The Relationship between Iranian EFL Students' Language Proficiency and Their Cross-cultural Speech Act Knowledge

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Abstract—It is about three decades that the term communicative competence has been utilized in EFL literatures. Pragmatic knowledge is one of the main aspects of the communicative competence. This study intended to investigate the relationship between Iranian EFL students' language proficiency and their cross-cultural speech act knowledge. To this end, 50 EFL students from Islamic Azad university of Tehran were selected through quota sampling. The instruments utilized in this study were IELTS test and Discourse Completion Task (DCT) test. The Pearson Correlation was utilized to compare the scores obtained from the students' language proficiency and their scores of cross cultural speech act knowledge. As the results of this study showed, there was a negative correlation between students' scores in language proficiency and their scores of cross cultural speech act knowledge.

Index Terms—communicative competence, pragmatic knowledge, speech acts, language proficiency, gender

I. INTRODUCTION

Clarifying the role of language in political and economic arrangements, in modern world, is indicating that finding the new way for language teaching is of great importance not only for academic needs but also for routine daily needs. Consequently, during the history of language teaching this want has been considered as the first priority for scholars in TEFL. Initially they try to define language teaching in compliance with new findings in linguistics. After that, they designed different methods and techniques. Passage of time brought the efficacy of those methods under question. Under such circumstances, scholars revised those methods repeatedly (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). In parallel with those efforts new variables were introduced to this field. One of the important variables was pragmatic knowledge.

Pragmatic knowledge is one of the aspects of communicative competence. Communicative competence was introduced by Hymes (1972) as a reaction to Chomsky's distinction between competence and performance. Chomsky (1965) divided competence and performance; he described 'competence' as an idealized function that is located as a psychological or mental property and 'performance' as the production of actual utterances. In other words, competence involves "knowing" the language and performance involves "doing" something with the language. The first scholar who criticized Chomsky's distinction between competence and performance was Hymes, who believed Chomsky did not pay attention to communicative competence. He defined communicative competence not only as an inborn grammatical competence but also as the ability to use grammatical competence in different communicative situations. Therefore, he brings the sociolinguistic perspective into Chomsky's linguistic view of competence.

Hymes believes that the language users must follow two purposes in language learning. The first purpose is the ability to use grammatical rules and the second purpose is to form correct utterance and knowing how to use that utterance appropriately in a context. According to Hymes, to be communicatively competent; we should be capable of making 4 kinds of assessments about a sentence:
  1): How much the sentence is possible or grammatical?
  2): How much the sentence is feasible (semantically possible)?
  3): How much the sentence is appropriate?
  4): How much the sentence is actually done?

It was after Hymes' definition of communicative competence that the models of communicative competence were originated. One of these models was proposed by Bachman (1990). Bachman was the first applied linguist who mentioned pragmatic aspect explicitly. He developed a model of communicative language ability in which three components were: language competence, strategic competence and psychomotor skills. In this model, language competence was, in turn, divided into two components, organizational and pragmatic competence. Pragmatic competence is a central component in Bachman's (1990) model of language competence. According to Bachman, pragmatic competence is the capability to utilize the language in order to clearly state different functions and on the

other hand, to explain their illocutionary force based on the sociocultural context. In Bachman's model, pragmatic competence is not subjugated to grammar and text, but it is equal with formal linguistic and textual knowledge and interacts with organizational competence in complicated manners.

After Hymes (1972), the second scholar who criticized Chomsky's dichotomy of competence and performance was Halliday (1978). He identified language as "a social fact and a reality" (p.2). According to Halliday, people in their everyday life play a certain role in the social structure. They confirm their own roles, set up, and transfer the shared systems of knowledge. As Halliday argued, language does not only include sentences, but it contains text or discourse. In other words, language is the exchange of meanings in interpersonal contexts. Halliday rejected Chomsky's dichotomy of competence and performance because according to him, the potential of meaning was covered by both knowing and doing. According to Fulcher and Davidson (2007), there seems to be five important principles for these communicative competence approaches:

1. Communicative competence is comprised of grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and communication strategies. The first goal of a communicative approach should be to make easy the merging of these types of knowledge for the learner.

2. A communicative approach should be established on the learner's communication needs. These needs must be indicated regarding grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence.

3. The foreign language learner should be provided with an opportunity to participate in meaningful communicative interactions with native speakers. This principle is a challenge for teachers and program designers.

4. At the first steps of second language acquisition, we have to use better those aspects of communicative competence, which the learner has progress in it through acquisition and utilizing the native language.

5. The first objective of a communication-based second language program should be to supply the learners with the knowledge, and the experience required to fulfill their communicative needs in the second language.

The models of communicative competence were proposed after Hyme's definition of communicative competence. The first and most persuasive model of communicative competence was proposed by Canale and Swain (1980). They differentiated between communicative competence and performance (cited in Uso´-Juan & Martı´nez-Flor, 2006). Canale and Swain's model consisted of four main competences: Grammatical, sociolinguistic, strategic, and discourse competence. Grammatical competence involves the knowledge of the language code including knowledge of vocabulary, rules of spelling and pronunciation, word formation as well as sentence structure. Sociolinguistic competence comprises the knowledge of the sociocultural rules of use in a specific situation. Strategic competence includes the knowledge of using verbal and nonverbal communication strategies. Finally, discourse competence is dealt with the knowledge of achieving coherence and cohesion in a spoken or written text.

The second model was proposed by Savignon (1983). Savignon's model contained the same four competencies mentioned in the Canale and Swain's (1980) model. It also contains grammatical, sociolinguistic, strategic, and discourse competence (cited in Uso´-Juan & Martı´nez-Flor, 2006). Grammatical competence involves the knowledge of the language code including knowledge of vocabulary, rules of spelling and pronunciation, word formation as well as sentence structure. Sociolinguistic competence comprises the knowledge of the sociocultural rules of use in a specific situation. Strategic competence includes the knowledge of using verbal and nonverbal communication strategies. Finally, discourse competence is dealt with the knowledge of achieving coherence and cohesion in a spoken or written text. The main difference between Savignon's model and Canale and Swain's model is that Savignon believes, since all components are interrelated, there is a relationship among the components of the models to show how an increase in only one component produces an increase in the overall level of communicative competence. Although Savignon's model solved one of the criticisms to Canale and Swain's model, it was criticized because it still did not take into account the pragmatic component.

The first applied linguist who mentioned pragmatic aspect explicitly in his model was Bachman (1990), who developed a model of communicative language ability in which three components were: language competence, strategic competence and psychomotor skills. Language competence is, in turn, divided into two components, organizational and pragmatic competence. Organizational competence consists of grammatical competence and textual competence. Pragmatic competence comprises two parts: illocutionary competence and sociolinguistic competence. Illocutionary competence is about the pragmatic conventions to do language functions satisfactorily. Sociolinguistic competence refers to the knowledge of the sociolinguistic conventions to do language functions properly in a specific context.

Bachman considered two more components of communicative language ability, namely strategic and psychomotor skills. Pragmatic competence is a principal component in Bachman's model of language competence. It integrates the capability to utilize the language to clearly state different kinds of functions and interpret their illocutionary force in discourse according to the sociocultural given context.

Pragmatics has been defined in various ways. Crystal (1997, p. 301) considered pragmatics knowledge as "the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the restriction they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication" (quoted in Kasper & Rose, 2001). To conclude, Crystal believed that pragmatics dealt with studying communicative action in its sociocultural context. Communicative action comprises implementing speech acts like requesting, complimenting, apologizing, and complaining and involving in various kinds of discourse.

Leech (1983) and Thomas (1983) divided pragmatics into two components: pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics. According to Kasper & Rose (2001, p.2) "pragmalinguistics referred to the resources for conveying communicative acts and relational or interpersonal meanings. Such resources include pragmatic strategies such as directness and indirectness, routines, and a large range of linguistic forms which can intensify or soften communicative acts." Leech (1983, p. 10) identified sociopragmatics as "the sociological interface of pragmatics." As Kasper & Rose argued sociopragmatics refers to "the social perceptions underlying participants' interpretation and performance of communicative action. Speech communities differ in their assessment of speakers' and hearers' social distance and social power, their rights and obligations, and the degree of imposition involved in particular communicative acts" (p.2).

Speech act is one of the most important aspects of pragmatic knowledge. According to Olshtain and Cohen (1991, p.19), "speech acts are often but not always the patterned, routinized language that native and pragmatically nonnative speakers and writers in a given speech community use to perform functions such as thanking, complimenting, requesting, refusing, apologizing and complaining".

Shatz and McCloskey (1984; cited in Bialystok, 1993) believed that preschoolers know much about various speech acts. They argued that by age two children are able to identify between speeches acts like questions and non-questions without caring about how they are made. According to them, there are some children under the age of two who can identify different kinds of questions: yes/no questions from wh- questions.

As children enter the school years, there is an enlargement in the range of language functions for them. One of the facets of pragmatic competence is the capability to modify the form of speech to consent to contextual factors. This act of manipulating is shown by children's role to utilize and interpret these forms as indirect requests. While developing this aspect of competence, little children frequently make apparent errors. For example, notice the following telephone conversation between a child and an adult:

The caller says, *"Is your mother home?"*

The child says, *"Yes"*.

In the mentioned case, the child who is talking on the telephone is not able to recognize the question as an indirect request for calling his mother. Becker (1982), records the variations happening in children's planning of requests from the earliest efforts based on gestures, sounds, and simple utterances to requests based on well-formed syntactic structures, and by about age three to the incorporation of some indirect requests. Children's control over requests is very complex by age five, involving different indirect forms and utterances that contain sequencing several steps to reach the requested aim. The ratio of indirect to direct requests goes up between the ages of about three and five years. After that age, it stays comparatively unchanged until about age eight.

One of the issues in the pragmatics domain is consciousness or unconsciousness of pragmatics knowledge. The first researcher who considered the consciousness or unconsciousness of pragmatics was Wolfson. Wolfson (1981) believed the native speakers' pragmatic knowledge is unconscious in most of the times. She supported her claim with several types of evidence in which speakers do not have reliable information about the ways they utilize the language. According to her, bilinguals sometimes switch from one language or different kinds of languages to another language unconsciously. Some other researchers like Kendall (1981) and Ochs (1979) reject Wolfson's hypothesis.

According to Ochs (1979), pragmatic knowledge is not always used in an automatic manner and unreflectively. Conversations vary a great deal based on spontaneity and planning. On the other hand, Kendall (1981) pointed out that some people's preplanning telephone conversations or writing consists of a large amount of conscious and careful considerations in discourse organization. There are various conditions in which producing an appropriately polite language are very important. The learners may be concerned about how to address teachers and many aspects of utilizing personal address are not unthinking reaction to a determining context but stand for strategic and sometimes manipulative options. Therefore, we can say that pragmatic knowledge is somehow conscious and to some degree convincible to consciousness; however all pragmatic knowledge cannot be convincible to consciousness.

Teaching pragmatic knowledge in foreign language and second language context is different. As Bardovi-Harling (1992) argued, EFL learners and instructors pay more attention to grammatical development and have difficulty in sociocultural norms and pragmatic knowledge. The reason is that the second language learners are better in pragmatic knowledge because they are in the atmosphere of the target language.

Learners who learn the language while living in the target culture are inclined to regard pragmatics as important, emphasizing on pragmatic errors more than grammatical errors. The high importance they place on pragmatics seems to be because they interact daily with natives of the target culture. On the other hand, learners who learn the language in a classroom outside the target culture seem to be less sensitive to suitability and to place more importance on grammatical accuracy instead (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996).

According to Kasper and Rose (2001), not all EFL classrooms are weak sources of pragmatic information. On the other hand, learning the language in the target culture will make learners more sensitive to the importance of pragmatics because the amount and quality of relevant input and the chances for relevant practice will be greater than in a classroom in the back home. As opposed to second language learning atmosphere, in EFL contexts the amount of speech acts is low, and the typical interaction patterns limit pragmatic input and opportunities for practicing discourse organization strategies (Kasper, 2001; Eslami-Rasekh, 2005). There are some qualities in the EFL context that prevent

pragmatic learning. These are large classes; limited contact hours and little opportunity for intercultural communication are some of the (Eslami-Rasekh, 2005).

Schmidt (1993) claimed the difference between first and second language pragmatics is that since adults can report their comprehensions much more readily than children can, it is possible to inspect the role of noticing and understanding in the evolution of pragmatic ability by adult second language learners directly, by asking learners to report their experiences. For second language acquisition, focusing on linguistic forms, functional meanings, and the relevant contextual features is required. Fox (1987) believes pragmatics principles are better represented as associative networks rather than as propositional rules.

One of the issues in teaching pragmatics to EFL students is which one will be better in pragmatic knowledge, students with higher proficiency knowledge or students with lower proficiency knowledge. Takahashi and Beebe (1987) proposed the positive correlation hypothesis. Based on this hypothesis, proficiency knowledge in second language is positively related to first language pragmatic transfer. Here, second language learners with low proficiency level rarely display first language pragmatic transfer in second language context than second language learners with high proficiency level. The reason is that low proficiency second language learners do not have essential linguistic knowledge to transfer pragmatic knowledge of their own native language. Second language learners who are highly proficient probably show sociocultural norms of their native language in second language production. The reason is that they have control on the target language.

Trosborg (1987) performed a comparative research about apology strategies. In her research, Trosborg used various proficient groups of Danish students of English using role-play. In this study, twelve native English speakers and twelve Danish students of English participated. These two groups were in low level, intermediate level, and advanced level. In her study, Trosborg did not discover the obvious proficient influence on L1 pragmatic transfer based on reoccurrence of apology strategies utilized by these three levels of learners, comparing with those Danish native speakers and those native English speakers.

In another study, Takahashi (1996) inspected transferability of five Japanese indirect request strategies into English. In this study, Takahashi investigated the interaction between transferability and the amount of imposition included in a request situation and the interaction between transferability and learners' second language proficiency. 142 freshmen Japanese students of English participated in this research. Based on this study, Takahashi argued that learners' transferability was affected by the various amount of imposition implied by its communicative goal. He also concluded that neither a positive correlation nor a negative correlation between first language pragmatic transfer and second language proficiency. She believes the reason is that both low proficiency learners and high proficiency learners depend on their native language request rules in an equal manner, in the case that they perform their requests in the target language.

The researches performed in the domain of cross-cultural pragmatics have demonstrated that speech acts realization varies from a language to another. This diversity across languages leads to misunderstanding. Thomas (1983) called these misunderstandings as pragmatic failure. Thomas believes pragmatic failure happens when the second language learners exchange the rules of first language pragmatics with the rules of second language pragmatics. This causes most of the EFL learners cannot communicate with people from other cultures. Hence, one of the important issues in the EFL classrooms is teaching of pragmatics knowledge. There is a controversy among the EFL researchers whether pragmatics knowledge is teachable. The majority of these researchers (e.g. Bardovi-Harlig, 2003; Kasper, 2001; Kondo, 2008) have faith in teachability of pragmatics knowledge; however, they apply different approaches to teach pragmatics. Meier (1997), for example, preferred a cultural approach to instruction of pragmatics to make best use of their contextual and cultural insights to assist learners to be good understanders of their own world and others. Bardovi-Harlig (2003) believes that the best place to teach pragmatics is classroom.

As Eslami and Eslami-Rasekh (2008, p.10) put it, Iranian EFL learners do not have the opportunity to have an encounter with target language speakers and the target culture. Therefore, it is difficult to teach target language pragmatics to them. According to them, communication of EFL learners with native speakers may cause pragmatic failure because of the "lack of pragmatic knowledge of the sociocultural norms of the target community." Therefore, to decrease pragmatic failure or communication malfunctioning between native and non-native speakers, pragmatic competence should be acquired. Learners should use the language effectively to understand the language in context.

One of the issues in the domain of pragmatics and pragmatics teaching is the effect of students' language proficiency on their pragmatics knowledge. The purpose of this study is to know how the language proficiency can affect on EFL students's pragmatics knowledge. Since many language teachers are still uncertain to teach pragmatics in their classrooms, this study can be helpful to show whether pragmatics knowledge is teachable or not. In other words, by determining the level of non-native speakers' ILP (Inter Language Pragmatics) knowledge and comparing the result with their language proficiency knowledge, it can be understood whether the students with high level of proficiency are also good in pragmatic knowledge or not.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

A. Participants. In the present study, the participants were 50 individuals studying at Azad University of Tehran. 25 participants were males and 25 were females. The subjects were all native speakers of Persian and their age ranged from

20 to 30. The subjects were all chosen through quota sampling. The quota sampling is a kind of sampling in which the researcher subdivides the population into classes or categories (e.g. males and females). In this kind of sampling there is non- random sample selection. This kind of sampling is useful when the time is limited and the research budget is very tight. Based on its characteristics, quota sampling was utilized, because in this study there were two groups of males and females and the selection of the subjects was not based on randomization, and the researcher selected EFL senior undergraduates and EFL graduated students.

B. Instruments. The main instruments utilized in this study were IELTS test and DCT test. IELTS test was utilized to measure the learners' language proficiency and it was taken from the series of IELTS books. Since the proficiency test was taken from the IELTS test, and the IELTS test is a standardized test, it can be said that the validity and reliability of the proficiency test was substantiated. 30 questions were selected from the collection of IELTS tests in order to assess the language proficiency of the subjects. The time limit for this test was 30 minutes.

After the IELTS test, Discourse Complement Task (DCT) was administered to the participants. According to Varghese & Billmyer (1996, p.40), "DCT is a questionnaire containing a set of very briefly described situations designed to elicit a particular speech act". The DCT test was designed by Jalilafar (2009) and the time limit for this test was 10 minutes. The validity and reliability of this questionnaire was substantiated through a pilot study carried out with 10 students by Jalilafar.

C. Procedure. In the data collection phase, the following steps were taken:

1. At first, the IELTS test was administered. The students were told about the source of questions and the way of taking the test. Using dictionaries was forbidden by the test takers throughout the test.

2. After administering the IELTS test, the DCT questionnaire was administered to the participants. Since majority of the participants were unfamiliar with DCT questionnaire, the way of doing the DCT questionnaire was explained by the tester in advance. For example, the tester asked the participants to put themselves in each of the conditions in the DCT questionnaire and try to answer the questions as fast as possible.

Although the DCT questionnaire was in English, the students were allowed to use their native language, Persian to express their intentions and the request and apology strategies. This was due to the fact that although all of the participants were able to read and understand the questions in English, they were unable to transfer their ideas in English. The participants' answers were translated into English. To ensure the validity and correctness of the translations, the data were checked by some skillful experts in the field.

III. RESULTS

The present study intended to find answers to the following question and hypothesis:

RQ: Is there any significant relationship between Iranian EFL students' language proficiency and their cross-cultural speech act knowledge?

NH0: There is no any significant relationship between Iranian EFL students' language proficiency and their cross-cultural knowledge of speech acts.

In order to inspect the above-mentioned question and hypothesis, the Pearson Correlation was utilized (Table 1.1). In the following Table, The relationship between the students' LP and their cross-cultural knowledge of speech acts (in this case, requesting speech act) was inspected.

TABLE 1.1
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE LP VARIABLE, AND REQUESTING VARIABLE

		LP	Requesting
LP	Pearson Correlation	1	-.322[*]
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.013
	N	50	50
Requesting	Pearson Correlation	-.322[*]	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.013	
	N	50	50

In Table 1.1, the correlation between Iranian EFL students' language proficiency and their cross-cultural speech act (requesting) knowledge is illustrated. As the Table 1.1 shows, students' language proficiency scores has a meaningful relationship with their cross-cultural speech act (requesting) knowledge ($r= -.322$, $p<0.05$). This correlation is a negative correlation. This shows, the more the students' scores in language proficiency, the less their scores in cross-cultural speech act (requesting) knowledge. Hence, the result of this study rejects the research's null hypothesis because as the results of this study showed there is a negative significant correlation between students' language proficiency and their cross-cultural knowledge of speech acts.

IV. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study showed that there is a negative correlation between students' scores in language proficiency and their scores of cross cultural speech act knowledge. In other words, there is no relationship between

EFL students' language proficiency level and their pragmatic knowledge. This finding is similar to Takahashi's (1996) finding. Takahashi discovered that proficiency level of L2 learners does not have any impact on their pragmatic competence. In other words, Takahashi found that there is a negative relationship between the learners' scores in language proficiency and their scores of cross cultural speech act knowledge. The finding of this study is also in par with a study performed by Kim (2000). According to him, proficiency level does not have any influence on EFL learners' pragmatic competence. This might be due to the fact that EFL learners just learn English in the classroom; therefore, the problem is lack of access to authentic materials. As Barron (2003, p.10) also argued, increased grammatical proficiency may or may not lead to an increase in pragmatic abilities. "It may allow the learner to construct or overuse a structure, which is pragmatically less effective."

Since the students' language proficiency does not affect their pragmatic competence, pragmatics instruction can be started from the beginning stages in EFL classrooms. Instructors should provide the learners with authentic situations in classrooms. More authentic materials need to be learnt by the EFL learners instead of mastering simple rules of the language. By providing the learners with different communication opportunities, they will gain a fair amount of knowledge of the language or in other words, a proper competence.

V. SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The studies to investigate the effect of gender on pragmatic competence (PC) and the effect of language proficiency on pragmatic competence (PC) are scarce in pragmatics domain. More studies are required to consider these issues. In the future researches it is better to utilize a broader sample to increase the generalizability of the research.

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