The Relationship-between the Extent of Iraqi EFL Learners' Pragmatic-Knowledge of Apology and Request-Speech Acts and Their Ability to Comprehend and Produce Them: Is Language Proficiency-Level-Important?[1]

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the pragmatic understanding of request and apology speech acts among Iraqi EFL students, and how pragmatic instruction can improve their performance. The article also explored the relationship between language proficiency and the ability to comprehend and produce these speech acts, and gathered perceptions of the instruction from learners and the teacher. The study used the Oxford Quick Placement Test and the Multiple-choice Discourse Completion Test, as well as conducting semi-structured interviews. The results showed that the experimental group had a significant improvement in pragmatic knowledge compared to the control group, and that language proficiency did not affect performance in the experimental group. Both learners and the teacher had positive attitudes towards the instruction. The study provides pedagogical implications and suggestions for future research.

Keywords: *Pragmatic knowledge; speech act; apology; request; language proficiency; EFL learner*

INTRODUCTION

To communicate effectively in any language, learners need not just the knowledge of grammar, but also they need to be familiar with the ways to employ their skills and knowledge of language appropriately both socially and culturally (Bachman, 1990). There comes the role of Pragmatic competence which entails learners' ability to employ their knowledge effectively in real-time communication (Taguchi & Sykes, 2013) and is one of the significant factors for efficient communication and being successful in learning a language. According to LoCastro's (2003) characterization of pragmatic competence, it is the study of how people who speak or listen convey meaning through their everyday actions, which may include language and nonlinguistic cues in the context of in society structured tasks .

One of the major problems within the Iraqi English teaching methodology is that Iraqi EFL instructors largely neglect teaching pragmatic issues since their instructional objectives, teaching materials, and curriculum have been designed to put emphasis on grammatical instruction instead of communication-based teaching. Nevertheless, teaching pragmatic issues like speech acts is advantageous to L2 and foreign language students (Beebe & Takahashi, 1989).

In a recent study, Omrani and Tafazoli (2021) investigated the variations in Iranian EFL students' pragmatic awareness of their skill level and motivational styles. Moreover, the results demonstrated demonstrated learners with diverse skill levels performed similarly and that even a high degree of linguistic ability does not ensure pragmatic understanding.

As another example, Alsuhaibani (2020) considered the impacts of consciousness-raising instruction and corpus-based teaching on EFL students' improvement of compliment responses among 136 EFL university students. The researcher employed a DCT as both pre- and post-tests in these groups to look for any discernible changes between the groups. The findings demonstrated the usefulness of pragmatic teaching of compliment responses via both corpus-based and

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consciousness-raising teaching. The findings also indicated significant differences between the corpus group and the consciousness-raising group on the one hand and the control group on the other hand.

Moreover, some other studies have investigated the Apology Speech Act. Shark (2019) inspected the impacts of explicit and implicit instruction on Iraqi Kurdish EFL learners' pragmatic knowledge at advanced level with regard to the apology speech act. He randomly divided these 40 participants into two groups of explicit group (EG) and implicit group (IG). The objective of the study aimed to see if EG and IG differed significantly from one another. (EG) and (IG) completed the identical MDCT as the post-test following the course of therapy. The results revealed that EG and IG differed significantly and that they had improved following therapy. It was also demonstrated that the EG performed better than the IG in post-test and delayed-test scenarios.

Derakhshan and Arabmofrad (2018) examined the Effect of video-enhanced teaching on Iranian medium EFL students' understanding of speech actions of request, apologies, and denial. The findings obtained from the MDCT indicated that the three experimental groups could improve their knowledge from pre- to

post-test. Based on a The post hoc test using Tukey's revealed that the metapragmatic sub-group was significant. had a better performance in comparison to the other groups.

Other studies were concerned with the Request Speech Act. In a recent study, Omrani and Tafazoli (2021) investigated the differences among Iranian EFL learners' pragmatic knowledge regarding their proficiency level and motivation types. Moreover, the results demonstrated revealed learners with diverse skill levels performed similarly and that even the greatest level of linguistic ability does not always imply pragmatic understanding.

Fathi and Feozallhi (2018) investigated the impact of The outcomes of the two types of education on Iranian EFL trainees' enhancement of the demand speech act. 51 Iranian EFL English majors were allocated at random to one of two groups: the one with the inductive reasoning group (n = 27) or the other logical group (n = 24).

Despite the increasing interest in research on developing the language learners' pragmatic competence in the field of language pedagogy, the association between the learners' pragmatic awareness of speech acts and their ability to understand them is still underexplored in the Iraqi EFL context. Considering this paucity of research in this context, the present study was done to fill this gap. It mainly examined the role of the degree to which Iraqi EFL students' practical grasp of apologies and requests, as well as their capacity to understand and use them. To this end, their pragmatic knowledge of these two speech acts were measured, then, they received the relevant instruction. It also compared the role of the learner's language proficiency level in this regard to examine which level outperformed. Exploring the learners' and teachers' beliefs and attitudes toward the instruction they receive was another issue examined in this study.

In this paper, we have considered three goals. First, it set out to examine the degree to which Iraqi EFL students' practical grasp of apologies and requests, as well as their capacity to understand and use them. The second goal of the study was to investigate how implicit and explicit pragmatic instruction can develop the learners' performance of apology and request speech acts. In the explicit teaching method, learners are engaged in metapragmatic activities that focus on the target language features, however, in implicit teaching, such an opportunity is not provided for the learners. The third goal of the current thesis was to explore the association concerning verbal skill level and the ability of Iraqi EFL students to comprehend and produce apology and request speech acts.

In fact, the overall The study's goal is to determine whether there is significant variation in pragmatic knowledge (performance in two speech acts of request and apology) of the language learners who receive instruction in employing them and those who do not receive instruction. Besides, the researcher investigated if there is significant difference in pragmatic knowledge (performance in two speech acts of request and apology) between the Iraqi EFL learners who experience instruction in apology and request speech acts with regard to their English language proficiency level.

METHOD

Participants

The participants the first phase of the study were 80 EFL learners at Thi-Qar University, Nasiriyah, Iraq. This group consisted of the learners who were taught both explicitly and implicitly how to use speech acts, particularly apology and request speech acts. In each lesson, students first viewed a video clip in which the speech actions under discussion happened naturally in a conversation. It should be emphasized that students got scripts of the circumstances without

any words underlined in bold and viewed videos of events without any writing on the screen. The learners were shown certain video tracks. The intended forms (i.e., requests and apologies in focus) displayed in bold in the screenplay the students received. The goal forms were enhanced typographically for the students in implicit teaching as opposed to the explicit teaching learners for whom they were presented in plain text type. Additionally, learners were given recasts during implicit training while they were working on production tasks.

Generally, there were 43 female and 37 male students. Their ages ranged from 18-22 (Mean: 19.88). Regarding English language proficiency level, 25 students belonged to the high-proficiency (HP) level (including upper-intermediate levels, advanced levels, and very advanced proficiency levels) and 55 students were in the low-proficiency (LP) level (including beginner levels, elementary levels, and lower-intermediate levels). Both the test group and the oversight sample, there were 40 students. All the participants of this study were native speakers of Arabic and were taking general English courses whose emphasis was on improving all four skills and sub-skills.

Within the second phase of the study and to answer the qualitative questions of the study, five EFL students were chosen from the previous phase of the study to be interviewed. All of them were willing to take part in the interview session. In addition to five EFL students, one EFL teacher was also interviewed to respond to the research's qualitative inquires. The interviews were semi-structured and were conducted in the classroom venue.

INSTRUMENTS

To collect data, the researcher gave three tests in the beginning and with in conclusion of the treatment for the quantitative section of the study and conducted semi-structured interviews for the qualitative part of the study. A customizable English language proficiency exam called the OQPT was created to provide instructors a quick and accurate way to determine the student's level of language ability.

OQPT has been calibrated to the competency levels derived from the Common European Framework of Knowledge for Language (CEFR), the Cambridge ESOL Testing, and other significant international exams like the TOEFL, as stated by Allan (2004), the test's creator and is a valid test to measure candidates' general English proficiency level.

To evaluate Iranian EFL students' pragmatic understanding of speech actions of apologies and requests in language classes, the MDCT developed by Birjandi and Rezaei (2010) was employed as a pre-test and post-test. To develop MDCT, Birjandi, and Rezaei (2010) went through several steps including to assess Iranian EFL participants' pragmatic knowledge of demands and regrets in language courses, the development of the multiple choices, and final piloting of the MDCT.

To answer the qualitative questions of the present research and obtain richer sources of data, interview questions developed by the researcher Through these questions, the researcher explored the learners' and teachers' beliefs and attitudes toward the instruction they received and its impacts on their ability to comprehend and produce apology and request speech acts better. There were four questions in the learners' interview and three questions in the teacher interview.

Procedure

The current study had quantitative and qualitative analyses to respond to the study's objectives and evaluate the theories. In the beginning, two English language classes at Thi-Qar University, Nasiriya, Iraq were randomly selected. In the control group, the teacher taught as she had already taught. In this group, there was not any specific emphasis on using apology and request speech acts. In other words, they did not have any training in how to use these speech acts in their speech or writing. However, the experimental group had explicit and implicit training in how to use these speech acts effectively.

As mentioned previously, one professor taught both groups. The students and the teacher's perceptions of speech acts instruction were collected through interviews. Five willing participants from the study population were interviewed, along with another EFL professor. The purpose of the interviews was to explore their attitudes toward the effectiveness of the speech act instruction in the learners' performance.

Data analysis was done differently for the two interrelated phases. The main statistical methods were the t-test for and descriptive stats (since the data were normally distributed). The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS v 22) was used for inputting data and computing descriptive statistics. Additionally, to determine whether there is substantial

variation between Iraqi EFL learners' performance in the experimental group with regard to their English language proficiency level, independent samples t-test was run (since the data were normally distributed).

The qualitative interviews were semi-structured in design. The data collected through interviews with four language learners and one language teacher were initially transcribed, coded, and then analyzed. To code the data, the researcher looked for keywords, phrases, clauses, and sentences in the data and tried to find commonalities in the collected data. Following this, categories and subcategories (emerging themes and subthemes) related to the purposes of this research and the research questions posed were dug out of the qualitative data.

RESULTS

English Language Proficiency Test

In this study, according to According to Allan's (2004) scoring standards, learners who achieved scores of 39 and lower were placed in the Low Proficiency (LP) level, while those with values between 40 and 60 were placed in the High Proficiency (HP) level.

Table 4.1 shows, the number of members in the LP set is more than those in the HP group. In the LP level, none of the participants is beginner, nine learners belong to the elementary level, and 46 learners are in the lower-intermediate level. Regarding the HP level, 20 learners are in the upper-intermediate level, four learners belong to the advanced level, and one learner was recognized to be at the very advanced level.

Findings in the First Phase

In the initial stage of the investigation, the investigator is aimed to examine how implicit and explicit pragmatic instruction can develop the learners' performance of apology and request speech acts. Moreover, the connection within the EFL students' degree of linguistic competence and their ability to comprehend and produce the apology and request speech acts was explored. To this end, two tests, English language proficiency test and pre-tests and post-tests of MDCT, were given.

Table 4.1. *Results of the OQPT*

LP Level	Frequency	HP Level	Frequency
Beginner	0	upper-intermediate	20
Elementary	9	Advanced	4
lower-intermediate	46	very advanced	1
Total	55		25

The participants in this phase were from different language proficiency levels. The results of OQPT showed that the number of participants in the LP group was more than those in the HP group (55 vs. 25).

There was no statistically significant distinction between the groups, according to the study's initial research issue. In pragmatic knowledge (performance in request and apology speech acts) of the language learners who receive instruction in employing them and those who do not receive instruction. To answer this question, MDCT was given to the participants two times, at the beginning and the end of the semester. The findings of the pre-MDCT indicated that the mean of pre-test was a bit higher in the experimental group. However, There was little variation in the scores, according to the findings of the independent samples t-test obtained for pre-MDCT between the students in the control set and those in the experimental set. Thus, there was not a significant difference in the pragmatic knowledge of apology and request speech acts between the two groups in the beginning (before the treatment).

The findings obtained from the post-MDCT given to the participants at the end of the semester indicated that the mean of post-MDCT was higher in the experimental group. The results of independent samples t-task for post-MDCT showed that there was a significant difference in pragmatic knowledge of apology and request speech acts between the two groups at the end of the semester (after the treatment).

Thus, the study's initial null theory, which claimed that there's no apparent distinction in pragmatic knowledge (performance in two speech acts of request and apology) of the language learners who receive instruction in employing

them and those who do not receive instruction was rejected since after the treatment, the experimental group significantly improved in its understanding of apology and request speech acts.

With regard to the difference in pragmatic knowledge (performance in two speech acts of request and apology) between the Iraqi EFL learners who experience instruction in apology and request speech acts with regard to their English language proficiency levels, the descriptive statistics showed that the mean of post-MDCT was higher in the HP group (= 17) in comparison to that of the LP group (= 15.74).

Table- 4.2.-*Independent-Samples-T-test for-Post-MDCT*

| | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | | | | |
| | F Sig. | t | df. | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference | 95% Confidence Interval of-the-Difference | | |
							Lower	Upper
Equal-variances assumed-	0.547 0.462	-6.440	78	0.000	-3.27500	0.50856	-4.28747	-2.26253
Equal-variances not assumed-		-6.440	77.473	0.000	-3.27500	0.50856	-4.28758	-2.26242

The findings from the t-test using separate specimens for both the LP and HP categories pragmatic knowledge in the experimental group showed that there was not a significant difference in the pragmatic knowledge of apology and request speech acts between the LP and HP students at the end of the treatment in the experimental group. Hence, the second null hypothesis of the research which stated that there is no significant difference in pragmatic knowledge (performance in two speech acts of request and apology) between the Iraqi EFL learners who experience instruction in apology and request speech acts with regard to their English language proficiency level was supported since there was no significant difference between the LP and HP levels in their pragmatic knowledge of apology and request speech acts as shown in Table 4.3.

Results of the Second Phase

The findings obtained from the interviews with the learners indicated that they believed in the large difference of Arabic culture and English culture in many respects. They thought that this difference could also be seen in making requests and apologizing to the others. In their view, this difference makes learning pragmatics difficult for them. They stated that in the English class they attended in this semester, they could gain enough information on pragmatics. In this class, the teacher explicitly taught them the different rules and patterns to make a request and apologize to others. This helped them to learn many things they had not paid attention to previously.

Table 4.3.

Independent Samples T-test for LP and HP Groups' Pragmatic Knowledge in the Experimental Group

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	F	Sig.	t	df.	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	0.074	0.787	-1.758	38	0.087	-1.25926	0.71650	-2.70974 0.19122	
Equal variances not assumed			-1.831	26.440	0.078	-1.25926	0.68789	-2.67210 0.15358	

According to what the EFL learners expressed in their responses, they experienced a good class in this semester. In their view, their experience was a success. The learners had a desire to experience other English classes which emphasize explicit teaching of pragmatics.

The participants referred to the positive benefits they had from this class. One of them was the point that they experienced new activities and this made them interested in learning. Moreover, they mentioned that this class helped them to raise their confidence. The results obtained from the individual interviews with the learners generally indicated that EFL learners had a positive reaction to instruction in apology and request speech acts.

Regarding the teacher's views concerning instruction in apology and request speech acts, positive points were asserted. The teacher believed that this learning context could improve the students' pragmatic knowledge. Although he had to work more in the experimental class, his attempt to teach a short part of pragmatics was valuable. He stated that the learning was much better in the experimental class. In his view, Beneficial results could occur from teaching speech actions in school.

DISCUSSION

Within the first phase, the aim was to examine the difference (if any) pragmatic comparison between the control set and the experimental set knowledge (performance in two speech acts of request and apology) at the beginning and at the end of the research. As stated previously, there was a significant difference in pragmatic knowledge between the language learners in the control group and those in the experimental group at the end of the semester. It was also shown that language proficiency was not a key factor in this study as there was no discernible difference across the LP and HP levels.

The reason why the participants in the experimental class showed a better performance in pragmatic knowledge at the end of the research can be the point that the learners were experiencing a language class where pragmatics was taught explicitly and implicitly, and they had not experienced this teaching in the regular classes they had attended previously. This is informative for language teachers, particularly in EFL contexts, because they can recognize the value of teaching pragmatic aspects.

Alsuhaibani considered the impacts of consciousness-raising instruction and corpus-based instruction on EFL students' improvement of compliment responses among EFL university students.
The results concerning the test group's superior performance compared to the placebo group are also in agreement with the findings in Abolfathiasl and Abdullah's (2015) study in which they explored the impacts of consciousness-raising activities on the pragmatic performance of suggestions among EFL students. In their study, the experimental group had consciousness-raising instruction which consisted of pragmatic discussions, role plays, reading conversations, and watching film sections on suggestions for a period of eight weeks.

The findings of the study demonstrated that both email exchanges and instructional interventions could positively affect the American students' use of sentence-final particles. Moreover, the findings are partially similar to Shark's

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(2019) who examined the impacts as there was little distinction between both explicit and implicit guidance on the formation of pragmatic understanding of apologetic speech and act among advanced EFL learners in Iraq. The conclusions demonstrated that the explicit category's and implicit group's findings were significant and that they had improved, and the explicit group outperformed the implicit group in post-test and delayed-test.

Moreover, it was found that inductive instruction was more influential than deductive instruction. The results of the present study demonstrated that there was not any significant difference between the LP and HP levels of language proficiency. One possible reason for this finding might be the point that many language learners in EFL contexts do not know the pragmatic aspects of language as they should know since EFL teachers do not focus on teaching pragmatic aspects of language and the learners improve just in the linguistic aspects of language.

The finding concerning the relation of language proficiency and pragmatic competence of the learners is in line with what Omrani and Tafazoli (2021) could find. The results demonstrated Students with varying skill sets and that even an elevated level of linguistic competency cannot ensure practical expertise were similar in their performance.

They stated that even learners at high levels of language proficiency who are proficient in vocabulary and grammar often have difficulties in making sense of a speaker's intention or communicating politeness values appropriately in communicative contexts. The result obtained in this section is also in agreement with that of Tabatabaei and Farnia's (2015). The researchers came to the conclusion that language proficiency cannot greatly impact the pragmatic comprehension of EFL learners.

This finding is somewhat in contrast to what Han and Burgucu-Tazegul (2016) found. Hence, the behavior of students at the upper-intermediate level was more native-like in comparison to those at the pre-intermediate level. The result in this section is also in contrast to that of Allami and Naeimi (2011), who stated that in comparison to learners at lower levels of language proficiency, learners at upper-intermediate level of language proficiency made more pragmatic errors and transferred more L1 sociocultural rules to the target language.

The second phase of the study aimed to investigate The responses of participants on your apologies and demand remarks teaching. The interviews showed that, generally, individuals who took part in the study groups had positive evaluation of their experiences. The participants believed that the pragmatics instruction positively impacted their knowledge and increased their motivation and confidence in learning). This finding substantiates those found by Alsuhaibani (2020) in that the participants found their learning in a similar context extremely good. Similar to the present research, in Alsuhaibani's (2020) research, the students valued the significance of teaching pragmatics. It was indicated that this instruction was not only necessary but also useful and enjoyable.

The previous studies have generally done quantitative research on the issue under investigation in this study and the studies which have employed a mixed-methods design are scarce.

As one of the first mixed-methods research on pragmatics in EFL learning in Iraq, the present study has some shortcomings. However, numerous studies have indicated that this kind of test is frequently used in research on speech acts (Aufa, 2013). Hence, future researchers are recommended to use other qualitative approaches such as case studies and observations to understand the potential relationships between the variables of the current study.

Scholars should use caution when attempting to generalize findings that are limited to the Iraqi environment. Doing this research with participants in both language institutes and universities and comparing pragmatic knowledge among male and female learners at different age groups can produce richer findings. This study was limited to examining two speech acts of apology and request among EFL university students and did not consider other types of speech acts. In future research, the time duration of the research can become longer and the impacts can be assessed in a longer time period.

This study researched understanding how to apologize and make requests in speech among Iraqi EFL learners through both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Other studies can also do case study research with a small number of language learners.

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