

**EXPLORING THE PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE OF EFL
LEARNERS IN THE PRODUCTION AND JUDGEMENT OF
FORMAL WRITTEN REQUESTS**

**A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF LINGUISTICS
DIVISION OF LINGUISTICS AND PSYCHOLOGY
MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY**

**THIS THESIS IS PRESENTED AS PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS**

BY

Kwai Peng SIU

July, 2008

STATEMENT OF CANDIDATE

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been submitted for any degree to any other university or institution. The sources of information used and the extent to which the work of others has been utilized have been indicated in this thesis in the manner conventionally approved in the research field in which the thesis fits. The approval from Ethics Committee has been obtained (Protocal number HE25NOV2005-D04426).

Signature of the candidate: _____

Date: _____

ABSTRACT

This study sets out to examine the pragmatic competence of Cantonese adult learners of English possessing different levels of proficiency when performing the speech act of requesting for a formal purpose in writing. Pragmatic judgment – one of the two aspects of pragmatic competence – was examined by studying the most proficient group (i.e., native Cantonese-speaking EFL teachers at university), whereas pragmatic performance – the other aspect of pragmatic competence – was examined by studying the two weaker groups (i.e., university students at two language proficient levels). Both pragmatic judgment and pragmatic performance were examined by investigating the same four dependent variables (i.e., *politeness, directness, formality* and *amount of information*). Teacher data, collected through a Pragmatic Judgment Questionnaire completed and returned by sixteen EFL teachers (eight native Cantonese speakers and eight native English speakers) and by means of individual interviews, were analyzed quantitatively for responses to twelve questions and qualitatively for responses to an additional two questions. Student data, consisting of both experimental and authentic letters and e-mails, were analyzed quantitatively.

Main research findings suggest:

- It is possible for very proficient NNSs of English, (i.e., the EFL teachers in this study), to achieve native-like pragmatic judgments in most aspects, except for their views on several pragmatic considerations (i.e., “unnaturally polite” expressions, usefulness of “negative” words, supportive moves not to be used and writing plans preferred).
- As the English proficiency of L2 learners improves from Grade E to Grade A/B (as determined by the Hong Kong A-level Examinations in the subject “Use of English”), their pragmatic performance shows improvement.

For pedagogical reasons, a qualitative analysis was conducted for Questions 1 and 2 in order to generate examples of "unnaturally polite"/ "polite" / "impolite" expressions and to provide examples of inappropriate supportive moves in relation to three writing topics.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincere thanks to the following people:

I wish to thank Professor Christopher N. Candlin (my Principal Supervisor) and Dr Peter Roger (my Associate Supervisor) for their valuable and indispensable guidance on this thesis, for their willingness to discuss problems that came up during the process of this study, and for reading the successive drafts of this thesis.

I am especially grateful to Jean Young, the Head of the English Language Centre (ELC) at the City University of Hong Kong, for her kind assistance in allowing me to use the authentic letters and e-mails ELC students sent to her as part of the data for this study.

I also wish to thank Professor Joseph Hung for his kind assistance in collecting data from students studying in the English Department of the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Special thanks also go to my colleagues, my friends and my relatives (Herbert Au-Yeung and Vicky Li) for their participation in this study and for their kind assistance in the process of data collection.

I particularly wish to express my heartfelt gratitude to one of my friends who wishes to remain anonymous and who has given me unfailing support and

constant care in the entire process of doing this thesis.

I would also like to thank Agnes K Y Law, the statistical consultant in the Department of Management Sciences at the City University of Hong Kong, for her advice on data analysis and data interpretation.

Finally, I thank Sam and Shelley as well as my parents for their family support throughout the whole process of this study.

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1	Explanations and examples of various types of supportive moves..	50
Table 2	Examples of background information.....	55
Table 3	The makeup of the sixteen raters	133
Table 4	The makeup of the twelve letters used for the Pragmatic Judgment Task.....	138
Table 5	The order of the twelve letters in the sixteen versions.....	140
Table 6	The makeup of the scripts collected from two groups of students.	156
Table 7	The makeup of student participants in each of the two groups.....	158
Table 8	Examples of "background information"	167
Table 9	The makeup of authentic e-mails and authentic letters.....	179
Table 10	Differences in the mean scores reported by CSTs and ESTs for the appropriateness of supportive moves as shown by <i>t</i> tests.....	194
Table 11	Differences in the frequencies of politeness categories chosen by CSTs and ESTs as shown by Proportional <i>t</i> test at 95% confidence level.....	195
Table 12	Differences in "formality/informality" categories chosen by CSTs and ESTs as shown by Proportional <i>t</i> test at 95% confidence level.....	197
Table 13	Differences in the mean scores reported by CSTs and ESTs for the appropriateness of the register as shown by <i>t</i> test.....	198
Table 14	Differences in the mean scores reported for the appropriateness of the position of the head act by CSTs and ESTs as shown by <i>t</i> test.....	199
Table 15	Differences in the three categories chosen by CSTs and ESTs concerning the usefulness of "negative" expressions, as shown by Proportional <i>t</i> tests at 95% confidence level.....	200
Table 16	Differences in the mean scores reported by CSTs and ESTs for the appropriateness of the amount of information in a letter as shown by <i>t</i> test.....	202
Table 17	Differences in the mean scores reported for the overall appropriateness of a letter by CSTs and ESTs as shown by <i>t</i> test..	202
Table 18	The SMs ranked "1" (the most important) by CSTs and ESTs (in raw frequencies).....	204
Table 19	The SMs ranked "1"(the most important) by CSTs and ESTs (in percentages)	205
Table 20	Differences in the supportive moves ranked "1" (the most important) by CSTs and ESTs, as shown by Proportional <i>t</i> test	206

Table 21	The SMs chosen by CSTs and ESTs as the SMs they would definitely not use (in raw frequencies)	207
Table 22	The SMs chosen by CSTs and ESTs as the SMs they would definitely not use (in percentages)	208
Table 23	Differences in the supportive moves chosen by CSTs and ESTs as the SMs they themselves would not use, as shown by Proportional <i>t</i> test.....	209
Table 24	Topic 1 SM12.....	209
Table 25	Topic 3 SM 9.....	210
Table 26	Writing plans chosen by CSTs and ESTs as the plan they would use (in both raw frequencies and percentages)	212
Table 27	Differences in the numbers of CSTs and ESTs preferring the four writing plans for the three topics, as shown by Proportional <i>t</i> test	213
Table 28	Topic 2 Plan 2.....	213
Table 29	Topic 3 Plan 2.....	214
Table 30	The difference between two percentages for a sample containing eight participants, as shown by Proportional <i>t</i> test	215
Table 31	Choices made by CSTs and ESTs regarding their inclination to use negative/positive words (in both raw frequencies and percentages)	216
Table 32	The differences in the tendency to use negative/positive words between CSTs and ESTs, as shown by Proportional <i>t</i> test.....	217
Table 33	Differences in the scores reported by female and male teachers for the appropriateness of supportive moves as shown by <i>t</i> tests.....	221
Table 34	Differences in the “politeness” categories chosen by female and male teachers as shown by Proportional <i>t</i> tests at 95% confidence level.....	222
Table 35	Differences in “formality/informality” categories chosen by female and male teachers as shown by Proportional <i>t</i> tests at 95% confidence level	224
Table 36	Differences in the mean scores reported by female and male teachers for the appropriateness of the register as shown by <i>t</i> test	225
Table 37	Differences in the mean scores reported by female and male teachers for the appropriateness of the position of the head act as shown by <i>t</i> test	226
Table 38	Differences in the three categories chosen by CSTs and ESTs concerning the usefulness of “negative” expressions, as shown by Proportional <i>t</i> tests at 95% confidence level.....	227

Table 39	Differences in the mean scores reported by female and male teachers for the appropriateness of the amount of information as shown by <i>t</i> test	229
Table 40	Differences in the mean scores reported by female and male teachers for the overall appropriateness of the letter as shown by <i>t</i> test.....	229
Table 41	The SMs ranked “1” (the most important) by female and male teachers (in raw frequencies)	230
Table 42	The SMs ranked “1” (the most important) by female and male teachers (in percentages).....	231
Table 43	Differences in the supportive moves ranked “1” (the most important) by female and male teachers, as shown by Proportional <i>t</i> test.....	232
Table 44	SMs chosen by female and male teachers as the SMs they would definitely not use (in raw frequencies)	233
Table 45	SMs chosen by female and male teachers as the SMs they would definitely not use (in percentages)	234
Table 46	Differences in the supportive moves chosen by female and male teachers as the SMs they themselves would not use, as shown by Proportional <i>t</i> test.....	235
Table 47	Writing plans chosen by female and male teachers as the plan they would use (in both raw frequencies and percentages)	236
Table 48	Differences in the numbers of female and male teachers preferring the four writing plans for the three topics, as shown by Proportional <i>t</i> test.....	237
Table 49	Topic 3 Plan 2.....	237
Table 50	Choices made by female and male teachers regarding their inclination to use negative/positive words (in both raw frequencies and percentages)	239
Table 51	The differences in the tendency to use negative/positive words between female and male teachers, as shown by Proportional <i>t</i> test.....	240
Table 52	Differences in instances of mitigating expressions used by A/B-grade and E-grade students as shown by <i>t</i> test.....	246
Table 53	Differences in the sub-categories within mitigating expressions (showing statistical significance) used by A/B-grade and E-grade students as shown by <i>t</i> test.....	247

Table 54	Differences in the sub-categories within mitigating expressions (not showing statistical significance) used by A/B-grade and E-grade students as shown by <i>t</i> test	249
Table 55	Differences in the numbers of types of supportive move used by A/B-grade students and E-grade students as shown by <i>t</i> test	251
Table 56	Differences in the frequency of each type of supportive move (showing statistical significance) between the letters written by A/B-grade students and those written by E-grade students as shown by <i>t</i> test	254
Table 57	Differences in the frequency of each type of supportive move (not showing statistical significance) between the letters written by A/B-grade students and those written by E-grade students as shown by <i>t</i> test	256
Table 58	Differences in the plans chosen by A/B-grade and E-grade students as shown by Proportional <i>t</i> test	259
Table 59	Differences in instances of negative words used by A/B-grade students and E-grade students as shown by <i>t</i> test	261
Table 60	Differences in the mean length of the letters written by A/B-grade students and E-grade students as shown by <i>t</i> test	261
Table 61	Differences in total instances of expressions showing violation of formality in the letters written by A/B-grade students and E-grade students as shown by <i>t</i> test	262
Table 62	Differences in the sub-categories within “violation of formality” (showing statistical significance) used by A/B-grade students and E-grade students as shown by <i>t</i> test	267
Table 63	Differences in the sub-categories within “violation of formality” (not showing statistical significance) in the letters written by A/B-grade students and E-grade students as shown by <i>t</i> test	270
Table 64	Differences in features of formality in letters written by A/B-grade	272
Table 65	Differences in total instances showing violation of formality in the authentic letters and authentic e-mails written by E-grade students as shown by <i>t</i> test	278
Table 66	Differences in the sub-categories within “violation of formality” in the authentic letters and authentic e-mails written by E-grade students as shown by <i>t</i> test	281
Table 67	Differences in features of formality in the authentic letters and authentic e-mails written by E-grade students as shown by <i>t</i> test .	285

Table 68	Differences in the mean scores given to the appropriateness of supportive moves used by B/C-grade and E-grade students as shown by <i>t</i> test	289
Table 69	Differences in the politeness categories assigned to the B/C-grade letters and the E-grade letters as shown by Proportional <i>t</i> tests at 95% confidence level.....	292
Table 70	Differences in the formality/informality categories assigned to the letters written by B/C-grade and by E-grade letters as shown by Proportional <i>t</i> tests at 95% confidence level.....	295
Table 71	Differences in the mean scores for the appropriateness of the register used by B/C-grade and E-grade students as shown by <i>t</i> test.....	296
Table 72	Differences in the mean scores for the appropriateness of the position of the head act in the letters written by B/C-grade and E-grade students as shown by <i>t</i> test	297
Table 73	Differences in the mean scores for the appropriateness of the amount of information in the letters written by B/C-grade and E-grade students as shown by <i>t</i> test	297
Table 74	Differences in the mean scores for the overall appropriateness of the letters written by B/C-grade and E-grade students as shown by <i>t</i> test.....	298
Table 75	The confidence levels for samples containing 8 participants in each group	303
Table 76	The confidence levels for samples containing 16 participants in each group.....	303
Table 77	Politeness expressions underlined in the twelve letters to elicit teachers' pragmatic judgments.....	305
Table 78	“Polite”.....	311
Table 79	“Unnaturally polite” expressions showing a difference of 2 teachers choosing this category between CSTs and ESTs	315

LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix A	Template 1.....	420
Appendix B	Template 2a.....	428
Appendix C	Template 2b.....	430
Appendix D	The Pragmatic Judgment Questionnaire.....	432
Appendix E	A Trial Version of the Discourse Completion Task Questionnaire.....	439
Appendix F	Sample of the Metapragmatic Judgment Task Questionnaire designed by Chen (1996).....	448
Appendix G	Three topics used in the writing task.....	451
Appendix H	Version One of the twelve letters used to elicit teachers’ pragmatic judgments.....	453
Appendix I	First language, gender and the version of the twelve letters assigned to each of the sixteen raters.....	473
Appendix J	The letter soliciting participation of teachers in this study....	474
Appendix K	Personal Background Questionnaire (Part 1).....	476
Appendix L	The Personal Background Questionnaire (Part 2).....	478
Appendix M	Instruction sheet provided to teachers for administering the writing task.....	480
Appendix N	The breakdown of the scripts collected by four teachers.....	483
Appendix O	Examples of expressions regarded as a certain type of support move.....	484
Appendix P	Rules followed in counting the overall length of a letter.....	487
Appendix Q	Rules followed in counting the number of T-units.....	489
Appendix R	The first draft of the three writing topics use in the pilot test	490
Appendix S	Three drafts of the Pragmatic Judgment Questionnaire.....	491
Appendix T	Three drafts of the Personal Background Information Questionnaire (Part 1).....	511
Appendix U	The total raw frequencies and percentages of the three categories (“useful”, “counter-productive” and “neutral”) chosen by the sixteen teachers for 21 “negative” expressions (Question 11).....	517
Appendix V	The raw frequencies of the categories “U”, “N” and “CP” for each “negative” expression (Question 11).....	518
Appendix W	Qualities mentioned by at least two teachers for the expressions they considered “impolite.....	524

Appendix X	ISMs as reported by sixteen teachers for Topic 1	534
Appendix Y	ISMs as reported by sixteen teachers for Topic 2.....	546
Appendix Z	ISMs as reported by sixteen teachers for Topic 3.....	559
Appendix AA	“Unnaturally polite” expressions showing a difference of 2 teachers between CSTs and ESTs	569
Appendix BB	“Counter-productive” expressions showing a difference of 2 teachers between CSTs and ESTs	571
Appendix CC	SMs ranked as most important by at least two teachers out of sixteen	573
Appendix DD	Comments made by sixteen teachers concerning missing and unnecessary information for the three writing topics (Question 13).....	574
Appendix EE	Examples of expressions, sentence structures and supportive moves considered informal by at least two of the sixteen teachers	576

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES	vi
LIST OF APPENDICES	xi
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	1
A. Purpose and scope of this study	9
B. Rationale and significance of this study.....	15
1. Politeness expressions used in a request message	15
2. Supportive moves used in a request message	16
3. The pragmatic preferences of addressees who speak different first languages	18
4. The pragmatic preferences of the addressees of different genders ..	22
5. Relationship between linguistic and pragmatic competence	28
6. Computer-mediated communication.....	31
7. Language features of E-mail as a CMC sub-variety	33
8. The classification of genre	35
9. Analysis in studies of CMC	39
10. Formality of language	41
C. Terms used in this study	44
1. Head acts and supportive moves.....	44
2. The four pragmatic variables	45
a. Politeness.....	46
b. Directness.....	53
c. Amount of information	57
d. Formality.....	58
3. Pragmatic competence, pragmatic judgment and pragmatic performance	59
4. Mean T-unit Length.....	60
5. The first language of a rater	62
6. Modes of discourse	64
7. Genre.....	65
8. The English proficiency level of students.....	65
Notes	67
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW	70
A. Inadequacies of Brown and Levinson's (1978) model.....	72
1. Power, distance and imposition as defining constructs.....	72

2.	The universality of the politeness theory	78
B.	The issue of directness/indirectness in relation to language strategies	82
C.	Level of indirectness and the Bulge Theory	88
D.	Pragmatic judgment	90
E.	Rhetorical plans, content and form.....	91
1.	Rhetorical plans	91
2.	Content.....	95
a.	Amount of information	95
b.	Pragmatic failure and supportive moves.....	96
3.	Form.....	97
a.	Linguistic forms used by NNSs	97
b.	Linguistic competence and pragmatic competence	100
F.	The disinclination of L2 learners to follow target language norms ..	103
G.	Data collection methods	105
1.	The inadequacies of Written Discourse Completion Tasks	107
a.	The internal validity of the data	107
b.	The usage of spoken language by means of written language.	109
c.	Different perceptions of the power, social distance and imposition of the addressee.....	110
d.	Focusing only on the speaker's point of view only	113
e.	Relatively low ranking of WDCT compared with other forms of Discourse Completion Tasks	115
2.	Observation of authentic speech	116
3.	Role-play and simulated data.....	117
H.	Frameworks of analysis	118
1.	Four related studies	118
2.	Modifications made to suit the analytical framework used in this study	122
I.	Mean T-unit length as a measure for "complexity of sentence structure"	125
1.	The three syntactic measures developed by Hunt (1965)	125
2.	Limitations of T-units.....	127
3.	Reasons for using mean T-unit length as a syntactic measure.....	128
	Notes	130
	CHAPTER THREE METHODOLOGY	131
A.	Research focus 1: Measuring teachers' pragmatic judgments	131
1.	Independent variables	131

2.	Dependent variables.....	131
3.	Control variables.....	132
	a. Sociopragmatic variables of “power”, “social distance” and “degree of imposition”	132
	b. Age of the participant’s interlocutor	132
	c. The first language of the participant’s interlocutor	132
	d. Gender of the participant’ interlocutor.....	133
4.	Teacher participants	133
	a. Four Cantonese female raters.....	134
	b. Four Cantonese male raters.....	134
	c. Four British female raters.....	135
	d. Four British male raters	135
5.	Instrumentation	136
	a. The selection of three writing topics for the written formal requests	136
	b. The makeup of the 12 letters used for eliciting the responses from the raters	137
	c. The pragmatic judgment questionnaire.....	141
6.	Data collection: soliciting and interviewing teacher participants ..	148
7.	Unexpected technical problems	151
8.	Data analysis	151
B.	Research focus 2: Measuring students’ pragmatic performance	152
	1. Measuring students’ pragmatic performance using experimental data.....	152
	a. Independent variables.....	152
	b. Dependent variables.....	153
	c. Student participants	153
	d. Instrumentation of the experimental data	154
	e. Data collection for experimental data	156
	f. Unexpected technical problems.....	158
	g. Data analysis of the experimental data	160
	2. Measuring students’ pragmatic performance using authentic data	175
	a. Independent variables.....	175
	b. Dependent variables.....	176
	c. Student participants, data collection and instrumentation.....	176
	d. Unexpected technical problems	181
	e. Data analysis of the authentic data.....	181

C.	Ensuring the accuracy and reliability of data entry and data analysis	183
1.	Ensuring the accuracy of entering teacher and student data into SPSS.....	183
a.	Teacher data	183
b.	Student data.....	184
2.	Ensuring the reliability of the outcome of categorization.....	184
D.	Pilot tests for the research tools	186
1.	The three writing topics	186
2.	The Pragmatic Judgment Questionnaire and the Personal Background Questionnaire	187
a.	The major modifications made to the Pragmatic Judgment Questionnaire after the first pilot test.....	188
b.	The major modifications made to the Pragmatic Judgment Questionnaire after the second pilot test.....	189
c.	The major modifications made to the Pragmatic Judgment Questionnaire after the third pilot test	190
d.	The major modifications made to the Personal Background Questionnaire after three pilot tests	190
	Notes	191
	CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS.....	192
A.	Quantitative findings related to Hypothesis 1	193
1.	Individual questions	194
2.	Summary and the meaning of results concerning Hypothesis 1	218
a.	Summary	218
b.	The meaning of results for Hypothesis 1	220
B.	Quantitative findings related to Hypothesis 2	221
1.	Individual questions	221
2.	Summary and meaning of results concerning Hypothesis 2	241
a.	Summary	241
b.	The meaning of results for Hypothesis 2	243
C.	Quantitative findings related to Hypothesis 3	243
1.	Individual categories.....	244
2.	Summary and the meaning of results concerning Hypothesis 3	273
a.	Summary (Hypothesis 3).....	273
b.	Meaning of results (Hypothesis 3).....	277
D.	Quantitative findings related to Hypothesis 4.....	278
1.	Individual categories.....	278

2.	Summary and the meaning of results concerning Hypothesis 4	286
a.	Summary (Hypothesis 4).....	286
b.	Meaning of results (Hypothesis 4).....	286
E.	Findings of supplementary analysis	287
1.	The scores reported by the sixteen teachers for the six letters written by two B/C-grade working adults and two E-grade students	288
a.	Individual questions	289
b.	Summary and meaning of results.....	298
2.	Qualitative findings concerning Questions 1 and 2	300
a.	Politeness levels of individual expressions (Question 1).....	304
b.	Inappropriate supportive moves (Question 2).....	325
CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION.....		337
A.	Discussion about findings concerning four hypotheses.....	337
1.	Hypothesis 1.....	337
a.	“Unnaturally polite” expressions and the usefulness of “negative” expressions.....	340
b.	Pragmatic preferences of CSTs and ESTs.....	345
2.	Hypothesis 2.....	351
a.	Sub-category “hard to categorize as either ‘formal’ or ‘informal’”	353
b.	Writing plans.....	354
3.	Hypothesis 3.....	355
a.	Categories showing no significant differences	356
b.	Categories showing significant differences	364
4.	Hypothesis 4.....	370
B.	Limitations of this study.....	373
Notes		380
CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION.....		381
A.	Summary of main findings.....	381
B.	Recommendations for future research and for classroom teaching .	382
1.	Suggestions for further research	382
a.	Suggestions for new directions for future research in order to explore avenues opened but not pursued in this research.....	383
b.	Suggestions for future research studies aiming at replicating this study in order to confirm (or disconfirm) its findings.....	391
2.	Suggestions for classroom teaching.....	396
a.	The first language of the addressee.....	396

b. The gender of the addressee.....	399
c. Students' pragmatic performance.....	400
References.....	404