

# Examining Egyptian ESL Learners' Grammatical and Pragmatic Awareness

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## Abstract

Proficiency in second language (L2) has traditionally been linked to grammatical competence. However, as opposed to common misconceptions about language learning, to be proficient in a second language does not only entail the ability to produce grammatically correct sentences, but it also entails the ability to use this language appropriately. The purpose of this study is to compare the pragmatic awareness of Egyptian students in an English-medium university to their grammatical awareness in an attempt to determine whether there is, in fact, a need for ESL instruction there to focus more on developing ESL learners' pragmatic awareness. Data were collected from 67 Egyptian ESL learners at two different proficiency levels by means of a judgment task questionnaire adapted from Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei's 1998 study. In-group comparisons revealed no significant differences between the grammatical awareness and the pragmatic awareness of the members within each proficiency group. The results of the cross-group comparisons indicated, however, that the high-proficiency group displayed a significantly higher level of grammatical awareness than the low-proficiency group. On the other hand, analysis of the difference in the pragmatic awareness between the high- and low-proficiency groups did not yield any significant results. This indicated that possessing a high proficiency level in an L2 does not necessarily entail a higher level of pragmatic awareness and that more focus should be placed on developing L2 learners' pragmatic ability.

**Keywords:** Interlanguage pragmatics, pragmatic awareness, grammatical awareness, communicative competence.

## **Introduction**

The ability to produce grammatically accurate sentences in a second language (L2) has been traditionally considered to be the primary and sometimes even the sole indicator of L2 proficiency. Contrary to popular belief, however, being proficient in a second language does not only mean that one is able to produce grammatically correct sentences, but it also entails the ability to use this language appropriately. According to Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1991), the development of grammatical competence in L2 usually takes place without placing enough emphasis on the development of the necessary pragmatic competence. This deficiency in pragmatic competence is one of the main causes of the discrepancy which usually exists between L2 learners' grammatical knowledge and their pragmatic knowledge.

The proposed study aims at comparing the extent to which Egyptian learners of English recognize grammatical violations versus pragmatic infelicities. By comparing the learners' awareness of grammatical errors to their pragmatic awareness, the researcher seeks to explore the discrepancy between the learners' grammatical and pragmatic awareness in an attempt to determine whether or not there is a need for ESL instruction in the academic context of an English-medium university in Egypt to focus more on developing ESL learners' pragmatic awareness.

Models of linguistic competence encompass grammatical competence as well as communicative competence (Finch, 2003). In turn, all major models of

communicative competence include pragmatics as a key component (Röver, 2011). In a recent model developed by Bachman and Palmer (2010), the construct of language knowledge was presented as comprising what they referred to as organizational knowledge and pragmatic knowledge. Under organizational knowledge Bachman and Palmer listed grammatical knowledge, which includes knowledge of lexis, syntax, and phonology/graphology. Pragmatic knowledge, on the other hand, was presented as a separate area of language knowledge dealing primarily with the relationship between the “communicative goals of the language user” and “the features of the language use setting” (Bachman & Palmer, 2010, p. 45).

In the field of Second Language Acquisition, research investigating the communicative competence of non-native speakers of a language falls under the purview of interlanguage pragmatics (ILP). This particular area of research is primarily concerned with the study of the "pragmatics of language learners" (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999) and the way non-native speakers use and acquire pragmatic knowledge (Barron, 2012).

The construct of interlanguage pragmatics has been explored using a number of various approaches. Many studies on interlanguage pragmatics have been conducted with the aim of comparing the pragmatic production of L2 learners to that of native speakers (Bella, 2012; Chang, 2009; Harlow, 1990; Sabaté i Dalmau, 2009; Smith, 2009) from a cross-cultural point of view. Studies of this nature have addressed a myriad of questions pertinent to pragmatics and

second language learning by analyzing the pragmatic output of L2 learners and comparing it to native speakers' pragmatic production.

While most of the research on interlanguage pragmatics has focused on cross-cultural differences and pragmatic transfer in the production of language learners' speech acts in L2, a relatively smaller number of studies examined learners' awareness of L2 pragmatics. Schauer (2006, 2009) points out that an even smaller number of studies have explored the relationship between pragmatic and grammatical awareness, the most important of which is the study conducted by Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998).

In a large-scale, seminal study, Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) investigated the grammatical and pragmatic awareness of a total of 543 learners of English in Hungary, the U. S. A., and Italy. The sample was intended to compare and contrast learners' grammatical and pragmatic awareness in an EFL and ESL context. The data was elicited using a judgment task designed to measure pragmatic and grammatical awareness in context. The participants were asked to watch a video with 20 scenarios, and to judge these scenarios in terms of grammaticality and pragmatic appropriateness. In addition, the participants were asked to rate the gravity of the identified errors and pragmatic violations using an answer sheet developed by the researchers.

Niezgoda and Röver (2001) and Schauer (2006) replicated Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei's (1998) study but in different contexts with different populations. While Niezgoda and Röver (2001) used ESL learners in Hawaii and EFL learners

from the Czech Republic, Schauer (2006) conducted her study on German learners of English in England (ESL) and German learners of English in Germany (EFL). The results of these three studies were relatively similar in that they indicated that learners in an ESL context tend to demonstrate a higher degree of pragmatic awareness than those in an EFL context. Another finding was that EFL learners typically tend to rate grammatical errors higher in severity than the participants in ESL contexts. Schauer (2009) summarizes the findings of this small number of studies comparing grammatical and pragmatic awareness by pointing out that the learners' proficiency level, the learning environment, and the learners' access to L2 input are the three most significant factors that affect their linguistic awareness in general, and their pragmatic awareness in particular.

Schauer (2009) notes that not enough attention has been given to the investigation of "the pragmatic and grammatical awareness of L2 learners in an integrated paradigm." (p. 22). In other words, there appears to be a gap in the body of ILP research examining this particular interrelationship between awareness of L2 grammar and L2 pragmatic norms. A survey of the literature on Interlanguage Pragmatics (ILP) also indicates the need to investigate this interrelationship in different contexts and with different types of learners. While earlier studies on pragmatic and grammatical awareness focused on the differences between ESL and EFL learners (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998; Niezgodna & Röver, 2001), the present study is situated in a different context. It investigates the pragmatic awareness of Egyptian English-medium university

students in relation to their awareness of grammaticality with the aim of contributing to this growing field of ILP research.

Teaching pragmatics does not receive due attention in the typical ESL classroom as opposed to grammar and vocabulary. Smith (2009) explains that because most ESL teachers find grammar and vocabulary easier to teach and assess, they tend not to put enough emphasis on pragmatics in the classroom, especially as it requires them to have solid knowledge of the sociocultural norms of the English language. The tendency in ESL instruction to value grammaticality more than pragmatic appropriateness results in a gap between the learners' grammatical competence and their pragmatic competence and awareness. This often renders ESL learners unable to distinguish between what is and what is not appropriate in the target language.

This study takes place in an English-medium university situated in Egypt where the relationship between grammaticality and pragmatic appropriateness is regarded as rather complex. The university is characterized by international faculty members and an international student body. The university Faculty Handbook states that the university strives to keep a balance between the number of Egyptian and non-Egyptian faculty members with a "mix of faculty that is 45% Egyptian, 45% American, and 10% of any other nationality". This university is, therefore, quite a unique speech community. Unlike other English-medium universities in Egypt, many of the faculty members of this university are native speakers of English whereas the overwhelming majority of the students

are native speakers of Egyptian Arabic. Therefore, this speech community does not adequately fit in the typical dichotomy of EFL versus ESL. One can argue that it is rather a mixture of both, leaning more towards being an ESL context due to the fact that the English language permeates most out-of-class communication within the university as opposed to other English-medium universities where the use of English is limited to the classroom. In order for Egyptian students at this university to be able to communicate effectively with their native English-speaking professors, they are expected to not only use English correctly, but also appropriately.

### **The Study**

The purpose of this study is to look into the discrepancy between the students' ability to recognize ungrammaticality and their ability to recognize pragmatic inappropriateness in an attempt to answer the following research questions:

1. Do Egyptian students at different proficiency levels display discrepancies in their awareness of grammatical versus pragmatic violations?
2. In what way does the students' proficiency impact their awareness and judgment of pragmatic versus grammatical violations?

For the purpose of this study, grammatical awareness is operationalized as the ability to detect grammatical errors. This kind of awareness is thus quantified by examining the participants' ability to identify the scenarios in the judgment task questionnaire which contain grammatically incorrect utterances. Pragmatic awareness is operationalized as the ability to distinguish between what is and

what is not appropriate to say in a given situation. This is measured by examining the participants' ability to identify the pragmatic infelicities in the judgment task questionnaire.

### **Participants**

The participants in this study are composed of two learner groups at different proficiency levels. The first group of learners, the low-proficiency group, comprised almost all Egyptian students enrolled in an intensive English program at an established English-medium university in Egypt (n = 23). Their ages ranged from 18 to 22. The judgment task questionnaires which were filled out by non-Egyptian students and those in which a substantial number of questions were left unanswered were discarded.

The second group of learners, the higher-proficiency group, included 46 students enrolled in advanced freshman writing classes offered by the Rhetoric and Composition department (RHET) in the same university. Two completed questionnaires had to be discarded, because the respondents were not Egyptian. The participants in this group (n = 44) ranged in age from 17 to 21.

Although convenience sampling typically lacks generalizability, purposefulness compensates for it (Perry, 2011). The aim of this study is to compare L2 learners' pragmatic awareness to their grammatical awareness within the unique context of an English-medium university in Egypt. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants in the two proficiency groups.

Table 1  
*Demographics of the Participants*

Group	Gender		Total Number (N)	Age Range
	Male	Female		
<b>Low-proficiency (IEP)</b>	17	6	23	18-22
<b>High-proficiency (RHET)</b>	21	23	44	17-21

### **Data Collection Instruments**

As mentioned earlier, the present study is largely informed by Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei's (1998) seminal research project which aimed to investigate the effects of the learning context on the grammatical and pragmatic awareness of L2 learners. Unlike Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei's study, however, the purpose of this study was not to compare learners in an ESL context to learners in an EFL context. Instead, the study examined the discrepancy between the grammatical and pragmatic awareness of Egyptian university students at different proficiency levels.

In Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei's study, the judgment task was given to the participants in a different format. The participants were asked to watch a video with 20 scenarios, and to judge these scenarios in terms of grammaticality and pragmatic appropriateness. In addition, the participants were asked to rate the gravity of the identified errors and pragmatic violations using an answer sheet (Figure 1) developed by the researchers.

<p>7. <i>Teacher:</i> Anna, it's your turn to give your talk.</p> <p><i>Anna:</i> I can't do it today, but I will do it next week.</p>	<p><i>Was the last part appropriate/correct?</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"> <input type="checkbox"/>                      <input type="checkbox"/>  Yes                                      No </p> <p><i>If there was a problem, how bad do you think it was?</i></p> <p>Not bad at all ____:____:____:____:____:____: Very bad</p>
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Figure 1. Questionnaire scenario from the original study containing a pragmatic infelicity

However, in the present study, the video prompt was completely discarded for two reasons: Firstly, using the video prompt would have caused unnecessary logistical challenges during the data collection period because bringing together such a large number of students, enrolled in two different programs with different schedules, and asking them to watch video clips and answer the questionnaire would have been nearly impossible. Secondly, although the video prompt would have been inherently richer in contextual information, the listening comprehension component accompanying the task would have posed a challenge to the participating students who are at a lower proficiency level. Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) pointed this idea out in their discussion of the judgment task questionnaire; they acknowledged that “the video task, with its listening comprehension component, may have been inherently more challenging than the written presentation” (p. 242). For this reason, the judgment task used in the present study was administered in the form of a written questionnaire rather than a video task. Furthermore, the judgment task also underwent major changes in the formatting as shown in

Figure 2 in order to eliminate some ambiguities in the original questionnaire which were pointed out by Schauer (2006).

Adam: Good morning, Sally. Sally: <b>Good night, Adam.</b>	
<p><b>Is the part in bold grammatically correct?</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/>   <input type="checkbox"/> Yes   No</p> <p>If your answer is <b>no</b>, how serious do you think this mistake is? Check only one:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Very ungrammatical</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Ungrammatical</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat ungrammatical</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Slightly ungrammatical</li> </ul>	<p><b>Is the part in bold appropriate in the situation?</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/>   <input type="checkbox"/> Yes   No</p> <p>If your answer is <b>no</b>, how serious do you think this mistake is? Check only one:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Very inappropriate/unacceptable</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Inappropriate/unacceptable</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat inappropriate/unacceptable</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Slightly inappropriate/unacceptable</li> </ul>

Figure2. Questionnaire scenario from the present study in the modified format

The judgment task questionnaire contains 18 scenarios in which the following speech acts occur: requests, apologies, and refusals. Eight scenarios contain grammatical errors only, eight scenarios contain pragmatic infelicities only, and two scenarios contain neither grammatical errors nor pragmatic infelicities; the latter were used as distractors. The change in the format of the judgment task questionnaire resulted, in turn, in a change in the way the data analysis was carried out. In Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei's study, the participants were only asked if they could identify "a problem" in the scenario with no further questions regarding the possible types of problems. Schauer (2009)

pointed out that this is one of the limitations of the Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei 1998 study. She explained that “the researchers had to assume that when the participants indicated that there was an infelicity in a scenario, they had in fact detected the one planted by the researchers rather than identifying a ‘false error’” (p. 23). In contrast, the judgment task questionnaire used in the present study was designed to overcome this problem. The participants had to make two distinct decisions after reading each scenario. They had to (a) decide on whether or not the scenario is grammatically correct; and (b) decide on whether or not the scenario is appropriate. In other words, each scenario was presented and later analyzed as having a grammar component and a pragmatics component.

In other words, the participants’ grammatical awareness was measured by analyzing not only their ability to identify the scenarios which contain grammatically incorrect utterances, but also their ability *not* to erroneously identify a grammatically correct scenario as containing a grammatical inaccuracy. In the same vein, the participants’ pragmatic awareness was measured by their ability to identify the pragmatically inappropriate scenarios as well as their ability *not* erroneously mark a pragmatically appropriate scenario as containing a pragmatic infelicity.

After the judgment task questionnaire was administered, each response was scored individually and the data were entered using Microsoft Excel. The process of scoring was quite straightforward: If a participant failed to identify an error or if s/he marked a correct scenario as containing an error, the answer was

considered incorrect (0). If a student correctly identified a scenario as containing an error, the answer was marked as correct (1).

## Results

### In-group differences.

To determine whether or not there are discrepancies between the pragmatic and grammatical awareness within each one of the participant groups, the overall scores of the participants on the two components of the judgment task questionnaire were calculated. The level of grammatical awareness of the members of the low-proficiency group was 66%. This percentage is equivalent to the amount of correct answers given by all 23 members of the group on the grammar component of the scenarios in the judgment task questionnaire. Their level of pragmatic awareness was quantified at 72%. Table 3 demonstrates the mean scores and the standard deviation values of the grammar and pragmatics components for the members of this group.

Table 3

*Descriptive Statistics for the Low-proficiency Group*

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Grammar	10.78	2.62	.548
Pragmatics	11.43	2.86	.596

In addition, a paired-samples *t* test was run using SPSS in order to determine if there are discrepancies between the grammatical and pragmatic awareness within each participant group. According to Green and Salkind (2005), in a paired-samples *t* test, “each case must have scores on two variables” (p. 161); this is the case here because each participant received scores on the grammar and

the pragmatic component of each scenario. The results indicated that there are no significant differences between this group's grammatical awareness ( $M = 10.78$ ,  $SD = 2.62$ ) and their pragmatic awareness ( $M = 11.43$ ,  $SD = 2.86$ ),  $t(22) = -1.07$ ,  $p > .05$ . The results of this paired-samples  $t$  test are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4  
*Paired-samples t Test for Low-proficiency Group*

Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower	Upper			
-.65217	2.91717	.60827	-1.91365	.60931	-1.072	22	.295*

\* $p < .05$

As for the high-proficiency group, they showed a higher level of grammatical awareness at 79%. Again, this percentage refers to the percentage of correct answers given by all 44 members of the group on the grammar components of the scenarios in the judgment task questionnaire. Similar to the low-proficiency group, the level of pragmatic awareness of the members of the high-proficiency group was quantified at 72 %. Table 5 provides the mean scores and the standard deviation values of the grammar and pragmatics components of the high-proficiency group.

Table 5  
*Descriptive Statistics for the High-proficiency Group*

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Grammar	12.64	1.53	.230
Pragmatics	12.05	1.74	.262

Another paired-samples *t* test was conducted using SPSS in order to compare the grammatical and pragmatic awareness of the high-proficiency group. The results showed that the mean of the difference between this group's grammatical awareness ( $M = 12.64, SD = 1.526$ ) and their pragmatic awareness ( $M = 12.05, SD = 1.738$ ) bordered on being statistically significant,  $t(43) = 2.01, p = 0.05$ . The results of the paired-samples *t* test for the high-proficiency group are shown in Table 6.

Table 6  
*Paired-samples t Test for High-proficiency Group*

Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower	Upper			
.59091	1.94480	.29319	-.00036	1.18218	2.015	43	.050*

#### **Differences across the groups.**

The purpose of the second research question was to examine the effect of the participants' proficiency level on their grammatical and pragmatic awareness. The grammatical awareness and the pragmatic awareness of the members of the low-proficiency group were each compared to those of the high-proficiency group. An independent-samples *t* test was run using SPSS to measure the difference between the means of the two independent groups (Green & Salkind, 2005). The independent groups were the low-proficiency group and the high-proficiency group. Each group had scores on two variables; namely, the

grammatical component and the pragmatic component of the judgment task questionnaire.

On the one hand, the independent-samples *t* test revealed no significant differences between the pragmatic awareness of the two participant groups ( $t = -1.09, p > 0.05$ ). In other words, the participants' proficiency level did not seem to have an effect on their pragmatic awareness. On the other hand, the results indicated that the difference between the grammatical awareness of the two groups is statistically significant ( $t = -3.12, p < 0.05$ ). The effect size for this analysis was  $d = 0.87$  which exceeds the value set by Cohen for a large effect size ( $d = 0.80$ ). The detailed results of the independent *t* test are demonstrated in Table 7.

Table 7

*Independent-samples t Test for Cross-group Comparisons*

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Gr.	Equal variances not assumed			-3.119	29.968	.004*	-1.85375	.59428
Pr.	Equal variances assumed	8.041	.006	-1.088	65	.281*	-.61067	.56152

\* $p < .05$

## Discussion

This study aimed at comparing the level of L2 pragmatic awareness of Egyptian university students to their level of L2 grammatical awareness. Data

were collected from two groups of students at two different proficiency levels to examine the effect of proficiency on the two types of awareness. Data were analyzed in a twofold manner; in-group comparisons as well as comparisons across groups were carried out in order to answer the research questions.

Statistical analyses revealed that the difference between grammatical awareness and pragmatic awareness within the low-proficiency group was not statistically significant. Interestingly, however, members of the low-proficiency group displayed a higher level of pragmatic awareness ( $M = 11.43$ ,  $SD = 2.86$ ) than of grammatical awareness ( $M = 10.78$ ,  $SD = 2.62$ ). On the one hand, his finding seems to contradict the findings of Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) when they found out that the level of grammatical awareness of the Hungarian EFL student sample was significantly higher than their level of pragmatic awareness.

On the other hand, the results of this study are similar to the findings of Niezgoda and Röver's 2001 study. Similarly to the results revealed here, their findings show that the low-proficiency group recognized a significantly higher number of pragmatic errors than grammatical errors. In keeping with the results of Niezgoda and Röver's 2001 study, members of the high-proficiency group in the present study displayed a higher level of grammatical awareness ( $M = 12.64$ ,  $SD = 1.526$ ) than of pragmatic awareness ( $M = 12.05$ ,  $SD = 1.738$ ). Again, this finding in both the present study and in Niezgoda and Röver's study are different from the results discussed in the study by Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei

(1998), where the mean scores of the high-proficiency group on pragmatics were higher than on grammar in both the ESL and the EFL sample.

A possible explanation for the contrasting findings uncovered by this study, the original study, and the 2001 replication could be due to the different nature and background of the participants in each study. While the participants in Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei's study could be classified as "average language learners" (Schauer, 2009, p. 24) who received L2 instruction in a typical, low-stakes language learning setting, the participants in Niezgodá and Röver's study as well as in the present study can be considered as above average learners of English because they have been through a relatively rigorous language testing experience which then led them to be placed in intensive English programs at the university level. The results of the present study cannot therefore be generalized to the entire population of Egyptian learners of English.

Another unexpected finding is that the difference between the pragmatic awareness of the high-proficiency group and the low-proficiency group was not statistically significant. In other words, the participants' proficiency level did not seem to affect their awareness of what is and what is not pragmatically appropriate. This particular finding is peculiar in that it contradicts the findings of the original 1998 study where high proficiency was associated with a higher level of pragmatic awareness. The only statistically significant difference emerged when the grammatical awareness of the two proficiency groups was analyzed. This finding is self-explanatory, however, because the grammatical

awareness of the low-proficiency group is naturally lower and this in turn explains why they were enrolled in an intensive English program at the time of the study.

The findings bring to the forefront the issue of L2 pragmatic instruction. Research has consistently demonstrated that instructional intervention positively affects L2 pragmatic development (Taguchi, 2011). In an investigation of the effect of explicit and implicit L2 pragmatic instruction, Alcón-Soler (2007), for instance, discovered that both types of instruction resulted in better performance on the post-test. Explicit instruction, however, was different in that “the explicit group maintained learning up to the delayed posttest given 3 weeks after the treatment” (Taguchi, 2011, p.292).

Koike and Pearson (2005) also examined the effects of implicit and explicit instruction on the development of pragmatic competence. The results revealed that both types of instruction were conducive to the development of the learners’ pragmatic competence. There appears to be a consensus in the ILP literature that teaching pragmatics whether implicitly or explicitly is instrumental in improving learners’ pragmatic competence which is understood to include both awareness and productive abilities. In fact, pragmatic instruction has been linked to an increase in pragmatic awareness in particular (Sykes, 2009, 2011, as cited in Taguchi, 2011).

There is an abundance of literature on L2 pragmatic instruction providing teaching resources, materials, and suggested activities that can be used to

develop learners' pragmatic competence in the L2 classroom. In her study on how native and non-native speakers of English perform request speech acts in emails to their professors and instructors, Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) notes that ESL books tend to focus, for the most part, on general email etiquette rather than on the teaching of how specific speech acts are performed in emails. She proposes a five-step plan for pedagogical intervention which can be used to explicitly teach advanced learners how to write appropriate request emails to faculty. Sample teaching materials obtained from the author included a wide range of awareness-raising activities as well as productive activities which, among other things, highlight the notion of high-imposition versus low-imposition requests and provide ample email writing practice.

Taguchi (2011) explains that awareness-raising tasks usually involve activities where the learners listen to conversations and evaluate their level of appropriateness using a rating scale for example. Other activities can target productive skills. Role-plays, guided writing practice, and discourse completion tasks for instance can be used in the L2 classroom to provide students with the opportunity to practice the production of speech acts "by assuming specific roles in hypothetical scenarios and interacting with peers" (Taguchi, 2011, p.296).

Huth and Tleghani-Nikazm (2006) discuss at length the benefits of using conversation analysis in teaching L2 pragmatics. They propose that this type of pedagogical intervention be carried out in five instructional phases: "(a) in-class reflection about conversational practices, (b) contrastive in-class analysis of L1

and L2 sequence structure, (c) using written transcripts, audio and video materials, (d) practicing sequence structures with role-plays, and (e) reflection and evaluation: discussing the cross-cultural differences” (Huth & Tleghani-Nikazm, 2006, pp. 66-69).

In light of the findings of this study, there seems to be a need for instruction in the intensive English program in question as well as in the advanced freshman writing courses to address and shed light on issues pertaining to L2 pragmatics in the classroom. Even the learners who are considered to be at a high level of L2 proficiency could benefit from pragmatic instruction to hone their communicative skills.

#### **Limitations**

The present study is not without limitations. The limitations can be broadly divided into two categories: (a) limitations pertaining to the data collection and analysis, and (b) limitations pertaining to the validity of the judgment task questionnaire as a data collection tool. The most apparent limitation is the number of participants. Enrollment figures in the intensive English program were remarkably low in the spring semester of 2015. Only three classes were opened and a number of instructors were given teaching assignments in other departments. Therefore, data from the low-proficiency group could be collected from only 23 participants.

The other shortcoming in the study is related to the validity of the judgment task questionnaire as a tool for assessing learners’ pragmatic awareness. In a personal interview with Professor James Purpura, the prominent

scholar and professor of second and foreign language assessment and author of the seminal book *Assessing Grammar* (Purpura, 2004), the researcher was faced with the central question of what is and what is not appropriate. In a discussion about the extent to which the data collection instrument used in this study is valid, Purpura made the insightful remark that “measurement is supposed to match reality” (J. E. Purpura, personal communication, March 11, 2015). Although the scenarios in the judgment task questionnaire are similar to situations university students encounter in their day-to-day life, the written format in which the questionnaire was administered inherently lacks the contextual clues necessary to make the scenarios mirror reality. Another point worth mentioning is that treating grammar and pragmatics as dichotomous is a relatively dated approach and it thus might have compromised the validity of the judgment task questionnaire.

Another limitation is related to the various levels of pragmatic meaning proposed by Purpura (2004). He contends that pragmatic meaning encompasses five levels of meaning: contextual, sociolinguistic, sociocultural, psychological, and rhetorical meanings. The present study, on the other hand, adopted a somewhat simplistic view of pragmatic appropriateness which does not necessarily take into account the five levels underlying pragmatic meaning. The scenarios in the judgment task questionnaire which contain pragmatic infelicities were designed to be clearly marked as pragmatically inappropriate. In other words, none of the pragmatically inappropriate scenarios was arguable or could

be interpreted differently by different people. It is worth mentioning that the purpose of the study was not to devise an assessment to adequately measure L2 pragmatic knowledge. Purpura (2004) acknowledges that “the measurement of pragmatic knowledge presents a major challenge for test developers” (p. 77). The aim of the present study was rather to explore pragmatic awareness as opposed to grammatical awareness in a unique academic context using an already established data collection tool.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Instead of exploring the effect of proficiency only on grammatical and pragmatic awareness, future studies could also look into the effects of the learning environment and the learners’ access to authentic L2 input. When data were collected from the high-proficiency group, no distinction was made between the direct entry students who were directly placed in the RHET classes and those who were previously required to take remedial English classes in the intensive English program or any other similar programs. Future studies could take this variable into account and explore whether or not there are differences between these two groups of students.

The grammatical and pragmatic awareness of Egyptian students in different English-medium universities across Egypt would potentially render richer results. Post hoc interviews with the participants could also render very rich findings as described in Schauer (2009). Using this data collection method can give the researcher better insight into why the participants assigned a specific severity rating to one scenario rather than another, for example.

## **Conclusion**

The study has one major implication. It demonstrated that possessing a high proficiency level in an L2 does not necessarily entail a higher level of pragmatic awareness. The high-proficiency sample in this study is a case in point. Despite being placed in advanced academic writing university classes based on their achievement on rigorous language examinations, their pragmatic awareness was not significantly higher than that of the low-proficiency group. This might be perceived as an impetus for finding more effective ways of integrating pragmatics into L2 instruction and assessment. This is deemed necessary because of the importance of pragmatic competence, especially in an academic context where the students are expected to interact and communicate in their L2 with their professors and colleagues.

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