

PRAGMATIC FAILURE AMONG IRANIAN EFL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: The development of L2 learners' pragmatic competence plays a key role in the achievement of communicative competence. The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between language proficiency and pragmatics. **Materials and methods:** The data were collected from 60 Iranian EFL students (33 females and 27 males) for a period of 2 weeks. The instruments used in this study were Oxford Placement Test and Pragmatic Knowledge Quiz. The data were analyzed qualitatively and the obtained results were analyzed by the software SPSS 16. **Results:** The results indicate that Iranian EFL students are poor in pragmatic issues and they have a lot of problems in this field. Regarding the relationship between language proficiency and pragmatics, there is a significant relationship between them but it is moderate. Sex difference regarding the use of pragmatic features of English reveals that there is no significant relationship between two sexes and two groups did almost the same job. And finally pragmatic features of English is predictable by a language proficiency test; namely as the students linguistic knowledge increases, their pragmatic awareness rises as well.

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INTRODUCTION

Learning a language is too often viewed as simply a matter of mastering a distinct system of signs, without reference to the context in which a particular language is used. Recently, research in cross-cultural pragmatics has, however, clearly illustrated that different cultures use language in culturally distinctive ways.

People do not always or even usually say what they mean. Speakers frequently mean more than their words actually say. People can mean something quite different from what their words say, or even just the opposite. As a domain within L2 studies, pragmatics is one of the terrains deserving more attention. Pragmatic knowledge is an inseparable area of language proficiency as defined by Bachman [1]. Pragmatics is concerned with the study of meaning as communicated by speaker (or writer) and interpreted by a listener (or reader). It is the study of speaker's meaning [2].

Language learners may be competent in linguistic forms of the target language, but they may not be aware of the different functions and meanings of those forms in the target language. Pragmatic failure may not only cause ineffective communication, but may also cause native speakers to form misjudgments or misperceptions about the personality, beliefs and attitudes of the learner.

It has, consequently, more to do with the analysis of what the words or phrases in utterances might mean by themselves. This type of study deals with the interpretation of the people's utterance in a specific context and how context influences the speaker's utterance. Pragmatics also explores how listeners of the language interpret what is said in order to reach an interpretation of the speaker's intention. It also deals with what is unsaid by the speaker. Kasper and Schmidt note that although pragmatics has played a considerable role in approaches to first and second language classroom research, classroom research has played only a minor role in interlanguage pragmatics thus far [3]. Pragmatics, as Kasper and Blum-Kulka put it, is the study of people's comprehension and production of linguistic action in context. Interlanguage pragmatics, thus, refers to the study of nonnative speakers' use and acquisition of linguistic action patterns in a second language [4]. It seems that Iranian EFL students are paralyzed

in pragmatic areas. Although they are proficient and competent in different aspects of language, they have a lot of problems facing the pragmatic issues.

The main objectives of this study is discovering pragmatic failure, and finding out the relationship between pragmatics and second language learning. It is striving to respond to the question that if those learners who are competent in language proficiency have this ability to deal with pragmatic issues, or being linguistically competent guaranties coping with pragmatic problems. So to respond these issues, the following research questions are posed:

- How is the performance of Iranian EFL learners in pragmatic situations?
- Is there any sex difference regarding the use of pragmatic features of English?
- What is the relationship between proficiency and knowledge of pragmatic features of English?
- Can knowledge of pragmatic features be predicted by a language proficiency test?.

INTRODUCTION TO PRAGMATICS

Learning language is not a linear process in which the individual learn the materials one after another but it is a spiral one in which the learners try to acquire the materials in several grammatical areas simultaneously. Learning to use language accurately (grammatical accuracy) as well as appropriately (pragmatic appropriacy) is a must. Pragmatic appropriacy and linguistic accuracy are two wings of language learning in which absence of one make the flying impossible. It presumably possible to produce pure correct language in terms of grammatical accuracy, but it makes no sense without considering pragmatic appropriacy and it makes communicative barriers in the process of language learning.

As Rintell and Mitchell point out, resorting to only literal meaning of the words can lead to misunderstanding or create offence when the person does not know the rules to interpret them[5]. According to Fraser, who insists a theory of linguistic communication, “any effects beyond the successful recognition of the speaker's intentions, such as convincing, annoying, or confusing the hearer, are not part of communication but the result of communication or perhaps the result of failure to communicate” [6]. What Fraser describes means “pragmatic failure to the inability to understand what is meant by what is said” presented by[7,6] . Pragmatic failure is a sub branch of cross-cultural pragmatics which has grown tremendously in last twenty years.

Pragmatics

The general area in language learning from the view point of its use is labeled as pragmatics. The main focus of pragmatics is on language users- the choice they make, kinds of words regarding formality or informality, the effect the language has on the other participants in the process of communication and the like.

Thomas believes that pragmatics is meaning in interaction [8]. He holds that pragmatics is concerned with the negotiation of meaning between the participants, the context in which the utterance is taking place, whether it is physical, social, linguistic or potential meaning of utterance.

LoCastero views language as an attempt to create meaning in a joint action by the speaker and the hearer that include both linguistic and non-linguistic signals in the sociocultural context[9]. Pragmatics is also the study of invisible meaning (2)– it regards how a lot of unproduced language is communicated between the speaker and the hearer. Speakers have a presupposition in their mind to assume that there is a great deal of information shared between the participants.

Pragmatic failure

It is worth to say that a great deal of misunderstanding is not because we do not hear the speaker or his words are not grammatical, but it is the inability to understand ‘what is meant by what is said’, Thomas exploited the term ‘pragmatic failure’[7]. It is pragmatic failure which leads to cross-cultural communication failure, thus it seems essential to investigate the causes of pragmatic failure and seek for the ways to avoid them by choosing unwise linguistic forms for not to be offended or make a hindrance in the process of communication Sharifian offers the following example from an Iranian student:

An Iranian student at Shiraz University receives the recommendation letter from her American lecturer that she has asked him to write for her and then turns to him and says, "I'm ashamed." Bewildered by the student's response, the lecturer asks, "What have you done?!!!" [10]

This is a case in intercultural miscommunication because of inappropriate use of the illocutionary force for appreciating. This expression is used in a situation in which an offence has taken place rather than expressing appreciation.

Pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic failure

Leech, quoting Thomas, classifies general pragmatics into pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics [11]. He describes "pragmalinguistics is related to grammar" while "sociopragmatics is related to sociology." In other words, "pragmalinguistic studies are language-specific" while "sociopragmatic studies are culture-specific". Pragmalinguistics concerns with the conveying communicative acts and interpersonal meaning. It includes some resources such as directness and indirectness, routines, and a large range of linguistic forms, which can intensify or soften communicative act (1 [12])

Sociopragmatics, on the other hand, refers to the way in which language is used in a social situation, in other words, it concerns with the function of a language in the situation, and thus, learning of the language is interwoven with the learning of the culture in which language is taking place. The relationship that holds between both, language and culture is depicted, as shown in **Figure- 1** below:

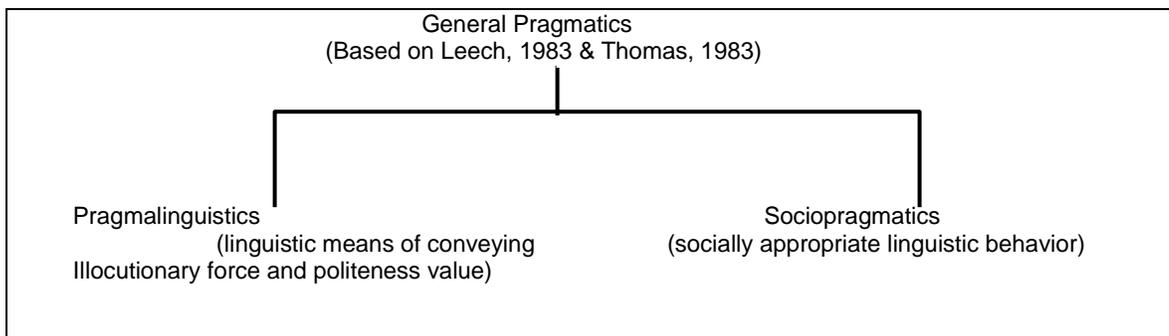


Fig:1.the pragmatic continuum: language- culture

As illustrated in **Figure- 1** above, Leech regards general pragmatics as "the study of linguistic communication in terms of conversational principles", whereas pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics belong to "more specific local conditions of language use" [11].

Speech act

While talking, people do not only produce meaningful utterances, they also perform actions via those utterances, which are known as speech acts – apologizing, promising, complaining, complimenting, inviting, etc. This can be done directly or indirectly.

The term speech acts was proposed for the first time by Austin [13]. He indicates that "the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action" [13], and he provides the concept of speech as an act. Speech acts, according to Searl, are "the basic or minimal units of linguistic communication" [14] Schmidt and Richards state that speech acts are "all the acts we perform through speaking and all the things we do when we speak" [15]. Speech acts are the actions we do through speaking, and they can cause a change as we speak or have an effect on the person we are talking to. For example, in saying I apologize, one is not only stating something, but is also performing an act of apology.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Totally 60 EFL learners participated in this study. They constituted 30 fourth-year undergraduate, and 30 first-year graduate students from Shiraz Azad University, majoring in English teaching. They were studying English as a foreign language for four and five years, respectively. All learners were native speakers of Persian and their age ranged from 22 to 32. They were considered to be at a high level of language proficiency. None of them had visited any English-speaking country. The instruments utilized in this study consisted of two parts; a language a pragmatic awareness quiz and proficiency test. In order to examine participants' pragmatic knowledge, a pragmatic awareness quiz was employed. It constituted 40 items and all the items were in multiple choice format. It was provided by Professor Yarmohammadi and its content validity was approved by him. For the sake of reliability, it was calculated and 0.7 was obtained. The purpose of the pragmatic awareness quiz is to elicit participants' pragmatic awareness and the level of their pragmatic knowledge and to know how much they have acquired pragmatics during their academic studies.

To assess participants' language proficiency, Oxford Quick Placement Test (1999) was employed. It was a 60-item multiple-choice test consisting of three sections: Reading with fill in the blanks (25 items), Grammar (10 items) and Vocabulary (20 items) and language use (5 items). The reading Section assesses the students' ability to fill in the blanks with appropriate words. The grammar section assesses students' grammatical knowledge and asks them to choose the item which is grammatically correct. The purpose of the vocabulary section is to assess students' range of vocabulary understanding. Since this is a standard test and is used in language institutes to assess students' level of language proficiency, and its validity and reliability have already been established by Oxford University, we preferred to utilize it.

The data were collected over two weeks during the fall semester 2008- 2009. The data collection was carried out in paper and pencil. The nature of the test was explained to the participants of the study on the exam session. Moreover, the participants were assured on the confidentiality of the results and the advantage of their contributions to the study. On the exam session, half of the participants were given pragmatic quizzes and at the same time, the other half were given the language proficiency tests. After they completed their task, those who had pragmatic quizzes, were given language proficiency tests and those who had language proficiency tests were given pragmatic quizzes to have counter balance. They were given 40 minutes on the pragmatic quiz and 40 minutes on the language proficiency test. The exam sessions were observed and the participants' possible questions were answered.

The data were analyzed through the following statistical procedures through SPSS software (version 13) to answer the research questions. To find out the level of Iranian EFL students' pragmatic knowledge, descriptive analysis was used. Correlation test and One Way ANOVA were run to see the relationship between participants' language proficiency and pragmatic knowledge. The test which was employed to compare the differences between the males and the females concerning use of pragmatic features of English was Independent Samples T.test. To find out whether pragmatic features of English were predictable by language proficiency test, regression test was employed. All these constituted the quantitative part of the analysis.

RESULTS

Results of the analysis of the data along with their interpretation and discussion are presented in this chapter, which is divided into two main parts. The first part deals with the quantitative analysis of the data, the tables and their interpretations, and in the second part discussions of the data analyses are presented.

Participants' performance in pragmatic issues

The first research question refers to the performance of Iranian EFL learners in pragmatic issues in which descriptive analysis was used. The participants' scores on pragmatics are shown in **Table- 1**, including the mean, standard deviation, minimum, and maximum of the participants.

Table: 1 .Descriptive statistic results of the participants' pragmatic performance

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
pragmatic test 40	60	9	26	18.35	3.839
Valid N (listwise)	60				

Table- 1 indicates that the number of the participants is 60, the minimum achieved score is 9, the maximum score is 26, the mean obtained is 18.35 and the standard deviation is 3.839. Since pragmatic quiz consists of 60 items, the achieved mean of the participants is less than the total half.

Relationship between language proficiency and pragmatics

The second research question is concerned with the relationship between language proficiency and knowledge of pragmatic features of English. Table 2 reveals the relationship between language proficiency and pragmatics. It can be observed that the Pearson correlation between pragmatic quiz and language proficiency is 0.506.

Table: 2 .Correlation between linguistic knowledge and pragmatics

Correlations			
		Pragmatic test (40)	placement test (60)
Pragmatic test (40)	Pearson Correlation	1	.506**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	60	60
placement test (60)	Pearson Correlation	.506**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	60	60
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).			

Table -3 shows the results achieved by On Way ANOVA test. It reveals that the level of significant between language proficiency and pragmatic quiz is 0.000 (between groups).

Table: 3. Statistic result of relationship between pragmatics and language proficiency

ANOVA					
pragmatic test 40					
	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	257.216	2	128.608	11.970	.000
Within Groups	612.434	57	10.744		
Total	869.650	59			

Table- 4 indicates the multiple comparisons of the participants in pragmatics. We divided them into three groups as High, Mid, and Low, the level of significance between High and Low group is 0.000. It is 0.432 between High and Mid, and finally the level of significance between Low and Mid is 0.002.

Table: 4 . Multiple comparisons of three different groups of pragmatics

	(I) Group	(J) Group	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Scheffe	High	Mid	1.335	1.022	.432	-1.23	3.90
		Low	5.235*	1.124	.000	2.41	8.06
	Mid	High	-1.335	1.022	.432	-3.90	1.23
		Low	3.900*	1.022	.002	1.33	6.47
	Low	High	-	1.124	.000	-8.06	-2.41
		Mid	-	1.022	.002	-6.47	-1.33
*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.							

Sex difference regarding the use of pragmatic features of English

The third research question concerns the sex difference with regard to the use of pragmatic features of English in which the results are shown in the **Table- 5**.

Table- 5 pertains to the sex difference regarding the use of pragmatic features of English. It is observed that numbers of male and female participants are 27 and 33, respectively. Their mean scores achieved are 18 for the males and 18.64 for the females.

Table :5 .Sex difference regarding the pragmatic features of English

Group Statistics					
	Sex	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pragmatic test 40	Male	27	18.00	4.010	.772
	Female	33	18.64	3.732	.650

Independent Sample test was used to see if the males and the females differ concerning the use of pragmatic features of English. As can be seen from the table 6, the levels of significance between the males and the females are 0.528 and 0.531.

Table :6 .Independent Sample Test for sex difference regarding use of pragmatics

Independent Samples Test								
		t-test for Equality of Means						
		T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
							Lower	Upper
Pragmatic test 40	Equal variance assumed	.636	58	.528	.636	1.001	2.641	1.36
	Equal variances not assumed	-.631	53.911	.531	.636	1.009	2.659	1.38

Prediction of English pragmatic features by language proficiency test

Regression test was conducted to see if it is possible to predict pragmatic features with a language proficiency test. **Table- 7** reveals the descriptive analysis of the regression test. As it is demonstrated, the R is 0.506 and R square or correlation coefficient is 0.256.

Table: 7. Correlation between language proficiency and pragmatics

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.506a	.256	.243	3.340
a. Predictors: (Constant), placement test 60				

The main statistical data concerning the subjects’ results in the language proficiency test and the pragmatic quiz are shown in **Table- 8**. It reveals the achieved results by ANOVA test. As it is observed, the significance is 0.000.

Table: 8 . Predictions of pragmatic features by linguistic knowledge test

ANOVA b						
Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	222.519	1	222.519	19.944	.000a
	Residual	647.131	58	11.157		
	Total	869.650	59			

Pragmatic and grammatical competences show a regular imbalance in the sense that grammatical competence exceeds pragmatic competence [16].

In order to answer question one in the research question, which is how the performance of Iranian EFL students is in pragmatic situations, the descriptive statistics was used. As can be seen from the **Table- 1**, the pragmatic knowledge test yielded lower scores than it was expected. The maximum obtained score was 26 and the minimum

achieved score was 9 out of 40. And considering mean score which is 18.36, it is drastically low, and since the participants' mean score is less than the total half, it indicates that Iranian EFL students are poor in the pragmatic awareness.

The second hypothesis question suggested what relationship there is between language proficiency and knowledge of pragmatic features of English. Regarding the results illustrated in the **Table- 2**, we can see that the correlation between proficiency test and pragmatic knowledge test is 0.506. And **Table- 3** shows the level of significance which is 0.000. It means that the correlation between these two kinds of tests is moderate, but it is significant. From **Table- 2**, these conclusions can be drawn as follows:

- (a) The linguistic ability of the participants is not tied inextricably with their pragmatic awareness.
- (b) There is a relationship between language proficiency test and pragmatic knowledge quiz (sig: 0.000) but it is not so strong. We can say that the relationship between these two tests is moderate (correlation: 0.506).

The level of significance between Low Level and Mid level is 0.002. It means that as the subjects go from low level to high level in language proficiency their pragmatic knowledge increases and in the same line, as the subjects go from low level to high level their pragmatic knowledge increases as well (sig, 0.000). But the difference between mid level and high level is not significant. This indicates that there is no significant difference between these two groups namely as their levels of language proficiency increases, it has no effect on their pragmatic knowledge.

The third hypothesis question is striving to answer the question if there is a sex difference regarding the use of pragmatic features of English. To answer this question Independent Sample t-test was employed. **Table- 5** demonstrates that the mean score of the males is 18 and the mean score of the females is 18.6 out of 40. **Table- 6** reveals the level of significance which is 0.5. This means that there is no significant relationship between the two sexes regarding the use of pragmatic features of English. The Two groups do not differ significantly in term of their English pragmatic knowledge and both sexes did the same job in pragmatic awareness.

The fourth question is dealing with the question if pragmatic knowledge is predictable by a language proficiency test or not. The results reported in **Table- 7** and **-8** reveal that the R Square which is correlation coefficient between language proficiency test and pragmatic knowledge quiz is 0.25 and the level of significance is 0.000, so it is predictable. This indicates that there is a significant relationship between these two tests, but the correlation coefficient is very low. This shows that those students who are in higher level of language proficiency do a better job in pragmatic contexts. Namely, the higher the level of subjects' language proficiency is, the higher their pragmatic knowledge would be.

CONCLUSION

Despite the importance of teaching English in Iran, its functional goals have not been achieved yet. The assumption is that there are some problems in teaching English regarding the methods employed as well as textbooks which are currently used in the country. Consequently, such problems hinder the learners to acquire, or if acquire, develop communicative abilities. The present study was an attempt to prove the existence of such problems regarding the teaching methods in Iranian colleges.

Besides, this study explored to find out if pragmatics and grammatical knowledge develop simultaneously. This study suggests that linguistic competence is necessary for pragmatic competence, but not sufficient. In other words, linguistic competence is a necessary prerequisite to pragmatic competence, but it does not guarantee pragmatic competence.

There has been a large number body of studies regarding pragmatics in the field of applied linguistics during the last four or five decades [17-27].

In the last decade works of some scholars such as Kramsch indicate the close relationship between L2 teaching and pragmatics [28]. Some studies suggest that participants, who had higher language performance, completed the pragmatic tests much better comparing low language proficiency participants in ESL contexts [29-31]. On the other hand, some studies indicated that even learners who performed well in language proficiency, may exhibit a wide range of pragmatic competence when compared with native speakers in conversations and elicited conditions [32-34]. In addition Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei believe that a good level of language proficiency may not

guarantee a good level of pragmatic competence for "The disparity between learner's and NS's pragmatic competence may be attributed to two key factors related to input and the salience of relevant linguistic features in the input from the point of view of the learner" [16].

In a study conducted by He and Yan on Chinese EFL learners, they found that the level of pragmatic competence was not proportional to their grammatical competence [35]. In another study carried out by Hong et al in which they compared freshmen and seniors in terms of their pragmatic competence, they understood senior who were linguistically competent, did not perform significantly better than the freshmen in pragmatic development [36]. Bardovi-Harlig et al suggest two reasons that a grammatical competence does not guarantee pragmatic competence: "The disparity between non-native and native learner's pragmatic competence may be attributed to two key factors related to input and the salience of relevant linguistic features in the input from the point of view of the learners " [16].

In this study, we found out that Iranian EFL students are poor in pragmatic situations. Although they have gained mastery in language proficiency, they encounter a great deal of difficulties when they are put in a pragmatic situation. We also investigated the relationship between language proficiency and pragmatics and found out that they are correlated with each other and that there is a significant relationship between language proficiency and pragmatic awareness, but this correlation is weak. We also found that there is no difference between male and female learners in pragmatic field, and eventually we came to this conclusion that pragmatic feature of English is predictable, namely, those students who are in a high level of language proficiency, do better in pragmatic situations.

This study shows that the learners of English have a good command of linguistic forms but it doesn't mean they can communicate with native speakers appropriately. An EFL learner may speak English frequently, and may not make any errors in vocabulary or grammar, but that doesn't necessarily mean that he can communicate with native speakers without pragmatic failures. Developing pragmatic competence is the most important task in cross-cultural communication.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no competing interests

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FINANCIAL DISCLOSURE

None.

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