ความตระหนักเชิงอภิวัจนปฏิบัติศาสตร์ของผู้เรียนชาวไทยที่เรียน
ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ
METAPRAGMATIC AWARENESS OF THAI EFL LEARNERS

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Abstract

This study investigated Thai EFL learners' levels of metapragmatic awareness with an aim to assess the metapragmatic awareness of Thai EFL learners who had different levels of English language proficiency and experience. The participants in this study were four groups of Thai EFL learners whose levels of English language proficiency and experience differed. The research tool used was a pragmatic judgment task, consisting of twelve situations where apologies were provided for the participants to judge their appropriateness. It was found that different levels of metapragmatic awareness could be observed among the four groups of Thai EFL learners. The Thai EFL learners with high English proficiency and experience demonstrated the highest level of metapragmatic awareness. Moreover, those with high English proficiency and low experience exhibited the higher level of metapragmatic awareness than those with low English proficiency and high experience. The findings suggest that (1) the high level of English proficiency or the high level of English experience alone is not sufficient for enhancing metapragmatic awareness; and (2) English proficiency and experience are important factors in developing metapragmatic awareness among the English language learners.

Keywords: Metapragmatic awareness; Interlanguage pragmatics; Apologies; EFL learners;
Pragmatic judgment

บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้ศึกษาระดับความตระหนักเชิงอภิวัจนปฏิบัติศาสตร์ของผู้เรียนชาวไทยที่เรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ ซึ่งมีระดับความสามารถและประสบการณ์ภาษาอังกฤษที่แตกต่างกัน กลุ่มตัวอย่างประกอบด้วยผู้เรียนชาวไทยที่มีระดับความสามารถและประสบการณ์ภาษาอังกฤษในระดับที่ต่างกันจำนวน 4 กลุ่ม เครื่องมือวิจัยที่ใช้วัดระดับความตระหนักเชิงอภิวัจนปฏิบัติศาสตร์คือ แบบสอบถามการตัดสินความเหมาะสมทางวัจนปฏิบัติศาสตร์ (Pragmatic judgment task) ซึ่งประกอบด้วย 12 สถานการณ์ที่กลุ่มตัวอย่างต้องตัดสินว่าคำขอโทษในแต่ละสถานการณ์เหมาะสมหรือไม่ ผลการวิจัยพบว่ากลุ่มตัวอย่างทั้ง 4 กลุ่มมีระดับความตระหนักเชิงอภิวัจนปฏิบัติศาสตร์ที่แตกต่างกัน กลุ่มตัวอย่างที่มีระดับความสามารถและประสบการณ์ภาษาอังกฤษสูงมีระดับความตระหนักเชิงอภิวัจนปฏิบัติศาสตร์สูงที่สุด นอกจากนี้ยังพบว่ากลุ่มตัวอย่างที่มีความสามารถทางภาษาอังกฤษสูงแต่มีประสบการณ์ภาษาอังกฤษต่ำยังคงมีระดับความตระหนักเชิงอภิวัจนปฏิบัติศาสตร์สูงกว่ากลุ่มตัวอย่างที่มีความสามารถทางภาษาอังกฤษต่ำแต่ประสบการณ์ภาษาอังกฤษสูง ผลการวิจัยชี้ให้เห็นว่า (1) ระดับความสามารถทางภาษาอังกฤษสูง หรือระดับประสบการณ์ภาษาอังกฤษสูงเพียงอย่างเดียวไม่เพียงพอสำหรับการพัฒนาความตระหนักเชิงอภิวัจนปฏิบัติศาสตร์ และ (2) ทั้งความสามารถและประสบการณ์ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นสองปัจจัยสำคัญในการพัฒนาความตระหนักเชิงอภิวัจนปฏิบัติศาสตร์ในหมู่ผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษ

1. Introduction

When compared to linguistic realizations and pragmatic transfer, metapragmatic awareness has received less attention from researchers in the field of interlanguage pragmatics. To date, few studies investigate metapragmatic awareness of language learners (e.g. Olshtain and Blum-kulka, 1985 [1]; Bardovi-Harlig and Dornyei, 1998 [2]; and Niezgoda and Roever, 2001[3]). Moreover, to the best of my knowledge, there is only one study (Nipaspong, 2011)[4] that assesses metapragmatic awareness of Thai EFL learners. It is also found that previous studies on metapragmatic awareness rarely took the level of experience in the target language into consideration. This reveals the research gap that needs to be filled. This study attempted to bridge the research gap by investigating the metapragmatic awareness of Thai EFL learners who had different levels of English language proficiency and experience. The following sub-sections present a review of literature: theoretical background and related studies.

1.1 Theoretical background

This section provides a theoretical background of the present study, which includes interlanguage pragmatics and metapragmatic awareness.

1.1.1 Interlanguage pragmatics

According to Kasper and Blum-kulka (1993) [5], Interlanguage Pragmatics (ILP) is the branch of both second language acquisition research and pragmatics, focusing on the development of pragmatic competence of the language learner along with their development of linguistic knowledge of the second or a foreign language as well as on the use of language in the society. Boxer (2002) [6] views ILP as part of Applied Linguistics as "it assumes that the nonnative speaker (NNS) is progressing along an IL continuum toward some target language norm" and "it is the task of the language learner or newcomer to acquire the norms of the host community" (p. 150-151).

Kasper and Blum-kulka (1993) [5] introduced the domains of ILP study which include (1) pragmatic comprehension; (2) production of linguistic action; (3) development of pragmatic; (4) communicative effect; and (5) pragmatic transfer. This study investigated the Thai EFL learners' pragmatic comprehension of illocutionary force in the speech act of apologies.

1.1.2 Metapragmatic awareness

Metapragmatic awareness is "the ability to develop a conscious understanding of pragmatic aspects, which include rules that represent, organize and regulate the use of speech itself in all the communicative aspects of language" (Isarankura, 2008, p. 63) [7]. According to Kasper and Dahl (1991) [8], such awareness may help "explain or predict the values obtained for the observed speech act realization patterns" (p.24).

According to Kasper and Dahl (1991) [8], assessing the metapragmatic awareness of the non-native speakers is one way to investigate the language learners' pragmatic comprehension. By using a pragmatic judgement task, the participants are required to make judgments of the given responses to some situations in terms of appropriateness with regards to situational and/or social variables. This study applied Kasper and Dahl's methodology to investigate the Thai EFL learners' metapragmatic awareness via their appropriateness judgments of apologies offered in university contexts.

1.2 Related studies

This section provides a review on some previous studies on metapragmatic awareness in the domain of interlanguage pragmatics; that is, they investigated the language learners' metapragmatic awareness in the target language.

Bardovi-Harlig and Dornyei (1998) [2] investigated Hungarian EFL and ESL learners' recognitions of grammatical errors and pragmatic infelicities, focusing on four speech acts: apologies, refusals, requests, and suggestions. The subjects were asked to rate any grammatical errors or pragmatic infelicities. They found that the ESL group was able to identify more pragmatic infelicities and rated such infelicities more serious than grammatical errors. The EFL group, in contrast, was more aware of grammatical errors.

Niezgoda and Roever (2001) [3] conducted a study with Czech EFL learners and Czech ESL learners in the U.S. using the same research instruments. Their findings revealed that the EFL group outperformed the ESL group in pragmatic infelicity recognition and rated the severity of both grammatical and pragmatic errors higher than the ESL group. Such findings contradict those of Bardovi-Harlig and Dornyei. The similarity found in both studies was that the ESL groups in both studies agreed that pragmatic infelicities are more noticeable than grammatical errors.

Matsumura (2003) [9] examined the effect of English proficiency and exposure to English on Japanese ESL learners' perception of pragmatic appropriateness in situations involving giving advice. The subjects were those who stayed in Canada for eight months in an exchange program. The findings indicated that when staying in the target country, the amount of exposure helped promote the learners' pragmatic development more than the level of proficiency.

Garcia (2004) [10] conducted a study to investigate pragmatic awareness among non-native English speakers of high and low English proficiency levels, using a multiple-choice questionnaire which tests the subjects' ability to recognize certain types of speech acts (requests, corrections, suggestions and offers). The findings indicated that pragmatic awareness of the non-native English speakers with high proficiency were similar to that of the native speakers of English. The low proficiency non-native English speakers only relied on their current linguistic knowledge, resulting in their low pragmatic awareness.

Shauer (2006) [11] examined pragmatic awareness among German ESL and EFL learners using a video-questionnaire instrument and post hoc interview. It is found that the German ESL group who spent one academic year in the UK displayed higher degree of pragmatic awareness than the German EFL group as they could identify more pragmatic errors. The researcher highlighted the importance of the L2 environment in enhancing language learners' pragmatic awareness and the length of stay in L2 environment correlated with the learners' increasing pragmatic awareness.

2. Objective

The present study's main objective was to assess the metapragmatic awareness of Thai EFL learners who had different levels of English language proficiency and experience.

3. Scope of the study

The participants in this study were second-year university students from the Faculty of Engineering and the Faculty of Science, consisting of 10 Thai learners of English with high English language proficiency and high English language experience (HH), 10 Thai learners of English with high English language proficiency and low English language experience (HL), 10 Thai learners of English with low English language proficiency and high English language experience (LH); and 10 Thai learners of English with low English language proficiency and experience (LL).

4. Research methodology

This section provides some details on the study's research methodology, including participants, research instrument, and data collection and analysis.

4.1 Participants

The participants in this study consisted of four groups of Thai EFL university students whose levels of English language proficiency and experience differed. Their levels of English language proficiency were measured using a proficiency test, which helped distinguish the participants into the high proficiency and low proficiency groups. Then, the participants were further divided into two more groups based on their levels of English language experience, using an English language experience questionnaire (adapted from Modehiran, 2005) [12]. To conclude, the participants in this study were 1) ten Thai EFL learners with high English language proficiency and experience (HH); 2) ten Thai EFL learners with high English language proficiency but low English language experience (HL); 3) ten Thai EFL learners with low English language proficiency but high English language experience (LH); and 4) ten Thai EFL learners with low English language proficiency and experience.

4.2 Research instrument

After dividing the participants into four groups according to their levels of English language proficiency and experience, they were asked to complete a pragmatic judgment task, the study's research instrument consisting of twelve situations in university contexts requiring apologies with an apology offering provided for each situation (see Appendix). The participants were asked to (1) evaluate the provided apology offerings based on their appropriateness to the given contexts; (2) provide justifications for their appropriateness judgments; and (3) give alternatives for the apology offerings they considered inappropriate. The time allotment for completing the task was 20 minutes.

4.3 Data analysis

Following the data collection, all of the responses were coded and categorized under the adapted categories previously employed by Safont Jorda (2003) [13]. The appropriateness judgment was categorized as follows:

1. *Correct judgment*: the subjects can correctly indicate the appropriateness of the provided apology in each situation;

2. *Incorrect judgment*: the subjects cannot make correct judgment on the appropriateness of each provided apology.

The provided justification was categorized as follows:

1. *Justification not related to politeness*: the justifications which are related to grammatical aspects and/or sentence structures of apology offerings; and

2. *Justification related to politeness*: the justifications related to the situational variables (i.e. social distance, relative power and severity of the offence) which "denote pragmatic awareness" (p. 55).

The provided alternatives were categorized as follows:

1. *Inappropriate alternatives*: the alternatives which are considered inappropriate for the given contexts; and

2. *Appropriate alternatives*: the alternatives which are considered appropriate for the given contexts

5. Results

The findings are presented in three sections as follows: (5.1) appropriateness judgments; (5.2) provided justifications; and (5.3) provided alternatives.

5.1 Appropriateness judgments

The results of Thai EFL learners' appropriateness judgments of apology offerings are presented in the following table.

Table 1 Frequencies and percentages of appropriateness judgments

	Correct		Incorrect	
	N	%	N	%
HH	95	79.16	24	20
HL	91	75.83	28	23.33
LH	82	68.33	35	29.16
LL	72	60	46	38.33

Out of 120 apology offerings (12 apology offerings judged by ten subjects per group) to be judged, the HH could make the most correct appropriate judgments of apology offerings, followed by the HL, LH and LL, respectively. Regarding incorrect judgments, it was the LL group who made the most incorrect judgments while the HH made the least. The results revealed that, as expected, the learners with higher levels of English language proficiency were better at evaluating apology offering appropriateness than those with lower levels of English language proficiency. In terms of English language experience, the difference between the HL and LH's appropriateness judgments seemed to suggest that having only high levels of English language experience is inadequate for pragmatic perception.

5.2 Provided justifications

The quantity of the Thai EFL learners' provided justifications for their appropriateness judgments is illustrated first. Table 2 presents the number of justifications provided by all four groups of Thai EFL learners.

Table 2 Frequencies and percentages of provided justifications

	Justifications			
	Politeness-related		Not politeness-related	
	N	%	N	%
HH	30	31.58	65	68.42
HL	20	22.47	69	77.53
LH	6	11.11	48	88.88
LL	4	6.35	59	93.65

It can be seen that the HH were able to provide more politeness-related justifications for their judgments, followed by the HL, LH and LL, respectively. The results seemed to show that having high levels of English language proficiency and experience enabled the HH to be aware of the situational variables and to provide more justifications related to politeness than other groups of Thai EFL learners could. Apart from that, it was found that the LH provided less politeness-related justifications than the HL. The results seemed to suggest that having high levels English language experience may not be sufficient for promoting the awareness of situational variables.

The HH's politeness-related justifications indicated the awareness of all situational variables: social distance (D), relative power (P) and severity of the offence (R) as seen in the following politeness-related justifications.

HH8: This offence is extremely severe *(R). It is inappropriate to say this to* your classmate *(P).*

HH2: Since the student and the other party are in the same level *(P), they do not need to be too polite. However, they should not use too many colloquial expressions because they are* not familiar with each other (D).

For the HL, who also displayed relatively high awareness of the situational variables via their politeness-related justifications, two variables – distance and power, were found, as seen in the following examples.

HL2: It is appropriate given the professor's higher status. *(P)*

HL6: The student is familiar with the professor. *(D)*

From the politeness-related justifications given by the LH, only the justification provided by the LH6 showed the subject's awareness of the severity of the offence. Other than that, the LH's awareness of situational variables appeared to concern mainly about the social distance.

LH5: Appropriate for a friend. *(D)*

LH6: This is ok for a classmate *(D). And it is* not serious *(R).*

The LL provided the least politeness-related justification when compared to the other groups of Thai EFL learners.

LL9: Appropriate for a classmate *(D) and better than using formal forms.*

LL9: It is appropriate because the other party is a close friend. *(D)*

It can be seen that the LL subject was aware of the distance between the offended party and the speaker. Other variables were not mentioned in their justifications.

5.3 Provided alternatives

The Thai EFL learners' number of provided alternatives is presented in the following table.

Table 3 Frequencies and percentages of provided alternatives

	Alternatives			
	Appropriate		Inappropriate	
	N	%	N	%
HH	14	100	0	0
HL	10	76.92	3	23.08
LH	1	100	0	0
LL	0	0	1	100

Table 3 presents the frequencies and percentages of the alternatives provided by the Thai EFL learners for the apology offerings they considered inappropriate for the situations. It was obvious that the HH could suggest more alternatives for the appropriate apology offerings. In fact, all of their alternatives given by the HH were considered appropriate in the situations given the relevant situational variables. For the HL, some of their alternatives were inappropriate. Similar to the HH, all of the LH's alternatives were considered appropriate although the number of their provided suggestions was limited. The LL's alternatives, however, were all inappropriate in the given situations.

6. Discussion

The findings revealed that different levels of metapragmatic awareness could be observed among the four groups of Thai EFL learners. When considering the appropriateness judgments, provided justifications related to politeness and provided alternatives, it was found that the HH showed the higher level of metapragmatic awareness when compared to the other three groups of Thai EFL learners. It is clear that the high levels of English language proficiency and experience are important; that is, both of them complement each other in promoting the language learners' metapragmatic awareness.

Although the HL were close to the HH in their appropriateness judgments, their politeness-related justifications showed that the social distance and relative power were two variables that they were more aware of. It would be unfair to say that they were not aware of the severity of the offence. However, from their justifications, it is possible to say that they were more aware of the two variables than the severity of the offence. Regarding their appropriate alternatives, the HL could provide less when compared to the HH. It can be said that high level of English language proficiency alone may not be sufficient in enhancing metapragmatic awareness.

For the LH and LL, it was clear that the LH were able to make more appropriate judgments than the LL and provide slightly more politeness-related justifications, which showed that they were more aware of the social distance and the severity of the offence. However, with the limited data collected from the LH and LL in terms of politeness-related justifications and appropriate alternatives, one cannot conclude that the LH were better than the LL in terms of their levels of metapragmatic awareness. There may be some possible explanations regarding the nature of the task. First, the subjects were asked to write their responses with the time allotment of 20 minutes. Although the subjects could write their responses in Thai (i.e. their mother tongue), all the situations and apology offerings were in English. With their low level of English language proficiency, the LL would need more time to understand the apology offerings provided in each situation. Consequently, it was possible that, with the time constraint, the subjects were unable to finish the task on time. Furthermore, despite the fact that the subjects were asked to respond to all items in the task, some of them might find writing their responses exhausting and time-consuming and as a result, did not provide all the responses, especially when the task was rather difficult. Further research should adopt an oral pragmatic judgment task instead in order to facilitate the low proficiency subjects. Regardless of

the drawbacks of the instrument that might obstruct the LH and LL to complete the task, it revealed that with the low levels of English language proficiency and experience, the LH and LL's metapragmatic awareness diverged from the HH and HL.

The findings in this section correspond with those of some previous studies. According to Bardovi-Harlig and Dornyei (1998) [2], level of language proficiency, learning environment, and access to authentic L2 input are the three factors that enhance language learners' pragmatic perception. The HH in this study were those who took extra hours of English classes with native speakers, were taught in some courses in English and used English textbooks and had experiences going abroad to English speaking countries. It was not surprising to find that they outperformed the other groups of Thai EFL learners in all aspects, showing their higher level of metapragmatic awareness. The fact that the HH outperformed the other groups of subjects supports Garcia (2004) [11], who found that there was a connection between the high pragmatic awareness and the high language proficiency. The findings are also in line with some previous studies (e.g. Matsumura, 2003 [9]; Olshtain and Blum-kulka, 1985 [1]; and Schauer, 2006 [12]) in that the amount of exposure to the target language and overall proficiency are two factors that enhance learners' metapragmatic awareness.

The findings that the HL's metapragmatic awareness was lower than that of the HH and the metapragmatic awareness of the LL was lower than that of the LH parallel with previous studies (Bardovi-Harlig and Dornyei, 1998 [2], and Niezgoda and Roever, 2011 [3]) in that pragmatic awareness developed independently from linguistic competence. That is, despite the same level of language proficiency, their level of metapragmatic awareness was rather different.

The results from the LL data also supports Garcia's (2004) [11] explanation that the low proficiency learners relied on their current linguistic

knowledge and contextual knowledge in their pragmatic comprehension. For this reason, their limited knowledge of the target language possibly resulted in their low pragmatic awareness.

The metapragmatic awareness findings revealed the relationship between metapragmatic awareness and English proficiency and experience. First, it was evident that high English proficiency and experience enhance the development of metapragmatic awareness. Without either of them, the language learners' metapragmatic awareness could not be increased. In addition, the HL's metapragmatic awareness suggests that high English proficiency alone could not ensure the language learners' high metapragmatic awareness. The L2 pragmatic knowledge must be promoted simultaneously as the learners improve their L2 proficiency. Still, the findings suggest that at least with the high proficiency, the HL's metapragmatic awareness was increasing. Also, with the high proficiency, the HL's metapragmatic awareness was higher than the LH whose level of English experience were higher. Although there were no significant differences between the HL and LH's metapragmatatic awareness, the findings of the appropriateness judgments suggest that the high English proficiency enables the learners to perform better in pragmatic evaluation.

7. Conclusion

It can be concluded that levels of English language proficiency and English language experience contribute to the learners' pragmatic competence, both in pragmatic production and perception. The findings showed that the HH performed better than the other groups of Thai EFL learners, demonstrating the high metapragmatic awareness. This confirms the results of previous research (e.g. Shauer, 2009, among others) that highlighted the importance of both proficiency and experience in the target language. The differences in pragmatic perception between the HH, HL and LH especially suggest the importance of experience in

the target language. High levels of proficiency alone are insufficient for language learner' pragmatic development. Both proficiency and experience are very important in promoting language learners' pragmatic competence.

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