On the relationship between pragmatic knowledge and language proficiency among Iranian male and female undergraduate EFL learners

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was, firstly, to investigate the relationship between pragmatic knowledge and language proficiency, i.e. whether the learners with different proficiency levels perform differently in a pragmatic test. Secondly, the study aimed at exploring the relationship between gender and language proficiency and pragmatic knowledge. That is, the study examined whether there is any significant difference between the performance of males and females regarding their pragmatic knowledge and language proficiency. 120 university students including 60 freshmen and 60 seniors majoring in English Translation from Bandar Abbes Azad University were selected randomly. The participants were placed in the beginning, intermediate and advanced levels based on the results of the proficiency (TOEFL) test. Then, a pragmatic competence test (MDCT) was used to determine the extent of participants' pragmatic knowledge. The calculated data were analyzed through an inferential statistics. The findings of the study obtained through statistical analyses indicated that a) there was no significant relationship between pragmatic knowledge and language proficiency. In other words, the learners with different proficiency levels did not perform differently in the pragmatic test; b) female participants performed better in pragmatic and proficiency tests.

Keywords: pragmatic knowledge; language proficiency; EFL Learner, gender, speech act

INTRODUCTION

Interacting with speakers of other languages and cultures needs the linguistic competence (grammatical competence) as well as pragmatic competence or knowledge, which is considered as one of the intricacies of language competence. Sociocultural norms and constraints influence individuals' speaking in their first or second language as well as the way of interaction with others. Rizk (2003) cautions the issue of appropriateness of the utterances and asserts that what is perceived as an appropriate utterance or response in one language or culture may not be the exact case in another culture or vice versa. For example, lauding or extolling a fleshy or plump girl is considered as an affront in American context but in another context like western African community, it is a compliment. This highlights the pragmatic

dimension of the language competence, which is perceived as an indispensible part of communicative competence.

Pragmatics is considered as a subfield of linguistics developed in the late 1970s and has been defined in various ways, reflecting authors' theoretical orientation and audience. Many definitions have been proposed for pragmatics. Crystal (1997 p.301), as one of the prominent and a pioneer of pragmatics domain, has defined pragmatics as:

The study of language from users' viewpoints: These standpoints include making the choices on the part of the users, confronting with the constraints in their social interaction and their effect of their language use on other speakers in the process of interaction. In other words, pragmatics is the study of communicative action in its socio cultural context. This communicative or interactional action consists of an assortment of perspectives encompassing performing and making use of the speech acts (like requesting, apologizing, complaining, complimenting, thanking and so on) Yule (1996) defined pragmatics as "the study of intended speaker meaning" (p.127). Pragmatics includes "the study of how speakers use and understand speech acts" (Richards and Schmidt 2002).

It is worth mentioning the fact that pragmatics plays a very important role in the production and perception of the language. That is why interlocutors should have enough pragmatic knowledge to produce and perceive the proper and intended speech acts based on the situation. Therefore, possessing pragmatic competence is one of the key factors in the process of communication. Pragmatic competence in foreign language contexts is defined as the knowledge of communicative action or speech acts, how to perform it, and the ability to utilize the language in proper ways based on the context or contextual factors (Kasper 1997; Kasper & Roever 2005). In addition, Leech (1983) and Thomas (1983) divided the pragmatic competence into pragmalinguistic competence, ''the particular resources which a given language provides for conveying particular illocutions'', i.e., the degree to which one is able to use appropriate linguistic forms to realize speech acts and their associated strategies and sociopragmatic competence, ''the sociological interface of pragmatics'', which refers to understanding of contextual variables such as the social distance, power and imposition of the action between participants in an interaction. In other words, the relationship between linguistic action and social structure refers to social factors such as status, social distance and degree of imposition that influence what kinds of linguistic acts are performed and how they are performed (Martinez-Flor and Uśo-Juan 2010).

In fact, two conclusions can thus be made about pragmatic competence (Rose, 1997b; Taylor, 1988). First, pragmatic competence consists of knowledge, and not the ability to use knowledge. Second, pragmatic competence consists of (at least) two components: knowledge of a pragmatic system, and knowledge of its appropriate use. The former provides the range of linguistic options available to individuals for performing various acts (pragmalinguistics) , while the latter enables them to select the appropriate choice given a particular goal in a particular setting (Sociopragmatics). Pragmatics as an area of query within foreign language acquisition is usually named as Interlanguage Pragmatics. Interlanguage pragmatics is convinced as the "nonnative speakers' comprehension and production of speech acts, and how their L2 (second language)-related speech act knowledge is acquired" (Kasper and Dahl 1991, p. 1). In other words, interlanguage pragmatics is the study of the use and acquisition of various speech acts in the target language by second or foreign language learners. In this study, nonnativeness is conceptualized as the EFL. In general, Interlanguage refers to the second or foreign language learners' developing understanding and knowledge of the target language.

How interlocutors produce and perceive the language in different situations is a significant issue that has been investigated so far by different researchers since creating inappropriate utterances would lead to misunderstanding or even breakdowns in communication. Accordingly, knowing this matter is very essential especially for foreign language learners because they do not have enough

knowledge of the target language and they are not exposed to rich input and as a result, they would be influenced by their first language and transfer their pragmatic knowledge of their native language to the target language.

Lack of pragmatic awareness is most evident among EFL learners   while communicating with people from other cultures. Teachers in EFL classrooms are partly responsible for the lack of pragmatic knowledge among learners. EFL teachers mostly concentrate on the grammar and vocabulary (linguistic competence) and they do not pay sufficient attention to the pragmatic or sociolinguistic dimension of language. Therefore, EFL learners may produce utterances that are perfectly grammatical, but they may violate social norms of the target language because they lack pragmatic competence (appropriateness of meaning) to support grammatical competence (appropriateness of form) (Thomas 1983; Leech 1983; Bardovi-Harlig & Dornyei 1998).

Eslami-Rasekh, Eslami-Rasekh and Fatahi (2004) also emphasize this issue and caution that the communication of   EFL learners with native speakers (NSs) may bring about pragmatic failure due to the lack of pragmatic knowledge of the sociocultural norms of the target community. As such, pragmatic competence should be acquired in order to lessen pragmatic failure or communication breakdowns between NSs and NNSs. Elsamaty (2005) states that learners should be able to use the language efficiently to perceive the language in context (contextualized language). Iranian EFL students are not exposed to the target community and culture and they find it extremely difficult to produce or sometimes understand a speech act.

Actually, the underlying pragmatic problems of Iranian EFL learners are rooted in this fact that the speech act sets as the dominant aspect of pragmatics are considered problematic experience for Iranian learners. They often are unable to recognize or produce appropriate strategies or patterns in the target language and they mostly transfer from their first language for the recognition, comprehension and production of different pragmatically proper sentences. Moreover, they often fail to identify the proper function of speech acts in EFL educational settings (Eslami-rasekh and Mardani 2010).

Major issues which are studied in pragmatics domain are deixis, presupposition, indirectness, politeness, conversational implicature, cooperative principles and speech acts. The focus of this study is on speech acts only because in relation to foreign language learning, pragmatics has mostly been conceptualized as pertinent to speech acts, language functions and linguistic politeness (Vásquezand & Fioramonte 2011). A key facet of pragmatic competence is to understand the speech acts and their appropriateness in a specific context (Cheng 2005, p. 9). Speech acts, in its general sense, have been defined as the utterances and the total situation in which the utterances are issued (Austin 1962). Of different types of speech acts, only requests and apologies are the concern of this study. The rationale behind choosing these two speech acts is that firstly, they are considered as two face-threatening speech acts and call for redressive action. Requests affect the face of the hearer while apologies counteract the speaker's face wants (Blum-Kulka et al 1989) and secondly, due to the fact that every day and in every situation, people perform the acts of request and apology frequently. An apology is a speech act that is used to restore relationships between a speaker (S) and a hearer (H) after S has offended H intentionally or unintentionally. Concerning apology, Olshtain (1983) states that "the act of apologizing requires an action or an utterance which is intended to ' set things right' (p.235)".

In addition, Goffman (1971) defined apology as a kind of remedial work which involves the splitting of the speaker's self into two parts, the one guilty of having offended the addressee, the other aligning himself or herself with the addressee and with the violated norm. Excuses according to him, have a remedial function too, but belong to another kind of remedial work, namely, accounts, which consist in redefining a potentially offensive act, so as to make it acceptable. The speech act of request is realized when a speaker verbalizes a wish which can be carried out by the hearer. Thus, a request

requires the hearer to carry out an act or to provide some information or goods for the speaker's sake (Olshtain 1983). In the following section, we will review some of the studies of pragmatics and language proficiency previously conducted.

A REVIEW OF STUDIES RELATED TO PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE AND LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

A number of studies have investigated the effect of language proficiency on different dimensions of pragmatic competence. The following section summarizes the studies conducted by Keshmiri (1999), Garcia (2004), Al-Tayib Umar (2004), Håkansson and Norrby (2005), Rattanaprasert & Aksornjarung (2011) and Al-Gahtani & Roever (2011) which have findings relevant to the present study.

Keshmiri (1999) investigated the effect of proficiency level on the interpretation of conversational implicatures by Iranian and American students. Analysis of the results indicated that 1) more proficient participants interpreted the implicatures included in the test significantly better than the less proficient ones, 2) not all types of implicatures had equal difficulty, even for American NS participants, 3) even NSs differed in their ability to interpret at least some types of implicature, and 4) the way Iranian L2 learners of English interpreted the implicatures provided some support for the non-universality and cultural specificity of the Gricean maxims which was in accordance with the conclusions drawn by some other scholars. These findings seem to indicate that if students are exposed to conversational implicatures, their communicative use of the target language will be developed.

Garcia (2004) made a comparison of the performances of 16 advanced and 19 beginning English language learners on a listening comprehension task focusing on linguistic and pragmatic processing. T-test results indicated the developmental differences in comprehension of pragmatic meaning. Pearson correlation results support construct differences between linguistic and pragmatic comprehension, and between the comprehension of speech acts and the comprehension of implicatures.

In another study, Al-Tayib Umar (2004) demonstrated that Arab students of English, even at advanced levels, may retreat on their cultural background while making their requests strategies. It is suggestive of a matter that Arab learners of English do not have the awareness of the pragmatic differences between Arabic and English and an appropriate Arabic request system in a given situation might not be proper in English in the same situation.

Håkansson and Norrby (2005) compared pragmatic and grammatical development in Swedish EFL learners. For analyzing the grammatical knowledge, data gathered from translation tasks and essays were tested against the stage model proposed in Processability Theory, which identifies five stages of morpho-syntactic development for Swedish (Pienemann 1998, Pienemann and Håkansson 1999). A gap-fill task was used for the analysis of pragmatics, like the discourse completion task (Blum-Kulka 1982, Kasper and Roever 2005), by considering the sequential aspects of the interaction. A pilot study was done for all of the tasks with a control group of Swedish native speakers. The findings indicate a relationship between native-like pragmatic command and a high level of morpho-syntactic processability. The results are suggestive that lower level students with restricted grammatical processing capacity hardly contextualize their utterances in a pragmatically appropriate way.

Following the previous studies, Rattanaprasert & Aksornjarung (2011) conducted a study on the relationship between the learners' grammatical knowledge (grammar and vocabulary) and the pragmatic competence of the Medical first year students at a University in the South of Thailand. The study aimed at investigating the relationship between the subjects' knowledge about vocabulary and grammar and pragmatic competence in four speech acts – apology, requests, acceptation, and decline. Sixty-two 1st year medical students were the participants of this quasi-experimental study.

Data were accumulated using a questionnaire, a multiple-choice test of grammar and vocabulary, and a contextualized pragmatic judgment test. Results showed that participants who had high score in the grammar and vocabulary test did not have good performance in the test of pragmatic knowledge, and vice versa.

In a cross-sectional study, Al-Gahtani & Roever (2011) did a research from learners at four proficiency levels by using the role-play data and concentrating on the sequential organization of the interactions and the effect of participants' proficiency level. Findings showed that lower level learners were less likely to develop the upcoming request and lay the groundwork for it through ascertaining interlocutor availability and providing accounts. They made use of fewer first-pair parts and uttered the request early relying on the interlocutor to elicit further information. The interlocutor also adjusted to learners' proficiency level in keeping complications to a minimum. Effects of the social context variable power were very limited but discernible at high-proficiency levels.

STUDIES CARRIED OUT ON THE SPEECH ACTS OF APOLOGY AND REQUEST AND GENDER DIFFERENCES

Considering the gender-based studies in the domain of speech acts, Holmes (1989) investigated the differences between males and females in terms of using the frequency of complaints and apology strategy. The participants included New Zealanders of European origin. The data were gathered through a Discourse Completion Task (DCT). The results suggested that there were significant differences between the two gender performance regarding the distribution of apologies between men and women, and also that women apologized more than men. Holmes concludes that this is because women perceive apologies as important face-supportive strategies while men seem to regard them as dispensable.

In another study, Holmes (1995) did a study on the gender differences and similarities in two speech acts of apology and request. The participants were 60 Mexican students. The data collection method was Discourse Completion Task (DCT). The results revealed that females use significantly more apologies compared to their male counterparts. In addition, female participants apologize for the hearers with equal power while males use the apology strategy for the females with various statuses (low, equal, high). He found that women apologize to female friends but men do it for socially distant females.

Thijittang & Lê (2008) examined some aspects of gender differences in relation to pragmatic strategies and sociolinguistic variation from the perspective of Thai learners of English in relation to the apology speech act using a DCT. The findings of this study illustrated that sociolinguistic factors, such as social status, social distance and severity of offence are closely related to the participants' apology realization patterns. In addition, according to sociolinguistic factors, men and women sometimes evaluate the need for apologies differently. Secondly, there are some similarities in apology strategies across genders, although there are also several differences among them. Overall, both men and women use the same apology strategies. However, some findings indicate differences between them. Women seem to offer more apologies than men do. This finding recalls that of other research studies, given that in Holmes's (1989: 198) study women also used apologies more frequently than men did. Overall, the results of this study seem to reinforce the notion that the apology is a speech act, which is deeply rooted, in cultural discourse.

Although a relatively large number of studies have been done on issues related to different types of speech acts and the fact that "research concerning L2 pragmatic competence often focuses on learners speech act behavior, primarily by contrasting nonnative with native performance" (Yu 2011, p.1128), little research has been done in the context of Iran to investigate the perception of the speech

acts of apology and request among non-native speakers. In addition, some studies have shown that the influence of the level of L2 proficiency and gender on pragmatic competence and performance has not been widely researched (Kasper & Schmidt 1996). Accordingly, following these studies, this study aimed to investigate the effects of language proficiency and gender on the pragmatic knowledge of Persian non-native speakers of English and considered this issue as a research gap thus bridging this gap by the present research. Based on the findings of the study, some suggestions have been offered to EFL teachers and syllabus designers of Iran. This study is crystallized around three following research questions:

1. Do senior students have higher pragmatic knowledge than freshmen? (Do the years of study (freshmen and senior) have any effect on the pragmatic performance of Iranian EFL learners?
2. Do learners of different EFL proficiency levels (both freshmen and seniors) perform differently in a pragmatic test?
3. Is there any significant difference between males and females' performance regarding their language proficiency and pragmatic knowledge?

METHODOLOGY

PARTICIPANTS

The participants in this study comprised 120 Iranian students of Shiraz Islamic Azad University. They were selected among freshmen and seniors majoring in English translation. The sampling procedure was that of convenient sampling. The researcher then had four groups on a voluntary basis; therefore, each group included 30 students who were: 1) 30 male seniors 2) 30 female seniors 3) 30 male freshmen 4) 30 female freshmen. In this study, gender of participants as one variable was taken into consideration but their age was not controlled.

INSTRUMENTS

Two instruments were utilized for data collection purposes in this study. The first instrument was a Language Proficiency Test and the second one was a Pragmatic Competence Test. The Test of English as a Foreign Language (Farhady 2006) was designed to measure the participants' language proficiency and the Multiple Discourse Completion Test (MDCT) was used to measure the participants' pragmatic knowledge.

The employed language proficiency test in this study was one of Farhadi's complete standard TOEFL proficiency tests in 2006 taken from IRAN English Language Center in Tehran which consisted of 60 multiple choice questions (20 items on structure, 20 items on vocabulary and 20 items on reading comprehension). To calculate the reliability of the proficiency test in this study, we used the Internal Consistency Method (KR-21) having the reliability index of 0.80 which is a high positive reliability. The TOEFL Proficiency Test which was used in this study is a valid test developed and validated by Farhady (2006) who is a professor of applied linguistics at the Iran University of Science and Technology (IUST) in Tehran.

Multiple Discourse Completion test (MDCT) as a Pragmatic competence test was a test taken from a dissertation. This test that was utilized in this study developed and validated by Liu (2004) in multiple-choice items. In the present study, two speech acts (request and apology) were investigated. The items include 13 situations for requests and 12 situations for apology. The participants were

required to read each scenario and select the most appropriate response based on the situations. The Cronbach alpha reliability estimate for MDCT was satisfactory at .88 in Liu's (2004) study. The reliability of this test was studied through KR-21 method in this study. To evaluate the reliability of the pragmatic competence test, 40 English seniors of Translation from Bandar Abbas Islamic Azad University were chosen. The reliability index was 0.79, which is a high reliability. To ensure the content validity of the test, it was given to three experts in pragmatics domain to confirm the validity of the contents.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The data were collected over two weeks during the first semester of 2010-2011 academic years. The data collection was carried out by the researchers with the cooperation of 60 freshmen and 60 senior students of Shiraz Islamic Azad University. In each part and for each group, the nature of the research was explained for the students. In addition, the researchers explained the advantages of their participation in the study. In order to avoid any misunderstanding on the students' part, the instructions were also given orally in their native language. The exams were administered in two sessions for each group (male and female senior students of translation and male and female freshmen students of translation) separately.

In the first session, each group took the proficiency test. There was a time limit in this part. 20 minutes was allocated for each part (structure, vocabulary and reading comprehension) and the total time for the proficiency test was 1 hour. At the beginning of the exam session, the students were informed that this proficiency test is supposed to tap their overall English knowledge and it does not have any negative points. The explanations were given orally about the test in the students' native language. The nature of the test was explained and elaborated to the freshmen because it was felt that they might have difficulty as they were facing such tests for the first time. After the students finished the exam, all of the papers and answer sheets were collected.

After scoring the Language Proficiency Test, the mean and the standard deviation were calculated. In order to divide the participants into three groups of high, mid, and low, it was decided to consider the scores which lie one standard deviation above the mean as the high group and the ones lining one standard deviation below the mean as low and the scores lining in between as the mid. Thus, the scores higher than 34 (out of 60) were considered as representing high language proficiency and those below 26 are representing low language proficiency. The rest of the scores falling between 26 and 34 were considered as intermediate language proficiency. Consequently, out of 120 participants, 36 belonged to the high language proficiency group, 43 to the middle group, and 41 were attributed to the low language proficiency group.

In the second session, these three proficiency groups took the pragmatic test, with time limit (40 minutes). The explanations about the test were given orally and in their native language and the participants were asked to read the items (especially the instructions) carefully and put themselves in different situations in the target language environment and select the best response. During the administration, the participants' questions were answered. If the participants did not understand the instructions in English, they were explained orally in their native language. In order to find answers to the research questions posed earlier, a number of statistical analyses were run on the data. These included three Independent Samples t-tests, and a One-Way ANOVA.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To be able to answer the research questions introduced earlier. , the researcher considered the appropriate data analysis into consideration.

The first question of the study is:
Do senior students have higher pragmatic knowledge than freshmen?

To answer this question, the scores of all seniors and all freshmen regarding their pragmatic competence were compared through the application of an Independent-Samples T-test. The results are shown in the following table.

TABLE 1.1 An Independent samples t-test for the pragmatic test among freshmen and seniors

Pragmatic Knowledge	Freshmen Mean	Seniors Mean	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Equal variances assumed	12.5333	13.0167	0.097	0.756	-0.939	118	0.350
Equal variance not assumed					-0.939	117.998	0.350

Table 4.1 shows that the t-value does not exceed the critical value at the level of 0.05. The significance value (.350) is larger than the significance level (.05). Therefore, there is no significant difference between the two groups (freshmen and seniors) in their performance on pragmatic test. Practically, seniors did not show higher pragmatic competence even though their language proficiency is higher than that of freshmen. It shows that mere language proficiency is not a sufficient factor to enhance the pragmatic knowledge of learners, and other factors should be taken into consideration.

The second question of the study is:
Do learners of different EFL proficiency levels perform differently in a pragmatic test?

In order to answer this question and to understand whether there is any significant difference between the means of the three proficiency groups on their pragmatic test, a One-Way ANOVA was performed. Table 1.2 shows the results of this ANOVA. The figures in the table show that the obtained F ratio is highly significant. This indicates that the means of the participants belonging to each of these three proficiency groups are significantly different from each other regarding their language proficiency. The results show that there is no significant difference between these three groups. This means that the difference between the three groups (high, mid and low) in terms of their pragmatic competence is not significant.

TABLE 1.2 One-Way ANOVA Results for the Differences among Means of the
Three Proficiency Groups on Their Pragmatic Test

ANOVA

		Sum of				
language proficiency	Between Groups	5893.172	2	2946.586	208.334	.000
	Within Groups	1654.794	117	14.144		
	Total	7547.967	119			
pragmatic knowledge	Between Groups	17.568	2	8.784	1.108	.334
	Within Groups	927.357	117	7.926		
	Total	944.925	119			

As the Table 1.2.shows, the significance value (.000) is less than .05 (significance level), so there is a significant difference among the mean scores for the three groups regarding their language proficiency. This table also shows that there is not a significant difference between the means of three proficiency groups on the pragmatic test because the significance value (.334) is larger than .05 (significance level). . The pragmatic test does not clearly reflect the differences on pragmatic knowledge among the subjects who are at different levels of grammatical proficiency in English.

The third question of the study is:

Is there any significant difference between males and females' performance regarding their language proficiency (grammatical knowledge) and pragmatic knowledge?

To answer this question, two Independent- Samples T-tests were run to determine the difference between male and female participants in terms of their proficiency knowledge (grammatical knowledge) and pragmatic knowledge.

TABLE 1.3 An Independent Sample T-test between gender & Language Proficiency Test

Language proficiency	Female Mean	Male Mean	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Equal variances Assumed	27.5833	23.4500	1.528	0.219	2.932	118	0.004
Equal variance not assumed					2.932	114.695	0.004

As the table shows, the significance value .004 is less than the significance level (.05), so there is a significant difference between the mean scores of two groups of males and females. The result shows that the female participants performed better than the male ones on language proficiency test.

TABLE 1.4 An Independent Samples T-test between gender and The Pragmatic Competence Test

Pragmatic Knowledge	Female Mean	Male Mean	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Equal variances assumed	13.3000	12.2500	1.053	0.307	2.069	118	0.041
Equal variance not assumed					2.069	115.181	0.042

As the table shows, the significance value .041 is less than the significance level (.05), so there is a significant difference between the mean scores of two groups of males and females. The result shows that the female participants performed better than the male ones on pragmatic test.

It is normally assumed that senior students have a much higher pragmatic knowledge than freshmen students because they pass more courses on four skills, but the results of the t-test did not commensurate with the expected results. There was no significant difference between seniors and freshmen regarding their pragmatic knowledge. In other words, years of study or level of education did not have any significant effect on the pragmatic knowledge of the learners. Therefore, participants of higher level of English proficiency (grammatical knowledge) did not have correspondingly higher pragmatic ability. It can be concluded that the grammatical knowledge which represents only the formal properties alone is not enough to elevate the pragmatic knowledge of learners and other factors such as familiarity with the target culture and society, sufficient exposure to input, direct access to native speakers are essential in this aspect. This finding is in line with Delen (2010)'s claims. He is of the opinion that if someone has high level of grammatical competence, it does not mean that she or he is pragmatically competent too. In addition, Takahashi & Beebe (1987), Omar (1991) and Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford (1993), and Liu (2004) showed disparities between learners' grammatical development and pragmatic development. They reported that even learners who are grammatically competent might exhibit a wide range of pragmatic competence when compared with native speakers in conversations and elicited conditions. Barron (2003) also reported that increased grammatical proficiency may or may not cause a corresponding increase in pragmatic capabilities. This result is in line with Rattanaprasert & Aksornjarung 2011's findings which showed that the subjects who gained high score in vocabulary and grammar test did not have good performance in the pragmatic test, and vice versa. These results revealed there is a negative relationship between the grammar and vocabulary knowledge and the pragmatic knowledge of the participants.

The results of One Way ANOVA showed that there was not any significant difference between the performances of three proficiency groups regarding their pragmatic knowledge. It may be concluded that contrary to our expectation, the level of EFL learners' language proficiency (grammatical knowledge) is not affected by their pragmatic knowledge. This may be partly due to the low scores the students obtained, suggesting that the students are weak in their pragmatic knowledge. Results of the Scheffer test confirmed that although the proficiency test could differentiate between all levels of proficiency at p<.05 level of significance but the pragmatic test could not discriminate between the subjects at different levels of proficiency at p<.05 level of significance. This can be evidence of a fact that the three proficiency groups had similar performance regarding the pragmatic knowledge. This finding is in accordance with Kit (2000) who asserted that proficiency did not have the expected effect on PC. The main reason may be attributed to the fact that EFL learners just learned English through what they were exposed to in the classroom; the problem may be lack of access to the authentic materials.

Another variable which was investigated in this study was gender. According to the present study, it was found that gender differences had a significant effect on the performance of students regarding their language proficiency (grammatical knowledge) and pragmatic knowledge. In addition, the results showed that in both the language proficiency and pragmatic competence tests, females performed better than males. It shows that females maybe more sensitive and pay more attention to the social factors such as formality/informality, power, dominance and distance relationships influencing the way messages are conveyed or perceived in a given situation. That is why they had better performance in a pragmatic test. This finding is in line with Liao and Bresnahan's (1996) study, which also showed that females are more sensitive regarding the social and situational factors than males. In addition, this finding accords with Holmes (1995) who looked at gender differences in the

use of two speech acts of apologies and requests and found differences between males and females performance. The most noticeable difference found in this study was that female participants utilized significantly more apologies and requests than male ones did confirming the females' attention towards the intricacies and sociocultural norms of the language. Thijittang & Lê 2008's research on gender differences in terms of apology speech act points to this fact that men and women have different evaluations for apologies. The mention that women tend to be more sensitive to the imposition caused, so they are more prone to apologize.

In addition, the findings of the studies done by Mulac, Bradac & Gibbons 2001; Mckelvie 2000; Shams and Afghari 2011 represented the effect of gender on the use and perception of direct and indirect request speech act. The results of these studies show that females are more prone to produce indirect request and males direct. In addition, females are more attentive about the patterns of politeness and situation variables than males. It also confirms the study done on gender differences by Ide (1992) revealing that females are more polite than males and try more to retain the interpersonal relationship.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research contributes to the body of research on interlanguage pragmatics and gender studies by illustrating those senior students have higher language proficiency (grammatical knowledge) than that of freshmen but there is not a significant difference between seniors and freshmen performances regarding their pragmatic knowledge. It was found that there is not a positive and significant relationship between language proficiency (grammatical knowledge) and the pragmatic knowledge. In addition, it was also revealed that the difference between the three groups of language proficiency (high, mid and low) in terms of their pragmatic knowledge is not significant. Finally, it was found that gender affects the language proficiency and pragmatic knowledge. That is, female participants performed better both in language proficiency and pragmatic competence tests.

As the results show, the students who have high grammatical proficiency do not necessarily have high pragmatic knowledge as well. Even though having high grammatical knowledge can assist them to succeed in learning, lack of pragmatic knowledge might cause them to be unsuccessful in their communication and, thus, may result in breakdown in the interpersonal relationship between the speakers and listeners. To successfully master English language in international communication, as the recent views are moving towards English as an International language and lingua franca, people possessing different linguistic and cultural backgrounds truly need to have intercultural communicative competence in addition to communicative competence as a successful non-native speaker (Byram 1997, as cited in Houghton 2009, p.70). Besides emphasizing on only grammar aspects, teachers must encourage language learners to pay more attention on how to use language appropriately in diverse situations and contexts and avoid making pragmatic mistakes to breakdown the communication. To help learners avoid making pragmatic mistake, it is necessary to instruct them the sociocultural rules of the English, demonstrate to them what pragmatic transfer is, and provide them with pragmatic knowledge. Pragmatic knowledge of a language is better acquired by exposing the learners to natural environment and authentic materials. In the case of EFL, students are deprived of such conditions; moreover, these conditions cannot be completely provided for in the classrooms, so students may need special training in this aspect. Foreign language learners should be taught to recognize the situations and circumstances in which different kinds of language are appropriate, and should be given enough practice in using the proper linguistic forms according to those contexts. In addition, as Holmes and Brown (1987) pointed out, studying the pragmatic performance of females and males is a key aspect

of communicative competence. The results can be utilized as a source for establishing appropriate methods to help learners acquire communicative competence.

There are several possibilities for future research. First, this study used a pragmatic competence test (MDCT) containing the situations where social and contextual factors were not taken into consideration. Future research is needed to consider the factors that are power difference, social distance and degree of imposition. Second, this study was conducted with EFL learners with only one L1 background; therefore, there was no comparison between learners of diverse L1 backgrounds. So, it would be interesting to do a research to compare the performance of pragmatic perception of learners of different L1 backgrounds. Third, this study was a cross-sectional study using the MDCT as a research instrument. Future research can be conducted to include production data or employ a longitudinal approach for a better understanding of the development of pragmatic competence.

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