An Investigation into the Effect of Authentic Materials on Improving Intermediate EFL Learners' Pragmatic Competence

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Abstract

The present study was an attempt to investigate the effect of authentic materials on improving intermediate EFL learners' pragmatic competence. To this end, 140 female Iranian EFL learners were originally employed out of which 60 participants were selected as a homogeneous sample based on their performance an OPT and then they were divided into equal groups; an experimental and a control group. Having received a diagnostic pragmatic test, the former group was exposed to authentic materials, while the latter one to conventional pedagogic materials. Afterwards, they received a posttest identical to the pretest; measuring pragmatic competence. The data analysis through an independent sample t-test revealed that the experimental group outperformed on the posttest of pragmatic competence. In other words, teaching authentic materials showed to have a significant effect on improving learners' pragmatic competence.

Keywords: authentic materials, pragmatic competence, EFL learners

INTRODUCTION

As a matter of fact, the process of learning a new language and being able to communicate with language is an achievement beyond memorizing vocabularies and becoming skilled at its grammatical structures. Knowledge of grammar and lexis is necessary and needed for successful language learning, but it appears to be insufficient for effective and successful communication. In order to be able to use foreign/second language efficiently and to acquire the capability to communicate effectively and positively, English language learners need to improve their communicative competence in all aspects of second language. In order to communicate with others effectively, L2 learners should be able to use language appropriately in context (Brown, 2007).

Pragmatic competence can be described as the ability to understand, construct and transfer meanings and it can also be accurate and appropriate for social situations in which communication takes place (Thomas, 1983; Richards & Schmidt, 2010). Adequate pragmatic competence can help language learners in achieving an effective communication in every context. According to Thomas (1983), pragmatics involve the study of how to interpret and use utterances and it depends on knowledge about the real world, how speakers use and comprehend speech acts and the relationship between the speaker and the listener which affects the structure of sentences.

In this regard, the pragmatic building blocks in the field of linguistics were laid by language philosophers and speech-act theorists such as Austin and Searle. Owing to the performative hypothesis proposed in 1930, Austin was able to show that people do not use language just to make statements about the world but they also use language to perform actions which affect or change the world in some way so pragmatics can be described as the study of language as it is used in daily communication (Thomas, 1995).

So far, the definition of pragmatics has been constantly improved and reformed. According to Yule (1996), it can be defined as the study of intended speaker meaning. Thomas (1983) defines pragmatic competence as "the ability to use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand language in context" (p. 94). Chomsky (1965) stated that pragmatic competence is the knowledge of foreign or second language learners about situations and accurate use of language in L2 culture. Consequently, pragmatic competence is all about the students' ability to match the appropriate linguistic action with appropriate social situation. Hence, to communicate with others effectively, EFL learners should develop their pragmatic awareness because according to Fernández Amaya (2008), "lack of pragmatic competence on the part of L2 students can lead to pragmatic failure and, more importantly, to a complete communication breakdown" (p. 11).

COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

Many different definitions have been proposed for pragmatic competence by several authorities including Hymes (1966) who reacted against Chomsky's competence and performance (Savignon, 1983). In general, communicative competence can be defined as the learner´s ability to apply and use grammatical rules, to form correct utterances and to know how to use these utterances appropriately. In other words, the basic idea of communicative competence remains the ability to use language appropriately, both receptively and productively, in real situations (Brown, 2007). Communicative competence involves the ability to use grammatical competence in a variety of communicative situations, thus bringing the sociolinguistic perspective into Chomsky's linguistic view of competence (Hymes, 1972). Savignon (1983) claimed that the development of the concept of communicative competence as it relates to language teaching can be traced back to two sources: one theoretical, and the other practical. Theoretical sources are related to psychology, linguistics, and communication theory and practical sources are related to pedagogical needs and concerns.

IMPORTANCE OF PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE (PC)

PC can be described as the ability to understand, construct and transfer meanings and it can also be accurate and appropriate for social situations in which communication takes place (Brown, 2007; Richards & Schmidt, 2010). Chomsky (1965) stated that pragmatic competence is the knowledge of foreign or second language learners about situations and accurate use of language in L2 culture. Consequently, pragmatic competence is all about the students' ability to match the appropriate linguistic action with appropriate social situation. It is the students' ability to understand and produce appropriate language speech acts such as refusal based on specific social and cultural situations. Accordingly, communicative competence is divided into four categories, namely, grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competences (Rose & Kasper, 2001). According to Brown (2007) and Canale and swain (1980), grammatical competence can be described as the grammatical knowledge of linguistic code features such as phonology, syntax and semantic.

Discourse competence can be defined as the knowledge of achieving coherence and cohesion in a spoken or written communication. Sociolinguistic competence can be defined as the knowledge of contextually appropriate language use. Strategic competence can be described as the knowledge of how to use communication strategies to handle breakdowns in communication and make communication more effective. In spite of what has been said, Bachman (1990) proposed different model of language competence encompassing grammatical competence as well as pragmatic competence as two major language competences. These are divided into three categories, namely organizational, grammatical, and textual competencies. According to Brown (2007) and Bachman (1990), organizational competence can be explained as the speakers' control of aspects of formal language. Grammatical competence consists of vocabulary, syntax morphology and phonology. Textual competence is critical in cohesion, coherence, rhetorical organization. And finally, pragmatic competence consists of sociolinguistic and illocutionary competence.

According to Kasper and Schmidt (1996), in order to be able to communicate more effectively is the main purpose of pragmatic competence. In order to have an acceptable and effective communication in a second language, it is needed not only to master basic linguistic elements, namely phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics but also the capability to use suitable expressions in appropriate situations. Based on the above mentioned explanations of pragmatic competence, it is true that many English learners have a good knowledge of grammatical structures and lexis but the learners come across serious difficulties when they engage in real communication because of pragmatic failure. The importance of pragmatic competence in the foreign and second language learning and acquisition is fairly clear because it goes beyond the domain of grammatical structures and lexis and is related to the learners' ability to communicate in second language communities (Brown, 2007; Richards & Schmidt, 2010).

DEVELOPMENT OF PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE

Omaggio Hadley (1993) states that one of the most important principles of communicative language knowledge or instruction is using authentic material in instruction. Authentic material can be defined as spoken or written language that has been produced in the course of real communication (Nunan, 1999). According to Kasper (1997), authentic second language input is essential for pragmatic learning, but it does not secure successful pragmatic development. Many researchers have stated that noticing or consciousness is a prerequisite for the acquisition of second language pragmatic features (Kasper & Schmidt, 1996 & Schmidt, 1990). According to Ellis (2003), noticing is a way through which input is integrated into the learner's developing system. Noticing is used to distinguish between implicit and explicit knowledge. The former refers to the knowledge of language that a speaker manifests in performance but has no awareness of and the latter refers to knowledge about language that speakers are aware of and, if asked, can verbalize. According to Doughty (2003), another difference between these two concepts i.e. implicit and explicit knowledge or teaching, is that when explicit teaching consists of directing learners' attention towards the target forms with the aim of discussing those forms, an implicit pedagogical approach aims to attract the learner's attention, avoiding any type of metalinguistic explanation and minimizing the interruption of the communicative situation. In order to promote pragmatic competence, language learners can develop their linguistic and communicative competence.

AUTHENTICITY

According to Rost (2002), authenticity is one of the terms which researchers talk about questionably. Kilickaya (2004) holds that authenticity has been put under deep discussion by many researchers. As a result, they came up with different definitions for this problematic term. Defining authenticity is a vital element for both materials designers and language teachers, who are willing to employ authenticity in language teaching in EFL classrooms. For many researchers, authenticity is very significant, because it prepares the learners for the real world situations in terms of using the target language. On the other hand, using less authentic materials with our learners, may lead to less practice in the real world. According to Hedge (2000), the notion of authenticity, came to the surface in association with communicative approach in language teaching in the 1970-s. Defining authenticity is not an easy matter. Therefore, there are various differences among writers, regarding the definition of this term. According to Tatsuki (2006) authenticity is taken as being synonymous with genuineness, realness, truthfulness, validity, reliability of materials.

Widdowson (1996) states that teaching "real English as it functions in contextually appropriate ways, needs to refer to how people who have the language as an L1 actually put it, to communicative use " (p.67). Furthermore, Dunlop (1981) states that since ability to read authentic materials has special significance for learners, teachers have to use more of this type of materials in the classrooms. Otte (2006) believes that learners need to "practice using authentic language themselves, in order to be better prepared to

deal with authentic language in the real world " (p.56). According to Brown and Eskenzai (2004), by using textbooks alone, learners will not be exposed to the real language, as it is used in the real world.

Definitions of Authentic Materials

Authentic material refers to those taken from real life sources and they are not designed for teaching and learning purposes. Wallace (1998) defines authentic texts as "real-life texts, not written for pedagogic processes" (p. 145). One of the main purposes of using authentic materials in the classroom is to "expose" students to as much real language as possible. The most common sources of authentic materials that can be used in the classroom are newspaper, magazine, songs, literature and materials from the internet. In the present study, authentic materials are those texts produced by native speakers for non-pedagogical purposes (Nunan, 1988). He defines authentic materials as the materials which have been produced for purposes other than to teach language. Jordan (1997) defines authentic texts as the ones which are not designed for pedagogical aims. Authentic material refers to those taken from real life sources and they are not designed for teaching and learning purposes. Wallace (1998) defines authentic texts as "real-life texts, not written for pedagogic processes" (p. 145). Jacobson, Degener, and Purcell-Gates (2003) sees authentic materials as printed materials, which are used in classrooms in the same way they would be used in real life. Stubbs (1996) defines authentic texts as actual, attested, and such that they have real authentic instances of use. According to Carter and Nunan (2001) authentic materials are "ordinary texts not produced specifically for language teaching purposes " (p. 68).

Authentic materials are texts produced by native speakers for a non-pedagogical purpose (Bacon & Finnemann, 1990). Since they are not designed for pedagogical purpose, commonly, they do not come from a course book. They are not systematically developed in stages for language learners. However, nowadays, there are many experts who prefer to use authentic materials in teaching and learning English, both written and spoken as an alternative material. A material is authentic when it contains authentic text (Kilickaya, 2004). According to Tomlinson (1998), an authentic text is a text which is not written or spoken for language teaching purposes. A newspaper article, a rock song, a novel, a radio interview and traditionally fairy story are examples of authentic texts. Therefore, we can see such texts from television, newspaper and magazine. In that mass media, information is spread widely from a place to many other places. In communicating in such media, people naturally use and apply their language as how they communicate and use their language in their daily life. It surely could be a perfect lab for a language learner. Nunan (1999) also defines authentic materials as spoken or written language data that have been produced in the course of genuine communication, and not specifically written for purposes of language teaching. Therefore, by using authentic materials, a teacher can bring the students the authentic data from real world context into classroom. They can practice reading authentic and genuine language which is used in real life as the language and the students themselves

really occur. For another purpose, the foreign language learners also can be introduced to the culture of the native people through the authentic materials.

Genhard (1996) sees authentic materials as a way to contextualize language learning. It means that authentic materials are also effective in providing the students with the context of every text. When they normally study the pedagogical materials, they tend to focus more on content and meaning rather than the context. On the other hand, authentic materials provide rich source of context in language instead of the language which are only provided by the teacher. Herrington and Oliver (2000) suggested a new pedagogical term, called authentic learning. This term is directly related to the students' real life and prepares them to face and deal with real world situations. According to Herod (2002), authentic learning materials and activities are designed to imitate the real world situations.

Types of Authentic Materials

Genhard (1996) classified authentic materials into three categories as follows:

- Authentic listening materials, such as radio news, cartoons, songs, etc.

- Authentic visual materials, such as street signs, magazines and newspapers pictures, post cards, etc.

- Authentic printed materials, such as sports reports, newspapers, restaurant menus, train tickets, etc.

Many studies (e.g., Marzban & Davaji, 2015; Mousavi, 2011; Ghaderpanahi**,** 2012) have focused on the authentic materials and their effects on different parts of English language but to the best researcher's knowledge, no research studies have been worked on the effect of authentic materials on improving pragmatic competence of language learners. In order to fill the gap, this study was conducted in order to explore investigate the effect of authentic materials on improving intermediate EFL learners' pragmatic competence. Accordingly, to achieve the mentioned purpose, the following research question was proposed:

RQ: Are authentic materials more significantly effective than pedagogic materials in improving EFL learners' pragmatic competence?

METHOD

Participants

The total population of this research was 140 Iranian EFL learners in Iran Language Institute in Bandar Abas, Iran. They were all female learners and varied in age from 11 to 18 years old. Out of the whole population, 60 learners were selected after the homogenization test as the main members of the current research.

Instrumentation

The instruments and materials used for the purpose of the present study were a version of Oxford Placement Test (2006), Discourse Completion Test to measure pragmatic competence before and after the treatment, authentic materials and pedagogic materials.Although, the MDCTs in this study were adapted from published articles in scholarly journals, the researchers measured Cronbach Alpha for ensuring stronger reliability of the tests. The reliability index reported for the pretest was 0.768 and for the posttest was 0.740.

Procedure

Based on quasi-experimental design, a homogeneous sample of 60 EFL learners were selct5ed based on their performance on OPT out of 140 ones. Then they received the Discourse Completion Test both prior to and after the treatment. Divided into two equal groups, the experimental group received authentic materials-based online covering reading passage, conversation, listening and grammar practices. On the contrary, the control group received pedagogic materials from the English course books such as *New Interchange1 or American English File 3*. The treatment lasted for 16 90-minute sessions.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

The pre-test and post-test scores of the experimental and control groups are shown respectively.

Table 1. Descriptive Data of the Pre-Test and Post-Test Scores of the Experimental and Control Groups

Max	Min	SD	M	N		G
14	5	2.82	8.40	30	Pre-test	Experimental
15	5	2.78	14.80	30	post-test	Experimental
15	5	3.41	7.80	30	Pre-test	Control
20	8	4.19	12.13	30	post-test	Control

Based on the results of table 1, it is observed that the mean scores of the experimental group had significant increase in post-test in comparison with pre-test stage. Moreover, the mean scores of control group had substantial increase in post-test in comparison with pre-test stage. Furthermore, it was observed that mean scores of the experimental group was greater than the mean scores of control group in post-test stage. In other words, teaching authentic materials to the experimental group would be effective in improving intermediate EFL learners' pragmatic competence.

Table 2. Paired Samples Test

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	P (2-tailed)
				Lower	Upper			
Post Exp Pre Exp	6.4000	1.2984	.3352	5.6810	7.1190	19.091	14	.000
Post Con Pre Con	.5333	1.1255	.2906	-.0899	1.1566	1.835	14	.088

According to the results of Table 2, there was a significant difference between the pre-test and the post-test of the experimental group (t (14) = 19.091, P<0.05). On the other hand, there was no significant difference between the pre-test and the post-test of control group (t (14) = 1.835, P>0.05).

Table 3. Independent Samples Test in the Pre-test

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means							
F	P.	T	df	P. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
							Lower	Upper	
Equal variances assumed	.156 .696	-.462	28	.648	-.46667	1.01074	-2.53707	1.60373	
Equal variances not assumed		-.462	27.954	.648	-.46667	1.01074	-2.53722	1.60388	

With respect to the results of Levene's test for equality of variances in Table 3, the data of the first row is reported (Levene's F = .156, P>0.05. Therefore, there was no significant difference between the pre-test scores of the experimental and the control groups (t (28) = -.462, P>0.05).

Table 4. Independent Samples Test in the Post-test

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means							
F	P.	T	df	P. (2-tailed)	MD	SED	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
							Lower	Upper	
Equal variances assumed	.285 .597	-6.130	28	.000	-6.33333	1.03310	-8.44955	-4.21712	
Equal variances not assumed		-6.130	27.970	.000	-6.33333	1.03310	-8.44965	-4.21702	

With regard to the results of Levene's test for equality of variances in Table 3, the data of the first row is reported (Levene's F = .285, P>0.05). Therefore, there was a significant difference between the post-test scores of the experimental and the control groups (t (28) = -6.130, P<0.05, R=0.87). Based on the results, the null hypothesis of the present study was rejected. In other words, authentic materials had significant effect on improving intermediate EFL learners' pragmatic competence.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The main purpose of the present study was to investigate the effect of authentic materials on improving intermediate EFL learners' pragmatic competence. The research question of this study inquired whether authentic materials had any significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' pragmatic competence. The data analysis and the results of this research revealed that the answer the question was positive. In fact, those EFL learners who were taught English through authentic materials outperformed those learners who were taught the language through pedagogic materials.

The results of this study are in line with Marzban and Davaji (2015) who conducted a research study to investigate the effect of authentic texts on motivation and reading comprehension of EFL students at intermediate level of proficiency. After administration the research, they concluded that "reading authentic texts has positive effect on the reading comprehension of intermediate students. Conducting the motivation questionnaire on the authentic group showed positive changes on four domains of motivation " (p. 85).

Similarly, Habouti, Mohammad, Mahmoodi and Ziaei (2015) have investigated the effect of authentic listening materials on EFL learners' listening comprehension. The results showed that there were significant differences among EFL learners in relation to their listening comprehension ability since the authentic materials were while learning.

In another research, Alijani, Maghsoudi, and Madani (2014) have examined the influences of authentic materials on listening ability of sixty female language learners. To this aim, sixty Iranian EFL learners in upper-intermediate level who studied in two institutes in Esfahan were participated to this study. "At the end of the study it was concluded that using authentic materials in language classes would be more fruitful for EFL learners than non-authentic ones. Of course, based on the advantages of authentic materials, we deduced they are useful and applicable. Anderson and Lynch (1988) believed that if students want to a successful listener in real life should be more active in listening process. As you know the primary reason for learning a new language is to become closer to its culture and people " (p.156).

Likewise, Barekat and Nobakhti (2014) have conducted a research study to examine the effect of authentic and inauthentic materials in cultural awareness training on the listening comprehension ability of EFL learners. The results revealed that the listening ability of learners in the experimental group had improved better than the learners in

the control group. This study may have implications for improving EFL learners' listening ability.

Finally, Mousavi (2010) investigated the impact of the authentic versus non-authentic listening materials on the listening comprehension of Iranian EFL subjects. The results revealed that: a) after treatment and post-test, the subjects who were instructed on the basis of authentic radio-tapes had gained a higher degree of listening comprehension and proficiency than non-authentic groups, b) no statistically significant gender disparity was observed apropos of the application of authentic or non-authentic listening materials. Given the results of this experiment, the tentative extrapolations could be that some of the assumptions about the futility of teaching authentic listening materials should be rigorously re-examined; that is the use of aural authentic listening materials in EFL classroom improve learners listening comprehension, and have a positive effect on EFL learners.

The findings of the present study may be beneficial for materials and curriculum developers in designing and preparing authentic materials that are more adaptable with those communicative and learner-centered approaches in order to help EFL/ESL learners to use language communicatively. Nowadays, the area of communicative and pragmatic competence is very important particularly in the present condition of requirement of English in Iran so, changes from the traditional teaching methods which use non-authentic based materials to novel and communicative teaching methods which uses authentic materials are required to make sure learners' engagement in pragmatic competence process. Improving pragmatic competence of language learners is very important for academic education. Therefore, EFL/ESL teachers should pay special attention to this area in their teaching and enhance their learners' ability in pragmatic competence in order to reduce their pragmatic failure.

This study was designed to investigate the effect of authentic materials on improving the learners' pragmatic competence. In view of that, future research could investigate the effectiveness of authentic materials to improve other main and sub-skills of the Iranian learners such as reading, writing and listening. It was mentioned that this research studied female intermediate learners. Hence, future researches could study male EFL learners. Because of the limitation of the present study, this study was conducted with a limited number of EFL learners. Thus, future researchers could be conducted on large number of the learners.

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