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The Effect of Grammatical Competence on EFL Learners' Pragmatic Competence

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Abstract

Pragmatic competence, being a crucial aspect of communicative competence, is among the key competencies necessary for successful communication. The present study was an attempt to investigate the effect of EFL learners' grammatical competence (knowledge of linguistic features such as grammar and vocabulary) and proficiency level on their pragmatic competence. The participants were 165 Iranian intermediate and upper intermediate EFL learners. They were freshman and junior students (considered as intermediate and upper intermediate learners) in eight intact classes (four freshman and four junior classes) at some universities in Qom, Iran. Initially, the participants took a general proficiency test (TOEFL Test, 2002) to homogenize the participants at each proficiency level and indicate that the junior students were truly more linguistically proficient than freshman students. Subsequently, they were given a discourse completion test, involving 12 multiple-choice questions assessing learners' recognition of appropriate speech acts and pragmatic markers. The results were analyzed using some SPSS statistical techniques, which revealed that there was a moderately significant correlation between grammatical and pragmatic competences, and language proficiency has a significant effect on the pragmatic competence of the learners, as the junior students outperformed the freshman students.

Keywords: discourse completion test, grammatical competence, language proficiency, pragmatic competence

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1. Introduction

Effective language use and communication necessitate the development of communicative competence by language learners. This competence encompasses pragmatic competence, which is defined as “the ability to communicate appropriately in particular contexts of use" (Johnson & Johnson, 1998, p. 249). Ellis (2008) further elaborates that pragmatic competence involves understanding what constitutes suitable linguistic performance in a given situation. Canale and Swain (1980) as well as Bachman (1990) have both integrated pragmatic competence into their models of communicative competence. Language users must ensure that their utterances are not only grammatically correct but also contextually fitting for the particular setting. For example, while saying "*open the window*" is grammatically accurate, it may be contextually inappropriate when addressing a university professor. In such cases, a more suitable and polite alternative like "*Sir, would you mind opening the window, please*?" is preferred. Within the realm of pragmatic competence lies the crucial ability to demonstrate respect and consideration for one's conversational partners by utilizing appropriate linguistic forms, a concept known as "linguistic politeness." This aspect involves how languages express social variables such as role relationships, social distance between speakers, and the level of imposition of a communicative act, as discussed by Brown & Levinson (1978). It is essential for language users to navigate these nuances to ensure effective and respectful communication in diverse contexts.

The field of pragmatics involves the study of language use in communication. According to Crystal (1997), pragmatics is defined as:

> the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication. (p. 301)

Leech (1983) and Thomas (1983) further categorized pragmatics into pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics. Pragmalinguistics, as described by Kasper and Rose (2001), pertains to "the resources for conveying communicative acts and relational or interpersonal meanings," which include "pragmatic strategies such as directness and indirectness, routines, and a large

range of linguistic forms which can intensify or soften communicative acts" (p. 3). On the other hand, sociopragmatics deals with the social perceptions that underlie participants' interpretation and performance of communicative acts. In fact, pragmalinguistics focuses on linguistic forms and their respective functions, while sociopragmatics is concerned with appropriate social behavior. Richards and Schmidt (2002) further break down pragmatics into three categories:

> *(a)* how the interpretation and use of utterances depends on knowledge of the real world; (*b)* how speakers use and understand speech acts; (*c)* how the structure of sentences is influenced by the relationship between the speaker and the hearer. (p. 423)

The second category encompasses recognition and use of speech acts by language users and linguistic politeness, as highlighted by Richards and Schmidt, falls under the third category and explores the social and contextual elements that dictate suitable language use, such as the level of intimacy, indirectness, and formality deemed appropriate in a given situation, as well as how politeness is manifested through linguistic forms, known as politeness markers.

Different societies have varying pragmatic rules, speech acts and politeness markers when it comes to expressing consideration and respect. Kasper and Rose (2001) note that speech communities assess social distance, social power, rights, obligations, and the level of imposition differently, leading to differences in sociopragmatic rules. Additionally, pragmalinguistic resources, such as linguistic structures used for speech acts and politeness, differ across languages. For example, the English structure "*I was wondering if you could/wouldn't mind...*" for making polite requests may not be literally translated into other languages like Persian. This highlights a challenge for language learners, who cannot rely solely on their native language's pragmatic rules when using a second language. Research indicates that even advanced learners may struggle to meet native speaker norms, leading to perceptions of being 'direct', 'insensitive', or 'rude'. Unlike native speakers, language learners may not use ‘mitigators’ to soften their speech acts and may unintentionally use ‘aggravators’, which can be seen as impolite (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001).

Furthermore, it is important to note that pragmatic competence is not contingent upon grammatical proficiency and does not progress in tandem with an increase in grammatical

competence. Bardovi-Harlig (2001) highlights that grammatical competence is not automatically assured by pragmatic competence. In fact, many advanced language learners may lack pragmatic competence and exhibit linguistic behavior that is not considered appropriate. Various studies have demonstrated that individuals with high grammatical proficiency may not necessarily excel in L2 pragmatic aspects (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Bouton, 1994; Boxer & Pickering, 1995; Kasper, 1997). Language learners, especially those in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts, often lack the opportunity to interact with native speakers, which hinders the development of their pragmatic competence. Additionally, English textbooks used in EFL contexts, particularly at universities, do not effectively cover pragmatic features and fail to provide learners with opportunities to practice them. Consequently, these textbooks cannot be relied upon as reliable sources of pragmatic input for classroom language learners (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001). Research has revealed that the pragmatic rules presented in English textbooks are not reflective of real-life conversations and differ from those used by native speakers (Bouton, 1996; Scotton & Bernsten, 1988).

There have been some studies investigating the relationship between grammatical competence (knowledge of language features, such as grammar and vocabulary) and pragmatic competence, as well as the effect of proficiency level on language learners' pragmatic behavior. However, they have provided mixed results, some studies revealing a strong positive relationship between grammatical and pragmatic competence and a significant effect of proficiency level on language learners' use and recognition of pragmatic features, while others indicating no such associations. Moreover, few researchers have explored these issues in the Iranian context. The present study was an attempt to further investigate and shed more light on the issue. To that end, the following research questions were put forth, and the corresponding null hypotheses were assumed.

RQ1: Is there any significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners' grammatical competence and their pragmatic competence?

RQ2: Is there any significant difference between Iranian intermediate and upper intermediate EFL learners' pragmatic competence?

2. Literature Review

Pragmatics delves into the examination of language within the context of its use; it is “the study of people’s comprehension and production of linguistic action in context” (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993, p. 3). Pragmatics focuses on how individuals convey or deduce meanings in context that go beyond linguistic meanings. Pragmatic competence refers to the knowledge that language users possess and employ to partake in communication, the "knowledge of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behavior in a particular situation" (Ellis, 2008, p. 956). It is a component of communicative competence, the ability which is required for successful communication.

Canale and Swain (1980) introduced a model of communicative competence which consists of four main components: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competence. Language users need all types of competence for effective and appropriate communication. Pragmatic competence is encompassed within Canale and Swain's (1980) framework as part of sociolinguistic competence, specifically referred to as 'rules of use'. Richards and Schmidt (2002) define these competences as:

> Grammatical competence (also formal competence), that is knowledge of the grammar, vocabulary, phonology, and semantics of a language; sociolinguistic competence (also sociocultural competence), that is, knowledge of the relationship between language and its nonlinguistic context, knowing how to use and respond appropriately to different types of speech acts, such as requests, apologies, thanks, and invitations, knowing which address forms should be used with different persons one speaks to and in different situations, and so forth; discourse competence (sometimes considered part of sociolinguistic competence), that is knowing how to begin and end conversations; and strategic competence, that is, knowledge of communication strategies that can compensate for weakness in other areas. (pp. 90–91)

2.1. Grammatical and pragmatic competence

Various instances of proficient language learners who exhibit pragmatic behavior that deviates from native speaker norms provide evidence that pragmatic development does not simply follow grammatical development. Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) highlight that even individuals with a high level of language proficiency frequently make pragmatic errors in their communication, such as failing to convey or understand the intended illocutionary force or politeness value. Bardovi-Harlig (2001, p. 28) argues that "grammatical competence does not guarantee pragmatic competence."

The research examining the relationship between grammar proficiency and pragmatic competence yielded inconclusive findings, with some studies showing a strong positive correlation and others finding no relationship between the two. Hankinson and Norrby (2005) conducted a comparison of pragmatic and grammatical development in Swedish EFL learners, revealing a correlation between native-like pragmatic command and a high level of morpho-syntactic proficiency. Ahmadi Safa and Mahmoodi (2012) revealed a significantly positive correlation between the learners' lexico-grammatical knowledge and pragmatic competence. However, Rattanaprasert and Aksornjarung (2011), investigating the relationship between learners' lexico-grammar knowledge and their pragmatic competence, demonstrated that high scores on the grammar and vocabulary test did not necessarily correspond to good performance on the test of pragmatic knowledge. Arghamiri and Sadighi (2013) found that proficiency level did not determine the learners' degree of pragmatic competence, as there was no significant relationship between proficiency level and performance on the employed DCT.

Many research studies (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Bouton, 1994; Boxer & Pickering, 1995; Kasper, 1997) have demonstrated that foreign language learners who exhibit high grammatical proficiency may not necessarily possess competence in the pragmatic aspects of the second language. Olshtain and Blum-Kulka (1985) noted that it has been repeatedly demonstrated in the literature that second language learners do not attain native communicative competence even at an advanced stage of learning or acquisition in the natural setting. Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1990) made a similar observation regarding graduate students at an American university. As Boxer and Pickering aptly stated:

> Grammatically advanced learners may not know how to use appropriate language in different situations and deviate from pragmatic norms of the target-language. One can find examples of pragmatic failure regarding L2 learners when they are involved in the communication acts. They may directly translate speech acts from their mother tongues into the FL when they are trying to get the intended meaning across. Unlike grammatical errors, pragmatic failures are often neglected by the teacher and sometimes are ascribed to some other causes, such as insolence. (p. 47)

Various research studies have highlighted the distinction between grammatical proficiency and pragmatic competence as two separate components of communicative competence. It has been suggested that the development of L2 pragmatic knowledge does not progress at the same rate as L2 grammatical knowledge, indicating an inherent difference between pragmatic competence and grammatical knowledge (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999; Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1990; Koike, 1989). Eslami-Rasekh (2005) revealed, through research on adult foreign and second language learners, that grammatical advancement does not guarantee a corresponding advancement in pragmatic skills. Even learners with high proficiency levels may struggle to understand or convey intended meanings and politeness values. Bardovi-Harlig (1999) synthesized findings from various studies, concluding that "interlanguage grammatical competence is not sufficient condition for interlanguage pragmatic competence" (p. 686).

Pragmatic competence does not necessarily accompany grammatical competence, but it seems to rely on grammatical proficiency. Without adequate grammatical knowledge, the development of pragmatic competence appears to be nearly impossible, or at the very least, extremely challenging. Furthermore, research has not proven the autonomy of pragmatic competence from grammatical competence. Bardovi-Harlig (1999) argues that while grammatical competence may not be sufficient for pragmatic development, it may be a necessary condition. In many instances, language learners' pragmatic errors can be attributed to their lack of grammatical competence. Olshtain and Cohen (1989) noted that nonnative speakers are often aware of the sociolinguistic necessity to apologize, yet due to their limited linguistic competence, they use incorrect language forms and produce speech acts that sound

abnormal or even lead to communication breakdown. A number of studies have associated nonnative speakers' pragmatic errors with their knowledge of lexicogrammar, or the lack thereof. Eisenstein and Bodman (1986) highlighted the importance of grammatical knowledge in pragmatic communication in their research article *'I Very Appreciate'*, where they observed significant syntactic and lexical problems in the written responses of advanced learners. Cohen and Olshtain (1993, p. 40) identified lexical development as the culprit behind an inappropriate request such as "I want to drive with you" instead of the more suitable "Could you give me a lift?"

However, the impact of grammatical competence on pragmatic development is still not fully understood, as indicated by Bardovi-Harlig (1999) and House (1996). Bardovi-Harlig (2001) adds that "it is not yet clear to what extent the development of pragmatic competence depends on grammatical competence" (p. 28).

2.2. Proficiency Level and Pragmatic Competence

Several comparative pragmatic studies have explored the impact of proficiency level of the learners on their pragmatic competence. These studies have typically found that lower-level language learners exhibit limited pragmatic competence, possess less knowledge of politeness features, and employ a restricted range of politeness markers, as well as more direct speech and incorrect hedges. In contrast, advanced language learners tend to display a greater resemblance to native speakers in their use of appropriate pragmatic features and politeness markers. They tend to make lengthier requests, utilize more conventionally indirect requests, and use fewer direct requests compared to lower-level learners. However, higher proficiency learners exhibit differences in behavior compared to native speakers, such as verbosity and a tendency to use more conventionally indirect utterances and longer requests. Their speech is characterized by an excessive use of politeness markers, syntactic downgraders, supportive moves, and double-marking. Minimal distinctions were found between intermediate and advanced language learners.

Scarcella (1979) discovered that low-level learners heavily relied on imperatives when making requests, while higher-level learners demonstrated sensitivity to the status of the interlocutors and limited the use of imperatives to equal familiars and subordinates. However,

the lower-level learners exhibited much less variety in the politeness markers they used and appeared to lack any distribution of politeness features. Takahashi and Beebe (1987) observed that high and low proficiency language learners differed in the frequency and order of semantic formulas they used, with lower-level learners being more direct in their refusals and the higher-level English as a second language (ESL) learners displaying a greater level of formality and a greater inclination to soften the directness of their refusals. Jalilifar (2009) conducted an investigation into the impact of proficiency level on the use of request strategies by Iranian EFL learners and Australian native speakers of English using a cross-sectional design. The researcher found that the pragmatic behavior of the higher-proficiency learners was more native-like than that of the lower-proficiency learners, and concluded that pragmatic development occurs on the part of EFL learners, especially in the movement from direct to conventionally indirect strategies. However, learners with higher proficiency showed an overuse of indirect request strategies, whereas lower proficiency learners were characterized by the use of the most direct strategy type.

However, some studies have presented findings that differ from those mentioned previously, suggesting that proficiency level may not have a significant impact on pragmatic competence. For instance, Kasper and Schmidt (1996) conducted a literature review which indicated that proficiency level might not greatly affect the variety of realization strategies employed by language learners. In another study, Omar (1991, as cited in Bardovi-Harlig, 1999) compared the greeting behavior of 16 beginner and 16 intermediate-advanced non-native speakers of Kiswahili. Through the analysis of elicited data, it was discovered that there was little disparity between the two groups, as both failed to adhere to the more intricate Kiswahili greeting customs compared to English. Additionally, Takahashi (1996) found that learners' perception of the transferability of first language request strategies was minimally influenced by proficiency level. Both learners with low and high-intermediate proficiency levels tended to rely on their native language request patterns when expressing requests in the second language.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants were 165 Iranian university students (144 female and 21 male learners) in the 18-25 age range, majoring in English Translation or English Language and Literature. Eighty-three of the participants were freshmen (second-semester students), and 82 were juniors (sixth-semester students). They were from eight intact university classes of 20-22 students at Hazrat Masoomeh University, Qom University, and Mofid University. Initially, a general proficiency test (TOEFL Test, 2002) was administered among the participants in order to homogenize the students at each proficiency level and compare the freshman and junior students in terms of their general proficiency. The results of the test revealed that the students at each proficiency level were homogeneous, except for five students, among the early 171 participants, who scored more than 2 standard deviations above/below the mean score of the proficiency level and were excluded as outliers. Moreover, the junior students exhibited a significantly higher level of language proficiency compared to the freshman students. Based on the TOEFL test results of the freshman and junior groups and taking into account the participants' length of study at university, the freshman students were categorized as intermediate EFL learners, while the junior students were classified as upper intermediate learners. This categorization was done in order to facilitate the generalization of the research findings.

3.2. Data Collection Instruments

The instruments which were used for data collection included a general proficiency test (TOEFL, 200), whose reliability was assessed, and a multiple-choice discourse completion test (MDCT), which was developed and validated by the researcher.

3.2.1. General Proficiency Test

The participants' general proficiency was assessed using the TOEFL Test (2002). The Listening Comprehension and Writing sections were omitted for practical reasons. The test, which was conducted in one session, consisted of (a) Structure and Written Expressions, and (b) Reading Comprehension and Vocabulary sections, with a total of 70 multiple-choice items. To determine the reliability of the test, a Cronbach's Alpha analysis was performed on the participants' TOEFL test scores. The analysis indicated a high level of reliability, with a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.84.

3.2.2. Discourse Completion Test

The researcher-made discourse completion test (DCT) comprised 12 multiple-choice items (see Appendix for some example items). Each item contained a scenario description in the stem, outlining a hypothetical situation including the setting, the individuals involved, the social distance and role relationship between the individuals, which necessitated the employment of a specific politeness marker. Each stem was accompanied by four alternative responses, requiring participants to carefully consider the given situation and select the most suitable option based on the context and social factors. Every response included a politeness marker, with only one option being deemed appropriate for the specific scenario.

In order to create the DCT, the initial step involved identifying the specific scenarios that necessitated the use of politeness markers. These scenarios were determined based on social variables such as social distance, role relationship between the individuals involved, and the level of imposition of the communicative act. Subsequently, the researcher examined the DCT items utilized in prior research studies, selecting those that aligned with the identified situations. Necessary adjustments were then made to the wording and choices of the items to suit the current study. In cases where no existing DCT items addressed certain politeness markers, the researcher took the initiative to develop new scenarios and options for the DCT.

Twenty-two English native speakers between the ages of 20 and 35 (19 Americans and three British individuals) were involved in assisting the researcher with the test development. These individuals were undergraduate students enrolled in religious courses at two Islamic Studies centers in Qom (Jameat Al Mostafa and Al Mahdi Center), who had relocated to Iran within the last six months. They willingly participated in the project by responding to the DCT items. Initially, two American native speakers reviewed and refined the first version of the DCT, enhancing the clarity and naturalness of the scenario descriptions and options, or suggesting suitable natural responses when none of the options were appropriate. For example, the phrase *'Your car is broken down outside the town'* was modified to '*Your car broke down outside the town'* and the sentence *'Sorry professor, but I thought you were going to give me a ride that one night.*' was proposed as an alternative to the less natural sentence *'Sorry but could I ask why you didn't give me a lift as you had promised.*' Subsequently, the revised version was

distributed among the remaining 20 native speakers. Responses chosen by at least 80% of the participants were deemed correct. A high level of agreement (ranging from 80% to perfect) was observed among the native speakers for 12 out of the initial 16 items, which were then included in the final DCT. The reliability analysis conducted on the DCT results confirmed the test's dependability, with a Cronbach's Alpha value of .73.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

Initially, the students of the eight intact university classes in the above-mentioned universities were requested to participate in the study, and they agreed to take part in the research. Subsequently, they were given the TOEFL Test to identify the proficiency level of the freshman and junior students. In the following session, the participants took the MDCT, and their performance on the test was scored by the researcher. Finally, the TOEFL and MDCT results were analyzed through SPSS (Version 27). The statistical techniques which were used to analyze the data included Pearson correlation analysis and the independent samples t-test.

4. Results

4.1. General Proficiency Test

Initially, the examination of the TOEFL test scores at each proficiency level indicated that five students (2 freshmen and 3 juniors) scored more than 2 standard deviations above/below the mean score and were excluded as outliers. The remaining participants in the two proficiency levels were homogeneous. Subsequently, an independent samples t-test was carried out on the TOEFL test scores of the freshman and junior students in order to ascertain if there was any significant difference between the freshman and junior students in terms of their general English proficiency. The results of the t-test [$t(163) = 7.85$, $p = .00$] demonstrated a notable distinction between the freshman and junior students.

The descriptive statistical data from the two groups (Table 1) indicated that the junior students exhibited a significantly greater overall proficiency compared to the freshmen students. Therefore, the superiority of the junior cohorts in general English was confirmed.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of the TOEFL Test Results

Level	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Freshmen	83	35.68	5.10	.56
Juniors	82	42.14	5.45	.60

4.2. Grammatical and Pragmatic Competence

The first research question concerned the relationship between EFL learners' grammatical competence (knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, etc.) and their pragmatic competence. It attempted to ascertain if the learners who have greater proficiency in general English have a greater knowledge of pragmatic features as well.

A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to determine the relationship between the participants' TOEFL and MDCT scores. The findings of this analysis can be observed in Table 2. The results revealed a noteworthy positive correlation ($r = .39$, $p = .00$) between the overall English proficiency (TOEFL test scores) and familiarity with English politeness markers (MDCT scores), leading to the rejection of the corresponding null hypothesis (There is no significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners' grammatical competence and their pragmatic competence.).

Table 2

Correlations Analysis between TOEFL and MDCT Scores

	General Proficiency	Discourse Completion
Pearson Correlation		.39
Sig. (2-tailed)		.00
N		165

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The findings indicated that, on the whole, EFL learners with higher language proficiency tend to have a better understanding of English pragmatic features. Nevertheless, the correlation coefficient ($r = .39$) showed a moderate value, suggesting that factors such as

duration of study and exposure to university courses also play a role in influencing students' pragmatic skills.

4.3. Proficiency Level and Pragmatic Competence

The second research question pertained to the impact of proficiency level on the pragmatic competence of language learners. It sought to determine whether EFL learners at an upper intermediate proficiency level can demonstrate notably superior performance compared to intermediate learners on a measure of pragmatic competence.

The performance of the intermediate and upper intermediate groups on the MDCT was examined and contrasted using an independent samples t-test to address the above-mentioned research question. The analysis of the two groups' performance indicated a notable distinction between the two proficiency levels. The independent samples t-test (Table 3) comparing the MDCT scores yielded the following findings: t (163) = 2.16, p = .032.

Table 3

Independent Samples t-Test Analysis of Freshman and Junior Groups' MDCT Results

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
	F	Sig.	t	df.	Sig. (2-tailed	Mea Difference	Std. Error Difference
Equal variances assumed	.84	.34	2.16	163	.032	.47	.21

Table 4 presents the descriptive statistics for the MDCT results of the intermediate and upper intermediate groups. The results show that the upper intermediate groups performed better than the intermediate groups. With a significant difference between the two proficiency levels, it can be concluded that the upper intermediate students excelled over the intermediate students in their understanding of English pragmatic features. Consequently, the corresponding null hypothesis (There is no significant difference between Iranian intermediate and upper intermediate EFL learners' pragmatic competence.) was rejected.

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics of Freshman and Junior Groups' MDCT Results

Level	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Freshmen	83	5.78	1.44	.159
Juniors	82	6.25	1.38	.150

5. Discussion

The present study tried to investigate the relationship between grammatical and pragmatic competence and the effect of proficiency level on EFL learners' knowledge of pragmatic features. The first research question concerned the relationship between grammatical knowledge of intermediate and upper intermediate EFL learners and their pragmatic competence, and the results of the data analysis revealed that there is a significant relationship between the two competences, and learners who have a greater grammatical knowledge feature a higher level of pragmatic competence. Previous research has indicated that although pragmatic development does not depend on grammatical development and the increase in grammar knowledge does not guarantee an increase in the knowledge of pragmatic features (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Kaspe, 1997; Olshtain & Blum-Kulka, 1985), there might be a moderate go-togetherness in the development of grammatical and pragmatic competences. It might be the case that when learners are exposed to language data, they might pick up some knowledge of pragmatic features from the received input in parallel with deducing grammar knowledge. Xu et al. (2017) demonstrated that their Chinese students developed their pragmatic comprehension and production in tandem with enhancing their grammar accuracy over an academic year. However, as the correlation coefficient between the two competences in the present study was a moderate one (rxy = 0.39), it could be concluded that grammatical knowledge is not the only factor influencing pragmatic development, and other factors such as interaction with native speakers, being exposed to more conversational data such as movies and plays, and direct instruction of pragmatic features are influential in pragmatic development. The finding is in line with the studies which revealed a significant relationship between

grammatical and pragmatic competences (e.g., Ahmadi Safa & Mahmoodi, 2012; Hankinson & Norrby, 2005).

However, the previous research examining the connection between grammatical proficiency and pragmatic competence has yielded inconsistent findings, with some studies indicating a significant positive correlation while others suggesting no such relationship. Ahmadi Safa and Mahmoodi (2012) identified a notable positive correlation between learners' pragmatic competence and their lexico-grammatical knowledge. In a comparative study of pragmatic and grammatical development among Swedish EFL learners, Hankinson and Norrby (2005) found a link between native-like pragmatic skills and advanced morpho-syntactic proficiency. Conversely, Rattanaprasert and Aksornjarung (2011), investigating the relationship between learners' grammatical knowledge and their pragmatic competence, observed that participants with high scores on grammar and vocabulary assessments did not necessarily excel in pragmatic tests. Additionally, the findings of Arghamiri and Sadighi (2013) indicated no significant correlation between learners' proficiency levels and their performance on the designated DCT. The current study aligns with research supporting a significant positive correlation between grammatical proficiency and pragmatic competence, revealing a positive relationship between scores on the TOEFL and MDCT assessments.

The second research question explored the effect of proficiency level on pragmatic competence of Iranian EFL learners. The performance of the intermediate and upper intermediate groups on a DCT was compared, and the results indicated that the upper intermediate group significantly outperformed the intermediate group. Thus, it can be concluded that Iranian upper intermediate language learners are superior to intermediate learners in terms of pragmatic competence. The finding can be justifiable considering these learners' higher general proficiency, longer exposure to the second language, more interaction with peers and professors, and other related factors. Studies conducted on the pragmatic skills and abilities of lower-level and higher-level EFL learners have consistently shown a significant gap between the two groups, with advanced learners demonstrating a higher level of competence compared to their lower-level counterparts (Azarmi & Behnam, 2012; Hill, 1997; Jalilifar, 2009; Scarcella, 1979; Trosborg, 1987). On the other hand, previous research has

suggested that there is minimal disparity between intermediate and upper intermediate learners in terms of pragmatic competence.

Pragmatic behavior of language learners at different proficiency levels has been shown to vary considerably. Research comparing learners across various proficiency levels has consistently indicated that advanced learners exhibit a greater understanding of pragmatic features. In contrast, lower-level language learners demonstrate limited awareness of these features, utilizing a narrow array of politeness markers, exhibiting less indirect speech, and employing inappropriate hedges. Advanced learners, however, tend to align more closely with native speakers in their application of suitable pragmatic features, such as politeness markers, although their behavior still diverges from that of native speakers. Specifically, higher-level learners are noted for producing a greater number of conventionally indirect requests while minimizing direct requests. Nonetheless, their speech often includes an overabundance of politeness markers, syntactic downgrading, supportive moves, and double-marking, distinguishing it from that of native speakers. Scarcella (1979) observed that lower-level learners predominantly relied on imperatives when making requests, whereas higher-level learners demonstrated an awareness of the interlocutor's status, limiting their use of imperatives to interactions with peers and subordinates. Hill (1997) reported that lower-level learners frequently employed direct requests, while advanced learners did so much less often. Conversely, a contrasting trend was noted in the use of conventionally indirect requests. Additionally, Azarmi and Behnam (2012) analyzed the responses of intermediate and upper-intermediate learners to a DCT of the complaint speech act, revealing that these two groups utilized different speech act types in various contexts. However, Farnia and Raja Rozina (2009) found no significant differences in the thanking strategies employed by advanced and intermediate Iranian EFL learners. Thus, the findings of the present study align with research findings that made a distinction between higher and lower level learners' pragmatic competence; however, unlike the studies which indicated that there is no significant difference between intermediate and upper intermediate EFL learners, the present study demonstrated a significant disparity between the two proficiency levels.

However, the moderate correlation between grammatical and pragmatic competence and the modest difference between intermediate and upper intermediate learners' pragmatic competence in the present study further suggests that "grammatical competence does not guarantee pragmatic competence" (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001, p. 28). Thus, the researcher recommends that pragmatic features be incorporated into language teaching materials and courses. Moreover, further studies should probe the effect of instructional intervention on pragmatic development. There have been some studies investigating the effect of different teaching methods and techniques on pragmatic competence (Ahmadian, 2018; Author & Colleague, 2020; Bagherkazemi, 2020; Canbolat et al., 2021; Matsumura, 2022; Pérez Vidal & Shively, 2019; Sykes & Cohen, 2018), but the findings have been mixed and inconclusive. Thus, it is suggested that more research be done on pragmatic development and the factors affecting it. Moreover, interested researchers can work on other proficiency levels and investigate the effects of other factors such as motivation, age, and gender on pragmatic development.

6. Conclusion

The present study investigated the relationship between grammatical and pragmatic competences and the effect of proficiency level (intermediate versus upper intermediate) on pragmatic competence of Iranian EFL learners and demonstrated both a significant relationship and a significant effect. However, the values for the correlation and the difference were not very large, indicating that grammatical competence and proficiency level are moderate indicators of pragmatic development and some kind of instruction is required for pragmatic development. Interested researchers can delve into the effects of various factors and teaching methods on pragmatic development. Meanwhile, teachers and materials developers are recommended to include pragmatic features in their English courses and materials. Furthermore, teachers are recommended to develop their own supplementary instructional materials for teaching pragmatic features or occasionally draw learners' attention to pragmatic features.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) certify/certifies that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest (such as honoraria; educational grants; participation in speakers' bureaus; membership, employment, consultancies, stock ownership, or other equity interest; and expert testimony or patent-licensing arrangements), or non-financial interest (such as personal or professional relationships, affiliations, knowledge or beliefs) in the subject matter or materials discussed in the present research paper.

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Appendix

Examples of multiple-choice discourse completion test items

1- Your car broke down outside the town, and you see a man who is going to get into his car, parked by the side of the road. You want to ask him for a ride. You approach him and say:

a. You are taking me to the town, will you?

b. If you give me a lift into town, I'll pay you 20 dollars.

c. Excuse me, sir, my car broke down; could you please give me a lift into town?

d. Sir, can I ask you something? I was wondering if you would mind if I asked you to give me a lift into town.

2- You go to the library to return a lot of books, and your hands are full. As you stand near the door, a man who looks like a professor walks up to the door of the library. You want to ask him to open the door. What would you say?

a. My hands are full.
b. Please open the door.
c. Would you open the door?
d. Excuse me, sir, but would you mind opening the door?

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