ABSTRACT

Literature on communicative language ability has identified pragmatic competence as a crucial aspect of second language (L2) communicative language ability. However, current literature has employed varied definitions of pragmatic competence, and little effort has been made to synthesize pragmatics studies in order to come up with a comprehensive list of components that comprise pragmatic competence. This effort was recently undertaken by Laughlin, Wain, and Schmidgall (2015), who conducted a systematic literature review of many different models, principles, and theories of pragmatics. The result was a construct of pragmatic competence which included five components, namely sociocultural knowledge, pragmatic-functional knowledge, grammatical knowledge, discourse knowledge, and strategic knowledge. In addition to proposing a more comprehensive construct of pragmatic competence, Laughlin et al. (2015) also suggested an operationalization of the construct through the use of multimedia materials.

The present study aims to operationalize this construct by designing, producing, and evaluating multimedia materials to teach pragmatics, particularly making requests in spoken and written communication within U.S. academic settings. More specifically, this research work investigates: (1) how participants perceive the effectiveness of the multimedia materials and accompanying tasks for developing their pragmatic competence; and (2) how participants’ performance differs between pre-instruction and post-instruction assessments. The creation of the multimedia materials was guided by multimedia design principles proposed by Mayer (2009) and Chapelle’s (2001) Computer Assisted Language Learning task appropriateness framework. Two groups of participants, namely current U.S. international students and prospective international students, participated in the study. Both groups used and evaluated the multimedia
materials hosted on an online learning platform. Data were collected from participants’ responses to feedback questionnaires, and their self-evaluation and self-reflection reports as well as their performance on pre-instruction and post-instruction assessments.

Findings suggest that overall, participants’ learning experience was positive: they perceived gains specifically in their sociocultural, pragmatic-functional, and grammatical knowledge. However, certain limitations to the multimedia materials were also commented on by the participants, including the audio quality and length of the videos. Additionally, a comparison of participants’ performance in the pre-instruction and post-instruction assessments in Unit 1 seemed to suggest that most of the participants were able to successfully use the knowledge of request strategies and politeness features that they obtained from the instructional materials. This is indicated by their shift from using speaker-oriented strategies that are more direct in the pre-instruction assessment to using hearer-oriented strategies that are more indirect in the post-instruction assessments. Additionally, participants’ use of request strategies and politeness features were more varied after instruction. Results of this study provide insight on multimedia materials design that promotes an effective learning environment, especially for acquisition of pragmatic competence.
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

In the past few decades, the development of the internet and multimedia technology has helped advance education, specifically the teaching of English as a second or foreign language. Multimedia materials have been incorporated into language teaching courses as well as made available in the form of self-access materials. As self-access materials, the multimedia materials are not necessarily attached to a language course. The advantage of self-access materials is that when made available on the internet, the materials can be accessed by anyone, anytime, and anywhere.

Self-access materials have been defined as “materials that are designed and organized in such a way that students can select and work on tasks on their own …. and obtain feedback on their performance, for example by comparing their answers to a key which accompanies the material” (Sheerin, 1991, p. 143). In the context of this study, self-access materials is operationalized as multimedia materials (mainly video materials) hosted on an online learning platform (i.e., Moodle) with tasks and assessments, as well as accompanying feedback for some of the assessments. The decision to use self-access multimedia materials to teach pragmatic competence, specifically making requests in spoken and written communication in academic settings, was based on the targeted users of the materials who are current and prospective international students interested in studying in the United States. Prospective international students are expected to want to develop their English language proficiency, especially in relation to the academic settings that they will most likely encounter in U.S. universities. Meanwhile, current international students, especially those with a relatively short length of residence in the U.S., are expected to benefit from explicit instruction of pragmatic knowledge, particularly on topics that they might encounter in their daily academic lives. Furthermore,
materials that are presented in self-access format will enable both prospective and current international students to use the materials whenever and wherever they decide to. Finally, students are free to look back on the materials that are provided whenever they feel the need to refresh their knowledge.

Pragmatic competence, specifically making requests, was chosen as the topic to teach for several reasons. Firstly, as an international student myself, the ability to communicate in a pragmatically appropriate way has often been a source of anxiety, especially when communicating with native speakers of English. This anxiety becomes more apparent when making requests in both spoken and written (i.e., email) communication as it is a potentially face-threatening act, even more so when the request is of a high degree of imposition and when the requestee is someone of a higher status (e.g., professors). Secondly, many of my colleagues have expressed their concern regarding their international students’ ability to make appropriate requests. Often, their requests are expressed as demands as they use fairly direct requests when more indirect requests would be appropriate. Finally, the literature on international students in U.S. higher education has reported that international students do face language-related problems which can affect their academic achievement (Gautam, Lowery, Mays, & Durant, 2016; Lee & Carrasquillo, 2006; Zimmermann, 1995). Although none of these studies explicitly point to international students’ lack of pragmatic competence, it is assumed that one of these language-related problems would pertain to pragmatic competence, as revealed by the experiences of my colleagues who are either native speakers of English or highly proficient non-native speakers of English who are graduate assistants.

Requests are one of the speech acts that have been extensively investigated in the area of intercultural pragmatics. In general, these studies can be categorized based on their research
aims. The first category consists of studies that aim to investigate the requests produced by non-native speakers by asking them to respond to various scenarios and make judgments on the appropriateness or politeness of their requests (e.g., Fukushima, 1990; Syahri & Kadarisman, 2007; Taguchi, 2006; Trosborg, 1995; Yang, 2009). In making politeness judgments, the researchers would typically use the requests made by native speakers of the investigated language or use other request studies as a baseline to make politeness comparisons between requests produced by native speakers and those made by non-native speakers. The second category consists of studies that aims to analyze cross-cultural differences in making requests (e.g., Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Fukushima, 1996; Kim & Wilson, 1994). Finally, the third category consists of pedagogically based studies aimed at teaching requests using certain methodologies (e.g., Cunningham, 2016; Glass, 2013; Li, 2012; Tan & Farashaiya, 2012). Of particular interest to this study is the third category. Despite the considerably large body of research on this particular speech act, there are few studies seeking to investigate the teaching of requests, and there are even fewer on the use of multimedia to teach making requests or other components of pragmatic competence, which is the main focus of this current study.

Learning through multimedia instruction has become increasingly attractive because of its ability to incorporate multiple formats of information to improve comprehension (Jones & Plass, 2002; Kim & Gilman, 2008; Whiting & Granoff, 2010). As discussed in Dillon and Jobst (2005), multimedia (which they termed ‘hypermedia’) can accommodate learners with different learning styles and needs through its application of multiple media formats. Indeed, this can be a huge advantage for learners. However, Clark and Mayer (2011) point out that research carried out in the past sixty years has shown that learning occurs not because of the delivery medium,
but because of the instructional methods. In other words, multimedia materials need to be
designed using effective instructional methods for successful learning.

For the teaching of pragmatic competence, multimedia materials seem to be a natural
choice. This is especially true when multimedia materials incorporate videos as a medium to
communicate information. In a study conducted by Culbertson, Shen, Jung, and Andersen
(2017), the development of pragmatic competence was facilitated using a voice-driven video
learning interface. Participants indicated that the system promoted pronunciation learning, and
most importantly raised their awareness on context-specific features that are crucial in improving
their pragmatic competence. Furniss (2016) also used videos in the instructional website that she
developed to teach the pragmatics of Russian conversations. Feedback given by participants in
her study shows that the video materials facilitated in raising their awareness of the functions of
several Russian formulaic sequences in the appropriate contexts. These studies highlight the
affordances of multimedia materials in the teaching of pragmatic competence, especially as it
supports raising awareness of the context-specific situations in the form of visualizations that
appear to be crucial in the learning of pragmatics.

However, the concept of pragmatic competence in multimedia materials is more complex
than the ideas put forth in these studies. In the present study, the operationalization of pragmatic
competence in multimedia materials in Laughlin et al. (2015) was used. In their study, they
synthesized definitions or conceptualizations of pragmatic competence found in the present
literature to come up with a comprehensive construct definition of pragmatic competence. Using
this construct, the authors made suggestions for its operationalization in multimedia materials
created to teach pragmatic competence in the workplace. In the current study, the target language
use domain is the U.S. academic setting, which has been chosen due to reasons that have been
stated in the beginning of this introduction. The construct of pragmatic competence proposed by Laughlin et al. (2015) will be further elaborated in Chapter 2.

The goal of this project is to design self-access multimedia materials to teach making requests in spoken and written communication in U.S. academic settings, to trial the materials with current and prospective international students as the intended users of the materials, and to evaluate the effectiveness of the materials. The evaluation is based on feedback obtained from the students, as well as data on their performance on several tasks (pre- and post-instruction). These tasks are embedded in the Moodle course to engage students with the materials as well as to allow for an analysis of their learning outcome as a measure of the usefulness of the materials.

Focusing on the instructional design of the materials and the process of learning pragmatic competence, the following research questions guide the research study:

1) How do participants perceive the effectiveness of the audiovisual materials and accompanying tasks for developing their pragmatic competence?

2) How do participants’ performance differ between pre-instruction assessments and post-instruction assessments completed after viewing the instructional content?

This thesis consists of five chapters. Following this introduction, Chapter 2 reviews literature related to problems faced by international students studying in U.S. universities to highlight the importance of connecting research on international students and second language acquisition (SLA) research to provide solutions. In addition, literature on designing and evaluating multimedia technology for foreign language learning as well as the construct of pragmatic competence which guided this study will be reviewed. Chapter 3 explains the design choices made in the creation of the self-access materials and the procedures involved in collecting and analyzing the data. Results and analysis of the research data are presented in
Chapter 4. These include results based on the use of both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Chapter 5 concludes the thesis by summarizing the study findings, indicating its limitations, and offering recommendations for future research on using multimedia materials to teach pragmatic competence.
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews studies that help motivate and inform the current study. The first section provides a background on higher education research pertaining to international students in U.S. universities. This section ends by underlining the importance of addressing the language problems faced by the international students identified in these studies. The second section elaborates on the definitions of pragmatic competence that have been put forth in the literature focusing on the construct of pragmatic competence as defined by Laughlin et al. (2015), which is the foundation of the current study. The review will then shift to a review of studies on the explicit versus implicit instruction of pragmatics, emphasizing the outcomes observed in such instructional approaches. The fourth and final section of this chapter starts by covering research that has been conducted on the use of multimedia to teach a second language, followed by a review of the relatively small number of studies involving the creation and/or evaluation of multimedia materials to teach pragmatics specifically. The section concludes with an explanation of Mayer’s (2009) twelve principles of multimedia design which informed the design decisions for the multimedia materials used in this study.

Connecting Higher Education and Second Language Acquisition Research

Higher education presents many challenges for all students. However, for international students, additional problems most likely arise. Indeed, extensive research has been conducted to understand the kinds of challenges faced by international students adapting to university life. For example, Lee and Carrasquillo (2006) examined responses of college professors and Korean students in colleges in the United States on cultural/learning and linguistic causes that affect international students’ academic achievement. Findings suggest that the cultural/learning
characteristics that influence academic achievement include class participation, indirect thinking, ownership of knowledge, and eye contact. Meanwhile, the linguistic characteristics include difficulties with oral communication, difficulties with the structure of the English language, inability to answer questions in English, and language preferences.

A more recent study by Gautam et al. (2016) examined the concerns and difficulties of students from several different countries while studying in a small-town university in the United States. Two main themes emerged from the qualitative analysis of questionnaire responses and interviews, namely situational constraints and socio-economic/cultural challenges. The situational constraints were mainly issues with external factors, specifically the city, the people, and the opportunities provided for them as international students as well as their plans and successes for the future. Socio-economic/cultural challenges included language, jobs and finances, transportation, adjustment and cultural assimilation, cultural and religious encounters, and their double identities.

Zimmermann (1995) conducted a study that is considerably older than the ones previously mentioned, but is undoubtedly related to the current study. Results from interviews with 101 international undergraduate students in a Midwest university found that international students placed a high emphasis on their ability to talk with American students, and how it affects their adjustment to American life. One of the suggestions proposed by Zimmermann was for universities to design programs that can encourage international students to interact more with members of the university community (e.g., faculty, staff, other students) as “developing intercultural communication competence in individuals is essential in the academic world and in the workplace” (p. 333).

The literature indicates that a recurring challenge faced by international students studying
in the higher education level, specifically in the United States, is concerned with English proficiency. Moreover, it seems that it is not only a matter of lack of linguistic competence, but also the pragmatic competence of the international students. However, much of the current research is focused solely on identifying the challenges faced by international students. Thus, more effort is required to bridge the gap between research conducted within the general higher education area pertaining to international students, and the SLA area. One way is to provide language learning materials for international students that focus on pragmatic aspects of the English language. Ideally, these materials can be accessed by international students as separate from English language courses that they should take, but the materials could also be used as supplemental materials in the English language courses. Furthermore, the design and creation of these materials should be informed by current SLA research.

**Pragmatic Competence Defined**

Literature on communicative language ability has identified pragmatic competence as a crucial aspect of second language (L2) communicative language ability. However, pragmatic competence has been difficult to operationalize in language teaching and assessment due to two main problems. Firstly, although there has been a lot of work on pragmatics, the definition of pragmatic competence employed in the studies itself is varied, prompting Eslami-Rasekh (2005) to state that there is no clear and generally accepted definition of the term itself. In relation to this, there has been little effort to synthesize pragmatics studies in order to come up with a comprehensive list of components that comprise pragmatic competence (Laughlin et al., 2015).

Pragmatic competence has been broadly defined by Taguchi (2009) as “the ability to use language appropriately in a social context” (p. 1). Meanwhile, Fraser (2010) described pragmatic competence as “the ability to communicate your intended message with all its nuances in any
socio-cultural context and to interpret the message of your interlocutor as it was intended” (p. 15). Several other definitions have been put forward, but as Eslami-Rasekh (2005) pointed out, “Even though pragmatic competence has been recognized as one of the vital components of communicative competence ... there is a lack of a clear, widely accepted definition of the term” (p.199). If we were to operationalize the construct of pragmatic competence in learning materials, then we would certainly need to create a more comprehensive definition of it. Researchers from the Educational Testing Service have recently undertaken this endeavor. Laughlin et al. (2015) conducted a systematic literature review of many different models, principles, and theories of pragmatics. Their aim was to “propose a construct definition of pragmatic competence for the development of future assessment and learning tools” (p. 1).

Based on their synthesis of literature on pragmatic competence, they defined pragmatic competence as “mastery of strategically relating linguistic and nonlinguistic contextual information in order to generate meaning beyond the grammatical level in oral, written, or a hybrid mode of communication” (Laughlin et al., 2015, p. 19). This definition was further realized in the form of a framework that they call “a somewhat modified construct of pragmatics, situating pragmatic principles and pragmatic-functional knowledge within a larger context of general language ability” (p. 3). Figure 1 roughly illustrates their proposed construct. In this figure, the gray base represents context which mediates the meaning, with the interlocutors encoding and decoding the input and output in reference to the contextual information. It also shows how each interlocutor’s pragmatic competence consists of five distinct but interrelated dimensions of knowledge, namely sociocultural knowledge, pragmatic-functional knowledge, grammatical knowledge, discourse knowledge, and strategic knowledge (illustrated in the figure as the spiral circling around all knowledge dimensions).