

A Case Study of Iranian EFL Learners' Intensive Speaking Practice to Express Regrets in English Language

Seyyed Hossein Kashef (Assistant Professor)

English Language Department, Urmia Branch, Islamic Azad University, Urmia, Iran

Email: Sh.kashef@iau.ac.ir

Parviz Alavinia (Associate Professor)

Department of English Language and Literature, Urmia University, Urmia, Iran

Email: p.alavinia@urmia.ac.ir

Farhad Khabazian (Corresponding Author)

English Language Department, Urmia Branch, Islamic Azad University, Urmia, Iran

Email: f.khabazian@iaurmia.ac.ir

Abstract

This study aimed to investigate Iranian EFL learners' expression of regrets in four main contexts. A qualitative case study design was adopted to address the research question. The participants were 3 male Iranian EFL learners. Sadra and Ata were 19 and Mehrdad was 20. The participants were chosen through purposive sampling and spoke Azeri Turkish as their mother tongue. The contexts used for the purpose of the study were a) classroom, b) shopping mall, c) park and d) coffee shop. The participants were instructed in six EFL classes to obtain an understanding of specific syntactic categories and lexical items related to the expression of regrets by their EFL instructor, the second researcher. High Inference observation (HIO) was used to observe the participants' speaking competence in expressing their regrets at two phases (the first three months and the last two months). Through initial data coding and comparison of the participants' use of syntactic and lexical items which were investigated during the two time periods (the first three months and the last two months), it was tangible that the participants failed to express their regrets due to lack of syntactic lexical competence and inadequate practice in their first three months role plays in comparison with their linguistic choices related to expression of regrets during the last two months. The participants' expression of regrets in the four main contexts pursued for five months up to the time when the researchers reached saturation and were empirically confident about the participants' improvement in this case study. Scrutiny of the data entries (84 extracted data) revealed that the participants could improve their speaking competence in expressing their regrets in five months.

Keywords: Expression of regrets, speaking competence, case study

Introduction

Failing to express emotional feelings can be considered as one of the major problems that EFL learners face in various contexts. Learning related linguistic features (e.g., specific syntactic categories, lexical features and idiomatic expressions) can aid EFL learners to comprehensively express their emotional feelings to their interlocutors. The ability to express regrets effectively in a foreign language is crucial skill that contributes to effective communication with others. Additionally being proficient in more than one language is widely acknowledged as a significant asset (Azari, 2023) but, in order to have near native proficiency in the target language, the language learners should acquire how they can express their emotional feelings in that target language. This study aimed to provide a meticulous investigation of the intensive speaking practice undertaken by Iranian EFL learners in order to express their regrets in English language.

Literature Review

Expressing emotional feelings (e.g., regrets, sympathies, angers, fears) is pivotal in our communication with our interlocutors in various contexts (e.g., school, office, home, coffee shop and park). There have been recent developments in the study of emotional expressions (Keltner et al., 2019) and some researchers (e.g., Dewaele, 2008; Gutfreund, 1990; Ożańska-Ponikwia, 2012; Panicacci, & Dewaele; 2018) have investigated the role of emotional expressions in foreign language from diverse perspectives. Expressing these feelings in our native language is facile, but if we are obliged to express our emotional feelings in a foreign language, it can be arduous. It is for this reason that we need specific syntactic categories, lexical items, particular phrases, idiomatic expressions and adequate practice to successfully express our emotional feelings in a foreign language. Furthermore, understanding syntactic morphological similarities and differences (Khabazian, 2023) between languages can aid EFL learners to express their emotional feelings in the target language. Thus, elucidation of syntactic categories and lexical items related to expression of emotional feelings can aid EFL learners to utter their emotional feelings in a comprehensible way.

It is worth noting that in multilingual families (Sevinç, & Mirvahedi, 2023), parents and children may switch to the kind of language in which they can conveniently imply their feelings and the one which is easier for other members of the family to infer the expressions in the target language. According to Dewaele (2006), multilingual individuals have preferences for their L1 for expression of strong emotions, including anger and disgust. However, in multilingual nations individuals may frequently code-switch (Holmes & Wilson 2022) between various languages because these specific languages may facilitate the expression of one's emotions.

This research focused on expressing regrets in English language through succoring EFL learners to retreat from their native language (Azeri) and use English to express their regrets to their EFL classmates and other participants whether for refusing an offer or requesting for help and for expressing their regrets for their own actions. Expressing regrets is pivotal in that the

interlocutor ought to try to use indirect refusal strategy to avoid threatening the face of the addressee (Wang 2019). Discourse analysis and ethnographic methods can be fruitful in expression of emotions (Hufnagel, & Kelly, 2018). These strategies and methods can aid individuals to reject offers or requests in a gentle manner. Furthermore, the interlocutors periodically intend to express their regrets about their own actions or past events. EFL learners switch to their mother tongue or any language of which they have near native proficiency (e.g., second language, national language and official language) when they are not able to express their intended meanings, in this case regrets, in a foreign language (Holmes & Wilson 2022). In view of the above-mentioned concerns, the current case study was guided by the following research question:

RQ: How do Iranian EFL learners successfully express their regrets in English language?

Method

Design of the Study

The current research was based on a qualitative case study design. Case studies have been used in a wide variety of EFL research studies (Ary et al., 2018), and primarily aim to provide a holistic description of language learning and use of the target language in a specific context (Mackey & Gass, 2015). In this type of study, because of the detailed information the researchers intend to gain about the case, they frequently spend an extended period of time investigating and observing the case in its natural surroundings (Dörnyei, & Griffee 2010). Consequently, case studies can be longitudinal and very time-consuming (Hatch & Lazaraton 1991). This study investigates three cases, namely Sadra, Ata and Mehrdad.

Participants

The present study was carried out with three adult male participants, namely Sadra, Ata and Mehrdad in Aflakian Language Institute. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants for this study. Sadra and Ata were 19 and Mehrdad was 20. The participants' mother tongue was Azeri Turkish and their proficiency level was Advanced in English language. They were among top students in their EFL classes for several semesters. Sadra, Ata and Mehrdad were close friends for approximately 5 years. The participants' friendship was strong enough to let them express their emotions (e.g., regrets) freely while spending time with each other. They also spent an adequate amount of time with each other for the expression of these feelings in various contexts. The researchers, as their EFL instructors, were pleased with the participants' active involvement in EFL classes and their scores in final achievement tests. Because of the reasons mentioned above, the researchers chose these EFL learners as cases for the present study, and then held a friendly meeting with Mehrdad, Ata and Sadra to explain the process and aims of the research. The EFL learners consented to participate in this case study. The informed written consent was taken from the participants.

Instruments and Materials

High Inference Observation abbreviated as HIO (Mackey & Gass 2016) was used in this study to observe the participants speaking competence in expressing regrets to their interlocutors. In this case the interlocutors were the other participants. The same instructor (the second researcher) observed the participants to see whether or not they could successfully express their regrets to their EFL friends in four contexts. Moreover, the purposeful dialogues were recorded and transcribed by the researchers. In order to analyze the extracted data through HIO, the researchers added their judgments and assumptions to the data in this longitudinal research.

Explanations and instructions were given to the learners as to how to express their regrets in English language in six EFL classes. At two phases, lexical and syntactic levels, the participants were instructed to express their regret to their EFL friends with great success. For this purpose four main books were used to clarify the linguistic elements related to expression of regrets in English language.

- 1- A dictionary of American Idioms (Makkai, 1995)
- 2- NTC's American Idioms Dictionary (Spears, 2000)
- 3- English Grammar: Understanding and Using (Azar & Hagen, 2009)
- 4- Practical English Usage (Swan, 2005)

Procedure

The participants were instructed (by the second and third researchers as their EFL instructors in the institute) in six EFL classes to obtain an understanding of the needed discourse to express their regrets to their EFL friends in four main contexts (i.e., classroom, shopping mall, park and coffee shop). The English classes met twice a week and each lasted 268 minutes. They were attempted to use syntactic categories (i.e., counterfactual conditionals, should have and wish modals) and lexical items (i.e., idiomatic expressions and prefabricated chunks) in order to successfully express their regrets.

The second researcher observed the participants' expressions and recorded the EFL learners' dialogs for investigation in this study. After each participation in the role plays, the researchers transcribed the recorded data and elicited 84 sample data.

The researchers observed and investigated the participants' role plays at two time periods, i.e. during the first three months and the last two months. Through initial data coding and comparison of role plays in these two periods of time, the participants' expressions of regrets and their improvement were investigated.

Classroom Context

As for the classroom context, the participants sat face to face and asked questions (e.g., borrowing a pen, asking for aid from the other participants and requesting for sharing knowledge).

In these types of utterances, the interlocutors were trained to reject the offers and requests via expressing their regrets.

Shopping Mall Context

In the second context, shopping mall, the participants walked around in an eminent shopping mall in Urmia to buy some stuff. They expressed their regrets about buying stuff with high price or purchasing things that they did not need to their EFL friends.

Park Context

Park was the third place where the participants and the observer met each other in the Ellarbaghi Park in Urmia. In a friendly manner, they offered their interlocutors to play (e.g., football, volleyball, and tennis). The participants were supposed to turn down the offers by expressing their regrets and explaining their reasons for their rejections.

Coffee Shop

For the last context, coffee shop, Mehrdad, Ata and Sadra frequently met each other in a coffee shop, near Aflakian Language Institute. They usually ordered Turk Coffee and each time one of the participants expressed his regrets about his unsatisfactory decisions and regretful behaviors to his friends.

In this longitudinal case study, for five months the participants were observed through HIO by the second researcher. The recorded interpersonal communications (i.e., role plays) were transcribed by the researchers and any probable improvements in expressing their regrets were investigated. A total of 50 sample data pieces were extracted and used to elucidate the participants' developments in expressing their emotional regrets.

Data Analysis and Results

Observing and investigating the participants' expressions of regret in their role plays with the EFL learners (the other participants) aided the researchers to become empirically confident that the participants' speaking abilities improved successfully in various contexts. Iteration, moving back and forth between data collection and data analysis (Dörnyei, 2007) succored the researchers to reach saturation in this longitudinal case study. In this research, the participants' role plays were divided into two phases. A total of 40 data pieces were extracted from the first three months during which the EFL learners expressed their regrets to their friends and 44 specimens were extracted during the last two months. Investigating and comparing the participants' expressions showed that for the first three months, their expressions were deficient. However, the participants could utter their regrets to their EFL friends by using syntactic categories

and lexical items they were instructed during the study in a better way during the last two months in comparison with their role plays during the first three months. In this longitudinal study, conducted during five months, the participants had 84 role plays in four main contexts. Specific details about the participants' role plays (i.e., number of data pieces, sequence of data and total minutes for each context) are shown in Tables 1 and 2 below.

Table 1

The number of data samples elicited for each context during the first three months (1 to 3)

Contexts	Number of Data	Sequence of Data	Total Minutes
Classroom	7	1-7	22
Shopping Mall	8	8-15	25
Park	10	16-25	34
Coffee Shop	14	26-40	42

Table 2

The number of data samples elicited for each context during the last two months (4 to 5)

Contexts	Number of Data	Sequence of Data	Total Minutes
Classroom	8	41-48	24
Shopping Mall	9	49-57	33
Park	11	58-68	40
Coffee Shop	16	69-84	48

In tables 3 to 6, it is illustrated that the participants failed to successfully express their regrets by using specific syntactic categories and lexical items during the first three months in most of the role plays which they had in the four main contexts.

Table 3

Extract No. 1 (Data 2)

Elicited example entry of the participants expressions of regrets in the classroom context from the first three months

Mehrdad: Sadra, I couldn't buy the book that our math teacher offered us. It is so expensive. Can I use your book please?

Sadra: But if I borrow you my book, I can't study and do my tasks. I wish I can borrow you, but I need it. Why don't you ask Ata for help?

Ata: Mehrdad don't ask me. Even if I had two books, I wouldn't borrow you. I gave you two books and you lost them. I really regret.

Merhdad: Okay my dear friends. I shouldn't ask you for your book.

In the Extract No. 1 (data 2) from classroom context, through initial data coding, it was tangible that the participants failed to clearly express their regrets. The expressions that the participants used to express their regrets were grammatically wrong (e.g., I wish I can borrow you, I really regret, I shouldn't ask you for your book). In a sample expression of regret by Ata (I really regret), for instance, it was not evident whether he did regret to lend his friend that two books as he mentioned in the role play or for his friends' request in this dialog. Also, when Mehrdad attempted to express his regret for asking his friends to lend him the book, he had to use "shouldn't have asked", but he erroneously expressed his regret saying "I shouldn't ask you for your book".

Table 4

Extract No. 2 (Data 10)

Elicited example entry of the participants expressions of regrets in the shopping mall context from the first three months

Ata: Hey friends, I think that I need a new suit for my brother's wedding ceremony. Which one of these suits do you offer me?

Sadra: I think that black suit is very nice. I think if you choose other suit, you will regret.

Merhdad: I agree with Sadra. It's nice and cheap. Other colors are not suitable for wedding. But it's your choice.

Ata: let me wear it and then I can decide. It's not expensive. I think that black suit with a white shirt can be a good choice. If I choose this suit, I won't regret.

The participants in Extract No. 2 (data 10) used only conditional type one (e.g., I think if you choose other suit, you will regret and If I choose this suit, I won't regret) to express their regrets and their expressions were not rich enough. They could use lexical items and modal verbs to enrich their expressions in the shopping mall context.

Table 5

Extract No. 3 (Data 19)

Elicited example entry of the participants expressions of regrets in the park context from the first three months

Sadra: lets walk for one hour in the park and talk about our next week final exam. Do you think it's a good idea to walk around here and talk about our exam?

Ata: Are you serious? I can't concentrate and think about our final exam. You know I didn't study during this semester.

Mehrdad: But I think we can talk about our semester as we walk and explain our regrets. Do you regret about any event of this semester?

The participants were supposed to use lexical items and syntactic categories in their expressions but in the Extract No. 3 (data 19) only Mehrdad used a question form (do you regret about any event of this semester?) to ask about his friends' feelings and he failed to express his own regrets.

Table 6

Extract No. 4 (Data 31)

Elicited example entry of the participants expressions of regrets in the coffee shop context from the first three months

Mehrdad: I'm really sad. You know, we were planning to travel to Tehran city. My grandparents live in Tehran. But as my father is busy these days our plan is canceled. I wish I could see my grandparents. I really missed them. And I can't go to Tehran alone.

Sadra: I can understand. Because my grandparents don't live here. But don't be sad about it. There more important works to do like studying your course books.

Ata: Yes, I agree with Sadra. You can call them and talk with them. Regretting the past is like chasing it. So just focus on your education.

In Extract No. 4 (data 31), Ata failed to use a lexical item correctly to express his regret. He uttered "Regretting the past is like chasing it." But the correct form of this idiom is "Regretting the past is like chasing the wind." In this role play, Mehrdad was able to successfully express his regret by using modal verbs (I wish I could see my grandparents. I really missed them).

As it is depicted in Tables 7 to 10, the participants attempted to express their regrets in four main contexts for the last two months. During this period of time, the participants and the second researcher met each other 44 times in the four main contexts. The EFL learners' role plays were recorded and transcribed by the researchers for further investigation. The researchers investigated

the data after initial data coding. At the second phase, the participants used various lexical items (e.g., figurative meanings) and specific syntactic categories (e.g., conditional type 3, modal verbs).

Table 7

Extract No. 5 (Data 45)

Elicited example entry of the participants expressions of regrets in the classroom context from the last two months

Sadra: You know, unfortunately we had to visit our grandmother yesterday and I couldn't write my essay. Can you help me to write my essay Ata?

Ata: Sadra I should leave the class early. I'll join my friends after this class to play football. I wish I could help you but I promised them.

I think you can ask Merhdad, he doesn't have any especial plan for today. Oh... Mehrdad is coming.

Sadra: Mehrdad please help me with this essay or I'll fail in this course. My scores aren't good at all. I wish I had studied harder for my essay writing class. If I don't finish my essay on time, I'll be in a huge trouble. Please.

Mehrdad: Here we are again... How many times did I help you with your homework? I'm really sick and tired of doing your tasks...

Okay but this is your last time that you ask me to do your homework. Got it?

Sadra: So sorry, you're right. I should have prepared it sooner. Thank you for your help. Let's finish this essay.

Extract No. 5 (data 45) illustrated that the participants in the classroom context used specific syntactic categories (e.g., I wish I could help you, I wish I had studied harder for my essay writing class or I should have prepared it sooner). Furthermore, lexical items (e.g., I'm sick and tired of doing your homework) were used by the participants in this elicited sample role play. It was tangible that Sadra, Ata and Mehrdad could use appropriate linguistic choices to express their regrets in the classroom context.

Table 8

Extract No. 6 (Data 56)

Elicited example entry of the participants expressions of regrets in the shopping mall context from the last two months

Mehrdad: Hey Ata, look at this beautiful laptop. Your laptop is from this mark. Isn't it? I want to buy that black one. Do you think it's a good idea?

Ata: Yeah, it's the same as mine. But I don't recommend you to buy any laptop from that brand. If I had checked the PC market well, I wouldn't have bought it. It doesn't work as I want and you should choose a better one. I really regret buying that laptop.

Sadra: Ata, don't cry over spilt milk. I think for that price, it's a good choice. After all we can't afford expensive brand like HP.

Mehrdad: Well, then I should have second thoughts about it or I may regret as you do. Maybe I can save more money to buy as updated laptop.

I can even borrow some money from my father and pay him back later.

As it is intelligible from Extract No. 6 (data 56), Mehrdad, Ata and Sadra could successfully apply counterfactual conditionals, conditional type 3, (e.g., If I had checked the PC market well, I wouldn't have bought it) and figurative meaning (e.g., don't cry over spilt milk) to express their regrets with each other in shopping mall context for shopping purposes.

Table 9

Extract No. 7 (Data 67)

Elicited example entry of the participants expressions of regrets in the park context from the last two months

Ata: Hey friends, Today weather is great for playing volleyball. You see park is not crowded and weather is not rainy. Let's play volleyball. We may not have any chance for several weeks to play again.

Mehrdad: Yeah, you are right. But you should have called me before. If I had known your opinion sooner, I would have brought my ball. Now how can we play?

Sadra: Mehrdad don't feel repentant about it. We can buy a new ball. How much does it cost? It's not that much expensive. Or I will buy it for myself. Then we can play. He who hesitates regrets. What are we waiting for? Let's go and buy one.

Ata: I wish I had money to buy a new ball but I'm out of budget. Okay. Then Sadra buy that blue one. That ball is light and cheaper. If we don't play volleyball today, we'll definitely regret it.

In Extract No. 7 (data 67), the participants met in the Ellarbaghi Park in Urmia. They contemplated to play volleyball. In this dialogue, the participants used prefabricated lexical items (e.g., don't feel repentant about it, he who hesitates regrets) and syntactic categories related to expression of this type of feeling (e.g., we'll definitely regret it, you should have called me before and If I had known this, I would have brought my ball) in order to express their regrets to their friends.

Table 10

Extracted No. 8 (Data 83)

Elicited example entry of the participants expressions of regrets in the coffee shop context

Sadra: This term I wanted to be the top student in the math class but as you know Reza could get a better score. I was totally disappointed that I couldn't be the top student in our class. My result wasn't acceptable. If only I had studied harder with discipline, Reza wouldn't have been the top student in our class. You know it's all my fault.

Ata: Come on Sadra. What is the difference between being the first student or second? I wish you could be the top student in our class but it doesn't matter. You are one of the best students, next year you will be. I promise you that it will happen.

Mehrdad: Now you know that wasting time was a bad idea. But don't regret it because your score is the result of your study during this year. I'm sure that you will learn your lesson and have a better result next year.

Sadra: Yeah, I agree with you guys. I'm kicking myself for not being the top student. But now it's too late to change the result. Next year I'll try to do my best to achieve my goal. Anyway...

The above-mentioned dialog between the participants is suggestive in that it signifies how the participants could successfully express their regrets through using counterfactual conditionals (e.g., If only I had studied harder with discipline, Reza wouldn't have been the top student) and the next inference one can make is that the participants used specific lexical items (e.g., now you know that wasting time was a bad idea, I'm kicking myself for not being the top student).

Going back and forth between data collection and data analysis, and through comparison of the participants' linguistic choices at two phases, during the first three months and the last two months, and investigating and finalizing the research data analysis of the participants' expressions of their regrets, the researchers were empirically confident about the participants' improvement in expressing their regrets in the four main contexts. The researchers set a friendly meeting with Mehrdad, Ata and Sadra sharing the results of the analyses. The participants confirmed their improvement in expressing their regrets in English language was tangible during this period of time. When they were asked about the role plays they had during five months, they asserted:

“We believe that a revolution happened in our speaking competence. Before our participation in this research, we never thought about trying to express our emotional feelings in English language. It seemed impossible for us to express our regrets in English. Even after having six classes to learn how we can express our feelings in real context like shopping mall, it was really difficult. But as we continued and had more role plays in these places, we could have better results and our emotional expressions were comprehensible for each other.” (Extracted data from the participants explanation)

Discussion

This study was conducted to investigate and observe EFL learners' expression of regrets in four main contexts. To answer the research question, three EFL learners were chosen through purposive sampling. The participants were in Advanced level and their mother tongue was Azeri Turkish. The participants were instructed in six EFL classes to learn the needed discourse to express their regrets to their EFL friends in the four contexts (i.e., classroom, shopping mall, park and coffee shop). The researchers investigated and observed the participants' role plays at two time periods, i.e. during the first three months and the last two months. Through initial data coding and comparison of role plays and the participants' performance in these two periods of time, the participants' expressions of regrets and their improvement were investigated.

The present study is in line with Keltner et al., (2019) study that investigated the structure of how people perceive emotional expressions and use their linguistic competence to express their emotional feelings to others. Based on Basic Emotion Theory (BET), the researchers investigated how emotions are a "grammar of social living" in this study.

Conclusion

The findings of the current study indicated that the participants, namely Mehrdad, Sadra and Ata could improve their speaking ability in the realm of expressing their regrets in the target language, in this case English. Comparison of the participants' role plays and their use of syntactic categories and lexical items aided the researchers to investigate their improvement in expression of regrets. The participants were supposed to express their regrets to their EFL friends in the four main contexts (e.g., classroom, shopping mall, park and coffee shop) during the period of five months. Their role plays started from the first month and continued till the last month. Moreover, further scrutiny of the data entries and comparison of the data (84 elicited data samples which were extracted during five months, 40 data samples from the first three months and 44 data samples from the last two months) revealed that the participants could improve their speaking competence in expressing their regrets and they could successfully communicate their regrets to their EFL friends. In the friendly meeting that was conducted after the study, the participants confirmed that their improvement in expressing their regrets was tangible. The researchers could reach saturation in this study by High Inference Observation during five months through investigating and observing the participants' use of syntactic categories (e.g., conditional type 3, modal verbs) and their choices of lexical items (e.g., figurative meanings).

This study can offer practical implications to both EFL instructors and EFL learners. It is practical even in EFL contexts to improve speaking ability in successfully expressing emotional feelings. Through instructing necessary syntactic categories, lexical items and adequate practice, EFL learners can comprehensively utter how they feel in various contexts.

Similar to many other studies, the current research had some limitations. The first one was the participants' gender. All three participants were male EFL students. The second limitation was

the number of contexts. This research investigated and observed the participants in four main contexts. As the third limitation, only one type of emotional expression, i.e. expression of regrets, was observed and investigated in this study.

This research investigated and observed the participants' expression of regrets through a qualitative case study perspective. More research could be done to investigate expression of other emotions (e.g., love, anger, sadness, guilt, shame) with the aid of EFL learners' role plays with their peers. Also, further research can be performed by having both male and female participants express their various emotions.

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Appendix

Table 11

Idioms and pre-fabricated chunks for expression of regrets used by the participants

Regretting the past is like chasing the wind	All the earth's treasures can't bring back the last moment
Perform good deeds, you will not regret them	Remorse is worse than beating
There is no repentance after death	He who hesitates regrets
Regrets, like tail, come at the end	Cry over spilt milk
Kick oneself	Second thoughts
Eat your heart out	Crying shame
Kick yourself	See the errors of your way
After a foolish deed comes remorse	Perform good deeds; you will not regret them
Turn over a new leaf	Broken dreams
Feeling blue	Make amends
Feel sorrow at	Pine over