In the Name of God

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M. A. Thesis

A comparison of linguistic and pragmatic knowledge: A case of

Iranian learners of English

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Abstract

The present study compared the linguistic and pragmatic knowledge of high intermediate level Iranian learners of English. 50 students of the same language background at the upper intermediate level of proficiency from 6 different language institutes took two tests of pragmatic competence and linguistic knowledge. Also the study evaluated the efficiency of the learners' textbook in providing sufficient pragmatic input to Iranian learners of English as its peripheral objective. An achievement test of linguistic competence and an oral discourse completion test developed and validated by the researcher composed major instruments of this study. Descriptive and inferential statistics including Pearson Product Moment Correlation, paired samples t-test, 5% trimmed mean and coefficient of determination revealed that although there was statistically significant correlation between the two tests, participants underscored on the oral discourse completion test and the disparity between scores was considerably high. Also finding of this study showed that the New Interchange Series managed to provide the required pragmatic input for Iranian Learners of English to fulfill their basic communicative needs. Findings of the study pedagogically call for more emphasis on teaching pragmatics to learners of English as a foreign language and highlight the need for establishing more reliable and valid measures of pragmatic proficiency in language institutes. Also the findings were theoretically in accord with the previous studies which concluded that learners with high levels of grammatical proficiency may exhibit a wide range of pragmatic competence in conversations.

Key Words: Correlational research, Interlanguage pragmatics, Communicative competence, Grammatical competence, Speech act theory, Oral discourse completion test

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List of Abbreviations

L1: First Language

L2: Second Language

EFL: English as a Foreign Language

ESL: English as a Second Language

ODCT: Oral Discourse Completion Test

ATLC: Achievement Test of Linguistic Competence

1.1. Overview

Language consists of more than string of words. As a matter of fact authentic language is not bounded by linguistic competence. It's wrong to believe that successful language usage would necessarily lead to successful language use. Researchers believe that linguistic aspects of language are only one part of the communication process (Farhady, Jafarpur & Birjandi 2001; Canale, 1983). In fact, it is the extralinguistic context that gives meanings to our utterances.

How is communicative competence defined? What are different aspects of acquiring a communicative competence? As cited in Richards, Communicative competence (introduced by Hymes, 1972) as opposed to linguistic competence includes the following aspects of language knowledge:

- Knowing how to use language for a variety of purposes and functions

- Knowing when to use formal and informal speech or how to use language appropriately for written as opposed to spoken communication

- Knowing how to produce and understand different types of texts (e.g. narratives, reports, interviews, conversations)

- Knowing how to maintain communication despite having limitations in one's language knowledge (e.g. through using different kinds of communicative strategies) (Richards, 2005)

As the above items imply, integral components of our communicative competence are defined as using the language to fulfill variety of communicative purposes via different styles according to the context and social distance of interlocutors and following rule of appropriate use of language. Learning only linguistic elements of a language, one cannot fulfill the abovementioned features contained in social interactions.

Hymes (1974) devised the acronym SPEAKING to illustrate subtle elements of communication. In his model S represents the social and physical "setting" where communication occurs. P stands for "participants", E represents "ends" or the purpose of interaction, K stands for "key" or manner of communication, I represents "instrumentation", that is the form and style and register of speech, N describes "norms" and social rules and expectations underlying communication and finally G stands for "genre" which implies the kind of speech act or communication involved. This model provides guidelines for appropriate communication.

Learning communicative competence is defined under the field of pragmatics (Edwards & Csizér, 2004). As stipulated in Spenser-Oatey and Zegarac (as cited in Schmitt, 2002), "There are two broad approaches to pragmatics, a cognitive-psychological approach and a social-psychological approach. The former primarily focuses on exploring the relation between decontextualized, linguistic meaning of utterances, what speakers mean by their utterances on given occasions. The latter, which is the focus of this study, addresses ways in which particular communicative exchanges between individuals are embedded in and constrained by social, cultural and other contextual factors" (p.84). Pragmatic competence itself is defined as the study of nonnative speakers' comprehension, production, and acquisition of linguistic actions in L2 (Kasper 1998).

There is no doubt that developing pragmatic competence in EFL/ESL courses is necessary (witness is the huge number of advertisement on teaching conversation in language institutes); though what is the best way to approach the teaching and testing of this competence has long been the focus of methodological debate (e.g. Bachman 1990, p.81-110; Richards 2006).

Studies addressing pragmatic competence report that even linguistically competent learners have problems concerning pragmatic competence and cannot use the target language appropriately, this shows their lack of awareness of social, cultural and discourse conventions that they are to follow (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999; Savignon, 1976). Thus, more research is required on the disparity between linguistic and pragmatic competence (e.g. Edwards & Csizér, 2004).

Also textbooks' contribution to pragmatic development of foreign language learners should not be taken for granted. Highlighting the necessity of teaching pragmatics to language learners, it should be noted that in foreign language context where the shortage of natural input is felt the role of text books become more important.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Studies documented that even advanced L2 learners suffer from pragmatic weakness (Kasper & Schmidt, 1996; Kasper & Rose, 1999). As stated by Miller (1974), communication breakdowns among learners of a foreign language are mostly due to pragmatic failures, that is, when their intentions are not articulated appropriately or they do not understand others' intentions correctly. Unfortunately, in Iran, language learners are not exposed to natural, real life input through which they can practice communicative skills. Also lack of competent language teachers amplifies the problem. Teachers usually neglect focusing on pragmatic competence and spend a great deal of class hours helping learners internalize linguistic rules and vocabulary items. Hence, learners usually do not have much opportunity to encode their intentions in the language they are practicing.

Although the problem has been felt long enough in our country, little research has been devoted to explore the problem and identify the respective causes of pragmatic failures among Iranian learners of English (Sahragard, Rahimi & Zaremoayedi, 2009). Additionally, regarding assessment, it seems that language institutes do not bother developing tests to measure the ability of Iranian learners of English to choose socially appropriate responses to clearly defined situations which they may encounter in their daily life in the L2 context. Thus, one can judge that our curricula seem to lack a well defined system for teaching and assessing pragmatic knowledge of learners. This study was

developed with an aim of systematic description of such a problem supported by quantitative data collection and data analysis.

Adhering to a practical criterion to evaluate EFL learners' mastery of pragmatic knowledge of L2 seems to be the major problem of Iranian language practitioners, including language institutes, which has been neglected over time (little research has addressed this issue). A reasonable excuse might be that since it is difficult to define communication, it would not be easy for a test taker to decide what to test in order to assess learner's communicative ability. Although the variety of EFL textbooks and materials available for language learners are considerably limited in Iran, a large number of language institutes throughout the whole country lack a reasonable criterion to evaluate learner's mastery of the pragmatic input presented to them via those course books and materials. Research shows that despite knowing the theory and principles associated with Communicative Language Teaching, teachers in practice rely on more traditional activities in their classrooms (e.g. Richards, 2009) which limit their focus to developing linguistic competence among language learners.

The speech Act Theory can function as a relevant criterion for evaluating one's pragmatic knowledge of language. Indeed, pragmatic knowledge is not limited to the use of speech acts, but mastery of speech acts is an essential, demanding part of pragmatic competence. The notion of speech acts goes back to the philosophical work of Austin (1962) who observed that most things that people say are not simply propositions that are true or false, but performatives that succeed or fail. This theory views language in the context of human action and studies the functions and purposes of human actions that are accomplished by sentences. It is assumed that the way learners convert their intentions into words, or in Austin's words, the way speech acts are realized in interactions, reflects learner's mastery of a language.

1.3. Significance of the Study

To address the issue that teachers skip tapping pragmatic awareness in learners, the present study set out to evaluate linguistic and pragmatic achievements of students who already finished the whole New Interchange Series as their input provider resource. Whereby such an evaluation, it was intended to provide information about disparity in language knowledge of learners finishing the last stage of the New Interchange courses. Investigating whether there is any correlation between progress of linguistic and pragmatic competence of Iranian learners of English, one might realize whether students passing the whole New Interchange Series successfully have learned to fulfill their basic communicative needs meanwhile they were learning linguistic codes of English via those course books. Since the population of this study was selected from among classrooms in which teachers followed teaching guidelines of the New Interchange Series, it could also be judged whether the above mentioned course books managed to provide sufficient pragmatic input for language learners to communicate their intentions in the target language (English). Also the present study attempted to construct and validate instruments, referred to as achievement tests of linguistic proficiency and pragmatic competence for the New Interchange Series.

Walking through displays of book shops which sell EFL materials in Iran, one can find New Interchange Series dominating the market. There also exist a limited variety of other textbooks and materials for EFL learners but once enrolling language institutes in Iran especially at beginner to upper intermediate levels, it will be realized that New Interchange Series are mostly popular in the language programs of Iranian institutes.

What can explain such popularity in our market? Possible reasons might be that, there might be surveys taken from language learners supporting the efficiency of these course books according to a number of criteria. Another reason for such abundance might be lack of any other appropriate or comprehensive input provider course book to fulfill major communicative and linguistic needs of language learners. Ease of teaching parts of the book according to its clear guidelines or variety of topics provided might be another justification for teachers to prefer these textbooks to other EFL materials. Also an EGP (English for general purposes) course book can be popular if it helps students master linguistic or communicative competence according to their academic purposes or their

social communicative needs. Unfortunately, to the researchers' best knowledge, efficiency of The New Interchange Series has not been academically investigated (Sahragard, et al., 2009). Thus, this study was conducted in an attempt to show that public use of a certain material for learning a language deserves academic investigations to approve or disapprove its efficiency. Academic research on the efficiency of second language materials will help first, language learners to feel more confident that they are within the right path for their learning purposes. Second, it will help material developers and language educators advertise those learning materials that are supported by academic research.

Subordinate to its major objectives, this study also intended to see in practice, which of the above mentioned factors justifies the abundance of New Interchange Series in Iran Market.

1.4. Research Questions and Hypotheses

Referring to the aforementioned problems, the present study was designed to address the following questions:

1- Can participants who already passed the whole New Interchange Series for at least 8 continuous terms realize and respond to a variety of speech situations which will be provided to them based on the content of their course books?

2- Is there any significant difference between linguistic and pragmatic knowledge of Iranian learners of English who already passed the whole New Interchange series?

3- Is pragmatic development of Iranian EFL learners parallel with progress of their linguistic proficiency?

4- Considering the results of this study, have the New Interchange course books been efficient enough in providing required input for Iranian learners of English to do things with words and to fulfill their basic communicative needs (those that are addressed in their course books, based on the table of contents of the New Interchange books).

According to the research questions above, the following hypotheses were made:

1. There will be no statistically significant correlation between linguistic and pragmatic test scores of Iranian learners of English (H_0).
2. Pragmatic development of Iranian EFL learners is not parallel with progress of their linguistic proficiency (H_A).

1.5. Definition of Key Terms

Correlational Research

This is categorized under quantitative type of research the goal of which is to determine whether a relationship exists between variables and, if so, the strength of that relationship will be analyzed. It differs from experimental research in that contrary to experimental research, a correlational or associational study is not concerned with causation, only with co-occurrence (Mackey and Gass, 2005).

Interlanguage Pragmatics

As a domain within L2 studies, pragmatics is usually referred to as interlanguage pragmatics (ILP), as analogy with interlanguage grammar, interlanguage phonology, and interlanguage lexicon (Kasper & Rose, 2002).
Kasper and Blum-Kulka (1993, p. 3) define ILP as "the study of nonnative speaker's use and acquisition of linguistic action patterns in a second language".

Communicative Competence

The notion of communicative competence (Hymes, 1972) includes knowledge of different communicative strategies or communicative styles according to the situation, the task and the roles of participants. The choice of an appropriate strategy for performing a communicative task or speech act is dependent on a number of factors including age, sex, familiarity and roles of interlocutors, which as cited in Richards (1983, p.116) will determine whether a speaker adopts conversational strategies implying either affiliation or dominance.

Grammatical Competence

Grammatical competence (as cited in Bachman, 1990) includes those competencies involved in language usage which consist of knowledge of vocabulary, morphology, syntax and phonology. This knowledge governs choice of words, forms and their arrangement in utterances to express propositions and to comprehend literal meaning of propositions (p.87).

Speech Act Theory

In general, speech acts are acts of communication. To communicate is to express a certain attitude, and the type of speech act being performed corresponds to the type of attitude being expressed. For example, a statement expresses a belief, a request expresses a desire, and an apology expresses regret. As an act of communication, a speech act succeeds if the audience identifies, in accordance with the speaker's intention, the attitude being expressed. Some speech acts, however, are not primarily acts of communication and have the function not of communicating but of affecting institutional states of affairs. They include judges' rulings, sentencing, bequeathing and appointing. The acts can be performed only in certain ways under certain circumstances by those in certain institutional or social positions.

Oral Discourse Completion Test

One of the data collection instruments in pragmatic research is Discourse Completion Test (DCT). It is a written or oral description of a particular situation intended to reveal the pattern of a speech act being studied (Nurani, 2009). In the type of discourse completion test used for this study, examinees are required to assume themselves in some situations and provide verbal responses to those situations. Discourse completion tasks along with role plays are used to elicit data in pragmatic research.

1.6. Outline of the Thesis

The outline of the chapters of the present thesis is presented in the following order. Chapter one presents the overview, background, statement of the problem, and significance of the study. In addition, the definitions of the key terms in use are provided. Chapter two