

# Effect of Pragmatic Instruction versus Educational Sojourn on Knowledge of Conventional Expressions

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## Abstract

Conventional expressions are crucial for social interactions. However, despite their communicative value, they are not acquired even by advanced language learners. Therefore, some sort of pragmatic intervention in the form of pragmatic instruction or educational sojourn should be provided to help language learners develop their knowledge of target language conventional expressions. To this end, the current study was conducted on two groups of participants including 15 Malaysian undergraduate students of English education at a university in Malaysia and 15 Malaysian undergraduate students of English education from the same Malaysian university on a one-semester academic exchange program at a university in the United States to compare the effect of pragmatic instruction and educational sojourn on the development of knowledge of target language conventional expressions. Knowledge of target language conventional expressions was assessed through a discourse completion task. The results of independent-samples t-test revealed the superiority of the effect of pragmatic instruction to educational sojourn in developing knowledge of target language conventional expressions. The pedagogical implications of the findings suggested incorporation of pragmatic features of the target language into foreign language class instruction.

**Keywords:** Conventional Expressions, Educational Sojourn, Pragmatic Instruction

## 1. Introduction

Conventional expressions, described as “tacit agreements, which the members of a community presume to be shared by every reasonable co-member” (Coulmas, 1981; 4), are crucial for social interactions (Bardovi-Harlig & Vellenga, 2012). However, they are not used by language learners in the same way as target language speakers because language learners do not have ready access to, and therefore do not make use of, standardized conventional expressions for social interactions as target language speakers do (Edmondson & House, 1991). In fact, despite their communicative value, conventional expressions are not acquired seamlessly even by advanced language learners: some language learners may be uncomfortable with the use of some common expressions, some may not link expressions to their target language function or context, and still some others may not control the form (Bardovi-Harlig & Vellenga, 2012). Therefore, some sort of pragmatic intervention in the form of either pragmatic instruction or educational sojourn, defined as “period spent abroad in a region where a target language is used as a medium of everyday communication” (Culhane, 2004: 50), should be provided for language learners to help them develop their knowledge of target language conventional expressions.

Research on language learners’ knowledge of target language conventional expressions and the methods of developing the knowledge in language learners has recently attracted the attention of a group of scholars in the area of interlanguage pragmatics. In one of these studies, Bardovi-Harlig (2009) explored the source of low production of conventional expressions by a group of learners of English enrolled in the intensive English program of a university in the American Midwest. An audio recognition task, an audio-visual production task, and a background questionnaire were used to collect data. The results of the study revealed that low production of conventional expressions by language learners has multiple sources including lack of familiarity with some expressions, overuse of familiar expressions, level of development, and sociopragmatic knowledge. In another study, Bardovi-Harlig and Vellenga (2012) investigated the effect of pragmatic instruction on the oral production of conventional expressions. Participants of the study were a group of language learners in the intensive English program of a university in the American Midwest. An aural recognition task and an oral production task were used as pre-test and post-test to collect the data. Intervention consisted of three sessions centered on contextualized input and guided metapragmatic noticing. The findings of the study revealed that pragmatic instruction promotes the use of some conventional expressions. Taguchi (2013) was another researcher who has examined the effect of general language proficiency and study-abroad experience on appropriate and fluent production of target language conventional expressions. Participants of the study consisted of three groups of Japanese learners of English at a university in Japan: a low language proficiency without study-abroad experience group, a high language proficiency without study-abroad experience group, and a high language proficiency with study-abroad experience group. The ability to produce target language conventional expressions was assessed through a computerized oral discourse completion test. The findings of the study suggested that while all language learner groups failed to reach a native level, study-abroad experience presented an advantage in the appropriate production of conventional expressions

whereas proficiency presented an advantage in speech rates. Most recently, Rafieyan et al. (2014) investigated the effect of form-focused pragmatic instruction on the ability to produce target language conventional expressions. Participants of the study consisted of three groups of undergraduate students of English at a university in Iran: one group receiving 'Focus on Form' pragmatic instruction, one group receiving 'Focus on Forms' pragmatic instruction, and the other group merely receiving grammar instruction. Data were collected through an oral discourse completion task following eight sessions of treatment. The findings of the study revealed that both groups of language learners who received pragmatic instruction were equally more successful in developing knowledge of target language conventional expressions than those who did not receive pragmatic instruction.

The studies conducted so far have either investigated the effect of pragmatic instruction on the development of knowledge of target language conventional expressions or investigated the effect of educational sojourn on the development of knowledge of target language conventional expressions. There is, however, a dearth of research on comparing the effect of pragmatic instruction and educational sojourn to determine the best method of developing language learners' knowledge of target language conventional expressions. Therefore, given the significance of knowledge of target language conventional expressions for successful cross-cultural interactions on one hand and the significance of determining the practical method which can best develop this knowledge in language learners on the other hand, the current study seeks to compare the effect of pragmatic instruction and educational sojourn on the development of knowledge of target language conventional expressions. In this respect, the research question to be addressed in the current study is:

Do pragmatic instruction and educational sojourn have equal effect on the development of knowledge of target language conventional expressions?

Accordingly the null hypothesis is:

Pragmatic instruction and educational sojourn do not have equal effect on the development of knowledge of target language conventional expressions.

## **2. Methodology**

### *2.1 Participants*

The study consisted of two groups of participants: 15 Malaysian undergraduate students of English education at a university in Malaysia and 15 Malaysian undergraduate students of English education from the same Malaysian university on a one-semester academic exchange program at a university in the United States. Both groups of participants were at the third year of their studies. Also, based on an English proficiency test administered to all students of English education at the university before the study to select students with equal level of English proficiency, they were all at the upper-intermediate level of English proficiency. Therefore, they all equally possessed a good command of linguistic proficiency. The length of residence in target language country for the students on the academic exchange program by the time of the data collection was around 4 months. Therefore, they were exposed to target language pragmatic features for a considerably long period of time.

## *2.2 Instruments*

The instrument used in the study to assess language learners' knowledge of target language conventional expressions was a discourse completion task eliciting a variety of speech acts including expressions of gratitude, apologies, warnings, leave-takings, requests, condolences, declining offers, acceptance of a request, acceptance of an invitation, invitation, declining an invitation, an agreement, deflecting thanks, and an introduction developed by Bardovi-Harlig (2009). The discourse completion task consisted of 32 scenarios comprising both initiating and responding scenarios. The initiating scenarios (n=13) required language learners to initiate an interaction and the responding scenarios (n=19) required language learners to respond to an interlocutor's turn.

## *2.3 Procedure*

Since the beginning of the fall semester of the academic year 2015/2016, language learners in both groups (study-abroad group and study-at-home group) went through a semester-long intervention. The intervention for the study-abroad group was merely through the random contact they had with target language speakers and the target language pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic features they were exposed to during their educational sojourn. The intervention for the study-at-home group was through pragmatic instruction in which pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic features of the United States were incorporated in regular classes in which language learners were enrolled. Intervention for both groups continued for the whole semester. Then, at the end of the semester, the discourse completion task which was used as the data collection instrument in the study was administered to all language learners in both groups. Language learners were instructed to read each scenario on the discourse completion task and then respond by writing the first few words they would say in each situation. Following the completion of the task, all test slips were collected and sent to the researcher for the subsequent data analysis.

## *2.4 Data Analysis*

To measure language learners' knowledge of target language conventional expressions, the appropriateness of the responses to the discourse completion task were assessed by two native speakers of English using a four-point rating scale ranging from zero (cannot evaluate) to three (native-like) developed by Taguchi (2013). The ratings along with the description for each band on the scale have been presented in Table 1. As there were 32 scenarios on the discourse completion task, each participant could get a mark ranging from 0 to 96. For the cases which were assigned different ratings, the two native English speaker raters discussed until they reached an agreement.

Table 1. Description of ratings for knowledge of conventional expressions

Rating	Band	Descriptions
3	Native-like	The utterance is almost perfectly appropriate. This is what a native speaker would usually say in the situation
2	Slightly off, but acceptable	The utterance is a little off from native-like due to minor grammatical and lexical errors but overall acceptable
1	Obviously off	The utterance is clearly non-native like because of strange, non-typical way of saying and/or major grammatical and lexical errors
0	Cannot evaluate	The utterance is impossible to understand

Adopted from Taguchi (2013).

To compare the performance of study-abroad group and study-at-home group on the discourse completion task, an independent-samples t-test, which is used when the mean score on some continuous variable for two different groups of participants is compared (Pallant, 2013), was conducted on the ratings assigned by the two raters. To provide an indication of the magnitude of the differences between the performance of study-abroad group and study-at-home group on the discourse completion task, eta squared ( $\eta^2$ ), which is the most commonly used effect size statistics (Pallant, 2013), was computed. The values obtained from the calculation of eta squared ( $\eta^2$ ) can range from 0.00 to 1.00 and represents the proportion of variance in the dependent variable (knowledge of target language conventional expressions) that is explained by the independent variable (type of intervention) (Pallant, 2013). The guidelines for interpreting the values of eta squared ( $\eta^2$ ), as proposed by Cohen (1988), are presented in Table 2. Finally, the graphical presentation of the performance of study-abroad group and study-at-home group on the discourse completion task was provided. All of the analysis was performed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software, version 22.

Table 2. Interpretation of Eta Squared ( $\eta^2$ ) Values

Value	Effect Size
0.01	Small Effect
0.06	Moderate Effect
0.14	Large Effect

### 3. Results

Table 3 presents the descriptive analysis of the data derived from the performance of language learners on the discourse completion task. The descriptive analysis of the data presented in the table consists of the number of language learners in each group as well as the overall mean score and standard deviation of marks assigned to the knowledge of target language conventional expressions for each group of language learners. The mean scores presented in the table show the superior performance of study-at-home group (mean: 49.67) over study-abroad group (mean: 35.60) on the discourse completion task. However, mean score by itself does not show whether the difference in scores obtained by the two groups is large enough to be considered significant or not. To determine whether the difference between the mean scores obtained by the language learners in the two groups is statistically significant or not, the results of the analysis of independent-samples t-test should be considered.

Table 3. Descriptive analysis of data

	Group	N	Mean Score	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Knowledge of Conventional Expressions	Educational Sojourn	15	35.60	14.711	3.798
	Pragmatic Instruction	15	49.67	18.074	4.667

Table 4 presents the results of the analysis of independent-samples t-test. The first section of the table gives the results of Levene's test for equality of variances. Levene's test for equality of variances tests whether the variance (variation) of scores for the two groups (study-abroad group and study-at-home group) is the same or not. The outcome of this test determines which of the t-values that Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software provides is

the correct one to use. If the significance value for Levene's test is larger than 0.05 ( $p > 0.05$ ), the first line in the table which refers to *Equal Variances Assumed* should be used. However, if the significance level of Levene's test is less than or equal to 0.05 ( $p \leq 0.05$ ), this means that the variances for the two groups (study-abroad group and study-at-home group) are not the same and the data violate the assumption of equal variance; subsequently, the second line of the table which refers to *Equal Variances Not Assumed* should be used (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2013). The significance value for Levene's test obtained in the current study is 0.55 which is larger than the cut-off of 0.05. This means that the assumption of equal variances has not been violated. Therefore, the t-value provided in the first line of the table referred to *Equal Variances Assumed* should be used.

Table 4. Analysis of Independent-Samples t-test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tail -ed)	Mean Differen -ce	Std. Error Differen -ce	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper	
Knowledge of Conventional Expressions	Equal variances assumed	0.356	0.556	-2.338	28	0.027	-14.067	6.017	-26.392	-1.741
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.338	26.891	0.027	-14.067	6.017	-26.415	-1.718

To find out whether there is a significant difference between the mean scores obtained by the two groups (study-abroad group and study-at-home group) or not, the column labeled *Sig. (2-tailed)* under the section labeled *t-test for Equality Means* should be referred to. Since the assumption of equal variances has not been violated, the significance value provided in the first line of the table referred to *Equal Variances Assumed* should be used. If the significance value is equal to or less than 0.05 ( $p \leq 0.05$ ), there is a significant difference in the mean scores on the dependent variable (knowledge of target language conventional expressions) for the two groups. However, if the significance value is above 0.05 ( $p > 0.05$ ), there is no significant difference in the mean scores for the two groups (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2013). The significance value obtained in the current study is 0.02. As this value is below the required cut-off of 0.05, there is a statistically significant difference in the mean knowledge of target language conventional expressions for study-abroad group and study-at-home group. The mean difference between the two groups is also provided in the table, along with the 95%

confidence interval of the difference showing the lower value and the upper value.

The significance value, however, does not show the size of the difference between the mean scores for the knowledge of target language conventional expressions obtained by the two groups of language learners (study-abroad group and study-at-home group). To provide an indication of the magnitude of the difference between the mean scores obtained by the two groups, effect size statistics need to be calculated. There are a number of different effect size statistics, the most commonly used being eta squared ( $\eta^2$ ) (Pallant, 2013). The formula for calculating eta squared ( $\eta^2$ ), using the information in Table 4, is as follows:

$$\eta^2 = \frac{t^2}{t^2 + (N1 + N2 - 2)}$$

Replacing with the appropriate values from the table gives:

$$\eta^2 = \frac{-2.338^2}{-2.338^2 + (15 + 15 - 2)} = 0.16$$

The effect size of the difference in the knowledge of target language conventional expressions for study-abroad group and study-at-home group obtained in the current study is 0.16 which according to the guidelines proposed by Cohen (1988) to interpret the values of eta squared ( $\eta^2$ ) represents a large effect. Expressed as a percentage ( $0.16 \times 100 = 16$ ), 16 percent of the variance in knowledge of target language conventional expressions is explained by the type of intervention. The graphical presentation of the knowledge of target language conventional expressions for study-abroad group and study-at-home group is depicted in Figure 1.

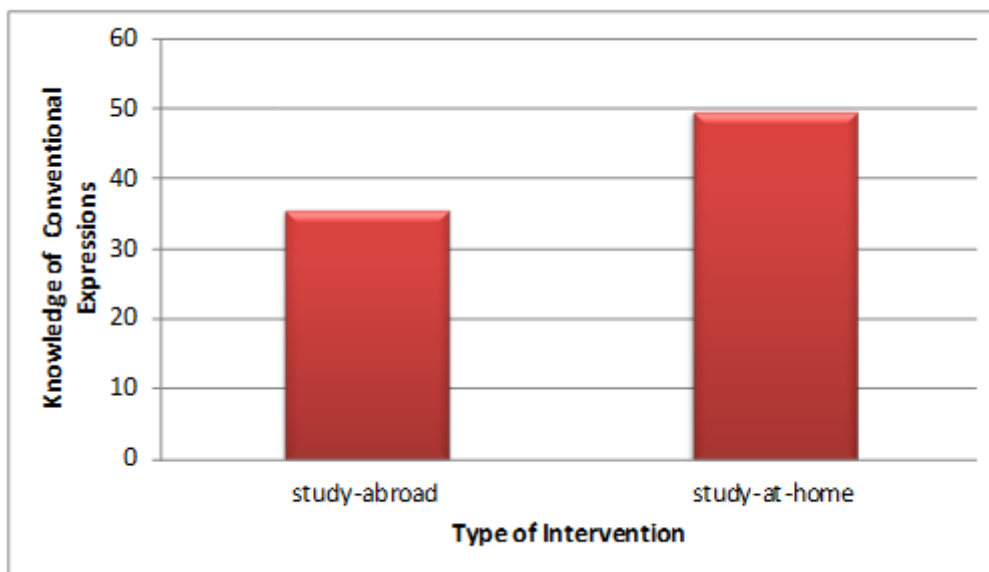


Figure 1. Level of knowledge of conventional expressions for both groups



#### 4. Discussion

The study found that pragmatic instruction develops knowledge of target language conventional expressions to a greater extent than educational sojourn. In the current study, language learners who were trained in pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic features of the target language demonstrated their knowledge of target language conventional expressions at a higher level than language learners who had contact with target language speakers and were exposed to target language pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic features. Therefore, the null hypothesis of the study which states that pragmatic instruction and educational sojourn do not have equal effect on the development of knowledge of target language conventional expressions is confirmed.

These findings can be explained through the Noticing Hypothesis. The Noticing Hypothesis introduced by Schmidt (1990) states that “people learn about the things that they attend to and do not learn much about the things they do not attend to” (Schmidt, 2001:30). This hypothesis emphasizes that in order for the input to become intake, the detection of input in the form of awareness and attention is necessary (Schmidt, 1995). Not all input has equal value and only that input which is noticed then becomes available for intake and effective processing (Schmidt, 1990; 2001). Intake is part of the input which is being paid attention to and is taken into short-term memory and consequently is integrated into the interlanguage, a language independent from both the language learner’s native language and the target language (Selinker, 1972).

Pragmatic instruction provided for language learners through intervention definitely developed their awareness of pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic differences between their native language and the target language. This awareness certainly led them to notice and pay attention to the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic features of the target language presented both through intervention and through media and internet. This noticing of target language pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic features subsequently must have helped them turn the input to which they were exposed into intake and effective processing of target language conventional expressions. Awareness of pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic differences between native language and the target language, however, certainly did not develop in language learners who did not go through pragmatic instruction. Consequently, despite having abundant exposure to target language pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic features during their educational sojourn, they may have failed to notice them and consequently may have failed to develop their knowledge of target language conventional expressions.

These findings can be also explained through the fact that in the current era the idea of turning the world into a global village has come through. Internet and media have linked people of all over the world together. People across the globe can communicate with each other through internet tools and can be exposed to cultural and pragmatic features of various countries through media. Therefore, exposure to target language pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic features can be equally present for both study-abroad and study-at-home language learners. However, provision of pragmatic instruction can not only contribute to the development of knowledge of target language pragmatic features but also can stimulate

awareness of pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic differences between language learners' native language and the target language.

In the current study, language learners who were studying at their home country were exposed to target language pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic features through internet and media almost to the same extent as language learners who were on the educational sojourn. However, the treatment that they received through intervention provided them with the advantage of being familiarized with the knowledge of target language conventional expressions to a higher extent, developing awareness of differences in conventionalized expressions of their native language and the target language, and realizing the significance of possessing knowledge of target language conventional expressions for successful cross-cultural interactions. This all likely contributed to the superior knowledge of target language conventional expressions in language learners who were trained in target language pragmatic features over language learners who were on the educational sojourn.

The findings obtained in the current study are consistent with the findings obtained in the studies conducted by Bardovi-Harlig and Vellenga (2012) and Rafieyan et al. (2014) who found that incorporation of target language pragmatic features in language classes develops knowledge of target language conventional expressions in language learners. The findings obtained in the current study, however, are not in line with the findings obtained in the study conducted by Taguchi (2013) who found educational sojourn more effective in the development of knowledge of target language conventional expressions in language learners than language proficiency.

## **5. Conclusion**

The study revealed the superiority of the effect of pragmatic instruction to educational sojourn in developing knowledge of target language conventional expressions. Language learners who were trained in target language pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic features and their distinctions with their native language managed to demonstrate a higher knowledge of target language conventional expressions than language learners who were exposed to target language pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic features through educational sojourn. Therefore, teachers of language courses in English as foreign language contexts are advised to incorporate the pragmatic features of the target language into their class instruction (Rafieyan et al., 2014, Rafieyan, in press).

The study was limited in some ways, however. First of all, the study did not include a control group to compare the effectiveness of pragmatic intervention as compared to a controlled situation. Secondly, the study did not include a pre-test to assess the precise effect of each form of pragmatic intervention. Finally, the study did not include a follow-up test to detect the sustainability of pragmatic knowledge obtained through each form of intervention. Therefore, future studies are recommended to include a control group and design the experiment based on a pre-test, post-test, and follow-up test design to obtain more comprehensive findings.

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