The Relationship Between Grammatical Knowledge and Pragmatic Knowledge of Speech Act of Request in Iranian EFL Learners

Bahareh Ashoorpour¹, Houshang Azari²
Department of English Language, Islamic Azad University, Tonekabon Branch, IRAN.
¹b.ashoorpour@gmail.com

ABSTRACT
The purpose of the current study was to investigate the relationship between grammatical knowledge and pragmatic knowledge of speech act of request among Iranian EFL learners. This study is an attempt to examine whether there is a significant relationship between grammatical knowledge and pragmatic knowledge of speech acts. The total data were obtained from a 90 university students majoring in English Translation in Rasht Azad University. In order to achieve this goal, the researcher first administered an OPT test; this test was supposed to determine the degree of language proficiency of each individual. After that the researcher divided the learners into 3 groups of pre-intermediate, intermediate and advanced group. Then for measuring grammatical knowledge of these selected subjects a validated 30 items grammar test administered. Then a discourse completion test (DCT) questionnaire as a pragmatic test had been taken. In the present study the speech act of request investigated. The calculated data were analyzed through an inferential statistics. The findings of the study obtained through statistical analyses indicated that there is significant relationship between grammatical knowledge and pragmatic competence in pre-intermediate and intermediate level students. But those who were in advanced level and have more grammatical knowledge performed better both in grammatical knowledge and pragmatic competence.

Keywords: pragmatics, speech acts, request, grammatical knowledge, EFL learner

INTRODUCTION
Communicating with speakers of other languages and cultures needs the linguistic competence (grammatical competence) as well as pragmatic competence or knowledge, which is considered as one of the main intricacies of language competence. Socio-cultural norms and constraints influence individuals’ speaking in their first or second language as well as the way of interaction with others.

Pragmatics is considered as a subfield of linguistics developed in the late 1970s and has been defined in various ways, reflecting authors’ theoretical orientation and audience. Many definitions have been proposed for pragmatics. Crystal (1997 p.301), as one of the prominent and a pioneer of pragmatics domain, has defined pragmatics as:

The study of language from users’ viewpoints: These standpoints include making the choices on the part of the users, confronting with the constraints in their social interaction and their effect of their language use on other speakers in the process of interaction. In other words, pragmatics is the study of communicative action in its socio cultural context. This communicative or interactional action consists of an assortment of perspectives encompassing performing and making use of the speech acts (like requesting, apologizing, complaining, complimenting, thanking and so on) Yule (1996) defined pragmatics as “the study of intended speaker meaning” (p.127). Pragmatics includes “the study of how speakers use and understand speech acts” (Richards and Schmidt 2002).
It is worth considering the fact that pragmatics plays a very important role in the production and perception of the language. That is why interlocutors should have enough pragmatic knowledge to produce and perceive the proper and intended speech acts based on the situation. Therefore, possessing pragmatic competence is one of the key factors in the process of communication. Pragmatic competence in foreign language contexts is defined as the knowledge of communicative action or speech acts, how to perform it, and the ability to utilize the language in proper ways based on the context or contextual factors (Kasper 1997; Kasper & Roever 2005). In addition, Leech (1983) and Thomas (1983) divided the pragmatic competence into pragmalinguistic competence, “the particular resources which a given language provides for conveying particular illocutions”, i.e., the degree to which one is able to use appropriate linguistic forms to realize speech acts and their associated strategies and sociopragmatic competence, “the sociological interface of pragmatics”, which refers to understanding of contextual variables such as the social distance, power and imposition of the action between participants in an interaction. In other words, the relationship between linguistic action and social structure refers to social factors such as status, social distance and degree of imposition that influence what kinds of linguistic acts are performed and how they are performed (Martinez-Flor and Uso-Juan 2010).

In fact, two conclusions can thus be made about pragmatic competence (Rose, 1997b; Taylor, 1988). First, pragmatic competence consists of knowledge, and not the ability to use knowledge. Second, pragmatic competence consists of (at least) two components: knowledge of a pragmatic system, and knowledge of its appropriate use. The former provides the range of linguistic options available to individuals for performing various acts (pragmalinguistics), while the latter enables them to select the appropriate choice given a particular goal in a particular setting (Sociopragmatics).

To use English successfully in international communication, people who have different linguistic and cultural backgrounds truly need communicative competence: the ability to use grammatically-correct sentences in appropriate contexts (Bachman, 1990; Canale and Swain, 1980; Hymes, 1971). Communicative competence subsumes linguistic competence and pragmatic competence. While the former refers to the ability to recognize language rules in order to form grammatically-correct sentences, the latter is the ability to use language appropriately in various contexts.

As one of the main goals of learning a second language is communicating the speakers of that language, being prepared to face with a large number of L2 interactions is vital. Lack of pragmatic knowledge is most evident among EFL learners while communicating with people from other cultures. EFL teachers mostly concentrate on the grammar and vocabulary (linguistic competence) and they do not pay sufficient attention to the pragmatic or sociolinguistic dimension of language. Therefore, EFL learners may produce utterances that are perfectly grammatical, but they may violate social norms of the target language because they lack pragmatic competence (appropriateness of meaning) to support grammatical competence (appropriateness of form) (Thomas 1983; Leech 1983; Bardovi-Harlig & Dornyei 1998).

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The specific research questions addressed in this study were:

RQ1: Do grammatical knowledge and pragmatic competence of speech acts relate each other in pre-intermediate level learners?
RQ2: Do grammatical knowledge and pragmatic knowledge of speech acts relate to each other in intermediate level learners?

RQ3: Do grammatical knowledge and pragmatic competence of speech acts relate to each other in advanced level learners?

METHOD

The Design of the Study

The design to carry out this study was quantitative. The quantitative research refers to the systematic empirical investigation of social phenomena via statistical, mathematical or computational techniques. And the design was also quasi-experimental, because not all the factors were strictly controlled as those of true experimental method. In fact according to Farhady (1997) "in applied linguistics the researcher deal with the most complicated human behavior".

Participants

The participants for the main study drew from a population of 90 Iranian EFL learners of English at university. They were selected through their mean scores of OPT test; from that population 30 subjects, representing three homogeneous groups were selected through their mean scores. After that the researcher divided the learners into 3 groups of pre-intermediate, intermediate and advanced group according to their language proficiency obtained from OPT test. They were 30 students in each group.

Instruments and Materials

In this study three instruments were utilized for data collection purposes. The first instrument was a language proficiency test, oxford placement test (OPT), the second one was a Grammar test of TOEFL, and at last, a Pragmatic Competence test of Discourse Completion Task (DCT) was the main instruments used to collect data for this study.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data were collected over two weeks during the second semester of 2013-2014 academic years. The data collection was carried out by the researcher with the cooperation of 90 EFL students of Rasht Islamic Azad University. In each part and for each group, the nature of the research was explained for the students. The exams were administered in three sessions. In the first session, an OPT test administered to examine the level of language proficiency of the subjects in order to be located into three different level groups. At the beginning of the exam session, the students were informed that this proficiency test is supposed to tap their overall English knowledge and it does not have any negative points. After scoring the Oxford Placement Test, the mean and the standard deviation were calculated. In order to divide the participants into three groups of high, mid, and low, it was decided to consider the scores which lie one standard deviation above the mean as the high group and the ones lining one standard deviation below the mean as low and the scores lining in between as the mid.

In the second session, a standard grammar test given to students that included 30 questions. Participants’ responses to items of grammatical test were given a single point for ten out of the thirty items and half a point given to each of twenty other items. Then in the next step they had been given a Discourse Completion Test in order to obtain data about their use of request speech act, they were scored according to their type of language used, that is being pragmatically accurate and appropriate.
In order to find answers to the research questions posed earlier, a number of statistical analyses were run on the data, Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) to calculate the Means, Standard Deviation for each of these three groups. Finally the results indicated the relationship between grammatical knowledge and pragmatic competence of different groups, calculated by using a Pearson Correlation Coefficient.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To be able to answer the research questions introduced earlier, the researcher considered the appropriate data analysis into consideration.

The First Question of the Study

Do grammatical knowledge and pragmatic knowledge of speech act of request relate each other in pre-intermediate level learners?

To answer this question, the scores of all Pre-intermediate level students (low group) regarding their performance in grammar knowledge and pragmatic knowledge for the speech act of request were compared. The results are shown in the following table.

Table 1. The descriptive statistics for the grammar and pragmatic competence at pre-intermediate level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grammar</td>
<td>12.05</td>
<td>2.537</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pragmatic</td>
<td>6.15</td>
<td>2.653</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 gives the descriptive statistics of the participants’ performance in grammar knowledge and pragmatic competence for the speech act of request. The table shows the mean differences and standard deviation of pre-intermediate level students. As shown there is a significant difference between these groups.

Table 2. Correlation coefficient between grammar knowledge and pragmatic competence At pre-intermediate level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Grammar</th>
<th>Pragmatic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar</td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.882</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>.028</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pragmatic</td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.882</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The second table is the correlation coefficient estimate of these two variables at the pre-intermediate level. As the output presents, the significance is (.882) that is more than (0.05) (p value > 0.05).
Therefore there is no correlation between grammatical knowledge and pragmatic competence for the speech act of request among subjects at the low group level. Thus it shows increasing in grammatical knowledge does not significantly cause to increasing in pragmatic knowledge of speech act of request at pre-intermediate level students. So the first hypothesis is accepted.

**Figure 1. Pre-intermediate level scatter graph in grammar and pragmatic competence**

In figure 1 there's a scatter plot that shows the distribution of student's scores in pre-intermediate level, as the dots presents each students scores, you can clearly see that they are scattered about so it is obvious that there is no meaningful difference between these two variables.

**The Second Question of the Study**

Do grammatical knowledge and pragmatic knowledge of speech act of request relate each other in intermediate level learners?

In order to answer this question and to understand whether there is any significant difference between the means of the intermediate level students (mid group) the two variables were compared. As shown in table 3 there is also a significant difference between these two variables at intermediate level students.

**Table 3. The descriptive statistics for the grammar and pragmatic competence at intermediate level**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grammar</td>
<td>13.20</td>
<td>2.420</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pragmatic</td>
<td>8.30</td>
<td>2.944</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 4. Correlation coefficient between grammar knowledge and pragmatic competence at intermediate level**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Grammar</th>
<th>Pragmatic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.060</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.752</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>.060</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pragmatic Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.752</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4 is the correlation output for intermediate level. Here the significance level is .752, therefore greater than 0.05 (p value > 0.05) and the correlation coefficient is .060. So there is no correlation between grammatical knowledge and pragmatic competence of these two variables at the intermediate level and the second hypothesis is accepted. So we can conclude from the results obtained that there is no statistically significant correlation between grammatical knowledge and pragmatic competence, this means that increases in grammatical knowledge is not correlated with increases in pragmatic competence of speech act of request in Iranian students at intermediate level.

![Figure 2. Intermediate level scatter graph in grammar and pragmatic competence](image)

In figure 2 the scatter plot shows the dots or in other words it indicates that the students' scores are so scattered about and the dots are not densely positioned in one place, instead they are all over the place, so in this case we have a zero correlation between these two variables.

### The Third Question of the Study

Do grammatical knowledge and pragmatic competence of speech acts relate to each other in advanced level learners?

To answer this question the two variables were compared

Table 5 shows the mean differences and standard deviation of advanced level students. As shown there is a difference between these groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grammar</td>
<td>15.30</td>
<td>2.015</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pragmatic</td>
<td>10.40</td>
<td>2.551</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The last table is the correlation coefficient output at the advanced level. The significance level is .000 that is less than 0.05 and the correlation coefficient is 0.96. As p-value is < 0.05 so there is a relationship of 0.96 between the grammatical knowledge and pragmatic
competence of these two variables and the third hypothesis is rejected. So it can be concluded that there is a positive statistically significant correlation between grammatical knowledge and pragmatic competence of Iranian advanced students.

**Table 6. Correlation coefficient between grammar knowledge and pragmatic competence at advanced level**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Grammar</th>
<th>Pragmatic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.967**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pragmatic Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).**

Therefore it shows that increases in grammatical knowledge do significantly relate to increases in pragmatic competence of advanced students. A positive relationship is supported.

**Figure 3. Advanced level scatter graph in grammar and pragmatic competence**

Figure 3 Shows the scatter plot of advanced level students, as it is shown the dots seem to go together to form a straight line and the line in this graph slopes upward from the lower scores to higher scores. So we have a positive relationship and a linear relationship exists between the grammatical knowledge and pragmatic knowledge of students in advanced level students.

**Results of Hypothesis Testing**

The research questions of the present study about the relationship between grammatical knowledge and pragmatic knowledge of speech act of request in different level students were investigated. And in this case it was found that the students with higher proficiency in grammatical knowledge performed better than those with lower grammatical knowledge.

The first hypothesis of the study had been confirmed because of the results of the Pearson correlation that presented a significant difference between the participants performance in lower group.
Also the second hypothesis of the study had been accepted according to the results of the Pearson correlation. It indicated that the students performance were not significantly different to the previous group.

Finally in the third hypothesis of the study the correlation results presented a positive relationship between the grammar knowledge and the pragmatic knowledge of speech act of request in advanced group. In other words, increase in grammatical knowledge does significantly increase the pragmatic competence of speech act of request in students with high level of proficiency. So the third hypothesis of the study had been rejected.

Pragmatic and grammatical competence shows a regular imbalance in the sense that grammatical competence exceeds pragmatic competence (Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei, 1998). This imbalance may be due to the Materials FL learners are presented with, both in the form of written tasks (Salazar and Usó, in press), and transcripts they have to listen to. It was found that there is not a positive and significant relationship between grammatical knowledge (language proficiency) and the pragmatic knowledge in the low groups’ level. In addition, it was also revealed that the difference between the three groups of language proficiency (high, mid and low) in terms of their pragmatic knowledge is not significant especially in pre-intermediate and intermediate groups. But in advanced group although there's also a slight difference in their mean and standard deviation but not significant. So in answering the research question, seeking differences of pragmatic competence in requesting of learners with different language proficiency, results showed significant differences between high- mid and low- English proficiency learners' pragmatic ability. The participants in the high group outperformed the mid and low-level group. The finding of this investigation also supports Garcia's claim that pragmatic competence is different from linguistic competence (Garcia, 2004). This supports that linguistic competence is necessary for L2 speakers to be pragmatically competent (Hoffman-Hicks, 1992).

Therefore it was found that those who are in advanced level and have more grammatical knowledge performed better both in grammatical knowledge and pragmatic competence.

CONCLUSION

To successfully master English language in international communication, as the recent views are moving towards English as an International language and lingua franca, people possessing different linguistic and cultural backgrounds truly need to have intercultural communicative competence in addition to communicative competence as a successful non-native speaker (Byram 1997, as cited in Houghton 2009, p.70). Besides emphasizing on only grammar aspects, teachers must encourage language learners to pay more attention on how to use language appropriately in diverse situations and contexts and avoid making pragmatic mistakes to breakdown the communication. To help learners avoid making pragmatic mistake, it is necessary to instruct them the socio-cultural rules of the English, demonstrate to them what pragmatic transfer is, and provide them with pragmatic knowledge. Pragmatic knowledge of a language is better acquired by exposing the learners to natural environment and authentic materials

Since the goal of EFL teaching must be to help students to communicate fluently in the target language, instructors should focus not only on grammatical knowledge or linguistic benefits, but also on other beneficial aspects of language like pragmatic competence in order to communicate properly in the right situations.

the need to move away from teaching only linguistic aspects of language and neglecting from pragmatic and socio-cultural aspects of language. Iranian EFL learners are advised to acquire
firm linguistic knowledge. Moreover, supplementing pragmatic knowledge in English teaching and learning is believed to help learners become proficient in the target language, i.e. able to communicate accurately and appropriately in different situations.

So in order to communicate effectively in the target language, learners of English language need to develop pragmatic competence, which can be accomplished through pragmatic instruction in the classroom, particularly in the spoken English class. With the raise of pragmatic awareness, it is expected that learners will acquire the competence and their target language performance will improve. Besides the teachers who are to explore and enhance materials form the textbook, material developers and curriculum designers should also include pragmatic awareness in the books and curricula.

Finally, it is important to direct L2 learners’ attention to their pragmalinguistic knowledge and present them with an opportunity to provide introspections about what they know.

REFERENCES


