Role Play and Iranian Male and Female EFL Learners’ Pragmatic Competence

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Abstract
Although a large body of research now exists on pragmatic competence, relatively few researchers have explored the impact of role-play on the pragmatic competence. Therefore, the present study is designed to investigate the effect of role-play as a pragmatic development activity after the formal instruction on the development of Learners’ pragmatic competence. The participants included 40 EFL students (15 male and 25 female) that studied English at Maham institute in Tehran. Nelson proficiency test (Fowler & Coe, 1976) was used in order to select the sample out of the population of 90 students who agreed to take part in the study. Based on the results, 40 high intermediate students were selected as the sample of the study. They formed two mixed groups (male and female role play group A, male and female conversation group B). The instruction took place; group A did role play, and group B did conversation followed by free discussion techniques. Having finished the treatment, the two groups gave the similar posttest. The results show there is not any significant difference between male and female learner’s pragmatic competence when they received instruction through conversation and there is not any significant difference between male and female learner’s pragmatic competence they received instruction through role play.

Keywords: role play, pragmatic competence, DCT, male and female learners
1. Introduction

Researches on second language try to investigate how learners acquire certain linguistic and extra-linguistic factors. This has revealed that learners eventually master competence in a second language. Other research on learners’ speech acts performance in a second/foreign language has disclosed distinctions of learners’ performance from those of the native speakers’. Bardovi-Harlig (2001) in Rueda (2006) has indicated several realizations missed such as availability of input, length of exposure, and transfer. The recommendation is to combine the teaching of interlanguage pragmatics in the classroom (Kasper & Schmidt, 1996).

In the spoken English classroom, the ability to communicate efficiently is strongly difficult. The demand absolutely inflicts huge burden on teachers’ shoulders to give proper pragmatic treatment in the classroom. On the part of textbook writers; coursebooks for pragmatic awareness yielding in pragmatic competence are to be explicitly investigated and greatly developed.

Bachman (1990) argued that pragmatic capability is a significant part of the construct of language proficiency. Pragmatic comprehension is the comprehension of oral language, interpretation of speaker’s emotion and views, and speaker’s intentions and the ability to select proper answers.

Pragmatic comprehension can be characterized as comprehension of speech acts and conversational implicatures (Garcia, 2004). Pragmatic comprehension demands the listener understand linguistic information such as vocabulary and contextual information such as the role and interlocutor’s status. Based on the above definition, pragmatic comprehension is different from linguistic comprehension. Though, a lot of research now exists on pragmatic competence, a few researchers have investigated the effect of role-play on the pragmatic competence. Regarding previous studies, adequate literature could be found on the concept of pragmatics and pragmatic competence. So this study aimed at investigating the following research question:

Is there any significant difference between male and female learners' pragmatic competence?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Pragmatic comprehension

Bachman (1990) discussed that pragmatic ability is an important part of the construct of language proficiency. Pragmatic comprehension refers to the comprehension of oral language, interpretation of speaker’s feeling and attitudes, and speaker’s intentions and the ability to choose appropriate responses.

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the above definition, pragmatic comprehension tends to be different from linguistic comprehension.

According to more recent conceptualizations of pragmatics, pragmatic knowledge is believed to have two areas: functional knowledge and sociolinguistic knowledge (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). Functional knowledge itself includes ideational, manipulative, imaginative and instrumental. Sociolinguistic knowledge involves the ability to produce and comprehend language which is appropriate for its given context. In order to produce these appropriate sentences, one should consider register, expressions, figures of speech and idiomatic usages of language and dialects and different varieties. Comprehension might have several aspects. Thomas (1983), for example, pointed to the importance of pragmatic mistakes which might render speakers rude, unfriendly or even dishonest. Language transfer is one of the interlanguage aspects of comprehension. As Kasper (1992) introduced two types of negative pragmatic transfer which might infect communication: pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic transfer. The first happens when the learner translates the L1 usage literally and neglects the correct contextual usage in L2. The second error occurs when the learner perceives the second language context the same way as they do the L1 context. In many cases teachers need to test the pragmatic knowledge and comprehension of the learners; consequently, the need to design and hold such tests is strongly felt. Oller (1979) indicated that there are some difficulties through setting two restrictions on the tests that were supposed to examine pragmatic proficiency: first, the examiner has to identify situations that can naturally happen in the second language situation and then the language used for designing such tests must have resemblances with the type of language which is used outside the formal environment of the classroom.

2.2 Competence or performance

The term “competence” refers to unconscious knowledge of a grammatical system and the term performance refers to how linguistic knowledge is used. According to fundamental distinctions between competence and performance, other researchers have asserted that learners’ failure to perform in experimental tasks like native speakers is not necessarily a direct indication that their linguistic competence is deviant as well. Thomas (1983) differentiates between the two competences: grammatical and pragmatic competences. Grammatical competence is concerned with the decontextualized linguistic knowledge without paying much attention to the context in which it occurs. This includes phonetics, phonology, syntax, semantics, etc. On the other hand, pragmatic competence is concerned with conveying an intended meaning and grasping it in the context when communicating with others. If L2 speakers’ intended meaning is misunderstood by L1 speakers, this means that the utterance did not help achieve L2 speakers’ intended purpose. In other words, pragmatic competence is knowledge of communicative action, the way it is carried out, and the capability of using language appropriately according to contextual factors (Kasper, 1997, as cited in Eslami-Rasekh & Mardani, 2010).
2.3 The spoken English classroom

Brown (2001) states that there are some issues in teaching oral communication skills that may help to provide some perspective, namely conversational discourse, pronunciation, accuracy and fluency, affective factors, and the interaction effect. Conversational discourse in Brown’s view requires the demonstration of an ability to accomplish pragmatic goals through interactive discourse with other speakers of the language. The goals and the techniques for teaching conversation depend upon the learner, the teacher, and the context of the class. The topics for a conversation class are therefore may vary from drilling to free and open discussions.

Pronunciation still invites a question whether the role of pronunciation would work in a communicative, interactive class. Teaching pronunciation has changed over the last half of the twentieth century. A current approach to pronunciation is a top-down approach in which the most relevant features of pronunciation—stress; rhythm, and intonation—become the priority (Brown, 2001). This approach emphasizes the importance of teaching pronunciation in a discourse, the goal of which is to produce clear, comprehensible pronunciation.

Accuracy and fluency are also primary in language teaching. Fluency may serve as the initial goal in language teaching, and accuracy will be accomplished to some extent by allowing learners to focus on the elements of phonetics and phonology, grammar, and discourse. The fourth issue, affective factor, is related to the language ego. This consequently results in learners’ reluctance to be judged by hearers. Hence, the teachers should motivate the learner to speak. The last issue is the interaction effect. In this term, the learners are encouraged to be actively engaged in conversations. As a participant in a conversation, the learner will negotiate meaning.

2.4 Communicative or pragmatist competence

Canale and Swain in Rose and Kasper (2001) put forward three subcompetencies, which are extended by Canale into four subcompetencies. The subcompetencies are grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence.

1. Grammatical competence refers to the knowledge of linguistic code features such as phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics.
2. Sociolinguistic competence refers to the knowledge of contextually appropriate language use.
3. Discourse competence is the knowledge of achieving coherence and cohesion in spoken or written communication.
4. Strategic competence refers to the knowledge of how to use communication strategies to handle breakdowns in communication and make communication effective.

In this model, pragmatic competence is represented as sociolinguistic competence, which Canale (1983) described as encompassing both appropriateness of meaning and appropriateness of form. This meaning appropriateness is in parallel with
Leech’s (1990) sociopragmatic component, which includes an interlocutor’s knowledge of pragmatic conventions and the ability to assess situational context and speech intentions. Bachman’s (1990) model and Bachman and Palmer’s (1996) consider communicative competence a dynamic system in which world knowledge (knowledge structures) and language competence feed into strategic competence which describes the degree to which linguistic intentions are efficiently executed (Niezgoda & Rover, 2001, p. 64). Grammatical and pragmatic competence is part of Bachman’s language competence, which he subdivides into organizational competence and pragmatic competence. Organizational competence concerns a speaker’s control of the formal aspects of language and is further subdivided in grammatical competence (vocabulary, syntax, morphology, phonology) and textual competence (cohesion/coherence, rhetorical organization).

Pragmatic competence consists of sociolinguistic and illocutionary competence. Sociolinguistic competence in this model is in parallel with Leech’s sociopragmatic component, and illocutionary competence is similar to Leech’s pragma linguistic component. The notion of pragmatic competence originates from pragmatics, a subfield in linguistics. Crystal (as cited in Kasper, 1997) defines pragmatics as “the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication.”

2.5 Acquisition of pragmatic competence

By tradition in the field of language teaching, grammatical notions and translation have been the chief objectives of teachers (Omaggio-Hadley, 2001). Primary approaches concentrated almost utterly on making language learners capable of translating and conjugating verbs, however eventually learners were left unable to be fluent in or productively use the L2 similar to a native speaker (Omaggio-Hadley, 2001). Rintell (1981) clarifies that first research was concerned with learners’ inaccuracies and how the learners place words together in syntactic patterns. More current methodologies to language teaching emphasize the prominence of communicative competence (Hymes, 1967, as cited in Colucci-Gray, 2007), which embraces knowing enough to be able to adjust fruitfully to the target culture. This notion takes in grammatical capacity, which would let the language learner turn out to be a contributing and successfully communicative associate of the L2 culture. Communicative competence grew into a fundamental part of L2 teaching approaches, which led to the insertion of pragmatics as a constituent of teaching set of courses.

Regarding the roles in society, Goffman (1959, as cited in Colucci-Gray, 2007) offered the first all-encompassing account of role-playing. He called the process of action in society as the process of playing a role in front of an addressee, which may be imaginary or real. According to the model, any physical setting is a context for a performance of an individual to the audience, and such performance contains words, appearances and gestures, which are the tools by which the individual in role put his/her thoughts into words in front of the audience. As stated by Goffman “It is important for us to realize that we do not as a matter of fact lead our lives,
make our decisions, and reach our goals on everyday life either statistically or scientifically. We live by inference” (p. 15, as cited in Colucci-Gray, 2007).

Hence in the society, being in role associates action and participation: a role usually exists when is presented to others and its presentation contains strong cognitive aspects, which notify both the audience and the performer with an understanding of the action which takes place in a specific context (Landy, 1993). Landy (1993) successfully suggested that acting out a role equates to learning a part, with the appropriate words, cues and gestures, and that such impulsiveness and spontaneity is accomplished through practice and rehearsal.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research design

Since the researcher used two groups namely, experimental and control and the research contained a treatment, the present research study followed the quasi-experimental approach.

3.2 Participants

The participants included 40 undergraduate university students (15 male and 25 female) studied English at Maham institute in Tehran. Nelson proficiency test (Fowler & Coe, 1976) was used in order to select the sample out of the population of 90 students who agreed to take part in the study. Based on the results, 40 high intermediate students were selected as the sample of the study.

3.3 Instrumentation

In order to meet the criteria of the present research according to the research questions, two instruments including, a discourse completion test (DCT) and Role-play tasks (RPTs) were used.

3.4 Data collection

First, forty participants (male, n=20 and female, n=20) formed two mixed groups (male and female role play group A, male and female conversation group B). Two weeks after the administration of the placement test; students of both groups took the DCT and responded the questions in 60 minutes. They were all naïve to the objectives of the research and the pretest was taken as one of the class exams. Exam papers were coded for all students; and an experienced teacher graded the test. After the test, the scores were calculated for data tabulation purposes. Group A was received treatment to perform the RPTs, while group B was taught to do ordinary conversation in the classroom. The teachers of both groups checked indirectly the learners’ improvement over the sessions. This helped the researcher to ensure that the treatment is done properly, since in some sessions directions or guidelines were provided by the researcher as to how teach the desired methods of role-play. In the first session after the instruction, learners of both groups (A and B) took the same DCT within 45 minutes and scores was compared to determine the possible differences among the groups and also to determine the difference
between male and female learners’ performance regarding the results of the posttest.

3.5 Data analysis

The collected data were entered into SPSS software program v.22 for data analysis. Regarding the research question, analysis of variance was applied and the female learners’ scores on the posttest were compared to the male learners’ scores on the same test. The results of the test indicated that which gender outperformed the other in pragmatic competence.

4. Findings of the Study

The question and hypothesis are as follows:

Q: Is there any significant difference between male and female learners' pragmatic competence?

H0: There is not any significant difference between male and female learner’s pragmatic competence.

To explore the difference between males and female participants, or in other words, to find which group outperformed the other, an independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the scores on the posttest; the results of which are provided in the following tables.

Table 1

Independent-samples t-test results to compare the mean scores of the male and female participants of the experimental group on the posttest

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>T</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.360</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>.191</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Eta squared = \(-1.360^2/-1.360^2 + 19 = 0.08\)

Results: As Tables 1 indicated, an independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the posttest scores for the male and female participants of the experimental group. There was not any significant difference in scores for the male participants (\(M=6.56, SD=.84\)) and the female participant [\(M=7.12, SD=.94; t (18) =-1.360, p=.191\)]. The magnitude of the differences in the means was moderate (eta squared=.08).

Therefore, the first section of the second hypothesis is confirmed and:

There is not any significant difference between male and female learner’s pragmatic competence when they receive instruction through role play.

For the second section, considering the control group who received the treatment of conversation, the statistical test of Paired-samples t-test was conducted for the male
and female participants, and the effect size was calculated. In the following the test results for the male and female participants of the control group are provided.

**Table 2**
*Mean, standard deviation and standard error mean for the control group’s male participants on the pretest and the posttest*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>5.82</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>5.82</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.44</td>
<td>.54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3**
*Results of Paired-samples T-test to compare the mean scores of the control group’s male participants on the pretest and posttest*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>T</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Eta squared: 0

**Results for the male participants:** As Tables 2 and 3 indicated, a paired-samples t-test was conducted to evaluate the effect of conversation on the control group’s male participants. There was not any increase in the discourse completion test scores from pretest \(M=5.82, SD=1.04\) to posttest \([M=5.82, SD=1.44, t(6)=.000, p>.05]\). The eta squared statistic \((0)\) indicated a very small size.

**Table 4**
*Mean, standard deviation and standard error mean for the control group’s female participants on the pretest and the posttest*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>6.11</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>5.78</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>.33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 5**
*Results of Paired-samples T-test to compare the mean scores of the control group’s female participants on the pretest and posttest*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>T</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.157</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>.008</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Eta squared: \(3.157^2 \div 3.157^2 + 12 = 0.45\)

**Results for the female participants:** As Tables 4 and 5 indicated, a paired-samples t-test was conducted to evaluate the effect of conversation on the control group’s female participants. There was a statistically significant increase in the discourse completion test scores from pretest \(M=5.78, SD=1.19\) to posttest \([M=6.11,\)
From the above results it could be argued that Iranian female EFL learners’ pragmatic competence improves when they are taught through conversation. To investigate whether there is any significant difference between the male and the female participants on the posttest, an independent-samples t-test was conducted as follows:

Table 6
Independent-samples t-test results to compare the mean scores of the male and female participants of the control group on the posttest

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>T</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-.528</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>.604</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Eta squared = \( .528^2/.528^2 + 19 = 0.01 \)

**Results:** As Tables 6 indicated, an independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the posttest scores for the male and female participants of the control group. There was not any significant difference in scores for the male participants \( (M=5.82, \text{SD}=1.04) \) and the female participant \( [M=6.11, \text{SD}=1.25; \ t(18) = -.528,\ p=.604] \). The magnitude of the differences in the means was small (eta squared=.01).

Therefore, the hypothesis is confirmed and:

There is not any significant difference between male and female learner’s pragmatic competence when they receive instruction through conversation and there is not any significant difference between male and female learner’s pragmatic competence they receive instruction through role play.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed at investigating the effects of role-play as a pragmatic development activity after the instruction on the development of male and female EFL learners’ pragmatic competence and its difference with the role-play before instruction since on the basis of Richards and Rodgers (1986) interactional view, role playing is considered as a technique which prepares the learners with conditions in which they can have interpersonal and social transactions in the classroom after the instruction and this activity should be very fruitful for learning pragmatics. Regarding the research question which focused on gender issues, no similar research study was found, yet some discussion over this factor is worth noting. The appearance of a gender dimension is significant for reflecting on concerns of validity of the study. The pure discrepancy between the boys’ argumentative pattern and the girls’ cumulative talk when being instructed through role play was consistent with the findings of the socio-cultural theory as in Mercer (2000) and Jerome and Algarra (2005). Such similar findings can be helpfully
assumed as a feature of the naturalistic dimension of role-play. For foreign language learners, the classroom might be the only available situation where they are able to try out what using the L2 feels like, and how more or less comfortable they are with various dimensions of L2 pragmatics. The sheltered environment of the L2 classroom will therefore prepare and uphold learners to communicate efficiently in L2. But more than that, by encouraging students to investigate and reflect their experiences, observations, and interpretations of L2 communicative practices and their own stances towards them, L2 teaching will expand its role from that of language instruction to that of language education.

References

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