

The Effect of Role Play on Pragmatic Competence among Male and Female Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract

This study aims at investigating the effects of role play on pragmatics competence among male and female Iranian EFL learners. To do so, 40 undergraduate university students (15 male and 25 female) majoring in English at Karaj Azad university were selected based on Nelson proficiency test (Fowler & Coe, 1976) that was used in order to select the sample out of the population of 90 students who agreed to take part in the study. Based on the results, 40 high intermediate students were selected as the sample of the study. They formed two mixed groups (male and female role play group A, male and female conversation group B). The instruction took place; group A did role play, and group B did conversation followed by free discussion techniques. Having finished the treatment, the two groups took the similar posttest. The results show the positive effect of role-play on increasing pragmatic competence among the intended sample.

Keywords: role play, pragmatics competence, gender, EFL Learners

INTRODUCTION

Language teaching for many years had been dedicated to the grammar accuracy; hence the communicative function of language seemed to be put aside. However, in the 1970s a new approach was introduced. This is a result from what teachers found out that learners lacked the ability to carry out natural exchanges in the second or foreign language. Research on second language has been trying to reveal how learners master certain linguistic and extra linguistic elements. This has shed some light that learners finally acquire (learn) competence in a second language. Further research on learners' speech acts performance in a second/foreign language has revealed differences of learners' performance from those of the native speakers'. Bardovi-Harlig (2001) in Rueda (2006) has mentioned several realizations missed such as availability of input, length of exposure, and transfer. The recommendation is to integrate the teaching of interlanguage pragmatics in the classroom (Kasper & Schmidt, 1996; Bardovi-Harlig, 1997).

In the spoken English classroom, the ability to communicate effectively is strongly demanded. The demand definitely imposes huge responsibility for teachers to give appropriate pragmatic instruction in the classroom. On the part of textbook writers; materials for pragmatic awareness yielding in pragmatic competence are to be explicitly explored and greatly enhanced. Bachman (1990) discussed that pragmatic ability is an important part of the construct of language proficiency. Pragmatic comprehension refers to the comprehension of oral language, interpretation of speaker's feeling and attitudes, and speaker's intentions and the ability to choose appropriate responses.

Pragmatic comprehension can be identified as comprehension of speech acts and conversational implicatures (Garcia, 2004). Pragmatic comprehension demands the listener comprehend linguistic information such as vocabulary and syntax and contextual information such as the role and status of the interlocutor. According to the above definition, pragmatic comprehension tends to be different from linguistic comprehension. Although a large body of research now exists on pragmatic competence, relatively few researchers have explored the impact of role-play on the pragmatic competence. It seems there has not been enough research about the effect of the activities after the formal instruction on the pragmatic development of the FL learners which function as a communicative practice for students to put themselves in a more natural communicative situation. Therefore, the present study is designed to investigate the effect of role-play as a pragmatic development activity after the formal instruction on the development of Learners' pragmatic competence and its difference with the role-play before formal instruction. So this study aims at investigating the following research question:

- Does role-play have any effect on Iranian EFL students' pragmatic competence?

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Acquisition of pragmatic principles

As pragmatic competence encompasses knowing more than just the syntax and lexicon of a language, the area of pragmatic acquisition has been considered profoundly by several researchers. This section will discover some significant research studies in several areas that have examined the association of applied linguistics and pragmatics.

Fraser (1978, as cited in Colucci-Gray, 2007) investigated questions regarding appropriate use of a certain language strategy in a certain situation. Moreover he studied how the appropriateness of a particular speech act alters by means of the culture of the speech contributors. He suggested that Acquisition of an L2 is beyond a syntactic process. He expounded on Austin's idea of illocutionary acts by stating the concept of institutional acts, those acts whose description and fruitful performances partly depend on particular social or cultural institutions, and vernacular acts, or those acts which lack such limitations. Besides, Fraser presented a taxonomy of speech acts which embraces representative acts, evaluative acts, commissive acts, directive acts, and establishive acts. He cautiously stated that while some languages might not display

all of these speech acts, most take in some of them. Fraser (ibid) concentrated on the speech act of “requesting”, for which he suggested the necessity to consist of an element of mitigation or intended relaxing or easing of the forces of the utterances, or an inflection of the basic message projected by the speaker. He found that mitigating forces in messages are practically identical in all languages under the study. He concluded that acquiring asocial competence does not contain noticeably new ideas regarding how language is structured and what types of strategies attend what social function. Fraser stated that a great deal of what a language learner requires in terms of L2 pragmatic competencies are already prepared and the L2 learner simply needs to implement those competencies to the target language. Yet he declared that although this knowledge may already be available, the schemes for its use may vary depending on the culture.

Role-play

Definition of role-play

Role-play can be defined as reproductions or simulations of social exchanges in which participants undertake and perform described roles within specified situations (Tran, 2004). Since the naturally occurring data are difficult to collect, role-plays are applied to gather naturalistic information.

Forms of role play

There are two forms of role play: closed role-plays and open role-plays. In both forms, instructions which specify the roles, the primary situation and at least one participant's communicative aim are presented to subjects. In closed role-plays, participants are required to represent a one-turn oral response. Alternatively, open role-plays often take a number of turns in discourse. Participants are not instructed with regard to what conversational results should be reached or how such results are reached. Open role-plays “represent oral production, full operation of the turn-taking mechanism, impromptu planning decisions contingent on interlocutor input, and hence, negotiation of global and local goals, including negotiation of meaning, when required” (Kasper & Dahl, 1991, p.228). The chief strengths of open role-plays are that they allow inspecting a particular speech act behavior in its complete discourse setting, to observe how speech act performance is organized in sequence and how particular strategic selections affect interlocutor responses (Tran, 2004).

Taking on role and performing

Taking on role is a natural and impulsive activity for children who perform different characters (Harris, 2000), via a combination of knowledge, facts, imagination and personal involvement. Role-players respond as though they were in an assumed situation, imagine how they would respond at that moment of time and feel what it might be like for them in reality (Mucchielli, 1993). Thru these imitational activities, children progressively develop their capacity to take on family and societal roles. The activity of role-taking continues from infancy through adolescence with specific features which are arranged within the environment of the family, the societal norms, the

cultural forms and values, and the relationship with certain groups (Colucci-Gray, 2007).

Claxton (2002) reported on children's' inborn capability to acquire mental habits and values from individuals around them. They learn from observing their elders, what to overlook, what to notice, what to laugh at, and what to be scared of. According to modern theories on personality, involvement and experience of social contexts and roles form the manners in which we understand other people and relate to them (L'Abate & Bagget, 1997). Through taking on a role we may experience what it may be like being in a situation, and develop empathy. In contrast, studies on autistic children accompanied a failure to communicate successfully with others with a trouble in taking on a role (Karmiloff & Karmiloff-Smith, 2001; Harris, 2000). Such a treasure of empirical evidence indicates that role-play is central and vital to the process of socialization. This is initiated in the family environment and moves into the larger context of society, where meanings are recognized by actions.

Role-play and language

Through recorded verbal exchanges within a group it is possible to evaluate which are the noticeable categories of interpersonal relationships (Mercer, 2000). However, revealing participants' suppositions and the rules which are at the basis of any relationship can be a far more problematic task. For example critical discourse studies have focused on "language as a cultural tool, mediating relationships of power and privilege in social interactions, institutions and bodies of knowledge" (Rogers, 2002, p. 251). The results of the interaction can be intensely influenced by the setting of the interaction and the power relationships between the group members which may not let open discussion and authentic exchange occur. Contributors may hide certain suppositions through applying specialist language and metaphors (Cassidy, 2004), and may not be conscious of the idiosyncrasies of value-positions and engagements between contributors (Fang, 2005).

Among language studies, Gee (1999) made a helpful discrepancy between two categories of discourses, sets of meanings which individuals can converse when they are playing their roles. The first category, little "d" Discourse, refers to language in interaction, while the second category, capital "D" Discourse refers to "socially accepted associations among ways of using language, of thinking, valuing and acting, and interacting, in the right places and at the right times" (p. 17). In other words, both discourses are present when roles are successfully accomplished in public interactions. For instance, a scientist presenting her work at a conference performs a scientist Discourse, by means of language in a particular way, but also by thinking, acting and interacting in particular ways. Discourses are shaped and changed in moment to moment interactions, but they are also indissolubly tied to history and culture (Carlone & Webb, 2006). Throughout the interaction of people in role, it is consequently probable that the two discourses will be acting at different levels, in the management of the communication, and the creation of new meanings. In multifaceted complex situations, which are regarded as by people holding a variety of points of view, there can be an

array of means for expression and interaction. Although some theorists have supported discussion setting in which people share through mutual leadership and reciprocally legitimated know-how (Funtowicz & Ravetz, 1999), other researchers have suggested the influence of existing structures on the selection of what counts as pertinent knowledge and preventing new meaningful interactions (Davies, 2003).

Therefore, to reflect on the consequences of a discussion in role implies a shift from a theoretical description of verbal exchanges, to a consideration of the nature of the discussion setting, and the practical outcomes of the verbal move (Abelson and Levi, 1985).

METHODOLOGY

Research design

The current study was quantitative in nature. Since the researcher used two groups (experimental and control) and the research contained a treatment, the present research study followed the experimental approach. To conduct the study, a dependent variable (pragmatic competence) and an independent variable (role play) were chosen. The study followed a pretest-posttest method to investigate the effect of role play on pragmatic competence.

Sampling and setting

Sample selection in this study was done on the basis of proficiency level of the participants and availability. The participants included 40 undergraduate university students (15 male and 25 female) majoring in English at Karaj Azad university. Nelson proficiency test (Fowler & Coe, 1976) was used in order to select the sample out of the population of 90 students who agreed to take part in the study. Based on the results, 40 high intermediate students were selected as the sample of the study. They formed two mixed groups (male and female role play group A, male and female conversation group B). The instruction took place; group A did role play, and group B did conversation followed by free discussion techniques. Having finished the treatment, the two groups took the similar posttest.

Instrumentation

In order to meet the criteria of the present research according to the research question, two instruments including, a discourse completion test (DCT) and Role-play tasks (RPTs) were used.

Written discourse completion test

A discourse completion test consisting of nine situations of request speech acts corresponding to the nine role-play tasks was developed by the researcher. The test battery was constructed based on preliminary analyses of what request situations they supposed necessary in natural environment. Students were asked to refuse the requests provided in each item and they gave their reason for such an answer. The test was

scored out of 9 (1 for each item) and a minimum score of 0.25 for each item was also possible. Therefore the range of scores for the test was 0-9.

Oral role-play tasks

The role-play tasks was adapted from Martinez-Flor and Uso-Juan's (2001) study and comprised of nine situations, which were categorized as occurring within the university context (situations 1, 3, 4, 5, 7 and 8) or within the environment of the learners (at the cafeteria=situation 2; at the butcher's=situation 6, and at the hairdresser's=situation 9) (Appendix B). All scenarios encompassed an enhanced photograph, which were presented to learners on a screen, with a written description for both the requester and the refuser. Photographs were used in order to provide interlocutors with adequate and detailed information about the context of interaction, so as to learners recognize them as real scenarios and social settings in everyday life. Moreover, the situations were considered for the status and position of the requester relative to the learner and social distance between the interactants. Regarding the status, situations were categorized as high (situations 3, 6 and 8), equal (situations 1, 4 and 9) and low (situations 2, 5 and 7). Social distance was identified in terms of the degree of familiarity between the participants in the role-play descriptions, which was conceptualized as stranger (situations 2, 4 and 6), acquaintance (situations 1, 3 and 7) and as intimate (situations 5, 8 and 9).

DATA COLLECTION

Procedure for eliciting pretest data

First, forty participants (male, n=20 and female, n=20) formed two mixed groups (male and female role play group A, male and female conversation group B). A week after the administration of the placement test, students of both groups took the DCT in 45 minutes. They were all naïve to the objective and hypotheses of the research and the pretest was taken as one of the class exams. Exam sheets were coded for all students; and an experienced teacher as a rater graded the test sheets. After the test, the scores were calculated for data tabulation purposes.

Treatment

After the pretest, group A was taught to perform the RPTs, and group B was instructed to do ordinary conversation in the classroom followed by free discussion techniques within an 8-session period. The teachers of both groups were required to indirectly check the learners' progress over the sessions. This helped the researcher ensure that the treatment is performed appropriately, since in some sessions directions or guidelines were provided by the researcher as to how instruct the desired methods of role-play.

Procedure for posttest

Since all students in both groups were unaware of the research purpose and there was an appropriate time interval (8 sessions in 4 weeks), in the first session after the instruction, students of both groups (A and B) took the same DCT within 45 minutes and scores was compared to determine the possible differences among the groups and also to assess the effect of role play on the pragmatic competence as well as to determine the difference between male and female learners regarding the results of the posttest.

RESULTS OF DATA ANALYSIS

Test of Hypothesis

In order to test the research hypothesis, first an independent samples t-test was implemented to make sure that there is not any significant difference between the two groups on the pretest. Afterward, the effect size was calculated using the following formula: $\text{Eta squared} = t^2 / t^2 + (N1 + N2 - 2)$.

Table 1. Mean, standard deviation and standard error mean for the experimental and control groups on the pretest

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Role-play (experimental)	20	5.92	1.02	.22
Conversation (control)	20	5.80	1.25	.28

Table 2. Independent Samples Test for the pretest

t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
.346	38	.732
Eta squared = $.346^2 / (.346^2 + 38) = 0.003$		

The results in tables 1 and 2 are interpreted as follows: An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the discourse completion pretest scores for the experimental and control groups. There was not any significant difference in scores for experimental group ($M=5.92$, $SD=1.02$) and control group [$M=5.80$, $SD=1.25$; $t(38) = .346$, $p=.73 > .05$]. The magnitude of the differences in the means was very small (eta squared=.003). This confirms that the pragmatic competence of the two groups before the treatment was at the same level. To evaluate the effect of treatment on the experimental group an independent-sample t-test was conducted. The results are presented in the following two tables. Accordingly, to test the hypothesis of the study and to compare the mean scores of both groups on the posttest, one-way repeated measures ANOVA was conducted for each group.

The question and hypothesis were as follows:

Q: Does role-play have any effect on Iranian EFL students' pragmatic competence?

H₀: Role-play does not have any effect on Iranian EFL students' pragmatic competence.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of the experimental group's scores on the pretest and the posttest

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
pretest	5.92	1.02	20
posttest	6.90	.92	20

Table 4. Multivariate tests results for the experimental group

Effect	Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Wilks' Lambda	.254	55.682 ^a	1.000	19.000	.000	.746

a. Exact statistic

Results for the experimental group

A one-way repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to compare the experimental group's scores on the discourse completion pretest (prior to the treatment), and the discourse completion posttest (after the treatment). The means and standard deviations are presented in Table 4-3. There was a significant increase in scores from the pretest to the posttest [Wilks' Lambda=.254, $F(1, 19) = 55.682$, $p < .05$, multivariate partial eta squared=.746.]

From the above statistical test, it could be argued that the treatment (role-play) had a significant effect on the experimental group's pragmatic competence. However to have reliable results and to make sure that the effect of the treatment has created such a difference, the control group's scores on the pretest and posttest were separately compared using the same statistical tests. The test will definitely determine the effect of role-play on pragmatic competence among the intended sample.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics of the control group's scores on the pretest and the posttest

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
pretest	5.80	1.25	20
posttest	6.01	1.16	20

Table 6. Multivariate tests results for the control group

Effect	Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Wilks' Lambda	.817	4.253 ^a	1.000	19.000	.053	.183

a. Exact statistic

Results for the control group

A one-way repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to compare the control group's scores on the discourse completion pretest (prior to the treatment), and the discourse completion posttest (after the treatment). The means and standard deviations are presented in Table 4-5. There was not any significant increase in scores from the pretest to the posttest [Wilks' Lambda=.817, $F(1, 19) = 4.253$, $p > .05$, multivariate partial eta squared=.183.]

From the above statistical test, it could be argued that conversation cannot significantly increase pragmatic competence as role-play can. The test revealed the positive effect of role-play on increasing pragmatic competence among the intended sample.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Though a large body of research now can be found on pragmatic competence, relatively few researchers have explored the effect of role-play on the pragmatic competence. Regarding previous research, adequate literature exists on the concept of pragmatics and pragmatic competence. Besides, there are many scholars who have studied about pragmatics instruction (explicit versus implicit) for FL learners. Others have also studied about some of the pragmatic activities before the formal instruction which raise the learners' pragmatic awareness. But, there has not been enough research about the impact of the activities after the formal instruction on the pragmatic improvement of the FL learners which function as a communicative practice for students to put themselves in a more natural communicative condition. Thus, the present study aimed to explore the impact of role-play as a pragmatic development activity after the formal instruction on the development of Learners' pragmatic competence and its difference with the role-play before formal instruction since on the basis of Richards and Rodgers (1986) interactional view, role playing is regarded as a technique which provides the learners with situations in which they can have interpersonal and social transactions in the classroom after the instruction and this activity should be very useful for learning pragmatics.

Regarding the research question, the findings are consistent with what, Fogg (2001), Harris (2000), Kasper and Dahl (1991), McKeachie (2003), Mucchielli (1993), Poorman (2002), Rintell (1981) and Scarcella and Brunak (1981). These researchers acknowledged the advantages of role play over other methods of pragmatic knowledge acquisition as well as its significant effect on improving the quality of social exchanges within specified situations. As seen, the experimental group outperformed the conversation group on the DCT indicating that role plays play a significant role in improving learners' social understanding where pragmatic knowledge should act in socially oriented situations without any predetermined rehearsal. This technique also helps learners to prepare themselves for more complex social interactions as in authentic and real life situations.

The research reviewed here indicates the role of role play in L2 pragmatics of Iranian EFL students. Role play serves as a means of delivery or connection whereby learners have enhanced access to genuine interaction and increased opportunities for participation in meaningful interactions, which have been shown to facilitate L2 pragmatic development. These opportunities can take the form of self-directed activities that involve examples of multimodal NS pragmatic performance and explicit discussions of pragmatic competence or naturalistic, projected-based interactions. Role play can serve as sources for instructional materials or which can be used to track changes in learners' L2 pragmatic competence over time, if composed of developmental data. Finally, role can afford the design and execution of developmental pedagogical

interventions on aspects of learners' emerging L2 pragmatic competence by directing their attention to their own and NSs' uses of focal pragmatic features in a context of authenticity.

The effect of role play on L2 pragmatic competence is a particularly underexplored area of research in Iran EFL setting. It must be pointed out that the pedagogical interventions constitute a type of dynamic assessment, that is, an "interactive assessment that includes deliberate and planned mediational teaching and the assessment of the effects of that teaching on subsequent performance" (Haywood & Tzuriel, 2002, p.40), because the scholars provided personal instruction and examination sensitive to the individual learner's needs, recognized hurdles to learning and performance, explored how particular learners function with the support of more experienced interventionists, and taught metacognitive strategies to enhance change.

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