The Relationship between Iranian EFL Learners’ Language Proficiency and Pragmatic Competence

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Abstract
Many scholars put emphasis on the mutual effect of pragmatic competence and language proficiency in conducting a healthy communication such as Hoffman-Hicks (1999) that claimed linguistic proficiency is a prerequisite to pragmatic competence though it does not guarantee pragmatic competence. Also Thomas (1983) supported that a lower-level grammar leads to the misinterpretation of speech acts among L2 learners. This study aimed to find out the relationship between pragmatic competence of Iranian EFL learners and their language proficiency. To this purpose, sixty-five participants attended the study including 25 males and 40 females who had been homogenized through Oxford Placement Test. To measure learners’ pragmatic competence, Roever’s (2005) questionnaire was used. The Spearman Rank-Order correlation test was run to calculate the relationship between pragmatic competence and language proficiency. The result of the study showed that language proficiency plays a significant role in Iranian EFL learners’ pragmatic competence.

Key words: Iranian EFL learners, language proficiency, pragmatic competence.

1. Introduction
English as an international language is a tool for communication without which our main goal of teaching and learning English will be fruitless. The role of pragmatics in communication has been regarded by many scholars because it is believed that linguistic knowledge is necessary for getting meaning across but this is not possible without cross-cultural understanding, which put emphasis on the importance of the issue. Hoffman-Hicks (1999) claimed that that linguistic proficiency is a prerequisite to pragmatic competence though it does not guarantee pragmatic competence alone. Putting in mind that both pragmatic and linguistic knowledge are required for communication, in the current study the researcher was going to investigate the mutual effect of pragmatic competence and language proficiency.

Yi shih (2006) asserts that in intercultural communication, foreign language speakers not only should gain grammatical competence to achieve linguistic accuracy, but also need to internalize sociolinguistic rules to help them employ appropriate linguistic forms. Hymes (1974) points out that there are systematical relations between grammatical and social structure underlying the varieties of speech in communities and in the individual conduct. According to Alptekin (2002) communicative competence entails four competencies: Grammatical competence, Sociolinguistic competence, Discourse competence, Strategic competence. So here we can conclude that for holding a healthy communication linguistic competence is necessary but is not enough for getting the meaning across.
As it can be seen, language proficiency seems to play role in pragmatic production in a real communication. Regarding this Kasper (1997) argues, for adult learners, some universal pragmatic knowledge already existed in their minds and can be used for free. Here it can be concluded linguistic knowledge that interlocutors have in advance correlates their ability to convey their message which is expected to be socioculturally appropriate. Similarly, Beebe and Takahashi (1989) hypothesized that L2 proficiency is positively correlated with pragmatic transfer. As we see the two aspects of language competence seem to be closely related.

2. Review of the Related Literature

2.1 Theoretical background

Pragmatics, which was put forward by Charles Morris in 1930s, has drawn a lot of attention in recent decades. Pragmatics is broadly framed as the study of language use in social contexts. The cornerstone of pragmatics based on Tsutagawa (2013), is arguably speech act theory, which was founded by the language philosophers Austin (1962), Grice (1957) and Searle (1965). Steiner and Veltman (1988, p. 2) view pragmatics as “the means by which students of language come to terms with language as a process as well as language as a product”. According to Fraser (1983, cited in Hamidi & Montazeri, 2014), pragmatic competence is the knowledge how an addressee determines what a speaker is saying and recognizes intended illocutionary force conveyed through subtle attitudes in the speakers’ utterance.

When talking about pragmatic competence it is only natural that the term pragmatic production cannot be ignored. Regarding this, Thomas (1995) claims that pragmatic production refers to the ability to perform speech functions appropriately in social contexts. The study of pragmatics delves into the capacity of language users to see if they can employ appropriate utterances based on related contexts. Stalnaker (1972) sees pragmatics as "the study of linguistic acts and the contexts in which they are performed" (1972, p. 383). Similarly, Kasper (1997) mentions that a further aspect of students' pragmatic competence is their awareness of what is, and is not appropriate in the given contexts. Based on House, kasper, and Rose (2003), we can say that pragmatics is the knowledge that makes people understand the intercultural interaction structures and speech act strategies to avoid misunderstanding encountered in the international social occasions. Therefore, pragmatics seems to pave the way for language users to find socially appropriate language for the situations that may come across.

English is an international language and as McKay (2002) claims, is currently used by people in the world for interaction and communication with each other in order to do international trade or participate in the academic conferences. Regarding the importance of the issue, culture as an inevitable part of language, cannot be ignored. Regarding this, Crystal (1997) points that having pragmatic knowledge is necessary and useful in second language learning.

Therefore, we can say that teaching and learning pragmatics is essential in the world of communication to avoid misunderstanding caused by cross-cultural differences. Although pragmatics has been pointed by many scholars, it was not emphasized as needed. Regarding this, kasper (2001) claims that pragmatics has played a vital role in first and second language classroom research, but classroom research has played only a minor role in interlanguage up to now. So, what seems necessary is paying a particular attention to the issue, in order to make a progress in resolving the misunderstandings that come across.

In the model of communicative language competence in Bachman (2000) and also Bachman and Palmers (2010), pragmatic competence is considered the central component in language learning because it is seen as one of the two main components of language competence parallel to organizational competence. Therefore, it may be concluded that there should be a mutual effect of language proficiency and pragmatic competence in communication.
Many studies have already been done on the relationship of pragmatic competence and language proficiency such as Garcia (2004) that the researcher investigated linguistic and pragmatic processing on a listening comprehension task of learners of different proficiency levels. The results revealed that the higher-level learners significantly performed better than the lower-level learners. Similarly, Naoko Taguchi (2006) tried to analyze the appropriateness in speech act of request in L2 English. The researcher indicated that there was a significant L2 proficiency effect in appropriateness ratings, which shows there was relationship between the quality of speech act production and language proficiency.

In a study of relationships between L1 pragmatic transfer and L2 proficiency (Bu, 2011), revealed that L1 pragmatic transfer decreases with the increase of L2 proficiency such as learners’ use of direct strategies, lexical and phrasal down graders, imperatives and grounder and no clear relationship is found between L1 pragmatic transfer and L2 proficiency in terms of the other request strategies, internal modifiers and external modifiers. The researchers further that the results provided support to negative correlation hypothesis which claims that high proficiency L2 learners are less likely to commit pragmatic transfer because they have enough control over L2. Ashoorpour and Azari (2014) demonstrated that there is significant relationship between grammatical knowledge and pragmatic competence in pre-intermediate and intermediate level students.

Carrell (1981) have focused on pragmatic development among learners at various proficiency levels, which demonstrated that higher levels of linguistic proficiency often correlate with higher levels of pragmatic competence. In a longitudinal study done by Siegal (1996), the researcher revealed that language proficiency plays an important role on pragmatic competence. Keshmiri (1999) studied the effect of proficiency level on the interpretation of conversational implicatures by Iranian and American students. Analysis of the results showed that more proficient participants interpreted the implicatures included in the test significantly better than the less proficient ones.

However, different studies show different results. Sahragard and Javanmardi (2011) revealed that there was no difference between the participants of different levels of education in using the strategies for producing speech act of refusal. Also, Mirzaei and Esmaeili (2013) investigated the effects of planned instruction on Iranian L2 learners’ interlanguage pragmatic development. The study demonstrated that learners’ level of language proficiency had no significant role in the incorporation of the instruction. In a study of interrelations between sociopragmatic and linguistic competences by Xiaole (2009), the researcher found that learners’ sociopragmatic competence does not improve in a positive relation to their linguistic proficiencies.

Similarly, Farshaiyan and Hua (2012) investigated the relationship between pragmatic knowledge and language proficiency among Iranian undergraduate EFL learners across genders. They observed that there was not a positive and significant relationship between language proficiency (grammatical knowledge) and pragmatic knowledge. They also added that the difference found between the three groups of language proficiency (high, mid and low) in terms of their pragmatic knowledge was not significant. Also, Trosborg (1987) did a comparative study of apology strategies employed by the different proficient groups of Danish learners of English including low level learners, intermediate level learners and advanced level learners using role-play. The researcher has not found the apparent proficient effect on L1 pragmatic transfer according to frequencies of apology strategies used by the three levels of learners, compared with those of the Danish native speakers and those of the native English speakers.
2.3 Research question

In order to achieve the goal of the study the researcher presented the following research question:

RQ: Is there any relationship between language proficiency and pragmatic competence in Iranian EFL learners?

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants were 65 students selected randomly for this study including 25 male and 40 females who were homogenized through test of OPT. The participants were Iranian EFL students of English at Poya-Simin institute, Qaemshahr branch, north of Iran.

3.2 Instruments

As to the instruments, the Oxford placement test was used as the test of language proficiency. A questionnaire of pragmatics for assessing the knowledge of pragmatics (Roever, 2005). The aforementioned questionnaire was used as a research instrument. The questionnaire included 31 questions providing communicative context for the participants. The questionnaire consisted of different parts for evaluating different aspects of pragmatic competence of participants. The aspects regarded in the questionnaire include questions for implicatures, questions for situational routines and questions for speech acts.

3.3 Procedure

The OPT was given to the participants in order to have homogenized members to carry out the study. The scores of the participants after the homogeneity test was regarded as their proficiency score too. Roever’s (2005) pragmatic questionnaire was used for investigating Iranian EFL learners’ pragmatic competence and every participant was assigned to answer the questions of the questionnaire. Participants were not allowed to discuss on the items with their classmates. Every question had one point and had no negative mark. A Spearman’s Rank Order correlation was used in order to find out whether there was any relationship between language proficiency and pragmatic knowledge. This study was qualitative in nature and the researcher did not give any treatment to the participants, rather he intended to find the relationship between two variables. The first variable was language proficiency and the second variable was pragmatic competence. In order to avoid any further problems the researcher explained the task to the participants and made sure that participants understood what to do. The researcher assured the participants that their information would remain confidential.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Result of the OPT used as homogeneity test

In order to have homogenized participants in terms of their general English language proficiency, the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was administered. The descriptive statistics for the OPT test are displayed in table 4.1.
Table 4.1 The Descriptive Statistics of the OPT score

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statistic</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>OPTScores</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>28.00</td>
<td>63.00</td>
<td>91.00</td>
<td>76.2125</td>
<td>1.00783</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Std. Error</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9.01433</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Valid N (listwise) 80

Out of the eighty participants, sixty-five were considered as homogenous members based on one standard deviation above and below the mean (+/- SD). They were 25 males and 40 females.

4.2 Analysis of the first research question

The first research question of this study was as follow:

RQ1: Is there any difference between males’ and females’ pragmatic competence?

In order to run a t-test, the researcher had to meet two assumptions; normality of data distribution and homogeneity of variances. As it can be seen in table 4.2 below, the Sig value of the Shapiro-Wilk Test is greater than 0.05, meaning that the data is normally distributed.

4.2 Test of normality for the pragmatic score

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tests of Normality</th>
<th>Kolmogorov-Smirnova</th>
<th>Shapiro-Wilk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Statistic</td>
<td>df</td>
<td>Sig.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RealPragmatics</td>
<td>.100</td>
<td>.178</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

As it can be seen in table 4.3 below, the two groups were homogenous in terms of their variances as a condition to apply the t-test. As displayed in Table 4.4, the Levene F of 1.45 had a probability of .233. Since the probability associated with the Levene F was higher than the significance level of .05, it could be reasoned that the two groups enjoyed homogenous variances on the post-test of the writing test. Table 4.3 shows the group statistics for the male and female scores on pragmatic test.

Table 4.3 Group Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RealPragmatics dimension1</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>male</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>65.4400</td>
<td>4.64650</td>
<td>.92930</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>female</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>49.7750</td>
<td>5.67264</td>
<td>.89692</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the next step, table 4.4 below shows the result of the independent t-test for the final conclusion. An independent t-test was run to compare the mean scores of male and female participants.
The mean scores for the male and female groups were 65.44 and 49.77 respectively as displayed in table 4.3 above. As it can also be seen in table 4.4 above, the probability of $t(11.58)$ had the sig of (.000), that is much lower than the significance level of .05. Based on the results, it could be concluded that there was a significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups on the pragmatic test. The male group performed better on pragmatic test. Thus, it could be concluded that the null-hypothesis which was “there is no difference between males’ and females’ pragmatic competence.” was rejected, putting emphasis on the superiority of the male group on the pragmatic test.

**4.3 Analysis of the second research question**

The second research question of this study was as follow:

RQ2: Is there any relationship between Iranian EFL learners’ language proficiency and their pragmatic competence?

In order to run a correlation test, the researcher had to meet the normal distribution assumptions using the Shapiro-Wilk test. Table 4.5 below shows the result.

As it can be seen in table 4.5 above, the Sig value of the Shapiro-Wilk Test is less than 0.05, meaning that the data is not normally distributed. Therefore, Pearson Product Moment correlation cannot be used and Spearman Rank-Order correlation should be used instead. Table 4.6 below shows the result of the Spearman Rank-Order correlation test.
Table 4.6 Result of the Spearman Rank-Order Correlation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>RealPragmatics</th>
<th>OPTHomogenized</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spearman's rho</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Correlation Coefficient</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OPTHomogenized</td>
<td>Correlation Coefficient</td>
<td>0.991**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

The Spearman’s Rank Order correlation was run to determine the relationship between Iranian EFL learners’ language proficiency and their pragmatic competence. There was a strong, positive correlation between English and maths marks, which was statistically significant ($r_s(63) = .991, p = .000$). Thus, it could be concluded that the null-hypothesis which was “there is no relationship between Iranian EFL learners’ language proficiency and their pragmatic competence.” was rejected, meaning that in this particular case Iranian EFL learners’ language proficiency was related to their pragmatic competence.

As it is clear, the hypothesis that there is no relationship between pragmatic competence and language proficiency was rejected since the statistics confirms the significant role of language proficiency on pragmatic competence. The current study supports what Hoffman-Hicks (1999) claimed. They stated that that linguistic proficiency is a prerequisite to pragmatic competence though it does not guarantee pragmatic competence. Our study is also in agreement with Khamyod and Aksonjarung (2011) that stated “Participants with high English proficiency showed high pragmatic ability and vice versa. Findings also suggest that linguistic competence is necessary for L2 learners in acquiring pragmatic competence”. Taguchi (2006) tried to analyze the appropriateness in speech act of request in L2 English. The researcher indicated that there was a significant L2 proficiency effect in appropriateness ratings which shows that that quality speech act performance is related to overall language facility. Similarly, Carrel (1984) holds that language proficiency plays an important role on learners’ pragmatic competence, which also supported the findings of the current study.

On the other hand, results opposite to this study must be taken into account. Bardovi-Harlig (2001) and Bouton (1996) have revealed that learners of high grammatical proficiency do not necessarily show considerable pragmatic competence which is in contrast with the current study. Our study is also in contrast with Farshaiyan and Hua (2012) that investigated the relationship between pragmatic knowledge and language proficiency among Iranian male and female undergraduate EFL learners. They observed that there was not a positive and significant relationship between language proficiency and pragmatic knowledge. They also added that no difference was found between the three groups of language proficiency (high, mid and low) in terms of their pragmatic knowledge is not significant. Likewise, Xiaole (2009) found that learners’ sociopragmatic competence does not improve in a positive relation to their linguistic proficiencies.
5. Conclusion

As was claimed in the title of the study, the aim of the current study was to see if there was any relationship between Iranian EFL learners’ language proficiency and their pragmatic competence or not. The result of the study indicated that language proficiency plays a significant role on Iranian EFL learners’ pragmatic competence which means subjects with higher language proficiency performed better in the exam.

Regarding the result of the current research, the significant relationship between pragmatic competence and language proficiency was found since the study showed positive and strong correlation of the two variables. Due to this fact, the researcher suggests that more emphasis must be put on the issue. But caution must be taken that it is not easy yet to reach a consensus on the issue since there are studies that have taken opposite views. Therefore, desirable conclusions are dependent on further studies which are hoped to be replicated in the future. Generally speaking, because of the importance of the issue teachers should be careful not to ignore any of the two variables in English teaching.

References

Development.


Author Bio

Mohammadreza Khodareza (Ph.D. in TEFL) has taught in Tonekabon IAU and other universities in Iran. He has supervised more than a hundred M.A. theses. He has also published several books and ISI articles. He collaborates as a reviewer and an editor in different international journals. For the time being, he is the head of English department at Tonekabon Islamic Azad University.

Bahman Hamidi is an M.A graduate in applied linguistics from Tonekabon Islamic Azad University. He has taught English to Iranian EFL learners at different institutes for about 8 years. He has also published some papers in different international journals.