



Pragmatic Awareness in EFL Context: An Assessment on English Literature Students

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the research was to explore students' pragmatic awareness and their ability in recognizing grammatical and pragmatic problematic scenarios. There were 25 B2 level students of English Literature study program participated in the study. All students were in their fourth year of study and have completed Pragmatics course. The participants were asked to read 15 scenarios of judgment task and to decide whether the given scenarios presented pragmatic or grammatical problem or were unproblematic. The result revealed that the participants were better in recognizing pragmatic problems, followed by the identification of unproblematic scenarios and lastly, participants' were weakest at recognizing grammatical errors.

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INTRODUCTION

Pragmatics is one of the key linguistic tools that second language (L2) learners need to acquire in order to achieve a higher level of communicative competence. This concept follows what Chomsky (1965, in Samaie & Arianmanesh, 2018) has highlighted that communicative competence does not rely only on learners' grammatical and structural forms of knowledge, but also the ability to use such knowledge in real conversations according to the context. This shift from focusing on mechanical aspects of language to the capacity of functionally appropriate language use, in turn, has significantly influenced the theories and practices of L2 learning as well as its assessment.



Incorporating pragmatics in L2 learning or more importantly in foreign language learning has become urgent due to the realization that the context of where, when, and with whom the language is used plays a major role on learners' language choice. Language choice includes both the production and interpretation of utterances in conversations (Crystal, 2008, in Saadatmandi, Khiabani, & Pourdana, 2018). This notion, then, adds a critical component of organizational knowledge of a language that should not be left in language acquisition. Pragmatics as one of the main components in language acquisition is in fact logical considering the wider framework that it brought in identifying resources that learners need to employ to succeed in communication in different contexts.

The features of pragmatics are primarily to support learners in using the language to deliver messages, emotions, and ideas in a cross-lingual communication. To communicate appropriately in a foreign language context, learners should not neglect the context-bound factor or also known as sociocultural factor that subsequently interplays when a conversation happens. Although the concern of pragmatics as the key for an effective and appropriate use of language has risen, the basic knowledge of grammatical or the language forms itself is still needed to produce not only polite, but also accurate utterances.

Two essential tools in learners' language use, grammatical knowledge and pragmatics are usually held against each other. However, in language acquisition, these two aspects should not be separated and instead be evenly taught in the learning process. In the case of English literature students in this study, unfortunately, the course structure has experienced several amendments to achieve the goal of highlighting the four-skills of language learning by emphasizing on supplying enough grammatical tools (i.e., structural forms & vocabularies) for learners to be able to use the language accurately. This, in turn, leads to the elimination of several required subjects including Pragmatics. Although this course has no longer been taught as a compulsory subject, it is still taught as an elective for students above semester 4 who choose Linguistics as their stream. To respond to this situation of explicit pragmatics instructions, this study aims to measure learners' awareness on both grammar and pragmatics by noticing errors in utterances as well as distinguishing the unproblematic ones. Awareness tasks have been long used to elicit learners' awareness in both grammar and pragmatics which is the root of both knowledge.

1.1. Research Questions

Based on the research background above, three research questions are postulated in this study as follows:

1. How are learners' judgments for grammatical situations (G)?
2. How are learners' judgments for pragmatic situations (P)?
3. Do learners exhibit the same degree of awareness for the grammatical (G), pragmatic (P), and unproblematic (U) situations?



1.2. Research Questions

Based on the research background above, three research questions are postulated in this study as follows:

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1.3. Research Questions

Based on the research background above, three research questions are postulated in this study as follows:

1. This study will be published as an article in a reputable journal in the field of linguistics.
2. This study will become the first pragmatics assessment held in an English Literature study program after the course of Pragmatics has been removed from students' course list.
3. The result of this study will help inform pedagogical practice in teaching pragmatics either explicitly or implicitly.

Teaching and Assessing Pragmatics in EFL Context

While interacting, learners need to follow things beyond words, function of utterances, and communicative function of language. They need to know how to say something as well as when, where and to whom to say it. Therefore, communication is much more than putting some words in a linear order to form a set of items in various situations. Language learners are supposed to follow some conventions according to which their dialogue will be not only meaningful but also suitable. This analysis of how to say things in appropriate habits and places is essentially called pragmatics (Hussein, Albakri, & Seng, 2019).

Subsequent to the shift in which the emphasis in language pedagogy changed from the linguistic-based to communicative-based purposes, the impact and status of pragmatic competence has regularly increased in educational circles. Considering pragmatic competence as a vital component of teaching communicative functions in EFL context, it is important for teaching practice to emphasize on value and place of pragmatic competence in general language competence and activity-based language teaching as a communicative-based purposes (Hussein, Albakri, & Seng, 2019).

Pragmatic competence plays a vital role in acquiring diverse cultures of the foreign language, then it enables learners to understand the communicative function of language. Through teaching pragmatic, English students can obtain different socio-cultural languages, communicative functions of language by using activity-based teaching language. Sometimes, EFL learners show pragmatic competence when the written or spoken language produced is polite and socially suitable. Learners should recognize pragmatic instruction, and



communicative function of language by using activity-based teaching language that learners employ in their utterances and discover strategies employed by the learners to achieve their communication objectives in different countries. Pragmatic should be effectively and purposefully chosen in such a way that they should be more testable, teachable, interesting, motivating in FL classroom language.

Judgment Test

The investigation of pragmatic awareness in L2 learners has long been conducted by using judgment tasks. This tradition was predominantly sparked by Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei's (1998) research on the pragmatic and grammatical perceptions of 173 ESL learners in the US and 370 EFL learners in Hungary. The authors were interested in the influence of the learners' proficiency level as well as of the target language status (second language vs. foreign language) on the learners' perceptions. Video recordings of 20 role-played scenarios which had been derived from previously employed Discourse Completion Tests (DCTs) and which featured requests, apologies, suggestions and refusals were presented to the participants, who were asked to indicate whether the final turn in a situation contained a problem and, if so, to rate its severity on an answer sheet. Of the 20 situations, eight contained a grammar error (G), another eight a pragmatic infelicity (P), and the remaining four were unproblematic (U), i.e., both correct and appropriate. The results showed that the learners in the ESL context rated the pragmatic infelicities as more serious than grammar errors, whereas the EFL learners ranked the grammatical errors as more severe than the pragmatic problems.

Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei's study sparked a number of replication studies. Niezgodna and Roever (2001) employed the same data collection instrument to collect data from 48 ESL learners in the US and 124 EFL learners in the Czech Republic. While they also found that the ESL learners assigned higher severity ratings to the pragmatic infelicities than to the grammar errors, their EFL learners outperformed the ESL learners in both error identification and severity ratings. Also, the EFL learners rated the pragmatic and grammatical errors as similarly severe.

Grammatical and Pragmatics Awareness

Grammar relates to the accuracy of structure, including morphology and syntax, whereas pragmatics addresses language use and is concerned with the appropriateness of utterances given specific situations, speakers, and content. Research has shown that grammatical development does not guarantee a corresponding level of pragmatic development: Even learners who exhibit high levels of grammatical competence may exhibit a wide range of pragmatic competence when compared with native speakers (NS) in conversations. Thus, even advanced language learners often show a marked imbalance between their grammatical and their pragmatic knowledge or, more specifically, between the lexico-grammatical microlevel and the "macro level of communicative intent and sociocultural context".



The disparity between learners' and NS's pragmatic competence may be attributed to two key factors related to input: the availability of input and the salience of relevant linguistic features in the input from the point of view of the learner. Status-appropriate input is often limited or absent from the status-unequal encounters that characterize talk in advising sessions and classrooms, which would imply that learners do not acquire a sufficient level of L2 pragmatic competence because the target language they encounter in the L2 classroom simply lacks a sufficient range and emphasis of relevant exemplars. The influence of instruction (House, 1996; Wildner-Bassett, 1984) and proposals for greater authenticity in pedagogical materials for classroom language learners also address the issue of availability of input, although from the proactive perspective of making input available to learners.

Apparently, both capabilities are not contradictory. Linguistic competence is important but not sufficient as a platform for foreign language pragmatic competence development. The acquisition of the linguistics competence generally goes before the acquisition of the pragmatic competence. Hence, the instruction in pragmatics is necessary in order to develop pragmatic principles governing interpersonal interaction in cross-cultural communication (Kumar Dash, 2015). The lack of sufficient pragmatic knowledge like politeness, implicature, speech acts, etc. can be the primary cause of the breakdown of communication. It can lead towards the emergence of uncooperative and, more seriously rude or insulting (Rianita, 2017).

Grammatical and Pragmatics Awareness

The importance of teaching pragmatic competence has been widely noticed as a vital part of language teaching curriculum. Findings showed that pragmatic competence should be developed through explicit and implicit instruction, with the prevalence of the former, with a range of activities and situations/contexts. Especially the rules of social norms that are different from the ones in the learners' native cultures should be given emphasis. After all, communication is not a mere exchange of messages, but it also is correct and appropriate interpretation of intentions on both sides and being able to respond accordingly. That is why, integrating elements of pragmatic competence in EFL curricula and lesson plans is of crucial importance.

It has been argued that pragmatic studies provide the students with linguistic tools and help them to learn and understand the action in an appropriate way, i.e., TL culture. The textbook is the center of the curriculum and syllabus in most classrooms; however, rarely does it provide enough information for learners to successfully acquire pragmatic competence. It has been found that textbooks include a paucity of explicit metapragmatic information is the textbooks were rare. Implications suggest that textbook developers could include authentic examples of speech acts and sufficient metapragmatic explanations to facilitate acquisition of pragmatic competence. In addition to that, teachers' knowledge and teaching methods are also a crucial aspect in teaching pragmatics. Teachers' understanding of pragmatic knowledge and its teaching varied, although all of them recognised the vital importance of teaching pragmatic knowledge in enhancing EFL students' communicative competence; the way teachers taught



pragmatic knowledge was influenced by how they learned pragmatics and their perceptions of pragmatics; there was a dearth of pragmatic knowledge presented in the analyzed textbook; and teachers relied mostly on textbooks to teach pragmatics and encountered difficulties in teaching pragmatics because of their lack of pragmatic competence as well as methods to teach it (Ibrahim & Maniam, 2020).

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

To answer the research questions, this study will use a quantitative approach by asking students to categorize the errors as G, P, or U based on what they found in the given tasks. Results of the rating will then be assessed to obtain students' score for each of the three categories. These results will be presented descriptively based on the overall score for each category and compared from one to another.

Participants

Participants of this study are 25 English Literature students who are currently in semester 7 and have passed the course Pragmatics. This is to fulfill the criteria that students' have been exposed to pragmatic learning. All participants learned English as a foreign language (or EFL learners) and without the proficiency test conducted before this study, it is acceptable to assume that they have reached at least B2 level according to the CEFR considering the year of studying English in higher education. The students who are selected in this study have previously agreed to be the research subjects through consent forms disseminated prior to this study.

Instruments

The study adopted a judgment questionnaire containing 15 situations from the previous study by Glaser (2020) in assessing L2 pragmatic awareness of EFL learners with no modifications made to keep the realism and construct validity. Although in the early study the author included questions for students to make repair of the error, it is diminished in the current study due to the limited time for collecting data from participants in large numbers and that participants have no learning experience to do so. The questionnaire contains scenarios that have the same share of G, P, and U situations to account for the same share of replies, therefore there are five G, P, and U situations respectively (Glaser, 2020).

Analytical Procedures

Initially, the data will be coded based on students' ability to make judgment correctly following Glaser's (2020) coding scheme. For the G and P situations, the responses are classified either as Hits or Misses. The Hits and Misses mark are then coded based on what problems that participant had correctly 'hit' (i.e. Hit Pragmatics, HP, and Hit Grammar, HG), as well as what problem that the participant had 'missed' but incorrectly identified as another

problem (i.e. Miss Grammar for Pragmatics, MGP, and Miss Pragmatics for Grammar, MPG) or not able to notice any problem at all (Miss Pragmatics for Unproblematic, MPU). For the U situations, the responses are coded as False Alarms or Correct Rejections (CR). Furthermore, for the U situations the False Alarms are coded again as false grammar (FG) or false pragmatics (FP). The matrix of codes can be seen in table 3.

Table 3. Adapted Signal Detection Matrix

		Participant's response: Utterance contains:		
		Grammar problem	Pragmatic problem	No problem
Reality	Grammar problem present (G)	Hit Grammar (HG)	Miss G for P (MGP)	Miss G for U (MGU)
	Pragmatic problem present (P)	Miss P for G (MPG)	Hit Pragmatics (HP)	Miss P for U (MPU)
	Utterance is unproblematic (U)	False Alarm Grammar (FG)	False Alarm for Pragmatics (FP)	Correct Rejection (CR)

Adopted from Glaser, K. (2020). Assessing the L2 Pragmatic Awareness of Non-Native EFL Teacher Candidates: Is Spotting a Problem Enough? *Lodz Papers in Pragmatics*, 16(1), 36-65

To account for learners' score overall, descriptive statistics will be presented to attain the mean scores of students' ability to make judgment on errors in the three situations which will answer RQ1 and RQ2. These descriptive statistics will then be compared from one situation to another to answer RQ3.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Grammatical and Pragmatic Awareness

To obtain the level of accuracy, learners' overall score was calculated. From 15 questions, the mean score achieved is 5.15. The score distribution is presented in Figure 1.

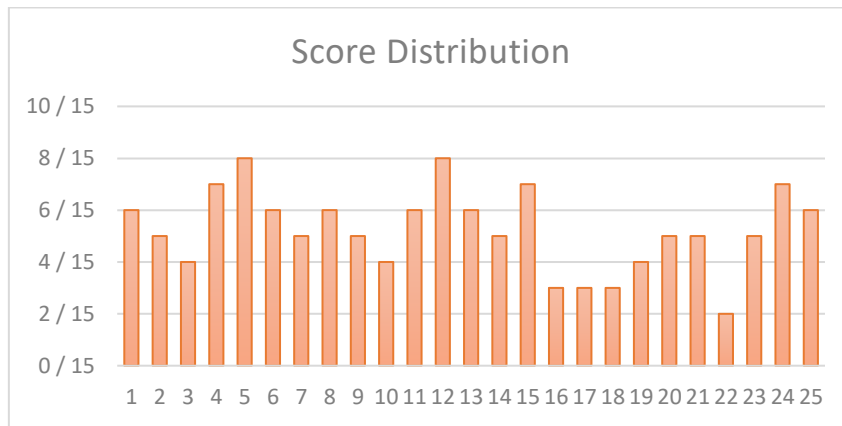


Figure 1. Overall Score

In the above figure, the highest score achieved was 8 by only two learners. Meanwhile the lowest score is 2 by one learner. This result shows that the highest score is only .5 higher than half of the full score (15) and there are still learners that almost completely failed at the judgment test. Scores that appeared the most are 5 and 6 (6 learners each) which reflect learners' ability that is still very low in recognizing errors in grammatical and pragmatic questions. Learners failed to make correct decisions in judging whether the questions have issues or not, or more specifically, in which aspect do the questions contain error. Whereas participants are students in their senior year majoring in English, the scores achieved are considerably detrimental as they have spent 3.5 years in higher education with two years acquiring grammar-focused subjects, and 1 semester-long course of explicit pragmatics learning.

To answer the first and second research questions regarding learners' achievement on making grammatical and pragmatic judgment, descriptive statistics has been employed to obtain the percentage of distribution in each problem's responses. Figure 2. depicts the response distribution in the grammatical (G) situations.

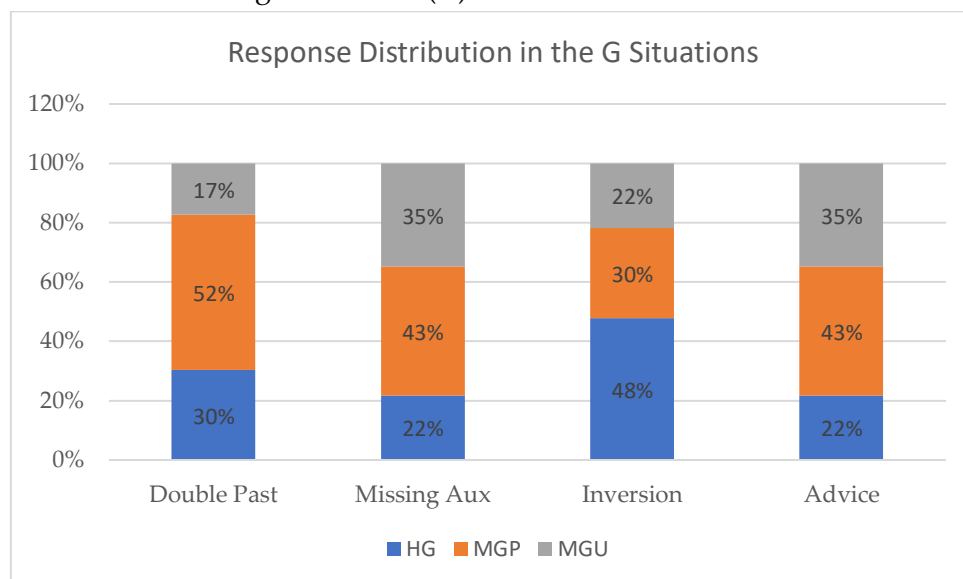


Figure 2. Response Distribution in the G Situations

The questionnaire has 4 items of grammatical situations or requires learners to recognize the grammatical errors occurring. The four items consist of different grammatical errors namely double past, missing auxiliary, inversion, and advice. From each problem, it is found that learners have different levels of ability to identify the error. The grammatical problem that is most easily recognized is inversion (48% HG). Meanwhile the most difficult grammatical problems to be recognized are Missing Auxiliary and Advice (22% HG on each). From this result, the correct rate of grammatical judgment is very low although learners have received intensive grammar learning during their study in the English department. From the distribution, it is also found that most learners make a mistaken judgment of grammatical problems as pragmatic problems (MGP).

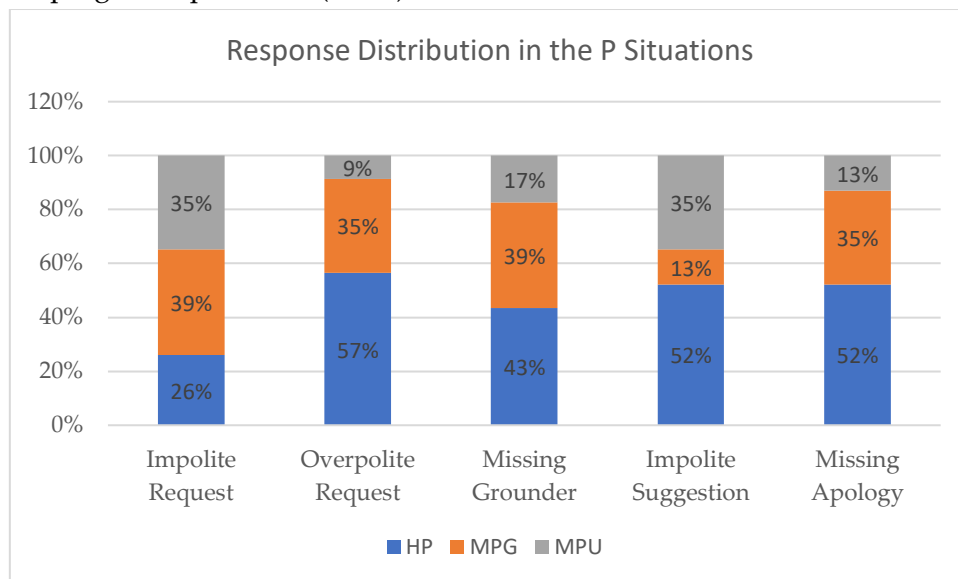


Figure 3. Response Distribution in the P Situations



Figure 4. Comparison between Grammatical, Pragmatic, and Unproblematic Situations

To answer research question 3, the correct rate of each situation is compared to one another. The correct rate is presented on Figure 5.

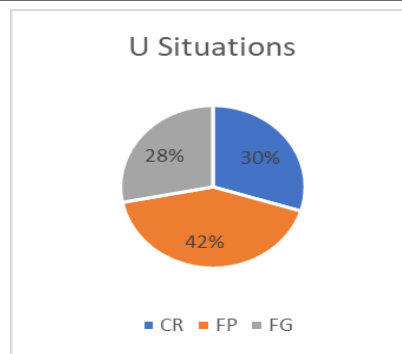


Figure 5. Response Distribution in the G Situations

Based on the results above, it is obtained that learners made the most correct judgments on pragmatic situations (46%), followed by unproblematic situations (29%), and the least correct on grammatical situations (24%). Although learners have shown higher awareness on pragmatics, the achieved score is still below half which means learners still lack the ability to make correct decisions on pragmatic situations. It is also shown that in both unproblematic situations and grammatical situations, learners have a high tendency to mis-identify the errors to be pragmatic.

Discussion

English grammatical rules have many exceptions and memorization that are difficult to remember. In a communicative context, writing a grammatically correct sentence is more challenging than producing it orally (Almekhlafi et.al, 2011). It is because of the communicative purpose where students are encouraged not to worry about the grammar when speaking to ensure confidence and fluency. Teachers need to provide a focused form of tasks in every communicative activity, especially due to the lack of English exposure in learners' daily life. Therefore it is fair to state that learners at whichever level of English proficiency could always have difficulties in learning grammar. It is advisable to modify this research in the future by asking students to revise grammar situations which they believe are wrong to learn the cause of grammar errors.

Though numbers of researchers identified the lack of pragmatic awareness among EFL learners (Niezgoda & Roever, 2001; Glasser, 2020), the present study showed the opposite. However, the results were not highly satisfying since students only guessed 46% of pragmatic situations correctly. In the course of English literature stream, students received practical pragmatic lessons through Cross Cultural Understanding subject. The aim was to provide students with the skill of communication competence when faced with cross cultural communication context. The course was supplemented with rich practical pragmatics scenarios in which students were trained to be able to address issues in cross cultural contact in various situations (i.e., family relations, friendship, workplace, etc). Cross cultural studies facilitate students in building awareness of some culturally appropriate ways of speaking and behaving in diverse situations such as addressing people, expressing gratitude, ordering



something, showing disagreements, and delivering opinions (Peterson & Coltrane, 2003). Culture is portrayed through language and this notion was emphasized in cross culture communication studies to strengthen students' ability to communicate effectively both in grammar and pragmatic aspects.

CONCLUSION

The present paper seeks to explore learners' degree of awareness in pragmatic scenarios and grammatical scenarios in EFL context. Participants were tested using a judgment test to explore their pragmatic awareness and the extent to where they can distinguish grammatical and pragmatic scenarios. Participants had to decide whether the given scenarios contained grammatical problems, pragmatics violations, or unproblematic. Results indicated higher awareness of pragmatic situations than grammatical ones. Evaluating from their level of study, participants have completed Pragmatics and Cross Cultural Understanding courses which might explain such competence in identifying pragmatics violations during judgement tests. Further research is advised to seek for students' ability in revising problematic grammatical scenarios.

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