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Document Type: Research Paper

A Cross-Cultural CMC-Based Study of the Speech Act of Criticism in Response to School Reopening During COVID-19

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Abstract

The purpose of this cross-cultural CMC-based study was to investigate how the speech act of criticism is realized in the Instagram comments by Persian and English-speaking users in response to an announcement in Fall 2020 about school reopening during COVID-19. To this end, 400 Persian and English comments were collected in Fall 2020 from the Instagram pages of Iran and the U.S Secretaries of Education, where they posted about the students' return to school during the pandemic. The data were then analyzed based on Nguyen's (2013) model of speech act of criticism. The findings showed that both Persian and English-speaking users tended to use direct criticism over indirect criticism with *an explicit expression of dislike* and *an explicit expression of disapproval* as the most frequently used direct criticism strategies. Moreover, with regard to indirect strategies, Persian speaking users employed more *request for change strategies* while English speaking users outperformed *hint strategies*. Also, the uses of supportive moves and internal modifiers were similar in the two corpora. The findings of this naturally occurring observational study partially confirm the results obtained by the elicited-based research method. The results showed that despite the similarities between the corpora, teaching criticism strategies and mitigating devices can help language learners perform the act of criticism more appropriately and avoid non-native like language use. From a pedagogical vantage point, the findings can help learners effectuate speech acts in a more authentic manner by, for example, raising their awareness as to the way speech acts are rendered more authentic in English vs. other languages.

Keywords: speech act of criticism, school reopening, computer-mediated communication, supportive moves, internal modifiers.

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INTRODUCTION

The use of social media has become the most favored activity worldwide, creating a new platform of communication with its audience (Duffy & Knight, 2019). On Computer-Mediated Communication (hence, CMC), Instagram has turned out to be the most popular platform (Laferra & Justel-Vázquez, 2020). With the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, schools decided to start education online, hoping the situation would not last long. Since then, several studies have explored how COVID-19 pandemic affects education at both the secondary (e.g., Rahimi, et al., 2021) and tertiary levels (e.g., Azizi, 2020; Hassani, 2021). Due to the surge in vaccinations and the challenges that online education and digital divide has brought to many students and their families, rumors about a return to school grew, which consequently aroused many parents' and teachers' criticism regarding health concerns. This criticism has projected itself through different channels ranging from face-to-face encounters such as interactions among family and friends or personal complaints to the Ministry of Education to virtual and online interactions in the forms of posts on social networks such as Twitter and Instagram, or reactions to the school reopening posts on these social networks in the forms of comments. When learning a foreign/second language, acquiring the appropriate use of a face-threatening speech act such as criticism can improve learners'/speakers' social relationship and help avoid communication breakdown. Previous research on speech acts show variations in their use across languages and cultures. Although several studies have addressed criticism in different contexts and languages, few cross-cultural studies have comparatively examined the use of the speech act of criticism on CMC between English and Persian languages. Thus, the purpose of this cross-cultural study is to study how the speech act of criticism is realized on Instagram by Persian and English-speaking users in objection to school reopening during the Covid-19 pandemic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

CMC and Social Networks

The term computer-mediated communication, or CMC, was first used in the United States in the 1960s to transmit data and computer programs for both governmental and military purposes, and subsequently, in the 1980s, for research and commercial purposes. In 1985, the first computer-mediated communication analyses for human interactions were conducted by Dennis Murray (Herring, 2004). CMC is mostly text-based and is often referred to as human-to-human interaction, which includes any communication using a computer or mobile phone via email, chat room, or social networks such as Instagram, Facebook, etc. (Hering & Androutsopoulos, 2015). Nowadays, CMC has become an arena for people to get to know and connect with each other through social pages and cyberspace, to share moments and experiences through photos or videos, or to talk about interests and ideas, and even for work, business, and income. With the advancement of technology in human life interactions, Crystal (2001) believes that CMC is becoming a new choice of language and not merely a means of communication.

CMC, as a new genre in communication, is divided into simultaneous and asynchronous communication (Bekar & Christiansen, 2018). Whereas in simultaneous communication such as online chat rooms all users are online at the same time, in asynchronous communication, the parties view their e-mail and web pages of voicemail without any time limit (Bekar & Christiansen, 2018; Crystal, 2001). In fact, the "first wave" of sociolinguistic research on CMC in the 1990s was based on the differences between simultaneous and asynchronous communication (Androutsopoulos, 2006). Due to the difference between communication discourse in cyberspace and face-to-face communication, researchers in the field of sociolinguistics examine the corpus associated with this type of communication in the field of "digital discourse analysis" or "computer-mediated discourse" (Blitvich & Bou-Franch, 2019). Accordingly, over the

last decade, the growing number of Internet users has encouraged researchers and educators to conduct different studies in order to evaluate their behavior to understand the CMC nature. According to Herring (2004), verbal language is the main way used by participants to interact online, indicating that online interaction mostly takes place by means of discourse.

Herring (2001) posited that in computer-mediated discourse analysis, methods are adopted from language-focused disciplines such as linguistics in order to perform an analysis of CMC. Therefore, all the messages, utterances, or words could qualitatively or quantitatively be analyzed in the computer-mediated discourse analysis. In fact, the use of all these messages refers to the pragmatic competence, which is "the knowledge of the linguistic resources available in a given language for realizing particular speech acts, knowledge of the sequential aspects of speech acts, and knowledge of the appropriate contextual use of the particular language's linguistic resources" (Barron, 2003, p. 10).

Social network platforms such as Facebook and Instagram have gained popularity with more than three billion users in 2019 (Statistica), making them ubiquitous in information dissemination. Not only individuals but also many non-profit organizations and authorities have Instagram accounts where they share news, inform their followers of upcoming events, make announcements, or announce decisions. The social network features of interactivity and anonymity enable users to share their thoughts verbally in the form of comments, and nonverbally, in the form of emoticons and smileys. In other words, individuals perform different types of speech acts on social network platforms as users to communicate with other users.

Speech Act of Criticism

Speech acts which have an influential role in pragmatic studies are associated with names such as Austin (1962) and Searle (1976) who defined speech acts as doing things with words (Austin, 1962). Based on Austin, there are three levels of meaning in what is said: locutionary (i.e., literal

words), illocutionary (i.e., the intended meaning), and precautionary (i.e., the effect of what is said on the hearer). It is the illocutionary meaning, however, which has attracted many researchers' attention in pragmatic studies. Searle has classified illocutionary meaning into five popular categories of declaration (e.g., blessing, announcing), directive (e.g., commanding, ordering), assertive (e.g., stating, claiming, describing), commissive (e.g., promising, threatening, refusing), and expressive (e.g., congratulating, thanking, apology). Speech acts are also studied for being direct or indirect. In direct speech acts, speakers say what they actually mean while in indirect speech acts, the speaker "communicates to the hearer more than he actually says by way of relying on their mutually shared background information, both linguistic and nonlinguistic, together with the general powers of rationality and inference on the part of the hearer" (Searle, 1975, pp. 60-61).

Nguyen (2013) investigated criticism in the form of direct and indirect strategies. As stated by Nguyen (2013), *direct criticism* refers to explicit statements of the problem, or an explicit expression of disapproval of, disagreement with, and dislike of hearer's choice, work, action, product, etc. Moreover, *direct criticism* pertains to warnings about the consequences of the hearer's choice, action, etc. *Indirect criticism*, on the other hand, is discussed in the form of a request for change or hints. In giving hints, on the contrary, the speaker presupposes or asks for the hearer's opinion of his or her own choice or work to indicate the inappropriateness of his or her act or choice. Sarcasm and light teasing are also recognized as other types of hint.

Among the many acts that users might perform on social media in response to an Instagram post is to express their opinions contrary to the page owner's post in the form of criticism. The speech act of criticism, which is the focus of the present study, is placed in Searle's expressive category. Criticism is an act used by the speakers to express a negative evaluation of what is said or done by the other interlocutor with an intention to improve that interlocutor's words or actions (Nguyen, 2005a; Tracy et al., 1987). Criticism also expresses disapproval with the hearer hoping for

betterment and/or benefit of the interlocutor or public (Nguyen, 2005a; Wierzbicka, 1987).

Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 70) referred to criticism as "certain kinds of acts intrinsically threaten face, namely those acts that by their nature run contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or the speaker". For instance, in this study, the act of criticizing threatens both the positive and negative face of those who posted about school reopening. In other words, on the one hand, criticism threatens the hearer's positive face to be appreciated and approved by calling them to take actions (Cao, 2005). On the other hand, it threatens the hearer's negative face by means of imposing a change of action on the hearer. Speakers can minimize the amount of imposition or the threats on the hearer either by using indirect speech acts or using some mitigating devices in the form of modifiers.

Modifiers are mitigating devices used to soften the criticism (Nguyen, 2013). Internal modifiers are defined as "elements within the request utterance proper (linked to the head act), the presence of which is not essential for the utterance to be potentially understood as a request" (Blum-Kulka, 1989, p.60). They may appear as downgraders, upgraders, or hedges, etc. Speakers might also use external modifiers (also known as supportive moves) as devices to support speech acts. These devices do not "affect the utterance used for realizing the act, but rather the context in which it is embedded, and thus indirectly modify the illocutionary force" (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2009, p.82).

Empirical Studies

Considering that criticism is a context/situation-dependent speech act, speakers should know how to perform criticism with regard to the hearer, the relation with the hearer, purpose, and topic (Farnia & Abdul Sattar, 2015). Results of previous empirical studies have shown variations in the use of strategies of the same speech act across cultures and languages (e.g., Alemi & Rezanejad, 2014; Farnia & Abdul Sattar, 2015; Nguyen, 2005,

2013). Some researches adopted a text-based approach to study criticism cross-linguistically in book reviews (e.g., Araújo 2012; Valor, 2000), in teachers' feedback on students' assignments (e.g., Hyland & Hyland, 2001), or students' emails (e.g., Lü, 2018). For example, in a cross-linguistic study, Araújo (2012) examined criticism strategies in Brazilian and American graduate students' book reviews and reported more similarities than differences in the corpus due to the influence of the genre on students' writings. In another study, Lü (2018) reported that Chinese students showed a tendency to express a direct criticism in their email communication to their western teachers. Lü added that despite the use of bald critical strategies, a balance was found between the use of positive and negative politeness strategies. In a cross-cultural study, Riekkinen (2010) analyzed native speakers of English and speakers of English as a lingual franca (ELF) for the use of hedges when criticism was exchanged. Riekkinen reported that although ELF speakers' use of hedges differed from that of English native speakers, these differences did not lead to any problems in their communication.

The traditional studies on the speech act of criticism using elicited methods (i.e., questionnaires) have been conducted in different languages analyzing data from L1 speakers such as Persian (e.g., Farnia & Abdul Sattar, 2015), English (e.g., Toplak & Katz, 2000), Chinese (e.g., Jian-xiang, 2007), Arabic (e.g., Al Kayed & Al-Ghoweri, 2019; El-Dakhs, 2020), or foreign language learners (e.g., Nguyen, 2005a, 2005b, 2008). While in these studies the common method of data collection was a questionnaire in the form of Discourse Completion Tasks (DCT) (e.g., Al Kayed & Al-Ghoweri, 2019; Farnia & Abdul Sattar, 2015) and role plays (e.g., Nguyen, 2013), a few others have used data in natural occurring situations such as doctoral defense sessions (Don & Izadi, 2013; Izadi, 2017; 2018).

For example, Abu Taleb (1995) studied the speech act of criticism among Jordanian EFL learners for the use of syntactic and lexical features. Results of the study obtained from a DCT questionnaire displayed the frequent use of negative adjectives and the prevalent use of simple

sentences and phrase structures to express criticism. In a cross-cultural study, Nguyen (2005) investigated criticism and response to criticism performed by Vietnamese EFL learners and Australian English native speakers by means of a written questionnaire and role play. The results showed that Vietnamese EFL learners' criticism performance significantly differed from that of native speakers, indicating the influence of language learners' first language on the production of the foreign language or, in other words, pragmatic transfer.

Farnia and Abdul Sattar (2015) investigated the realization of the speech act of criticism among 100 Persian speakers through an open-ended questionnaire in the form of a DCT and a post structured interview. The findings based on a coding scheme adopted from Nguyen's (2005) model showed that Iranian native speakers of Persian used *direct criticism* strategies more significantly than *indirect criticism* strategies. The results also indicated the effect of contextual variables (i.e., social power and social distance) on the use of strategies. In another study on the speech act of criticism, Toplak and Katz (2000) examined the perceived function of indirect form of criticism or sarcastic irony over direct strategies in order to evaluate the reasons that someone uses sarcasm in interaction with someone else instead of direct criticism. The findings showed that the participants felt more criticized when sarcasm was used by the speakers. In fact, the listeners found sarcasm a more severe form of criticism. In the present study, sarcasm is categorized as a subcategory of *hint,* which is labeled differently from direct criticism.

In another cross-cultural study, Nguyen (2013) investigated criticism between New Zealand English native speakers and intermediate ESL learners from different L1s studying in New Zealand. The data were collected through role play. The findings showed that unlike native speakers, ESL learners showed a tendency toward the use of direct criticism over indirect criticism. Moreover, even in situations where similar strategies were used by the two groups, there were great variations in the use of semantic formulas and mitigating devices by ESL learners.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study aims to investigate how criticism is realized by users on Instagram as a popular platform for communication for a number of reasons: First, though previous studies investigated how other types of speech acts such as gratitude (e.g., Hosseinpur & Mosavy, 2019), self-praise (e.g., Chalak, 2021; Matley, 2018), congratulations (Alemi, et al., 2021), and complaint (e.g., Anggraeni, et al., 2020) are realized by users on Instagram, the speech act of criticism on CMC seems to be under-researched. Second, other studies on the speech act of criticism have been conducted by means of elicited methods (e.g., Farnia & Abdul Sattar, 2015; Nguyen, 2013); however, naturally occurring data in the form of comments on Instagram pages are used in this study. Third, cross-cultural comparison of how different language users respond to similar topics on social media can enhance our knowledge of cross-cultural communication and improve our understanding of variation in strategy use across cultures and languages. To this aim, the following research questions were put forth:

1. What criticizing strategies are used by English and Persian speaking users in their Instagram comments?
2. Is there any statistically significant difference in the use of criticism strategies between the Persian and English corpora of Instagram comments on school reopening news?

METHOD

Corpus of the Study

The corpus consisted of 400 English and Persian comments (200 in each) in response to four Instagram posts to announce school reopening for the new academic year. These announcements were posted by the current United States and Iran's Secretaries of Education, Betsy DeVos and Mohsen Haji-Mirzaei, on their Instagram pages in Fall 2020, arousing critical reactions.

These comments were collected from these two pages. Although these two authorities made school reopening announcements addressing their own people in their pages, due to the anonymity of the users' identities in social networks, the terms "English speaking users" and "Persian speaking users" are used to refer to English and Persian comments.

Data Collection and Data Analysis Procedure

For the purpose of this study, more than 600 comments were initially collected in response to four Instagram posts announcing school reopening for the new academic year. After removing irrelevant comments and nonverbal comments such as advertisements, emojis, emoticons, etc., 400 comments (200 in English and 200 in Persian) were analyzed based on Nguyen's (2013) framework of the speech act of criticism for both strategies and modifiers in the dataset. Tables 1 and 2 present Nguyen's (2013) framework.

Table 1: Analytical framework adopted from Nguyen's (2013)

Strategy	Substrategies	Examples from the corpus
Direct Criticism	An explicit statement of a problem	kids and family members are dying**.** ما میترسیم بیایم حضوری امتحان بدیم. *We are afraid to come and sit for the exam in person* [Persian]
	An explicit expression of disapproval	Resign now!!! جون ما اصلن پشیزی ارزش نداره واسه این به اصطلاح وزیران. *Our soul is not worth it at all for these so-called ministers* [Persian]
	An explicit expression of disagreement	Any parent basing their decision to send their child to school based on Devos and 45's recommendation is child

			abuse.
			نه به امتحان حضوری. *No to the face-to-face exam* [Persian].
		An explicit expression of dislike	This woman is pure evil. خبر مرگتون *The news of your death* [Persian]
		Warning about the consequences	Close the schools!! Every death resulting from not doing so is on your hands. اگر مدارس باز بشه شاگردان و والدین شون بیمار می شوند. *If schools open, students and their parents will get sick.*[Persian]
Indirect Criticism	**Request for change**	Giving advice for changes and improvements	They try visiting less fortunate schools so you can actually understand what's going on in this country. مدارس رو بازنکنید. Do not open schools [Persian]
		Giving suggestion for changes and improvements	Find SAFE ways to reopen. کاش اگه امکانش باشه حجم کتابهارو کم کنند و بشه مجازی تدریس کرد. I wish they could reduce the volume of books and teach virtually if possible [Persian].
		Encouraging changes in hearer's choice, actions, work, etc.	اگر نظرت را تغییر بدی دعای مردم پشت سرت هست. If you change your mind, the prayers of the people are behind you [Persian]
		Insisting that changes be made	With all the "great personal offense," you really should resign. امتحان حضوری باید لغو بشه. In person exam must be canceled [Persian].
		Indicating standard and expectations	Close the schools!! Every death resulting from not doing so is on your hands.

Hints	Presupposing hearer's opinion of his/her own choice, actions, work, product etc.	Tell that to the 97,000 students who have already tested positive for covid. اگه قرار بود با ماسک و دستکش کسی کرونا نگیره از همون اول کسی قرنطینه نمیشد نیاد بیرون. If no one was to take a corona with a mask and gloves, no one would be quarantined from the beginning [Persian].
	Asking hearer's opinion of his/her own choice, actions, work, product etc.	Then why are you pushing to open schools too early and put us all at risk? خیلی خواستار کشتار جمعی هستین؟؟! Do you really want mass murder??! [Persian].
	Light teasing	Human Life or safety precedes social/emotional health!!How are we not seeing that !! الان این واقعا افتخاره که بیمار کرونایی که نیازمند استراحت برای سهل تر شدن روند بهبودی مجبوره که درس بخونه ؟؟؟؟ Now it is really an honor that a coronary patient who needs to rest to facilitate the recovery process has to study???? [Persian]
	Sarcasm	kids and family members are dying, but OK good job. به لطف شما ایشالله سال دیگه نیمی از دانش اموزان باقی میمونن. Thanks to you, God willing, half of the students will remain next year [Persian].

Table 2: Classification of Modifiers (adopted from Nguyen, 2013)

Type	Substrategies	Examples from the corpus
Modifiers	Steers	شاد رایگان کو جناب ماهم اون شاد رو برا خودمون نصب کنیم Can you show us the free SHAD application so that

(Supportive Moves)		we can download it? [SHAD is an educational platform for primary and secondary students]
	Sweeteners	
	Grounders	Ms. DeVos, please wear your mask properly. We need to model good behavior for our students. حاجی به دادمون برس ما چه گناهی کردیم که باید ازدرس های نخونده امتحان نهایی بدیم Haji, what sin did we commit that we should take the final exam from the lessons we did not read? [Persian]
	Disarmers	Keep that in mind when "God forbid" your child is in the ICU on a ventilator. حداقل مدارس ابتدایی رو شروع نکنید بچهها نمیتونن رعایت کنن محض رضای خدا. At least do not start primary schools. Children cannot observe protocols, for God sake. [Persian].
Modifiers (Internal Modifiers)	Understaters	Some people have to earn their positions and work for their money. این کارت بالاخره یکم خوب بود You finally did a good job! [Persian].
	Hedges	It'd be really cool if you were to work to release some sort of national guidelines for safely reopening... حداقل امتحانات رو یه ماه به تعویق بیندازید لطفا Postpone exams for at least a month please. [Persian].
	Downtoners	You might not be ashamed of yourself but don't worry since you're spitting up so high when it's on it's way down and it smacks you in the face it's going to hurt 10 times worse than what you did to us. کاش اگه امکانش باشه حجم کتابهارو کم کنن I wish they could reduce the volume of books if possible [Persian].
	Cajolers	You know this from all your education experience and background? یعنی یه ذره هم سلامت دانش اموزان براتون مهم نیست که میخوایید مدارس رو حضوری کنید This means that the health of the students does not matter to you that you want to open schools. [Persian].
	Subjectivizers	I think she should go teach in the fall too just to see what she creates works. ولی حس میکنم خطر داره . But I feel it is dangerous [Persian].

The data were manually coded for each sentence with a careful examination. In doing so, the researcher read each sentence back and forth to identify the

criticism strategies and modifiers. In order to minimize the level of subjectivity judgment, and for a consistency check, the researcher asked an expert in applied linguistics to code 10% of the data independently. The strategies were checked between the two coders to ensure agreement on the coded data. The coders discussed the cases of disagreement, finally reaching 95% of agreement in the coded classification. The process of codification took around three months.

To answer the research questions, the frequency of each strategy and modifier occurrence was counted and compared across languages. As the next step, chi-square analyses were run to see whether there were any significant differences in the distribution of each criticism strategy and their modifiers across the corpora.

RESULTS

Table 3 shows the distribution of criticism strategies and sub-strategies in the corpus. Results of the distribution of the sub-strategies are presented both in type (i.e., across the strategy) and total (i.e., across the whole corpora). As shown in Table 3, Instagram users employed *direct strategies* (60% in English and 57.6% in Persian corpus) more than *indirect strategies* (40% in English and 42.4% in Persian corpus) in the two corpora. Also, in the categories of indirect strategies, *hints* occurred more (36.4% in English and 23.8% in Persian corpus) than *request for change* (3.6% in English and 18.6% in Persian corpus) in the two corpora.

Table 3: The distribution of criticism sub/strategies in the two corpora

Type		English Corpus			Persian Corpus		
		F	% in type	% in total	F	% in type	% in total
Direct Criticism	An explicit statement of a problem	37	20.2	12.1	42	22.6	13.0
	An explicit expression of disapproval	66	36.1	21.6	54	29.0	16.7

	An explicit expression of disagreement	5	2.7	1.6	8	4.3	2.5
	An explicit expression of dislike	71	38.8	23.3	71	38.2	22.0
	Warning about the consequences	4	2.2	1.3	11	5.9	3.4
	Total	183	100.0	60.0	186	100.0	57.6
Indirect Criticism							
Request for change	Giving advice for changes and improvements	2	18.2	0.7	12	20.0	3.7
	Giving suggestion for changes and improvements	5	45.5	1.6	28	46.7	8.7
	Encouraging changes in hearer's choice, actions, work, etc.	0	0.0	0.0	1	1.7	0.3
	Insisting that changes be made	3	27.3	1.0	19	31.7	5.9
	Indicating standard and expectations	1	9.1	0.3	0	0.0	0.0
	Total	11	100.0	3.6	60	100.0	18.6
Hints	Presupposing hearer's opinion of his/her own choice, actions, work, product etc.	3	2.7	1.0	5	6.5	1.5
	Asking hearer's opinion of his/her own choice, actions, work, product etc.	25	22.5	8.2	31	40.3	9.6
	Light teasing	66	59.5	21.6	32	41.6	9.9
	Sarcasm	17	15.3	5.6	9	11.7	2.8
	Total	111	100.0	36.4	77	100.0	23.8
	Total indirect	122	---	40.0	137	----	42.4
Total Strategies		305	---	100.0	323	---	100.0

Note: F: Frequency, %: Percentage

In terms of the distribution of sub-strategies in each category, results showed that *an explicit expression of disapproval* (36.1% in English and 29% in Persian corpus) followed by *an explicit expression of dislike* (38.8%

in English and Persian corpus) were respectively the first and second most frequently used *direct strategies*. As for the distribution of *indirect strategies*, results showed that *giving suggestion for change and improvement* (45.5% in English and 46.7% in Persian corpus), followed by *insisting that change be made* (27.3 % in English and 31.7% in Persian corpus), were respectively the first and second most frequently used request for change strategies. Moreover, the distribution of hints indicated that light teasing (59.5% in English and 41.6% in Persian corpus), followed by *asking hearer's opinion of his/her own choice, actions, etc*. (22.5% in English and 40.3% in Persian), were respectively the first and second most frequently used hint strategies in the two corpora.

Table 4 shows the results of inferential statistics related to the use of strategies in the corpus. As shown in Table 4, although the occurrence of some sub-strategies was higher relative to each other in the corpus, the results of chi-square analyses showed no statistically significant differences in the use of *direct strategies* in the two corpora (*p* -value=0.05, sig.= 0.87).

Table 4: Results of distribution of strategies and inferential statistics in the two corpora

		English Corpus		Persian Corpus		Total		χ^2	Sig.
		F	%	F	%	F	%		
Type									
Direct Criticism	An explicit statement of a problem	37	46.8	42	53.2	79,	100.0	.316	.574
	An explicit expression of disapproval	66	55.0	54	45.0	120	100.0	1.200	.273
	An explicit expression of disagreement	5	38.5	8	61.5	13	100.0	.692	.405
	An explicit expression of dislike	71	50.0	71	50.0	142	100.0	.000	1.00
	Warning about the consequences	4	26.7	11	73.3	15	100.0	3.267	.071

	Total	183	49.6	186	50.4	369	100.0	.024	.876
Indirect Criticism									
Request for change	Giving advice for changes and improvements	2	14.3	12	85.7	14	100.0	7.143	.008
	Giving suggestion for changes and improvements	5	15.2	28	84.8	33	100.0	16.030	.001
	Encouraging changes in hearer's choice, actions, work, etc.	0	0.0	1	100.0	1	100.0	---	----
	Insisting that changes be made	3	13.6	19	86.4	22	100.0	11.636	.001
	Indicating standard and expectations	1	100.0	0	0.0	1	100.0	---	---
	Total	11	15.5	60	84.5	71	100.0	33.817	.001
Hints	Presupposing hearer's opinion of his/her own choice, actions, work, product etc.	3	37.5	5	62.5	8	100.0	.500	.480
	Asking hearer's opinion of his/her own choice, actions, work, product etc.	25	44.6	31	55.4	56	100.0	.643	.423
	Light teasing	66	67.3	32	32.7	98	100.0	11.796	.001
	Sarcasm	17	65.4	9	34.6	26	100.0	2.462	.117
	Total	111	59.0	77	41.0	188	100.0	6.149	.013
	Total indirect	122	47.1	137	52.9	259	100.0	.869	.351

Results also indicated that Persian speaking users employed statistically more *indirect strategies* of *request for change* than the English speaking users in the corpus (p = 0.05, sig.=0.001). For *hints strategies*, results showed that there is a statistically significant difference in the use of *light teasing* between English and Persian corpora (p =0.05, sig. = 0.001). In

other words, English speaking users employed this strategy more than Persian speaking users. However, there was no statistical difference in the overall use of *hints strategies* in the two corpora (p = 0.05, Sig. = 0.31). Despite the differences in the use and frequency of strategies, results of chi-square analysis showed no statistically significant difference between the two corpora in the use of criticism strategies.

Table 5 displays the distribution of internal and supportive modifiers across the corpora. As shown in Table 5, the distributions of both supportive moves and internal modifiers are very close figures in the two corpora. Results showed that *grounders* are the most frequently used *supportive moves* (63.25% in English and 96.88% in Persian corpus). Moreover, some supportive modifiers such as *steers, sweeteners* were absent in English and Persian corpora.

Table 5: Distribution of Modifiers in the Two Corpora

Type		English Corpus			Persian Corpus		
		F	%in total	% in type	F	%in total	% in type
Modifiers (Supportive Moves)	Steers	0	0.00%	0.00%	3	5.10%	7.89%
	Sweeteners	0	0.00%	0.00%	0	0.00%	0.00%
	Grounders	57	63.25%	96.88	58	57.60%	89.47%
	Disarmers	1	2.05%	3.12	1	1.70%	2.63%
	Total	58	65.31	100.0%	59	64.41%	100.0%
Modifiers (Internal Modifiers)	Understaters	8	16.30%	47.1%	9	15.25%	42.9%
	Hedges	1	2.05%	5.9%	7	11.85%	33.3%
	Downtoners	2	4.10%	11.8%	2	3.40%	9.5%
	Cajolers	4	8.15%	23.5%	2	3.40%	9.5%
	Subjectivizer	2	4.10%	11.8%	1	1.70%	4.8%
	Total	17	34.69%	100.0%	21	35.59%	100.0%
Total Modifiers		75	100%		80	100%	

Results of the distribution of modifiers across the strategies showed that grounders were the most frequently used in English direct strategies of an explicit expression of disapproval (21.3%) and an explicit statement of a problem (17.3%) in English corpus, and in direct strategies of an explicit

statement of a problem (16.2%) and an explicit expression of disproval (12.5%) in Persian corpus (See Appendix A, Table A1 and Table A2).

Table 6 presents the results of chi-square test for the use of modifiers in the corpora. Despite the differences, there are no statistically significant differences in the use of modifiers between the two corpora (p-value=0.05, Sig.= 0.33).

Table 6: Results of Chi-square between the modifiers in the two corpora

	English Corpus		Persian Corpus		Total		χ^2	Sig.
	F	**%**	**F**	**%**	**F**	**%**		
Modifiers (Supportive Moves)	58	49.5	59	50.4	117	100.0	.514	.473
Modifiers (Internal Modifiers)	17	24.3	21	30.0	38	54.3	.421	.516
Total	75	73.8	80	80.4	155	154.3	.926	.336

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was two-fold: First, it sought to examine the criticism strategies and the use of internal and supportive modifiers that English and Persian users employed in response to school reopening posts on Instagram. To accomplish the first objective, Nguyen's (2013) model of criticism was used to analyze the obtained data. The findings showed that all the strategies in Nguyen's model, except *encouraging change in hearer's choice, etc.* in English corpus, and *indicating standard and expectation* in Persian corpus, were present in the corpora. In addition, the findings generally displayed that both English and Persian users showed a tendency toward using direct over indirect strategies. The second aim was to find out if there are any statistically significant differences in the use of these strategies between the two corpora. The findings revealed that despite the differences in the use of sub/strategies in the two corpora, they failed to reach statistical significance.

In response to the first research question, the findings indicated that there are both similarities and differences in using the speech act of

criticism between English and Persian speaking users on Instagram, suggesting that both English and Persian speaking users favored direct criticism strategies to indirect strategies. Obviously, both Persian and English speaking users were worried about the pandemic, and they did not want to endanger their own lives or their children's lives by school reopening. Therefore, they expressed their worries very directly and did not hesitate to apply face threatening strategies. Interestingly, the two groups were similar in the pattern of strategies used: *an explicit expression of dislike* was followed by *an explicit expression of disapproval* and *an explicit statement of a problem*. The similar patterns of direct strategy use realized in both English and Persian corpora on Instagram imply that the issue of COVID-19 concerns raised global feelings of fear among people in general and parents of having young children, in particular, which drives them to act similarly in the same situation. The findings of this study are in line with Farnia and Abdul Sattar's (2015) study of the speech act of criticism in Persian language in that the overall uses of strategies used by Persian native speakers in response to DCT situations were *negative evaluation, identification of problem* and *disapproval*. Similarly, the findings are compatible with Farnia and Abdul Sattar's (2015) study of the speech act of criticism, where native speakers of Persian employed direct strategies more than indirect strategies. The Persian native speakers' preference for direct over indirect strategies has been reported in other studies such as Farnia and Abdul Sattar's (2014) study of the speech act of suggestion and Eslami-Rasekh et. al.'s (2012) study of the speech act of complaints.

However, the results obtained from English speaking users were in contrast with Nguyen's (2005a, 2005b, 2013) studies where data were collected by means of written and oral DCT. In these studies, native speakers of English seemed to be more inclined toward the use of indirect strategies over direct strategies. Several reasons may justify these contrastive results: first, the topic on which criticism is made. Most DCT scenarios on previous studies related to the pedagogical situations where an interaction between students and their peers or their teachers or topics

related to social life with no life threat being observed. The findings confirmed Farnia and Abdul Sattar's (2015) claims that the speech act of criticism is very situation-dependent; where one's own and beloved's life is in danger, employing direct criticism is inevitable. Second, participants' responses in studies where hypothetical scenarios in DCTs are used can be less authentic compared to interactions on social networks where users respond to real scenarios. Moreover, the nature of anonymity allows users to employ more direct strategies than in other methods of data collection.

With regard to the indirect strategies, there are, however, more variations. Results showed that English speaking users employed more hints while Persian speaking users used more request for change strategies. Despite the difference, the pattern of frequency of strategy use in each type (i.e., *request for change* and *hints*) was similar among the two groups of users. In other words, in expressing request for change sub-strategies, the findings showed that *giving suggestions for changes and improvements* was followed by *insisting that changes be made* and *giving advice for changes and improvements*. Similar patterns of frequency of use appeared in using hints sub-strategies: *light teasing* was followed by *asking hearer's opinion of his/her own choice*, *actions, etc., sarcasm*, and *presupposing hearer's opinion of his/her own choice, etc*. The findings are similar to those of Farnia and Abdul Sattar (2015) where *giving suggestion for change* was the most frequent sub-strategy; however, it is in contrast with their study where Persian native speakers employed *request for change* strategies more frequently than *hints* in the data obtained from written DCT. The findings confirmed Nguyen's (2013) results, which showed that native speakers outperformed in using *hints* than *request for change* strategies. A closer look at the data indicated that *light teasing* is the most frequently used hint sub-strategy in the two corpora. Based on Toplak and Katz (2000), people use sarcasm in the form of a seemingly positive comment instead of a direct criticism. These researchers noted that "with victims' reaction in mind, sarcasm is taken as a more severe form of criticism than found when criticism is directly expressed" (p. 1481). They added that a sarcastic, rather

than a direct form of criticism, may carry the speaker's true intent and, consequently, the message is more likely to be remembered later. In other words, sarcasm, which in this study appeared in the form of light teasing, "enhance[s] the criticism rather than reduce it" (Colston, 1997, cited in Toplak & Katz, 2000, p.1483), and sarcasm as an indirect strategy from Instagram users as victims of the consequences of school reopening is more critical than making an aggressive direct strategy (Colston, 1997).

Moreover, an analysis of modifiers displayed that the use of supportive moves was higher than internal modifiers in the two corpora. Although Persian speaking users employed the two types of modifiers more than English speaking users, the results of chi-square tests did not show any statistically significant difference between the two corpora. The frequency of modifiers was lower compared to the data obtained from other means of data collection, e.g., written or oral DCT. The low frequency of internal modifiers can be attributed to the platform where the data were collected, i.e., social network and the feature of anonymity.

Supportive moves are mitigating devices that may appear in the form of giving reasons, explanations, or justifications for a request (Hassall, 2001). The frequent use of grounders as a supportive move is in contrast with Nguyen (2013) where, unlike this study, native speakers tended to show a preference for internal modifiers. The frequent use of grounds or reasons to perform criticism may help the user to perform a more polite speech act of criticism. In other words, as Brown and Levinson (1978) put it, the use of grounders implies positive politeness by assuming the hearer's cooperation; the users believe that the hearer may wish to help them. Grounders are reported to be the frequent type of supportive moves in a number of cross-cultural and interlanguage studies (e.g. Hassall, 2001; Otcu & Zeyrek, 2006; Trosberg, 1995), consistently used across languages by both native speakers of English and even English language learners. This might be due to the fact that 'giving reasons, justifications, and explanations for an action opens up an empathetic attitude on the part of the interlocutor in giving his or her insight into the actor's underlying motive(s), and is thus

an efficient mitigating strategy with a wide range of applications' (Faerch & Kasper 1989, p. 239). In this study, both English and Persian speaking users seemed to assume that the authorities might reconsider their decision for school reopening in response to their direct criticism followed by reasons. What the present study adds to the available findings is reporting grounders as the main type of external modifiers on computer-based communication.

The findings were different from Farnia and Abdul Sattar's (2015) study in which the frequency of sweeteners was abundant compared to other types of modifiers while sweeteners were absent in the corpus of this study. Sweeteners are "employed to flatter the interlocutor and to put them into a positive mood" (Schauer, 2006, p. 162). Although Schauer (2007) suggested that the frequency of modifiers is associated with the imposition of the scenario, the low frequency of modifiers and even the absence of some such as steers and sweeteners on social network unlike the data collected by other research-based method may uphold the idea that "computer-mediated communication cannot be characterized in terms of spoken language or writing" (Renkema, 2004, p.70). Regarding the role of mitigating devices (i.e., supportive moves and internal modifiers), their use suggests that the users are hoping for some changes; however, since the decision for school reopening is made by a group of decision makers or authorities whose presence is not felt in the announcement, the users did not possibly bother themselves to make a flattering language.

CONCLUSION & PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICAION

This study was carried out to find out how the speech act of criticism is realized by English and Persian speaking users on Instagram in response to an announcement for school reopening. The findings show more similarities than variations in the overall use of strategies. In other words, the topic which draws criticism, i.e., school reopening during the pandemic, elicited almost identical patterns of strategies in realizing criticism on social network. This piece of evidence confirms the idea that criticism is situation-

dependent and speakers' similar strategies regardless of their language and culture could be expected.

The results of this study have some pedagogical implications. Since a cross-cultural understanding plays a critical role in interaction with speakers of a different language, learning the culture of the target language can help avoid cross-cultural miscommunication. Due to the importance of social media in people's interaction, it is of paramount importance to raise language learners' awareness of the strategies that native speakers of different languages employ to express criticism and the way in which they are similar or different as failure to perform this speech act appropriately may lead to communication breakdown. Therefore, it is suggested that language teachers raise language learners' awareness of the cross-cultural differences in performing criticism by means of authentic tasks such as comparing responses native speakers of English use in a criticism situations and how native speakers of Persian might respond to a similar situation.

In light of the results obtained, despite the similarities the two corpora displayed, teaching criticism strategies and the importance of modifiers as mitigating devices can help language learners perform the speech act of criticism more appropriately. In other words, language learners should be aware of these differences to avoid producing non-target like language which can be a consequence of negative transfer from their first language or lack of L2 pragmatic knowledge. In line with this view, the importance of the speech act of criticism is obvious not only in the context of second or foreign language learning, but also among native speakers as they "find this speech act challenging" and often "need to pre-plan how to perform it" (Nguyen 2013). The way someone expresses verbal criticism can influence the interaction and the type of chosen criticism by the speaker can change the listener's perception and reaction. Therefore, informing the L2 learners of such differences and their impact is important in the field of teaching and learning languages.

The findings can also be built upon to help learners effectuate speech acts in a more authentic manner, for example, by raising their

awareness as to the way speech acts are rendered more authentic in real situations in English vs. other languages.

This study has some limitations which should be acknowledged. Although the use of naturally occurring data, unlike the data collected from other methods such as written DCT, is more authentic, it is not possible to control a number of factors such the linguistic status of the speakers (whether the language they commented is their first or second language), their sociolinguistic variables, as well as their real identity. However, as Hopkinson (2021) noted, "the use of authentic data does make it possible to explore a type of speech act that would remain essentially off-limits to elicitation-based studies" (p.196). Instagram, like any other social network, is an invaluable source which enables the researchers to collect a large number of data; yet, they cannot provide "an insight into the complexities that are present on the individual level" (Hopkinson, 2021, p. 196).

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix A

Table A1: Distribution of English Modifiers across the Strategies

English Corpus		Modifiers																
		Steers		Sweeteners		Grounders		Disarmers		Understaters		Hedges		Downtoners		Cajolers		Subjectivizer
Type		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Direct criticism	An explicit statement of a problem	0	0	0	0	13	17.3	0	0	3	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	An explicit expression of disapproval	0	0	0	0	16	21.3	0	0	3	4	0	0	1	1.3	0	0	1	1.3
	An explicit expression of disagreement	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	An explicit expression of dislike	0	0	0	0	10	13.3	0	0	1	1.3	0	0	0	0	1	1.3	0	0
	Warning about the consequences	0	0	0	0	1	1.3	1	1.3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Indirect Criticism																			
Request for change	Giving advice for changes and improvements	0	0	0	0	1	1.3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Giving suggestion for changes and improvements	0	0	0	0	1	1.3	0	0	0	0	1	1.3	0	0	0	0	0	0

	Encouraging changes in hearer's choice, actions, work, etc.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Insisting that changes be made	0	0	0	0	2	2.6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Indicating standard and expectations	0	0	0	0	2	2.6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Hint	Presupposing hearer's opinion of his/her own choice, etc.	0	0	0	0	1	1.3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Asking hearer's opinion of his/her own choice, etc.	0	0	0	0	2	2.6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Light teasing	0	0	0	0	8	10.6	0	0	1	1.3	0	0	1	1.3	2	2.6	0	0
	Sarcasm	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1.3	1	1.3
Total Strategies =75		N=0		N=0		N=57		N=1		N=8		N=1		N=2		N=4		N=2	

Table A2: Distribution of Persian Modifiers across the Strategies

Persian Corpus	Modifiers								
	Steers	Sweeteners	Grounders	Disarmers	Understaters	Hedges	Downtoners	Cajolers	Subjectivizer

Type		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Direct criticism	An explicit statement of a problem	0	0	0	0	13	16.2	0	0	1	1.2	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1.2
	An explicit expression of disapproval	0	0	0	0	10	12.5	0	0	2	2.5	1	1.2	1	1.2	0	0	0	0
	An explicit expression of disagreement	0	0	0	0	3	3.5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	An explicit expression of dislike	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Warning about the consequences	0	0	0	0	5	6.2	0	0	0	0	1	1.2	0	0	1	1.2	0	0
Indirect Criticism																			
Request for change	Giving advice for changes and improvements	0	0	0	0	4	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Giving suggestion for changes and improvements	0	0	0	0	5	6.2	0	0	1	1.2	4	5	1	1.2	0	0	0	0
	Encouraging changes in hearer's choice, etc.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1.2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Insisting that changes be made	0	0	0	0	6	7.5	1	1.2	0	0	1	1.2	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Indicating standard and expectations	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
H	Presupposing hearer's	0	0	0	0	1	1.2	0	0	1	1.2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

	Asking hearer's opinion of his/her own choice, etc.	1	1.2	0	0	8	10	0	0	1	1.2	0	0	0	0	1	1.2	0	0
	Light teasing	1	1.2	0	0	2	2.5	0	0	2	2.5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Sarcasm	1	1.2	0	0	1	1.2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total Strategies= 80		N=3		N=0		N=58		N=1		N=9		N=7		N=2		N=2		N=1	