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Pragmatic Aspects of English for Tourism Course Books and ESL Learners Pragmatic Needs: A Speech Act Theory Perspective

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Abstract

Despite the need for communicating effectively for the ESL students engaged in jobs related to tourism industry, they still suffer from some incompetences while communicating in these contexts. Misunderstandings and communication breakdowns are said to mark many intercultural encounters as participants rely on the norms of their mother tongue and native culture to produce meaning in a foreign language. The aim of the current study is twofold: first, to study the extent that the course books deal with the pragmatic functions of language, and second, to assess the pragmatic needs of the EFL learners engaged in tourism industry. To study the pragmatic aspects of the course books, three different English for tourism course books were analyzed on the basis of Speech- act theory, and the frequency of each functional category was computed. Then, to assess the pragmatic needs of the EFL learners engaged in tourism industry, a discourse completion test consisting of fifty items (covering all the Speech-act Theory functions,) was given to 30 students studying EFL, and their pragmatic needs were specified on the basis of this test.

Key words: Material evaluation; Pragmatic evaluation; Tourism; Needs analysis

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1. Introduction

Despite the need for communicating effectively for the ESL students engaged in jobs related to tourism industry, they do not perform efficiently while communicating with their customers in these contexts. Misunderstanding and communication breakdowns mark many intercultural encounters as participants rely on the norms of their mother tongue and native culture to produce meaning in a foreign language (Kasper and Rose, 2002; Kaur, 2011).

The EFL learners' failure in communicating their messages can be traced back to their inadequacy in pragmatic competence. This competence comprises the knowledge that helps the speaker to express his/her meanings and intentions via speech acts (e.g. requests, invitations, disagreements and so on) appropriately within a particular social and cultural context of communication (Nguyen, 2011; Ishihara & Cohen, 2010). In this respect, pragmatic information provided in course books can play an important role in developing the pragmatic competence of ESL learners. Therefore, a pragmatically friendly course book should cover pragmatic awareness- raising activities and extra-linguistic contextual information. It should also provide a variety of language forms to accomplish certain speech acts (Vellenga, 2004; Whitelaw et al., 2009).

Different English Teaching programs offered for the students of tourism use course-books as the main framework for offering the courses, and much of the classroom activities are organized on the basis of these course books. While they provide the main scaffold for offering the courses and much of the classroom activities, the pragmatic knowledge presented by them has not been evaluated systematically (Sirikhan&Prapphal, 2011).

Considering the significance of the pragmatic aspects of conversations and other activities included in the course-books, this study aims to examine the pragmatic content of the English course-books published for the field of tourism. To this end, the speech act theory by Searle (1976) was adopted as a framework for the analysis. Furthermore, the students' ability to use language properly was assessed using a tourism discourse completion test (DCT). Accordingly the following research questions were formulated:

1) What is the frequency of each category of speech acts as categorized by Searle (1976) in the English for tourism course-books?
2) What are the pragmatic needs of the students according to the speech act theory?
3) To what extent do the speech acts in the course-books meet the students' needs?

2.Background

The significance of mastering communication skills for ESL learners engaged in jobs related to tourism has led researchers to conduct research in order to analyse the pragmatic needs of the students. In this respect, Sirikhan and Prapphal (2011), using a needs assessment questionnaire, Front Office Pragmatic-Test (FOP-Test) and a pragmatic knowledge questionnaire; evaluated students' pragmatic ability in the context of the hotel Front Office department. They found that pragmalinguistic and sociolinguistic incompetence of the participants were the major causes of failure in communication exchanged between hotel staffs and guests. Viewing this problem, many scholars have traced the reasons for the students' pragmatic incompetence in the course books designed for the students.

Therefore, scholars have analyzed course-books from different perspectives. As an example, Vellenga (2004) conducted a qualitative and quantitative study of 8 English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) course-books to specify the amount and quality of pragmatic information provided by them. The findings revealed that course-books lack explicit metapragmatic information. The study suggested that materials developers could have included authentic examples of speech acts and sufficient metapragmatic explanations in their books to help students acquire pragmatic competence.

In the same vein, Nguyen (2011) evaluated the pragmatic content of a developed series of course-books written for Vietnam's upper-secondary students. She examined how speech acts had linguistically been presented in the course-

books and whether adequate contextual and meta-pragmatic information had been provided to facilitate the learning of such speech acts. The study indicated that course-books do not always constitute an accurate and adequate source of pragmatic information. Furthermore, in order to facilitate learners' development of pragmatic competence, she argued for providing realistic models accompanied by adequate explanation of rules of usage in the target language.

In another study, Soozandehfar (2011) analysed the conversation section of *Top Notch fundamental* course-books from the pragmatic dimension of language functions and speech acts. For this purpose, 14 conversations from the entire 14 units of the books were selected randomly and the two pragmatic models of Halliday's (1978) language functions and Searle's (1976) speech acts were applied. The findings indicated that the conversations in thesecourse-books are not pragmatically efficacious and functional.

Soleimani and Dabbaghi (2012), using an oral DCT,also evaluated efficiency of the *New Interchange* course books in terms of providing sufficient and comprehensible pragmatic input for Iranian learners of English.. They concluded that audio conversations and video episodes in the books provided sufficient input for language learners who aim to communicate their basic needs of requesting/accepting, requesting/refusing expressing attitudes, and affirming through providing variety of scenarios of different speech situations.

As above review indicates, most of the studies applying the speech act theory to evaluate pragmatic information of course-books have focused on cours -books designed for teaching general English. Nevertheless, the field of English for specific purposes has been ignored. Considering the lack of research in the area of English for specific purposes, the present study aims to investigate the extent that the published course books in the field of tourism have addressed the communicative needs of the students involved in the tourism education. To this end, the speech act theory has been used to investigate the contents of the course-books. Furthermore, considering the pragmatic inadequacy of EFL learners in producing different types of speech acts, the current study intends to analyse the pragmatic needs of the EFL students to perform in tourism contexts through assigning a discourse completion test.

3. Method
3. 1. Participants

30 postgraduate students majoring in English at Sheikhbahaee University (SHBU) participated in this study. The reason for selecting these participants stemmed from the circumstance that these graduates usually are employed in jobs related to tourism industry like tour guides, travel agents and hotel receptionists after their graduation from college.

3.2. Instruments

A discourse completion test (DCT), consisting of fifty items, constituted one of the instruments of the current study. In designing this test two factors were taken into consideration: 1) the situations should have corresponded to the situations faced by those involved in the tourism industry jobs such as tour guides, managers, travel agents, and hotel receptionists or tourists in general; 2) the items should have corresponded to one of the five categories of speech acts as categorized by Searle (1976).

3.3. Materials

Five different course-books were put in the spotlight for evaluation. These books were as follows: *Oxford English for careers* (2009) series by Robin Walker and Keith Harding published by Oxford University Press. The series includes three books on tourism focusing on provision, encounters, and management skills respectively. They have been designed at three levels: pre-intermediate, intermediate, and upper-intermediate. Each book consists of three units which by itself contains several conversations where two or more people talk to each other in different situations such as hotels, travel agencies, tourist attractions, etc.

The second book was *English for International Tourism*(2003)series by Iwonna Dubicka and Margaret O'Keeffe, published by Longman. The series includes two books at two levels: pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate which consist of fifteen units and each unit contains several exercises focusing on the situations within hotel and tourism industries.

The third book was *Welcome! English for travel and tourism industry* (1998) by Leo Jones published by Cambridge University Press and designed for intermediate level students. The book contains 50 units each of which deals with a specific speech act.

The reason for selecting the above-mentioned books in this study stemmed from the circumstance that these books were usually selected for teaching English to tourism students.

3.4. Procedures

Primarily, as a pilot study, the conversations in *English for International Tourism* were analyzed and their speech acts were classified according to Searle's categorization's of speech acts. The aim of the pilot study was to devise a consistent way for analyzing the speech acts of the conversations in the course books.

As for the main study, initially the speech acts of the whole conversation and next the speech acts of its constituent sentences were specified. To this end, Geneva's hierarchical-functional model, which comprises a set of hypotheses developed in the 1980s regarding the hierarchical and functional organization of discourse structures, was applied. This model is based on three concepts: Exchanges, Moves, and Acts

-Units of type Exchange are made of units of type Move.
-Exchanges are composed of at least two Moves.
-Units of type Move are made of units types Act, Move or Exchange.
-Moves composed by a single Act are well-formed.
-Moves composed by an Act and another discourse-unit type (Move or
Exchange) are well-formed.
-Moves composed by a single Exchange are ill-formed. (Cited in Moeschler, 2002)
E = exchange, M = move, A = act

The following is an example where Geneva's hierarchical-functional model, to extract and categorize the conversations in the course books has been applied. The conversation has been extracted from *tourism 1* used in this study.

M1-   A Can I ask you a few questions?

E

  M2-   A Certainly
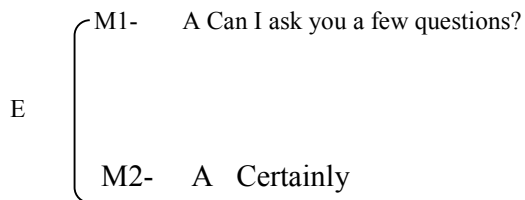
These structures mean that each exchange is made of two moves both composed of a single act. The second move can be made of another exchange with two moves. This model was followed to provide a statistical account of speech acts as the exchanges lead to moves and the moves to acts. The model was adopted and the data was collected according to that.

Using Geneva's model discussed above, the speech acts were extracted from all the listening activities in *tourism1*, *2*, and *3*.

Next, the speech acts of listening tasks were specified. The listening tasks were of two types: tasks involving two or more participants where the participants were tour leaders, hotel receptionists, visitors, travel agents, etc. (dialogues) and tasks involving only one person (monologues) where the speaker described a festival or a local dish, etc.

To address the second research question, i.e. to specify the pragmatic needs of tourism students according to speech act theory, a DCT was designed and was piloted on twenty BA students studying English translation and TEFL at Sheikhbahaee University. The test aimed to evaluate the participant's productive knowledge of using representative, directive and expressive speech acts. The analysis of the participants responses to the test indicated that some of the tests need to be modified as the answer to them was hidden in the stem of the questions. It also revealed that the test was too long and therefore boring to the participants. Consequently, a second draft of DCT was written and revised on the basis of the drawbacks observed in the pilot study.

As for the main study, the final draft of the DCT including 50 items, 10 items testing each category of speech acts was administered to the participants and scored by two raters. . The raters were asked to tolerate linguistic errors as far as the speech act produced could communicate the force intended since the test aimed at investigating the sociopragmatic knowledge of the test takers. Values on a scale from 0 to 3 were given by the raters to the responses made by the test-takers with the following criteria taken into consideration:

> 0 = a completely unacceptable item
> 1 = severely flawed response which still succeeded in conveying the speech
> intention
> 2 = a generally good response with slight flaws
> 3 = responses that did not need any further improvement

Finally, SPSS was used to calculate the mean and the standard deviation of   the scores.

4. Data analysis

4.1. The frequency and percentage of speech acts in Tourism course books

Initially, the conversations of the course books were analysed and their speech acts were specified, next the frequency and percentage of each speech act was computed. Table1 indicates the frequencies and percentages of each category of speech acts in all the five course-books. As it can be observed, the frequency of representative speech act is higher than the others.

Table 1. *The overall frequencies and percentages in all the five books*

Speech acts	Frequency	Percentage
Commissives	**13**	4%
Directives	**73**	25%
Declaratives	**71**	25%
Expressives	**17**	6%
Representatives	**115**	40%

The speech acts of the listening activities were also analysed and the frequency of each speech act was computed. Table 2 displays the frequencies and the percentages of each category of speech acts of listening tasks.

Table 2. The overall percentages of speech acts

Course books	Commissives	Directives	Declaratives	Expressives	Representatives
Tourism 1	4%	29%	16%	7%	44%
Tourism 2	1%	21%	21%	3%	54%
Tourism 3	2%	14%	41%	3%	40%
Overall Percentage	2%	19%	30%	4%	45%

According to Table2, again representatives constitute the greatest portion of speech acts presented in the listening tasks of the course books.

4.2. The scoring results of DCTs

As it was mentioned in the method section, the DCT contained 50 items (each 10 items called for the use of a particular speech act). For scoring the test, each category of speech acts was scored by two raters. Therefore, each participant had two scores which were summed up and their mean were calculated. Meanwhile, the interrater reliability was also computed through using Pearson correlation coefficient. Table 3 indicates the mean and the standard deviation of the scores obtained by the participants, and Table 4 represents the Pearson correlation coefficient of interrater reliability.

Table 3. Means and Standard deviations of DCT scores

Speech acts	Mean	Standard deviation	N
Representatives	18.92	3.1	30
Commissives	21.12	2.89	30
Directives	20.67	3.33	30
Declaratives	18.6	4.93	30
Expressives	17.65	4.69	30

As Table 3 displays, the highest mean belongs to commisives (21.12) while the lowest one belongs to expressives (17.65).

Table 4.Correlation coefficient across the scores of the two raters

		Correlations	Column B (*t*)
Evaluator 1		Pearson correlation	.763
Evaluator 2		Sig.(2-tailed)	.000
		N	100

Table 4.indicates a correlation coefficient of 0.76 which is considered a high correlation coefficient of the scores given by the two raters.

5. Discussion and conclusion

As for the first research question concerning the frequency of each speech act categorized by Searle (1976) in the course books, the analysis of the data indicated that the frequency of the representative acts is considerably higher than the other ones. 40 % of the speech acts fall into this category while the frequency of commissive and expressive acts is only 4% and 6 % respectively. Nevertheless, the distribution of the directives and declaratives was equal where 25 percent belonged to each. As the statatistics indicates the distribution of speech acts is disproportionate.

As table 2 indicates, such is the case with the speech acts of the listening tasks where representative speech acts contain 45% of the speech acts, declaratives 30%, directives 19%, expressives 4% and commissives 2%. This unequal distribution of speech acts may be due to the nature of communication. In daily communications, the distributions of the language functions cannot be equal since the nature of the language makes it inevitable. Participant in ordinary communication acts may not need to communicate their feeling as much as they need to explain things and present realities (domestication).

As it was mentioned, the distribution of the commissive and expressive speech acts in the course books is considerably lower than other speech act, i.e. 2% and 4%   respectively. This lower frequency of commissive and expressive speech acts in the tourism course books may be responsible for the students' weaker performance in completing these two speech acts in their DCTs.

Another finding of this study was that as the level of the course books increased, the frequencies of declaratives and representatives increased while the frequency of expressive and commissive acts decreased. In other words, at lower levels the speech acts were presented in the form of dialogues; however, in upper levels the focus was shifted towards presenting the speech acts through monologues like presenting seminars, giving explanations on a site or describing things like a local dish or custom. Moreover, most of the directive speech acts were in the form of questions or requests. There were a few cases where one gave direction to how to find a place or use a service or tried to convince the other participant by negotiation.

As for the second research question, i.e. the speech act needs of the students, the findings of the DCT revealed that the students performed adequately well on those sections of the test eliciting the commissive, declarative, directive, and representative functions.

The participants' performance was, however, slightly lower (17.65) in items eliciting expressive speech acts. As it was discussed, expressive function of communication, where one needs to convey his/her feelings and attitudes, finds considerable significance in tourism communication. In this respect, Blue and Harun (2003; p.74) believe that hospitality language which is concerned with "the cluster of activities oriented towards satisfying guests" is of crucial importance to EFL learners to be employed in tourism workplaces. Therefore, the findings of the current research call for incorporation of more frequent expressive acts in the tourism course-books developed for Iranian students studying English for Tourism.

In sum, the incompetence of tourism students in performing expressive, commissive and directive speech acts may be traced back in the low frequency of these speech acts presented in the course-books. This may be due to the fact that, as Alemi and Irandoost (2012) state, the amount of input given to the students through their course books can play an important role in forming good competence for dealing with different communicative situations.

The findings of this study can be insightful to both language teachers and material designers. By getting information about the distribution of speech acts in tourism course books, the teachers can make up for the inadequacies by using extra materials in their classes. Furthermore, the findings also can provide material designers with the type of speech acts which they need to put more emphasis on when designing new materials.

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