

A PROBLEM AMONG EFL: CAN HIGH-PROFICIENCY STUDENTS USE PROPER DISAGREEMENT STRATEGIES AS NATIVE SPEAKERS DO?

Defry Azhari
University of Bengkulu
defryazhari@gmail.com

Abstract

This research aims to find out the correlation between students' proficiency and disagreement strategies. The study involved the fourth-semester students of English Education Study Program. The instruments of this research were English language proficiency test to get the data of students' language proficiency scores and Discourse Completion Task (DCT) to get the data of students' disagreement statements. The correlation between language proficiency test scores and DCT's scores was significant with the coefficient correlation (r_{count}) was 0,264 which was higher than $R_{\text{table } 5\%}$ (0.235). The coefficient correlation shows that the correlation was positive. However, the strength of correlation was weak. The results implied that there was a correlation between students' proficiency and disagreement strategies but the language proficiency did not indirectly affect the disagreement strategies of students because the correlation was weak.

Key words: *students' proficiency, disagreement strategies*

Introduction

Communication is a part of social life. In communicating with others, people use language because it can represent their thinking. Brinton (2000) states that language is rule-governed, creative, universal, innate and learned. The most important point in communication is how the speakers convey their messages to the hearers. In order that the speakers should have the communicative competence to use the target language based on the context. Hence, pragmatic competence as the ability to use language appropriately in different social situations is needed. It is for maintaining a good relationship between speaker and hearer.

One of an influential factor in maintaining a good relationship is politeness. Politeness is used to reduce the risk of conflict in conversation. Watts (2003) points out "politeness as a form of behavior of a given society and at the same time as one dimension of culture." It means that politeness is also a representation of people's thinking or even culture. The speakers which in this case EFL learner tend to deliver their disagreement using appropriate strategies depending on the hearer's power status, distance, and rank of imposition. Without these three considerations, the speakers may threaten the face of the hearer. The face theory itself had been explained by Brown and Levinson (1987) and Leech (1983).

The disagreement that had been investigated in this study is one of *the face-threatening act* (FTA) because it can threaten the *face* of the hearer. The study about disagreement frequently compares between students' performance and native speakers as investigated by Locastro (1986) and Kamisili and Dogancay-Atkuna (1996). While there are two studies about the interaction between the students' English proficiency and linguistic features used by English students in realizing disagreement. Behnam and Niroomand (2011) and Xuehua (2006) contend that resulted in high-level proficiency in English is followed by an increase in the use of mitigating devices, and the low level of English proficiency is followed by a decrease in the use of mitigating devices.

In this research, the researcher investigated the correlation between students' proficiency and disagreement strategy of the fourth-semester students in English Education Study Program Bengkulu University. The investigation on politeness strategy in Indonesia is still limited especially in showing disagreement. The disagreement should be delivered well by students because this act can threaten face of interlocutors. The objective of this study was to investigate the correlation between students' proficiency and disagreement strategy of the fourth-semester students in English Education Study Program.

The hypotheses of this study were: (1) There was a correlation between students' English proficiency and students' disagreement strategies (H1), and (2) There was no correlation between students' English proficiency and students' disagreement strategies (H0). This study was limited to the investigation on the disagreement strategy as the pragmatic competence of the fourth-semester students in English Language Education Study Program. This study was focused on the written disagreement as of the representation of disagreement strategy used by English students that were correlated with their proficiency scores.

Method

This research was designed as a correlational study. According to Gay (1990), "a correlational study attempts to determine whether, and to what degree, a relationship exists between two or more quantifiable variables." The first variable was students' English proficiency scores and the second variable was disagreement strategy of the students.

This research involved the subjects who were able to understand English sentences well. Besides, the subjects had to represent the EFL students. Hence, the researcher chose the fourth-semester students in English Education Study Program as the subject. They had taken language proficiency test in the first semester. Because of their total is 69 students, which is under 100, the researcher employed all of the students of the fourth semester.

There were two instruments used in this research. The first was English language proficiency test. It was a tool in measuring language proficiency of subjects. The second was discourse completion task (DCT). DCT was written questionnaire containing short descriptions of a particular situation to reveal the pattern of disagreement. It consists of twelve situations. The appropriate response was given ten points while the inappropriate response was given five points and the blank answer was given zero point. So, the highest score is one hundred and twenty points and the lowest point is sixty points. The DCT was appropriate to use in this research, as Beebe and Cumming (cited in Lucia, 2009) state that "DCT allows researchers in collecting a large amount of data in a relatively short time."

In making the DCT, there were 5 steps : (1) the researcher identified and classified situations which were appropriate for subjects, (2) the researcher designed the character in the situation given that consisted of equal, high, and low status of the subjects , (3) the researcher modified the situation in DCT in order to include social distance as a factor which also influences the choice of students strategy in disagreeing, (4) the DCT was tried out to students of English Department, and (5) the DCT was revised based on the comment and suggestion from the subjects.

To validate the DCT, a try-out was given to some sixth-semester students that were chosen randomly. There were 22 students. To validate data of DCT related to the rightness of the researcher in giving the score, the researcher took the sample in the form of disagreement given in the DCT. These samples were given to the co-rater who is one of the expert lecturers in this field.

In taking the data of disagreement, there were some steps: (1) the researcher gave the DCT to the subjects, (2) the written disagreement response of the students on the DCT

was analyzed by the researcher, 3) the numerical data were correlated with the students' proficiency scores, and (4) the researcher showed and described the result.

The responses of subjects in the DCT were analyzed based on their similarity to definition and kind of politeness strategies. The score of every strategic response used was the same: (a) the appropriate response was scored ten points, (b) the inappropriate response was scored five points, and (c) the blank response was scored zero points.

The result was then compared with the co-rater result by using Cohen's kappa. If the kappa shows 0 or less, it means that the researcher and corrector do not have the agreement and the data is not valid. It means that the researcher had to discuss the result of strategies' classification with the corrector until the minimal Kappa scores show that there was substantial agreement. It means there is a strong agreement between researcher and corrector. It could then be said that the data is valid and research can be continued to the next step, i.e. correlating the data.

The data correlation was found using The Pearson Product Moment. It was performed by SPSS software version 16.00. There were five steps in correlating variables: (1) reviewing the hypotheses, (2) calculating the correlation by applying Pearson product Moment Analysis, (3) comparing the result of R_{count} and R_{table} ; if $R_{count} < R_{table}$, H_1 is rejected, H_0 is accepted. And if $R_{count} > R_{table}$, H_1 is accepted, H_0 is rejected, (4) consulting the correlation strength, and (5) taking the conclusion of the correlation strength and hypotheses testing result.

Discussion

The data of language proficiency test scores were taken from the database of language laboratory. The students' proficiency test scores were put into five categories. Many of the students were in the range of 396-436. There were 29 students in this range. The 25 students were in the range of 355-395. The other 18 students were in the range of 313-354, 437-477, and 478-517, as shown in table 1.

Table 1. Result of the Students' Proficiency Test

The scores of students' language proficiency	The number of students
478-517	3
437-477	4
396-436	27
355-395	25
313-354	10

The second instrument, DCT, presents the students' disagreement response. The samples of DCT analysis' result were validated by an independent rater. The inter-rater reliability was measured using Cohen's Kappa. The result of the inter-rater analysis showed that Kappa = 0.772 with $p < 0.001$. It was in the range of 0,61-0,80. There was substantial agreement between the researcher and co-rater. Therefore, the result of students' disagreement strategies by the researcher can be accepted. Table 2 presents the result of DCT analysis.

Table 2. The Result of DCT

The scores of students' DCT	The number of students
109-120	1
97-108	18
85-96	39
73-84	9
60-72	2

Table 2 shows that many of the students got the scores in the range of 85-96. 17 students got scores in the range of 97-108. It also can be seen that only one student got the scores in the range of 109-120. The other 12 students were in the range of 60-72 and 73-84. The correlation between language proficiency test scores and DCT's scores was significant at $R_{table} 5\%$ (0.235). The correlation was positive because the R_{count} was 0,264. The correlation was weak, based on the five categories of correlation strength where the R_{count} was in the range of 0,200 – 0,399, as shown in table 3.

Table 3. Correlation between TOEFL and DCT Scores

		TOEFLscores	DCTscores
TOEFLscores	Pearson Correlation	1	.264
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.028
	N	69	69
DCTscores	Pearson Correlation	.264*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.028	
	N	69	69

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Based on the findings of this research, it was found that there was a significant correlation between students' language proficiency and disagreement strategies. This significant correlation meant students' language proficiency influenced their variant disagreement strategies. The correlation was also positive which meant that the increase in students' language proficiency affected the increase of students' ability in choosing appropriate disagreement strategies. However, based on the categories of correlation's strength from Sugiyono (2014), the correlation between these two variables was weak. Since disagreement strategies are a representation of pragmatic competence, it can be assumed that the language proficiency influences the pragmatic competence of students and their correlation is weak. All of the result in this research can be implied as follow:

Firstly, high language proficiency is not a guarantee of high pragmatic competence. This implication was strengthened by the finding of the Bardovi-Harlig and Kreutel that proficiency did not automatically affect pragmatic competence. Bardovi-Harlig (1993) states that “even though it seems logical to assume that a higher lexico-grammatical proficiency facilitates pragmatic proficiency it cannot be assumed that the former automatically gives rise to the latter.” This statement was in line with Kreutel (2007) who found that there was no strong correlation between proficiency levels and the use of desirable or undesirable features of disagreement.” Kreuter's study proved that lexico-grammatical proficiency did not automatically facilitate pragmatic competence. Both of these studies show that the higher proficiency students may possibly use appropriate statements in delivering their intention that in this research in the form of disagreement. However, it is not sure that the students with higher proficiency will convey their intention as pragmatically correct.

Secondly, pragmatic competence has to be implicitly taught to the students in order to strengthen students' ability in using language. English is not only as an instruction between lecturer and students in teaching and learning process but it is also emphasized as

the tool in communication. Students cannot only learn grammar, lexis or phonology area in English but also pragmatic competence as the ability to deliver intended meaning of the speaker to the interlocutor. It is in line with Locastro (1986) who states that “besides acquiring elements of the target language, students must be able to function within the total meaning system of that language.” In this statement, Locastro tries to emphasize that students also have to understand how to convey an intention by using a language they learn. In conveying the intention, a speaker should use language according to the cultural norms of the target language society. There will be a misunderstanding in the communication if the speaker lacks pragmatic skills.

Thirdly, the language proficiency is not the only factor which affects students’ pragmatic competence. Another factor which influences the development of pragmatic competence is the culture. It is because pragmatic is related to the culture of the society. Culture itself is different from one region to another. It could be a reason of why it is difficult for most learners of the foreign language to gain pragmatic competence in the target language. For some EFL learners in Indonesia, it is challenging to understand how to express something using the culture of English native speakers because they do not live in native speakers’ environment. The students can check whether their grammar in sentences or utterances is right or wrong by using grammar rules. However, in pragmatic competence, the students cannot check whether the way they convey the intention is appropriate to the English native speakers’ culture or not.

Although there is no certain rule in judging pragmatic competence, the EFL learners are challenged to understand how to appropriately convey their intention to the interlocutor, as Nakajima (1997) states that pragmatic competence cannot be clearly judged as correct or incorrect according to prescriptive rules. The wrong way in delivering information to the interlocutor may affect a bad relationship between speaker and interlocutor. Moreover, the information is about disagreement to the interlocutor’s statements as had been investigated in this research. The speaker has to conduct an appropriate strategy to make disagreement can be accepted by the interlocutor.

The lack of language mastery usually is a big obstacle for EFL learners as the non-native speakers in delivering their disagreement appropriately in English way. Behnam (2011) in his research on Iranian EFL learners states that “Inappropriate performance of learners in different disagreement situations may result from their linguistic limitations.” This result is in line with the findings of Umar (2006) by Sudanese learners on the speech act of complaint and Jalilifar (2009) by Iranian subjects on request strategies. They found that lower proficiency learners have pragmatic competence may be to some extents, but they lack sufficient linguistic competence to perform appropriately in a foreign language. It indirectly can be assumed that the higher the proficiency level, the more appropriately they will utter their disagreements. It was caused if they have higher proficiency; there will be more choices of words, phrase or even sentences to show disagreement that is implied to a number of choices of disagreement strategies. If they can use appropriate strategies in disagreeing, the message will be more polite and clear to be understood. It is accordance with Kreutel (2007) who mentions that “ESL learners often lack appropriate disagreement strategies, which makes their utterances appear impolite and rude, and which may even result in message abandonment.”

Fourthly, a weak correlation between students’ proficiency and disagreement strategies in this research may also be caused by students’ difficulty to perfectly imitate native speakers’ pragmatic competence in using English. The native speakers of English as the owner of this language have a number of politeness strategies to reduce the potential face-threat of their speech act and make a *bridge* between their desire of expressing an opinion and undesired action. There is a tendency to agree and save the hearer’s positive

face by "claiming common ground" (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The native speakers also tend to use Leech's *Agreement Maxim*, which he formulates in the frame of his politeness principle: "(a) minimize disagreement between self and other, and (b) maximize agreement between self and other" (Leech, 1983).

Moreover, the native speakers in friendly conversation tend to use agreement maxim in friendly conversation to avoid dispute. They rarely use the performative *I disagree* (Pearson, 1986 cited in Kreutel, 2007); they generally deliver their disagreement by using *mitigation* to reduce the directness of the disagreement and with it the strength of the FTA. In Brown and Levinson's (1987) terms, this means that native speakers often choose to perform the FTA *off-record* that means indirectly. Other terms for mitigation found in the literature are *softeners* (Pearson, 1986 cited in Kreutel, 2007) and *redress* (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

The most frequently observed strategy of disagreement mitigation used by native speakers is partial or *token agreement*, where the speaker starts out by "agreeing with the prior speaker's position" (Pomerantz, 1984, p. 72) before saying disagreement. In most cases, the token agreement takes on the *yes, but...* form (LoCastro, 1986, p.9) and shows that the speakers are "responding to the preference structure of the discourse as well as to the specific prior assessment with which they are disagreeing" (Mulkay, 1985).

Other surface realizations of mitigation are the use of modal verbs (Locher, 2004) and *hedges* (LoCastro, 1986), also called *uncertainty markers* (Pearson, 1986), *reluctance markers* (Kotthoff, 1993), *disclaimers* (Hayashi, 1996), *prefaces* (Kuo, 1994) or *modality markers* (García, 1989). According to Aijmer (1986), "the hedge frees the speaker from the responsibility for the word and saves him the trouble of finding a 'better' word or phrase, [thereby] "soften[ing] the impact of negative statements" (Tannen, 1993, p. 28). Frequently used hedges are *well, just, I think* and *I don't know* (Locher, 2004). In addition, hedging is often realized on the suprasegmental level by hesitating or pausing (Kuo, 1994). The hesitation or pause help the person disagreeing to "buy time" and thus to soften the FTA by its delay.

Giving *explanations* for their disagreement is a further typical mitigation strategy used by native speakers (Kuo, 1994). Moreover, these explanations are often personally or emotionally colored (Nakajima, 1997). Other mitigating elaborations on disagreements that are found in native speakers are expressions of regret (LoCastro, 1986) and *positive remarks* such as compliments, gratitude or signals of cooperation (Beebe & Takahashi, 1989). It can be concluded from some kind of strategies used by the native speakers that native-like strategies of disagreement expression display a high degree of complexity.

Conclusion

Based on the results of this study, it can be concluded that there was a significant correlation between students' language proficiency and their using of disagreement strategies. The correlation was positive which can be meant that students with higher language proficiency can produce more variant disagreement strategies. However, the correlation between both of them was weak. It means that the language proficiency not strongly affected the variance of students' disagreement strategies. But, the high proficiency students tend to have better and more variant disagreement strategies to be delivered.

The students with high proficiency cannot directly assume that they also have high pragmatic competence. Thus, it is important for a teacher to implicitly teach pragmatic competence to their students in order to balance between their language proficiency and pragmatic competence. However, the language proficiency is not the only one factor which

affects the development of students' pragmatic competence. There are other influencing factors of pragmatic competence; it can be different culture between the students and native speakers or the complexity of native speakers' pragmatic competence.

References

- Aijmer, K. (1986). Discourse Variation and Hedging. In J. Aarts, & W. Meijer (Eds.), *Corpus Linguistics II. New Studies in the Analysis and Exploitation of Computer Corpora* (pp. 1-18). Amsterdam, AMS: Rodopi.
- Bardovi-Harlig, K., & Hartford, B. S. (1993). *Refining the DCT: Comparing Open Questionnaires and Dialogue Completion Tasks*. Paper presented at the 6th Annual Meeting of the International Conference on Pragmatics and Language Learning, Urbana, IL: USA.
- Behnam, B., & Niroomand, M. (2011). An Investigation of Iranian EFL Learners' use of politeness strategies and power relations in disagreement across different proficiency. *English Language Teaching*, 4(4), 204-220. Retrieved from www.researchgate.net/profile/Biook_Behnam/publication/
- Brinton, L.J. (2000). *The Structure of Modern English: A Linguistic Introduction*. Amsterdam, AMS: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Brown, P., & Stephen C. L. (1987). *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge, CA: Cambridge University Press.
- Gay, L.R. (1990). *Educational Research Competencies for Analysis and Application* (3rd ed). United States: Merrill Publishing Company.
- Jalilifar, A. (2009). Request Strategies: Cross-sectional Study of Iranian EFL Learners and Australian Native Speakers. *English Language Teaching Journal*, 2(1), 790-803. Retrieved from ccsenet.org/journal/index.php/elt/article/download/334/297
- Kamisili, S., & Dogancay-Aktuna, S. (1996). Effects of Social Power on Language Use Across Speech Communities. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 6(2), 199-222. Retrieved from <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1473-4192.1996.tb00095.x/pdf>.
- Kreutel, K. (2007). "I do not agree with you" ESL learners' expression of disagreement. *TESL-EJ TOP*, 11(3), 1-20. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1473-4192.1996.tb00095.x>
- Leech, G. N. (1983). *Principles of Pragmatics*. Harlow, HOH: Longman.
- Locastro, V. (1986). Yes. I agree with you, but...: Agreement and Disagreement in Japanese and American English. *Paper presented at the Japan Association of Language Teachers' International Conference on Language Teaching and Learning at Seiri, Gakuen, Hamamatsu, Japan, November 22-24*. 1-21, Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED284425.pdf>
- Locher, M. A. (2004). *Power and Politeness in Action: Disagreements in Oral Communication*. Berlin, BL: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Mulkay, M. (1985). Agreement and Disagreement in Conversations and Letters. *Text*, 5.3, 201-28.
- Nakajima, Y. (1997). Politeness Strategies in the Workplace: Which Experiences Help Japanese Businessmen Acquire American English Native-like Strategies? *Working Papers in Educational Linguistics*, 13.1, 49-69.
- Pomerantz, A. (1984). Agreeing and Disagreeing with Assessments: Some Features of Preferred/Dispreferred Turn Shapes. In J. M. Atkinson, & J. Heritage (Eds.), *Structures of Social Action. Studies in Conversation Analysis* (pp. 57-101). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sugiyono. 2014. *Statistika untuk Penelitian*. Bandung: Alfabeta

Watts, R. J. (2003). *Politeness*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Xuehua, W. (2006). A Study of Strategy Use in Showing Agreement and Disagreement to Others Opinions. *CALEA Journal* (Bimonthly), 29 (5), 55-65. Retrieved from www.celea.org.cn/teic/69/69-55.pdf