L2 pragmatic comprehension. Furthermore, it was found that gender did not play any significant role in the use of pragmatic comprehension strategies. Study findings suggest that explicit teaching of pragmatic comprehension strategies helps learners promote their L2 pragmatic comprehension.

Keywords: cognitive strategies; lexico-grammatical strategies; pragmatic comprehension; socio-pragmatic strategies; verbal think-aloud protocols

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Introduction

Since its inception, interlanguage pragmatic competence (ILP) has received considerable attention in L2 studies. As Taguchi and Roever (2017) stated, interlanguage pragmatic competence is an L2 learner's dynamic, systematic, and variable knowledge of how to produce and comprehend the intended discoursal meanings in all authentic L2 sociocultural contexts. Bardovi-Harlig (2015) illustrated the nature and content of interlanguage pragmatic competence, asserting that it encompasses L2 learner's or speaker's knowledge of pragmalinguistic forms and sociopragmatic norms. In her definition, the forms are the linguistic patterns that are socially appropriate to convey or understand an intended meaning and to perform a social act through the target language. The norms include L2 speaker's awareness and recognition of the social norms which are acting indirectly on socio-pragmatic forms and exert a direct influence over the choice of lexicon and grammar of these forms based on the features of the context.

Many researchers have studied ILP competence in the last two decades in Iranian EFL context (e.g., Derakhshan & Arabmofrad, 2018; Derakhshan & Eslami, 2015; Tajeddin & Malmir, 2014, 2015) and other EFL/ESL contexts (Bardovi-Harlig, 2005, 2013a, 2015; Barron, 2003; Kasper, 2001; Kasper & Rose, 2002; Taguchi, 2003, 2009, 2011, 2015, 2017). These typically cross-cultural studies have investigated the acquisition of L2 pragmatic components and aspects such as the production of different speech acts (especially requests, apologies, and refusals), politeness patterns, distance and power, and gender-based effects. A review of the available literature reveals that the majority of these studies have focused on pragmatic production (Bardovi-Harlig, 2013b; Barron, 2003; House, 2003; Matsumura, 2003; Rose, 2000; Schauer, 2004, 2005; Taguchi, 2014) and that a few studies have been done on the nature of pragmatic comprehension and its underlying processes.

As far as pragmatic comprehension is concerned, only a handful number of reliable studies can be referred to (Kasper, 1984; Taguchi, 2003, 2005, 2011; Takahashi & Roitblat, 1994). Iranian EFL context is not an exception and few studies have been done on L2 interlanguage pragmatic comprehension (e.g., Birjandi & Derakhshan, 2014; Derakhshan & Eslami, 2020). Moreover, these studies mainly examined the degree of comprehension based on the learners' answers, and only a few explanatory studies investigated the processes or strategies in L2 pragmatic comprehension. Taguchi is the key researcher in exploring L2 pragmatic comprehension in a series of studies (Taguchi, 2003, 2005, 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2013). Even, most of Taguchi's studies are descriptive as well, and the nature and the mechanism of processes and strategies involved in L2 pragmatic comprehension are an under-researched gap in the recent pragmatic literature. If we find out what the nature of pragmatic comprehension and underlying processes/strategies used by L2 learners are, it will be easier to help these learners develop their pragmatic competence. Therefore, the current research was conducted to shed light on interlanguage pragmatic comprehension strategies that L2 learners reported in an EFL context.

Literature Review

Pragmatic competence means the ability to produce and comprehend intended meanings in any authentic discourse encounter based on the features of the situational context (Taguchi, 2017). As Kasper and Rose (2002) pointed out appropriately, pragmatic production is intricately interwoven into pragmatic comprehension and none can operate independently. According to Taguchi (2013), pragmatic comprehension is the L2 learner's capability to reconstruct, interpret, and understand other interlocutors' intended intentions on the basis of the shared knowledge of the world, sociolinguistic knowledge, interactional competence, and the various dynamic dimensions of the context. Taguchi (2013) maintained that the main concern in L2 ILP comprehension is that the propositional meaning is not always the transferred meaning because of some hidden

underlying processes which are involved in pragmatic comprehension on behalf of the interactants. Pragmatic comprehension is multifaceted because there are some nonlinear cognitive, social, linguistic, cultural, and pragmatic processes that determine the comprehension, reconstruction and interpretation of the intended meanings in discourse (Taguchi, 2009). Garcia (2004) maintained that pragmatic comprehension refers to the comprehension of pragmatic meaning through the spoken discourse during authentic interactions with native or competent non-native speakers of the L2.

In comprehending pragmatic meanings, the mind is engaged in a chain of simultaneous and multidimensional interactions with the dimensions of the context of situation. Both mind and context are highly dynamic and change drastically as their variables continuously vary. These moment-by-moment and active mechanisms are hard to grasp, conceptualize, and formulate. Pragmatic comprehension, therefore, is not vividly observable and studying it is more difficult compared to pragmatic production (Taguchi, 2011). That is the reason why most of the studies in L2 pragmatics have investigated learner's pragmatic production and a scant number of studies have been conducted on pragmatic comprehension. Here, some of these pragmatic comprehension studies are briefly reported and scrutinized.

Some pragmatic comprehension studies have examined whether L2 learners can precisely understand the implied meaning or not (Taguchi, 2002, 2005, 2009, 2013; Taguchi, Gomez-Laich, & Arrufat-Marqués; 2016; Taguchi, Li, & Liu, 2013). Taguchi (2002) studied how the pragmatic meaning in indirect replies is comprehended by EFL learners with different proficiency levels and found that generally the higher the proficiency levels of language learners, the better their pragmatic comprehension would be. Taguchi (2003, 2011) investigated how L2 Japanese learners of English comprehended implied meaning in implicatures. She found that pragmalinguistic knowledge was the first source of comprehension. Contextual cues such as temporal and spatial features were the second useful aids, and the social relevance i.e. sociopragmatic norms were the third type of cues that helped learners comprehend the implicatures as rather difficult pragmatic elements. Likewise, Taguchi et al. (2016) examined the comprehension of indirect pragmatic meaning across indirect refusals, indirect opinions, and ironies in Spanish as an L2 and revealed that learners understood indirect opinions more accurately and more quickly than direct opinions, and ironies. The results of the conducted retrospective verbal interview indicated that learners utilized various linguistic, non-linguistic (sociocultural), and contextual cues to decipher the indirect pragmatic meaning.

Another group of studies in L2 pragmatic comprehension investigated the role of internal (learner) and external (social) variables (Bouton, 1994; Perez, 2017). Bouton (1994), for example, explored pragmatic comprehension by investigating the developmental aspect of pragmatic comprehension and found that ESL learners' overall ILP comprehension improved over time as the learners stayed in the target language community for longer time periods. In an extensive study, Perez (2017) investigated pragmatic comprehension of English refusals by Spanish-English bilinguals versus native English speakers. Her study revealed that both pragmatic production and comprehension were influenced by variables such as the length of study-abroad stay in the L2 community, directness and indirectness, politeness issues, speed of lexical access, and working memory. Mostly, native English speakers outperformed the Spanish-English bilinguals across all variables. Bilinguals with short L2 community stay, for example, could not comprehend indirect refusals with upgraders (those politeness strategies that increase the force of the effect an utterance may have on the interlocutor) or downgraders (those politeness markers that tend to reduce the effect of a face-threatening speech act) as effectively as their native speaker counterparts with larger residency did. Politeness issues also affected the comprehension of indirect requests. The native speaker's refusal comprehension also correlated with the speed of

lexical access and effectiveness of the working memory compared to that of the bilingual counterparts.

Most of the pragmatic comprehension studies have focused on comprehension accuracy, specifically the knowledge aspect of pragmatic competence until recently. However, Taguchi's (2007) outstanding study attempted to explore the development of fluency i.e., speed alongside accuracy in pragmatic comprehension, showing that there was no significant relationship between L2 proficiency and pragmatic comprehension speed. Furthermore, the study showed that lexical access speed had a significant relationship with accuracy. Accuracy and pragmatic comprehension turned out to have no meaningful relationship.

A branch of studies has shown that oral or written pragmatic comprehension demands both linguistic knowledge and situational knowledge including knowledge of participants, the target topic, physical setting, body language, nonverbal behavior, and knowledge of the world that is shared by interactants (e.g., Kelly, 2001; Krultaz, 2018; Shardakova, 2016). The results of Kelly's (2001) study demonstrated larger sources of clues beyond the verbal message and the sentence level are required for successful pragmatic understanding. Regarding oral pragmatic comprehension, Corsetti's (2014) study highlighted the centrality of both linguistic and sociocultural clues and knowledge, and supported the use of the strategies-based investment for enhancing both listening and interlanguage pragmatic comprehension. Krultaz (2018) pointed out the priority of oral and written pragmatic comprehension over pragmatic production and argued that collateral interrelationships of both pragmatic skills and pragmalinguistic skills are "responsible for the ability to correctly interpret, select, and utilize speech act strategies, which are conventionally, socially, and culturally determined" (p. 7).

Another group of pragmatic studies dealt with cognitive processes underlying pragmatic comprehension. They revealed that top-down processing which contains shared knowledge of the world by interactants and bottom-up processing including lexico-grammatical features of the communicative acts are important in understanding implicatures and the trend of utterances in a piece of oral or written discourse. Garcia (2004) inspected the recognition levels of L2 speech acts among low and high proficient L2 Spanish learners (NNS) and native English speakers (NS). The study groups' recognition capacities were measured in authentic conversations selected from an academic spoken corpus. Through answering a listening comprehension task, both groups of NSs and NNSs were asked to detect various forms of L2 speech acts including requests, suggestions, corrections, and offers. Garcia' (2004) investigation sought to check whether there was any significant relationship between L2 learners' proficiency levels and their extent of accurate pragmatic comprehension and to probe the role of non-conventional linguistic characteristics and contextual knowledge on participants' skill to detect and locate the aforementioned L2 speech acts. Garcia' (2004) investigation indicated that contextual information and linguistic facets like the stated agent, lexical indicators, false starts, and use of simulations could interact with the type of the speech act to explain the pragmatic comprehension. By specified agent, she meant the cause or the initiator of the intended speech act that is a contextual factor. Who the initiator of the discourse is and why a certain chain of speech acts is utilized can influence both the production and comprehension of any act. Lexical markers in Garcia's (2004) study refer to the choice of words based on the type of situation (e.g. its formality and informality). Finally, false starts are those incomplete speech acts that the interactants try to express but are not finished due to the pragmatic competence deficiencies of the involved parties, pragmatic misunderstandings, and/or dynamism of the discourse context.

The developmental patterns and learning strategies in interlanguage pragmatic comprehension have been also the target of extensive research (e.g., Bouton, 1994; Lee, 2010; Longobardi, Lonigro, & Laghi, 2017; Loukusa, Leinonen, & Ryder, 2007; Matsumura, 2003; Taguchi, 2014). Lee (2010), for instance, examined the developmental patterns in the interlanguage pragmatic

comprehension of young Chinese EFL learners. She found that young learners' comprehension of direct and indirect speech acts (refusals, apologies, requests, compliments, and complaints) increased longitudinally; however, this progress was less for indirect speech acts. According to Lee (2010), these young learners mentioned that they relied on the literal and semantic meanings of the speech acts for pragmatic comprehension in their earlier stages of L2 learning. Accordingly, these learners faced difficulty in comprehending indirect speech acts that demanded higher sociopragmatic awareness and focus on the aspects of the situational context. Over time, as students grew older and increased their L2 learning experience, they also acquired to rely on other factors such as the speaker's intention and contextual clues to comprehend both direct and indirect speech acts. Loukusa et al. (2007) also reported that a stronger capacity to utilize contextual information in interlanguage pragmatic comprehension is related to age and maturation.

Generally speaking, most of the studies in L2 pragmatics have investigated L2 learners' pragmatic production and less research has been conducted on pragmatic comprehension. Moreover, this limited body of research on interlanguage pragmatic comprehension studied topics such as the accuracy or speed of comprehension, age and other developmental issues, directness and the degree of pragmatic comprehension for different speech acts, the comprehension of implicatures and ironies, and the role of learner and external variables such as proficiency level and the length of stay in the L2 community. Even though a minority of these studies examined some of the processes and strategies involved in L2 pragmatic comprehension as their secondary focus, none of them comprehensively explored the patterns, processes, strategies, and their relationships with the cognitive, social, and cultural dimensions in L2 pragmatic comprehension nor did they provide a classification of these comprehension processes and strategies.

Furthermore, a walkthrough of the studies on the role of gender in L2 interlanguage pragmatics reveals two striking points. First, they have treated gender mostly as a biological factor that opposes the more realistic view toward gender, i.e. gender as a sociocultural trait (Taguchi & Roever, 2017). Second, the majority of these studies address pragmatic production (Ross & Kasper, 2013; Taguchi, 2013, 2015). As aforementioned, pragmatic comprehension is an under-researched area in SLA and accordingly learner and external variables that play a part in L2 pragmatic comprehension and its underlying processes are not sufficiently inspected as well (Taguchi, 2011). Due to the scarcity of research in this domain, Taguchi (2017) has called for extensive explanatory and qualitative studies on learner, contextual, and social variables that exert substantial influences over pragmatic comprehension. No outstanding study can be referred to about the role of gender in pragmatic comprehension and pragmatic comprehension strategies so far (Bardovi-Harlig, 2013a; Taguchi et al., 2013). Filling this research gap about the use of pragmatic comprehension strategies by male versus female L2 learners was the motivation for conducting the present investigation.

Purpose of the Study

Understanding mechanisms, processes, and strategies involved in interlanguage pragmatic comprehension is a very important research gap that has remained understudied so far. Knowing such possible procedures and strategies can help L2 teachers tailor better instructions for pragmatic comprehension development. In addition, gender in its socio-psychological view (as claimed by Kasper & Rose, 2002) is a factor that can likely affect pragmatic comprehension in general and the pragmatic comprehension strategies in particular and therefore, it was included in the present research. Because of the significance of knowing such pragmatic comprehension strategies, on the one hand, and the scarcity of studies in this domain, on the other hand, the

current investigation was launched to identify the strategies used by Iranian EFL learners in their L2 pragmatic comprehension. The research questions which this study specifically intended to answer are as follows:

1) What are the frequently used interlanguage pragmatic comprehension strategies by Iranian EFL learners?

2) Are there any significant differences between different types of interlanguage pragmatic comprehension strategies used by Iranian EFL learners?

3) Are there any significant differences between interlanguage pragmatic comprehension strategies used by male vs. female Iranian EFL learners?

Method

Participants

The sample comprised 40 students majoring in English Language Translation and English Language Teaching at Imam Khomeini International University, Qazvin. The age of the participants varied from 18 to 26 (M=20.9, SD=2.9). Regarding the year of study, the participants contained juniors (35 %) and seniors (50 %), and graduate students (15%). The average number of courses successfully passed by the participatory students ranged from 5 to 8. Their mother tongues were Persian, Turkish and Kurdish and they were from different social strata. Out of the initial sample of 90 students, forty (20 females and 20 males) learners were homogenized and selected on the basis of their performance on a paper-based TOEFL test. The learners' answers were corrected based on the rubrics given for scoring TOEFL test (provided by EST website) by the researchers with the help of a professional TOEFL rater. Those learners who scored above the mean (X ≥ 525) were selected for the current study.

Instruments

Multiple-Choice Discourse Completion Test (MDCTs)

In order to gather the required data, a previously validated Interlanguage Pragmatic (ILP) test developed by Tajeddin and Ahmadi Safa (2010) was used. This interlanguage pragmatic test has acceptable reliability (r=.87) indices based on the previous studies in Iran (e.g. Malmir, 2015; Tajeddin & Malmir, 2014, 2015) and this research for the advanced EFL learners. The test includes 16 items. Each item consists of a context in which a two to six-lines conversation between the interactants is taking place, and three choices are listed at the end. One of these alternatives is the most appropriate option, considering all the pragmatic dimensions of the situational context. The given contexts range from very informal ones to the really formal situations involving different speech acts such as apology, disagreement, request, complaint, and invitation. The vocabulary, grammar, and the needed socio-pragmatic knowledge are suitable for advanced levels. The sentences in the referred interlanguage pragmatic test were originally produced by native speakers of English and less modification was done on it by the test developers. All the multiple-choice discourse completion test (MDCT) items showed IF indices between the standard range of .37 and.50. The ID indices for all the 16 items were greater than .45 and less .90, demonstrating the dependability of this multiple-choice discourse completion test to assess learners' pragmatic comprehension.

Think-Aloud Verbal Protocols

Verbal protocol analysis (VPA) has become popular as a methodology to uncover psychological processes that a person goes through to perform a task in EFL/ESL studies. According to Schauer (2009), there are two types of verbal protocols that are known as think-aloud protocols as well: *concurrent and retrospective verbal protocols.* Based on Woodfield (2008), the *concurrent verbal protocols* are applied to gather deeper insights into the hidden and unobservable learning processes in the minds of the participants while they are completing a target research task; however, *retrospective verbal protocols* are administered when the research task has been finished by the learners (Cohen & Olshtain, 1993; Felix-Brasdefer, 2008; Park, 2009). It should be noted that these verbal protocols are mainly used with other data collection instruments such as non-interactive and interactive production tasks in L2 pragmatics research to provide broader insights about the underlying processes and phenomena (Taguchi & Roever, 2017). Such a balanced combination of verbal protocols and productive measures helps the researchers gain a more thorough and realistic picture of the pragmatic knowledge.

Moreover, these verbal protocols assist the researchers in gleaning invaluable information about the other pragmatic choices made by L2 learners and to trace the patters and reasons that propelled the L2 learners to abandon other choices and select or produce a particular choice. Hence, as asserted by Ross and Kasper (2013), using the concurrent verbal protocols leads the researchers toward realizing the pragmatic or linguistic considerations that shaped learners' choices and preferences.

The main drawback of the concurrent verbal protocols as pointed out by Kasper and Roever (2005) is that they "may produce reactivity, that is, they may interfere with doing the task" (p. 329). However, the retrospective verbal protocols do not expose this shortcoming because they are conducted after the task and the learners do not feel the pressure of the task and even if they want they can listen to or watch their own performances to recall more about their pragmatic experience. Nevertheless, one of the major weaknesses of the retrospective verbal protocols is the passage of time because they are employed after the completion of the research task and they are influenced by forgetting processes.

The semi-structured interviews into participants' pragmatic comprehension strategies were also followed by a retrospective report, increasing the duration of the data collection procedure. The interview included ten short questions for each item on the multiple-choice discourse completion test (ILP Test). The content of these questions was developed based on the main concepts in interlanguage pragmatic theory and a few earlier studies on the nature of pragmatic compression (Taguchi, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2008b, 2009, 2013), including pragmatic meaning, the role of cotext and context, politeness theory, relevance theory, Grice's (1975) maxims, power and distance, use of socially acceptable vocabulary and structures, and the speech act theory. These questions were operationalized, postulated, revised, and later scored through negotiations with two native speakers of English who teach interlanguage pragmatics and discourse at American State Universities. The use of native speaker raters obviated the problems which are inevitably attached to non-native speaker's pragmatic judgments such as experience inadequacy, ineffective L2 pragmatic competence, and lack of necessary cross-cultural knowledge about the nature of speech (Alemi & Khanlarzadeh, 2016). Other test features including the item and whole test characteristics were meticulously checked as required by testing and assessment guidelines (see Bachman & Palmer, 2010; Sadeghi & Abolfazli Khonb, 2015).

Data Collection Procedure

For gathering the needed data, a multiple-choice discourse completion test (The ILP Test) was given to participants and they were asked to answer the items individually. Simultaneously, participants' think-aloud protocols during answering each item were recorded using an MP3 recorder or a PC in the language lab of Imam Khomeini International University, Qazvin. That is, the study used "concurrent verbal protocols" as the main data collection instrument. This procedure was done for each item to the end of the test. The learners were required to verbalize why they chose a special option and why they rejected the two other choices. The verbal protocols were initiated and controlled by the researcher to better cater into the manifold dimensions of participants' pragmatic comprehension strategies. Learners were asked to express all interlanguage pragmatic strategies they used to choose one option as the most appropriate one but not the two others. Accordingly, verbal protocol recordings (VPRs) were somehow lengthy. They ranged from 10 to 40 minutes. In fact, some participants were more cooperative and they talked about all pragmatic comprehension strategies in detail but other participants were more introvert and, hence less interactive, especially when their voices were recorded. The length of the VPRs had a mean of 14 minutes ($M_{VPR} = 14$) and a standard deviation of 3.5 ($SD_{VPR} = 3.5$). The VPRs were recorded in a period of one month because of the coincidence of the project with final-term examinations. A few VPRs were totally excluded because of poor performance, voice quality, and other intruding distractions.

Intercoder Reliability

Intercoder reliability for the participants' answers in concurrent and retrospective think-aloud verbal protocols was achieved through the judgments given by two raters who were native speakers of American English. Consistency among the two raters' judgments was established through Cohen's kappa ($\varkappa = .82$, 95% CI, .671 to .923, $p < .05$) and Krippendorff's Alpha (Kalpha = .83 95% CI, .772 to .951, $p < .05$) that were calculated utilizing SPSS and ReCal programs, respectively. Cohen's kappa value of .82 and Krippendorff's Alpha of .83 showed a strong and dependable agreement (Hallgren, 2012, Hayes, 2007) between the two raters' subjective judgments.

Research Design

The present research was a descriptive mixed-method research in Dörnyei's (2007) sense of this term. That is, it sought to "describe naturally occurring phenomena without experimental manipulation" and had a "narrower scope of the investigation" (p. 124). The study used both quantitative and qualitative procedures in two subsequent stages. The first stage was audio verbal protocol recordings taken from think-aloud verbalizations of EFL learners talking about their comprehension of different speech acts in English. The second stage was a detailed description of interlanguage pragmatic comprehension strategies found in the data, including quantification of some aspects of them. The pragmatic comprehension strategies mentioned by learners in concurrent think-aloud verbal protocols were audiotaped while they were answering a multiple-choice discourse completion test. After finishing the test and concurrent VPRs, another short qualitative step was taken during which the participants were enquired to think retrospectively and talk about their pragmatic comprehension strategies during completing the MCDT and their past language learning experience. The audiotaped VPRs were carefully listened to and meticulously transcribed.

Data Analysis

This research used a mixed-method research design through concurrent triangulation since it collected the qualitative and quantitative data simultaneously. Then, the elicited strategies were codified, segmented, compared, and finally classified into three groups of strategies. Similar words or phrases cited by the participants and content resemblance were two salient techniques that helped the researchers categorize the elected strategies into the same classes of themes. For example, Tina (pseudonym) chose option c for Item 3:

Context: Driving in a highway, you suddenly notice that your speed is 110 miles which is far beyond the speed limit (90) and the police are chasing you. They ask you to stop. The police officer comes over and is to punch your driving license.

> **Police officer:** Sir I'm sorry to tell you that you were speeding up over 120 miles.
>
> **You (Driver):** …………………………………………………
>
> a. Wow, 120. Don't make me laugh! I wasn't!
>
> b. Don't you think that you are exaggerating a bit!
>
> c. I'm not sure if I agree on 120.

In her concurrent VPR, she told the researchers that "*The reason I chose choice c is that it is politer; actually, I as a driver has not the power to mock at the police by expressing my disagreement and complaint that way. Using words and expressions such as 'don't make me laugh!', "exaggerating" are not appropriate when you have disregarded driving rules and the police may fine you…The meaning of the sentences especially in the form of question tags such as 'Don't you…' are not helpful when you are caught by the police on your way... .*" After the test, Tina was asked to talk about her reasons for choosing those answers and she added: "*Through watching movies and TV series, I learned that politeness is also a very basic feature in everyday conversations especially in formal situations, when the person you are talking to is not a close friend… .*"

Tina's used strategies (i.e., politeness considerations, power relations and asymmetrical distance between her and the police) in this case, for comprehending the pragmatic meaning. These pragmatic features were put under the class of sociopragmatic strategies. The second class of strategies pertained to linguistic or lexico-grammatical ones (as named by this study) which were under the influence of the first group of strategies. Cognitive strategies were those related to activating shared knowledge of the world (bottom-up processing) and encoding the pragmatic information from the contextual clues. Of course, this procedure was completed for all the 16 items for each participant and their answers were analyzed, codified, and segmented. Then the elicited strategies, i.e., sociopragmatic, lexico-grammatical, and cognitive strategies were compared across all items and all participants several times to have the final classification. Some sub-categorical classifications were also made for each type of these three strategies (See Tables 2 to 4 in the next part).

Results

The study examined interlanguage pragmatic comprehension strategies used by Iranian EFL learners. Verbal reports were collected from Iranian L2 learners of English engaged in answering a previously validated *multiple-choice discourse completion test (MDCTs)* on speech acts. The performances of the participants on the MDCT are summarized in Table 1:

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for the Performances of the Participants on the MDCT Test

Participants	N	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Female	20	13.70	2.21	9	16
Male	20	14.20	2.41	10	16
Total	40	13.90	2.30	9	16

Because direct observation and categorization of pragmatic comprehension strategies were not possible, they were extracted through learners' concurrent and retrospective think-aloud verbal protocols while they were answering an MDCT Test. The mean scores for male and females' ILP performances are 13.7 and 14.2 (out of a total score of 16), respectively. And the total sample's ILP performance mean score is 13.90 with a standard deviation of 2.30. Such a high mean score for the whole sample (and also for male vs. female learners) with low standard deviation values indicated that the advanced EFL learners who participated in this study had developed effective pragmatic knowledge and hence pragmatic comprehension ability as well. Accordingly, their elicited pragmatic comprehension strategies were adequately valid and dependable. Participants' recorded verbal protocols were carefully listened to three times and were meticulously transcribed by two raters. Three general types of pragmatic comprehension strategies were recognized: lexico-grammatical, cognitive, and socio-pragmatic strategies.

Socio-pragmatic strategies are those based on social and cultural considerations that are needed for comprehending any piece of discourse and the related speech acts including politeness issues, gendered language use, the nature of power relations, and distance. The most important sociopragmatic comprehension strategies are listed in Table 2. The name of these strategies and the number of learners (out of 40) who used them in their answers to each item (16 items) are displayed.

Table 2
Frequency of the Elicited Socio-Pragmatic Comprehension Strategies

	Strategy Type						
	Politeness	Formality	Solidarity	Distance	Directness	Implicature	Inference
Item	F(P)	F(P)	F(P)	F(P)	F(P)	F(P)	F(P)
1	38 (95%)	20 (50%)	30 (75%)	32 (80%)	35 (87.5%)	14 (35%)	8 (20%)
2	28 (70%)	20 (50%)	18 (45%)	30 (75%)	15 (37.5%)	12 (30%)	7 (17.5)
3	38 (95%)	37 (92.5%)	35 (87.5%)	40 (100%)	34 (85%)	17 (42.5%)	8 (20%)
4	33 (82.5)	20 (50%)	25 (62.5%)	29 (72.5)	31 (77.5%)	13 (32.5%)	4 (10%)
5	40 (100%)	25 (62.5%)	24 (40%)	32 (80%)	31 (77.5%)	7 (17.5)	2 (5%)
6	31 (77.5%)	27 (67.5%)	21 (52.5%)	18 (45%)	20 (50%)	8 (20%)	2 (5%)
7	27 (67.5%)	20 (50%)	19 (47.5%)	18 (45%)	20 (50%)	11 (27.5%)	3 (7.5%)
8	40 (100%)	15 (37.5%)	17 (42.5%)	18 (45%)	21 (52.5%)	14 (35%)	6 (15%)
9	36 (90%)	22 (55%)	27 (67.5%)	24 (40%)	19 (47.5%)	8 (20%)	3 (7.5%)
10	22 (55%)	21 (52.5%)	17 (42.5%)	18 (45%)	28 (70%)	15 (37.5%)	3 (7.5%)
11	39 (97.5%)	27 (67.5%)	30 (75%)	14 (35%)	19 (47.5%)	10 (25%)	1 (2.5%)
12	40 (100%)	33 (82.5)	30 (75%)	32 (80%)	37 (92.5%)	11 (27.5%)	4 (10%)
13	23 (75.5%)	23 (75.5%)	27 (67.5%)	21 (52.5%)	36 (90%)	20 (50%)	12 (30%)
14	35 (87.5%)	30 (75%)	31 (77.5%)	26 (65%)	35 (87.5%)	11 (27.5%)	4 (10%)
15	32 (80%)	24 (40%)	20 (50%)	28 (70%)	20 (50%)	12 (30%)	6 (15%)
16	25 (62.5%)	17 (42.5%)	19 (47.5%)	13 (32.5%)	19 (47.5%)	17 (42.5%)	8 (20%)

After the socio-pragmatic comprehension strategies, lexico-grammatical strategies were used more in Iranian EFL learners' pragmatic comprehension. These types of strategies were more lexical rather than grammatical. The lexical strategies included formality vs. informality considerations, slang and colloquial range of the used vocabulary, synonyms and antonyms, idiomatic expressions

and appropriate collocations. Based on what the students said in their concurrent and retrospective verbal protocols, the strategies related to grammar were the least used types of strategies which helped in pragmatic comprehension.

Table 3
Frequency of the Elicited Lexico-Grammatical Pragmatic Comprehension Strategies

	Lexical	Grammatical
Item	F(P)	F(P)
1	27 (67.5%)	3 (7.5%)
2	18 (45%)	2 (5%)
3	33 (82.5)	2 (5%)
4	23 (75.5%)	5 (12.5%)
5	29 (72.5)	3 (7.5%)
6	31 (77.5%)	5 (12.5%)
7	16 (40%)	4 (10%)
8	26 (65%)	4 (10%)
9	14 (35%)	1 (2.5%)
10	15 (37.5%)	7 (17.5)
11	26 (65%)	2 (5%)
12	15 (37.5%)	3 (7.5%)
13	9 (22.5%)	7 (17.5)
14	30 (75%)	3 (7.5%)
15	20 (50%)	5 (12.5%)
16	10 (25%)	1 (2.5%)

As far as the cognitive strategies are concerned, nearly all participants reported that they used both top-down and bottom-up processing strategies for effective pragmatic comprehension. Some participants used cross-cultural speech act comparisons and translation from L1 into L2 to comprehend better. Transfer of lexicogrammar and shared knowledge about the world and norms of conversation were claimed by some learners in their pragmatic comprehension (Table 4).

Table 4
Frequency of the Elicited Cognitive Pragmatic Comprehension Strategies

Strategy	N(P)
• Top-Down Processing	39 (97.5%)
• Bottom-Up Processing	38 (95%)
• Translation from L1 into L2 to comprehend better	28 (70%)
• Transfer of lexicogrammar and shared knowledge about the world and norms of conversation	22 (55%)
• Cross-cultural comparisons	20 (50%)
• Recombining the sentences	18 (45%)

To answer the second research question, the frequencies of the pragmatic comprehension strategies were compared to examine if there were any significant differences between the use of these elicited strategies by study participants. Table 5 shows the descriptive statistics for the frequency of strategy use across socio-pragmatic, lexico-grammatical, and cognitive strategies.

Table 5
Descriptive Statistics for Strategy Use Frequency

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Deviation
Socio-Pragmatic	40	32	40	35.50	3.18
Lexico-Grammatical	40	10	36	24.81	7.89
Cognitive	40	2	8	4.93	1.80

As you can see in Table 6, the mean score for the number of participants who used socio-pragmatic strategies is the highest (M=35.50), followed by the lexico-grammatical strategies (M=24.81) and the cognitive pragmatic comprehension strategies (M=4.93). This trend can be seen in the percentile ranks and median scores for strategy use as well:

Table 6
Descriptive Statistics & Ranks for the Three Categories of Pragmatic Comprehension Strategies

		Percentiles			
	N	25th	50th (Median)	75th	Mean Rank
Socio-Pragmatic	40	32.25	34.50	38.75	2.94
Lexico-Grammatical	40	18.50	26.50	31.50	2.06
Cognitive	40	3.25	5.00	6.00	1.00

Because the distributions for the whole group's strategy use and for the use of different strategy types were not normal, Friedman Test was utilized to check if such differences in strategy use are statistically significant or not (Table 7).

Table 7
Friedman Test Statistics for the Use of Different Pragmatic Comprehension Strategies

N	16
Chi-Square	30.12
Df	2
Asymp. Sig.	.000

Results of Friedman Test indicated that there were statistically significant differences in the type of pragmatic comprehension strategies across three different categories of socio-pragmatic, cognitive, and lexico-grammatical comprehension strategies, (χ_2 (2) = 30.12, n=40, p < .05). To explore the exact location of the differences, three separate Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were run for each group of the strategies.

Table 8
Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Tests on the Differences among Pragmatic Comprehension Strategies

	Sociopragmatic- Lexico-grammatical	Sociopragmatic-Cognitive	Lexico-grammatical - Cognitive
Z	3.524	3.468	3.518
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.001	.000

Post hoc analysis with Wilcoxon signed-rank tests was employed with a Bonferroni correction applied, resulting in a significance level set at p<.017 (.05/3=0.017). Significant differences were found between the sociopragmatic and lexico-grammatical strategies (Z=3.524, p=.000), between the sociopragmatic and cognitive strategies (Z=3.468, p=.001), and between the lexico-grammatical and cognitive strategies (Z=3.518, p=.000). Therefore, it was concluded that socio-pragmatic strategies were used more than lexico-grammatical and cognitive strategies. Also, lexico-grammatical strategies were utilized more than cognitive strategies.

The third research question probed the role of gender in the use of interlanguage pragmatic comprehension strategies. The descriptive statistics for the total use of pragmatic comprehension strategies by male and female learners are displayed in Table 9.

Table 9
Descriptive Statistics for the Performances of the Participants on the MDCT Test

Participants	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Skewness	Kurtosis
Male	20	64.40	9.53	49	79	1.11	1.50
Female	20	61.45	8.81	45	81	1.00	.994
Total	40	62.92	9.18	45	81	1.04	1.32

The mean and standard deviation values for the frequency of strategy use are greater for male learners; however, other statistics are approximately the same. For male learners, the skewness is 1.11 (right-skewed) and the kurtosis is 1.50 (heavier tails than normal distribution). This distorted change from normality can be observed for the female learners' and the total sample's use of strategies. These numbers alone are not reliable predictors of departures from normality; therefore, the normality tests, the results of which are presented in Table 10, were applied.

Table 10
Kolmogorov- Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk's Test of Normality for Strategy Use across Gender

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Male Learners	.089	20	.000	.945	20	.000
Female Learners	.176	20	.007	.883	20	.003

Since the sample size for each group was 20, the Shapiro-Wilk's p-value was considered. The p-value for both groups is less than .05 (p= .000 and .003, respectively); therefore, the distributions for the use of strategies by male and female participants were not normal. So, the non-parametric version of the independent samples t-test, i.e. Mann-Whitney U Test, was run to check the differences between two groups across the three strategy types (Table 11).

Table 11
Ranks for Differences between Pragmatic Comprehension Strategies Used by Males vs. Females

	Gender	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Socio-pragmatic strategies	Male	20	21.40	428.00
	Female	20	19.60	392.00
	Total	40		
Lexico-grammatical strategies	Male	20	19.83	396.50
	Female	20	21.18	423.50
	Total	40		
Cognitive strategies	Male	20	22.43	448.50
	Female	20	18.58	371.50
	Total	40		
Total	Male	20	22.25	445.00
	Female	20	18.75	375.00
	Total	40		

As shown in Table 12, Mann-Whitney U test revealed that there were not any significant differences between the socio-pragmatic (U=182, p=.625), lexico-grammatical (U=186.50, p=.711), cognitive strategies (U=161, p=.296), and hence the total pragmatic comprehension strategies (U=165, p=.343) used by male vs. female learners.

Table 12

Mann-Whitney U Test Statistics for the Differences between Pragmatic Comprehension Strategies Used by Males vs. Females a

	Socio-pragmatic	Lexico-grammatical	Cognitive	Total
Mann-Whitney U	182.000	186.500	161.500	165.000
Wilcoxon W	392.000	396.500	371.500	375.000
Z	-.489	-.371	-1.044	-.949
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.625	.711	.296	.343
Exact Sig. [2*(1-tailed Sig.)]	.640b	.718b	.301b	.355b
Exact Sig. (2-tailed)	.633	.720	.303	.350
Exact Sig. (1-tailed)	.317	.360	.152	.175
Point Probability	.005	.006	.003	.003

a. Grouping Variable: Gender

b. Not corrected for ties.

Accordingly, it was concluded that there were not any significant differences between male vs. female Iranian EFL learners in the use of socio-pragmatic, lexico-grammatical, and cognitive pragmatic comprehension strategies.

Discussion

The first and the most significant finding of this study was the categorization of interlanguage pragmatic comprehension strategies. This study revealed that pragmatic comprehension is a manifold process involving the simultaneous use of different socio-pragmatic, lexico-grammatical and cognitive strategies. Based on the findings of this study, the socio-pragmatic comprehension strategies were those tactics based upon social and cultural considerations that are needed for comprehending any piece of discourse and the related speech acts. Pragmalinguistic or lexico-grammatical comprehension strategies are defined as those that help learners choose the most socially appropriate words and structures. Moreover, cognitive pragmatic comprehension strategies are related to how we plan and act to comprehend the intended meanings or the illocutionary force of speech acts based upon the contextual clues and the previously acquired schemata and knowledge of the world.

This classification is indirectly supported by some studies, i.e. some earlier researchers have mentioned one or two of these types of strategies in interlanguage pragmatic comprehension by using similar or different terminologies (Garcia, 2004; Lee, 2010; Perez, 2017; Taguchi, 2003, 2011). Garcia (2004), for example, argued that pragmatic comprehension is achieved through the use of cognitive knowledge, shared knowledge about the world, linguistic ability, and contextual factors that help learners infer meanings expressed by the L2 speech acts. In fact, Garcia (2004) has implicitly introduced the three different pragmatic comprehension strategies though she did not present any classification. Lee (2010) also contended that L2 pragmatic comprehension is mainly the result of the use of sociopragmatic knowledge retrieval processes. In a similar vein, Perez (2017) mentioned a range of lexico-grammatical and sociopragmatic tactics which underlie the comprehension of direct and indirect speech acts as the building blocks of interlanguage pragmatic competence. Although she did not use the word strategy, Taguchi (2011) asserted that

using pragmalinguistic knowledge (lexico-grammatical choices) is the most important procedure in EFL Japanese learners' pragmatic comprehension.

The second seminal finding of the present research was that Iranian EFL learners used more socio-pragmatic comprehension strategies compared to lexico-grammatical and cognitive pragmatic strategies. This finding that socio-pragmatic knowledge is the most crucial factor in L2 pragmatic comprehension influencing the choice of lexico-grammar is supported by some theoretical conceptualizations (Kasper & Rose, 2002; Schauer, 2009) and empirical studies (Taguchi, 2008a, 2013). Schauer (2009) noted that pragmatic comprehension requires the effective use of sociopragmatic knowledge which is manifested in the special vocabulary and grammar of the L2. Politeness, for example, motivates the interactants to use the special vocabulary for a specific situation considering social and cultural appropriateness. In fact, we can say that socio-pragmatic knowledge is the first phase of producing a special utterance in any kind of real-world interaction which determines the meaning and form of discourse. As articulated by Kasper and Rose, (2002), familiarity with sociocultural knowledge, social norms, and accepted discourse regularities in the target language is necessary for pragmatic comprehension. Taguchi (2017) maintained that awareness of socio-pragmatic knowledge is the main cornerstone of interlanguage pragmatic comprehension. This knowledge determines politeness, the degree of formality and informality, the accepted level of directness and indirectness, and indirectly restricts the use of semantic and syntactic structures in a contextualized piece of discourse in real-world situations.

This investigation also suggested two points about lexico-grammatical pragmatic comprehension strategies. First, lexical choices were more determinant than grammatical or structural choices in L2 pragmatic comprehension. Second, these lexico-grammatical pragmatic comprehension strategies did not act alone; rather they were used under the influence of the cognitive and pragmatic comprehension strategies, signifying that lexico-grammar is just a vehicle for conveying higher functional choices. Therefore, it can be said that lexico-grammatical strategies are used in third place after socio-pragmatic and cognitive strategies in comprehending L2 discoursal chunks. This finding is in line with Taguchi et al.'s (2016) study. Their study also advocated that lexical clues more satisfactorily help L2 pragmatic comprehension than the mere grammatical clues. Taguchi et al. (2016) argued that the ability to employ vocabulary knowledge including formality vs. informality, the connotative and denotative meanings, degree of directness and indirectness, use of different sentence types (imperatives, affirmative or negative statements, and integrative ones), mood and modality, metaphors and ironies, familiarity with colloquial and slang words, and familiarity with the gender preferences demonstrated through the choice of L2 lexicon are considered to be integral for interlanguage pragmatic comprehension.

As far as the cognitive strategies in interlanguage pragmatic comprehension are concerned, it can be observed that most learners who participated in the study said that they used both top-down and bottom-up processing strategies. Bottom-up processing of the linguistic elements or lexico-grammar of the discourse occurring in the working memory, as introduced by Perez (2017), and then top-down processing of the socio-pragmatic and contextual clues to reconstruct and comprehend the meaning are two main classes of cognitive pragmatic comprehension strategies. By top-down processing strategies, it is meant using the shared knowledge of the world, presuppositions, schemata, and scripts form long-term memory and short-term memory. Most of the interviewees reported that they used top-down and bottom-up processing pragmatic comprehension strategies in a sequence. First, they employed bottom-up processing of the contextual and lexico-grammatical clues and then they used top-down processing to activate their shared knowledge of the world by using socio-pragmatic strategies. They also added that they employed this dynamic cycle many times before deciding on the intended meaning with certainty. Some studies disapprove this finding. For instance, Garcia (2004) accentuated the dominance and priority of top-down processing in understanding L2 indirect speech acts, claiming that this cognitive tendency is in agreement with the priority of socio-pragmatic and lexical knowledge in

pragmatic comprehension. Taguchi (2008b), however, gave her support to the necessity of both top-down and bottom-up processing in decoding, interpreting, and comprehending comprehension.

The third finding of the present research revealed that participants' gender did not play any significant role in the choice and frequency of the interlanguage pragmatic comprehension strategies. Though many previous studies argued for the significant differences in the pragmatic production patterns between male and female L2 learners (Geluykens & Kraft, 2002, 2007; Herbert, 1990; Parisi & Wogan, 2006), no empirical finding argues for or against gender-based difference in the use of pragmatic comprehension strategies. The findings of this study are in line with those studies that have adopted a neutral gender role for pragmatic production and pragmatic comprehension (Kasper & Schmidt, 1996; Kasper & Rose, 2002) and also those studies about the use of general language learning strategies (LLS) by two genders (see Ellis, 2008 for a complete list). This neutral role can be generalized to the use of interlanguage pragmatic comprehension strategies.

Conclusion and Implications

The present investigation was launched to probe into the interlanguage pragmatic comprehension strategies used by Iranian advanced EFL learners in their comprehension of speech acts as the core of pragmatic competence. The main findings of this study are as follows: First, interlanguage pragmatic comprehension strategies were classified into three categories based on content similarities: socio-pragmatic, lexico-grammatical, and cognitive. Second, it was deduced that Iranian EFL learners used more socio-pragmatic comprehension strategies than the other two categories. The second frequently used type of pragmatic comprehension strategy was lexico-grammatical (pragmalinguistic) strategies and finally, cognitive pragmatic comprehension strategies occupied the third position in the classification. The difference in the use of lexico-grammatical and cognitive pragmatic comprehension strategies was also significant.

Third, the most frequently used sociopragmatic comprehension strategies were those that helped in understanding politeness, formality, solidarity, distance, directness, implicature, and inference issues. Moreover, as far as the second type of interlanguage pragmatic strategies is concerned, it was found that lexical strategies were more frequently used compared to grammatical strategies. Regarding the cognitive pragmatic comprehension strategies, both bottom-up and top-down processing strategies were employed in a chain of dynamic cycles to decipher the pragmatic meaning from the context of the situation and from the broader sociocultural context. Fourth, it was related to the difference between pragmatic comprehension strategies used by male vs. Female Iranian EFL learners. No significant difference was observed for two genders' use of total pragmatic comprehension strategies and also for the use of any categories of socio-pragmatic, lexico-grammatical, and cognitive strategies.

The findings of the study have some pedagogical implications for L2 language learners and language teachers. In light of the results gained, it is suggested that instructors need to make sensitize their learners to socio-pragmatic, lexico-grammatical, and cognitive strategies. Another suggested implication is that the interface of pragmatic knowledge and lexicon of the language plays a very essential role in L2 interlanguage pragmatic comprehension, and it should be treated more seriously. Accordingly, giving awareness about the lexico-grammatical pragmatic strategies in general and about lexico-pragmatic strategies, in particular, is necessary for L2 learners. Pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge should grow hand in hand, and as the results indicated, students favored sociopragmatic strategies more than pragmalinguistic and cognitive

strategies. Therefore, teachers can also teach L2 learners how to use more effective pragmalinguistic strategies and cognitive top-down and bottom-up processing strategies for better pragmatic comprehension.

Like any other study in interlanguage pragmatic comprehension, this study suffered from some limitations. The first limitation was the number of learners who participated in the study. Better-Designed research with a larger sample is needed to increase the internal validity and generalizability of the findings of this study. In addition, a more controlled approach in using verbal protocols can yield more insightful self-reports from the learners. The ability of the learners in noticing the gaps in their own pragmatic comprehension and its strategies is an invaluable topic that can be investigated in another study. The relationship between individual learners' learning styles and their pragmatic comprehension strategies can also be further researched in another well-designed inquiry.

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