

Effect of Pragmatic Awareness on Comprehension and Production of Conventional Expressions

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Abstract—Mastery of target language conventional expressions seems to require awareness of the differences between native language and target language pragmatic features. To test the effect of awareness of target language pragmatic features on comprehension and production of target language conventional expressions, the current study was conducted over 60 learners of English in an intensive English program in Universiti Sains Malaysia. Pragmatic awareness, comprehension, and production were respectively assessed through a contextualized pragmatic judgment task, a multiple choice pragmatic listening comprehension test, and an oral discourse completion task. The results of the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient revealed that awareness of target language pragmatic features is a predictor of appropriate comprehension and production of target language conventional expressions. The pedagogical implications of the findings suggested the development of awareness of target language pragmatic features in English as Foreign Language learners.

Index Terms—conventional expressions, noticing hypothesis, pragmatic awareness

I. INTRODUCTION

Conventional expressions, described as “tacit agreements, which the members of a community presume to be shared by every reasonable co-member” (Coulmas, 1981, p. 4), “consist of strings such as *no problem*, *nice to meet you*, and *that’d be great*, which native speakers use predictable in certain contexts” (Bardovi-Harlig, 2009, p. 756). Knowledge of target language conventional expressions for language learners is of crucial importance not only because they contribute to nativelike speech fluency (Pawley & Syder, 1983) but also because speakers from the same speech community share knowledge and use of the same inventory of conventional expressions (Wray, 2002), put it simply, “in embodying societal knowledge they are essential in handling of day-to-day situations” (Coulmas, 1981, p. 4).

Mastery of conventionalized expressions of the language to be learned seems to require language learners’ awareness of the differences between the sociolinguistic and sociocultural features in their native language and the target language. Generally, awareness of target language sociolinguistic and sociocultural features (pragmatic awareness), defined as “conscious, reflective, explicit knowledge about pragmatics”, that is, “knowledge of those rules and conventions underlying appropriate language use in particular communication situations and on the part of members of specific speech community” (Alcon Soler & Safont Jorda, 2008, p. 193), plays a crucial role in foreign language acquisition (Schmidt, 1990, 1993, 2001; Leow, 1997, 2000; Takahashi, 2001, 2005). In fact, according to the noticing hypothesis, conscious noticing or awareness is a necessary and sufficient condition for input to be converted into intake for learning to take place (Schmidt, 1993).

Given the significance of familiarity with the expressions which have been conventionalized in the target language for effective cross-cultural communication and avoiding communication failure between native speakers and nonnative speakers on one hand and the role of awareness of target language sociolinguistic and sociocultural features (pragmatic awareness) in facilitating learning conventionalized expressions of the target language on the other hand, the current study seeks to investigate the relationship between level of awareness of target language pragmatic features and the ability to appropriately comprehend and produce target language conventional expressions. More specifically, the research questions to be asked in the current study are:

1. Does awareness of target language pragmatic features lead to appropriate comprehension of target language conventional expressions?
2. Does awareness of target language pragmatic features lead to appropriate production of target language conventional expressions?

Accordingly the null hypotheses are:

1. There is no significant relationship between awareness of target language pragmatic features and appropriate comprehension of target language conventional expressions.
2. There is no significant relationship between awareness of target language pragmatic features and appropriate production of target language conventional expressions.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *Pragmatic Awareness*

A review of literature in the field of interlanguage pragmatics shows that the studies conducted on the awareness aspect of pragmatics have predominantly explored the influence of a variety of individual difference variables including motivation (e.g. Takahashi, 2005), language proficiency (e.g. Matsumura, 2003; Takahashi, 2005), learning environment (e.g. Matsumura, 2001; Schauer, 2006), target language exposure (e.g. Matsumura, 2003), length of residence in target language country (e.g. Bella, 2012), and emotional intelligence (e.g. Rafieyan et al., 2014b) on the development of pragmatic awareness.

Matsumura (2003) conducted a study to examine the effect of target language proficiency and exposure to target language on the development of language learners' pragmatic awareness. Participants in the study consisted of 187 Japanese learners of English on an eight-month academic exchange program at a university in Canada. Pragmatic awareness was measured using a multiple choice questionnaire focusing on offering advice. English proficiency was also measured using language learners' TOEFL marks. Amount of exposure to English was obtained through a self-report questionnaire. The findings revealed that amount of target language exposure has potential to account for the development of pragmatic awareness (as cited in Rafieyan et al., 2014a).

Schauer (2006) was the other researcher who explored the effect of learning environment on the development of pragmatic awareness in language learners. Two participant groups consisting of 16 German learners of English enrolled in a university in England and 17 German learners of English in a higher education institution in Germany participated in the study. Data for the study were elicited using the combined video-and-questionnaire instrument developed by Bardovi-Harlig and Dornyei (1998). The study revealed that learning environment plays a substantial role in priming language learners' pragmatic awareness (as cited in Rafieyan et al., 2014a).

Most recently, Bella (2012) investigated the effect of length of residence in the target community on the development of pragmatic awareness in language learners. Two groups of participants with differing lengths of residence in Greece, one group with 1.6 years mean length of residence and the other group with 3 years mean length of residence, participated in the study. The instrument for data collection was the contextualized pragmatic and grammatical judgment test developed by Bardovi-Harlig and Dornyei (1998). The findings of the study revealed that increase in length of residence does not result in increase in pragmatic awareness (as cited in Rafieyan et al., 2014a).

B. *Comprehension of Conventional Expressions*

Studies on comprehension of conventional expressions have been both cross-sectional and developmental. These studies, conducted predominantly by Taguchi, have either compared language learners' ability to comprehend conventional and nonconventional expressions (e.g. Taguchi, 2007) or explored the role of individual difference variables such as language proficiency and study-abroad experience on the development of ability to comprehend target language conventional and nonconventional expressions (e.g. Taguchi, 2008; Taguchi, 2011).

In one study, Taguchi (2007) investigated whether language learners' accurate and speedy comprehension of implied meaning improve over time. Ninety-two Japanese learners of English enrolled in an intensive English program in a university in Japan participated in the study. The ability to comprehend implied meaning was assessed by a computerized listening task consisting of conventional and nonconventional expressions. Findings suggested that although the development of accuracy and comprehension speed was observed in both types of expressions, language learners' comprehension was more accurate and faster for conventional expressions than nonconventional expressions.

In another study, Taguchi (2008) explored whether there are gains in accurate and speedy comprehension of implied meaning of target language expressions over time. Participants in the study were 44 Japanese learners of English at a college in the United States. Participants' ability to comprehend implied meaning was assessed by a computerized listening task comprising conventional and nonconventional expressions. The findings revealed that significant gains in accuracy scores were found only for conventional expressions. There were almost no gains in accurate comprehension of nonconventional expressions. Conventional expressions were also faster for language learners to process than nonconventional expressions.

Taguchi (2011) also investigated the effect of target language proficiency and study-abroad experience on pragmatic comprehension. Participants were three groups of Japanese learners of English at a college in Japan with different proficiency levels and study-abroad experiences. A computerized pragmatic listening test was used to examine language learners' ability to comprehend conventional and nonconventional expressions. The findings revealed that study-abroad experience affected comprehension of conventional expressions but not nonconventional expressions. As for comprehension speed, proficiency, not study-abroad experience, was the decisive factor and the pattern was the same for both types of expressions.

C. *Production of Conventional Expressions*

Studies on production of conventional expressions have been also both cross-sectional and developmental. These studies, conducted predominantly by Bardovi-Harlig, have either explored the effect of pragmatic instruction on the ability to produce target language conventional expressions (e.g. Bardovi-Harlig & Vellenga, 2012) or the influence of individual difference variables such as pragmatic awareness on the ability to produce target language conventional expressions (e.g. Bardovi-Harlig, 2009; Bardovi-Harlig, 2014).

In one study, Bardovi-Harlig (2009) explored the source of low production of conventional expressions by language learners. Participants consisted of 122 learners of English enrolled in the intensive English program of a university in the American Midwest. The instruments consisted of an audio recognition task, an audio-visual production task, and a background questionnaire. The results suggested that low production of conventional expressions by language learners has multiple sources including lack of familiarity with some expressions, overuse of familiar expressions, level of development, and sociopragmatic knowledge.

Bardovi-Harlig and Vellenga (2012) also investigated the effects of instruction on the oral production of conventional expressions. Participants consisted of 36 language learners in the intensive English program of a university in the American Midwest. An aural recognition task and an oral production task were used as pre-test and post-test. Intervention consisted of three sessions centered around contextualized input and guided metapragmatic noticing. The findings suggested that instruction promoted the use of some conventional expressions.

Most recently, Bardovi-Harlig (2014) investigated language learners' awareness of the meaning of target language conventional expressions and the effect of the associated meanings on the use of conventional expressions in social interactions. One hundred and fourteen language learners enrolled in the intensive English program of a university in the American Midwest participated in the study. To explore the meaning that language learners assigned to conventional expressions, the modified aural Vocabulary Knowledge Scale was used. The data suggested that language learners' awareness of the meaning of conventional expressions seems likely to play a role in whether language learners use an expression and which expression among related expressions they use to the exclusion of others.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. *Participants*

Participants in the study consisted of 60 learners of English in an intensive English program in Universiti Sains Malaysia. Their ages ranged from 22 to 42 with a mean age of 28.2. Among the participants, 26 were males and 34 were females. All of the participants were at the intermediate level. Therefore, they were considered to be at the same level of English proficiency. They came from various countries including Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Korea, Japan, China, Finland, France, Germany, Thailand, Myanmar, and Indonesia.

B. *Instrument*

Three instruments were used as means of data collection for the current study: a pragmatic awareness test, a pragmatic comprehension test, and a pragmatic production test.

To assess language learners' pragmatic awareness, 8 grammatical but pragmatically inappropriate scenarios eliciting four speech acts of requests, apologies, suggestions, and refusals were adopted from the contextualized pragmatic judgment task developed by Bardovi-Harlig and Dornyei (1998). Each scenario was introduced by a short narration that set the scene. The sentence to be judged was the last sentence in the scenario which was indicated by an exclamation mark. Language learners were first asked to judge whether the targeted utterance was appropriate by marking the box labeled "yes" or "no". Then they were asked to rate the gravity of the problem on a six-part scale from "not bad at all" to "very bad" by placing an "X" along the scale.

To assess language learners' ability to comprehend conventional expressions, a pragmatic listening comprehension test measuring comprehension of indirect refusals including refusals of requests, invitations, suggestions, and offers developed by Taguchi (2007, 2008) was adopted. The test consisted of 24 items. Each item contained a short dialogue spoken by a male and a female native English speaker followed by a multiple choice question with four options. The reply that appeared at the end did not provide a straightforward answer to the speaker's question. The participants had to listen to each dialogue and decide which option expressed the speakers' intention.

To assess language learners' ability to produce conventional expressions, an oral discourse completion task eliciting a variety of speech acts including expressions of gratitude, apologies, warnings, leave-takings, requests, condolences, declining offers, acceptance of a request, acceptance of an invitation, invitation, declining an invitation, an agreement, deflecting thanks, and an introduction developed by Bardovi-Harlig (2009) was adopted. The discourse completion task consisted of 32 scenarios comprising both initiating and responding scenarios. The initiating scenarios (n=13) required respondents to initiate an interaction and the responding scenarios (n=19) required respondents to respond to an interlocutor's turn.

C. *Procedure*

During the second semester of the academic year 2013/2014, the three tests assessing pragmatic awareness, pragmatic comprehension, and pragmatic production ability were respectively administered to the language learners participating in the current study. Language learners were instructed on how to answer each test upon administration. They were not informed about the purpose of the tests, however. Following the completion of the tests, test slips were collected for data analysis.

E. Data Analysis

To measure language learners' level of pragmatic awareness, all "yes" responses to the question: "Is the target sentence appropriate?" were converted to 0 on the scale, thus obtaining error salience scales ranging from 0 to 6; as a result all participants had score on all of the items. To measure language learners' ability to comprehend conventional expressions, each correct answer on the test was assigned 1 mark while no mark was allocated to wrong answers. As there were 24 experimental items on the pragmatic comprehension test, each student could get a mark of between 0 and 24. To measure language learners' ability to produce conventional expressions, all responses were transcribed and checked by the researchers. The appropriateness of the responses was then assessed by two native speakers of English using a four-point rating scale ranging from zero (cannot evaluate) to three (almost perfect). Interrater reliability was $r = 0.92$. Table I displays the rating descriptions. As there were 32 scenarios, each participant could get a mark ranging from 0 to 96.

TABLE 1.
RATING BAND DESCRIPTIONS

3	Native-like	The utterance is almost perfectly appropriate. This is what a native speaker would usually say in the situation
2	Slightly off, but acceptable	The utterance is a little off from native-like due to minor grammatical and lexical errors but overall acceptable
1	Obviously off	The utterance is clearly non-native like because of strange, non-typical way of saying and/or major grammatical and lexical errors
0	Can't evaluate	The utterance is impossible to understand

Adopted from Taguchi (2013)

To measure the relationship between pragmatic awareness and pragmatic comprehension as well as the relationship between pragmatic awareness and pragmatic production, Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was used. Pearson correlation produces a value between -1 and +1. A value of +1 indicates a perfect positive relationship, a value of -1 indicates a perfect negative relationship, and a value of 0 indicates no relationship between the variables being assessed. According to Cohen (1988), values between 0.10 and 0.29 indicate a small correlation, values between 0.30 and 0.49 indicate a medium correlation, and values between 0.50 and 1.00 indicate a large correlation. The coefficient of determination was then computed to measure the proportion of variability in the level of pragmatic comprehension and production that can be determined from the relationship with the level of pragmatic awareness.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Findings

Table II presents the result of Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient for language learners' pragmatic awareness and pragmatic comprehension. According to this table, a Pearson correlation (r) of 0.80 was obtained which, according to the guidelines set by Cohen (1988), indicates a large positive relationship between language learners' level of pragmatic awareness and their level of pragmatic comprehension. In other words, as pragmatic awareness increases, pragmatic comprehension increases accordingly, that is, language learners who are more pragmatically aware can comprehend more conventional expressions appropriately.

TABLE 2.
PRAGMATIC AWARENESS AND PRAGMATIC COMPREHENSION

		Pragmatic Awareness	Pragmatic Comprehension
Pragmatic Awareness	Pearson Correlation	1	0.804
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
	N	60	60
Pragmatic Comprehension	Pearson Correlation	0.804	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
	N	60	60

To measure the proportion of variability in the level of pragmatic comprehension that can be determined from the relationship with the level of pragmatic awareness, the coefficient of determination was computed. The coefficient of determination, obtained through computing the squared correlation (r^2), is $r^2 = (0.80)^2 = 0.64$ which, when converted into percentage, shows that 64 percent of variability in pragmatic comprehension (i.e. comprehension of conventional expressions) can be determined from the relationship with pragmatic awareness.

Table III presents the result of Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient for language learners' pragmatic awareness and pragmatic production. According to this table, a Pearson correlation (r) of 0.75 was obtained which, according to the guidelines set by Cohen (1988), indicates a large positive relationship between language learners' level

of pragmatic awareness and their level of pragmatic production. In other words, as pragmatic awareness increases, pragmatic production increases accordingly, that is, language learners who are more pragmatically aware can produce more conventional expressions appropriately.

TABLE 3.
PRAGMATIC AWARENESS AND PRAGMATIC PRODUCTION

		Pragmatic Awareness	Pragmatic Production
Pragmatic Awareness	Pearson Correlation	1	0.754
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
	N	60	60
Pragmatic Production	Pearson Correlation	0.754	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
	N	60	60

To measure the proportion of variability in the level of pragmatic production that can be determined from the relationship with the level of pragmatic awareness, the coefficient of determination was computed. The coefficient of determination, obtained through computing the squared correlation (r^2), is $r^2 = (0.75)^2 = 0.56$ which, when converted into percentage, shows that 56 percent of variability in pragmatic production (i.e. production of conventional expressions) can be determined from the relationship with pragmatic awareness.

B. Discussion

The present study investigated the effect of awareness of target language pragmatic features on the appropriate comprehension and production of target language conventional expressions. The study found that there is a significant positive relationship between pragmatic awareness and both comprehension and production of conventional expressions. That is, a higher level of awareness of target language pragmatic features leads to a higher ability to appropriately comprehend and produce target language conventional expressions.

These findings can be explained through the noticing hypothesis proposed by Schmidt (1990, 2001) which states that “people learn about the things that they attend to and do not learn much about the things they do not attend to” (Schmidt, 2001, p. 30). Language learners who were aware of sociolinguistic and sociocultural (pragmatic) differences between their native language and the target language certainly paid more attention to the appropriate use of expressions which have been conventionalized in the target language. Consequently, knowledge of target language conventional expressions which they had gained enhanced their performance on the pragmatic comprehension and production tests. On the contrary, language learners who were not aware of sociolinguistic and sociocultural (pragmatic) differences between their native language and target language seemingly relied on the expressions conventionalized in their native language. Consequently, they had a poor performance on the pragmatic comprehension and production tests.

These findings reject the first null hypothesis which states that there is no significant relationship between pragmatic awareness and comprehension of target language conventional expressions. These finding also reject the second null hypothesis which states that there is no significant relationship between pragmatic awareness and production of target language conventional expressions.

The findings obtained through this study are consistent with the findings obtained through the study conducted by Taguchi (2011) who found that study-abroad experience affected comprehension of conventional expressions. The findings obtained through this study are also consistent with the findings obtained through the study conducted by Bardovi-Harlig (2014) who found that language learners’ awareness of the meaning of conventional expressions seems likely to play a role in whether language learners use an expression and which expression among related expressions they use to the exclusion of others.

V. CONCLUSION

The study found that awareness of target language pragmatic features leads to the more appropriate comprehension and production of target language conventional expressions. Language learners who were more aware of target language pragmatic features had a higher ability to appropriately comprehend and produce target language conventional expressions than language learners who were less aware of target language pragmatic features. Therefore, English language teachers in English as Foreign Language contexts are advised to develop awareness of target language pragmatic features in language learners (Rafieyan et al., 2014a, Rafieyan et al., 2014b).

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