

## Pragmatic Competence in Business Context: A Case Study of Thai EFL University Students

สมัตติยะด้านวจนปฏิบัติศาสตร์ในบริบทธุรกิจ: กรณีศึกษานักศึกษาไทย  
ที่เรียนภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศ

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### ABSTRACT

The present study investigated the development of pragmatic competence of Thai EFL university students majoring in business studies. Data were collected from two groups of participants, 40 first-year and 40 third-year EFL students, all majoring in business studies in a university in Thailand. The participants' pragmatic competence was evaluated by employing a Written Discourse Completion Test (WDCT) which covered 16 business scenarios aiming to elicit 4 face-threatening acts: refusal, request, complaint, and advice. Comparisons between the two groups' WDCT data revealed that when confronting the 4 face-threatening acts in business interactions, the third-year participants demonstrated a statistically noticeable improvement compared to their first-year counterparts and were proved to have a relatively wider access to typical expressions, appropriate amount of information and politeness strategies in the business situations under examination. Finally, based on the interviews with selected informants from the two groups, 6 potential factors, i.e. explicit instruction, textbooks, input from multimedia sources, L1 transfer, language proficiency and output, were identified for the intricate roles they each played in accounting for the participants' development in pragmatic competence.

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## บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยฉบับนี้ศึกษาสามัคติยะด้านวัจนปฏิบัติศาสตร์ของนักศึกษาวิชาเอกธุรกิจชาวไทยที่เรียนภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศ ข้อมูลเก็บจากผู้เข้าร่วมงานวิจัยสองกลุ่มคือ นักศึกษาวิชาเอกธุรกิจชั้นปีที่ 1 และปีที่ 3 กลุ่มละ 40 คน สามัคติยะด้านวัจนปฏิบัติศาสตร์ของนักศึกษาได้รับการประเมินโดยใช้แบบทดสอบชนิดเติมบทสนทนาซึ่งครอบคลุมสถานการณ์ทางธุรกิจ 16 สถานการณ์ แบบทดสอบนี้มีจุดประสงค์เพื่อกระตุ้นให้ผู้เข้าร่วมงานวิจัยตอบในวัจนกรรมที่คลุมเครือหน้า 4 ประการซึ่งประกอบไปด้วยวัจนกรรมในการปฏิเสธ การขอร้อง การร้องเรียนและการแนะนำ ผู้วิจัยทำการวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลที่ได้จากแบบทดสอบทั้งในเชิงปริมาณและคุณภาพ ผลการศึกษาเปรียบเทียบระหว่างนักศึกษาทั้ง 2 กลุ่มพบว่าการปฏิสัมพันธ์เชิงธุรกิจเมื่อต้องเผชิญกับการกระทำที่คลุมเครือ นักศึกษากลุ่มชั้นปีที่ 3 แสดงให้เห็นถึงพัฒนาการสามัคติยะด้านวัจนปฏิบัติศาสตร์ที่เพิ่มขึ้นอย่างมีนัยสำคัญในเชิงสถิติเมื่อเทียบกับนักศึกษาชั้นปีที่ 1 โดยนักศึกษามีการใช้สำนวนที่ซับซ้อนในแต่ละวัจนกรรมในปริมาณเนื้อหาที่เหมาะสม และมีกลวิธีการแสดงความรู้สึกในแต่ละสถานการณ์ทางธุรกิจได้ จากการสัมภาษณ์ผู้เข้าร่วมงานวิจัยส่วนหนึ่งจากทั้งสองกลุ่ม พบปัจจัยที่มีบทบาทสนับสนุนต่อการพัฒนาการสามัคติยะด้านวัจนปฏิบัติศาสตร์ 6 ปัจจัย คือ การสอนแบบชัดเจน หนังสือที่ใช้ในการเรียน ข้อมูลรับเข้าจากแหล่งข้อมูลมีมติเดียว การถ่ายโอนจากภาษาที่หนึ่ง ความสามารถทางภาษา และ ข้อมูลส่งออก

## Introduction

Pragmatic competence has been acknowledged as an essential part of communicative competence (Kasper, Nguyen, & Yoshimi, 2010). Bachman's model (1990) of *language competence* distinguishes *organizational competence* and *pragmatic competence*, the latter constituting *illocutionary competence* and *sociolinguistic competence*. According to Bachman (1990, p.87), *illocutionary competence* is defined as "knowledge of communicative action and how to carry it out". On the other hand, *sociolinguistic competence* comprises the ability to use language appropriately according to context. It thus includes the ability to select communicative acts and appropriate strategies to implement them in different contexts. Following this line of thinking, and also drawing on the earlier works by Austin (1962), we perceive pragmatic competence as the speaker's knowledge and use of rules of appropriateness and politeness to understand and formulate speech acts.

A number of studies indicated that even advanced-level nonnative speakers, especially in the case of EFL, often lack native-like pragmatic competence in different speech acts (Bardovi-Harlig, Hartford, Mahan-Taylor, Morgan, & Reynolds, 1991). In other words, speakers who may be considered 'fluent' in a second language due to their mastery of the grammar and vocabulary of that language may still be unable to produce language that is socioculturally and contextually appropriate.

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), people who participate in interaction cannot ignore the need to maintain each other's face. Of direct relevance to the notion of face is Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, one central idea being that "some acts are intrinsically threatening to face and thus require 'softening' " (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.24). Therefore, five politeness

strategies are formulated to save the participant's face when face threatening acts (FTAs) are inevitable, namely, bald-on-record, positive politeness strategy, negative politeness strategy, off-record, and not doing FTAs.

In business, the stakes are higher because business interactions are of critical consequences, such as the attainment of business goals or building and maintaining partnership. Thus "language plays a subtle role in negotiating human relationships, and hence, the outcomes of a transaction" (Kong, 2009, p.241). As Vandermeeren (2005) stated, business interaction is often affected by limited sociolinguistic and pragmatic knowledge. As a result, the cultivation of pragmatic competence has been emphasized in business English teaching. With regard to business English in the Thai context, apart from basic English courses, additional business English courses are usually provided. The students in the current research site are not only required to take five basic English courses but also to enroll in 5 more business English courses including correspondence, presentation, negotiation, meeting and customer service. The overall course design attempts to offer more opportunities for Thai business students to be exposed to real-life business situations via appropriate use of the language, which can ultimately enhance their pragmatic competence.

Given the importance of pragmatic competence in business situations, several studies on EFL students' pragmatic competence have been conducted, such as Bilbow's (2002) commission acts in business meetings, Koester's (2014) investigation of hypothetical reported speech in business negotiation and Trosborg & Shaw's (2017) study of complaints in intercultural business communications. In addition, in the Thai context, a number of studies have investigated Thai EFL students' pragmatic competence in speech acts (Chakorn, 2006; Prachanant, 2016; Srinarawat, 2005; Ukosakul, 2005; Wongwarangkul, 2000) whereas others focus on Thai students' pragmatic competence in business situations. For instance, Chakorn (2006) conducted a comparative analysis of persuasion strategies in business request letters written in English by Thai speakers and by native speakers of English. Srisuruk (2011) discussed the level of politeness of Thai speakers of English when confronted with face threatening acts related to their daily life and workplace. However, there is yet a dearth of research that includes speech acts typically seen in business situations. In addition, previous studies did not consider the development of pragmatic competence of Thai EFL students majoring in business. As a response to the aforementioned gaps, the current study set out to investigate business English university students' pragmatic competence in terms of four face-threatening speech acts (requests, refusals, complaints and advice). The study also aimed to compare the first-year and the third-year students and explores the factors that may have contributed to their pragmatic competence

development (or any apparent lack of it). Two research questions were posed for the present study:

1) Is there any significant difference in the level of pragmatic competence in speech acts between the first-year and the third-year Thai EFL university students majoring in business? If yes, in what way?

2) What are the factors that affect the development of pragmatic competence for those Thai EFL university students majoring in business?

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

This study was conducted in a public university in the northeastern part of Thailand. To study the development of pragmatic competence, two groups of 40 business majors, who were in the first year and third year of their studies, were randomly selected. The first-year group had taken 3 English courses, 2 focused on communication in daily life and 1 on academic reading. On the other hand, the third-year group, in addition to the same 3 courses, had received training on another 5 business English courses as mentioned earlier. None of the subjects had any overseas learning experience or business experience in workplaces. Gender was not considered or controlled, as it was not a crucial variable in the present study.

### **Instruments and procedures of data collection**

#### ***WDCT***

Written Discourse Completion Test (WDCT), a widely used tool in pragmatic research (e.g., Cohen, Olshtain & Rosenstain, 1986; Ikoma, 1993; Muthusamy & Farashaiyan, 2016; Olshtain & Weinbach, 1987; Srisuruk, 2011), was employed in the present study, but the test items were adapted to suit our business orientation. The test included two sections: Section A collected the participant's demographic information, including their length of learning English, and experiences, if any, of living abroad or of working in business environments, while Section B contained 16 items to elicit responses in four face threatening speech acts in business contexts, i.e., refusals, requests, complaints and advice (See Appendix A). For each speech act, 4 varied scenarios were presented, simulating issues commonly seen in business transactions, such as business proposals, business orders, and business negotiations. In the design of the WDCT, factors such as social status and social distance between the interlocutors were also considered.

Three experts who were experienced in pragmatics research were invited to evaluate the content validity of the WDCT scenarios using Item-objective congruence (IOC) measure (Rovinelli & Hambleton, 1977). All experts rated independently each scenario, regarding the degree to which they elicit the speech act they are supposed to elicit (1, if the item is congruent with the objective; -1, if the item is not congruent with the objective; or 0, if the congruence of the item is unclear). Results of IOC reached 0.86, indicating a high content validity. Revisions and modifications were made accordingly based on the feedback from the experts.

The WDCT was administered to the two groups of participants on separate dates, each lasting for 2 hours. It was declared prior to the test that there was no risk of harm to the subjects in this study and that they were requested to give impromptu responses in English, without consultations with peer students, the Internet, dictionary, or reference material of any kind.

### ***Interview***

A semi-structured interview was conducted to explore the factors that may affect the students' development of pragmatic competence. Four informants were purposively selected from each group. The interviews were composed of two sessions, the first being a focus-group, a form of cooperative activity for eliciting the students' opinions, which centered around the participants' perceptions of several issues concerning their learning of pragmatic knowledge on the research site, such as the teacher's instruction style, textbooks, and influence from their L1. The second session was one-to-one stimulated retrospective questions referring to particular instances of responses given in the informants' tests to query their perceptions, reflections and explanations. The interviewees were free to choose either speaking in Thai or in English.

### **Data analysis procedure**

For the data analysis, a mixed method combining quantitative and qualitative approaches was utilized in the current study. Quantitatively, each response in the test was rated by two researchers based on the rating criteria adapted from Hudson, Detmer & Brown (1995). That is, four domains of pragmatic competence were rated, i.e. the ability to use the correct speech act, typical expressions, amount of speech and information, and levels of formality, directness and politeness, on a five-point scale ranging from very inappropriate (1) to completely appropriate (5). To illustrate the rating process, one response in scenario 4 is taken as an example. The scenario is presented as below:

#### Scenario 4:

You are head of the material department in your company. You have just placed an order with one of your suppliers. However, when you receive the goods, you find that the goods are damaged in several places due to careless delivery. You call the director of the shipping company to make a complaint.

#### What are you going to say?

One of the student responses was:

*Good morning. This is Mary, the head of material department of XXX company. I am calling to complain about that I received the goods, but with several places scratched. The machines were in emergent need, but now I cannot put them into positions. How am I supposed to do with this situation?*

The scores given by the two raters were the same in the four domains, which were 5, 4, 4, and 4. This scenario aimed to elicit the speech act of complaint, and the above response successfully conducted the target speech act by saying “*I am calling to complain about...*”. As for typical expressions, “*This is Mary*” to start a telephone conversation, and “*I cannot put them into positions*” and “*How am I supposed to do...*” to explain the problems being complained about, were mostly appropriate and effective, but with some minor errors in the wording. In terms of amount of information, this response contained an ‘almost’ appropriate length of content for expressing greetings, complaints and elaborations. For levels of formality, directness and politeness, this response not only included a direct complaint, but also involved an indirect act to explain the trouble caused by the problem; furthermore, it made good use of some politeness strategies such as greetings, questions and hedges. Thus, it showed a mostly balanced degree of formality, directness and politeness, which was considered by the two raters as almost appropriate given the mode of communication (a telephone call) and the social status and distance between the two interlocutors. Overall, 17 points out of 20 were given to this response.

Two researchers, both having experience in researching the field of applied linguistics and being familiar with the rubrics, rated 10% of the sample tests independently and compared their rating on each domain item by item. When there was a disagreement of 3 points or above for each domain, a third researcher, also experienced in pragmatics, was consulted to make the final judgment. Ultimately, a 97% agreement was achieved for inter-rater reliability. The total scores obtained by each participant were normalized at a 100-point level.

## Results and Discussion

This section presents the results yielded from the WDCT, which enabled us to compare the two groups of students in terms of their pragmatic competence in business-related contexts. To illustrate their varied performances in the four speech acts, characteristics of representative responses in relevant scenarios will be discussed qualitatively. Then, based on the interviews with the student informants, factors influencing the students' development of pragmatic competence will be further discussed. Note that the grammar errors existing in the data are presented as they are and are not discussed.

### The differences of pragmatic competence between the two groups

With regard to the quantitative data collected from WDCT in terms of overall scores, a significant difference,  $t(78) = -2.92, p = .005$  was found between the two groups as shown in Table 1. This indicates a development in the performance of pragmatic competence between the first-year ( $M = 29.16, SD = 9.15$ ) and the third-year students ( $M = 34.71, SD = 7.83$ ). That is to say, compared with the first-year students who only studied 3 General English courses, the third-year students who studied 5 additional Business English courses displayed an actual development in their pragmatic competence. This result is in accordance with many previous studies which have shown that the level of pragmatic competence was improved through various instructions in particular situations (House, 1996; Koike & Pearson, 2005; Soler, 2005; Takahashi, 2010). Specifically, it echoed the statement that business language students face at least two levels of pragmatic difficulties: coping in a foreign language and coping in a business situation (Trosborg, 2003). In order to handle these two levels of pragmatic difficulties, business language students should develop their pragmatic competence by learning to use a foreign language in a particular professional context (Pöchlacker, 1995).

**Table 1.** Comparison of pragmatic competence in terms of speech acts between the first-year and the third-year Thai EFL students majoring in business

Destination	The First Year (N=40)		The Third Year (N=40)		MD	t (78)	Sig.(2-tailed)
	M	SD	M	SD			
Refusals	29.56	10.93	34.00	9.83	-4.44	-1.91	.060
Requests	28.16	7.95	34.50	8.55	-6.34	-3.44	.001*
Complaints	30.72	10.18	35.75	10.30	-5.03	-2.20	.031*
Advice	28.18	10.10	34.59	9.58	-6.41	-2.91	.005*
Overall	28.16	9.15	34.71	7.83	-5.55	-2.92	.005*

p < 0.05

Considering each speech act, a significant difference was found between the first-year and the third-year students in three speech acts, i.e., requests,  $t(78) = -3.44, p = .001$ ; complaints,  $t(78) = -2.20, p = .031$ ; and advice,  $t(78) = -2.91, p = .005$ . This seemed to corroborate Trosborg's (2003) idea that if an explicit and clear context is given, it is easier for students to learn how to deal with customers' complaints appropriately. As a result, pragmatic competence in terms of requests, complaints and advice as in the present study could be developed if students were exposed to explicit business contexts.

On the contrary, there was no significant difference between the first-year and third-year students in refusal speech acts,  $t(78) = -1.91, p = .06$ . Both groups seemed to perform similarly when making a refusal. A possible reason for this was that the refusal speech act in both groups of students was greatly affected by their L1 culture and social norms. A common problem in interlanguage pragmatics is that learners assume universal principles which do not exist. As a result, the influence of the learners' native language and culture resulted in inappropriate FL speech acts. Influenced by Thai norms of social behavior regarding confrontation, which may lead to loss of face, Thai people tended to use indirect speech acts of refusal (Wannaruk, 2008). This is in agreement with Bornmann (2001) who stated that Thai people were reluctant to say "no". As a result, this cultural and social predisposition caused similar responses in both groups despite their different levels of pragmatic competence.

Another important finding was the generally low level of pragmatic competence of both groups, as demonstrated by the scores of the first-year ( $M = 29.16, SD = 9.15$ ) and the third-year students ( $M = 34.71, SD = 7.83$ ). Evidently, the scores were not above 50. In short, the subjects in the first-year and the third-year group, seemed to have a lower-to-intermediate level of pragmatic competence. This was in line with several previous studies which found that Thai EFL students did not have a good standard of pragmatic competence which could cause communication failure (Intachakra, 2004; Leelaharattanarak, 2015; Sirikhan & Prapphal, 2011; Wannaruk, 2008).

To sum up, based on the quantitative analysis, the third-year group seemed to have developed their pragmatic competence in three out of the four speech acts, i.e., requests, complaints and advice.

### **Characteristics of representative responses in the four speech acts**

Koike (1989) stated that pragmatic competence lied in the speakers' knowledge and the use of rules of appropriateness and politeness which influenced the way they would understand and formulate speech acts. In this section, we focus on one single scenario of each speech act in the WDCT



test, with one representative response selected from each group for a qualitative analysis. Comparisons were made regarding the two groups' various choices concerning typical expressions, amount of information, and more importantly, (in)appropriate politeness strategies used in the business situations under examination.

### **Refusal**

Most first-year students showed a comparatively poor performance in refusal speech acts. Take scenario 8 for example.

**Scenario 8:** You are the manager of public relation department in a big company. A small company intends to establish a cooperative partnership with your company, but you are not willing to accept it because you are not sure about its background and reputation.

#### **What will you say to this company?**

One first-year student responded as follows:

*"Can I have more information about your company? Such as photo or your old customer".*  
(G1-N8-Sc.8)

In this response, it could be seen that no correct refusal speech act or typical refusal expressions like *"I'm not willing to...; I have to decline..."* were used. Instead, the student only focused on asking for information about the company, so the utterance sounded more like a request rather than a typical refusal. This might lead to misunderstandings in a business context. In addition, the amount of speech and information given was mostly irrelevant or does not indicate any intention to refuse. Furthermore, the level of formality, directness and politeness was not considered appropriate in this business scenario. Thus, this response represented a poor performance for a refusal speech act.

On the contrary, most third-year students tended to have a relatively better pragmatic competence, as can be seen as follows.

*I'd like to apologize. I'm not sure that I'll accept it but I will consider about this and contact you as soon as possible. (G2-N10-Sc.8)*

Specifically, the student expressed his/her regret by saying *"I'd like to apologize"* to save the hearer's face. In addition, a typical expression *"I'm not sure that I'll accept it"* implied an indirect meaning of refusal, although the degree of indirectness was not considered completely appropriate in the current scenario. In terms of the amount of information, the utterance *"I will consider about this and contact you as soon as possible"* was regarded as unnecessary or not very appropriate in this scenario because it could lead to a misinterpretation that the cooperative proposal would still be possibly accepted later. However, this did not affect the overall message from being received as a refusal.

Further, the level formality, politeness and directness was regarded as generally appropriate for a manager in a large company to refuse such a proposal in this way. As a result, it could be considered as a relatively appropriate response.

### **Request**

The development of pragmatic competence could also be seen in the request speech act as in scenario 10.

**Scenario 10:** You are the manager of personnel department in a big company. You want to make a proposal to CEO of your company about increasing income for employees in the company from next year.

#### **What will you say to him?**

The response from the first-year group read like this:

*President, I want to discuss about income of our employees. Could you prefer add more? Because I think how much income increase that mean how much their [morale] and performance of their work will increase too. But it still not affect company to much. Regardness from me. (G1-N9-Sc.10)*

In this response, “*I want to...*” and “*could you ...*” were used to request the CEO for a raise. Although “*could you ...*” was a polite strategy to make a request, “*I want to ...*” had a subjective imposition on the hearer. Given the CEO’s higher status level, this expression did not seem to be appropriate in that it threatened the hearer’s “negative face”. In this situation, expressions, such as “*I’d like to...*” might be reckoned as a more appropriate polite strategy to make the request. However, the response from the first-year group failed to realized it, which affected the socio-pragmatic competence. In addition, the address “*president*” also showed a low degree of politeness and the long explanatory utterance gave too much unnecessary information and was inflicted with too many lexical and syntactic errors. Thus, this response represents a poor request speech act indicating a low level of pragmatic competence.

On the contrary, one representative response in the same scenario from the third-year group was as follows:

*Would you mind increasing income for employees in next year because they work hard in this year? (G2-N14-Sc.10)*

Compared with the previous one, this response was short but concise. “*Would you mind...*” was used to make the request, followed by a generally appropriate amount of information to further explain the request. Obviously, to make a request to a CEO, it would seem more appropriate to include

more polite strategies, such as addressing him as “*Dear Mr. President*” and/or adding a final note such as “*Thank you for your consideration*” to express gratitude. Generally speaking, this response achieved the aim of making a request by adopting an appropriate speech act with appropriate politeness and a proper use of linguistic resources. Thus, it demonstrated a high level of pragmatic competence.

### ***Complaint***

Similar findings could be found in the speech acts of complaint as in scenario 4 in which there was an unpleasant interaction between people with the same status level but rather distant social relationships.

**Scenario 4:** You are head of the material department in your company. You have just placed an order with one of your suppliers. However, when you receive the goods, you find that the goods are damaged in several places due to careless delivery. You call the director of the shipping company to make a complaint.

### **What are you going to say?**

The sample from one first-year student read like this:

*The product that you have sent me has a lot of scratches. Next time, let's be careful about transportation. (G1-N7-Sc.4)*

This response was composed of a brief description of the problem and “a light request” for future carefulness. The participant was prudent with his/her use of negative politeness strategies, i.e. “be conventionally indirect and minimize imposition”, which was also reflected by his/her use of the phrase “*let's*”. However, the use of such indirect strategies and expressions rendered this particular speech act ambiguous and could easily be misunderstood as a tentative request instead of a real complaint, resulting in a pragmatic failure to perform the intended speech act.

On the contrary, a sample from the third-year group was as follows:

*Excuse me, I have a complaint about goods. Our goods are broken. How do you handle this? (G2-N18-Sc.4)*

This response included a phrase “*I have a complaint...*”, which was one of the typical expressions often used in unsatisfactory business transactions. Apart from that, it also employed two negative politeness strategies, i.e. “apologize” and “a question”, expressed through “*Excuse me*” and “*How do you handle this?*”, the latter indicating an effort to seek solutions for the problem being complained about. The use of these strategies and corresponding expressions were not considered as perfect yet almost appropriate in the situation.

### **Advice**

In our study, giving advice seemed to present considerable difficulty, especially when addressing a person of a higher status. As in scenario 3, a staff member was giving advice to a person with a higher position.

**Scenario 3:** You are a staff with the facility department. Recently, your company plans to replace the computers in all of the offices with new ones. Two offers are received from two PC companies at the same time. One is from a supplier with whom you have a long-standing cooperation, and the other from a new-established company who offers a substantially lower price than the former. Your line-manager cannot decide, and at a department meeting, you offer your advice to him.

#### **What are you going to say to him?**

A response from the first-year group was the following:

*Choose the company that worked together. Because the computers the company has done before may be better performing. (G1-N7-Sc.3)*

This response first stroke us as badly organised and syntactically incorrect, as well as an insufficient amount of information. An even more striking feature of this response was its marked use of the “bald-on-record” strategy, which was realised by the imperative mood at the very beginning. This bold move was considered unacceptable when addressing superiors.

The speech act of “advice” seemed to be a domain where Thai EFL learners were poorly equipped with pragmatic competence, as even among the third-year group, outstanding responses in this speech act were hardly found. One possible reason for this could be the learners’ reluctance and inability to offer concrete and reasonable advice which might be a result of their limited English proficiency. This observation holds true when we look at a response from the third-year group as below:

*I think you should select companies that are partners with us for a long time because we don’t know what the new company is reliable. (G2-N26-Sc.11)*

While this answer might not be qualified as excellent on its own terms, we were still able to identify several improvements. For one thing, the sentences were neater in organization, with the intended speech act generally accomplished with the sentence pattern “*I think you should...because*” structures. On the other hand, it also contained a hedge – “*I think*” – at the beginning of the response. Nevertheless, the given information was only appropriate in general but not sufficient. Given the hierarchical social status and distance between the two interlocutors, the whole utterance was considered, as regards politeness, as not appropriate but merely acceptable.

## Factors in developing pragmatic competence

Based on the findings above, we could infer that, when confronting the four face-threatening acts in business interactions, the third-year participants displayed an improved pragmatic competence over their first-year counterparts. Their improvement, although statistically noticeable, remained barely satisfactory. A more detailed qualitative analysis of the representative samples indicated varied choices between the two groups in terms of typical expressions, amount of information and (in)appropriate politeness strategies. So, what are the reasons that can be held accountable for the differences and variations? What are the factors that may have an impact on the Thai EFL students' pragmatic competence? Do those potential factors play a positive role that helps explain the improvement observed, or a negative one hindering the participants from attaining a yet higher level? Our interviews with 4 informants yielded quite interesting answers'.

### ***Explicit instruction***

A number of studies have suggested that explicit instruction is more beneficial than implicit treatment in promoting pragmatic competence (e.g., Jeon & Kaya, 2006; Taguchi, 2015). The role of explicit instruction was confirmed by the present study, as several informants from the third-year group unanimously ascribed their increased knowledge about language use and politeness in English verbal communications — in business situations in particular — to the teachers' instruction in the classroom, which was almost absent in their first year coursework.

That said, information explicitly offered in classrooms about pragmatic norms in business situations was still far from adequate or sufficient, a fact that could possibly explain the rather limited development detected in our participants. In some cases, as our informants mentioned, the teachers pointed out the (in)formality of certain forms only by passing, for example, “*could is more formal than can*”, and offered no further explanation.

### ***Representation of pragmatic knowledge on textbooks***

Coupled with the explicit instruction, there is another source for overtly uttered pragmatic knowledge: the textbooks. However, the explicit input of this kind provided a much less promising outlook. According to the first-year informants, pragmatic knowledge, such as being polite or appropriate language use in different situations, was almost nowhere to be found in their textbooks:

*We are just reading passages. (G1-S1)*

With the third-year group who had already taken up business courses, the situation was better. In the one-to-one stimulated recall interviews, our informants attributed their use of certain lexical forms or strategies to what they have been exposed to in the textbooks. However, we were not allowed

be too optimistic because the textbooks used in these 5 courses aimed to teach business English and touched upon pragmatic knowledge passingly. As one of the informants mentioned:

*I think in the textbooks, not many examples are given. (G2-S1)*

The pessimistic overtones of our informants echoed what previous studies have reported in other contexts. As Cohen & Ishihara (2013) noted, most of the materials appeared to under-represent pragmatic use of the target language. Learners were often presented with insufficient context when the target linguistic resources were introduced (Harwood, 2014). Many ELT textbooks include stereotypical characterizations of pragmatic norms (McConachy & Hata, 2013) and a limited range of speech acts (Vellenga, 2004). Nonetheless, it is not surprising that textbooks and classroom instruction are not the only sources of input for students to acquire pragmatic knowledge.

Future researchers may pursue a systematic examination of how much pragmatic knowledge is covered in business English textbooks.

#### ***Implicit input from media sources***

Several respondents from the third-year group mentioned that a certain amount of the pragmatic knowledge they used in responding to the WDCT situations was learnt from online videos, English movies, fictions, or TV programmes:

*I think I know it is intercultural communication. I learnt similar things from TV, or English movies. (G2- S3)*

This seemed to suggest that the third-year group had already developed certain cognitive abilities to infer pragmatic knowledge from implicit input. It is interesting to note that, how in recent years technology with multimedia capabilities could enhance and facilitate the provision of rich and comprehensible L2 input to the learner in the classroom setting and thus increase the pedagogical quality, albeit this is a hotly-discussed issue, especially in the fields of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) and mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) (See Chinnery, 2006; Salaberry, 2001). However, most of the studies we have seen so far were focused on L2 listening or speaking tasks (Rousell, 2011; de la Fuente, 2014). Future researchers may pay more attention to how technology with multimedia resources can be systematically deployed to improve EFL students' pragmatic competence.

#### ***L1 pragmatic transfer***

Another important factor is pragmatic transfer, which was defined as the “influence of the learners' knowledge of other languages and cultures on their pragmatic use and development on the use of the L2” (Kasper, 1992, as cited in Ishihara & Cohen, 2010). Interestingly, as shown in the

present case, the influence of L1 appears to play both a positive and a negative role.

Politeness is essential in all cultures. Thai culture is no exception. In particular, the norms of politeness in Thai are expressed with linguistic markers relative to the degree of status superiority and inferiority of speakers which determines the etiquette that pervades social interactions (Scupin, 1988). This significantly affected how Thai students would perform in face-threatening situations in English, as most of our respondents were aware of the influence of their own culture:

*Mostly, we were responding from a Thai perspective. (G2-S3)*

A promising result of such pragmatic transfer was that the participants were quite familiar with expressing regret, apology or gratitude in performing the speech act of refusal. The effects of positive transfer seemed to be more evident on the third-year group. Several informants from this group noted this in their one-to-one stimulated recall interviews.

*Thai students always say sorry before canceling or refusing something. (G2-S1)*

*...our own culture. Thai people usually say Khob Khun Na Ka for invitation even if they cannot make it. (G2-S3)*

Although this confirms the idea that some pragmatic knowledge is universal (Ochs, 1996), and some can be transferred from learners' first language (L1) (Kasper, 1997), some pragmatic knowledge is strictly tied to individual languages and thus can lead to overgeneralizations and pragmatic failure. The notion of "Thai politeness" seems to be different in many ways from that of English-speaking cultures. The differences are largely beyond the perceptions of the Thai EFL learners in our study, resulting in L1 negative transfer which does a serious disservice to the learners and leads to confusions in pragmatic perception and a failure to perform appropriate speech acts in several face-threatening situations.

This L1 negative transfer was more obvious when the Thai students were forced to make a refusal or complaint. As observed from WDCT, they were uncomfortable saying NO or making any negative comments in such situations, perhaps a disposition deeply rooted in their Thai culture; thus they tended to use unnecessary "indirectness" in their responses, which made their refusals or complaints more likely to be misunderstood as requests from an English-speaking perspective.

*What I exactly want to say is "No", but I think I should be polite... we should care about the other persons we are speaking with. Don't hurt their feelings. (G2-S1)*

### **Output**

The last factor diagnosed from the interviews was the lack of language output. Here the term output is used in quite a narrow sense referring to the production and use of the target language on the

part of the learners themselves (Swain, 2008). Several informants from the third-year group revealed that the three hours of English lessons they had each week were quite insufficient, and that their classes were generally teacher-dominated so they did not have much chance to speak or participate in any productive activities.

*We don't have much time to speak on ourselves. Sometimes, I raise my hand to answer questions, but my teacher would simply say "Ok" and ignore me and continues her teaching. She has a lot to say. (G2-S1)*

*The teacher has to teach a lot, so we students don't have many opportunities to respond or practice. (G2-S2)*

However, how output can facilitate EFL learners' development of pragmatic competence is less addressed and less explored in the existing literature, which suggests a line of inquiry worth pursuing in the future.

## Conclusions

The present study was an attempt to explore the development of pragmatic competence of Thai EFL university students majoring in business studies. The results revealed a statistically noticeable improvement in pragmatic competence on the part of the third-year students than their first-year counterparts. The improvement was manifested in their overall scores of WDCT and the characteristics of the representative responses of each speech act. However, it is important to note that the pragmatic competence demonstrated by both groups was not as satisfactory as it is expected to be. The findings implied that despite the positive effects from the teacher's explicit instruction and representation of pragmatic knowledge in the textbooks, there was still a wide gap between what was needed for students in professional contexts and what the teachers and textbooks could offer. Teachers should be aware of this discrepancy and include more potentially effective ways to raise students' pragmatic awareness and competence; for example, by including more naturally occurring data or authentic episodes selected from the Internet, films, or TV shows. In addition, learner-centred discussions, cooperative grouping, role-plays, and other pragmatically oriented productive tasks should be integrated into classroom activities. On the other hand, textbook writers should design textbooks that offer rich sources of pragmatic knowledge for teaching, especially the EFL textbooks intended for communication in professional settings or for specific purposes. Specifically, textbook writers could include authentic examples of speech acts and more metapragmatic explanations to facilitate the teaching of speech acts in the target contexts.



Meanwhile, the researchers are aware of the limitations that exist in the present study. First, the subjectivity in rating the WDCT could not be absolutely avoided, as the raters came to the test items with their own social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, which might inevitably impact on their judgments. To counteract this constraint, however, the raters in this study carefully observed Hudson, Detmer & Brown's rubrics (1995) and maintained a high-level inter-rater agreement rate so as to warrant the reliability of the rating both theoretically as well as methodologically. On the other hand, the present study made no attempts to control the variable of language proficiency, despite the fact that language proficiency seems to be an important factor (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig, 1999; Salsbury & Bardovi-Harlig, 2000; Taguchi, 2007). Taking this factor into account in future work will enable us to obtain clearer evidence to substantiate our claims.

There are a few suggestions for future studies. Firstly, more speech acts as well as other components of pragmatic competence can be taken into consideration, such as routine and implicature. Furthermore, future researchers may adopt multiple data collection methods other than WDCT to examine pragmatic competence via naturally occurring discourse, such as role-play or audiovisual methods. In addition, this study drew on cross-sectional data from two comparable groups of students. With more time permitted, a longitudinal approach that traces the development of a single stream of participants may generate more promising findings and a more nuanced understanding of the issues concerned. Finally, since the present study demonstrated that it was meaningful to investigate pragmatic competence in business situations, studies of a similar nature can be extended into other professional or academic contexts with potential rewards.

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## Appendix A

### Writing Discourse Completion Test

**Instruction:** The purpose of this test is to investigate your natural and direct responses in the following scenarios related to business interaction. Please write down what you would say according to your own willingness.

#### Part One

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Gender: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Major: \_\_\_\_\_ The time of learning English: \_\_\_\_\_ years

Any experience of oversea study or residence? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

If yes, please give some detailed information.

\_\_\_\_\_

Any business-related work experience? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

If yes, please give some detailed information.

\_\_\_\_\_

Are you willing to participate in our follow-up interviews?

If yes, please leave your contact information.

Tel. \_\_\_\_\_ Email \_\_\_\_\_

#### Part Two

##### Scenario 1:

You are the manager of marketing management. You have received a new business proposal from a cooperative partner who has cooperated with your company for a long time, but the price of the product is not reasonable. So you want to decline this proposal without harming the future cooperation.

**What will you say to your cooperative partner?**

##### Scenario 2:

You are a senior manager in ABC Company. Your typist, who has been working for you for more than 5 years, has corrected a brochure you are working on for three times, but there are still some misspellings in it.

**What are you going to say to her?**

**Scenario 3:**

You are a staff with the facility department. Recently, your company plans to replace the computers in all of the offices with new ones. Two offers are received from two PC companies at the same time. One is from a supplier with whom you have a long-standing cooperation, and the other from a new-established company who offers a substantially lower price than the former. Your line-manager cannot decide, and at a department meeting, you offer your advice to him.

**What are you going to say to him?**

**Scenario 4:**

You are head of the material department in your company. You have just placed an order with one of your suppliers. However, when you receive the goods, you find that the goods are damaged in several places due to careless delivery. You call the director of the shipping company to make a complaint.

**What are you going to say?**

**Scenario 5:**

You are head of the purchasing department for your company. You have placed an order for 10000 printers for your company last week and the supplier has promised to finish before April 11, 2017. However, they cannot fill the order before the due time, so you want to make a complaint and cancel the order with the supplier.

**What will you say to him/her?**

**Scenario 6:**

You are the manager of sales department in your company. You want your cooperative partner to reduce the price of the products and hope to discuss it with her at her earliest convenience.

**What will you say to your cooperative partner?**

**Scenario 7:**

You are considering buying a new smart phone. You see an advertisement on a local newspaper that they are selling it at a discount price. However, you find out that the final price (tax included) offered in the retail store is greatly higher than what has been advertised in the newspaper. You think this company isn't being truthful with the customers and feel a little irritated. You talk directly to the senior sales manager.

**What are you going to say to her?**

**Scenario 8:**

You are the manager of public relation department in a big company. A small company intends to establish a cooperative partnership with your company, but you are not willing to accept it because you are not sure about its background and reputation.

**What will you say to this company?**

**Scenario 9:**

You are the director of Human Resources Department of your company. One of our colleagues, who, in private, is also a close friend of yours for more than ten years, tells you that he is recently invited to join in a new project with another team. However, he already has too much work to do lately, so he is not sure if he can really handle them and can't make a decision. He comes to you and asks for your advice.

**What will you say to him?**

**Scenario 10:**

You are the manager of personnel department in a big company. You want to make a proposal to CEO of your company about increasing income for employees in the company from next year.

**What will you say to him?**

**Scenario 11:**

You are the owner of a small company. A well-known company has placed an order for your company's 1000 type ZP099 printer. However, you are unable to fill this order due to the shortage of stocks, so you have to refuse it.

**What will you say to this company?**

**Scenario 12:**

You are head of the marketing section in your company. Your colleague, who is a newcomer to your company for less than 3 months, shows you a promotional plan to attract more customers, but in your opinion it will be difficult to carry out and probably won't be very cost-effective.

**What are you going to tell him to make the plan better?**

**Scenario 13:**

You are the manager of marketing management in a well-known company. You want your supplier to improve the packing of the products and offer them some samples of packing and ask them to have a look.

**What will you say to him/her?**

**Scenario 14:**

You are the manager of one branch in your company. The CEO of your company invites you to the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary party of the company's establishment on Tuesday, April, 11. However, you have to attend a project meeting on that day so you cannot make it.

**What will you say to your CEO?**

**Scenario 15:**

You are the manager of sales department in a supermarket. The delayed goods ordered from a big company have caused a great loss for your supermarket. You intend to ask for compensation.

**What will you say to this company?**

**Scenario 16:**

You get a new job in the Reception Department of a trade company. One of your company's business acquaintances, Mr. Frank Murphy from Australia, visits your city for the first time for a business trip. You pick him up at the airport. He wants to stay in a reasonably-priced hotel near the city centre, so he asks for your advice.

**What are you going to tell him?**