


Examination of data collection methods for pragmatic competence assessment of EFL learners



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ABSTRACT

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This research examined whether three commonly used data collection methods, namely the discourse completion test, role-play tasks, and naturally occurring data, are appropriate data collection methods for the assessment of the pragmatic competence of English as a foreign language (EFL) learners. Moreover, the study used the three data collection methods to determine whether there was a significant correlation between the grammatical competence and the pragmatic competence of EFL learners. Participants included 100 Asian EFL learners at two English proficiency levels. This research found a significant difference in the speech act performance of the EFL learners between each pair of the three data collection methods. The results suggested that the naturally occurring data collection method revealed the speech act performance of the EFL learners at its optimal. Furthermore, a significant correlation was found between the grammatical competence and the pragmatic competence of the EFL learners by using the naturally occurring data collection method. Both results indicated that the naturally occurring data collection methods may be more appropriate for the assessment of the pragmatic competence of EFL learners. Further empirical experiments should be conducted to ascertain the correlation between grammatical competence and pragmatic competence.

Contribution/ Originality: This research contributed in the form of a new perspective in terms of the data collection method for future studies of pragmatic competence. It emphasized the importance of using the naturally occurring data concerning the EFL learners' pragmatic competence assessment.

1. INTRODUCTION

The number of studies on the pragmatic competence of EFL learners has grown in the past decade owing to the groundwork of systemic functional linguistics (Halliday & Hasan, 1985). The main theoretical groundwork that has influenced the study of pragmatic competence is the speech act theory introduced by Austin (1962) which posits three levels of utterance, and further developed by Searle (1975) who introduced five categories of illocutionary act. With the underpinning of the Gricean maxims of conversation (Grice, 1975), studies have investigated pragmatic competence through an examination of the speech act (Bijari, Mehrdad, & Karimi, 2014; Khamkhien, 2022; Mohebbali & Salehi, 2016). These studies focused on the use of grammatical structures (e.g., the lexical patterns) to evince the patterns of speech acts by EFL learners.

To date, speech acts have mainly been examined through the concept of politeness introduced by the Gricean maxims of conversation (Grice, 1975). A diverse range of studies focusing on politeness using the speech act theory (Austin, 1962) and Gricean maxims of conversation (Grice, 1975) have been conducted. These studies have had various focuses: speech act knowledge in cross-cultural environments (Huttayavilaiphan, 2022; Mohebbali & Salehi, 2016) interlanguage pragmatics of EFL learners (Khamkhien, 2022) pragmatic knowledge relating to gender differences (Bijari et al., 2014; Farashaiyan & Tan, 2018) and pragmatic knowledge relating to disagreement in the genre of the classroom conversation (Charoenroop, 2015). In these studies, the politeness analysis was distinguished by the focus on refusals, requests, suggestions, and apologies. Given the necessity of having appropriate methods for assessing language competence, a suitable method for assessing the pragmatic competence of EFL learners should be considered for two reasons. First, the assessment of pragmatic competence has in many cases been examined in the context of verbal communication, in which there exists a pervasive under-determinacy (Ifantidou, 2014) in the pragmatic competence assessment based on the linguistic patterns produced by EFL learners. Second, there exists the potential problem of the validity of different methods to collect the spoken data for assessing the pragmatic competence of EFL learners (Felix-Brasdefer, 2003). So far, three major methods have been found: the use of the discourse completion test (henceforth, the DCT; (Huttayavilaiphan, 2022; Jalilifar, 2009; Mohebbali & Salehi, 2016)) the use of role-play inspired by the DCT (Srisuruk, 2011) and the collection of naturally occurring data (Charoenroop, 2015). Criticism of these three methods for the assessment of pragmatic competence has emerged recently, casting doubt on whether they are appropriate for the assessment of the pragmatic competence of EFL learners (Boxer, 2010; Ifantidou, 2014; Walters, 2007). It is therefore essential to re-examine these three commonly used methods before any further investigation of the pragmatic competence.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Pragmatic Competence vs. Speech Act

Leech (1983) argues a canonical perspective on pragmatics by claiming that it subsumes pragma-linguistics and social linguistics. This indicates that a master of both pragma-linguistic competence and social-linguistic competence possesses a high level of pragmatic competence (Qian, 2015). This paradigm evinces at least two distinctive conventions for the conceptualization of pragmatics and pragmatic competence. In a broad sense, the inferential criteria for the periphery between the semantics and the pragmatics are decoded from this perspective. In contrast to the explicit sense of the utterance that is not concerned with the contextual conditions, the pragmatics must adhere to the intentional sense of the utterance and social information (Walters, 2007). In contrast, Leech (1983) perspective exploits the delimitation of pragmatics, distinguishing the sense of the utterance into the realization of the speech intentions (for pragma-linguistics) and the awareness of the social sense of the utterance in different contextual environments (for social linguistics; Marmaridou (2011) indicating that the explicatory and the implicature of the utterance are worthy of examining in studies of pragmatics (Carston, 2012).

Similarly, in what was called a “cocktail party” definition, Bardovi-Harlig (2013) stated that pragmatics studies how what is said to the interactants in a specific contextual environment in an oral communication. Pragmatics gives more focus to the language use of the speaker, encompassing the lexical or grammatical choices and the language constraints according to the social interaction and the interactants in the ongoing communication (Kasper & Rose, 2002). The study of pragmatic competence integrates the language use both in terms of the speaker’s point of view and its social and contextual functions and effects.

As shown in previous research on pragmatics, the significant components that must be carefully considered are the implicatures from the explicit sense of the utterances and the occasional, situational, contextual, and social sense from the speaker’s perspective. Hence, pragmatic competence should be a measure of the extent to which the speaker is aware of the implicatures and the social sense of the utterances. In this respect, the speech act with Gricean maxims of conversation serves as the cornerstone of the assessment of pragmatic competence in that this

groundwork provides the framework for the researchers to assess the pragmatic competence from the suggestions, the apologies, the politeness strategies used by the speakers. A number of studies have examined the speech act output of EFL learners (Ifantidou, 2014). These recent empirical studies have yielded a strand of fruitful results and implications relevant to the pragmatic competence assessment for EFL learners (Jalilifar, 2009; Mohebbali & Salehi, 2016). Nevertheless, two main criticisms have been made of the focus on the speech act and Gricean maxims of conversation. First, critics have pointed at the vagueness of the concept of pragmatic competence in the recent studies, which has led to vagueness in the subsequent assessment (Cummings, 2009). The plausible interpretation of the linguistic structures found in the data used by non-native English speakers may cause misleading results in the assessment of pragmatic competence. Second, critics have argued that the misuse of the speech act and Gricean maxims of conversation by non-native English speakers may not truly reflect their pragmatic competence (Cummings, 2009; Ifantidou, 2013). The overgeneralization of the concept of pragmatic competence in the previous research was found to be inappropriate to the non-native English speakers' pragmatic use.

Two points are worth making concerning the criticism of the recent studies on pragmatic competence. First, there is a high correlation between the first and the second criticism. Pragmatic competence has been conceptualized in many recent studies as the competence in performing the speech act and using Gricean maxims of conversation. Subsequently, the overgeneralization of the non-native English speakers' pragmatic use ensued. Hence, the use of the speech act alone is considered insufficient to assess EFL learners' pragmatic competence.

2.2. DCT vs. Role Play vs. Naturally Occurring Data

For speech act assessment, previous research used various instruments and methodologies. Questionnaires, for example, have been used for the assessment of pragmatic awareness (Prakaiborisuth & Trakulkasemsuk, 2016). However, the focus has primarily been given to the actual use of speech acts by EFL learners. Various studies have used the DCT and the role-play tasks to collect spoken or written data for the analysis of pragmatic competence (Huttayavilaiphan, 2022; Jalilifar, 2009; Mohebbali & Salehi, 2016).

The DCT was originally developed by Blum-Kulka (1982) for the study of speech act performance and has been widely used in the assessment of pragmatic competence. There is a considerable diversity in the scenarios for the test-takers to contemplate the speech act by using different grammatical structures. This approach has been popular due to its efficiency, with the test-takers completing the DCT in a relatively short time, and the researchers can collect data concurrently from a large number of participants (Kasper, 2000). The commonly used DCT has 12 pairs of scenarios for the test-takers. One pair of scenarios is presented below:

Scenario 8:

Instruction 8-1: You have been put in charge of a project at work. You go to the desk of a colleague and ask him to type a few letters for you. What do you say to him?

Instruction 8-2: Your colleague comes to your office with the typed letters you asked him to type. When he gives them to you, you realize you had given him the wrong letter. What do you say to him? (Format adapted from Blum-Kulka (1982)).

As shown in the example above, the test-takers must use their linguistic knowledge in conjunction with the scenario to answer the question at the end of each instruction. This allows the examiner to assess the test-taker's ability to interpret the speech act. The example above also shows that the DCT mainly involves requests and apologies, which have been studied by various researchers in the past (Ogiermann, 2018; Walters, 2007).

The DCT does not provide a more open-ended dialogue, however, and the question has been raised as to whether the short answer is sufficient for the speech act assessment (Ogiermann, 2018). Variations of the DCT have therefore been used to elicit longer dialogues and examine the speech acts used by EFL learners. One of the variations that is commonly used is the role-play task (Srisuruk, 2011). In the role-play task, the researchers normally present the instructions selected from the DCT and inquire if the participant understands them. A role

play ensues between the participant and the researcher, including greetings, small talk, the required utterances elicited from the participant based on the given scenario and the participant's linguistic and pragmatic knowledge, and a proper ending. In contrast to the DCT, the role-play task requires the test-takers to speak. However, the role play usually lasts only a short time, and therefore the data may not be sufficient or natural.

Naturally occurring spoken data have been given more attention than the DCT or role playing (Cummings, 2009; Ifantidou, 2013) owing to the insufficient data collected from EFL learners. The use of naturally occurring data is conceivable thanks to the development of the theoretical and analytical methodology (i.e., the use of corpora) and critical discourse analysis. For the analysis of pragmatic competence or speech acts, naturally occurring data give the researcher access to the spoken texts directly uttered by EFL learners. Therefore, it is clear to see how EFL learners use different grammatical structures to evince their pragmatic competence. Researchers have given various perspectives with respect to the time engagement and whether the speech act production can be elicited in the process (Charoenroop, 2015).

2.3. Grammatical Competence vs. Pragmatic Competence

As argued in previous studies (e.g., Ifantidou, 2013, 2014) the interpretation of pragmatic competence must be analyzed from the presentation of the language used by EFL learners, thus leading to the grammatical competence of EFL learners. Grammatical competence means using the correct grammatical elements in writing and speech. It is closely linked to social interaction competence so that the contextual or social interactions reveal the features of the language use from the speaker (Ifantidou, 2014). It is thus believed that there should exist a correlation between both competences, revealing how the speaker can manipulate the grammatical structures to exhibit the pragmatics in the social interactions. The data must therefore be able to provide ample grammatical structures for the interpretation of pragmatic competence. More specifically, the determination of the level of pragmatic competence of the EFL learner must be made through the analysis of the grammatical structures.

2.4. Criticism of Pragmatic Competence Studies

The problems in pragmatic competence studies should be given adequate attention to avoid further misleading in future studies, starting from the concept of pragmatic competence, since pragmatic competence may not be equal to the speech act in interaction (Cummings, 2009; Ifantidou, 2014). As far as the concept is concerned, problems have been highlighted regarding the use of data. The DCT and the role-play tasks have been used in the examination of speech act performance by EFL learners, yielding insights into the patterns of speech acts performed by EFL learners (Bardovi-Harlig & Griffin, 2005; Takimoto, 2009). However, these approaches use artificial and small-scale scenarios from which the data are not adequate to draw firm conclusions regarding EFL learners' speech act ability. Since the answers elicited by the DCT and the role-play tasks are in a set form and the utterances are isolated from natural daily interactions, the results may lead to misjudgments of the levels of EFL learners' pragmatic competence (Ifantidou, 2014).

Another problem concerns the equivocal correlational development between grammatical competence and pragmatic competence. The question has been raised as to whether the two competences are in fact dissociated from each other—that is, the level of pragmatic competence has no significant correlation to the level of grammatical competence (Kasper & Rose, 2002)—or whether the development of grammatical competence is essential to an achievement of pragmatic competence at a high level (Garcia, 2004).

2.5. Focus of this Study

Based on the literature review and the criticism of the issues in the study of the pragmatic competence of EFL learners, this study examined the three commonly used data collection methods in the assessment of EFL learners' pragmatic competence, namely: the DCT, role-play tasks, and naturally occurring spoken data. To avoid vagueness

in the assessment, this study focused on the speech act assessment. More specifically, given the DCT's (Blum-Kulka, 1982) focus, this study examined the requests and the apologies performed by EFL learners. All the data collected in this study were in the spoken form of the English language. As elucidated in the literature review, the grammatical structures pertaining to requests and apologies were examined and used to measure the EFL learners' grammatical competence in the pragmatic competence assessment. To gain a better understanding of the three commonly used data collection methods, this study aimed to examine whether they were able to achieve the same result in the assessment of Asian EFL learners' speech act ability as well as in the correlation between grammatical competence and pragmatic competence. This study has two research questions:

1. Can significantly different results of using the DCT, the role-play tasks, and the naturally occurring data be found concerning the pragmatic competence of EFL learners?
2. Can a significant correlation be found between EFL learners' grammatical competence and their pragmatic competence by using the DCT, the role-play tasks, and the naturally occurring data?

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Population and Participants

This study involved Asian EFL learners whose native or first language was not English. They were mainly raised in their own countries where the official language was not English. Data were collected from 60 intermediate-level EFL learners and 40 advanced-level EFL learners, giving a total of 100 EFL learners.

3.2. Data Collection

Each participant was requested to complete three steps in the data collection process. In the first step, the participants were required to read the instructions from the DCT adapted from Blum-Kulka (1982) and provide a short, immediate answer based on each instruction. The participants were given around 30 seconds to read each instruction and think of the answer before they gave their responses.

In the second step, the participants read the instructions retrieved from the DCT and were asked to take part in a role play with the researcher based on the given scenario. The dialogue of each role-play task involved greetings, small talk, the task required from the scenario, and an ending. To avoid using the same scenarios in the DCT data collection step and the role-play tasks, six of the 12 pairs of scenarios in the DCT were arranged in the first step, and the other six pairs were used in the role-play tasks.

The final step involved each participant having a conversation with the researcher for around 15 minutes for the collection of naturally occurring data. The researcher started the conversation by randomly selecting a topic to lead each participant into the conversation (e.g., daily life, favorite food, living problems in Bangkok). To achieve as natural an interaction as possible, each participant was informed before the data collection that they could ask the researcher any questions during the conversation. All the spoken data in each step was recorded by the sound recording machine and transcribed by the researcher into the written form for further analysis.

It is worth mentioning the control of the variables, namely social power and social distance, with regard to the speech act performance. The DCT was designed for various levels of social power and social distance (Blum-Kulka, 1982; Ogiermann, 2018) including the different social power between the teacher and the student, the different degrees of social distance between the older colleague and the new one in the same company, naturally attested the two variables when the participants answer the question about each scenario. Similarly, the role-play tasks revealed the same issues, since the instructions were elicited from the DCT. For the naturally occurring data, because of the researcher's social power and social distance, as a university lecturer who did not have any intimate acquaintance with any participant involved in this study, it can be seen that the two variables were controlled equally in the three different data collection methods.

3.3. Data Analysis

This study employed a mixed approach, including collecting quantitative statistics through the significant difference tests and conducting qualitative analysis to illustrate the distinctive differences retrieved from the participants' data using the three data collection methods. To examine the probability of the significant differences in the results, a score-scaled system was established for the inferential statistics for each research question.

As described in the previous section, this study focused on requests and apologies performed by the EFL learners, and the politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) was used to manage the scores. According to the politeness theory, five super-strategies can be used by the speaker to perform the speech act, including request and apology, as demonstrated in Figure 1:

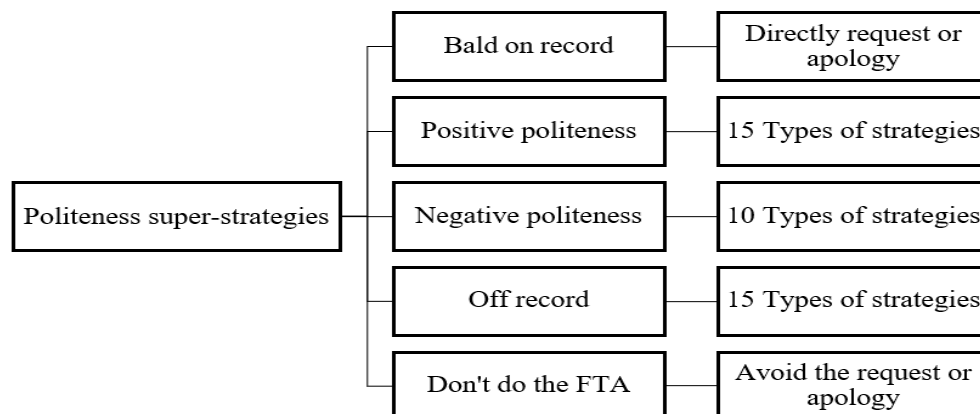


Figure 1. Five politeness super-strategies.

Source: Brown and Levinson (1987).

As indicated by Brown and Levinson (1987) the core of the politeness theory is avoidance of the face-threatening act (the FTA in the figure). To avoid the FTA, each super-strategy is not performed equally. The speaker is supposed to avoid the FTA toward both himself and the hearer, and they pursue harmony with the hearer in the interaction. It is therefore conceivable that the least politeness will be found in the use of the first super-strategy, "bald on record," and the most politeness will be considered to use the last super-strategy, "do not perform the FTA." Two raters assessed the politeness super-strategies used by each participant: 1 point was given for the use of the super-strategy "bald on record"; 2 points for "positive politeness"; 3 points for "negative politeness"; 4 points for "off record"; and 5 points for "do not perform the FTA." The score was given to the participant each time a super-strategy was used. Subsequently, the mean score was calculated from the performance in each data collection method. A one-way repeatedly measured Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to examine the significant difference to answer the first research question. To examine the grammatical competence, the two raters used error analysis to examine the correct use of the grammatical structures when the request or the apology was performed (James, 1998). The *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999) was used as the corpus-based reference for both raters to examine the errors. Zero points were given if the grammatical structure was incorrectly used, and 1 point was given if it was used correctly. The mean score was calculated from the performance of all the participants in each data collection method. Pearson correlation was employed to examine the significant difference between the linguistic competence and the pragmatic competence.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Information about the Participants

Oral data were collected from 100 participants. Among the 60 intermediate-level EFL learners, there were 37 Thais, 10 Burmese, 09 Indonesians, and 04 Chinese. In the 40 advanced-level EFL learners, there were 29 Thais, 08

Indonesians, 02 Burmese, and 01 Chinese. As indicated in the previous section, none of the participants' native or first language was English; they had attended English classes to learn English consciously until the undergraduate level.

4.2. Inter-Rater Reliability

Given that two raters assessed the pragmatic competence and conducted the error analysis, the inter-rater reliability was tested. As the reliability statistics showed, the intraclass correlation coefficient of the average measures was 0.914 for the pragmatic competence assessment and 0.875 for the grammatical competence assessment, revealing the high reliability of the scores given by the two raters.

4.3. Results of the Pragmatic Competence Assessment

To answer the first research question, three significant difference tests were conducted based on the three data collection methods used for the 60 intermediate-level EFL learners, for the 40 advanced-level EFL learners, and for all 100 EFL learners.

First, for all 100 EFL learners, we found that, regarding the performance of the speech act, there was a significant difference in the results of the three data collection methods when the p value was set at the 0.05 level, as demonstrated in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics extracted from the result run by SPSS.

	Mean	Std. deviation	N
DCTSA	2.85	0.60	100
RPTSA	2.42	0.49	100
NODSA	2.08	0.53	100

Note: DCT refers to the discourse completion test; RPT refers to the role-play tasks; NOD refers to the naturally occurring data; SA refers to the speech act. Std. deviation refers to standard deviation. N refers to the number of participants.

Table 2. Multivariate tests^a extracted from the result run by SPSS.

Effect		Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.	Partial ETA squared
Method	Pillai's trace	0.599	73.340 ^b	2.000	98.000	0.000	0.599
	Wilks' lambda	0.401	73.340 ^b	2.000	98.000	0.000	0.599
	Hotelling's trace	1.497	73.340 ^b	2.000	98.000	0.000	0.599
	Roy's largest root	1.497	73.340 ^b	2.000	98.000	0.000	0.599

Note: a. Design: Intercept.
Within subject's design: Method.
b. Exact statistic.

As was shown in Table 1, the mean of the pragmatic competence performed by all the participants decreases consecutively from the DCT to the naturally occurring data. Moreover, Table 3 presents the significant difference between each pair of the data collection methods. The pairwise comparisons presented in the table reveal that statistically significant differences were found between each pair of the three data collection methods.

Table 3. Pairwise comparisons extracted from the result run by SPSS.

(I) Method	(J) Method	Mean differences (I-J)	Std. error	Sig. ^b
1	2	0.428*	0.048	0.000
	3	0.765*	0.064	0.000
2	1	-0.428*	0.048	0.000
	3	0.337*	0.051	0.000
3	1	-0.765*	0.064	0.000
	2	-0.337*	0.051	0.000

Note: Based on estimated marginal means.
*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.
b. Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni.

The significant difference was also examined by comparing the three data collection methods with 60 intermediate-level EFL learners only and 40 advanced-level EFL learners. For the performance of the speech act by intermediate-level EFL learners, we found a significant difference in the results of the three data collection methods. As for the 100 EFL learners, the mean exhibits a downward trajectory from 2.6617 in the DCT, to 2.2718 in the role-play tasks, and 1.8742 in the naturally occurring data. In each pair of the three targeted data collection methods there existed a significant difference in the speech act assessment ($p = 0.000$ for each pair).

With respect to the performance of the speech act by the advanced-level EFL learners, the multivariate tests revealed a significant difference ($p = 0.000$) in the results of the three data collection methods. The significant differences were likewise found in each pair of the three targeted data collection methods ($p = 0.000$ for the pair of the DCT and the role-play tasks and the pair of the DCT and the naturally occurring data; $p = 0.018$ for the pair of the role-play tasks and the naturally occurring data).

Thus, the three data collection methods cannot be used equally to assess EFL learners' speech act ability. From the mean of the pragmatic competence assessment in each method, it is clear that both the intermediate-level and the advanced-level EFL learners performed the best in the DCT and performed the worst in the naturally occurring data. Two reasons may explain this finding. First, the DCT and the role-play tasks allow the EFL learners to prepare while reading the instructions, whereas the naturally occurring data method (as used in this study) does not allow the EFL learners to consider the output as carefully as the DCT or the role-play tasks. Second, as indicated in previous research (Cummings, 2009) the short responses to the instructions in the DCT or the closed-ended dialogue in the role-play tasks may not elicit the natural performance of the EFL learners' speech act ability or a full pragmatic competence. In contrast, the unpredictable casual conversation provides a testbed to expose the speaker's natural performance of the speech act or their pragmatic use.

From a closer investigation of the speech act uses through the three targeted methods, three points are worth mentioning. First, the participants used more super-strategies at higher politeness levels in the DCT and the role-play tasks than in the naturally occurring data method: 57.83% (347) of the instances where the politeness super-strategies were above the level of the negative super-strategies (the score was equal to or higher than 3 points) were found in the DCT, 42.67% (256) were found in the role-play tasks, and 29.43% (151) were found in the naturally occurring data. This finding fully explains the decrease of the mean of the pragmatic competence of the EFL learners from the DCT to the naturally occurring data. Moreover, this result shows that the naturally occurring data may elicit a more representative picture of the EFL learners' use of speech acts and their pragmatic competence, since they are allowed no time to prepare the politeness super-strategy for subsequent utterances.

It is interesting to find that, in the requests, there was no use of *could*, *would*, or *may* from the intermediate-level EFL learners in the DCT and the role-play tasks, whereas there were 49 instances (6.81%) of requests beginning with *could* and 36 instances (5%) of requests beginning with the use of *may* by the advanced-level EFL learners (no *would* was found). In the naturally occurring data, five instances (1.66%) of requests preceded by *could* were found, one of which was produced by an intermediate-level EFL learner. Three instances (0.99%) of requests preceded by *may* were found in the advanced-level EFL learners' naturally occurring data. Uses of *could* and *may* by advanced-level EFL learners retrieved from the naturally occurring data are shown below.

Excerpt 1

A67: (.) could you tell me again?

A67: I didn't understand (.)

Excerpt 2

A75: So (.) may I ask you a question to your life here?

Given the prevalent use of *could*, *would*, and *may* by native English speakers (Srisuruk, 2011), it is worth pointing out that the Asian EFL learners at both English proficiency levels seldom used them for requests. For the requests, the participants were required to initiate the turn-taking, as demonstrated in both excerpts above. It is

thus conceivable that *could*, *would*, and *may* were rarely found in the naturally occurring data owing to the passive roles of the participants, especially the intermediate-level EFL learners.

Another difference lies in the apologies. The EFL learners used two types of the “off record” super-strategy to deliver the apologies in the DCT: 17 instances of giving hints (2.83%) and 29 instances of giving associated clues (9.67%; Brown and Levinson (1987)). Five instances (0.83%) of giving hints and 11 instances (1.83%) of giving associated clues were found in the role-play tasks; whilst no “off record” super-strategy was found in the naturally occurring data. All the “off record” super-strategies were used by the advanced-level EFL learners, as shown in the two short answers retrieved from the DCT data below.

The instruction in the DCT:

Your recently appointed manager at work has lent you some money that would enable you to settle your bills. You had promised to return the money in a week. After three weeks, you go to his office to return the money. What do you say to him?

The short answer from A84:

Hello boss! I forgot to pay you back the money. Here it is.

The short answer from A91:

Hey you! My (.) I have a family crisis and I am so busy to fix it. I give you the money here. Thank you.

No direct apology with common lexical choices such as *sorry*, *I'm sorry*, and *my apology* was used in both answers. For A84, the participant delivered a hint that he had forgotten to pay back the money. For A91, the participant directly illustrated the associated clue about the family situation. In this scenario, the money was returned after this associated clue was given. As argued in previous research (Brown & Levinson, 1987) the use of the “off record” strategy for the apologies saves the speaker’s face since the avoidance of the direct apology utterances at the moment does not seriously impair the speaker’s dignity. As in the requests, it is understandable that the EFL learners were unprepared for the conversation, which resulted in no “off record” super-strategies used in the naturally occurring data.

4.4. Correlation between Grammatical Competence and Pragmatic Competence

To answer the second research question, three significant difference tests were conducted for the two competences performed by all the participants, by the intermediate-level participants, and by the advanced-level participants. First, the results are presented of the correlation between both competences from the three data collection methods. For the performance of all the participants, a significant correlation was found between both competences in the result from the naturally occurring data collection method, whereas no significant correlation was found in the results from the DCT and the role-play tasks, as shown in the tables (Table 4 and Table 5).

Table 4. Correlation between the two competences from the DCT data collection.

		DCTPC	DCTGC
DCTPC	Pearson correlation	1	0.009
	Sig. (2-Tailed)	0.926	
	N	100	100

Note: DCT refers to discourse completion test; PC refers to pragmatic competence. GC refers to grammatical competence. Sig. refers to the significant value.

Table 5. Correlation between the two competences from the role-play tasks data collection.

		RPTPC	RPTGC
RPTPC	Pearson correlation	1	0.028
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.784	
	N	100	100

Table 6. Correlation between the two competences from the naturally occurring data collection.

		NODPC	NODGC
NODPC	Pearson correlation	1	0.427*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
	N	100	100

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

Table 4 presents the correlation information between the two competences by using the DCT, while Table 5 presents the correlation information between the two competences by using the role-play tasks. These results suggest that by using the DCT and the role-play tasks, no significant correlation can be found between the two competences, indicating that the ability of EFL learners' performance of the speech act cannot be inferred from the level of their grammatical competence. In other words, the English proficiency of an EFL learner cannot determine the level of their speech act ability.

Table 6 presents the correlation information between the two competences by using the naturally occurring data. A significant correlation coefficient was found between EFL learners' grammatical competence and their speech act ability in the naturally occurring data collection method, suggesting that, in this method, grammatical competence is significantly correlated to EFL learners' speech act use. This result indicates that by using the naturally occurring data, the EFL learners' speech act ability can be determined by the level of their grammatical competence.

Furthermore, the correlation between the two competences performed by the intermediate-level EFL learners in the three data collection methods and the advanced-level EFL learners in the three data collection methods was examined. No significant correlation coefficient between any data collection method at either English proficiency level was found, indicating that there exists no significant relationship between the two competences at either English proficiency level. This result suggests that grammatical competence does not influence pragmatic competence within the same English proficiency level.

In a closer investigation of the grammatical errors made by all the participants, seven categories were found as shown in Table 7.

Table 7. Grammatical errors found in the three data collection methods.

Error categories	Discourse completion test		Role-play tasks		Naturally occurring data	
	Cases	Percentage	Cases	Percentage	Cases	Percentage
Verb forms	85	14.17	103	17.17	209	40.74
Noun forms	59	9.83	125	20.83	156	30.41
Lexical orders	45	7.50	58	9.67	133	25.93
Sentence fragments	29	4.83	51	8.50	104	20.27
Lexical choices	26	4.33	80	13.33	179	34.89
Preposition errors	21	3.50	76	12.67	97	18.91
Lexical part-of-speech errors	21	3.50	37	6.17	126	24.56

The largest number of errors within the same category was always found in the naturally occurring data. The errors of the verb forms were found most often in the DCT and the naturally occurring data collection methods, whereas the errors of noun forms were found most often in the role-play tasks.

The errors of the verb forms were subject-verb disagreement, including the third-person present singular form, and tense errors, as illustrated in the two excerpts retrieved from the naturally occurring data.

Excerpt 3

INT: it is sometimes (.) hard (.) I believe.

B03: ok (.) but can I ask what if (.) someone (.) ask you about the question?

Excerpt 4

INT: that's (.) I remember (.) what my teacher told me.

A90: oh wow (.) amazing.

A90: is it possible (.) if she *have correct* for you?

Excerpt 3 demonstrates third-person present singular disagreement, while Excerpt 4 shows incorrect use of the present perfect tense. As mentioned in the methodology, the error analysis in the naturally occurring data was focused only on the utterances for the requests or the apologies. However, the similar errors identified above were found prevalently in the naturally occurring data in this research.

The errors relating to noun forms primarily involved the misuse of the singular and plural forms. The instances in which the speaker used another part of speech in the subject position or the object position were categorized as lexical part-of-speech errors. The excerpt below, retrieved from the role-play data, illustrates the errors of the noun forms.

Excerpt 5

B05: can you (.) let (.) me to print some *letter*?

Many errors similar to the omission of the plural form of the word *letter* in the excerpt above were found in all three data collection methods.

It should be noted that two of the error categories, the sentence fragments and the lexical choices, influenced the understanding of the semantics of the utterances, while other error categories did not. This issue had a direct impact on the assessment of the speech act ability by the two raters, since it was difficult to understand the semantic meaning of the utterance.

The main concern in this study was whether there existed a significant correlation between the grammatical competence and the pragmatic competence of an EFL learner, which is the question raised in previous studies (Ogiermann, 2018). From the significant correlation results of the three data collection methods, the conclusion can be drawn that the DCT and the role-play tasks data collection methods did not yield a significant correlation between the EFL learners' grammatical competence and the pragmatic competence, owing to the fact that no significant correlation coefficient was found in any of the significance tests in these two data collection methods. Since the only significant correlation attested was in the results of the naturally occurring data with the performances of all the participants, we conclude that, of all three data collection methods, the naturally occurring data collection method had the highest chance of yielding a significant correlation between the two competences of the EFL learners. A definite conclusion cannot be drawn, however, due to the pervasive under-determinacy of the naturally occurring data, as found in previous research (Ifantidou, 2013, 2014; Ogiermann, 2018). Further empirical research should be conducted to confirm this finding.

5. CONCLUSION

This study used both quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine the three commonly used data collection methods for the assessment of the pragmatic competence of EFL learners. With the support of significant tests, we intended to enlighten the study of pragmatic competence in the future with one of the most significant methodology procedures: the data collection method. To reiterate the significance of this study, it is perhaps time for researchers who study the pragmatics of English or any other languages to consider the correct method to conduct empirical experiments.

The findings overall suggest that the three data collection methods will produce significantly different pragmatic results. Given that the lowest mean was found in the naturally occurring data use, it may be more appropriate to choose the naturally occurring data as the data collection method for the future pragmatic competence studies. Concerning the correlation between the two competences, it seems that the DCT and the role-play tasks cannot reveal any significant correlation between the two competences, while the naturally occurring data is much more likely to illustrate the correlation between the two competences.

This study aimed to provide a reference for future research into pragmatics. It was limited, however, in that no definite answer could be given to the issue of whether there was a significant correlation between the grammatical competence and the pragmatic competence of EFL learners, since the significant correlation was only found in the naturally occurring data collection method. Hence, further empirical experiments are required. Moreover, more examination of the pragmatic competence, as well as the identification of the concept of the pragmatic competence, is suggested to study further by involving more EFL learners with different language backgrounds.

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