Pragmatic Competence in Requests: A Case Study with Thai English Teachers

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ABSTRACT

Successful communication in cross-cultural situations requires two crucial abilities: speakers’ linguistic competence and pragmatic competence—the ability to use language appropriately according to context which is often overlooked despite its significance. This study investigated the pragmatic competence of 30 Thai English teachers in three aspects of requests: making, accepting, and declining requests. The study focused on speech acts regarding requests because they are regarded as one of the most face-threatening and frequently-occurring areas. Data were collected through an oral discourse completion test (ODCT) consisting of 27 situations. The teachers were requested to produce an oral response in English to the given prompt. Five English native speakers rated the data according to score criteria adapted from the Cohen and Olshtain Communicative Ability Scales. It was found that the mean score for the pragmatic competence of the Thai English teachers in the three aspects of requests was 36.5 out of 54 (68%). These results indicated that the pragmatic competence of the teachers was at a moderate level; the level was just adequate for communication in the given contexts. Three potential causes for the teachers’ lack of great success in pragmatic competence were identified: a lack of pragmatic knowledge, transfer from L1, and linguistic deficiency.

Key word: Pragmatic competence, Pragmatic failure, Oral discourse completion test, Thai English teachers
INTRODUCTION

English is widely accepted as a dominant tool for global communication. The language is used to various degrees by people all over the world. On a small scale, people speaking different mother tongues use English for different purposes: to access advanced academic publications, to facilitate study abroad, and to better their career opportunities. On a larger scale, English is considered a prominent language in numerous fields, including international trade, banking, manufacturing, diplomacy, science and technology, entertainment, and education (Crystal, 1997; Smith, 1988). Given such worldwide importance, an individual’s English ability needs to be at least at a comprehensible level.

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.

Thomas (1983) subdivided pragmatic competence into two parts: pragma-linguistic competence (the ability to use grammar rules to form sentences correctly), and socio-pragmatic competence (the ability to communicate properly according to the social rules of a language). Lack of either may lead to cross-cultural communication mistakes or pragmatic failure.

Thomas (1983) defines pragmatic failure as the inability in using an appropriate language form to express a particular meaning in a particular context, and understanding a speaker’s intention when that person makes an utterance. It is divided into two segments: pragma-linguistic failure and socio-pragmatic failure. The first deals mainly with the linguistic problems that occur when inappropriate language forms are used to perform actions. The other is caused by misunderstandings which arise from the different perceptions that affect linguistic choices during cross-cultural exchanges. Pragmatic failure is more serious than linguistic failure (Thomas, 1983). A person might sound rude or disrespectful when he or she commits a pragmatic error, which could lead to breakdowns in communication.

Over the past few decades, great attention has been given to the investigation of the causes of pragmatic failure. Thomas (1983), on one hand, argues that cultural differences and negative transfer from learners’ L1 to L2 are two important causes. Kasper (1997), on the
other hand, claims that inadequate pragmatic knowledge can also cause pragmatic failure. Yet another researcher, Mei-Xiao (2008) proposes three potential sources of pragmatic failure: differences between a speaker’s culture and the target culture, pragmatic transfer (the influence from a speaker’s native language and culture on his or her pragmatic knowledge and performance (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993), and a lack of pragmatic knowledge.

Numerous studies on pragmatic failure were conducted in order to examine the potential of the three abovementioned sources, Cedar (2005), Kelly (2003), and Prachanant (2006), for instance. Using interviews, Cedar (2005) investigated Thai and American responses to English compliments and found differences in the responses from the two groups. From this, she suggested that English should be taught together with instruction on the cultures of English-speaking peoples. In another study, Kelly (2003) investigated the realization of requests made by 70 Japanese EFL students through a discourse completion task. It was found that Japanese students were perceived as being rude by native speakers. It was concluded that limited knowledge of the target language was the main source of their pragmatic failure. In a similar study, Prachanant (2006) investigated and compared the occurrences of pragmatic strategies and pragmatic transfer in complaint responses given by Thai EFL learners in the hotel business and by native English-speaking hotel employees. The findings revealed that the strategies utilized by the two groups had both similarities and differences. In particular, pragmatic transfer occurred in the responses given by the Thai EFL learners. The results of these studies provide evidence that EFL learners encounter difficulties in their cross-cultural communication as a result of the three sources of pragmatic failure reviewed above.

Thus, to help EFL learners avoid making such mistakes, it is necessary to teach them the social rules of the target language, demonstrate to them what pragmatic transfer is, and provide them with pragmatic knowledge. Scholars (Olshtain & Cohen, 1990; Kasper, 1997; Bardovi-Harlig, 1999) suggested that the EFL classroom environment is a good place for EFL learners to acquire pragmatic knowledge. Findings from studies (Kondo, 2002; Eslami-Rasekh, 2004; Edwards & Csizer, 2004; and Safont Jorda, 2004) confirmed the effectiveness of teaching pragmatics in an EFL classroom.

To achieve the goal of developing pragmatic competence of EFL learners, there is strong evidence that well-trained teachers play a key role. A teacher who gives pragmatic instruction to EFL learners must be equipped with a good command of pragmatic knowledge (Dong, 2006; Vasquez & Sharpless, 2009). Nevertheless, this issue has not attracted the attention it deserves. Instead, the majority of studies have concentrated on investigating the
pragmatic failure of EFL learners rather than on the supportive role that teachers can play in learners’ pragmatic acquisition. A study by Dong (2006) did focus on the pragmatic competence of teachers. Using a 48-item, multiple-choice discourse completion test, Dong surveyed the pragmatic competence of 120 Chinese English teachers in remote areas of China. Results showed that the pragmatic competence of these teachers was at a relatively low level evidently due to their lack of pragmatic knowledge. It was recommended that more research be conducted to investigate the pragmatic competence of EFL teachers.

In response to Dong’s recommendation, the present study is aimed at providing the answer for the research question, to what extent do Thai English teachers have pragmatic competence in making, accepting, and declining requests? An oral discourse completion test was employed in data collection. The study, in particular, focused on request speech acts, which are regarded as one of the most frequently-occurring and face-threatening areas (Mei-Chen, 1996; Kasper & Rose, 2002).

METHOD

Participants

The participants were thirty Thai teachers of English (7 males and 23 females) who were enrolled in the Master of Arts program in Teaching English as an International Language at the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Prince of Songkla University, Hat Yai campus in the 2009 academic year. Their age range was from 23 to 50 years old. Among these bachelor’s degree holders, 24 majored in English and the other 6 in different subjects. Ten of the teachers taught at the primary level. Three taught at the lower secondary level, and another three taught at the upper secondary level. Four of them taught at both the lower and upper secondary levels. Five teachers taught at the vocational level. The final five taught at the university level. All of the teachers used the Thai language as the communication medium in their English teaching.

Instruments

Oral Discourse Completion Test (ODCT) is one of the tests used to assess L2 learners’ pragmatic knowledge (Liu, 2006). The objective of using an ODCT (see Appendix A) is to elicit natural answers from the participants in order to measure their true pragmatic ability. The ODCT employed in the current research contained 27 situations for the speech act of requests: nine each for the sub-acts of making, accepting and, declining requests. Each test item was designed with social status and social distance indicated. A description of each
situation was written in Thai in order to ensure that the intended meaning would be conveyed to the participants.

**Data collection**

The ODCT was administered to the participants in a language laboratory. After a thorough explanation of the test procedure, they were allowed to try speaking in five situations in order to get them familiar with the process before a real test administration. In addition, the actual test contained a Thai description of each situation in which the participants were required to say in English what they would say in each situation. Varying time slots of 10, 15 or 20 seconds were given for reading each test prompt depending on the length of the prompt. The participants, then, responded to each prompt within 15 seconds by speaking into a tape recorder.

**Data analysis**

In order to ascertain the overall pragmatic competence in the three aspects of requests, the participants’ utterances from the oral discourse completion test were scored by five native speakers of English, according to the score criteria adapted from the Cohen and Olshtain Communicative Ability Scales, as follows:

0 = No answer

- Wrong answers
- Answers irrelevant to the given situation
- Answers which do not convey a speaker's intention at all or change a speaker's intention

1 = Acceptable answers which contain one or more of the following characteristics, but can still convey the speaker's correct meaning and intention

- Too much or too little information
- Grammatical or lexical errors impairing but not preventing the interlocutor understanding the meaning or intention of the utterance
- Too polite or rude linguistic expression

2 = Appropriate answers which fully convey a speaker's correct meaning and intention and contain the following characteristics

- Proper amount of information
- Grammatical and lexical correctness or minor errors which do not affect the interlocutor's ability to understand the meaning or intention of the utterance
- Polite linguistic expression
The scores from each examiner were then totaled up and divided by five to obtain the mean score and the percentage representing the pragmatic competence of the Thai English teachers. A one-way analysis of variance was performed to further investigate whether there was a difference in the teachers’ performance among the three aspects of requests.

**FINDINGS**

**The pragmatic competence in making, accepting and declining requests of Thai English teachers**

An ODCT was administered to measure the pragmatic competence in making, accepting and declining requests of the English teachers. A calculation and an analysis of the raw data elicited were made to identify the percentage and the mean score.

**Table 1: Mean score of the English teachers’ pragmatic competence in making, accepting and declining requests**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>Full score</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>36.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 shows that out of a possible total of 54, the lowest score was 16 (30%), while the highest score was 47 (87%), and the mean score of the English teachers was 36.5 or 68%.

The mean scores and the percentages of each aspect were computed, as presented below in order to further determine whether there was a difference among the English teachers’ pragmatic competence in the three aspects of requests: making, accepting and declining requests.

**Table 2: Three aspects of the pragmatic competence**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspects of request</th>
<th>Full score</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Score</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Score</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Score</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making a request</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepting a request</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declining a request</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 shows a slight difference between means of scores of making, accepting and declining requests. The mean scores of each aspect were 11.37 (64%), 12.57 (69%) and 12.20 (67%), respectively. The findings indicate that the Thai English teachers’ pragmatic competence in making, accepting and declining requests differs slightly.
In addition, a one-way analysis of variance was carried out to capture a clearer picture. The results as illustrated in Table 3 shows no differences between means of the three aspects of requests: making, accepting and declining, F (2, 87) = 1.535, p<0.05. It, thus, confirms that the pragmatic ability of the Thai English teachers in the three aspects of requests was virtually at the equivalent level.

**Table 3: Results of the Test of Difference between Means**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tested Means</th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between group</td>
<td>22.689</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11.344</td>
<td>1.535</td>
<td>.221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within group</td>
<td>643.133</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>7.392</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>665.822</td>
<td>89</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**DISCUSSION**

**Pragmatic competence of Thai English teachers in making, accepting, and declining requests**

The results obtained from the ODCT indicate that the overall pragmatic competence of the Thai English teachers in making, accepting and declining requests was average with a test result of 36.50 (68%). The mean scores for each aspect were 11.37 (64%), 12.57 (69%), and 12.20 (67%), respectively. According to the five English native-speaking raters, this figure indicated that the group had a moderate level of pragmatic competence in the three aspects of requests. This finding is, to a certain degree, consistent with Dong’s (2006) study which reported that the pragmatic competence of the Chinese English teachers was relatively low due to their lack of pragmatic knowledge.

In further examining the participants’ utterances, three major problems were recognized as possible causes for their lack of strength in pragmatic competence. First, most of their utterances were overly polite in the informal situations, and some utterances sounded rude in the formal situations. This problem was also encountered in other studies which explored the pragmatic competence of EFL/ESL learners. For example, in an investigation of pragmatic transfer in refusal by Thai EFL learners, Wannaruk (2005) found that the participants tried to be more polite when communicating in English. Similarly, in a contrastive study of request strategies between Thai and American students, Luksaneeyanawin (2005) found that the Thai EFL learners used indirect strategies to try to make their requests more polite. In contrast, Mei-Xiao (2008) found that Chinese EFL learners were perceived as being rude by native speakers of English because of their
unawareness of the cultural differences between English and Chinese. Below examples of the utterances produced by the participants in the present study illustrate this first problem.

**Example 1**

**Situation:** You are having dinner with your close foreign friend. What do you say to get your friend to pass you the sugar?

In this situation, the participants were required to make a request of a friend. This context was considered informal as this friend was explained to be of equal status and close social distance.

Participant 4: *Excuse me. Could you please give me a favor? I need some sugar.*

Participant 3: *Pass me some sugar.*

The utterance produced by Participant 4 was overly polite. He said, “Could you please give me a favor?,” which is normally used only in very formal situations. This utterance was considered too formal for the context according to native speakers norms. Moreover, it was incorrect. The accurate one is “Could you please do me a favor?”

In contrast, the utterance made by Participant 3 sounded slightly rude because it was a command. Even though the addressee in this context was a close friend, the speaker would be better off to speak in a moderately polite way when asking a favor. Three of the raters suggested that a politeness marker, such as “please” or a tag, such as “will you?,” would help soften the expression.

The second problem was that some of the participants’ utterances contained improper amount of information. They either contained inadequate information, when they failed to convey the speaker’s real intention; or were overly verbose, where too much information was given. This finding was consistent with the finding of Blum-Kulka & Oshtain (1986), who suggested that deviation from native norms of utterance length can cause pragmatic failure in several ways. It was also supported by Prachanant (2006), who observed excessive productions from Thai university students in his contrastive study of complaint responses between Thai and American learners. More clarification can be seen in Example 2 below.

**Example 2**

**Situation:** At work, you want a subordinate to copy a document for you. What would you say?

Participant 4: *Excuse me, sir. Could you please give me a favor? I really need a copy of this paper. You’re so close with a copy machine.*

**Situation:** Today you need to take a half-day leave to go to your friend’s wedding party. What would you say to your big boss?
Participant 25: Sir, I’d like to leave the office.

The sentence, “You’re so close with a copy machine,” produced by Participant 4 was considered excessive for the situation by most of the raters. In contrast, Participant 25’s utterance was considered too short to fully convey the speaker’s intended meaning. Furthermore, this utterance sounded strange because it did not contain a request expression, and it did not furnish necessary details. This might be due to the speaker’s lack of English vocabulary and fixed expressions.

Given the information seen in Example 2, it may be concluded that the participants’ over-production of utterances was due to their lack of pragmatic knowledge which led to transfer from L1, while linguistic deficiency, i.e. a lack of appropriate expressions, is responsible for situations when insufficient information was given by the participants.

The last problem found with the participants’ utterances was related to grammar. While certain participants produced minor grammatical errors, others made serious ones potentially leading to communication breakdown. This finding was consistent with previous studies (Kelly, 2003; Kwai, 2008; Mei-Xiao, 2008) in which learners’ deficiency in linguistic knowledge of a target language caused misunderstanding in cross-cultural communication. The linguistic deficiency sometimes motivated speakers to resort to their mother tongue leading to L1 transfer. In this case, when lacking linguistic formulae to utilize in given situations, speakers translated linguistic form in Thai to what they assumed equivalent to English. This lends support to a study by Kelly (2003) who found that Japanese EFL learners were judged as rude because when they made a concerted effort to communicate in English, they translated a Japanese linguistic form to English equivalent. These translated sentences sounded awkward to native speakers. Example 3 below demonstrates this problem.

Example 3

Situation: Emmy, your niece is listening to music. The music is very loud and is disturbing you. What would you say to Emmy to get her to turn down the volume?

Participant 20: Emmy, reduce the radio, please.

The utterance produced by Participant 20 was incorrect; she used the word “reduce” instead of “turn down”. This example demonstrates the participant’s inability to use correct vocabulary to convey the intended meaning.

In addition to these three problems, it was found that 33.3% of the participants (10 teachers) did not respond at all in some situations. Two reasons were made for the lack of response. First, it was due to the participants’ limited linguistic knowledge. If that is the case, linguistic competence is clearly a dominant factor in pragmatic competence. The other was
that the participants were too anxious to be able to produce utterances in the given situations, imposed by the time constraints.

In conclusion, this group of Thai English teachers was seen to have encountered the same problems as EFL speakers in previous studies. The problems these teachers struggled with can be categorized into three major types. These were a lack of pragmatic knowledge, transfer from L1, and linguistic deficiency. This confirms that both pragmatic competence and linguistic competence are vital factors for successful and effective international communication. Accordingly, the results from this group of Thai English teachers demonstrates that Thai English teachers in general should develop their pragmatic and linguistic ability, as they may be the only available source English students can rely on for pragmatic development.

**Strategies employed by the Thai English teachers to perform the three aspects of requests**

In addition to their overall pragmatic competence in making, accepting, and declining requests, the present study investigated differences in the participants’ pragmatic ability among the three request aspects. Even though the results from an ANOVA test showed no significant differences, it was noticeable that among the three request aspects, the participants gained the highest score in the accepting requests category. This may be because words used in accepting requests are usually short and uncomplicated, e.g., yes, okay (Allwood, Nivre, and Ahlens, 1993). These short utterances are considered appropriate and effective to convey intended meanings in certain situations. Nevertheless, a deeper look into the participants’ utterances revealed that apart from saying “yes” or “okay”, they usually gave more explanation or details to completely express their acceptance, as illustrated by the following example.

**Example 4**

**Situation:** Emmy, your niece, asks you to help her with her homework. You are free and want to help. What do you say?

Participant 2: *Yes. I’m free to teach the homework to you.*

Participant 7: *Sure. I will teach your homework for you.*

The first part of the utterances, “Yes” and “Sure,” was acceptable, as they accurately conveyed the speakers’ intentions. However, the second part of the utterances containing the word “teach” sounded unusual to the English raters; the participants literally translated it to English from the Thai word /sorn/. Linguistically, the word “teach” in English means to
show someone how to do something so that they will then be able to do it themselves. The meaning of this word is hence not accurate in this situation. “Help you with your homework” is more appropriate.

While short utterances can be used to accept requests, i.e., the single word “no” can be used to decline a request. However, only saying “no” as a refusal is not an easy task because speakers may risk offending their counterparts (Wannaruk, 2005). As a result, other strategies: for instance, expressing an apology, giving reasons for a refusal, giving an alternative to the person are employed as Supportive Moves (Wannaruk, 2005; Luksaneeyanawin, 2005). The participants in the present study managed to employ these strategies. Due to their linguistic deficiency or their lack of pragmatic knowledge, however, their elaborations sometimes resulted in communication difficulties as illustrated by Example 5 below.

Example 5

Situation: Your classmate, who has just begun studying in your college today, asks you to tutor her in biology, but you are in a hurry to get to work. What would you say to decline her request?

Participant 6: Sorry. Now I’m hurry up to go outside.

Participant 21: Oh! Sorry. I can’t tu the knowledge for you.

Both of the utterances successfully conveyed the speakers’ negative intention, but the statement might sound confusing for the listeners. The speakers used making an apology as a refusal strategy in the first part of the utterances. However, the followed elaborations expressing reasons for refusal sounded awkward to the five native speakers. In English, the phrase, “hurry up” in the first sentence means to do something quickly, but this speaker used it with the meaning that he was in a hurry. The word /tu/ in the utterance made by Participant 21 is a Thai word meaning “tutor” in English. These two examples demonstrated a transfer from the speakers’ L1 to English, resulting in misunderstandings in their cross-cultural communication efforts.

Phrases utilized to make requests, on the other hand, are generally longer and more complex than those used to accept or decline requests. This is because such utterances may consist of an expression for making a request (Head Act) and expressions providing reasons for that request or other supporting expressions, other supporting information, or politeness markers (Supportive Moves) (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984). The participants in the study employed this principal when making their requests, as demonstrated by the following examples.
Example 6

**Situation:** Today you need to take a half-day leave to go to your friend’s wedding party. What would you say to your boss?

Participant 15: *Boss. I must go to wedding party, so I need to free in the afternoon.*

Supportive move + Supportive Move + Head Act

The sentence, “I need to free in the afternoon,” is ungrammatical and sounds highly unusual according to the raters. “Boss, May I have a half day off today so I can go to my friend’s wedding party?” is an appropriate answer for this situation as suggested by one of the raters.

As illustrated by the previous examples, in searching for words to get their meanings across, the participants overlooked the language forms which were appropriate for the given contexts. Moreover, as the situations were designed for the participants to assess their relationships with the interlocutors when producing utterances for making, accepting, and declining requests, they encountered additional difficulties. Kelly (2003) posits that attempting to take into consideration both meanings and forms is a big challenge for EFL learners. These reasons, together with their insufficient linguistic ability caused the participants in the present study to experience even more difficulties in producing appropriate and effective utterances in the three aspects of requests. Therefore, this may be the reason why no significant differences were found between the types of requests.

**CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY**

This study investigated the pragmatic competence of the Thai English teachers in making, accepting, declining requests. The findings showed that the teachers’ pragmatic competence in the three aspects of requests was at a moderate level (68%). Three major reasons for this moderate adequacy were found: lack of linguistic and pragmatic knowledge, and L1 influence. It was also found that each participant’s ability in making, accepting, and declining requests was rather similar. The findings suggest that teachers need to receive more extensive and intensive training on linguistic and pragmatic knowledge in order that their ability in the language use improves.

The following suggestions made based on the present study should be considered for future research. First, further research should explore the pragmatic competence of other groups of Thai English teachers in other regions of the country, or should focus on different types of participants, e.g., EFL students, people who mainly use English in workplaces, etc. Secondly, since the current research focused only on the speech act of requests, future
research should aim to investigate the pragmatic competence of Thai English teachers in other speech acts, such as apologies and complaints. Third, investigating the pragmatic usage of English in the textbooks used in Thai educational institutions would be interesting and beneficial to overall English education since textbooks are one of the vital tools for EFL learners’ pragmatic acquisition. Lastly, research using other data collection methods, such as role-play or spontaneous face-to-face interaction should be conducted since these methods may provide more real-life settings for the participants, and thus, more accurate data.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I gratefully thank Asst. Prof. Dr. Patama Aksornjarong and Asst. Prof. Dr. Chonlada Laohawiriyanon for their enthusiastic and consistent supervision, the anonymous readers, and the participants in the study.

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