The Relationship between Language Awareness and Pragmatic Performance: A Case of Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to determine if language awareness affect Iranian EFL learners' pragmatic performance. Ninety language learners at English institutes were requested to complete the elicitation instruments. The elicitation instruments used for data collection were a) Grammaticality Judgement Test (GJT), to decide on their language awareness, and b) the Discourse Completion Test (DCT) developed by Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990), to investigate their pragmatic ability. The data collected from the administration of the above mentioned two tests were then analyzed using the descriptive statistics, and correlation coefficient. The results revealed learners' pragmatic performance was significantly affected by their language awareness.

Keywords: pragmatics, language awareness, EFL learners

INTRODUCTION

The question of to what extent the overall metalinguistic knowledge contribute to pragmatic competence has been an ongoing debate among experts in the field ; however, only a very small number of studies have examined the pragmatic and grammatical awareness of second or foreign (L2) language learners in an integrated framework. The main reason for this was the teaching methodology used, in which grammar was central to learning. An increasing consensus among educators and researchers (Alderson & Steel, 1994; Germain & Seguin, 1995; Hammery, 1991; Larsen-Freeman, 1995) was that a number of learners lacked linguistic accuracy in performance. They maintain, this linguistic accuracy stems from the knowledge of grammar, proficiency, and knowledge about grammar, Metalinguistic Knowledge (MK) or Metalinguistic Awareness (MA).

Pragmatic comprehension is different from linguistic comprehension in view of the fact that it requires the listener to understand not only the linguistic information, such as vocabulary and syntax, but also contextual information such as the role and status of

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interlocutor, the physical setting of the conversation and the types of communicative acts that would likely occur in that context (Rost 2002).Bardovi-Harlig, and Mahan-Taylor (2003) defined pragmatics as "using socially appropriate language in a variety of informal and formal situations"." Pragmatic ability, which is an important part of the language proficiency construct (Bachman, 1990; Canale, 1983; Canale & Swain, 1980), is the ability to use language appropriately according to the communicative situation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers working in different areas of L2 acquisition have examined pragmatic development from several perspectives. In a recent study, Kasper (2012) identified four general theoretical paradigms that have been taken to account for pragmatic development in foreign language learners: a comprehensive model of communicative ability, information processing hypotheses, sociocultural theory, and language socialization. The approach important for this study concerns the relation between pragmatic competence and grammatical competence, so, the focus of the present study is the first option, that is, it focuses on a comprehensive mode of communicative competence. Pragmatic ability in a second or foreign language is part of a nonnative speaker's communicative competence and therefore has to be located in a model of communicative ability (Savignon, 1991). In Bachman's model (1990), 'language competence' is subdivided into two components, 'organizational competence' and 'pragmatic competence'. Organizational competence comprises knowledge of linguistic units and the rules of joining them together at the levels of sentence ('grammatical competence') and discourse ('textual competence'). Pragmatic competence is subdivided into 'illocutionary competence' and 'sociolinguistic competence'. 'Illocutionary competence' can be glossed as 'knowledge of communicative action and how to carry it out'.

Rahimy and Moradkhani (2012) found that using GJ tasks enhances knowledge of grammatical patterns in Iranian learners of English at university level. Correa (2011) considered Metalinguistic Knowlwdge as explicit, verbalizable knowledge of grammatical rules and investigated the relationship between MK and subjunctive accuracy by learners of Spanish at three levels. She found MK indeed is positively correlated with accuracy in the use of subjunctive structure as hypothesized. Fatahi Milasi & Pishghadam (2007) explored the role of explicit knowledge in general language proficiency and the interplay of explicit and implicit knowledge in grammaticality judgements and found that there was a strong relationship between both groups' performance on the two measures. Analysis of the response patterns on GJT indicated an intricate interplay between explicit and implicit knowledge of the test-takers. Also, in a study, Alderson, Clapham and Steel (1997) investigated the metalinguistic knowledge of university modern languages students and compared this knowledge with the students' level of foreign (French) language proficiency. As they reported, the relationship between metalinguistic knowledge and proficiency was weak. Elder and Manwaring (1997) widened the scope of the research done by Alderson, Clapham, and Steel (1997) by giving the Metalinguistic assessment Test and tests of language

proficiency to students learning three different languages at elementary as well as advanced levels. The findings supported the existence of a weak relationship between the metalinguistic knowledge and language proficiency.

Refusals are speech acts that function as a response to another act such as a request, an offer, an invitation and a suggestion. The speech act of refusal is a face-threatening act and requires a high level of pragmatic competence because it tends to risk the interlocutor's positive or negative face (Brown & Levinson, 1978).To check the pragmatic transfer of refusal strategies, Qadoury (2011) compared two groups of Iraqi native speakers of Arabic, and American native speakers of English by their responses to a modified version of 12- items written discourse completion task. This was the same as what Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990) did with Japanese and American speakers. In both studies, data were analyzed according to frequency types of refusal strategies and interlocutor's social status and was found that EFL learners expressed refusals with care represented by using more statements of reason/explanation, statements of regret, wish and refusal adjuncts in their refusals than the native speakers and they were more sensitive to the lower status interlocutors. The majority of studies that have looked at the relationship between grammatical and pragmatic competence show higher proficiency learners to be generally better at drawing inferences (Carrell, 1984), using speech act strategies (Trosborg, 1995), and comprehending illocutionary force (Koike, 1996). However, Bardovi-Harlig and Dornyei (1998) state that a good level of grammatical competence does not imply a good level of pragmatic competence. In short, the literature presents two generally accepted claims about the relationship between grammatical competence and pragmatic competence: (1) grammar is not a *sufficient* condition for pragmatic competence; however, (2) grammar is a *necessary* condition for pragmatic competence.

Xu, Case, and Wang (2009), in a study examined the influence of length of residence in the target language community and overall L2 proficiency on L2 pragmatic competence with a reference to L2 grammatical competence. A questionnaire consisting of 20 scenarios was administrated to the participants measuring their pragmatic and grammatical competence. Results revealed that both length of residence and overall L2 proficiency influenced L2 pragmatics significantly with overall L2 proficiency demonstrating a stronger influence. Findings also showed that there was a strong and positive correlation between pragmatic and grammatical competence for advanced participants and all participants as a group.

To investigate the relationship between pragmatic competence and organizational competence, and to see the possible effect of the learner's field of study on this relationship, Abuali (1995) examined two groups of subjects (native speakers of English and non-native speakers) participating in the preliminary phase and six other groups of Farsi speaking university students participating in the main phase of the study. The subjects were from different fields of study. The results of the study supported the idea that the EFL learners' field of study affects their language competence and also showed

a positively moderate correlation between pragmatic competence and organizational competence. Therefore, this study seeks to answer the following question:

- Is there any relationship between the learners' language awareness and their pragmatic ability?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Ninety male and female language learners at English institutes were purposively selected to cooperate in this study. They were all Persian speakers, learning English as a foreign language. The participants were between 19 to 23 years old.

Instruments

Grammaticality Judgment Test (GJT)

GJT, with ten ungrammatical sentences, was used to assess language awareness. It has three phases each having one point. In phase 1, the participants are to find the grammatical error in a given sentence and underline it. In phase 2, they are asked to provide the related rule in either L1 or L2. In the third phase, they should write the correct form of the grammatically ill-formed part. No time limitation is set. A total score of thirty is assigned, three for each item.

Discourse Completion Test (DCT)

The DCT, already used by Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1985), and Yamagashira (2001), is a written role-play questionnaire consisting of 12 situations. Each situation presents respondents with a detailed description of the context and the social status between the interlocutors. The refuser's social status relative to the interlocutor in each group of situations involves three levels: high, equal, and low. Each situation consists of a gap in which only a refusal would fit. The gap is followed by a rejoinder which is said to limit the range of allowable responses a DCT can elicit and thereby facilitate rating (Rover, 2005). The 12 DCT situations are divided into four types: three requests, three invitations, three offers, and three suggestions.

Data collection

The grammaticality judgment test and the Discourse Completion Test were administered simultaneously. Both tests were used by other others in the field several times and high levels of validity and reliability were reported for them. However, to double check the reliability of the DCT, the verbalizations were marked independently by the author and an experienced university instructor which revealed 89% inter- coder consistency.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the administration of the above mentioned tests were then transferred to SPSS Version 16 (1998) for statistical analysis. The significance level was set at .05. In analyzing the data, the descriptive statistics the relationship between the students' language awareness and pragmatic ability was computed using correlational analysis.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the relationship between the language awareness and the pragmatic competence of the students of different proficiency levels. The results show that there is a significant correlation between the scores on Grammaticality Judgement Test which is an indicator of metalinguistic knowledge, and the scores on the Discourse Completion test as an indicator of pragmatic ability

Table 1. Correlation between language awareness and pragmatic ability

Language awareness	Pragmatic ability
Pearson Correlation	.488*
Sig. (2-tailed)	.013

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As EslamiRasekh and EslamiRasekh (2005) found, the explicit teaching of pragmatics does influence the EFL learners' appropriateness. David (2008) also recommended that English language teachers should move beyond linguistic processing of meaning to pragmatic meaning in language teaching and learning, and that authentic language samples must be used by English language teachers to provide practice for students in expressing themselves pragmatically, not just linguistically. So, any students need to be exposed to the real situations through explicit instruction on pragmatics in classroom and watching films.

As mentioned earlier, the comprehension of pragmatic meaning can be differentiated from linguistic comprehension because it requires the listener to understand not only linguistic information, such as vocabulary and syntax, but also contextual information, such as the role and status of the interlocutor, the physical setting of the conversation, and the types of communicative acts that would likely occur in that context (Rost, 2002; Van Dijk, 1977).

 The insignificant differences between the performance of the three proficiency groups (high, mid, and low proficient) on Discourse Completion Test indicates that pragmatic failure can occur in an interaction between individuals from the three groups. That is, even high proficient students couldn't perform well in situations where pragmatic comprehension was needed. They even risked committing pragmatic failure and sometimes were considered rude. Foreign language teachers should be aware that

fluency in a language involves both a mastery of linguistic knowledge and pragmatic knowledge. Even language learners with a fairly advanced level of proficiency can produce pragmatic failures. This study illuminates several areas where ESL/EFL students might appear inappropriate (i.e., confrontational, presumptuous, vague) when making a refusal. To help our students achieve optimal pragmatic success, teachers need to make students aware of specific *speech act sets* and the accompanying *linguistic features* that are necessary to produce appropriate and well-received refusals, and other important speech acts. Therefore, explicit teaching of L2 pragmatics in the language classroom might be necessary. Language teachers should adopt teaching materials or language activities focused on consciousness raising. Moreover, language learners should be taught to be aware of pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic behavior (Kasper, 2001).

Before generalizing the findings of the study, we must be aware of some limitations. According to McNamara (2007), if pragmatics is to be understood as language use in social settings, tests would necessarily have to construct such social settings. There are many differences between written and spoken language with regard to hesitation phenomena, tone of voice, facial expression, gesture and a number of other nonverbal cues that interlocutors use to contextualize their utterance and convey their meaning. The present study used DCT as a research tool. Data obtained from a written role play questionnaire might be different from naturally occurring data. So, future studies need to employ other research tools such as role plays or simulation to support the use of Discourse Completion Task.

Limited number and incomplete cooperation of participants were among the two major limitations of the study. Factor analysis procedure was not conducted on the two scales used in this study due to the inappropriateness of the data gathered in this study. Interested researchers can check for the relationship between the two variables of the study among different proficiency groups.

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