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Pragmatic Comprehension of High and Low Level Language Learners

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Abstract

This study compares the performances of 16 advanced and 19 beginning English language learners on a listening comprehension task that focused on linguistic and pragmatic processing. Processing pragmatic meaning differs from processing linguistic meaning because pragmatic meaning requires the listener to understand not only linguistic information, such as vocabulary and syntax, but also contextual information, such as the role and status of the interlocutor (Rost, 2002). The study used a theoretical framework of pragmatic processing (Thomas, 1995) that included the comprehension of speech acts, in which the speaker tries to do something or get the hearer to do something (Searle, 1969), and conversational implicatures, in which the speaker expresses attitudes and feelings using indirect utterances that must be inferred by the hearer (Grice, 1975). T-test results indicate developmental differences in comprehension of pragmatic meaning. Pearson correlation results support construct differences between linguistic and pragmatic comprehension, and between the comprehension of speech acts and the comprehension of implicatures.

Pragmatic Comprehension of High and Low Level Language Learners: Differences in Construct

Pragmatic ability, which is an important part of the language proficiency construct (Bachman, 1990; Canale, 1983; Canale and Swain, 1980), is the ability to use language appropriately according to the communicative situation. The importance of the pragmatic dimension in the language ability construct is not disputed, yet its role in interlanguage development has only recently begun to be researched empirically, particularly within the aspect of comprehension (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999; Kasper & Rose, 1999). Pragmatic comprehension refers to the comprehension of oral language in terms of pragmatic meaning. English language learners need to be able to comprehend meaning pragmatically in order to: [-1-]

- understand a speaker's intentions;
- interpret a speaker's feelings and attitudes;
- differentiate speech act meaning, such as the difference between a directive and a commissive;
- evaluate the intensity of a speaker's meaning, such as the difference between a suggestion and a warning;
- recognize sarcasm, joking, and other facetious behavior; and

- be able to respond appropriately.

In one model of pragmatic ability, pragmatic comprehension can be characterized as comprehension of speech acts and conversational implicatures (Thomas, 1995). In speech acts, the speaker is trying to do something or trying to get the hearer to do something (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). In conversational implicatures, the speaker expresses attitudes and feelings using indirect utterances that must be inferred by the hearer (Grice, 1975; Sperber & Wilson, 1995). The comprehension of pragmatic meaning can be differentiated from linguistic comprehension because it requires the listener to understand not only linguistic information, such as vocabulary and syntax, but also contextual information, such as the role and status of the interlocutor, the physical setting of the conversation, and the types of communicative acts that would likely occur in that context (Rost, 2002; Van Dijk, 1977).

Questions related to the pragmatic comprehension of second language (L2) learners include: Are there developmental differences in the comprehension of pragmatic meaning? Is pragmatic comprehension different from linguistic comprehension? Is the ability to comprehend speech acts different from the ability to comprehend conversational implicatures? In order to investigate these questions, this study analyzed the performances of high-level and low-level English language learners on a listening comprehension task that focused on linguistic and pragmatic comprehension.

Pragmatic Comprehension: Speech Acts and Conversational Implicatures

Comprehension of speech acts and conversational implicatures involves the integration of information from a wide range of linguistic sources (i.e., phonetic, syntactic, and semantic) to comprehend a contextually appropriate utterance that reveals a speaker's intentions and attitude. In the comprehension of speech acts, the hearer recognizes what the speaker is doing with an utterance; in other words, the hearer must be able to understand the illocutionary force and respond to it. In everyday language use, people use speech acts to do things such as make requests, give advice, and extend offers and invitations. In much of the research on L2 pragmatic competence, linguists have studied how L2 learners produce speech acts (e.g., Cohen & Olshtain, 1993; Takahashi, 1996); and, there is a smaller, but growing, body of research on how L2 learners comprehend these utterances (e.g., Cook & Liddicoat, 2002; Kasper, 1984; Koike, 1996; Takahashi & Roitblat, 1994). [-2-]

In the comprehension of conversational implicatures, the hearer recognizes what the speaker thinks; in other words, the hearer infers the speaker's attitudes or feelings. Interpretations are based on the assumption that the speaker is communicating co-operatively (Grice, 1975; Levinson, 1983) guided by Grice's four maxims of the Co-operative Principle. These maxims were unified into a single theory that Sperber and Wilson (1995) called Relevance Theory. Under Relevance Theory, hearers use a process of hypothesis formation and confirmation in order to arrive at the correct interpretation of an utterance. The hearer assumes that the speaker's utterance is relevant to the previous discourse and seeks the most relevant and accessible interpretation of the intended meaning, usually deriving meaning from the context of the talk. Take for example the following exchange between two roommates:

A: Are the neighbors on vacation?
B: I haven't seen their car all week.

In this exchange, speaker B provides an answer that requires speaker A to infer that the neighbors are on vacation because speaker B does not explicitly say, "Yes, they are," or "Yes, I think they are." Although speaker B's answer appears to be a violation of relevance theory, it is, in fact, entirely relevant. The seeming violation becomes a signal to the hearer that more is being said than what is on the surface level; that is, speaker B hasn't seen the car, and therefore, he thinks the neighbors are indeed on vacation. Levinson (1983) explained that speakers do not always "adhere to these maxims on a superficial level, but rather that, wherever possible people will interpret what we say as conforming to [Grice's] maxims on at least some level" (p. 103).

Correctly interpreting conversational implicatures requires the listener to form hypotheses about what the speaker thinks and feels based on the combination of propositional content of the utterance and the context in which it was uttered. Misunderstandings and misinterpretations, for native (NS) and nonnative speakers (NNS) alike, are always possible (Leech, 1983; Mey, 1993, Thomas, 1983). As with speech acts, few studies have focused on how L2 learners comprehend implicatures (e.g., Bouton, 1988, 1992; Roever, 2001, Taguchi, 2003).

Pragmatic Comprehension vs. Linguistic Comprehension

Van Dijk (1977) proposed a theory of pragmatic comprehension made up of two main processes: context analysis and utterance analysis. In context analysis, language users analyze the meaning of an utterance based on the context in which it was uttered by using background

knowledge, past experiences, and knowledge of social rules. They also apply their own expectations of plausible goals of the speaker and expectation of the kinds of utterances that are likely to take place in that particular context. They decide which information to focus attention on, for example, the location of an interaction rather than the hair color of the speaker. This attention to relevant elements has been referred to as "salience" by Verschueren (1999).

Context analysis provides only a part of the information used to comprehend pragmatically; comprehension must finally be based on an analysis of the utterance itself. In utterance analysis, language users analyze semantic (e.g., speech parts, modality), syntactic (e.g., sentence forms, word order), lexical (e.g., word choice, fixed phrases), phonological (e.g., intonation, stress), and paralinguistic (e.g., gesticulation, facial expressions) information to interpret the meaning of an utterance. [-3-]

These same linguistic and paralinguistic elements can be applied to linguistic comprehension (Flowerdew, 1994; Lynch, 1998; Rost, 2002), which leads to the question: What is the difference between linguistic comprehension and pragmatic comprehension? The difference lies in the application of context analysis, following Van Dijk's (1977) model. Pragmatic comprehension includes linguistic comprehension, but it also involves sociolinguistic knowledge and context analysis. In other words, the two types of comprehension involve the same linguistic elements, but pragmatic comprehension involves an added dimension, namely context analysis.

Empirical evidence supports the separation of pragmatic processing skills from linguistic comprehension skills for native English speakers (e.g., Clark, 1991; Colombo, 1993; Gibbs, 1999; Gibbs & Moise, 1997; Holtgraves, 1999; Leinonen, Ryder, Ellis, & Hammond, 2003). In a recent study of native English-speaking children, Leinonen, et al. (2003) found that 17 language-impaired children (5 to 10 year-olds) comprehended implicatures at a success rate similar to 4 to 5 year-old children of normal cognitive ability, but had less success than the older children of normal functioning (7 to 9 year-olds). Furthermore, the language tests used to assess the children's linguistic comprehension did not indicate their success on the pragmatic comprehension task. These findings led the researchers to conclude that there are differences in the processing of pragmatic meaning compared to linguistic meaning. The present study attempts to explore differences in pragmatic comprehension and linguistic comprehension in the case of L2 learners by comparing two groups of learners at different proficiency levels.

Pragmatic Comprehension and Second Language Learners

Investigations of L2 learner's pragmatic comprehension have focused on how participants interpret speech acts and conversational implicatures. Several studies have found strong evidence for developmental differences among L2 learners in the comprehension of speech acts (e.g., Cook & Liddicoat, 2002; Hoffman-Hicks, 1992; Kasper, 1984; Koike, 1996). In addition, there has been some evidence of construct differences between linguistic comprehension and pragmatic comprehension of speech acts. In a study of 14 university-level French learners, Hoffman-Hicks (1992), found differences between students' ability to select pragmatically and linguistically appropriate responses in a variety of contexts. Hoffman-Hicks interpreted the results as evidence that there are two kinds of competence: linguistic and pragmatic.

For L2 learners, who may not have sufficient linguistic skills to fully interpret an utterance at the surface level, the ability to comprehend pragmatic meaning can be problematic (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999). Unfamiliar communicative situations and over-reliance on linguistic cues may contribute to L2 learners' difficulty in matching the utterance to a familiar context, thus hindering comprehension. In their study of 50 high-proficiency and 50 low-proficiency English learners, Cook and Liddicoat (2002) concluded that higher-proficiency L2 learners could process both contextual knowledge and linguistic knowledge in the comprehension of speech acts because they have achieved higher levels of language processing automaticity. The lower-proficiency learners, however, had not achieved such automated processing, and therefore relied only on bottom-up processing of linguistic information, resulting in miscomprehension of the speech acts. [-4-]

There have been fewer investigations of L2 learner's comprehension of conversational implicatures (e.g., Bouton, 1988, 1992; Roever, 2001; Taguchi, 2003). Research studies conducted by Bouton (1988, 1992), in which participants had to select responses with similar meanings to specific implicatures, resulted in developmental differences in the comprehension of implicatures. Roever (2001) analyzed comprehension of implicatures and speech acts through a web-based task in which participants selected one of four answer choices that accurately conveyed the meaning of the implied utterance. Participants included 181 German high school students, 25 Japanese college students in Japan, 94 ESL students at an American university, and 14 native speakers. Apart from significant differences in ability-level, Roever also found that conversational implicatures and speech acts demonstrated a moderate correlation (r^2=0.59).

The problem of breaking down the pragmatic comprehension construct into speech acts and conversational implicatures has not been explored sufficiently in the L2 pragmatic comprehension literature. This aspect needs to be worked out so that we can approach the various dimensions of pragmatic comprehension in language teaching, materials development, and language testing. This study attempts to shed

light on the construct of pragmatic comprehension by comparing the performances of two groups of English language learners.

The Present Study

The current study explored two main subproblems. The first subproblem was to determine if there were developmental differences in the comprehension of pragmatic meaning. Such differences could lend support to the existing research showing that high-level learners have better comprehension of speech acts and conversational implicatures (e.g., Cook & Liddicoat, 2002; Roever, 2001). The second subproblem explored the relationship between comprehension of pragmatic meaning and linguistic meaning. It has been theorized that language learners use both pragmatic knowledge and linguistic knowledge to comprehend meaning, but they apply either knowledge with varying success depending on their ability levels. By targeting two types of comprehension constructs, linguistic and pragmatic, differences between these two abilities might become apparent. Furthermore, the pragmatic comprehension construct could be further explored by separating comprehension of speech acts from comprehension of conversational implicatures. In order to explore these two subproblems, five research questions (RQs) were addressed.

Subproblem 1: Developmental differences in pragmatic comprehension

1. Do the two groups, high and low, perform differently from each other on the linguistic comprehension (LC) sub-task?
2. Do the two groups perform differently from each other on the pragmatic comprehension (PC) sub-task?
3. Do the two groups perform differently on speech acts and implicature subsections? [-5-]

Subproblem 2: Relationships between task subparts

4. To what degree do the high group's scores on LC and PC subparts correlate? To what degree do the low group's scores correlate?
5. To what degree do the high group's scores on speech act and implicature subsections correlate? To what degree do the low group's scores correlate?

RQs 1, 2, and 3 investigated the developmental differences in pragmatic comprehension of English language learners by comparing the performances of two groups of learners, high and low, on a pragmatic listening comprehension task and matching those differences to scores on the linguistic sub-task. RQs 4 and 5 sought to find out if linguistic comprehension and pragmatic comprehension required different abilities, and if pragmatic comprehension could be further broken down into the ability to comprehend speech acts and the ability to comprehend conversational implicatures.

It was hypothesized that in answer to RQs 1, 2, and 3, the high-level participants would outperform the low-level group on all sub-sections of the task. This hypothesis was motivated by the need to determine if the pragmatic comprehension task differentiated learners of different abilities. Addressing RQs 4 and 5, it was hypothesized that results would yield moderate correlations, indicating that the subtests assess related, yet not identical abilities. This hypothesis was motivated by Roever's (2001) finding of a moderate correlation between speech act and conversational implicature sub-sections.

Methodology

Participants

The 35 participants ranged in age from 18 to 42 and represented two groups: nonnative English speakers of high ability (High), and nonnative English speakers of low ability (Low). The High group (n=16) comprised graduate-level MA-TESL and Applied Linguistics PhD students. They had an average of 20 months, or 1 and three-quarters years in the United States. The Low group (n=19) comprised undergraduate-level students in an intensive English program. They had an average of 5 months in the United States. Participants spoke a variety of language backgrounds: 9 spoke Japanese, 7 spoke Korean, 5 spoke Arabic, 4 spoke Spanish, 3 spoke Chinese, 2 spoke Russian, and one each spoke Dutch, Portuguese, Hungarian, Haitian Creole, and Turkish.

These two groups differ greatly in terms of their exposure to English in the United States (i.e., 5 vs. 20 months) and in terms of their exposure to pragmatics as a field of study. Some of the graduate-level MA and PhD students had studied pragmatics and therefore, their results may have been influenced by background knowledge. This influence may limit the generalizability of the findings of this study. [-6-]

Instrument

The pragmatic listening comprehension task was a multiple-choice task made up of 48 items. The listening prompts (see Appendix A) used in the task consisted of six tape-recorded dialogues extracted from a corpus of academic spoken language that was collected at Northern Arizona University in the late 1990s. Two of the dialogues were service encounters between a university student and an office worker. Three dialogues were conversations between a professor and a student during office hours. And one dialogue was a conversation between two university students. These conversations were selected because they represent the kinds of conversations English language learners would likely encounter when studying at an American university.

A set of listening comprehension items was written for each dialogue by the researcher and piloted with a group of 5 nonnative English speakers. Each set of items consisted of a linguistic comprehension (LC) questions and pragmatic comprehension (PC) questions (see Appendix B).The LC task involved the processing of the listening text on a literal semantic level, and did not involve pragmatic comprehension such as interpretation of speech acts and inferencing of implicatures. LC questions required participants to: understand the main idea of the listening text, be able to predict what an interlocutor would do next by drawing conclusions from the overall meaning of the conversation, and locate details such as names, dates, numbers, and isolated facts from the listening text. These item types represent the typical items used to assess language learners' ability to comprehend meaning at the linguistic level (Buck, 2001; Shohamy & Inbar, 1991).

PC was comprised of comprehension of speech acts and comprehension of conversational implicatures. Speech act comprehension involved understanding what the speaker wanted the hearer to do as in requesting, or what the speaker wanted the hearer to know as in correcting. The speech acts subsection included four types of speech acts delivered in an indirect manner, all of which have been investigated in previous second language research. The speech act types were requesting (Niki & Tajika, 1994), suggesting (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1993; Hernandez-Flores, 1999), correcting (Takahashi & Beebe, 1993), and offering (Fukushima, 1991).

Below is an example of an indirect request and the task item that focused on the comprehension of this part of the conversation, which takes place in an office where students pay their housing bills. Note that this is a short excerpt; participants heard more of the conversation that is presented below. See Appendix A for the whole conversation.

Excerpt from Conversation 1:

Service provider: OK because they're charging you for a double I mean for a single. They're charging for a . . . the whole room . . . um
Student: Oh OK that's not right. I got to get that fixed. [-7-]

7. The man says, "Oh OK that's not right. I got to get that fixed."

[PC, Speech Act-Request]
What is another way for the man to say this?

1. You have to change my housing bill.
2. My room needs to be fixed.
3. Please help me fix this problem.*
4. I will fix my housing bill myself.

This item and others like it seem to have more than one correct answer but only one answer was correct **and** pragmatically appropriate. Participants who had a high level of knowledge about pragmatic appropriacy given the contexts of the conversations were able to answer correctly.

Comprehension of conversational implicatures involved understanding the attitude of the speaker and what the speaker intended to convey. This subsection consisted of two types of implicatures: general and specific. General implicatures involved using expectations of the context in order to calculate a speaker's attitude or intention from the interaction overall, not just a single utterance. Specific implicatures were single utterances that required the hearer to infer the speaker's meaning. Whereas specific conversational implicatures have been previously researched (Bouton, 1988; Roever, 2001), general implicatures have not. They represent a novel type of implicature developed to target comprehension of interlocutor's attitudes and intentions over a cohesive sequence of utterances, a research area that has been called for by theorists (Levinson, 1983; Van Dijk, 1977). Table 1 shows the number of items per comprehension type included in the task.

Table 1

Table of Specifications for Pragmatic Listening Comprehension Task

Comprehension Domain		
Linguistic Comprehension	**Pragmatic Comprehension**	
(24 items) • main idea • details • prediction	Speech Acts (12 items) • requests (4 items) • offers (4 items) • suggestions (2 items) • corrections (2 items)	Implicatures (12 items) • general (7 items) • specific (5 items)

[-8-]

In order to assess the internal validity of the pragmatic listening comprehension task, agreement between the researcher and three applied linguists was calculated. The applied linguists judged task items by identifying the types of speech acts and implicatures used in the items. Kappa coefficient was used to calculate agreement instead of percent agreement because Kappa takes chance into account, and therefore, does not overestimate the agreement (Hayes & Hatch, 1999). Agreement coefficients ranged from 0.71 to 0.83 based on the 24 speech act and implicature items rated. These are moderate levels of agreement, and are sufficient given the brief training session in which the coding rubric was normalized. (See Appendix C for the definitions of speech acts and implicatures used by the raters.)

Procedures

The task was administered in groups of up to 15 participants in sessions that lasted from 45 minutes to an hour. After responding to a short questionnaire and signing the informed consent form, participants were given brief instructions on how to fill out the answer sheet (see Appendix A for instructions and materials). Then, they were instructed to read the first set of items before listening to the first dialogue. After hearing the dialogue the first time, participants were given 30 seconds to 1 minute to answer the first set of items, usually about three to five items. Then they heard the dialogue a second time. After the second playing of the dialogue, participants were given as much time as they needed to finish answering the items related to that dialogue. The amount of time needed to complete the items in a set ranged from 3 to 5 minutes and did not vary greatly from group to group. The remainder of the task was administered in the same manner.

Results

Results were tabulated by marking each item correct or incorrect for each participant and entered onto a spreadsheet for carrying out statistical analysis (i.e., SPSS). Reliability of the pragmatic listening comprehension task was calculated using Cronbach's Alpha. Based on the 48 items and 35 participants, Alpha was 0.85, reflecting a sufficient level of internal reliability. Mean scores and standard deviations for the two groups were determined and are presented in Table 2. These results show that there were differences in linguistic and pragmatic listening comprehension abilities between high and low-level learners, with the High group scoring consistently higher on all parts of the task. [-9-]

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics on the Whole Task and Subsections

	Mean	Standard Deviation	SEM

Whole Task (k = 48) • High (n=16) • Low (n=19)	39.2 27.0	3.5 4.9	0.9 1.1
Linguistic Comprehension (k = 24) • High • Low	21.1 14.8	1.5 3.1	0.4 0.7
Pragmatic Comprehension (k = 24) • High • Low	18.1 12.2	2.5 2.8	0.6 0.6
Speech Acts Subsection (k = 12) • High • Low	9.0 6.1	1.4 1.6	0.4 0.4
Implicatures Subsection (k = 12) • High • Low	9.1 6.1	1.9 2.0	0.5 0.4

Note: k = number of items

In order to determine if the differences in scores were significant, independent samples T-tests were run. The T-tests resulted in significant differences between the High and Low groups (see Table 3).

Table 3

Independent T-Tests Between High and Low Ability Learners on Whole Task and

Subsections

	t	df	Sig.
Whole Task	8.3*	33	0.00
Linguistic comprehension	7.8*	33	0.00
Pragmatic Comprehension	6.5*	33	0.00
Speech Acts Subsection	5.7*	33	0.00
Implicatures Subsection	4.6*	33	0.00

* $p < 0.01$ [-10-]

The relationships between the comprehension of linguistic and pragmatic subparts, and between the speech acts and conversational implicatures subsections were determined by Pearson correlation. Correlations were calculated for each group separately in order to meet the assumption of equal variances. If correlations were calculated for both groups combined, the assumption of equal variances would be violated due to the significant differences between the high and low-level groups' means. Results yielded low correlations between linguistic and pragmatic subparts, and between speech act and conversational implicatures subsections (see Table 4).

Table 4

Pearson r and r 2 between Task Subsections for Both Groups, High , and

Low

	Linguistic *vs.* Pragmatic Comprehension		Speech Acts *vs.* Implicatures	
	r	r^2	r	r^2
High (n = 16)	0.45	0.20	0.15	0.02
Low (n = 19)	0.39	0.15	0.24	0.06

* $p < 0.01$

Discussion

In answer to the first subproblem seeking developmental differences in the comprehension of linguistic and pragmatic meaning, T-test results showed that there were significant differences between high and low-level learners' abilities. The High group significantly outperformed the Low group on linguistic comprehension, pragmatic comprehension, comprehension of speech acts, and comprehension of conversational implicatures. These results concur with the previous research on pragmatic comprehension ability (Cook & Liddicoat, 2002; Kasper, 1984; Koike, 1996). These results also substantiate the usefulness of the task in reliably differentiating between groups based on ability level. [-11-]

The second subproblem explored the relationships between linguistic and pragmatic comprehension, and between comprehension of speech acts and comprehension of conversational implicatures. The results showed that there were low correlations between the two sets of subparts. In the case of linguistic versus pragmatic comprehension ($r^2 = .20$), there was a 20% overlap of ability for the High learners, and a 15% overlap for Low learners ($r^2 = .15$). These results support L2 English (Hoffman-Hicks, 1992) and first language English (Leinonen, *et al.*, 2003) research showing that linguistic competence is distinct from pragmatic competence.

Another outcome was that the High group demonstrated a slightly higher correlation between linguistic comprehension and pragmatic comprehension (see Table 4) than the Low group, representing a degree of difference. This 5% difference in degree, although not a large difference, may be explained by the possibility that as language learners acquire greater proficiency, the ability to process contextual knowledge simultaneously with linguistic knowledge becomes automatized, as concluded by Cook and Liddicoat (2002). The Low group, not having achieved the high level of automaticity required to comprehend pragmatic meaning, relied more on bottom-up linguistic processing. Therefore, the comprehension of pragmatic meaning represents a different set of skills to a greater degree for the Low group than for the High group due to the Low group's lower level of language proficiency.

In the comprehension of speech acts compared to the comprehension of conversational implicatures, there was a mere 2% overlap of ability

for high-level learners, and only a 6% overlap for low level learners, reflecting a lack of relationship for these two constructs. These results indicate that comprehension of speech acts can be differentiated from comprehension of conversational implicatures. This finding contrasts slightly with those of Roever (2001), who found a moderate, but statistically significant, correlation between performances on speech acts and implicatures. This difference in findings may be due to the nature of Roever's speech act and implicature items: they may not have sufficiently distinguished between the two pragmatic ability types. Therefore, it can be concluded that task questions need to specifically target comprehension of speech acts and comprehension of conversational implicatures in order to tease out the differences between these two abilities. The way this was addressed in the current study was to use two types of implicature items, general and specific, and to utilize authentic conversations from a corpus as the listening task prompt.

These findings point out several implications for language teachers. Firstly, the supported distinction between linguistic competence and pragmatic competence means that L2 English learners can benefit from targeted focus on pragmatic comprehension. This can be done by using authentic language samples to provide practice with how native English speakers express themselves pragmatically, not just linguistically. A dual focus on pragmatic and linguistic meaning will provide learners, particularly low-level learners, with a fuller picture of English language use. Secondly, the distinction between speech act comprehension and conversational implicatures comprehension points out different areas of language use that ESL and EFL teachers can focus on when teaching pragmatic ability. Lessons can be designed around different speech act types, such as requests, offers, suggestions, etc. They can also focus on different conversational implicatures types, such as the general attitude of the speaker and the specific underlying meaning of utterances. It is beyond the scope of this study to describe teaching methods; a good source for seeking out methods for teaching pragmatics is Rose and Kasper (2001). [-12-]

The study presented here contributes to the literature on pragmatic comprehension and its difference from linguistic comprehension. The findings could have been enhanced if recall protocols had been conducted with the participants. Such follow-up interviews could have helped to uncover some of the cognitive processes and decision-making skills the participants used to complete task items. Another shortcoming of the study was the small n-size; the results of this study should be interpreted keeping this in mind. Nevertheless, in addition to answering questions about proficiency differences between learner groups and construct differences between pragmatic comprehension and linguistic comprehension, this study has also contributed a model of pragmatic comprehension that distinguishes between comprehension of speech acts and comprehension of conversational implicatures. And finally, this study has demonstrated how authentic, context-rich listening prompts can provide comprehension tasks that target pragmatic processing skills.

Conclusion

Pragmatic listening comprehension is an area of language ability that has not been investigated sufficiently considering its importance in the communicative competence models. The findings from this study distinguish pragmatic comprehension as a separate language skill from linguistic comprehension. They also show how pragmatic comprehension can be further classified into comprehension of speech acts and comprehension of conversational implicatures. These findings contribute to our understanding of the pragmatic comprehension construct. Language learning methodologists and researchers would be interested in investigating further this multi-faceted construct for use in language learning materials and assessments.

Another important observation is that the use of naturally-occurring language samples from authentic contexts, such as those found in a corpus, provide listening prompts that tap pragmatic comprehension abilities better than contrived examples can. Still, much more research on the construct of pragmatic comprehension needs to be done to fully understand this important component of communicative competence.

About the Author

Paula Garcia recently graduated from Northern Arizona University with her PhD in Applied Linguistics. Her dissertation was a corpus-based study of pragmatic meaning titled *Meaning in Academic Contexts*. She currently researches and analyzes assessment practices of online courses at NAU. [-13-]

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