

The Effect of Natural and Classroom Settings on Iranian Learners' Pragmatic Competence: Length of Residence Versus Intervention

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Abstract

The present investigation sought to comparatively explore the effect of length of residence (LOR) as well as EFL instruction on the pragmatic competence of Iranian learners. The participants were 45 EFL learners in Iran and 45 learners in Canada selected based on snowball sampling and each group was divided into three sub-groups based on the years of learning English in an EFL or a natural setting. The instrument used to collect data was a Pragmatic Test developed by Roever (2006) consisting of three subtests i.e. implicature, routines, and speech act sections, each containing 12 items. Initially, the participants in classroom settings in Iran were asked to complete the Pragmatic Test. As for the learners in the natural setting, the participants were requested to complete the test which was sent to them through social networks such as instagram, and submit it. The results of independent samples t-test and ANOVA indicated those residing in Canada were more competent in terms of pragmatic competence; however, the length of residence in Canada and also years of classroom experience did not have any significant effect on learners' pragmatic competence. The findings of the current study have implications for material developers, syllabus designers, and EFL teachers.

Keywords: EFL Setting, Natural setting, Pragmatic Competence.

1. Introduction

According to Murray (2010), the knowledge of the relationship between form and context which enables one to appropriately convey and interpret intended meaning correctly is called Pragmatic competence. Therefore, having such a pragmatic competence needs people to be able to use numerous linguistic methods correctly while involving in interaction in special social and cultural situations (Uo-Juan & Martinez-Flor, 2008). Acquiring this level of competence is very difficult for learners mainly in EFL contexts. Some researchers such as (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Boxer & Pickering, 1995; Bouton, 1996; Kasper, 1997) have stated that even students with high level of grammatical ability cannot be sure that they can obtain a pragmatic competence similar to native speakers. Moreover, Bardovi-Harlig (2001) states that even learners at the advanced level who are proficient in grammar may

use language incorrectly, presenting deviations from target-language pragmatic conventions.

Moreover, numerous research (e.g. Schauer, 2006; Tagashira, Yamato, & Isoda, 2011) demonstrated that by studying the target language in a context where the second language is available, the learning process becomes easier. Until now, more amount of awareness among learners in natural setting compared with EFL students is indicated by the most studies (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig & Dornyei, 1998; Schauer, 2006; Tagashira, Yamato, & Isoda, 2011), hence, according to these studies, the target language context left a positive effect on the proper use of sociopragmatics. In fact, it is often mentioned that students in the target society constantly receive more pragmatic input through their daily activities if they are motivated to communicate with the TL community and have positive social interactions. In contrast, for EFL learners, the classroom provides a setting for pragmatic instructions since the teachers are able to model and determine the way to do particular tasks based on several speech acts (Tagashira, Yamato, & Isoda, 2011).

According to the previous discussion, the present study addressed the main problem whether pragmatic competence of the learners in an EFL context is meaningfully different from the pragmatic competence being improved in a regular learning background. In addition, in developing pragmatic competence, the length of time as a potential element will be studied in the current research.

1.1 Research Questions and Hypotheses

The present study seeks to find reasonable answers to the following questions:

Question 1: Is there any significant difference between natural and classroom settings in developing Iranian learners' pragmatic competence?

Question 2: Is there any significant difference in the pragmatic development of learners with different length of residence in a natural environment?

Question 3: Is there any significant difference in the pragmatic development of learners with different years of EFL instruction in classroom settings?

In line with the research questions the following null hypotheses are stated:

H0₁: There is not any significant difference between natural and classroom settings in developing Iranian learners' pragmatic competence.

H0₂: There is not any significant difference in the pragmatic development of learners with different length of residence in a natural environment.

H0₃: There is not any significant difference in the pragmatic development of learners with different years of EFL instructions in classroom settings.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

Overall, there were two main groups and 6 sub-groups of participants in the present study. As for the main groups, the researcher found 45 Iranian EFL learners and 45 learners in a natural language setting (Canada), who did not attend any ESL classes, based on snowball sampling. Participants in each group were then divided into three sub-groups as shown in Table-1. The rationale behind selecting the sub-groups was to explore the effect of time-length on the pragmatic competence of the participants. As it can be noticed there is an interval of two years between the main time length categories.

Table 2.1 *Schematic Representation of the Participants*

Main Group One 45 Participants EFL	Main Group Two 45 Participants Natural Setting
Sub-group 1: 15 Members with fewer than three years of EFL experience.	Sub-group 1: 15 Members with fewer than three years of natural setting learning experience.
Sub-group 2: 15 Members with between 5 to 8 years of EFL experience.	Sub-group 2: 15 Members with between 5 to 8 years of natural setting learning experience.
Sub-group 3: 15 Members with more than 10 years of EFL experience.	Sub-group 3: 15 Members with more than 10 years of natural setting learning experience.

2.2 Instruments

The instrument which was used for the purpose of this study included a Pragmatic Test. The test was originally developed by Roever (2006). The construct validity of the test was established by comparing the results of the administration of this questionnaire with the findings of previous studies (Roever, 2006). Three indicators of reliability are also reported for this questionnaire i.e. Cronbach's alpha, the standard error, and KR-21 in previous studies. The total Cronbach's Alpha, standard error and inter-rater reliability indices calculated for the instrument are .91, 7.31 and .96, respectively (Roever, 2006).

The instrument consists of three subtests, each containing 12 items: an implicature section, a routines section, and a speech act section. The implicature section contains items which test the comprehension of English implicature

The routines section consists strongly situationally bound expressions (meal, telephone), as well as more functional routines (greetings, introductions, second pair parts) (Roever, 2006). The speech act section contains short-answer items, presented as discourse completion tasks with rejoinders with each four items testing each of the 3 speech acts of request, apology, and refusal (Roever, 2006).

2.3 Procedure

Initially, based on snowball sampling procedure 45 Iranian EFL learners in Iran and 45 Iranians working in Canada were selected. The main instrument which

was used for the purpose of this study was a Pragmatics Test originally developed by Roever (2006). The participants in classroom setting in Iran were asked to complete the Pragmatic Test in about 45 minutes. As for the learners in the natural learning setting, the test was designed as an online form and sent to the participants by a direct link through online social networks such as Instagram. The participants were requested to complete the test, and submit it. The responses were then automatically sent to the researchers Email.

During the process of data collection, care was taken to consider the ethical issues of the research. For example, the students' participation in the research was voluntary. Moreover, they were assured of the confidentiality of the information they provided. Also, they were informed that the collected data were used for research purposes only.

3. Results

Before starting the main statistical analyses, it was required to check the normality of all the six sets of data. Table 2 shows the results of Kolmogorov Smirnov test of normality on six sets of data.

Table 3.1 *Results of Tests of Normality on Data*

Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			
	Statistic	df	Sig.
Iran 1	.171	15	.200
Iran 2	.131	15	.200
Iran 3	.154	15	.200
Canada 1	.106	15	.200
Canada 2	.210	15	.074
Canada 3	.218	15	.052

Table 3.1 indicates that all the significant levels for the six sets of scores are greater than the confidence interval of 0.05. Accordingly, all the data sets enjoy normal distribution.

3.1 Investigating the First Research Question

Initially, in order to explore any significant difference between natural and classroom settings in developing Iranian learners' pragmatic competence, pragmatic scores of the two main groups, namely Iranian and Canadian regardless of their years of experiences or length of residence, were compared. Table 3.2 shows and compares the mean scores of the two main groups of the study.

Table 3.2 *Descriptive Statistics of Iranian and Canadian Groups*

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
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Prag	Iranians	45	23.3778	5.57710	.83138
matic scores	Canadians	45	31.7556	2.92447	.43595

The Iranian group had a mean score of 23.37 (SD=5.57) and the Canadian group a mean score of 31.75 (SD=2.93). This means that totally those who spent some time in Canada had better pragmatic development.

The difference between Iranians and Canadians in terms of pragmatic scores was investigated through statistical test of independent samples t-test.

Table 3.3 *The Result of Independent Samples t-test between Iranians and Canadians*

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances					
		F	Sig.	f	Sig. (2- tailed)
Pragmatic scores	Equal variances assumed	19.734	.000	8.924	.000
	Equal variances not assumed			8.924	6.496 .000

As Table 3.3 indicates, the significant difference between the groups was established, and it was concluded that Canadians had better pragmatic development than Iranians. Based on the obtained results, the null hypothesis was rejected, indicating that there is a significant difference between natural and classroom settings in developing Iranian learners' pragmatic competence.

Table 3.4 compares the Iranian and Canadian subgroups in terms of pragmatic scores.

Table 3.4 *Descriptive Statistics of Iranian and Canadian Subgroups*

	Subgroups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Less than three years	Iranian	15	21.4000	4.46894	1.15388
	Canadian	15	31.2000	3.42679	.88479
Between 5 to 8 years	Iranian	15	24.3333	5.13624	1.32617
	Canadian	15	32.0667	1.90738	.49248
10 years and above	Iranian	15	24.4000	6.71672	1.73425
	Canadian	15	32.0000	3.31662	.85635

As seen in Table 3.4, Canadians have higher mean scores than Iranians in all the subgroups. In order to make sure that such differences in pragmatic score are significant, independent samples t-test was run.

Table 3.5 *Results of Independent Samples t-test between Iranians and Canadians in Each Subgroup*

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances							Sig. (2-tailed)
			F	Sig.	t	df	
Less than three years	Equal variances assumed		1.670	.207	-6.740	28	.000
	Equal variances not assumed				-6.740	26.234	.000
Between 5 to 8 years	Equal variances assumed		11.900	.002	-5.467	28	.000
	Equal variances not assumed				-5.467	17.789	.000
10 years and above	Equal variances assumed		6.872	.014	-3.929	28	.001
	Equal variances not assumed				-3.929	20.444	.001

According to the result of t-test there was a significant difference between Iranians and Canadians in all the subgroups.

3.2 Investigating the Second Research Question

In order to find the answer to this research question, it was needed to check the pragmatic progress of those who had been in an English speaking environment over the time. Therefore, pragmatic scores of the subgroups of Canadians were compared and contrasted. Table 7 shows the mean scores and standard deviations of Canadian subgroups.

Table 3.6 *Descriptive Statistics of Canadian Subgroups*

Years of Residence	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	Minimum	Maximum
Less than three years	15	31.2000	3.42679	.88479	25.00	36.00
Between five to eight years	15	32.0667	1.90738	.49248	29.00	36.00
Above 10 years	15	32.0000	3.31662	.85635	24.00	35.00
Total	45	31.7556	2.92447	.43595	24.00	36.00

Apparently, there is not much difference between the subgroups in terms of pragmatic scores indicating that length of residence could not elevate people's pragmatic competence dramatically

To make sure about any significant difference between the Canadian subgroups, one-way ANOVA was run on the pragmatic scores.

Table 3.7 *Results of ANOVA between the Canadian Subgroups.*

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Levene F	Sig.
Between Groups	6.978	2	3.489	.397	.675	2.315	.111
Within Groups	369.333	42	8.794				
Total	376.311	44					

As Table 3.7 reveals, there were no significant differences between the three subgroups of the study in terms of pragmatic scores. Accordingly, it can be concluded that length of residence had no significant effect on their pragmatic development.

1.2 Investigating the Third Research Question

The purpose of the third research question was to find out if the length of formal instruction or classroom experience affects the pragmatic competence of Iranian EFL learners. The following Table displays the pragmatic scores of the Iranian groups.

Table 3.8 *Descriptive Statistics of Iranian Subgroups*

Years of Experience	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	Minimum	Maximum
Less than three years	15	21.4000	4.46894	1.15388	15.00	29.00
Between 5 to 8 years	15	24.3333	5.13624	1.32617	15.00	33.00
More than 10 years	15	24.4000	6.71672	1.73425	12.00	36.00
Total	45	23.3778	5.57710	.83138	12.00	36.00

As Table 3.8 indicates, not much difference is detected between the subgroups. To make sure about any significant difference between the Iranian subgroups, one-way ANOVA was run.

Table 3.9 *Results of ANOVA between the Iranian Subgroups*

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Levene F	Sig.
Between Groups	88.044	2	44.022	1.444	.247	1.372	.265
Within Groups	1280.533	42	30.489				
Total	1368.578	44					

Accordingly, it was concluded that years of classroom experience did not have any significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' pragmatic competence.

4. Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to explore the effect of length of residence on pragmatic competence of language learners. To this end, pragmatic competence of Iranian EFL learners and pragmatic competence of language learners residing in Canada was measured and compared. Moreover, the participants' length of stay in Canada and the participants' years of learning English in Iran were taken into account which led to three subgroups of participants in Canada and three subgroups of participants in Iran. Through a pragmatic test, participants' pragmatic knowledge was measured and analyzed.

4.1 Discussion of the First Research Question

According to the results, those who resided in Canada had significantly better pragmatic knowledge than those who were learning English in language classes in Iran. This result can be explained from various points of view such as the benefits of a richer second language context, more pragmatic interaction with native speakers, and the need of achieving language competence for those learning English in the target language context.

4.2 Discussion of the Second Research Question

Another finding of the study was that no significant difference was found between people with different lengths of residence in Canada in terms of pragmatic competence. Several explanations could be put forward for this finding. First of all, it can be argued that language learners who spent the very first years of their residence in Canada had acquired the necessary pragmatic competence, and accordingly they did not need to learn more pragmatic knowledge. In other words, they already learned enough pragmatic knowledge before reaching the third, fourth, fifth, etc. years of their stay in Canada. Another speculation is that they may have learned more pragmatic nuances that could not be measured by the current measurement of pragmatic competence used in the present study. For instance, a person who has resided in Canada may have learned about such pragmatic knowledge that he can understand more advanced genre of speech, such as political negotiations and debates, which could not be well captured by the current measure of pragmatic competence.

In support of this finding, outcomes of studies by Niezgoda and Rover (2001) and Taguchi (2008) also indicated that living in the TL setting with exposure to authentic feedback could not necessarily be of a better help for pragmatic competence.

4.3 Discussion of the Third Research Question

The third research question explored the difference in pragmatic development of Iranians who learned English in classroom setting over time. Results showed that no significant differences existed between Iranians with various years of English learning. Current literature, suggests that explicit instruction is necessary for L2

pragmatic development (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1990; Olshtain & Blum-Kulka, 1985) which is in contrast to what was found in the current study. Bardovi-Harlig (2001) argued that many aspects of L2 pragmatic must be learned with the help of direct instruction and many empirical studies have pointed to the positive effect of instruction on L2 pragmatic development (Rueda, 2006). Accordingly, it seems that some reasons rather than formal education and classroom instruction are responsible for lack of significant progress in L2 pragmatic competence among Iranian EFL learners.

5. Conclusion

Based on the results of the study, living in a target language community greatly affects the pragmatic competence of language learners which emphasizes the crucial role of input in language learning. These findings have important implications for language teachers, material developers, syllabus designers, and policy makers. The results of the study suggest the enrichment of language input in classroom setting in the way that second language learners receive. This enrichment can be accomplished through providing more authentic input, the use of real life situations in classrooms, the use of interactional patterns similar to those of native speakers and second language learners, etc.

Moreover, material developers need to improve the quality of textbooks by using more real life activates and incorporating authentic input. In the same vein, syllabus designers should think of lesson plans that make use of more authentic and rich input.

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