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Second Language Pragmatic Knowledge of Indonesian Higher Vocational Education Students

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***Abstract*—Research into second language (L2) pragmatics has predominantly investigated the L2 learners' productive pragmatic performance, leaving L2 receptive pragmatic knowledge an uncharted area. The present study was aimed to contribute to our understanding of the L2 learners' receptive pragmatic knowledge by examining the extent of L2 learners' receptive pragmatic knowledge operationally defined as the ability to map a requestive form with a given social context. Seventy-seven Indonesian-speaking higher vocational students (with a mean age of 19.7) studying through their fourth semester agreed to participate in the study. The research instrument deployed to measure receptive pragmatic knowledge was a timed 20-item written pragmatic knowledge test battery consisting of 10 target items and 10 distracter items. The data was analyzed quantitatively using descriptive statistics. The major finding of the study was that the students' receptive pragmatic knowledge was severely limited; on average, out of the 10 target items included in the test battery the students could manage to answer 3.7 items correctly, strongly indicating that they were still pragmatically incompetent, assuming that receptive pragmatic knowledge underlies productive pragmatic performance. Such poor pragmatic knowledge leaves the students prone to pragmatic failure when using English for interpersonal communication. This finding points to the desirability of directing the students' attention to the pragmatic aspect of the English language in formal learning contexts.**

***Keywords*—receptive pragmatic knowledge, second language request, Indonesian learners**

I. INTRODUCTION

If pragmatics refers to the study of the links between formal linguistic features and how they are utilized to make meaning which is appropriate to social context [1], second language (L2) pragmatic knowledge can be defined as the ability to link the L2 linguistic forms and appropriate social contexts according to the accepted social norms of the L2 linguaculture. This definition of L2 pragmatic knowledge applies not only to L2 pragmatic production but also to L2 pragmatic perception or reception as well. By L2 pragmatic perception is meant opinion or belief held by L2 learners vis-à-vis the appropriateness of a particular linguistic form in a given social context. As far as L2 pragmatic perception is concerned, an L2 learner can be considered to be pragmatically competent in the L2 if he or she has the knowledge of linguistic resources available in English to decode illocutionary intent, as well as knowledge of sociocultural conventions pertaining to the appropriate use of those linguistic resources [2]. These two distinct, yet interrelated knowledge bases, viz. linguistic and sociocultural knowledge, are widely referred to as the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge, respectively [3-5]. Compared to other components of communicative competence [e.g. 6], pragmatic aspect constitutes the most important one, since inappropriate use of language can potentially lead to unfortunate, or even dire, consequences [3, 7, 8].

This paper reports on a descriptive quantitative investigation into the extent of receptive pragmatic knowledge of a group of Indonesian-speaking students learning English as an L2. Research into L2 pragmatic perception has been scarce [see 1 for comprehensive review]. This is in stark contrast with research which investigated L2 learners' pragmatic production. Research into L2 pragmatic perception has largely been focused L2 learners' ability in comprehending implicature[see 9]. Very few studies conducted so far have examined to what extent L2 learners have the ability to recognize the links between linguistic forms and social contexts in which they are used. The present study attempted to contribute to our understanding of the receptive pragmatic knowledge of L2 learners. The construct of receptive pragmatic knowledge in the present study is given operational definition as the ability to recognize the requestive form which is most appropriate in a given context. The study was aimed to answer the following research question:

> RQ: *What is the extent of the Indonesian-speaking higher vocational education students' pragmatic knowledge?*

II. METHODS

A. Participants

The participants of the present study consisted of 77 fourth-semester students (61 females and 16 males) aged between 19 and 21 years (mean age = 19.7 years) pursuing an applied degree in accounting at a medium-sized public technical institute located in southern part of Bali. They came from three different intact classes. The participants were asked to self-assess their English proficiency level: 53 (68.8%) considered themselves as beginner learners and 24 (31.2%) as intermediate learners. Their formal English proficiency levels as measured by standardized proficiency exams, such as TOEFL, IELTS, or TOEIC, were not available at the time the study was conducted, since none of the participants reported to have taken any of the aforementioned exams. All but one mentioned that they had never been to a foreign country; the student who reported to

have visited another country spent a seven-day holiday in Singapore.

The participants agreed to take part in the present study on a voluntary basis. That is, they were not offered any reward of any kind for their participation in the study except extra credit. Prior to data collection, they were vaguely informed that they would participate in a study which examined students' English proficiency; nevertheless, they were not made aware of the specific aim of the study (i.e. to examine their pragmatic knowledge), as that would compromise the quality of the collected data which in turn might lead to invalid finding.

In the semester within which the study was conducted the participants received a 100-minute instruction in English for commer taught by a female Indonesian-speaking instructor having a master's degree in linguistics obtained from an overseas university. The medium of instruction was mostly in English, although Indonesian was also used sparingly to facilitate students' comprehension. It is to be borne in mind that despite the communicative approach employed by the instructor pragmatic aspect of the English language had never been brought to the attention of the students, let alone became the focus of instruction.

B. *Instrument*

To reiterate, the present study was primarily aimed at investigating the extent of the students' pragmatic knowledge or competence to the exclusion of their pragmatic performance. Pragmatic knowledge was narrowly operationally defined in the present study as knowledge of requesting according to English sociocultural norms. In accordance with this operational definition, therefore, the research instrument used in the present study to tap the students' pragmatic knowledge is a timed written pragmatics test battery comprising 10 multiple-choice pragmatics test items. As a matter of fact, the participants had to answer 20 questions making up the entire test, 10 of which were designed as distracter items and hence were excluded from the analysis (see appendix). The target items are the odd numbered questions, while the distracter items are the even numbered ones.

The test was deliberately entitled "Test of English Proficiency," and the participants were given no more than 35 minutes to answer all questions. The choice of the title and inclusion of the distracters in the test battery was intended to prevent the participants from knowing the actual focus of the study. All items (both target and distracter items) follow the same format: first, a scenario is presented, followed by a stem question. Then, the participants are to choose among the four plausible options provided the answer which best fits the scenario. It should be mentioned that the participants are not put in the context. Rather, two characters are introduced in the context. Arguably, such strategy could be considered legitimate, since the aim of the study was not to measure the participants' pragmatic productive ability, but rather their pragmatic knowledge or competence. Given the aim of the study, that is, to examine the extent of the students' sociocultural norms with regard to requesting, it is made clear in the test instruction that the conversation between the two characters introduced in each of the scenarios takes place in the U.S. and U.K. To avoid misunderstanding on the part of the participants, the scenarios and questions were written in the native language of the participants (Indonesian).

The target test items (i.e. the items measuring the participants' pragmatic knowledge were taken from two sources: a research article [10] and Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English (https://www.linguistics.ucsb.edu/research/santa-barbara-corpus). The research article reports on a qualitative investigation into "the different linguistic (lexico-syntactic) forms used to request" by British people in telephone calls [10]. The items derived from the research article are items 1, 3, 5, 7, 11, and 17. The Santa Barbara corpus was compiled out of spoken interactions between American people conversing face to face. The test items derived from the corpus are items 9, 13, 15, and 19. Since the test is a test of requestive knowledge, the three distracter answers were written in such a way that they represent expressions typically used to make requests in face to face conversations. Moreover, the distracter answers were constructed with caution ensuring that the words and phrases contained in them are within the participants' vocabulary repertoire.

C. *Procedure*

The pragmatics test was administered during normal (i.e. scheduled) English class by the English instructor teaching in the three classes from which the participants were recruited. Prior to the test administration, the participants were informed that they would take a test examining their general English proficiency. To ensure the independence of the data gathered, they were also requested to work on the test individually. Although they were advised that they could enlist assistance from the English instructor with regard to the meaning of words or phrases they might find difficult, none of the participants took advantage of the opportunity, which can be taken to mean that the words and phrases were within their vocabulary repertoire. The participants were allowed 35 minutes at the maximum to complete the test. Finally, the test administrator made every effort to create favorable conditions so as to reduce potential test anxiety and to maximize the participants' optimum performance on the test.

D. *Data Analysis*

Every correct answer was given a score of 1. Since there are 10 questions in the test battery, the probable maximum score is 10, accordingly. The data were analyzed quantitatively using descriptive statistics, with no inferential statistic performed.

III. Findings And Discussion

A. *Findings*

Table I below shows the descriptive statistics of the scores obtained by the participants on the pragmatic knowledge test.

TABLE I. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

N	Min	Max	Mean		SD
			Statistic	*SE*	
77	1	7	3.7	.16	1.4

TABLE II. FREQUENCY OF SCORES

Score	Frequency	Percent
1	4	5.2
2	9	11.7
3	21	27.3
4	24	31.2
5	9	11.7
6	9	11.7
7	1	1.3
Total	77	100

Tables I and II above immediately show that the scores obtained by the participants in the present study ranged from 1 to 7; although the highest score possible was 10 none of the participants managed to reach such highest point. The seemingly most pragmatically competent student could only get 70% of all questions on the test correct. Table II vividly reveals that the majority of the scores tend to cluster in the middle of the range of the scores (scores 3 and 4) obtained by 45 participants (58.5%), which means that the majority of the participants managed to get between 30% and 40% of all questions correct.

As can be seen from Table I above, on average the students who participated in the present study received a score of 3.7 (out of 10) strongly indicating that they performed quite poorly on the pragmatics test. A standard deviation value of 1.4 indicates that the participants in the present study were quite homogeneous in terms of the extent of their pragmatic knowledge, or to put it another way: on average, each score deviated from the mean score by 1.4 points only, which indicates that the difference in the extent of pragmatic knowledge among the participants in the present study was not large. We can be confident that the instrument used to tap the participants' pragmatic knowledge was quite reliable. To put it in different terms, should we use the test battery to measure different sets of participants taken from the same population from which the set of participants in the present study was taken the test would yield relatively the same result. This is evident from the SE (standard error) of the mean. An SE value of .16 indicates that the mean values yielded from different sets of participants having relatively the same characteristics as the present participants taken from the same population from which the participants of the present study were recruited would deviate from the average mean of those (hypothetical) means by .16. It can also be argued that, given the relatively small size of the SE value, the participants of the present study were quite representative of the population from which they were drawn. This value simultaneously suggests that the population of the present study might find the pragmatic knowledge test difficult to answer. In other words, they might also perform similarly poorly on the test.

The descriptive statistics presented in Tables I and II above show only the general picture of the participants' pragmatic knowledge. That is, the tables merely reveal that the participants performed somewhat poorly on the test. It is curious to see in what contexts or scenarios the participants' pragmatic knowledge was still insufficient. Therefore, we closely examined the situations in which the participants were found to be pragmatically quite competent and in which situations they were particularly struggling.

Test items #3 and #19 were found by the participants to be extremely difficult to answer, where only 3 (3.9%) and 5 (6.5%) respectively could answer these two questions correctly. Assuming that the participants would be producing the requestive expressions they chose on the test (rather than the correct one) when faced with these two situational contexts, almost all of them would be considered presumptuous by their interlocutor, in which case pragmatic failure would occur on their part. The scenario for items #3 and #19 is as follows:

Item #3 (English translation)
"Sean calls a doctor because his friend named John Brown has severe pains in his stomach. What does Sean say to the doctor?"

Item #19 (English translation)
"*Rebecca is a lawyer, and Rickie is her client whom she will defend in a trial of a sexual assault which Rickie experienced on a train. Rickie told Rebecca of the incident. Rebecca asks her client to tell the jury about the incident. What does Rebecca say to Rickie?*"

The fact that 96.1% of the participants failed on item #3 indicates that almost all of them did not have the knowledge of making request in a situational context where the speaker has lower power than the hearer and the social distance is quite large, yet the situation is of an emergency which requires urgent medical intervention. Likewise, their failure on item #19 also indicates their lack of knowledge of requestive expression appropriate in a situational context where the speaker has higher status than the hearer. Surprisingly, the majority of the participants (81.8%) got item #1 correct. Item #1 has the following scenario:

Item #1 (English translation)
"A husband calls a doctor because his wife is experiencing a serious medical condition, that is, she could not breathe properly. What does the husband say to the doctor?"

We can see clearly here that this situation is very similar to the situation depicted in scenario for item #3. How is it possible that they could get this item (item #1) correct, but not item #3? The answer to this question might lie with the options provided. The correct answer to item #1 is "*Could you come see my wife, please? She's breathless. She can't get her breathe*," which the majority of the participants correctly chose. This expression belongs to the category of conventionally indirect strategy. However, the answer to item #3 which, unfortunately, the majority of them did not choose, is "*Hello, I'd like a doctor sent out to Mr. Brown*." The fact that they did not pick this option as the appropriate expression for such situational context strongly suggests that they might be of the opinion that a direct request strategy was inappropriate for the context; they might consider that such

request form is impolite in that situation, an opinion which is not shared by the native speakers of British English [see 10]. This, in turn, suggests that their (the participants of the present study) requestive knowledge has not developed yet.

The other two items which the participants were also still struggling are items #5 and #15 whose scenario is shown below.

Item #5 (English translation)
"Leslie orders a book from a bookstore. She plans to pick up the book herself at the bookstore. However, for some reason she cannot pick it up, so she calls the bookstore and asks them to send it to her place by mail. What does Leslie say to the bookstore?"

Item #15 (English translation)

"Rebecca is a lawyer, and Rickie is her client whom she will defend at a trial of sexual assault which she Rickie has experienced on a train. Rebecca asks Rickie to recount the incident. What does Rebecca say?"

It seems that the study participants found these two items equally challenging, as the number of participants who got these two items correct is comparable, although item #15 was found to be slightly less challenging: item #5 = 10 (13%) and item #15 = 13 (15.6%). Item #15 was developed out of the same corpus as item #19 discussed above, and thus the situational context (i.e. contextual parameters) for the two items are relatively the same. Apparently, the study participants lack pragmatic knowledge usable in the situation where the speaker holds higher institutional status and the request made is not demanding but within the confine of his or her institutional rights. In such situation, the study participants consider that the use of direct strategy (e.g. *"Tell the jury that"* in the situation depicted in item #19) as less polite or even inappropriate. Perhaps, the participants conceive that due to the large social distance between the lawyer and her client the use of a direct strategy is not warranted.

The next set of items which posed considerable difficulty to the participants of the present study, although to a lesser extent than the items we have just discussed thus far, are items #11, #13, and #17.

Item #11 (English translation)
"Jenny Rahman calls an optical store to schedule an appointment to meet with an optician, Mr. Fawcet, one day next week. She is not quite sure whether or not he is available next week. What does Jenny say?"

Item #13 (English translation)
"Marylin and Roy are a married couple, both are in their 30s. They are preparing dinner. Marylin asks Roy to clean up the dining table. What does Marylin say to her husband?"

Item 17 (English translation)

"A mother calls a doctor to ask for medical advice because her son has been stung by a wasp on his thumb. What does the mother say to the doctor?"

It is interesting to note that although the contextual characteristics of the scenarios are different across the three items the participants error rates are comparable: 67.5%, 64.9%, and 63.6% on item #11, #13, and #17, respectively. While the conversation depicted in item #11 involves interactants who are unfamiliar to each other, which also holds true of the conversation depicted in item #17, that depicted in item #13 involves two intimate interactants. What these findings suggest is that the study participants' pragmatic knowledge usable in a variety of contextual situations has not sufficiently developed.

We have hitherto discussed the problematic aspects of the study participants' pragmatic knowledge, without touching on the items on which they exceled to some extent. There are two items on which the participants performed reasonably well: item #1 and #9, both with a correct rate of 81.8%. The scenario for item #9 is as follows (item #1 has been discussed above).

Item #9 (English translation)
"Marylin and Peter are close friends, both are in their 30s. they are preparing dinner. Marylin asks Peter to string beans. What does Marylin say to Peter?"

Obviously, the situational characteristics present in the two senarios are different; while scenario of item #1 depicts a formal (institutional, to be more exact) relationship, that of item #9 describes an informal one. By just looking at the correct rates on these two items, we might be lulled into the belief that the participants of the present study indeed had the ability to vary their linguistic behavior according to the levels of formality of the context in which they found themselves, assuming that the expressions they chose for these items are the ones they would use should they find themselves interact as the speaker in those situations. Recall that collectively the participants failed on item #13 whose scenario depicts an informal (intimate) relationship. If they indeed had pragmatic knowledge which enabled them to vary their use of language according to the level of situational context, they should also perform well on item #13. The inconsistent error rates on two relatively the same situational contexts strongly gives the indication that the study participants' pragmatic knowledge is still vulnerable.

To summarize what has been discussed above, the present study discovered that the pragmatic knowledge of the partcipants in the present study was severely limited in its extent. Out of the 10 target pragmatic questions included on the test battery, on average they could manage to answer only 3.7 items. What is more, they seemed to be unable to display their sensitivy towards situational nuances determining language variation. The findings of the present study also revealed that their pragmatic knowledge was shaky as indicated by the inconsistency of error rates on items with relatively the same contextual situations.

B. Discussion

The present study was aimed at examining the extent of Indonesian-speaking higher vocational education students' pragmatic knowledge deploying a written multiple-choice pragmatic knowledge test battery as the main research instrument.. That is, the study was exclusively carried out to investigate the students' ability to recognize the links between linguistic forms and the social contexts in which the

forms are used appropriately according to English cultural norms. As such, the study was primarily focused on the students' receptive sociopragmatic ability to the exclusion of their productive pragmatic performance. The general finding of the study was that the students performed poorly on the written pragmatic test: of the 10 target pragmatic items included on the test, on average they could manage to answer only 3.7 items correctly, leading us to believe that they are still pragmatically incompetent, assuming that sociopragmatic knowledge underlies pragmatic production [1]. To put it differently, the students still lack knowledge of sociolinguistic variation, defined as knowledge of how a speaker varies the formal features of his or her utterances according to social context[11]. The students' inability to use forms which is appropriate in a given context would lead their (native speaker) interlocutor to believe that the students challenge and transgress the agreed-upon, dominant social norms and ideologies/ belief systems, so to speak, and "transgressions count as rude, impolite, and so on" [12]. Needless to say, such negative evaluation on the students' verbal behavior might be detrimental to their professional career, interpersonal relation, and so on.

It has been mentioned above that the majority (68.8%) of the students perceived that their English proficiency level was beginner. Previous research typically attributes learners' pragmatic performance to proficiency by default [1]. Nevertheles, it would no doubt constitute a theoretical flaw to consider that the students' poor pragmatic knowledge in the present study was largely due to their low English proficiency level. The two phenomena (the students' proficiency level was low and so was their pragmatic knowledge) seemed to occurr by coincidence, or in other words, they were not correlated phenomena, in the sense that none of the two phenomena influenced the other.

Admittedly, we know nothing about how the students in the present study conceptualized the construct of proficiency when asked to self-rate their English proficiency level. However, it would be quite reasonable to assume that the students referred to their English proficiency as knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. In fact, this definition of proficiency has been popular among second language pragmatics researchers [1]. It should be made clear that by knowledge of grammar and vocabulary is meant the ability to construct morphosyntactically correct sentences or utterances and the ability to recognize the meaning of a word, respectively.

Now, to return to the argument made above (i.e. proficiency and pragmatic knowledge are uncorrelated), it is difficult to see how knowledge of grammar and vocabulary influence pragmatic perception. Unlike pragmatic production [but see 13 who found that grammar knowledge did not influence pragmatic performance], pragmatic perception is a cognitive activity which does not call for knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. When judging whether or not the verbal expression *"Why don't you clear the table?"* is appropriate to be uttered by a wife to her husband in the context of preparing dinner together, the students' knowledge of grammar and vocabulary does not seem to come into play.

Following Taguchi and Roever [1], "socialization through extended exposure and interaction within the target language setting" can bring to bear increased sociopragmatic knowledge of target community norms [1]. Thus, the lack of pragmatic knowledge or understanding on the part of the participants in the present study might be the byproduct of the lack of extended interaction with the target language community members, in this case native speakers of British and American English, a characteristic of foreign language learning context where the target language is not used as the medium of communication on a daily basis. However, it might be quite reasonable to argue that extended target language exposure per se cannot account for the development of second language pragmatic knowledge [see also 1]. That is, mere immersion into and engagement with the target language pragmatic input might not be a warranty for acquisition of second language pragmatic knowledge to take place. There are at least two cognitive variables which might mediate the effect of target language exposure on the development of pragmatic knowledge, viz., noticing ability and motivation. No matter how extended and/or extensive the exposure and interaction experienced by second language learners, if they do not notice the form-function-context mapping present in an utterance, chances are that they will not acquire the necessary pragmatic knowledge. Likewise, if the learners are not motivated enough to know about how a second language is used appropriately according to contexts, they will not focus their attention on the form-meaning-context mapping, eventually resulting in lack of pragmatic knowledge.

IV. Conclusion

Focusing on the speech act of requesting, the present study attempted to unveil the extent of the underlying pragmatic knowledge of Indonesian-speaking higher vocational education students, and discovered that their underlying pragmatic knowledge was rather poor. On the assumption that pragmatic knowledge largely affects pragmatic performance, that is, the way language is used in interpersonal communication is fundamentally influenced by what the speaker knows about 'when to say what and to whom,' the fact that their pragmatic knowledge was rather poor is unfortunate. As has been noted in the introductory section of this paper, pragmatic failure (i.e. the failure to observe the agreed-upon social norms) can bring about undesirable effects. Since the learners in the present study learn English in an English as a foreign language learning context, that is, in the so-called a pragmatics-poor environment, where opportunities to use English with native speakers are severely limited, or even almost non-existent, and hence the naturalistic learning of English pragmatics outside of the classroom is virtually impossible, the teaching of pragmatics is to be considered mandatory. The existing communicative approach currently employed in the teaching of English in the Indonesian context should be supplemented by deliberate instruction on how to use English following the English sociocultural norms. So far, the use of

communicative approach to teaching English in the indonesian context has been confined to a great extent to discussion of what linguistic resources (grammar and vocabulary) can be used to convey a particular communicative intent leaving the sociopragmatic aspect of language use as a neglected area. The fact that the students' pragmatic knowledge is rather poor pedagogically implies that it is high time English instructors at the level of tertiary education (perhaps, at all levels, too) begin to implement instructional intervention which attends to the sociopragmatic aspect of the English language.

Admittedly, the present study is not without limitations and hence its findings should be treated with caution. There are at least two obvious limitations of the present study. First, the present study set out to exclusively investigate the extent to which the students recognize the links between forms and social contexts in which they are used when making requests. No one would disagree that making requests is not the only ability constitutive of pragmatic knowledge. For this reason, future research into the pragmatic knowledge of Indonesian-speaking students should focus on more than one pragmatic feature. Moreover, pragmatic features other than speech acts should also be the examined. The second limitation of the present study pertains to the research instrument deployed to tap the students pragmatic knowledge. To ensure authenticity of the scenarios and their corresponding verbal expressions together with the limited availability of the data in the corpus and the research article, the written pragmatic knowledge test used in the present study consisted of only 10 target items. Arguably, the inclusion of a small number of target items in the test seems to be a threat to the reliability of the test. Therefore, future research should use a test which is comprised of a larger number of target items.

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