The interface between proficiency and pragmatics: A study on compliment responses

La relación entre la competencia lingüística y la pragmática: Un estudio sobre respuestas a cumplidos

ATHENEA BOTEY-RIAZA
JÚLIA BARÓN
UNIVERSITAT DE BARCELONA

ALICIA MARTÍNEZ-FLOR
UNIVERSITAT JAUME I

This study investigates the interface between second language pragmatics and proficiency by focusing on pragmatic awareness of compliment responses (CRs). The participants were Spanish learners of English as a foreign language. Their perceptive pragmatic knowledge was tested via a pragmatic awareness video elicitation task where they had to rate the appropriateness of 15 CRs from 1 (inappropriate) to 6 (very appropriate). Learners were divided into high and low proficiency groups according to their vocabulary sizes to check in what ways their responses to the task differed. Their ratings were then compared to a native speaker benchmark to obtain a sameness score and results indicate a moderate inverse correlation between proficiency level and near-nativeness. Findings suggest that the first language plays an important role in pragmatic awareness and that proficiency alone is not a determining factor to acquire pragmatic knowledge, as there are other factors that may influence pragmatic development.

Keywords: *L2 pragmatic awareness; proficiency; compliment responses; EFL; audio-visual input*

Este estudio investiga la relación entre la pragmática de una segunda lengua y la competencia lingüística en la conciencia pragmática sobre las respuestas a cumplidos (RCs). Los participantes fueron estudiantes españoles de inglés como lengua extranjera. Su conocimiento pragmático perceptivo se evaluó mediante una tarea audiovisual donde se debía indicar el nivel de adecuación de 15 RCs (de 1, inapropiado a 6, muy apropiado). Los alumnos se dividieron en grupos de alto y bajo nivel de competencia de acuerdo con el tamaño de su vocabulario. Luego, sus respuestas fueron comparadas con la evaluación de hablantes nativos. Los resultados indican una correlación inversa moderada entre el nivel de lengua y la valoración de los nativos. Los resultados sugieren que la competencia lingüística por sí sola no es un factor determinante para adquirir conocimiento pragmático, ya que existen otros factores que pueden influir en el desarrollo pragmático.

Palabras clave: *conciencia pragmática de la L2; competencia lingüística; respuestas a cumplidos; inglés como lengua extranjera; material audiovisual*

1. INTRODUCTION

Even though it is unavoidable that some diversity of opinion exists among native speakers (NSs) of any language when it comes to their view of the degree of appropriateness of a given speech act, there are certain unwritten rules in each society that are generally accepted as appropriate. It is less clear, however, in what ways learners of a particular second language (L2) perceive these acts when living in a foreign language (FL) context. Does it become more similar to the perception of NSs the more proficient they get? The aim of this study is to investigate the relationship between proficiency level and pragmatic awareness in teenage English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Research on this interface has yielded results that point to the correlation of learners' proficiency level and pragmatic development (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998; Cook & Liddicoat, 2002; Schauer, 2006) and the correlation of grammatical and pragmatic development (Celaya & Barón, 2015; Håkanson & Norrby, 2005; Hoffman-Hicks, 1992) as well as the complete opposite (Doğançay-Aktuna & Kamisli, 1997; Félix-Brasdefer, 2007; Kasper & Rose, 2002a; Martín-Marchante, 2021; Matsumura, 2003; Niezgoda & Roever, 2001). Most of these studies have focused on requests, and therefore it seems convenient to investigate how this relationship works when it comes to other speech acts, such as compliment responses (CRs) which have been underexplored. This mixed methods study will combine quantitative data collected through questionnaires and qualitative data from the interviews conducted with a small sample of participants.

In the first place, the review of the literature in the field of L2 pragmatics will be presented by addressing pragmatics and proficiency as well as the speech act of CRs. In the next section, the methodology used will be explained as well as the design of the tool used to test participants. In the fourth section of the paper, the statistical results will be analysed. This will be followed by the discussion of the findings and the last section will be devoted to the concluding remarks.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 *Pragmatics and proficiency*

NSs and L2 users and learners often have pragmatic skills that are quite diverse. Research has found that "grammatical development does not guarantee a corresponding level of pragmatic development" (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998: 234). In fact, when compared to NSs, L2 learners with an advanced level of L2 grammar may exhibit a variety of levels when it comes to pragmatics, including important imbalances between these two kinds of knowledge. In regard to this relationship between pragmatics and interlanguage development, some researchers have focused on trying to determine if it is grammar or pragmatics that develops first in L2 learners. On the one hand, findings point to the possibility that pragmatics can be learnt without the need of many linguistic resources, be it through the L1 or universal pragmatic knowledge (Kasper & Rose, 2002a). Félix-Brasdefer's (2007) findings support the primacy of pragmatics, with sociopragmatics developing first. On the other hand, other studies have found evidence that grammar precedes the development of pragmatics. In her study involving French FL learners, Hoffman-Hicks (1992) found the learners who excelled in the grammar tasks also did well in the pragmatics tasks. The author concluded that although linguistic competence is necessary for pragmatic competence, it may not be sufficient for it to occur. It follows then that the higher the grammatical competence the higher the pragmatic competence of the learners. She also emphasised the essential need for using new ways of comparing and measuring these two kinds of data (Hoffman-Hicks, 1992). Concurrently, other researchers have endeavoured

to search for an explanation on "how the emergent systems interact, […] and how growth in one leads to expanded expression in the other" (Bardovi-Harlig, 2013: 79). Schauer (2006), for instance believes the two competences develop in a parallel manner. Findings in the study with Swedish FL learners by Håkanson and Norrby (2005) showed how the learners' pragmatic competence evolved as their morpho-syntactic processability improved, in accordance with Celaya and Barón (2015).

As research has shown, some L2 users are able to be pragmatically appropriate with the help of some basic grammar, vocabulary and use of intonation. Whilst other highly proficient learners are not, for the most part, competent or incompetent pragmatically but rather display a wide variety of degrees of competence (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996). These findings point to pragmatic competence and language proficiency being separate systems. In their research Doğançay-Aktuna and Kamisli (1997) observed how learners with advanced language proficiency did not succeed in using it with appropriateness, due to the L1 influence, suggesting that language is not always learnt alongside pragmatic competence. Similar results were obtained in the subsequent Martín-Marchante's (2021) investigation, where not only a correlation between grammatical and pragmatic competence was not confirmed but the grammar and the pragmatic competence sections of the test analysed in the study revealed an inverse correlation "that is, if a student is good at grammar, it can be inferred that he/she is not so much at pragmatics" (Martín-Marchante, 2021: 30). Indeed, non-verbal language represents a large percentage of the overall communicative message (Mehrabian, 2017). A possible explanation for these results could be that just as in Tibus, Heier and Schwan (2013) and Sato, Yujobo, Okada and Ogane (2019), on occasions where L2 users have limited language skills, they rely on non-verbal information such as audio-visual input. Nevertheless, as pointed out by Sánchez-Hernández and Alcón-Soler (2019), L2 pragmatic development is non-linear, especially with a teenage population.

The above studies dealt with productive pragmatic data, whereas research on learners' perceptive pragmatic knowledge is smaller (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998; Cook & Liddicoat, 2002; Matsumura, 2003; Niezgoda & Roever, 2001; Schauer, 2006). For example, Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei's (1998) study explored how pragmatic violations and grammatical errors were perceived in Italian and Hungarian EFL settings and in the US as an English as a Second Language (ESL) context. To do this a "contextualised judgement task in an audiovisual format" (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998: 244) with 20 scenarios was employed. These scenarios with speech acts such as apologies, refusals, suggestions and requests could include errors of a grammatical or pragmatic nature which the ESL and EFL students had to rate. The researchers found both groups of EFL students rated grammatical errors as more serious than pragmatic ones whilst ESL learners were more inclined to rate pragmatic errors as more serious than grammatical ones, leading them to associate language development "with the increase of pragmatic/grammatical awareness in exactly the opposite direction depending on the instructional environment" (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998: 251). That is to say, EFL students showed a higher awareness of grammatical mistakes whilst ESL learners were more aware of pragmatics. Students with a higher proficiency regardless of the environment viewed pragmatic violations as more severe than grammatical errors. This study on learners' judgement of violations was replicated by Niezgoda and Roever (2001) with an added training period where EFL and ESL students were taught how to distinguish between pragmatic and grammatical errors. In opposition to Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998), it was the EFL participants who seemed more aware of both grammatical and pragmatic violations and rated them more severely than the ESL group. Overall low-proficiency students found more grammatical and pragmatic errors than their high-proficiency counterparts.

Pragmatic awareness and proficiency were also explored by Cook and Liddicoat (2002) who compared high and low ESL proficiency groups with Australian NSs. Their results showed

no significant difference between the request interpretations of high-proficiency learners and NSs, reinforcing the idea that the more proficient in the L2 the more pragmatically close to NSs. Similar results were found in Schauer's (2006) replication of Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) which included post-hoc interviews and revealed a correlation between pragmatic awareness and proficiency level. The tendency was for ESL learners to rate pragmatic errors as more serious and for EFL participants to pay less attention to those errors. Conversely, Matsumura (2003) is an example of a pragmatic awareness acquisitional study that showed that proficiency alone was not a significant factor in pragmatic development unless combined with lengthy exposure to the target language (TL).

The focus of the present study lies in perceptive knowledge in an FL context and it follows that this research is placed in the framework of awareness, particularly in reference to the Noticing Hypothesis laid out by Schmidt (1995). For pragmatics in particular, Schmidt distinguished noticing, the "conscious registration of the occurrence of some event" (p. 29), from understanding, "the recognition of a general rule in the presence of context variables such as distance, power and imposition" (p. 30). Unlike ESL environments wherein learners have ample exposure and thus increased opportunities for noticing, EFL environments render learners more prone to being influenced by their L1 as shown in Takahashi and Beebe (1987) where they found transfer took place both in the EFL and ESL contexts, but the L1 gained an especially strong influence in the EFL context in particular. Additionally, Cheng (2011) revealed that the strategies to respond to compliments used by Chinese L2 speakers of English differed greatly from those employed by NSs of English and demonstrated this was due in great part to the learners' L1 culture. As well as being influenced by the L1, pragmatic competence can be affected by a wide range of factors as it is a "multi-aspected ability with significant differences observed among component competences in learner performance, namely among pragmatic awareness, metapragmatic awareness, and metalinguistic competence" (Ifantidou & Tzanne, 2012: 68). In this study, the focus will be on learners of English in a FL context, a factor that could have a great influence on the level of awareness[1], as previous research has shown EFL learners are often more aware of grammatical prescriptiveness than of pragmatic appropriateness (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998).

2.2 Compliment responses (CRs)

2.2.1 Definition and types of CRs in English
As there is little research on pragmatic awareness carried out with CRs, the present study will focus on this not-so-often-examined speech act. CRs are a double-edged sword consisting of a speech act that has a positive and affective side on the one hand and a face-threatening side on the other (Holmes, 1986). Responding to the apparently simple speech act of a compliment creates a dispute between the politeness maxim of agreement and that of modesty (Leech, 1983; Maíz-Arévalo, 2012). Pomerantz (1978) observed that the in-between nature of most CRs could be placed somewhere between an acceptance and a rejection. The author adds that CRs are mainly constrained by supportive action on one hand and self-praise avoidance on the other. They have also been described as an act of solidarity in return to a compliment (Herbert, 1990). Among NSs of English, the general tendency to respond to a compliment is to say 'thank you' (Herbert, 1990: 207). Evading the compliment comes second (Pomerantz, 1978), followed by rejecting the compliment which "is the least favoured option since it entails disagreeing with the interlocutor and might be perceived by some as rude or inappropriate" (Maíz-Arévalo, 2012: 164).

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[1] Pragmatic awareness will be treated as a synonym of perceptive pragmatic knowledge.

Among the various taxonomies of CRs that have been proposed, in this study a combination of the two oft-quoted categorisations by Holmes (1995) and Herbert (1990) was employed. Holmes' (1995: 139) proposal consists of 12 CRs which she divides into three main types: accepting, rejecting and evading. Herbert (1990: 208-9) classifies a total of 12 CRs into strategies of acceptance, deflection and self-praise avoidance (see Table 1 for subtypes and examples).

*Table 1: **Classification of CRs***

Type of compliment response	Holmes (1995)	Herbert (1998)
Acceptance	Appreciation/agreement token (*Yes, thanks*)	Appreciation token (*Thank you*)
	Agreeing utterance (*I think it's lovely too*)	Comment acceptance-single (*Yeah, it is my favorite, too*)
	Downgrading utterance (*It's not too bad, is it?*)	Scale down (*It is really quite old*)
	Returning the compliment (*You're looking good too*)	Return (*So's yours*)
		Praise upgrade (*Really brings out the blue in my eyes, doesn't it?*)
Rejection / deflection	Disagreeing utterance (*I'm afraid I don't like it much*)	Disagreement (*I hate it*)
	Question accuracy (*Beautiful the right word?*)	Question (*Do you really think so?*)
	Challenge sincerity (*You don't really mean that*)	
		Qualification (*It's alright, but Len's is nicer*)
	Shift credit (*My mother knitted it*)	Reassignment (*My brother gave it to me; it really knitted itself*)
Evasion / self-praise avoidance	Informative comment (*I bought it at the Vibrant Knits place*)	Comment history (*I bought it for the trip to Arizona*)
	Ignore (*It's time we're leaving, isn't it?*)	No acknowledgement (*Topic shift or no response*)
	Legitimate evasion (*Sure, sure, now let's talk about serious things, shall we?*)	
	Request reassurance (*Do you really think so?*)	
		Request interpretation (*You want to borrow this one, too?*)

2.2.2 *Studies in CRs*

The majority of studies regarding CRs are contrastive studies of the use and types of CRs in different languages with NSs (Golato, 2002; Holmes, 1986; Maíz-Arévalo, 2012, 2013; Mir & Cots, 2017). Comparative research on CRs across languages has shown that Peninsular Spanish speakers use the acceptance strategy more often than German speakers (Siebold, 2006), but not as much as English speakers (Maíz-Arévalo, 2012). Moreover, the use of compliments by Peninsular Spanish speakers was found to be less frequent compared to American English users in Mir and Cots (2017), where 62% of English-speaking informants 'often' used compliments as compared to only 25% in Spanish suggesting that the lack of frequency of compliments in Peninsular Spanish may trigger a diminished confidence level in how to respond.

Fewer investigations, including the present study, aim to compare the productive or receptive knowledge of CRs among NSs and NNSs of a language (Chan, 2021; Hulstijn, 2012; Roever, 2011). For instance, a study with Thai EFL participants found a "correlation between proficiency levels and CR strategies in English in such a way that high-proficiency learners' CR patterns are more […] target-like, compared to the strategies used by learners with low proficiency", who transferred their L1 pragmatic knowledge into their CRs (Phoocharoensil, 2012: 285). Similarly, Tran (2007) also observed that Vietnamese learners of EFL recurred to pragmatic transfer from the L1.

Given the somewhat inconclusive, varied and still scarce findings regarding the role language proficiency plays in pragmatic competence and awareness, this study is an attempt to explore this research gap with a teenage population and a speech act that has not been explored enough in relationship to proficiency operationalised via vocabulary size (Miralpeix & Muñoz, 2018). In order to investigate the interrelationship between pragmatic awareness and language proficiency, this study will seek to answer the following research question while adhering to a mixed methods approach:

RQ: Do high and low proficiency learners differ in their pragmatic perception of CRs?, and if so, are differences explained by their proficiency level?

3. THE STUDY

3.1 *Participants*

The participants were a total of 72, of which 8 were NSs of English (3 females, 4 males and 1 non-binary) and 64 were EFL learners (40 females, 22 males and 2 non-binary) with Spanish and Catalan as their L1s. The latter were students at a public high school in Catalonia, Spain, aged 16 to 18 years (M = 16.69) who started learning English between the ages of 3 and 8 years (M = 5.54). Half of the subjects attended extracurricular lessons in English. Over half of the participants had never been to an English-speaking country (55%) and the rest of the students (45%) had been to one for a maximum of three weeks. Participants were divided into two groups: Group 1 comprising students with lower proficiency levels (with vocabulary sizes that ranged from 2.6K to 4.8K words) and Group 2 those with higher levels of proficiency (with vocabulary sizes that ranged from 4.9K to 7.5K words). The control group was composed of NS raters with Irish or British nationality (N = 8) of similar characteristics to the participants in terms of age (M = 19.5, Max = 22, Min = 17) and intellectual profile, rendering them a comparable baseline according to Hulstijn (2012).

3.2 *Instruments*

3.2.1 *Background questionnaire*
Students completed a short survey to collect information on their L1s and L2s, age at testing, gender, age of onset for English learning, whether they attended extracurricular English lessons, how often they watched series in English, and finally if they had lived in or visited an English-speaking country for a period of 3 weeks or more. In this way, those participants who stayed abroad for more than 3 weeks, who were assumed to have had more exposure to the pragmatics and culture of NSs of English, were differentiated from the group of FL learners who had had minimal face-to-face contact with NSs of English and who constitute the focus of this study.

3.2.2 *V_YesNo v1.0*
To operationalise proficiency, this investigation used the V_YesNo v1.0 vocabulary size test designed by Meara and Miralpeix (2014)[2] as it covers a range of 10,000 words and has an approximate duration of 10 minutes. The maximum score is 10,000 words and scores under 2,500 are not reliable. This tool was chosen as a measure of receptive vocabulary size which has been found to be a good indicator of general L2 proficiency (Miralpeix & Muñoz, 2018).

3.2.3 *Pragmatic Awareness Video Elicitation Task (PAVET)*
The choice of using a Pragmatic Awareness Video Elicitation Task (PAVET) was driven by the advantages of collecting large amounts of data simultaneously and of having control over variables such as age and the range of possible responses, making it easier to analyse the data statistically, compensating for its limitations (Golato, 2003; Roever, 2011). The contextualised judgement task consisted of 15 questions: 5 per CR type (acceptance, evasion and rejection). The instances of CRs were in audio-visual format to provide a richer situational context than the use of a written scenario as the only means of description as in Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998), Niezgoda and Roever (2001) and Schauer (2006). The items in the form of authentic scripted audio-visual input were reviewed by a NS from the US to make sure they matched the definitions of the subtypes in the taxonomies used (Herbert, 1990; Holmes, 1995). The video excerpts were selected from the television series *Gilmore Girls* (Sherman-Palladino, Palladino, & Myerson, 2001), chosen for its relatability for teenagers (as it follows a teenage girl) and its portrayal of a great variety of intergenerational exchanges with friends, family and strangers. The video excerpts were embedded in the questionnaire adding an adaptivity component so that (1) each student could watch them as many times as they needed in order to understand the situations and answer the questions properly and (2) so that each student could complete it at their own pace as opposed to doing it as a whole class activity. The clips ranged from 10 seconds to one minute long and captions were used in all clips to make the most of multimodality and to cater to all levels of proficiency and listening comprehension skills. The scale used to rate the CRs was adapted from a scale for teacher raters designed by Gilabert and Barón (2018). For the purpose of this study, it was adapted for learner users, it was made speech-act specific (CR) and the Likert-scale was shortened to range from 1 (=inappropriate) to 6 (=very appropriate) (see Figure 1). This scale was validated again through the piloting. Even though the term "appropriateness" is a cognate of Spanish, during piloting students interpreted the word as "age-appropriate" (such as when used for film ratings). Therefore, during data collection the scale was referred to as "politeness scale", to avoid any confusion for EFL students.

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[2] Vocabulary test retrieved from: https://www.lognostics.co.uk/tools/V_YesNo/V_YesNo.htm

*Figure 1: **Example of the question format***

The test included 15 items[3] (see Table 2), with different degrees of +/- Distance [D] and +/- Power [P] (these being two of the sociopragmatic factors included in Brown and Levinson's (1978) politeness theory). Each item in the PAVET was preceded by a brief contextualisation so that participants would know who the characters were and what their relationship was. For instance, as seen in Figure 1, which shows question 3 in the PAVET, participants were given the following context before watching the clip: "The man and woman are husband and wife. They are getting ready for a small celebration." After watching the conversation, they were instructed in the following manner: "Rate the man's response to the compliment about his tie."

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[3] A (for acceptance), E (for evasion) and R (for rejection) + question number (e.g.: A1 = acceptance question 1) onwards.

| Question number	Type of CR	Subtype of CR	Relationship between speakers	Degree of distance [D] and power [P]
1		Downgrading utterance	The boy and the girl are classmates at school, but he is a new student.	[+D] [-P]
2		Returning the compliment	The woman is a regular customer at the restaurant and her friend is the owner of the restaurant.	[-D] [-P]
3	Acceptance	Praise upgrade	The man and woman are husband and wife.	[-D] [-P]
4		Appreciation/ Agreement token	The girl's boyfriend compliments her grandmother.	[+D] [+P]
5		Agreeing utterance	The woman is a pastry chef at a bakery and the mother and daughter are customers.	[+D] [-P]
6		Legitimate evasion	A guest at a hotel is admiring how a musician plays the harp.	[+D] [+P]
7		Informative comment	They are mother and daughter but do not see each other very often.	[-D] [-P]
8	Evasion	Ignore	The grandfather is complimented on his granddaughter by his friends at the golf club.	[-D] [-P]
9		Request reassurance	The girls are classmates and friends.	[-D] [-P]
10		Shift credit	The woman and man are friends.	[-D] [-P]
11		Qualification	The women are mother and daughter.	[-D] [-P]
12		Challenge sincerity	The two girls are classmates.	[+D] [-P]
13	Rejection	Question accuracy	The girl compliments some pictures of her mother.	[-D] [-P]
14		Disagreeing utterance	The woman and the man are friends.	[-D] [-P]
15		Disagreeing utterance	The man and the woman are a couple.	[-D] [-P]

3.2.4 *Interviews*

The quantitative data was complemented with four brief semi-structured interviews to get insights into how students reached decisions when rating CRs. They were conducted in the students' preferred language and sought to find out how they would react in their L1 in the situations exemplified by the videos in the PAVET, as well as how important or useful they perceived this kind of reflection.

3.3 *Procedure*

A week prior to the first testing time, the tools were piloted with students in the same high school aged 14 and 15 years (N = 3). Data was collected in 4 sessions (one per intact group) in the course of two weeks. Each session lasted about 50 minutes. All learners followed the same sequence. Firstly, they were assigned a code (which they could access on their virtual campus). After brief instructions explicitly stating that some words were non-words and that they were supposed to select only words they knew the meaning of and not those they recognised, they completed the V_YesNo v1.0 test using their own laptops. Following this, the researcher described the following task, introducing first the appropriateness scale, after which they rated

a sample clip together with each intact group as a whole. Students then proceeded to answer the background questionnaire and complete the PAVET, using their earphones and laptops individually. During the task, testees could consult the politeness scale which was projected on the white board of their classroom (see Figure 2). Qualitative interviews to students (N = 4; 3 female and 1 male) were conducted two weeks after the activity. Consent forms signed by the parents were collected for all featured participants.
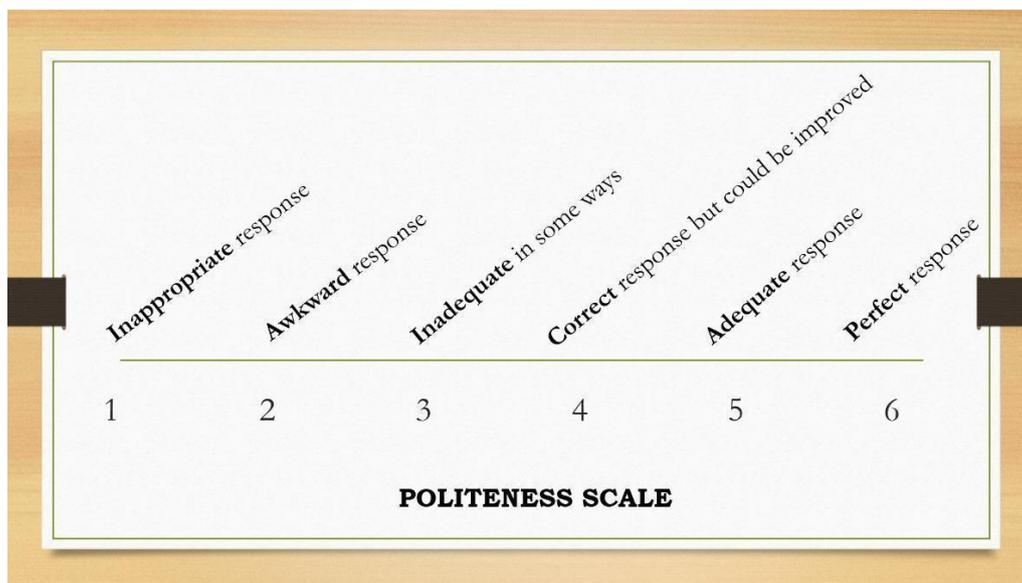
*Figure 2: **Slide shown to participants whilst they completed the PAVET***

3.4 *Data analysis*

Regarding the analysis of the participants' pragmatic awareness through the PAVET, the items that the students rated were reviewed by a NS to make sure they corresponded to the descriptions of the subtypes in the classifications by Herbert (1990) and Holmes (1995). Descriptive and inferential statistics of the data were calculated using IBM SPSS Statistics 27. Normality of distribution was not found when analysing the data between high and low proficiency learners, therefore nonparametric tests were used. Data from PAVET was normally distributed ($p > .05$) so a parametric test was used. The Cronbach internal consistency coefficient of the PAVET scale was questionable, $\alpha = .610$, M = 50.94, SD = 6.50, N = 15. The Likert-scale responses that originally ranged from 1 to 6 were reduced to range from 1 to 3, in order to find patterns in the data, which otherwise showed too much variability. The rest of the data consisted of the answers to the background questionnaire and the interviews with four participants. The focus of the interviews was to find out how subjects came to decisions when rating CRs and how they would react in their L1. Comments about CRs that groups had rated significantly differently were deemed relevant and were included in the results section to complement the statistical analysis.

4. RESULTS

4.1 *High and low proficiency learners' pragmatic perception of CRs*

In the first place, a K-cluster analysis was run to classify the participants into groups of high and low proficiency. This resulted in a group with lower proficiency clustered around the 3,905 vocabulary size with 34 subjects and a group with higher proficiency clustered around the 5,919 vocabulary size with 30 participants. The means of the two groups were then compared by computing several Mann-Whitney U tests, due to the lack of normality of distribution (see Table 3 and Figure 3).

*Table 3: **Non-parametric t-test with proficiency as a grouping variable***

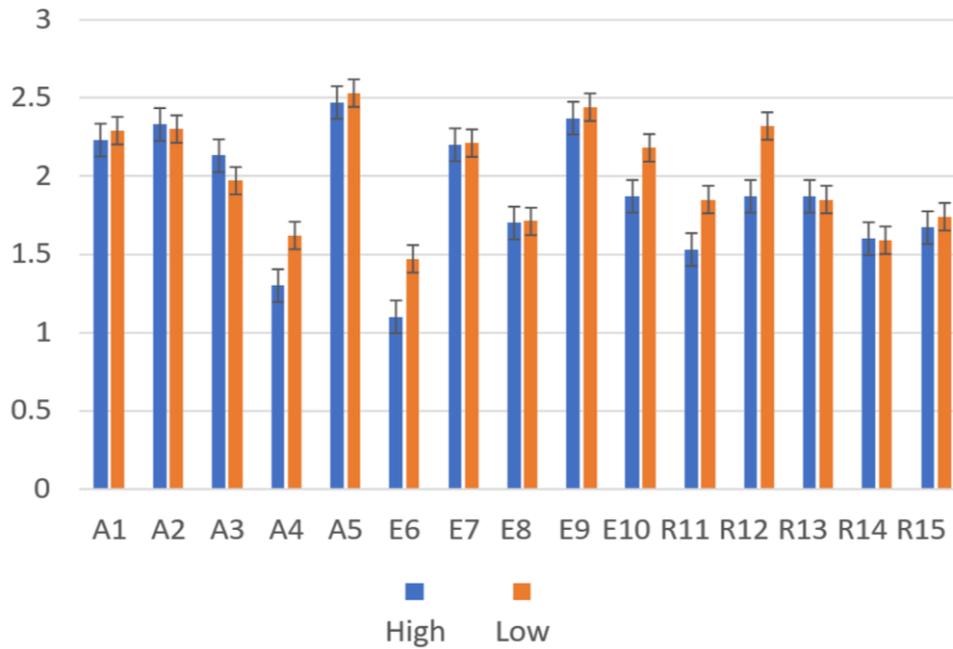|	Mann-Whitney U	Wilcoxon W	Z	*p*
A1	489	954	-0.345	0.73
A2	427	892	-1.249	0.212
A3	437.5	1032.5	-1.176	0.239
A4	358.5	823.5	-2.349	0.019*
A5	475	940	-0.538	0.591
E6	334.5	799.5	-3.023	0.003*
E7	507.5	1102.5	-0.037	0.97
E8	509.5	1104.5	-0.008	0.994
E9	468.5	933.5	-0.631	0.528
E10	379	844	-2.096	0.036*
R11	365.5	830.5	-2.23	0.026*
R12	342	807	-2.421	0.015*
R13	508.5	1103.5	-0.026	0.979
R14	502	967	-0.123	0.902
R15	480.5	945.5	-0.464	0.643

*Figure 3: **Comparative bar graph for High and Low mean ratings***

The results yielded no statistically significant differences between the groups except in their answers for items A4, E6, E10, R11 and R12. The fourth acceptance situation affirmed the significant difference between the high (M = 1.3, Mdn = 1, n = 30) and low (M = 1.62, Mdn = 2, n = 34) group responses, U = 358.5, z = -2.349, p = 0.019, which approached a moderate effect size[4], r = 0.293. In this video excerpt (Sherman-Palladino et al., 2000, S2, E1, 26.30), a woman in purple greets her daughter, granddaughter and her granddaughter's partner, who compliments the house. The grandmother is civil but cold in her reaction to the compliment, which was classified as an *appreciation token*:

> Dean: "Your house is great. It's huge. I've never seen a house this huge before."
> Emily: "Well thank you. So few people bother to notice the hugeness of the house anymore."

Low-proficiency students rated this reaction as being more appropriate. Conversely, the high proficiency group in general gave low ratings to this CR. According to the interviewees, whose ratings for this question were in the lower range, they perceived the situation as "tense" and the speaker as "unfriendly" as they could clearly see the grandmother did not approve of her granddaughter's partner, the one who had given her the compliment. Another student described the conversation as "passive-aggressive."

In the sixth evasion situation the high proficiency group presented a significantly lower rating (M = 1.1, Mdn = 1, n = 30) compared to the low proficiency group (M = 1.47, Mdn = 1, n = 34), U = 334.5, z = -3.023, p = 0.003, with a moderate effect size, r = 0.378. In this clip a guest at a hotel admires the music of a harp player who is an employee in said hotel and who answers with a *legitimate evasion*: "Yeah, well, tell it to the tip jar" (Sherman-Palladino et al., 2000, S1, E1, 9.00). The students with larger vocabulary sizes perceived the CR as inappropriate and those with smaller ones produced more varied ratings. According to one of the interviewees who rated the lowest possible score, "the response is very rude because it is very impolite to receive a compliment and say 'pay'". In her L1 she would maybe joke about

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[4] The effect sizes of the Mann-Whitney U t-test were interpreted according to Cohen (1988), by which .1 is described as small, .3 as moderate and values larger than .5 as large.

being paid but she would not say it so curtly, adding: "The way she says it makes you not want to pay".

The Mann-Whitney U test revealed that ratings for evasion situation number ten were significantly lower in the high proficiency group ($M = 1.87$, $Mdn = 2$, $n = 30$) compared to the low proficiency group ($M = 2.18$, $Mdn = 2$, $n = 34$), $U = 379$, $z = -2.096$, $p = 0.036$, with a small effect size, $r = 0.262$. The scene in question featured a woman who sees her friend's flat for the first time and compliments him on the curtains. His reaction is to evade and shift the credit "Yeah, yeah, Rachel picked them out" (Sherman-Palladino et al., 2000, S1, E19, 24.10). The informants that gave a low rating thought it was "not bad but instead of saying thank you he responds something that separates the compliment from him" and "answering that someone else chose the curtains instead of saying thank you is random and blunt". They added that the situation reflected "the tension of the characters who were friends because it was her first time in his apartment". On the other side of the appropriateness spectrum, one of the learners interviewed thought the complimentee was appropriate, displaying a difference in pragmatic perception.

In rejection situation eleven, the high proficiency group presented a significantly lower rating ($M = 1.53$, $Mdn = 1.5$, $n = 30$) compared to the low proficiency group ($M = 1.85$, $Mdn = 2$, $n = 34$), $U = 365.5$, $z = -2.23$, $p = 0.026$, with a small effect size, $r = 0.278$. The scene shows a daughter visiting her mother and giving her a compliment on the house, which the receiver rejects with the *qualification*: "It hasn't changed" (Sherman-Palladino et al., 2000, S1, E1, 19.00). This time those students with a higher level rated the CR as more inappropriate than those students who had a lower level. One of the interviewees commented that "judging by the way they talk to each other they do not seem to be mother and daughter". The overall treatment of the daughter on the mother's part was negatively viewed: "it's like she is a nuisance and she, the mother, is not excited or happy to see her daughter". The student questioned described her reaction as rude and unenthusiastic.

Rejection situation number twelve, showed a significantly lower score for the more proficient ($M = 1.87$, $Mdn = 2$, $n = 30$) in contrast with the less proficient learners' responses ($M = 2.32$, $Mdn = 2$, $n = 34$), $U = 342$, $z = -2.421$, $p = 0.015$, which had a moderate effect size, $r = 0.302$. In this situation a young teenager is getting ready for a date and she is reassured about her physical appearance by her friend. However, she challenges her friend's sincerity as follows (Sherman-Palladino et al., 2000, S1, E18, 26.26):

> Rory: "You look amazing."
> Paris: "Really? You're not just saying that?"
> Rory: "I swear to God"
> Paris: "Are you Atheist?"
> Rory: "Excuse me?"
> Paris: "Because that affects the whole validity of your swearing to God."

In fact, in the interviews two of the learners mentioned that the answer is "normal" between friends: "in a relationship of friends they often say I don't know if this suits me…". One of them would even ask a friend if they are sure about the compliment and they are not saying it only due to their friendship. Other opinions given by a learner who gave a low score included: "the fact that she asks if she believes in God is very random," but on second thought she imagines a middle score would have been a better choice taking into account that "the complimentee was nervous for her date and she needed to know if she was pretty". According to another subject, if they said 'I swear' in the L1, the response would not be to question it. She reported that it would find that strange.

As well as the t-test comparing learners with a higher or lower level of English language proficiency, the means for the NS control group were computed and introduced into bar graphs

to visually represent the differences between groups. As seen in Figure 4, NS rated 80% of items higher than the advanced level students. Items E6 and E10 presented the biggest differences in ratings between the advanced and NS groups. In addition, the control group also presented higher ratings in 73.33% of items in contrast to the beginner level group, as can be observed in Figure 5.
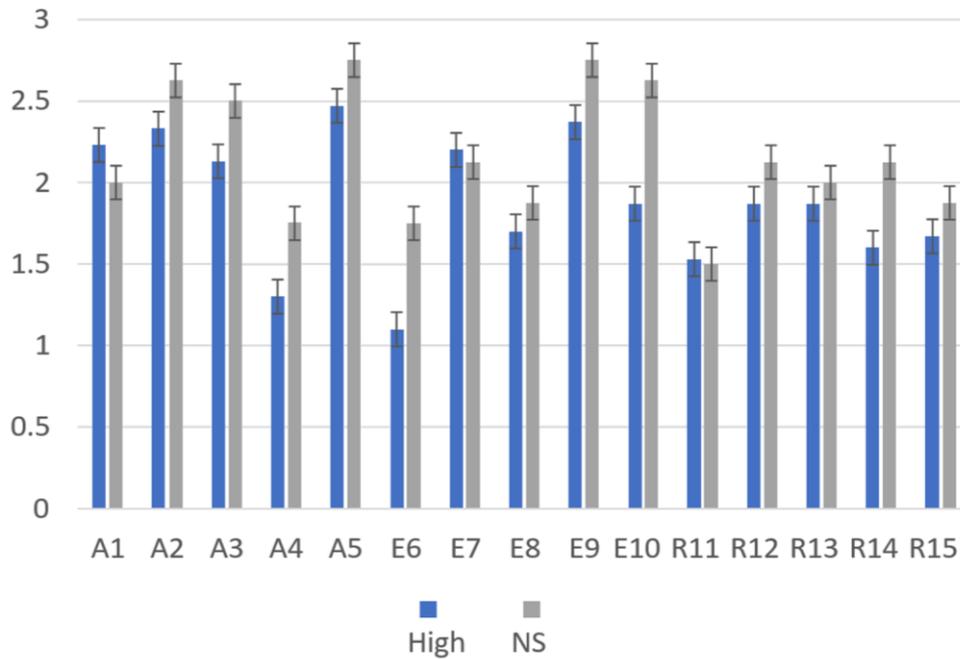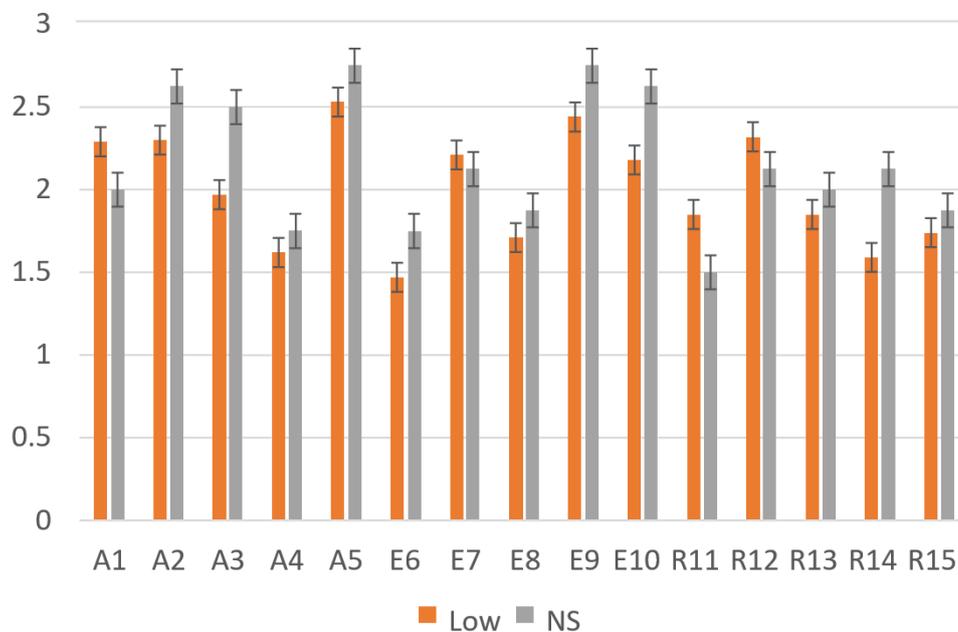

*Figure 4: **Bar graph comparing High and NS mean ratings***

*Figure 5: **Bar graph comparing Low and NS mean ratings***

The largest differences in ratings were those for situations A3 and R15. Overall, the items where the EFL learners' scores differed the most from the NS scores were A2, A3, E9, E10 and R14 (see Figure 6 and Table 4).
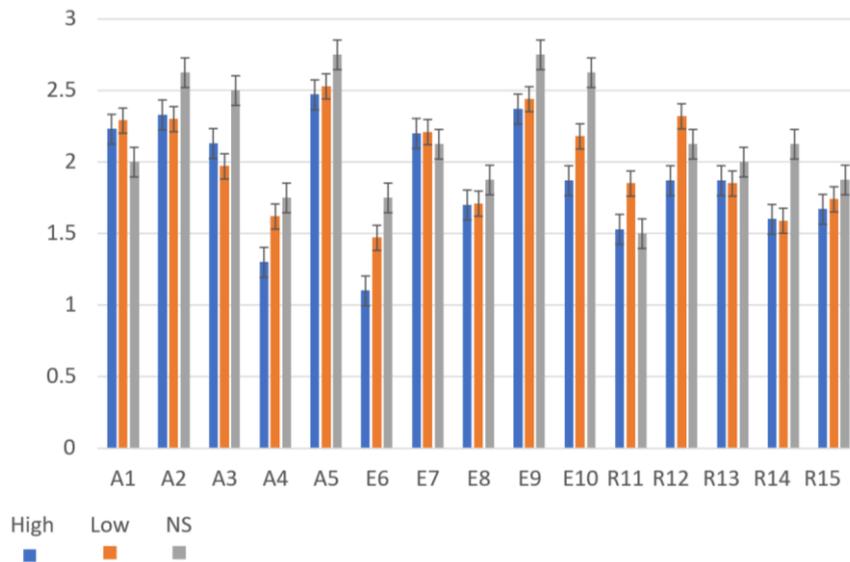

*Figure 6: **Bar graph by proficiency***

*Table 4: **Descriptive statistics with the mean ratings of each CR per proficiency group***

Statistics Report									
Proficiency									
	High			Low			NS		
	M	*SD*	*Mdn*	*M*	*SD*	*Mdn*	*M*	*SD*	*Mdn*
A1	2.23	.568	2.00	2.29	.462	2.00	2.00	.535	2.00
A2	2.33	.606	2.00	2.50	.663	3.00	2.63	.518	3.00
A3	2.13	.681	2.00	1.97	.460	2.00	2.50	.535	2.50
A4	1.30	.466	1.00	1.62	.551	2.00	1.75	.463	2.00
A5	2.47	.629	3.00	2.53	.662	3.00	2.75	.463	3.00
E6	1.10	.305	1.00	1.47	.563	1.00	1.75	.886	1.50
E7	2.20	.714	2.00	2.21	.641	2.00	2.13	.835	2.00
E8	1.70	.596	2.00	1.71	.629	2.00	1.88	.835	2.00
E9	2.37	.556	2.00	2.44	.613	2.50	2.75	.463	3.00

	Statistics Report								
	Proficiency								
	High			Low			NS		
	M	*SD*	*Mdn*	*M*	*SD*	*Mdn*	*M*	*SD*	*Mdn*
E10	1.87	.571	2.00	2.18	.576	2.00	2.63	.518	3.00
R11	1.53	.571	1.50	1.85	.558	2.00	1.50	.756	1.00
R12	1.87	.730	2.00	2.32	.727	2.00	2.13	.641	2.00
R13	1.87	.571	2.00	1.85	.436	2.00	2.00	.535	2.00
R14	1.60	.621	2.00	1.59	.500	2.00	2.13	.641	2.00
R15	1.67	.547	2.00	1.74	.567	2.00	1.88	.641	2.00

Overall, the rejection CR types were rated as the least appropriate by all three groups, followed by the evasion CR types (see Figure 7). CRs under the acceptance type were the ones that received higher ratings on average. More specifically, it is the low proficiency group that produced more similar ratings to the NS baseline and not the high proficiency students. As observed before, the NS control group rated most items higher, perceiving them as more appropriate than both the high and low proficiency groups.
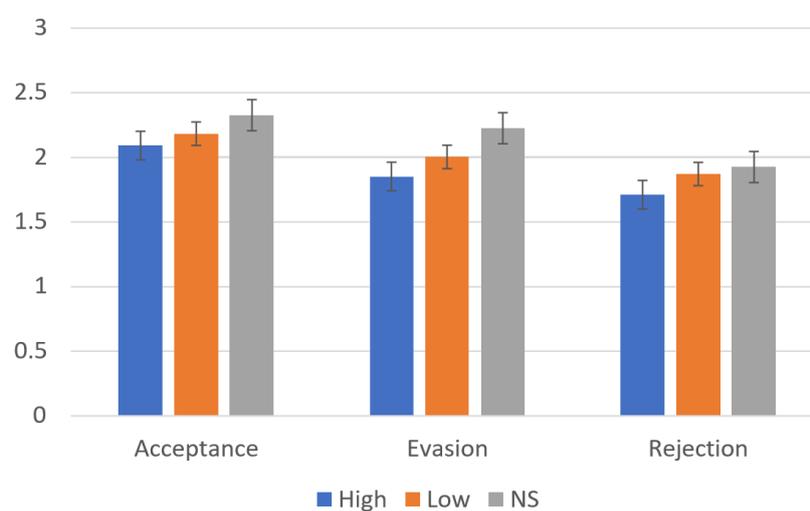
*Figure 7: **Mean ratings per CR type.***

In answer to the RQ, the high and low proficiency groups of EFL learners differ in their perception of appropriateness of CRs for 33.33% of the items in the PAVET but give similar ratings to the other 66.66% of the items. It can be said that according to their proficiency level EFL learners differ but not to a great extent.

4.2 Explaining the learners' responses to PAVET.

For the purpose of measuring the extent to which the perception of CRs by L2 learners in this study is similar to that of the NS control group, NS raters were submitted to an inter-rater reliability test. The resulting Cronbach's Alpha was moderately strong ($\alpha = .736$) and the intra-class correlation coefficient average measure was acceptable: .701, $p = <.001$. Furthermore, a 'sameness score' was computed for each participant using the NS group item means as a benchmark. This score was calculated as follows: In the reduced scale (1 to 3), if the difference between the participant's and the NS score was 2 points then 1 point was awarded. If the difference was 1 point, then 2 points were awarded and if they had given the same answer as that of the NS baseline then 3 points were added. This process was repeated for each of the 15 items and then added up resulting in an individual 'sameness score'.

Both variables underwent the Shapiro-Wilk normality test and presented a normal distribution: Vocabulary size with $p = .210$, $M = 4849.37$ and Sameness with $p = .093$, $M = 36.69$. A Pearson correlation showed sameness scores do not correlate positively with proficiency level (see Table 5). In fact, a significant moderate negative correlation was found, $r(62) = -.362$, $p = .003$. This may indicate to a certain extent that learners with lower proficiency levels significantly approached the NS baseline for the perception of CRs. Thus, it can be said that the degree of sameness to NSs when it comes to CR perception of appropriateness is related to proficiency level only to a certain extent, as there are various factors that can affect EFL learners' pragmatic perception.

Table 5: **Pearson correlation between EFL participants' vocabulary sizes and sameness scores**

Correlations

		Vocabulary Size
Vocabulary Size	Pearson Correlation	-
	Sig. (2-tailed)	
	N	64
Sameness	Pearson Correlation	-.362[**]
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.003
	N	64

[**]. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

5. DISCUSSION

As reported in Section 4.1, in the majority (66.66%) of items in the PAVET there is no significant difference in the answers given by the high and low proficiency groups. However, significant differences were found in the ratings for five situations. In all five cases, advanced learners gave lower mean ratings than the less proficient learners. In the fourth question, the acceptance strategy *appreciation token* was portrayed by the interaction between the girl's

boyfriend Dean and her grandmother Emily, who dislikes him (Sherman-Palladino et al., 2000, S2, E1, 26.30):

> Dean: "Your house is great. It's huge. I've never seen a house this huge before."
> Emily: "Well thank you. So few people bother to notice the hugeness of the house anymore."

Less advanced learners probably gave higher ratings in this question because the distance between the literal and the intended meaning of the CR employed was quite large. Conversely, the difference in power between the complimenter and complimentee could have affected the responses of the high proficiency group. In evasion strategy *legitimate evasion*, higher level students produced very low ratings, indicating that they understood the inappropriateness of the CR, whilst their classmates seemed to not fully understand what was going on or the term 'tip jar', resulting in mixed ratings. In the case of evasion type *shift credit*, the differing ratings might stem from a lack of contextual information, as students did not know who the characters were or what the circumstances of the friendship between them were. Those who gave a higher rating in this case were probably inclined to think it was not rude to evade the compliment when coming from a friend: "Yeah, yeah, Rachel picked them out" (Sherman-Palladino et al., 2000, S1, E19, 24.10). Regarding the rejection type *qualification*, the diversity of answers could be related to the CR being interpreted as both passive-aggressive or modest: "It hasn't changed" (Sherman-Palladino et al., 2000, S1, E1, 19.00). Finally, in the *challenge sincerity* excerpt where a teenager is getting ready for a date and is complimented by her friend, the uncommon phrasing of the response might explain why the high proficiency group gave it lower ratings ("Because that affects the whole validity of your swearing to God."). Also, since the situation showed no distance or power differences, it could have led the low proficiency group to view it as an appropriate reaction within the realm of friendly relationship. Overall, the acceptance strategies received higher ratings on the part of all three groups, which is congruous with the NS of English trend observed in Herbert (1990).

No significant differences were found between the EFL groups in the responses for 10 out of 15 questions. It is possible that students in this study were heavily influenced by their L1 culture, one of the major factors that affected ESL learners in Cheng (2011) and EFL participants in Takahashi and Beebe (1987) and Tran (2007). Moreover, as outlined in Mir and Cots (2017), the less frequent use of compliments in Peninsular Spanish could signify that students had less confidence when it comes to responding to a compliment. In this sense, it is possible that students could have been lacking the L1 pragmatic knowledge to deal with compliments and that the reduced knowledge they had from their L1 was transferred to interpret the appropriateness of the CRs in each situation in the L2. These results suggest that the influence of language proficiency in the pragmatic perception of CRs is not great and that the L1 still plays an important role in pragmatic awareness regardless of the level.

An important aspect to consider in the present study is that the operationalisation of proficiency was equated to vocabulary size and pragmatics was only tested in terms of awareness. The present findings, thus, do not support the statement that high proficiency learners would make similar choices to NSs, bringing them closer to the TL, which Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998), Cook and Liddicoat (2002) and Schauer (2006) pointed to. Whereas studies like Matsumura (2003) and Niezgoda and Roever (2001) had reported that advanced learners did not match NS responses most of the time, much as the present results, suggesting that sociopragmatic awareness is not acquired alongside the grammatical aspects of the language in the process of acquisition for EFL participants. Some studies that focused on production also concluded that pragmatic competence and linguistic competence are independent (Doğançay-Aktuna & Kamisli, 1997; Félix-Brasdefer, 2000; Martín-Marchante, 2021). On the other hand, productive pragmatics has been found to correlate with aspects of

language proficiency (Celaya & Barón, 2015; Håkanson & Norrby, 2005; Hoffman-Hicks, 1992; Phoocharoensil, 2012).

In line with these results and the mixed findings in the field regarding the relationship between pragmatics and proficiency, the negative correlation between the two variables of sameness and proficiency is not strong but it is significant. This leads to question whether factors such as the L1, personality, and the limited contact with the culture of the FL played a part in each students' perception of CRs. Possible explanations could be the following. First, students with lower proficiency could have given similar ratings to the NSs merely as a result of their individual differences, i.e. they could be more empathetic. Also, as Kasper and Rose (2002b) claim, "people do not just register cross-cultural differences, they have opinions (often critical ones) about them" (Kasper & Rose, 2002b: 275). These opinions coupled with age, gender, motivation, and identity have been found to affect L2 pragmatic development (Kasper & Rose, 2002b). Moreover, as Sánchez-Hernández and Alcón-Soler (2019) emphasise, pragmatic development in an L2 is of a variable and non- linear nature, which could explain why the results paint a mid-stage picture wherein due to their individual differences some students are at a more advanced stage in language proficiency than pragmatic awareness and vice versa. Second, this inverse relationship could be the result of a strategy to pay attention to non-verbal language, compensating for their limited language skills. Compared to more proficient learners, less proficient learners could have developed more advanced visuo-spatial comprehension strategies to compensate for their lack of language resources, thus relying on non-verbal language such as facial expressions, hand gestures, posture, implicit attitudes and tone of voice, which according to the well-known "7-38-55" model constitutes a considerable percentage of the average oral message (Mehrabian, 2017). In fact, in an experiment by Tibus et al. (2013) involving audio-visual input, it was found that pictorial information can compensate for missing verbal information and coherence breaks on a local level but not globally. Having said that, it is likely that those low proficiency learners who obtained higher sameness scores used inference processes to rate the situations in the PAVET. This was also pointed out, in a study on communication strategies, in which Sato et al. (2019) found that learners used non-verbal strategies when facing linguistic difficulties. It could be plausible then that the learners in the lower proficiency group in the present study resorted to using their non-verbal receptive strategies with aid of the audio-visual input. Third, the type of instruction received by this study's participants in their high school is very much grammar- and language-oriented. Those students who obtained higher English language proficiency scores were probably encouraged to focus on language and grammar throughout their learning trajectories. In this context, it is also a common practice to focus on exam preparation, particularly for 17-year-olds who prepare for their entry-level university exams, similar situations have also been found in previous studies in the field (e.g. Schauer, 2006).

6. CONCLUSION

This study explored the interface between proficiency and pragmatic awareness given the lack of consensus in previous research. It focused on CRs, and compared NSs perceptions to those of EFL learners. Lastly, it was centred on teenage participants, an underexplored group. Findings showed a modest percentage of difference between high- and low-proficiency learners' perception of appropriateness in CRs, possibly due to the influence of their shared L1. When these two proficiency groups' responses were compared to NSs' perceptions, a moderate negative correlation was found. This indicates that a considerable number of learners with lower language proficiency had a similar perception to NSs of CRs, possibly due to factors including: individual differences, the non-linearity of pragmatic development, the use of compensatory

non-verbal strategies, or the students' learning trajectories. Thus, results seem to point to the independent nature of pragmatic development and L2 language proficiency.

There are, however, some important limitations that need to be mentioned. One would be the need to include a wider variety of situations with + distance and + power differences. Another limitation would be that the compliment-compliment response exchanges were scripted and not naturally occurring data, thus further studies should aim at including other input resources and exploring this interface measuring proficiency by means of a wider variety of tests.

As for the pedagogical implications, they have shown that proficiency and knowledge of the language alone may not be sufficient for learners to acquire EFL pragmatic awareness. Thus, it would be highly recommendable to introduce pragmatic instruction and exposure to audio-visual material that is scripted in a natural-sounding way. Similar ratings between lower-level learners and NSs seem to indicate audio-visual input featuring NSs or proficient users can be a valid way to introduce or teach CRs and possibly other speech acts to EFL learners. As part of future research, it would be interesting to investigate the nature of the relationship between pragmatic awareness and proficiency level at different ages as well as explore if the relationship changes when it comes to productive knowledge.

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