

Bless you! Why?: A Study of Thai Learners' Understanding of Basic English Pragmatics

Penpitcha Prakaiborisuth and Wannapa Trakulkasemsuk

King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi

Abstract

A successful conversation does not only require understanding of semantic meaning, but pragmatic meaning also plays an important role. To fully understand and be able to appropriately interact with the interlocutor, a language learner needs to interpret what is not explicitly stated by putting the situational context to good use in clarifying ambiguous words, phrases, or sentences. It is debatable whether or not Thai English learners at undergraduate level are able to understand English pragmatics in basic daily English expressions. Therefore, this study aims to disclose Thai English learners' level of English proficiency, focusing on their comprehension of basic English expressions with underlying pragmatic meaning. To do so, one hundred Thai university undergraduate students were employed as the participants. A questionnaire acted as a test to elicit the students' understanding of the implied meaning of pragmatics. Also, a simulation scenario was used to investigate students' responses in a face-to-face communication. Findings highlight the actual ability of students in understanding pragmatic meanings. This study illustrates the importance of pragmatics in ELT in the Thai classroom context.

Introduction

As the significance of English has been obvious for decades, learners of English are determined to acquire the language. The fundamental linguistic components, including phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics, are the important keys to master the language. Considering the above linguistic components, it can be seen that phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics help decode the meaning based on the language form. However, pragmatics requires social and cultural knowledge in interpreting a speaker's intended meaning of an utterance or in producing socially appropriate utterances. Even though the knowledge of the other linguistic components without pragmatics might seem enough for a learner of English to comprehend English texts, either written or spoken, using the language appropriately and naturally demands at least a basic understanding of formulaic pragmatic patterns.

A lack of basic pragmatic knowledge that is generally expected by competent English users may lead to misunderstanding. Thus, it seems to be crucial for English learners to know and use basic pragmatic expressions. In practice, as English teachers in a Thai university, the researchers have observed that Thai students do not often use appropriate English pragmatic expressions even if they are taught them in the classroom. Therefore, it is interesting to investigate if Thai students really understand basic pragmatic expressions.

Pragmatics

Pragmatics, the study of the interpretation of meaning in context, is one of the significant linguistic components as it allows the listener to truly understand the real intention of the speaker by exploiting the surrounding context (Yule, 1996). In other words, pragmatics is a systematic way of explaining how people understand and communicate with each other linguistically. It spotlights the intended meaning of an utterance, the meaning potential of an utterance, and the contextual communication (Thomas, 1995). The interpretation beyond the

literal meaning of an utterance requires the interactional context and past experiences in order to understand how meaning is constructed in interaction.

For an utterance to be construed, embedded meanings such as the speaker's assumptions, purposes, and goals can be revealed from the listener's contextual analysis of the utterance. However, pragmatic ambiguity appears when the utterance is unspecific and the context does not supply the information needed for clarification (Walton, 1996). Therefore, the context may mislead the listener, who might have a different cultural background from the speaker, into inferring an unintended meaning which gives rise to interpersonal confusion. To overcome pragmatic failure when communicating with people from different cultures, the study of Köksal (2000) addresses the important roles of socio-cultural, socio-pragmatic and pragma-linguistic competence which enhances successful and effective cross-cultural communication. In other words, intercultural knowledge creates better understanding of the intentional meanings in conversation of people from different cultural backgrounds.

English Language Teaching (ELT) in Thailand

English has long been present in Thai education (Darasawang & Watson Todd, 2012), and it serves as a foreign language learnt in school. However, in comparison with other foreign languages taught, English is notably more important in that it is a compulsory subject. Given the fact that it is acknowledged as English as a Foreign Language (EFL), a native norm, either British or American, is usually applied in ELT. Thus, the English proficiency of Thai students is targeted to the native speaking standard.

Since 2008, the Ministry of Education has proclaimed that English should be one of the eight learning areas in the Basic Education Core Curriculum (BECC) for Thai students at the primary education level (grade 1) through the upper secondary education level (grade 12). The Ministry of Education also provides fruitful learning objectives for ELT in the BECC. By the time of high school graduation, students need to meet the four objectives, which are that they (1) must be able to use the language for communication, (2) appreciably understand both similarities and differences between language and culture of native speakers and Thai speakers, (3) be able to use the language to link knowledge with other learning areas, and (4) have the ability to use the language in various situations such as for further education (MOE, 2008). In order to pursue the second and fourth objectives, teaching students to realize and understand cultural differences is needed. Nonetheless, teaching cultural knowledge can be variously defined. To reach a consensus, a clear statement about teaching English pragmatics should be asserted in the Thai educational policy as it could be beneficial to students' communication skills. Due to the limitation of ELT in Thailand, this might be problematic, as developing pragmatic competence requires exposure to actual language use.

Even though authentic materials are widely suggested and advanced internet technology can provide great examples of real language use, it is still doubtful if these can truly help enhance Thai students' English pragmatic knowledge. A study by Srisuruk (2011) provides some information about Thai English speakers' pragmatic skills, reporting that 85.4% of Thai speakers of English are able to comprehensibly respond to the provided pragmatic scenarios. This can be interpreted to show that Thai speakers have a sound understanding of English pragmatics. However, since the study only included Thai English users who regularly used English in their daily life, it is not surprising that the results were positive. Also, it does not really either provide an implication for English teaching or discuss any points about Thai learners. Therefore, it is useful to further explore Thai English undergraduates' level of English proficiency, focusing on their understanding of the pragmatic meaning of basic English expressions.

Methodology

To gather information about Thai students' knowledge of basic pragmatic expressions, data collection in this study was divided into two stages. The first stage was to check students' understanding of different basic English expressions and the second stage was to elicit students' responses in real language situations.

Two different groups of participants were employed in this study. The participants in the first stage were a hundred Thai undergraduates at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT) who were enrolled in any of the three English fundamental courses provided at KMUTT. The participants were randomly selected from a greater population. Note that none of the participants was majoring in English; the level of the participants' language proficiency varied between A2 to B1 in CEFR, based on the descriptions of the English courses which aimed to enable students to communicate in various situations using English. Therefore, the students were expected to understand pragmatic meanings in order to effectively and successfully communicate with others.

In the second stage, seventy-five KMUTT undergraduates were randomly selected, and they were divided into five subgroups, fifteen participants in each. Each subgroup was given a different pragmatic eliciting scenario. To establish the actual situation for eliciting the data, the participants were approached by someone who was not a native speaker of Thai. Without being previously informed that they were being tested, the participants revealed their actual language performance in a face-to-face communication. Thus, the data reflected the participants' responses in an impromptu conversation.

The instruments used in the two stages were a set of multiple-choice test and a set of scenarios for simulation. In the first stage, a multiple-choice questionnaire was created by collecting basic English expressions from several textbooks used for teaching university students at A1 to B1 level. The expressions were rated by three experts who were university lecturers from the School of Liberal Arts, KMUTT. The rating criteria were that (1) the expressions were taught in class, and (2) the expressions could be frequently found in the raters' daily life. As a result, fifteen selected expressions which reached the consensus of all the experts were used for the fifteen multiple-choice items. An example of a multiple-choice question can be seen below:

1. *Scenario: You are reading a book while walking on a street. You bump into someone you do not know. Luckily, the person you hit is still in a good mood and does not get angry with you.
You: "I'm sorry."
Someone you hit: "_____"*
 - A. *"Oh, it's ok."*
 - B. *"Why are you sad?"*
 - C. *Unknown*

Each test item consisted of three parts, namely a scenario, a short conversation, and three choices (A, B and C). The scenario was different for each test item as a background which helped facilitate students' understanding of the short conversation in which one turn was omitted. The first two choices (A and B) were responses while the third choice (C) offered the 'Unknown' option for participants who were hesitant to answer the questions. By offering the choice C, the reliability of the collected data was increased as the participants had an option not to guess the answer. Since the selected expression had been taught in class, the native pragmatic norms were the standard for justifying the appropriateness of the response. English language teaching in Thailand still relies on native norms as can be seen in the preferred teaching method, Communicative Language Teaching, and almost all teaching materials such

as textbooks, audios, and examinations (Methitham & Chamcharatsri, 2011; Teng & Sinwongsuwat, 2015).

The second stage was to elicit real responses to basic pragmatic expressions from Thai students. In selecting the expressions, the students' scores from the questionnaire in the first stage were considered. As most of the Thai students could perform relatively well in all the fifteen items in the previous stage, the items which more than 60 percent of the students could answer correctly were selected. Then, to validate the selected items to use in the eliciting stage, five English native speakers were asked to evaluate whether the top five expressions are common expressions that native speakers regularly use. Then, they were asked to provide their natural formulaic responses to the expressions. Therefore, the identified expressions were used in the simulations in the second stage, and the native speakers' responses were used to evaluate the Thai subjects. The five pragmatic expressions and their natural responses from the native speakers are shown in Table 1.

Items	Suggested Responses by Native Speakers				
	NS1	NS2	NS3	NS4	NS5
1 (“I’m sorry”)	OK, no problem.	No problem.	No problem.	It’s ok. Don’t worry.	It’s ok.
5 (“How do you do?”)	(Explain what’s going on.)	I’m fine./ I’m doing great.	How do you do?/ Nice to meet you.	Very well, thank you.	How do you do?
10 (“What’s new?”)	(Start gossiping)	Nothing much.	Great./ Fine.	Nothing much. How about you?	Nothing much.
14 (“I’ve got to run”)	See you.	OK, I understand.	Yeah, I’ve got to go also. Nice seeing you.	OK, bye.	Good running into you.
15 (“See you later”)	See you too./ Have a good day.	See you later./ OK, bye.	Yep, See you later./ Good to see you.	Sounds good./ See you later.	OK, drop by sometimes.

Table 1. The expressions and formulaic responses from five native speakers

The results in Table 1 present the expected responses for the five expressions by the five native speakers. The bracketed responses, items 5 and 10 by native speaker one (NS1), were an explanation of the responses. In response to item 5, “How do you do?”, NS1 briefly talked about his recent experience in life, and for item 10, “What’s new?”, he started to gossip about people and things.

For this second stage, in addition to the results in Table 1, the native speakers were asked to provide some suggestions for appropriate situations when the five expressions can be used. To illustrate, one native speaker recommended that the item 1, “I’m sorry.”, could be easily said when you run into someone by chance. In other words, the native speakers indicated when and how the five expression could be used.

The suggested situation was used to create the second instrument of the study which was the scenarios for simulation. To collect the data from the simulation, a research assistant who was not a non-native speaker of Thai approached the second group of participants in the preset role, finding a chance to use the intended expression. A non-native Thai speaker was included in this activity because we would like to make the situations authentic in that the Thai student subjects had to speak English. The participants' responses were collected by the research assistant who made a written note of the data.

Data Analysis

For the multiple-choice questionnaire, the answers from the participants were converted into percentages. For the simulation, the collected data were compared with the expected response from the interview in order to identify appropriate responses. The results were then grouped and the percentage of appropriate responses was calculated for each expression.

Findings and Discussion

The mean scores for the questionnaire suggest that Thai undergraduates understand the underlying pragmatic meaning of the basic expressions. The overall result is that 59.9% of the participants show an understanding of the surface meaning of the expressions. Of the rest, 22.2% chose the incorrect answer and 17.9% selected the 'unknown' option.

Item	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
✓	69	58	56	40	60	54	51	42	59	71	57	57	56	78	90
✗	21	22	21	36	26	42	35	30	10	5	24	16	28	12	5
none	10	20	23	24	14	4	14	28	31	24	19	27	16	10	5

Table 2. Percent of correct responses in the multiple-choice test

Table 2 indicates the results of the multiple-choice test for each item. At least 60% of the participants chose the appropriate response for items number 1, 5, 10, 14, and 15. Further examination of these five items showed that all of them consist of simple expressions that are often used in daily life:

1. I'm sorry.
5. How do you do?
10. What's new?
14. I've got to run.
15. See you later.

Thus, these five items were used for the second two, the simulation, in order to investigate the participants' actual understanding of the pragmatic meanings.

Items	Appropriate	Inappropriate (e.g. silence or puzzled expression)
1. I'm sorry	10	5
5. How do you do?	6	9
10. What's new?	2	13
14. I've got to run	8	7
15. See you	10	5

Table 3: Results from the simulation

Table 3 presents the simulation results from different arranged situations. Two thirds of the participants could respond appropriately to items numbers 1 and 15, while just over half could respond to item 14. It seems that the participants are more familiar with items 1 and 15 as they can frequently be found in everyday life. Meanwhile, most of the participants remained silent after they encountered items 5 and 10. The concept of constructivism can be applied to clarify this situation. Thai students can be seen as collectivists whose focus is on community, society or nation; and avoiding conflict and communicating indirectly is important to Thai society (Miao, 2011). A similar situation can also be found in an English classroom from the study of Leelawatcharamas (2011), who reported that students frequently have pauses and silence when

another student stops speaking. Besides, face or a public self image is regarded as important in collectivist cultures. Consequently, Thais tend not to say or do anything to threaten another persons' face (Miao, 2011).

However, another expression, item 10, 'What's new?', surprisingly gets the lowest score even though it could be said in many situations several times in a day. It seems that the participants are more conversant with the expression 'How are you?' than 'What's new?' Therefore, it can be claimed that the participants have a tendency to respond appropriately to the expressions they are more familiar with. Similarly, item 5, 'How do you do?', is rarely used as it is supposed to be said only when you first meet a person.

Further examination suggests that the participants obtained poor results for items 5, 10 and 14 as there are no Thai equivalents for these three expressions. The expressions seemed to confuse the participants, especially if they interpreted the literal meanings. For the expression 'How do you do?', many participants showed confusion and they misinterpreted the meaning, tending to talk about the situation they were in or explaining about things that they were doing. When the expression 'What's new?' was asked, 13 out of 15 of the participants had no answer and instead showed puzzled faces or made the sound 'Auh?' Indeed, this expression can possibly be interpreted by Thai participants to mean that the speaker is curious about whether the listener has something new to show. Likewise, with the expression 'I've got to run', many of the participants remained silent, and this might be caused direct interpretation of the expression to mean that the speaker needed to exercise by running.

Cultural and linguistic differences between Thai and English may cause a different interpretation of the expressions. Drawing on the data from students' failure in items 5, 10 and 14, the misinterpretation might occur because of the students' L1. It is complicated for Thai students to acquire another language from a different language family like English. To clarify, the Thai language belongs to the Tai group of the Tai-Kadai language family while English is a member of the West Germanic group of the Germanic languages. In other words, Thai and English do not share any linguistic features. Similarly, the study by Leelasetakul (2014) reveals that Thai students at different proficiency levels have a different ability to produce collocations. One explanation is that low proficiency students would rely on the approximate translation from their L1 to L2, Thai to English.

Conclusion

According to the results shown in Table 2, it can be argued that university undergraduates understand the meanings of the pragmatic expressions. However, the results shown in Table 3 suggest they they are unable to provide suitable pragmatic responses. Even though the undergraduates have passed the English courses with a focus on communication skills, it might be claimed that they are not familiar with face-to-face communication which requires an immediate response. As a result, the undergraduates get better scores from the questionnaire as they have more time to consider how to respond to a particular situation.

For ELT in Thailand, it should be noted that actual language use is essential. Raising students' cultural sensitivity and awareness helps enhance the ability to decode pragmatic meanings of utterances, which then contributes to successful communication. Teachers should manage more time for students to experience actual language use. In order to do so, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) might be an interesting teaching approach to use in class as it provides learners a chance to use language through actual conversations. The notion was implemented in Olimnazarova's (2012) study of using students' linguistic repertoires for teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in Tajikistan. The study presents the positive effects of using L1 to facilitate EFL teaching.

To deepen the area of study, additional research on pragmatic competence of Thai students should be conducted so that the results can be used in order to find an effective English language teaching method in Thailand.

References

- Darasawang, P., & Watson Todd, R. (2012). The effect of policy on English language teaching at secondary schools in Thailand. In E. L. Low & Azirah Hashim (Eds.), *English in Southeast Asia: Features, policy and language in use* (pp. 207–220). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Köksal, D. (2000). Pragmatic approach to cross-cultural communication in the business world. *First International Joint Symposium on Business Administration. Challenges for Business Administrators in the New Millennium* (pp. 630–637). Gökçeada - Çanakkale, Turkey.
- Leelasetakul, M. (2014). Exploring lexical bundles in Thai EFL learners' writings. *Thoughts, 2014*. Retrieved from <<http://www.arts.chula.ac.th/~english/thoughts-2014.html>>.
- Leelawatcharamas, S. (2011). *An analysis of classroom discourse between Thai students and foreign teachers* (Unpublished master thesis). Kasetsart University, Bangkok, Thailand.
- Methitham, P., & Chamcharatsri, P. B. (2011). Critiquing ELT in Thailand: A reflection from history to practice. *Journal of Humanities, Naresuan University*, 8(2), 57–68.
- Miao, L. (2011). *A study of English communication problems between Thai students and foreign English teachers in Suwanplubplapittayakom school* (Unpublished master's thesis). Thammasat University, Bangkok, Thailand. Retrieved from <<http://digi.library.tu.ac.th/thesis/lg/0612/title-appendix.pdf>>.
- MOE (2008). *The basic education core curriculum B.E. 2552 (A.D. 2008)*. Bangkok, Thailand: The Ministry of Education.
- Olimnazarova, T. (2012). *Using students' linguistic repertoires for teaching English as a foreign language in Tajikistan*. University of Birmingham, UK.
- Srisuruk, P. (2011). *Politeness and pragmatic competence in Thai speakers of English* (Unpublished doctoral thesis). Newcastle University, UK. Retrieved from <<https://theses.ncl.ac.uk/dspace/bitstream/10443/1189/1/Srisuruk%2011.pdf>>.
- Teng, B., & Sinwongsuwat, K. (2015). Teaching and learning English in Thailand and the integration of Conversation Analysis (CA) into the classroom. *English Language Teaching*, 8(3), 1–11. Retrieved from <<http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1075215.pdf>>.
- Thomas, J. (1995). *Meaning in interaction: An introduction to pragmatics*. London: Longman.
- Walton, D. (1996). *Fallacies arising from ambiguity*. Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- Yule, G. (1996). *Pragmatics*. New York: Oxford University Press