A Comparative Study of Pragmatic Competence of Learners with High and Low English Proficiency

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Abstract
This study compares the pragmatic competence in performing speech act of apologies and thanks of 16 high and 14 low English proficiency learners. A multiple-rejoinder discourse completion task (multiple-rejoinder DCT) consisting of 24 scenarios was employed for data collection. Three native English speakers rated the data based on the scoring criteria adapted from the Cohen and Olshtain Communicative Ability Scales and a modified version by Pinyo, Aksornjarung, and Laohawiriyanon, 2010. A series of t-tests revealed significant differences in the pragmatic competence performed by the two subject groups. 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.

Key words: Pragmatic competence, Linguistic competence, Speech acts, Multiple-rejoinder DCT, Apologies, Thanks

Background
English has become an international lingua franca (Jenkin, 2006; Pakir, 2000), i.e. English is used as a medium of international and intercultural communication. It is the language most widely learned, read, and spoken the world has ever known (Kachru & Nelson, 1996). Besides being used by billions of people, English plays a vital role in economic progress, modern technology, diplomacy, internationalization (Spolsky, 1998), education, entertainment, and the Internet and websites, all of which inevitably concern cross-cultural exchange.
Intercultural or cross-cultural communication involves exchanging ideas, information, and knowledge between people from different cultural backgrounds through a lingua franca. This exchange, thus, occurs between native speakers of English and nonnative speakers as well as between the nonnative and nonnative. The phenomena, involving different cultures, can lead to misunderstanding (Saville-Troike, 1982) which is an obstacle of cross-cultural communication.

To overcome the cross-cultural obstacles and achieve the intercultural or cross-cultural communication goals, it is requisite that language users know what to say, to whom, when, why, and how to say it appropriately in any given contexts (Saville-Troike, 1982; Thomas, 1983). In other words, a repertoire of communicative competence or the ability to use language features grammatically in appropriate contexts is a must (Bachman, 1990).

Communicative competence is described as having four competencies (Alptekin, 2002). Grammatical competence, the first competency, involves the knowledge of language and the ability to use the given language accurately. Sociolinguistic competence, the second competency, refers to the social rules in language use. Discourse competence, the third competency, concerns the ability to use the language in contexts. Strategic competence, the ability to manage in real-life communicative situations, is the last competency L2 learners are required to achieve.

The first above-mentioned competence (grammatical or linguistic) refers to the correct language usage. Saville-Troike (1982) maintained that the knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, and phonology is only a part of the elements in the linguistic code; simply having such knowledge may be inadequate in real life communication. The last three competencies (sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic) refer to the appropriate language use which is in the scope of pragmatic competence (Zhuge & Wu, 2005). This competence involves the contextual meanings and purposes of the utterances, that is, the speaker’s intention and the hearer’s interpretation (Winkler, 2007). Thus, communicate accurately and appropriately in a given context, Saville-Troike suggested that the speaker must have linguistic and pragmatic competence.

Both linguistic and pragmatic competences are essential to help in communicating accurately and appropriately. The English learning and teaching within ESL and EFL settings, however, mostly focus on linguistic knowledge and neglect the importance of pragmatic knowledge. Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor (2003), for example, pointed out...
that the dimensions of language and language use such as speech acts, conversational structure, conversational implicature, sociolinguistics, and so forth, have not been addressed in the language teaching curricula. The lack of pragmatic knowledge of L2 learners, therefore, has been found in the results of previous studies on pragmatics (Lin, 2008; Wannaruk, 2005; Zhuge & Wu, 2005).

Besides its existence or nonexistence in the classroom, this language aspect in relation to linguistic competence has been in scholars’ interests (Garcia, 2004; Hoffman-Hicks, 1992; Li, 2007). Hoffman-Hicks (1992), for instance, investigated the relationship between linguistic competence and pragmatic competence in terms of the necessity and sufficiency to perform speech acts of 14 students of French. She concluded from her study that linguistic competence is necessary, but only linguistic does not guarantee pragmatic competence. Despite the results, a review of previous study by Bardovi-Harlig (1999) showed that SL researchers have not yet widely enough explored this language aspect. Rather, they had paid more attention to investigate pragmatics of advanced learners of which the results showed that this group of learners is not proficient in L2 pragmatics.

Regarding the EFL learning and teaching in the Thai context, study on pragmatics is still limited. A few focused on the differences in speech acts performed by Thai speakers of English and native speakers of English (Cedar, 2006; Modehiran, 2005; Wannaruk, 2005). Yet Prachanant (2006) provided the addition of comparison of learners’ proficiency in his study on the similarities and differences in responding to complaints and pragmatic transfer.

Following Prachanant’s study which examined the issue of learners with different English proficiency, the present study is aimed at answering the research question whether Thai learners with different English proficiency have different pragmatic competence. The research specifically focused on speech act of apologies and thanks owing to their frequent use when Thais engaged in intercultural communication. Additionally, both apologizing and thanking (expressive acts) are believed to satisfy the face wants of interactants (Intachakra, 2004). The results from this investigation are expected to provide insights for future research into the pragmatic knowledge of learners with different proficiency.
Technical Terms

**English language proficiency**  English language proficiency in this study is the participants’ ability in using English. Their proficiency was assessed considering their average grades of courses taken in their first- to third- year totally 11 English required courses.

**Pragmatic competence**  Pragmatic competence refers to the ability to use the language forms or speech acts appropriately in respect of social variables such as social status and familiarity. In other words, the participants under investigation are to know what to say, to whom, and how to say it appropriately in each situation given.

**Speech acts**  Speech acts refers to making utterances to perform some acts in communication, such as greeting, warning, ordering, responding to compliments, and so forth. Two speech acts were investigated in the present study, apologizing and thanking.

**Multiple-rejoinder discourse completion task (Multiple-rejoinder DCT)**

Multiple-rejoinder discourse completion task is a written test developed from a classical DCT by Cohen and Shively (2002/2003) to be used in their study on L2 pragmatic development during study abroad. The instrument used in the present study provides 24 scenarios (i.e. the description of situations and relationship of interlocutors) of two speech acts, apologies and thanks, and the rejoinders (i.e. the interlocutor’s responses in each scenario). Participants are required to complete each dialogue in English by filling in the blanks.

**Literature Review**

**Pragmatics: Pragmalinguistics and Sociopragmatics**

Language study is divided into four dimensions: syntax, phonology, semantics, and pragmatics. The first three dimensions focus on the rules of sentence structure, sound system, and meaning, respectively. The last one studies rules and principles of language use in social contexts (Tan, 1994). This linguistic subfield is viewed as “the study of communicative action in its sociocultural context” (Kasper, 1997, p.1). In other words, it is the use of social context to infer meaning in communication (Fasold, 1990). To summarize, pragmatics involves using the language to represent the linguistic functions supplemented with the social functions of language (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

The definitions above ensue the division of this linguistic subfield—pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics (Thomas, 1983), both of necessity to effective communication.
Pragmalinguistics involves the language features employed in adequately performing speech acts. Sociopragmatics refers to the appropriateness of using speech acts in particular contexts (Beebe & Waring, 2005; Cohen, 2004).

**Linguistic Competence VS. Pragmatic Competence**

Besides helping L2 speakers to communicate effectively; Saville-Troike (1982) indicated that perception, selection, and interpretation of linguistic features supplemented with knowledge about pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics is required when the interaction occurs. Linguistic or grammatical competence encompasses a range of knowledge of the syntax, phonology, morphology, vocabulary, or semantics of a language (Hoffman-Hicks, 1992). On the other hand, pragmatic competence refers to the ability to use the language appropriately in different cultural contexts of communication (Fujioka, 2003; Garcia, 2004; Thomas, 1983).

The two aspects of language competence seem to be closely related. Hymes (1974) argued that there exist systematical relations between grammatical and social structure underlying the varieties of speech within communities and in the individual conduct. Thomas (1983) supported that an imperfect command of lower-level grammar leads the misinterpretation of speech acts among L2 learners. Such misinterpretation leads to pragmatic failure and communication breakdown. As a result, it is inadequate to know only the words and phrases in a second language (Cohen, 2004). When making an utterance, the learners need to consider all the speech context including subject matter, place, time, approach, and audience in order to expect a positive result.

**Pragmatic Failure: Pragmalinguistic Failure and Sociopragmatic Failure**

Pragmatic failure was defined as, “the inability to understand ‘what is meant by what is said’” (Thomas, 1983, p.91). In other words, it is the incapacity to understand the speaker’s intended utterances and to express him/herself appropriately in different social and cultural contexts. For example, ‘Where are you going?’ is a sincere greeting made by Thai people. For non-Thai speakers, however, it seems to be interfering of the addressee’s privacy. Thomas divided pragmatic failure into two types: pragmalinguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure.

Pragmalinguistic failure occurs when there are differences in the linguistic encoding of pragmatic representation between a L2 speaker and the native speaker of the target language. It can also occur when speech act strategies are inadequately transferred from L1 to L2 (Thomas, 1983). Sociopragmatic failure, on the other hand, involves the perceptions of
different social and cultural conditions possibly leading to an inappropriate linguistic behavior. The two types of pragmatic failure could be the result of incompatible knowledge aspect of L2 speakers.

Lin (2008) identified three factors causing pragmatic failure, namely, cultural differences, pragmatic transfer, and the lack of pragmatic knowledge. The first factor, the differences between the L1 culture and the target culture, may lead to negative transfer, or errors induced by the speakers’ mother tongue. The second factor, pragmatic transfer involves the effects of L1 speech patterns employed when producing L2 utterances; for example, using a direct speech act where a native speaker may use an indirect one. The last factor, the lack of pragmatic knowledge, is the mainly important factor affecting the inefficient communication. To attain the communicative goals efficiently, therefore, both linguistic and pragmatic competence are required.

**Studies of Linguistic and Pragmatic Competence**

Given the importance of pragmatic knowledge, this language aspect has been explored both in ESL and EFL learning contexts.

Garcia (2004) conducted the study to explore linguistic and pragmatic processing on a listening comprehension task of different proficiency learners. Sixteen advanced and 19 ESL beginners participated in the study. These two groups differ in terms of their exposure to English in the United States (i.e. 5 vs. 20 months). Two tasks, linguistic comprehension task focusing on listening text on literal meaning, and pragmatic comprehension task composed of the comprehension of speech acts and conversational implicatures, were administered. The results showed significant differences between the high and low groups. The higher-level learners significantly outperformed the lower-level learners. A low correlation between linguistic and pragmatic comprehension was also identified. The researcher concluded that pragmatic comprehension is different from linguistic comprehension.

Hoffman-Hicks (1992) investigated the relationship between two kinds of language competence, linguistic and pragmatic, in the overall competence of 14 learners of French as a foreign language (experimental subjects). Nine native speakers of French took part in this study as a control group to rank the choices of each item in terms of the most to the least appropriate in a role play questionnaire. Three tasks (a standardized multiple-choice test of French, a role play questionnaire in multiple-choice format, and a discourse completion test) were used to measure both linguistic and pragmatic competence. The results from the Spearman’s rank order correlation suggested that linguistic competence is necessary for
pragmatic competence, but only linguistic competence does not guarantee pragmatic competence. The researcher also concluded that learners must attain a particular level of linguistic ability before they are able to use language in real contexts adequately.

In a similar study, Li (2007) examined the relationship between the two kinds of competence of 42 Chinese English learners with different levels of proficiency (high- and low-levels) in BeiHang University. The researcher adopted the College English Test-4 (CET-4) test paper to test participants’ linguistic competence and bi-lingual discourse completion task (DCT) for their pragmatic ability. The results showed that there is a positive relationship between linguistic proficiency and pragmatic ability. The participants with high linguistic competence have high pragmatic ability and vice versa. Li’s findings confirm Hoffman-Hicks’s research that linguistic ability is necessary for pragmatic competence, but it is not sufficient for pragmatic competence. She concluded that pragmatics can be taught, and thus it is necessary to teach students pragmalinguistics as well as sociopragmatics.

Prachanant (2006) also carried out the study on the speech act performance of Thai EFL learners with two different levels of proficiency. He investigated and compared pragmatic strategies and pragmatic transfer of speech act of responding to complaints in the hotel business. The participants in the study comprised 120 hotel employees. Sixty Thai learners were divided into two groups (high and low); besides, the two other groups were 30 Thai and 30 English native speakers which their responses were used as baseline data. Participants responded to complaints in a written DCT simulated situations occurring in the hotel business. It was found that the subjects used both similar and different strategies in responding to complaints. However, considering the prominent occurrences of pragmatic transfer that the higher-level learners were found to exhibit negative transfer more often compared with their lower-level learner counterparts. The researcher argued that the negative transfer performed by the two groups was attributed to their L2 proficiency and L1 culture.

**Framework of the study**

This research investigates the pragmatic competence of learners with two different English proficiency groups: 16 high- and 14 low-level participants. The participants were the fourth year students majoring in Language for Development of the 2010 academic year at the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Prince of Songkla University, Hat Yai campus. The participants’ average grades of their 11 English required courses were used to divide them into two groups.
Moreover, the pragmatic competence explored in this study focused on only two speech acts: apologies and thanks measured in the written format by using a multiple-rejoinder DCT. Three variables: social status, familiarity, and severity of mistake (apologies) or the imposition (thanks) were included varying from scenario to scenario in this instrument.

Research Methodology

Participants

Research participants in the study consisted of 30 (5 males and 25 females) fourth year students majoring in Language for Development in the 2010 academic year at the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Prince of Songkla University, Hat Yai campus. Their ages ranged from 21 to 23. The students were divided into two different language proficiency groups based on the ranking of their average grades of 11 English required courses taken in the first- to third-year. Sixteen were assigned to the high proficiency and 14 the low proficiency groups. All participants have average 15 years of English learning experience. Twenty-one reported having occasional opportunity to use English outside the classroom. Surfing the Internet for information is the activity they use English most frequently.

Instrument

Multiple-Rejoinder Discourse Completion Task (Multiple-Rejoinder DCT)

A written DCT was used to collect data in the present study. This test type is the most frequently used instrument in measuring speech act performance (Hoffman-Hicks, 1992; Lin, 2008; Prachanant, 2006; Li, 2007; Wannaruk, 2005). Despite its being used in several pragmatic studies, Cohen and Shively (2002/2003) modified the written DCT by adding in multiple rejoinders (i.e. the interlocutor’s responses in each scenario). This new instrument, called ‘multiple-rejoinder discourse completion task’, was believed to help reflecting the conversational turn-taking of natural speech.

The multiple-rejoinder DCT employed in the present study consisted of 24 scenarios to test two speech acts: 12 for thanks and 12 for apologies. These different scenarios are simulated situations observed being encountered frequently in real life. Three variables—social status, familiarity, and severity of mistake (apologies) or the imposition (thanks) varying from scenario to scenario were included in each test item. The description of each scenario was translated into Thai to avoid possible misunderstanding caused by language complexity. All rejoinders, however, are in English in order to reflect the real-life conversation. This research instrument was cross checked by three native speakers of English.
and an experienced translator for its equivalence in format, content, and grammaticality. It was also pilot-tested with students having similar background to the participants under investigation. Below is a sample item of multiple-rejoinder DCT used in this study

**Scenario 1:** At 3 p.m. today, you have an appointment with Mr. Andrews, your advisor, to discuss your project. You are well acquainted with him. However, you became sick and are unable to come to see him. You call him to apologize and ask if he could rearrange the appointment.

(Rejoinder) Mr. Andrews: Hello.
You: Hello, Professor Andrews. ____________________________

(Rejoinder) Mr. Andrews: Is that so? Why? I had hoped that you would come today so we could talk about your mistakes.
You: ____________________________

(Rejoinder) Mr. Andrews: Oh, then that’s okay. We can make it up another day.

**Data collection**

A multiple-rejoinder DCT was administered to the selected participants in September 2010. After receiving the explanation of the test procedure, the participants were requested to read the instructions written in Thai. Prior to taking the actual test, they were given a sample item of multiple-rejoinder DCT to get familiar with the task type.

All through the actual task, participants were to imagine that they were in the United States and interacting with native speakers of English. The participants, then had 1 minute to read the description and all rejoinders for each scenario on the computer screen. They had to complete each dialogue in English on the answer sheet provided within the next 2 minutes. The time allotted to complete each scenario was designated on the ground of real life settings.

**Data analysis**

In order to find out whether learners with different English proficiency have different pragmatic ability, the participants’ responses elicited from the multiple-rejoinder DCT were marked by three native English speakers based on the scoring criteria adapted from the Cohen and Olshtain Communicative Ability Scales (Cohen, 1994) and Pinyo, Aksornjarung, and Laohawiriyanon (2010) (See Appendix A).

The participants’ scores obtained from the native raters’ marking were calculated and analyzed statistically to determine mean scores and standard deviations. Additionally, a series of t-tests was performed to identify the differences in pragmatic competence regarding
speech acts of apologies and thanks performed by participants with high and low English proficiency.

Findings

Pragmatic Competence of Learners with Different English Proficiency

Scores sought from the multiple-rejoinder DCT administered were calculated and analyzed by Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 11.5. Mean scores, percentages, and t-value for these two groups were determined and are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Pragmatic Competence of High and Low English Proficiency Learners (N=30)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Full Score</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Score</td>
<td>%</td>
<td></td>
<td>Score</td>
<td>%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>87.50</td>
<td>36.94</td>
<td>76.95</td>
<td>3.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>69.44</td>
<td>28.74</td>
<td>59.87</td>
<td>3.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>87.50</td>
<td>33.11</td>
<td>68.98</td>
<td>5.43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note ** Significant at the 0.01 level

Table 1 shows that a total score out of 48, the lowest score was 21 (43.75%), whereas the highest score was 42 (87.5%). When the means of these two different proficiency groups were examined, it was found that the mean score of high-level learners was higher than the low-level learners, 36.94 (76.95%) and 28.74 (59.87%) respectively.

In order to find out whether there is a significant difference in the pragmatic competence performed by these two groups, independent t-test was run. The t-test (t = 5.846) resulted in a significant difference between the high and low English proficiency learners.

To further explore differences in speech act of apologies and thanks produced by the participants with high- and low- level English proficiency, the mean scores, percentages, and t-values of each speech act were computed (Table 2 below).

Table 2: Speech Act of Apologies and Thanks (N=30)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speech Acts</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Full Score</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Score</td>
<td>%</td>
<td></td>
<td>Score</td>
<td>%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apologies</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>90.29</td>
<td>18.38</td>
<td>76.56</td>
<td>2.086</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note ** Significant at the 0.01 level
Table 2 depicts the differences in performing two speech acts of high and low participants. Comparing means of these two groups’ performances via t-test, the results indicated significant differences at the 0.01 level between high- and low-level learners’ production of apologies and thanks. The high group’s mean score of apologies, 18.38 (76.56%) is higher than that of the low group, 14.48 (60.32%). Likewise, when producing thanks, the high-level learners outperformed the low-level group with the mean scores, 18.58 (77.43%) and 14.24 (59.33%), respectively.

Discussion
In answering the research question, seeking differences of pragmatic competence in apologizing and thanking of learners with different language proficiency, results showed significant differences between high- and low-English proficiency learners’ pragmatic ability. The participants in the high group outperformed the low-level group on the two speech acts (apologies and thanks). This result is consistent with the previous research on the relationship between linguistic and pragmatic competence (Garcia, 2004; Li, 2007). 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).

Conclusion and Recommendations for Further Study
The current study investigates the pragmatic competence of Thai learners with high and low English proficiency in producing thanks and apologies. The results showed that these two subject groups’ pragmatic knowledge was significantly different. The high English proficiency learners outperformed the low-level counterparts. Findings suggest that to attain pragmatic competence, Thai 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.
The following suggestions should be considered for further study. First, the pragmatic competence of other different groups of Thai English learners, e.g. learners in government schools and learners in bilingual or international schools, etc. should be compared for future study. Second, due to the present study limitation, investigating only two speech acts (apologies and thanks), other aspects, such as accepting thanks and refusing by Thai English learners could be an interesting area of investigation. Lastly, other data collection methods, such as role-play or face-to-face interaction should be employed to reflect real-life communication and to obtain more natural and accurate data.

References


APPENDIX A

Scoring Criteria

The scoring criteria used in marking the participants’ responses elicited through the multiple-rejoinder DCT are adapted from the Cohen and Olshtain communicative ability scales in Cohen (1994) and Pinyo, Aksornjarung, and Laohawiriyanon (2010). The scoring criteria employed in the present study are as follow:

0 = Unacceptable responses contain the following characteristics:
- No response
- No use of linguistic forms for expressing apologies or thanks
- Responses are irrelevant to the given situations and the interlocutor’s responses (rejoinders)
- Responses do not convey a speaker’s meaning and intention at all, and/or reflect incomplete dialogues

1 = Acceptable responses contain one or all of the following characteristics:
- Improper amount of information (too little information)
- There is some use of inappropriate linguistic forms for expressing apologies or thanks (by considering 3 social factors: status, familiarity, and severity of mistakes/imposition)
- Responses are somewhat relevant to the given situations and the interlocutor’s responses.
- There are some grammatical errors (sentence forms, tenses, vocabulary, and spelling) which change a speaker’s meaning and intention, and/or responses call for some interpretation to be understandable.

2 = Appropriate responses contain the following characteristics:
- The use of linguistic forms is fully appropriate for expressing apologies or thanks
- Responses are completely relevant to the given situations and the interlocutor’s responses.
- There are some grammatical errors (sentence forms, tenses, vocabulary, and spelling) which do not affect the understanding, and/or responses reflect the situations clearly or dialogues completely