

## IS GRAMMATICAL KNOWLEDGE RELATED TO PRAGMATIC KNOWLEDGE?

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### ABSTRACT

Despite its significance to the field of inter language pragmatics surprisingly little research has been conducted to investigate the issue of the relation between L2 grammatical knowledge and L2 pragmatic knowledge. The aim of the present study was to examine the extent to which the two types of knowledge correlate with one another. The target pragmatic feature of the study was requesting. A total of 77 fourth-semester students pursuing an applied academic degree in accounting at a technical college located in southern part of Bali participated in the present study. The participants' grammatical knowledge was measured using a timed, 40-item multiple-choice test, while their pragmatic knowledge was tapped using 10-item multiple choice test, built out of authentic materials extracted from Santa Barbara corpus of spoken American English and data from a research article. Data analysis using Spearman's rho correlational analysis revealed that the correlation between L2 grammatical knowledge and L2 pragmatic knowledge was statistically non-significant,  $r_s = -.08, p > .05$ . This suggests that the two constructs are independent of one another. In simple terms, it means that the development of grammatical knowledge is not a prerequisite of the development of pragmatic knowledge, or vice versa. Pedagogically, it implies that cultivating L2 pragmatic knowledge on learners cannot be done solely through L2 grammar instruction.

*Keywords: requesting, Indonesian learners, pragmatic knowledge, grammatical knowledge*

### INTRODUCTION

Grammatical knowledge and pragmatic knowledge are essential components of communicative language ability, i.e. the ability to engage in communicative language use (e.g. Bachman & Palmer, 2010). Grammatical knowledge refers to knowledge "involved in producing or comprehending formally accurate utterances or sentences" (Bachman & Palmer, 2010, p. 44). As a matter of fact, not only is knowledge of morphosyntax subsumed under the construct of grammatical knowledge, as lay people might understand it, but also knowledge of vocabulary, phonology, and graphology. Pragmatic knowledge,

according to Bachman and Palmer (2010), is knowledge that “enables us to create and interpret discourse by relating utterances or sentences and texts to their meanings, to the intentions of the language users, and to relevant characteristics of the language use settings” (p. 46). Thus, while grammatical knowledge concerns formal accuracy of language use, pragmatic knowledge pertains to appropriateness of language use. Logically speaking, the relationship between the two types of knowledge should not be difficult to see; to create discourse according to the characteristics of the language use settings calls for grammatical knowledge. It is difficult to imagine a person with no grammatical knowledge can produce the following utterance to his employer: *I was wondering if I could possibly get my paycheck before the payday*. Ellis (2008, p. 160) conjectured that “the development of pragmatic competence cannot be considered in isolation from the development of linguistic competence.”

How grammatical knowledge correlates with pragmatic knowledge is one of the important issues that interlanguage pragmatics research has raised (Bardovi-Harlig, 2013; Kecskes, 2015). Yet, surprisingly, very little research has been conducted to examine the relationship between grammatical knowledge and pragmatic knowledge. As a result, the relationship between the two constructs is still poorly understood. To the best of our knowledge, there have recently been only two studies that specifically examined the relationship between grammatical competence and pragmatic competence (Celaya & Barón, 2015; Sanjaya & Sitawati, 2017). Celaya and Barón (2015) analyzed the development of grammatical competence and pragmatic competence of 144 Spanish learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) at different proficiency levels and ages. The data for the study were gathered using oral role play with requesting as the target pragmatic feature. Grammatical competence was assessed using a 7-point grammars scale measuring the levels of complexity of the utterances and, to a lesser extent, the presence of modal verbs, questions, and syntactic accuracy. Pragmatic competence was examined in terms of the levels of directness of the utterances and use of internal and external modification. Celaya and Barón (2015) discovered that as the learners’ grammatical competence developed, their utterances became more socially appropriate suggesting that the development of grammatical competence goes hand in hand with that of pragmatic competence. However, the investigation conducted by Sanjaya and Sitawati (2017) yielded a conflicting finding, i.e. grammatical competence was not a significant predictor of pragmatic competence, a finding that corroborates the argument put forth by Bardovi-

Harlig (1999,2001). Such inconsistency in research findings on the relationship between grammatical knowledge and pragmatic knowledge proves the complicated nature of the issue. Therefore, following Kecskes (2015,p.424), more research needs to be conducted to investigate the issue. Such investigation can shed light on the nature of the development of pragmatic knowledge, in particular whether grammatical knowledge constitutes the underlying factor contributing to the development to pragmatic knowledge. The acquisition of pragmatic knowledge is of great significance to second language (L2)<sup>1</sup>learners, since pragmatically infelicitous utterances/ sentences, especially when produced by linguistically proficient L2 learners in a conversation with native speakers, can result in dire social consequences (Murray,2010). The study reported in this paper aimed to specifically investigate to what extent grammatical knowledge is related to pragmatic knowledge. The construct grammatical knowledge was confined to knowledge of morphosyntax and vocabulary, while the construct pragmatic knowledge was operationally defined as sociopragmatic knowledge, i.e. the ability to choose among alternative forms the form most appropriate for a given situation (Takahashi, 2013). The present study was undertaken to answer the following research question:

*RQ: Is grammatical knowledge related to pragmatic knowledge?*

This paper is organized as follows: after the presentation of the methods of the study, the findings are presented and discussed in light of current theorization and previous studies. In the concluding section, the pedagogical implication and the study limitation were discussed together with suggestions for future studies.

## METHODS

### *Participants*

A total of 77 undergraduate students (61 males and 16 females) coming from three intact classes agreed to participate in the present study. Their ages ranged from 19 years to 21 years with a mean age of 19.7 years. At the time when the study was conducted the students were in their fourth semester of a four-year applied degree program in accounting at a medium-sized public technical college located in southern Bali. Since they had not taken any standardized English proficiency test, such as TOEFL, IELTS, or TOEIC, it was not possible to ascertain their English proficiency level. To determine their English

proficiency level, the students were asked to self-assess their English proficiency level: 53 (68.8%) considered themselves as beginner learners and 24 (31.2%) considered themselves as intermediate learners. None of the students reported using English at home or work on a daily basis or lived in an English-speaking country for an extended period of time. One student reported spending one week for holiday purposes in Singapore.

<sup>1</sup> The term 'second language' in this paper is used as an umbrella term to refer to language used in a context where it is used as a medium of communication on a daily basis, such as English in Australia or the USA, and language used in a context for purposes other than a means of daily communication, e.g. school subject, such as English in Indonesia or Japan.

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 to what extent their pragmatic knowledge and grammatical knowledge correlate with one another), as that would compromise the quality of the collected data which in turn might lead to invalid finding.

<sup>1</sup> At the time when the study was conducted the students received a 100-minute English instruction per week taught using communicative approach by a female Indonesian native speaker instructor with near-native English proficiency. 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 become the focus of instruction.

#### *Research Instruments*

Two test batteries were specifically designed for the purposes of the present study: pragmatic knowledge and grammatical knowledge tests. The pragmatic knowledge test was designed to measure the students' requestive ability in English and took the form of a multiple-choice test consisting of 20 items: 10 target items and 10 distracter items. Only the data derived from the target items were included in the data analysis. The target items are the odd numbered questions, while the distracter items are the even numbered questions. All items (both target and distracter items) follow the same format: first, a scenario is presented, followed by a stem question. Then, the students are to choose among the four plausible options provided the answer which best fits the scenario. It should be mentioned that the students are not put in the context, i.e. the scenario does not read *You are ...* Rather, two characters are introduced in the context (e.g. *A husband calls a doctor*).

Arguably, such strategy could be considered legitimate, since <sup>3</sup> the aim of the study was not to measure the participants' pragmatic productive ability, but rather their pragmatic knowledge or competence. To avoid misunderstanding on the part of the students, the scenarios and questions were written in the native language of the students (Indonesian).

The target test items (i.e. the items measuring the participants' pragmatic knowledge) were taken from two sources: are search article (Curl&Drew, 2008) and Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English. The research article reports a qualitative investigation into "the different linguistic (lexico-syntactic) form sused to request" by British people in telephone calls (p.130). 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.

The grammatical knowledge test is a timed test designed to tap the students' knowledge of morphosyntax and vocabulary. It consists of 40 multiple-choice items following the TOEFL test format. The items were taken from the structure section of a practice test included in a TOEFL preparation book (Gear & Gear, 2002).

#### *Data Analysis*

Every correct answer on both tests was awarded as core of 1, while every wrong answer was given a score of 0. Therefore, the highest possible score that a student could obtain, i.e. when the student could answer all the questions correctly, was 40 on the grammatical knowledge and 10 on the pragmatic knowledge test. Recall that only the target items ( $k = 10$ ) were included in the analysis.

To answer the research question, i.e. *Is grammatical knowledge related to pragmatic knowledge?* the data were analyzed using the non-parametric correlational analysis, Spearman's rho, since one of the data sets, i.e. the data on the variable pragmatic knowledge, violated the assumption for parametric correlation analysis, i.e. they did not resemble normal or bell-shaped distribution (see Field, 2009).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

Table 1 below presents the descriptive statistics of the scores obtained by the participants in the present study on the tests of grammatical knowledge and pragmatic knowledge.

**Table 1.** descriptive statistics

	N	Min	Max	Mean		SD
				Statistic	SE	
Grammatical Knowledge	77	7	21	13.82 <sup>a</sup>	.35	3.05
Pragmatic Knowledge	77	1	7	3.73 <sup>b</sup>	.16	1.36

Note: <sup>a</sup> Maximum score =40

<sup>b</sup> Maximum score =10

As the above table readily shows, on average the learners obtained a score of 13.82 on the grammatical knowledge test, which means that out of the 40 items included in the test battery they could get correct on only 13.82 items (34.5%). Needless to say, such a score indicates that the level of their grammatical knowledge was low at the time when the study was conducted. This might be the byproduct of the implementation of a communicative approach where by formal aspects of the English language was not the focus of the course. Alternatively, it could be argued that the level of difficulty of the test may be beyond their current proficiency level. Recall that quite a good number of learners stated that their level of English proficiency level was beginner. A standard deviation (SD) of 3.05 (relative to the mean value, i.e. 13.82) could be taken to mean that the learners participating in the present study were quite uniform or homogeneous in terms of their level of grammatical knowledge. A SD value of 3.05 means that on average the scores that learners in the sample set obtained deviated from the mean value by 3.05 points. Finally, the small magnitude of the standard error of the mean (SE), i.e. .35, is an indication that the sample in the present study were indeed representative of the population from which the sample was drawn in terms of their level of grammatical knowledge.

Similarly, learners' pragmatic knowledge was also found to be rather low. On average, learners obtained a score of 3.73 on the pragmatic knowledge test (37.3%). We

can see here that their grammatical knowledge and pragmatic knowledge was comparable, 34.5% and 37.3%, respective. However, in terms of their pragmatic knowledge the learners were quite heterogeneous, which can be seen from the magnitude of the standard deviation (1.36) relative to them an value. The small SE value for the pragmatic knowledge variable (.16) also indicates that the learners were representative of the population from which they were drawn.

Prior to doing the inferential statistical analysis, i.e. correlational analysis, the data for the two variables were checked their distribution using the one-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. As noted above, the results of the test indicated that while the scores on the grammatical knowledge test,  $D(77) = 0.1, p > .05$ , were slightly normally distributed, the scores on the pragmatic knowledge test,  $D(77) = 0.17, p < .05$ , were significantly non-normal. Since one of the variables produced data that were not normally distributed, the non-parametric correlational analysis, Spearman's rho, was run on the data to examine whether grammatical knowledge and pragmatic knowledge were correlated with one another. The results revealed that the two constructs were not statistically significant,  $r_s = -.08, p > .05$ , which means that the two constructs were not related to one another. Surprisingly, the correlational coefficient was negative, meaning that as learners' grammatical knowledge increased, their pragmatic knowledge decreased, and vice versa. But once again this negative correlation was non-significant.

### *Discussion*

The present study investigated the extent to which L2 grammatical knowledge and L2 pragmatic knowledge correlate with one another, an issue of great importance to the field of acquisition and interlanguage pragmatics. The result of the non-parametric correlational analysis, Spearman's rho, based on a sample of 77 L2 learners revealed that the correlation between the two constructs were negative, but non-significant. To put it in different terms, the correlation coefficient between the two constructs was negligible. In simple terms, this finding indicates that the development of pragmatic knowledge does not go hand in hand with the development of grammatical knowledge; development of L2 pragmatic knowledge does not necessitate prior development of L2 grammatical knowledge, or viceversa. Learners' high level of grammatical knowledge does not automatically transfer to their pragmatic knowledge. Therefore, it is possible that a learner

who is pragmatically competent, i.e. who is able to produce pragmatically felicitous utterances, might have poor grammatical knowledge. By the same token, a learner's insufficient grammatical knowledge does not necessarily prevent him or her from being pragmatically competent. However, it should not be taken to mean that a learner with zero mastery of L2 grammatical knowledge can be pragmatically competent in the L2. In other words, it is not possible for a learner with no grammatical knowledge whatsoever to be able to successfully get his or her message across while observing the sociocultural norms of the speech community. To be able to communicate appropriately according to a given context requires two types of knowledge: knowledge of linguistic resources to convey the desired communicative intent (pragmalinguistics) and knowledge of when, how and to whom to say such communicative intent (sociopragmatics) (Leech, 2014). Therefore, there should be some threshold of L2 grammatical knowledge for a L2 learner to be able to produce pragmatically appropriate utterances/ sentences. Unfortunately, up to the present time no study has been conducted to determine such threshold level. Indeed, such study undoubtedly requires a very advanced research design, but arguably it constitutes a significant future research direction.

The absence of a significant correlation between L2 grammatical knowledge and L2 pragmatic knowledge is somewhat surprising. It is quite reasonable to expect that a learner of English having good mastery of English grammatical knowledge also has good mastery of pragmatic knowledge in that language, and viceversa. It is hard to imagine how a learner knows that the utterance *I wonder if you could send it to me by mail* is appropriate only in a certain context without knowing that such linguistic form can be used to perform a request. The explanation to this mystery might lie in how appropriateness and/or politeness can be achieved in English. Although English relies on formal linguistic features to materialize appropriateness, in face to face conversation paralinguistic devices, e.g. pitch, intonation, can also be deployed to that effect. Thus, a learner who says *I wondering you can to give me my pay check before the payday*, who in the context of the present study can be considered to have poor grammatical knowledge, might be regarded as polite by the interlocutor, assuming that such utterance is spoken with appropriate intonation or pitch..

The case study conducted by Schmidt (1983) provided empirical evidence that it is possible for a L2 speaker to be pragmatically competent without being highly proficient in the L2 grammar. Wes, the participant of the Schmidt (1983) study, was observed to be highly proficient in using English appropriately as no friend of his ever complained about



or felt offended by his use of English, in spite of the fact that his grammatical knowledge was exceptionally poor.

The finding of the present study is consistent with that of the Sanjaya and Sitawati (2017) study. It is to be noted that the measures used in the two studies are different; while in the present study the participants were tested on their receptive knowledge (both grammatical knowledge and pragmatic knowledge), in the Sanjaya and Sitawati (2017) study the participants were tested on their productive knowledge (also both grammatical knowledge and pragmatic knowledge). It is also important to note that the participants involved in the two studies were different. Thus, it seems that L2 grammatical knowledge and L2 pragmatic knowledge are indeed in dependent of on eanother, as in the words of Bardovi-Harlig (2001,p. 14), “a learner of high grammatical proficiency will not necessarily possess concomitant pragmatic competence.”

According to Kecskes (2015, p. 422), “*Willingness, motivation and ability of adult bilinguals to assume L2 (or subsequent language) socio-cultural beliefs, conventions and norms seems to play a decisive role in bi- and multilingual development and language use*” (italics in original). Thus, it is at times difficult, if not impossible, to establish whether learners’ seemingly deficient pragmatic knowledge is the by product of their willingness, motivation or ability, or all of these three factors. The nature of the measure of pragmatic knowledge used in the present study enabled us to rule out the effects of learners’ willingness and motivation. As the learners were not required to produce any utterance and they were not put in the situation we are quite confident that willingness and motivation did not represent confounding variables in the present study. In short, we are fairly sure that the correlation that we were testing was indeed between grammatical knowledge and pragmatic knowledge.

## CONCLUSION

This study yielded unexpected empirical evidence that the constructs of grammatical knowledge and pragmatic knowledge were not related to one another, which means that the development of grammatical knowledge is not parallel to the development of pragmatic knowledge. To put it bluntly, the development of grammatical knowledge is not, let alone the only, precondition for the development of pragmatic knowledge, or vice versa. However, as we have noted above, the development of pragmatic knowledge may not take place without a minimum level of grammatical knowledge.

The pedagogical implication of the finding of the present study is that pragmatic knowledge cannot be cultivated on learners through grammar instruction. Teaching students all the syntactic forms that can be used to perform requests, for example, may not lead to the acquisition of such speechact. In other words, the fact that students know that some form can be deployed to make requests may not spill over into their being able to use the forms appropriately in real communicative events. The present study examined only one speech act, i.e. requesting, as the target pragmatic feature, and consequently the argument put forth based on the finding of the present study should be considered with caution. It is suggested that future studies examine more than one speech act, so more valid conclusion can be arrived. The other limitation of the present study concerns the design of the study. The study used one-shot data collection with non-experimental research design to examine whether the development of grammatical knowledge takes place prior to the development of pragmatic knowledge. Experimental research design using longitudinal method might yield better results as development can only be examined through prolonged observation.

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