The Study of Relationship between Learners’ Knowledge about Grammar and Vocabulary and Pragmatic Competence: A Case Study of 1st Year Medical Students

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Abstract

This on-growing study investigated (the relationship between) the learners’ knowledge about grammar and vocabulary and the pragmatic competence of the Medical students at a University in the South of Thailand. The purpose of the study was to explore the participants’ knowledge about grammar vocabulary, pragmatic competence in four speech acts – apology, requests, acceptation, and decline, and the relationship between the participants’ grammar and vocabulary knowledge and pragmatic competence. Sixty-two 1st year medical students participated in this quasi-experimental study. Data collection involved the use of a questionnaire, a multiple-choice test of grammar and vocabulary, and a contextualized pragmatic judgment test. Results indicated that participants scoring highly in the test of grammar and vocabulary performed rather poorly in the test of pragmatic knowledge, and vice versa. It is, thus, recommended that learners of different disciplines be investigated.

Key words: pragmatics, grammar and vocabulary, pragmatic competence, speech act: apology, requests, acceptation, decline, contextualized pragmatic judgment test

Background

Currently, English is not just a language used by people in the inner circle as categorized by Krachu (1996), but it is also a global language. To date, no any other language is used as the international lingual franca by billions of people (Pakir, 2001). English has played an important role as a major medium for international communication. People in Krachu’s 3 circles communicate via English (Crystal 1997 and Pakir, 2001). In other words, besides the speakers in the inner circles, the English language has been increasingly used in...
the outer circle countries such as India, Malaysia and the Philippines, and the number of the speakers in expanding circle countries, where English is studied as a foreign language, is also rising.

Considering the function of the English language, both English and non-English speakers use the language for different purposes, for example, to access intellectual resources, to further study and to increase career opportunities. At a larger scale, English is considered a prominent language in different fields, including international trade, banking, industry, diplomacy, science and technology, entertainment and education (Crystal, 1997). For such local and global communication purposes, the language medium needs to reach the comprehensibility level.

Consequently, many countries around the world emphasizes on language learning and teaching. Thailand, a non English speaking country, for example, has set English as a compulsory subject; all students in formal education system take a certain number of English courses required by the Ministry of Education. Generally, Thai students start learning English at the age of 3 to 5, during which they practice four language skills – speaking, listening, reading, and writing. These skills are mostly taught through the content of language construction. The issue of learners’ pragmatic competence, thus, has attracted L2 researching.

Bardovi-Harlig et.al (1998), for example, explored the awareness on grammatical and pragmatic features in instructed L2 learners’ target-language production. The samples consisted of ESL learners in USA and EFL learners in Hungary, including EFL learners in Italy. Results showed that EFL learners and teachers were more aware of grammatical errors than pragmatic errors, whereas ESL learners and teachers were more aware of pragmatic errors than grammatical errors.

Relevant to the preceding study, Gülten (2006) investigated the pragmatic awareness of 27 third-year university female Turkish teacher trainees, using a contextualized pragmatic and grammatical judgment test prepared by Bardovi - Harlig and Dörnyei (1998). It was found that most of the Turkish teacher trainees were relatively aware of pragmatic inappropriateness. It was suggested that providing an ample amount of pragmatically relevant input and raising the learners’ awareness through activities may help learners to notice pragmatic failure, both in ESL and EFL settings.

In another study, Nelson et al. (2002) investigated the similarities and differences in declining between Egyptian Arabic and American English speakers, using a modified version of the discourse completion test (DCT) developed by Beebe et al. (1990). Two hundred and ninety-eight declines were made in 30 US interviews, and 250 in 25 Egyptian interviews.
Although each refusal was separated into its different component strategies, data were analyzed simply to compare the average frequencies of direct and indirect strategies. Specific indirect strategies, and the effect of interlocutor status on strategies with similar frequency in making decline were also investigated.

A different aspect of pragmatics was examined by Hinkel (1994) to find differences between the writing conventions in discourse traditions influenced by Confucian and Taoist precepts and those in the U.S. academic environment. The study compared native of English and non-native speakers’ evaluations of four short essays, two written by NSs and the other two by advanced ESL learners. Little similarity was found in NS and NNS’ judgment regarding the text’s purpose, audience, specificity, clarity, and adequate support in academic writing. The effects of dissimilarity on L2 learners’ pragmatic interpretations were examined and discussed for an appropriate writing pedagogy.

In addition to these aspects, the role of pragmatics in communication is vital. For example, Thomas’s (1983) study finds pragmatic failure is much more serious than linguistic failure (Thomas 1983). According to Thomas, ungrammatical sentences, unacceptable intonation and wrong pronunciation may hinder a flow of communication. If a speaker makes mistakes on language forms, he is considered less language proficient. If he makes pragmatic mistakes, on the other hand, he might sound rude or impolite. Even worse, such mistakes may break down the communication and personal relationship, which hardly happen in case of linguistic failure.

As human staying in group, how to stay and be accepted is important to us to think of. To be accepted and impressed involves how to speak the language appropriately. Leaver et.al (2005) mentioned that if a speaker is talking to whoever is considered a high-society audience, the speaker will choose the different words and grammar to speak to. In the other hands, if the speaker is talking to a youngster a particular place, the speaker must choose the words and grammar proper to the audience. That is a reason in which to confirm that social status comes to a significant way in language learning and, thus, pragmatics plays the essential part.

The present research, therefore, aims at studying the grammar and vocabulary and pragmatic competence of 1st year medical students. Specifically, the purpose is to find out whether the 1st year medical students, Prince of Songkla University have the same level of knowledge about the English grammar and vocabulary and pragmatic competence.

Medical students, the future doctors, have a lot of opportunities to communicate with a large number of people including foreigners: communicating with their foreign lecturers,
conducting research, continuing their study overseas, as well as communicating with patients speaking English. Besides mastering the English grammar and vocabulary, they must be competent in pragmatics. Since pragmatic failure is found to affect communication breakdown and affect interpersonal relationship, another research question this study seeks to answer is whether the knowledge of grammar and vocabulary and the knowledge of pragmatic are correlated. In other words, it is anticipated that if the participants get high-score on grammar and vocabulary, they are expected to get the same level of pragmatic knowledge.

**Research Question**

To fulfill the research objectives, 4 research questions were posed.

1. What is the 1st year medical students’ knowledge about grammar?
2. What is the 1st year medical students’ knowledge about vocabulary?
3. What is the 1st year medical students’ pragmatic competence?
4. What is the relationship between the participants’ knowledge about grammar and vocabulary and pragmatic competence?

**Technical Terms**

Five key terms involved in this study are described below.

1. **Pragmatics**: In this study, pragmatics refers to the knowledge about using proper language in a particular situation. This study focuses on the politeness of 4 speech acts, namely apology, requests, acceptance, and decline, as well as the level of language the participants use in a certain situation and with certain people.

2. **Grammar and vocabulary**: In this study, it refers to the 1st year medical students’ knowledge about the English language rules, systems and structures, and the knowledge of vocabulary.

3. **Pragmatic competence**: In this research, pragmatic competence refers to the participants’ abilities on pragmatic judgment. The participants were given a test on which they were to evaluate whether the expression spoken in each situation was appropriate.

4. **Speech act**: It refers to an act which the speaker performs in a particular situation. In the present study, 4 speech acts-apology, requests, acceptance, and decline – were the variables under investigation.

5. **Contextualized pragmatic judgment test**: This test type is developed by Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998). The test consisted of 16 scenarios measuring the pragmatic
awareness. The participants were asked to read the scenario and judge whether the last part of the conversation in each situation was appropriate. (see appendix)

Framework of the study

(1) The present study investigated the participants’ grammatical knowledge and knowledge about vocabulary using sixty items adapted from a standardized test.

(2) A contextualized pragmatic judgment test was administered to tap into the participants’ pragmatic competence.

(3) The four aspects of pragmatics under investigation are apology, request, acceptance, and decline.

(4) Participants under study were limited to a group of 1st year Thai medical students in 2010 academic year at Prince of Songkla University.

Research Methodology

Participants

Sixty-two 1st year medical students at Prince of Songkla University, Songkla, Thailand, participated in the present study, 32 of whom were males and 30 were female with age ranging from 18 to 20. All participants had taken 2 required courses: 890-101 Fundamental English Listening and Speaking and 890-102 Fundamental English Reading and Writing. Based on the university entrance examination scores, 8 of the participants were exempted from 890-101, 15 participants were exempted from 890-102, and 4 were exempted from both courses. The rest, 35, were required to take the 2 courses.

Prior to administering the test using of the Kelly’s Technique of 27 percent discrimination, all the participants were divided into two groups. Eight students were assigned to the high-score group and 54 students to the middle-score group can be detected. In other words, the participants’ English proficiency was relatively high. The information from the questionnaire shows that 34 of the participants took extra (tutorial) classes since they were in primary school all through their senior high school. Thirty-three participants stated that their parents involved in supporting English learning. Moreover, 17 participants had various chances in taking short courses and projects abroad.

Instruments

Three sets of instrument were administered to the research participants: grammar and vocabulary test, a contextualized pragmatic judgment test and a questionnaire. The first test
consisted of 60 multiple choice items, 40 items testing English grammar knowledge with 16 grammar features and 20 items testing English vocabulary with 10 items for unknown vocabulary using context clues to answer, and 10 items for general vocabulary using one owns experiences to answer. Besides the multiple-choice test, a contextualized pragmatic judgment test, modified from the version developed by Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998), was administered to examine the students’ pragmatics awareness in 4 speech acts; apology, request, acceptation, and decline. In addition to the 2 tests, a questionnaire was used to gather the participants’ personal information regarding their general bio-data and English learning.

Data collection and analysis

On the data collection process, the researcher first explained the research objectives to the participants, who, then, took the test given. After that, the data were statistically tested using the SPSS/PC tests. Then, the mean score of pragmatic knowledge, and the mean score of knowledge about grammar and vocabulary, and the relationship of both scores were identified. The comparison was made to locate the relationship between knowledge about grammar and vocabulary and pragmatic knowledge. Each of the 4 speech acts: apology, request, acceptation, and decline were also compared with the scores of grammatical and vocabulary test.

Finding

To find out the participants’ knowledge and its relationship, the scores on pragmatic test and grammar and vocabulary test were analyzed by using the Pearson Product Moment Correlation. Table 1 below shows the mean scores of knowledge about grammar and vocabulary, and pragmatic knowledge.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Grammar and vocabulary</th>
<th>Pragmatic knowledge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>x̄</td>
<td>S.D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. High-score (8)</td>
<td>76.04</td>
<td>2.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Middle-score (54)</td>
<td>61.73</td>
<td>7.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Low-score (0)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (62)</td>
<td>63.58</td>
<td>8.38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 shows the total scores of participants’ knowledge about grammar and vocabulary and pragmatic knowledge. According to their scores on grammar and vocabulary,
62 participants were divided into 2 groups – high-score level and middle-score level. Calculated into percentage, the mean score on grammar and vocabulary of the high-score group (n=8) was 76.04 while their pragmatic knowledge was 57.81. Their score, therefore, indicated their moderate impressive score on knowledge about grammar and vocabulary. The mean score on grammar and vocabulary of the middle-score group (n=54) was 61.73 while their pragmatic knowledge was 73.26. Regarding the mean score on grammar and vocabulary knowledge and pragmatic knowledge of the high-score group and the middle-score group, the table shows the converse data of the two groups. The high-score group performed poorer on the test of pragmatic knowledge then the middle-score group, who, on the other hand, did poorer in the test of grammar and vocabulary. These unexpected results are further demonstrated in the following table. One possible reason of the results showing that the participants rather performed well in the aspect of grammar might come from the pedagogy they received in class emphasizing on language construction and vocabulary.

Table 2: Relationship between scores on grammar and vocabulary test and pragmatic test of the middle-score group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Apology</th>
<th>Requests</th>
<th>Acceptation</th>
<th>Decline</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grammar (40 items)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.062</td>
<td>-.011</td>
<td>.073</td>
<td>-.147</td>
<td>-.045</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vocabulary (20 items)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.104</td>
<td>-.293*</td>
<td>.069</td>
<td>-.078</td>
<td>-.138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total (60 items)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.138</td>
<td>-.138</td>
<td>.111</td>
<td>-.152</td>
<td>-.057</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Significant at the level of 0.05
** Significant at the level of 0.01

Table 2 shows the relationship between the scores on grammar and vocabulary and those on 4 speech acts of the middle-score group. When compared with each speech act, negative relationship between their grammar knowledge and the knowledge on 4 speech acts was shown. When scores on vocabulary was compared with each speech act, however, it was found that one of the speech acts (request) was negatively related to the scores of vocabulary, at the significant level of 0.05 meaning that they were really negatively related to each other; their knowledge about vocabulary and the speech act ‘request’ were not in the equivalent. Negative relationship was found in the comparison of the total score of the grammar and vocabulary test and total score on the pragmatic test. However, positive relationship between grammar scores and speech acts of apology and acceptance was found. The vocabulary score was also found to be positively related to two speech acts – apology and acceptance.
Table 3: Relationship between scores on grammar and vocabulary test pragmatic test of the high-score group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Correlation (Pearson Product Moment Correlation = r)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Apology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar (40 items)</td>
<td>-.707*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary (20 items)</td>
<td>.623*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (60 items)</td>
<td>-.429</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Significant at the level of 0.05  
** Significant at the level of 0.01

Table 3 shows the relationship between the scores of grammar and vocabulary test and those of the 4 speech acts of the high-score group. The negative relationship between the total score of the grammatical knowledge and the 4 speech acts shows that the participants’ grammatical knowledge was not consistent with their pragmatic knowledge. The total scores of vocabulary and pragmatic knowledge were also found to be negatively related. However, there was positive relationship between the vocabulary score and speech act of apology at the significant level of 0.05, which indicates the consistency of the scores on vocabulary, and apology of the high-score group. After dividing the score of the two groups, the overall scores could be summarized, as shown in table 4.

Table 4: Relationship between scores on grammar and vocabulary test and pragmatic test of both high-score group and middle-score group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Correlation (Pearson Product Moment Correlation = r)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Apology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar (40 items)</td>
<td>-.106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary (20 items)</td>
<td>.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (60 items)</td>
<td>-.035</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Significant at the level of 0.05  
** Significant at the level of 0.01

Table 4 shows the relationship between the scores on grammar and vocabulary test and pragmatic test of both groups (high and middle score groups). Even though positive relationship between participants’ scores on vocabulary and the speech act of apology was found in this study, negative relationship, -0.292*, was, on the whole, found between the scores on grammar and vocabulary test and pragmatic test, at the significant level of 0.05. This means that the overall scores on grammar and vocabulary test and pragmatic test were negatively related to each other. The evidence that students who acquired high scores on
grammar and vocabulary test did poorly on the pragmatic knowledge test, and vice versa suggests that the pragmatic knowledge and knowledge about grammar and vocabulary of the 1st year medical students at Prince of Songkla University was negatively related.

**Figure 1** Scores on grammar and vocabulary test and pragmatic test of the *high-score group* and *middle-score group*

![Bar chart showing scores](image)

Figure 1 shows the scores on grammar and vocabulary test and pragmatic test of the high-score and middle-score groups. The figure suggested that the scores of the two groups were negatively related.

**Discussion**

Results from the statistical analyses show that the participating first year medical students of Prince of Songkla University were highly competent in grammar and vocabulary. Although they were non English major, the participants’ knowledge about grammar and vocabulary was above satisfactory level. The information from the questionnaire asking about their English learning and use experience revealed that the participants were highly motivated in the English learning. Most of them had taken extra tutorial classes since their primary school. Moreover, their parents supported and encouraged them to work on the exchange program abroad, or take English short courses abroad. All these factors may have led to their impressive linguistic competence.

However, since the scores on pragmatic competence were not as impressive, it is advised that the teachers should be more concerned to focus more on pragmatic knowledge, instead of grammatical or vocabulary knowledge alone. In other words, gaining more pragmatic competence would be of significant benefit to the participants. If the students are leaded more to the content of pragmatics, these two aspects on language construction and pragmatics would be possibly balanced.
Conclusion

This present study investigated the relationship between the learners’ knowledge about grammar and vocabulary and pragmatic knowledge. After analyzing the data gathered from the three sets of instruments, the results interestingly revealed that the participants who scored highly in grammar and vocabulary test did not perform well in the test of pragmatics, and vice versa. These results indicated that the two domains of grammar and vocabulary and pragmatics of this participating group are negatively related.

As the results shown, the students who master high grammatical proficiency are not mastering the high proficiency on pragmatics as well. Even though high-score in grammar and vocabulary could help them succeed in learning, lack of pragmatic knowledge might cause them unsuccessful in their communication and, thus, breakdown the interpersonal relationship between the speakers and listeners. To successfully master English in international communication, people having different linguistic and cultural backgrounds truly need communicative competence: the ability to use grammatically-correct sentences in proper contexts (Hymes, 1971). Besides emphasizing on only grammar aspects, teachers must encourage language learners to pay more attention on how to use language appropriately and avoid making such a mistake to breakdown the communication. To help learners avoid making such mistake, it is necessary to instruct them the social rules of the English, demonstrate to them what pragmatic transfer is, and provide them with pragmatic knowledge. Researchers (Olshtain and Cohen, 1990; Kasper, 1997) suggested that the EFL classroom environment is a good place for EFL learners to obtain pragmatic knowledge. As a result, as EFL learners, Thai students must be encouraged more seriously in the environment of social rules of English learning. As a result, teacher is the most important person to lead learners into the language learning focus. Teacher would pay more attention on selecting suitable textbooks containing balanced content of language body; not only containing the content of language construction. Moreover, locating learners to use the language in real situation would enhance them to focus more on how to use the language in the proper way with proper person and situation. With this reason, curriculum maker must be aware of the point as well. If the curriculums are featured with the proper content of these 2 important domains, learners would be of benefit in language learning success.

Recommendation

For the further study, it is recommended that learners of different disciplines be investigated. There should be some other analysis in the other group of participants such as
teachers; or other fields of students to discover deeper relationship between the knowledge about grammar and vocabulary and pragmatic knowledge. Moreover, in further study, the group of participants might be included more of the number of participants in order to obtain the deeper correlation between the two domains of knowledge about grammar and vocabulary and pragmatic knowledge. Since the current research focused on the 4 speech act of apology, requests, acceptation, and declines, and the 16 grammar features in the grammatical test, future research might aim to investigate the pragmatic competence of medical students in other speech acts, for example, greeting, complaints and might design more various features on the grammatical test to obtain deeper participants’ abilities.

References


**Appendix**

**Grammar and Vocabulary Test**

Direction: Choose the best answer for each item.

**Part I: Grammar**

1. A notebook computer ________ an opportunity for convenient and efficient work in everywhere.
   A. provides          B. to be providing  
   C. which provides    D. providing it

2. ‘I’m very sorry, sir. I’m so late because of the unexpected traffic jam. ________ I go in and joy the meeting, please?’
   A. Should          C. May  
   B. Might          D. Can

3. Some psychologists ________ about the personal motivation which is very important factor for a person’s success in doing something.
   A. was studying          B. were studied  
   C. is studied          D. are studying

4. That beautiful bouquet of roses really ________ my eye.
   A. catch          B. to be catches  
   C. catching          D. catches

5. The university previously ________ its entrance examination system in order to push the students to work harder.
   A. reform          B. reforms  
   C. reforming          D. reformed
Part II: Vocabulary

41. At this stage of the process, the gold is **melted** and then shaped into a new form.
   A. pressed  B. weighed  
   C. exploded  D. liquefied

42. Some scholars are worrying that the candidate’s past could **jeopardize** her chances of winning the prime minister.
   A. degrade  B. violate  
   C. endanger  D. harm

43. Under the present administration, the government begins to collect a **fee** from all passengers going through the immigration.
   A. charge  B. price  
   C. interest  D. payment

44. The doctor warns that drinking too much alcohol would only **aggravate** the drinkers’ poor condition.
   A. lower  B. worsen  
   C. lessen  D. decrease

45. Computers are used in every field of work, especially in engineering, because they produce **accurate** calculation.
   A. real  B. close  
   C. true  D. exact
Contextualized pragmatic judgment test

1. Maria invites Anna to her house but Anna cannot come.
Maria: Anna, would you like to come over this afternoon?
Anna: I’m sorry, I’d like to come but I have a difficult history test tomorrow.

Is student’s response appropriate? □ Yes □ No
Your version___________________________________________________

2. Anna goes to the cafeteria to have something to eat.
Anna: I would like a cup of chocolate, please.
Shop assistant: Of course. Would you like some bread too?
Anna: No, I don’t want it.

Is student’s response appropriate? □ Yes □ No
Your version___________________________________________________

3. George is going to the library. Peter asks him to return a library book.
George: Well, I’ll see you later. I’ve got to go to the library to return a library book.
Peter: Oh, if you are going to the library, can you please return my book too?

Is student’s response appropriate? □ Yes □ No
Your version___________________________________________________
4. Peter and George are classmates. George invites Peter to his home, but Peter cannot come.
George: Peter, would you like to come over to me tonight?
Peter: I’m sorry. I just can’t I’m very tired. I couldn’t sleep last night.

Is student’s response appropriate?  ❑ Yes  ❑ No
Your version_________________________________________________________________________

5. It is Anna’s day to give her talk in class but she is not ready.
Teacher: Thank you Steven, that was very interesting. Anna, it’s your turn to give your talk.
Anna: I can’t do it today, but I will do it next week.

Is student’s response appropriate?  ❑ Yes  ❑ No
Your version_________________________________________________________________________