Assessing Pragmatic Ability of Thai Hotel Management and Tourism Students in the Context of Hotel Front Office Department

Sonporn Sirikhan
Chulalongkorn University, Thailand

Kanchana Prapphal
Chulalongkorn University, Thailand

Bio Data:
Sonporn Sirikhan is a Ph.D. candidate in the English as an International Language Program, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand. She received her M.A. in Teaching English as a Foreign Language from the Faculty of Education, Chiangmai University. Her gratitude extends to Prof. Dr. Kanchana Prapphal and to the 90th Anniversary of Chulalongkorn University Fund (Ratchadaphisek Somphot Endowment Fund) for financing this research project. Her main interests are ESP teaching, teaching materials development, and pragmatic assessment.

Dr. Kanchana Prapphal, the corresponding author, is a professor at Chulalongkorn University Language Institute. She has contributed a number of articles in language teaching and testing.

Abstract
Effective and appropriate communication in the hotel business needs more than linguistic knowledge. Pragmatic competence plays a very crucial role. This study aimed to (1) assess students’ pragmatic ability in the context of the hotel Front Office department; (2) study whether the levels of English proficiency have a significant effect on pragmatic ability, and investigate similarities and differences of linguistic forms related to pragmatic ability produced by the students with different levels of English proficiency; and (3) study the errors that interfere with the students’ pragmatic knowledge. The subjects were 90 fourth-year Thai university students related to hospitality services. The stratified random technique was applied to obtain the sample size of the students in each language ability group. The research instruments were: a needs assessment questionnaire; the Front Office Pragmatic-Test (FOP-Test); and a pragmatic knowledge questionnaire. Descriptive statistics and one-way ANOVA were employed to assess the students’ ability, and observe the effect of the levels of English proficiency on pragmatic ability. Content analysis and frequency counts were conducted to reveal linguistic features and pragmatic failures. The findings revealed that (1) the FOP-Test could distinguish the students’ pragmatic ability into high, average, and low levels; (2) there was a significant effect as a result of the levels of English proficiency on pragmatic ability; and the linguistic features that
differentiated the students’ pragmatic abilities, in all groups, were the use of politeness markers and address forms; and (3) students produced pragmatic failures, in both pragmalinguistics and sociolinguistics. These errors were perceived as ineffectiveness and inappropriateness in hotel staff and guest communication. The findings provided more insights into ESP and EOP teaching and assessment, especially in hospitality services for Thai students.

**Background of the study**

In the hotel business, English is used as the lingua franca and is the most commonly used language in the hotel industry worldwide (Blue & Harun, 2003; Ruiz-Garrido & Iborra, 2006). Thai hotel staff use English as a major medium to communicate with foreign guests. Besides, English skills are regarded as a prerequisite for economic success (Vandermeeren, 2005). Blue and Harun (2003) emphasize that there is also a growing worldwide need for front-line staff who are able to communicate with guests effectively in the hospitality industry. Diethelm Travel affirms that the Thai tourism industry, including the hotel business, still needs qualified hospitality and tourism workers who have better English skills (Diethelm Travel’s Thailand Tourism Review, 2008). This concern corresponds with Wangpaichitr’s (2007) point of view in supporting Thai educational institutions to serve front-line staff is a very important factor to increase high quality personnel in the hotel business. Thus, there is a call for education across the country to prepare students for effective and efficient careers in the hospitality industry. According to the record of the Office of Tourism Development (2007), currently 89 institutes, including universities and colleges in Thailand, offer courses and curricula related to hospitality and tourism management. Thus, it is essential that the government and universities should concentrate on English skills in hospitality oriented programs in order to meet the increasing demand of the hospitality industry, and improve overall service quality. To put this into action, the Thai government has established the English Language Development Center (ELDC, 2005) in order to encourage people, in different career paths, to be well equipped with skills, knowledge, and competencies in English, in order to compete with the world economy. Initially, the English benchmarks for 25 occupations have been proposed, and the standard of English for hotel Front Desk is one of them (ELDC,
It is known that English communication skills are essential for hotel Front Office staff since they have the highest frequency of interactions with guests and they are centrally concerned with guests’ satisfaction. However, Ruiz-Garrido and Iborra (2006), and Vandermeeren (2005), stress that those professional staff in the hospitality industry do not only have grammatical communicative competence, but they also need pragmatic competence. This claim agrees with Blum-Kulka (1982) who concludes that effective communication in any given language requires more than linguistic knowledge. It also includes the ability to appropriately produce and understand utterances in that language. More importantly, Vandermeeren (2005) states that business interaction is often affected by limited sociolinguistic and pragmatic knowledge. In terms of the corporate world, Vande Berg (1997) points out that communication breakdown; either through linguistics or pragmatics, in any business, could damage customer relations or lose a contact. Thus, effective and appropriate communication in the hotel business does not depend only on grammatical competence, but also on the awareness of pragmatics.

In addition, politeness, a part of pragmatic competence, plays a very crucial role in the guest-hotel staff communication. Blue and Harun (2003) emphasize that hospitality in the hotel business is ‘commercial’ hospitality. The interaction between guests and hotel employees is a business transaction which aims for costs and benefits. Thus, the relationship between guests and hotel employees cannot be mutual, or friendly, as it occurs in private life. Social distance, power, and the rank of imposition in the aspect of politeness, have to be considered as vital in hotel staff-guest interaction. Accordingly, hotel employees have to employ politeness strategies in their communicative acts or speech acts in order to continue positive relationships with the guests and enhance the likelihood of repeating business. Consequently, the loss of business opportunity can happen if the hotel employees fail to convey the level of politeness appropriately. Since appropriate language use to meet the clients’ needs in a certain business can
decisively optimize profits, hotel personnel’s English communication skills cannot be overlooked. Apparently, some Thai hotels use their own in-house English tests to examine their employees’ communication skills in order to offer special training courses to develop their hotel personnel’s English skills; while many consider the scores of the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) for an application process, or for placing employees in language classes. However, the TOEIC result is an indirect measure of speaking and writing skills. The scores cannot reveal specific behaviors the candidates can perform in real situations. Moreover, Lui (2006) states that the scores from other large-scale proficiency tests, like TOEFL and International English Language Testing System (IELTS), do not correlate with pragmatic ability. Those who have higher scores do not seem to have correspondingly high pragmatic ability. A number of studies also point out that learners of English as a foreign language, who have excellent grammatical and lexical competence of the target language, still fail to convey their messages or communicate effectively. This is because of the lack of social appropriateness rules, as well as necessary pragmatic or functional communication rules, to communicate their intentions (Cohen & Olshtain, 1981; Blum-Kulka, 1982; Thomas, 1983; Trosborg, 1987, and Wolfson et al, 1989). Above all, those proficiency tests seem not to reveal the level of an examinee’s pragmatic ability, and the appropriateness of language use in the politeness aspect, which are essential in business communication.

To date, the studies examining pragmatic ability for English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), or pragmatic ability at the workplace, are considerably rare. Most available studies in pragmatics are cross-sectional studies, which compare pragmatic competence between English native speakers and nonnative English speakers (Rose, 2000). For foreign language learners, the assessment of pragmatic ability is generally assumed to be investigated under the communicative competence. Liu (2006) and Roever (2006) point out there may be a lack of pragmatic issues in language testing, because constructing valid pragmatic tests is not an easy process. To our knowledge, there are not many studies that assess pragmatic ability in the context of hotel Front Office department. As mentioned above,
the need to design a test to assess Thai students’ pragmatic ability in business communication, particularly in the hotel business, is urgent. The English proficiency test alone may not be sufficient to indicate one’s pragmatic knowledge. Serious misunderstanding generally occurs at the pragmatic level (Thomas, 1983). In addition, it is necessary to shift, from the test of language functions for all purposes, to focus on the pragmatic knowledge of English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) for Thai students in hospitality-oriented programs. Moreover, in order to provide qualified Thai hospitality workers and increase high quality in hotel business, there is a need to concentrate on the pragmatic ability of Thai students who are likely to be hotel employees, to produce pragmatically appropriate utterances in English in their future career.

**Objectives of the Study**

The main objectives of the study were as follows: 1) to assess the pragmatic ability of Thai students in hospitality oriented programs by using the Front Office Pragmatic Test based on speech acts and politeness; 2) to study whether the levels of English proficiency have a significant effect on the students’ pragmatic ability, and investigate similarities and differences of linguistic forms related to pragmatic ability produced by the students with different levels of English proficiency; and 3) to study the errors that interfere with the students’ pragmatic knowledge.

**Research Questions**

1. Can the Front Office Pragmatic Test (FOP-Test) differentiate students’ pragmatic ability into different levels?
2. Do levels of English proficiency affect students’ pragmatic ability; and what are the similarities and differences of the pragmatic ability of the students with different levels of English proficiency?
3. What are the errors that interfere with the students’ pragmatic knowledge?

**Methodology**

**Population and Sample**

The population of this study were Thai fourth year university students who
majored in the field of hospitality from private and public universities in Bangkok. These students had all completed the prerequisite courses of English at their universities, and were required to participate in an internship program with hospitality or tourism companies in Thailand before graduating. The participants of the study were selected from three universities in Bangkok which are long established in providing potential students to enter the hospitality or tourism industry. The students were classified into three groups of high, average, and low language ability, according to their GPA in English courses taken through the curriculum. The stratified random sampling technique was applied to obtain the sample size of 30 students in each language ability group. Thus, the sample of this study included 90 students.

Research Instruments
Research instruments in the study included: the needs assessment questionnaire; the Front Office Pragmatic Test (FOP-Test); and a pragmatic knowledge questionnaire. The development of each instrument is briefly explained as follows:

1. The needs assessment questionnaire was conducted to draw situations likely to happen in the hotel Front Office department; and investigate the problematic five speech acts, reflected by the hotel Front Office staff from six leading hotels in Bangkok. The questionnaire consisted of three parts: (a) demographic information; (b) closed and open items obtained from the surveyed situations that were likely to happen in the Front Office department concerning eight speech acts of informing, apologizing, handling complaints, offering, promising, requesting, thanking, and responding to compliments; and (c) hotel staff’s opinions towards the degree of difficulty of speech acts surveyed. As a result, the top five speech acts which were considered problematic for Thai hotel Front Office staff were: apologizing, handling complaints, requesting, informing, and promising respectively. The situations to be tested were drawn from the data collected from the questionnaire, and hotel staff’s opinions. The selection of three situations to be tested for each speech act was based on the Item Objective Congruence (IOC), from the occupational experts and
practitioners, related to the hotel Front Office services. The situations with the degree of congruence of more than 70% were randomly selected to be included in the test situations. Thus, the situations of five speech acts that were finally selected to be included in the FOP-Test are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: The given situations in the FOP-Test**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speech acts</th>
<th>Situations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Apologizing</td>
<td>Apologize for ineffective service claimed by the staying guest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Apologize for unavailability of the room asked for upon checking-in.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Apologize to the arrival guest for a shortage of staff when checking-in.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handling Complaints</td>
<td>Deal with the malfunction of a water heater.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Deal with noise disturbance from the next door, and the housekeeper’s duty on the floor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Deal with the no-show of the airport representative as requested in the reservation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requesting</td>
<td>Request a walk-in guest for a deposit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Request the check-in guest to give the check-out time, due to high occupancy rate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Request the check-out guest to pay for two hotel bathrobes taken from the room.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informing</td>
<td>Inform where to get access to the internet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inform the check-out guest regarding an invalid credit card.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inform the late check-out charge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promising</td>
<td>Promise to send more room amenities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Promise to arrange the limousine to the airport.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Promise to mail the hotel guest’s lost item if found.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. The Front Office Pragmatic Test (FOP-Test) focused on problematic speech acts reflected by the practitioners, and from the politeness dimension in the context of hotel Front Office department. The constructs of the FOP-Test were based on the theoretical framework of Austin’s speech acts (1962), and Brown and Levinston’s politeness (1987), as well as studies concerning assessment of pragmatic ability in different learning contexts. The test method of the FOP-Test was typically an oral discourse completion test; however, it was designed by the computer software called Adobe Captivate. The program can facilitate the test face with audio-visual simulation. There were 15 situations of 5 speech acts assessed in the FOP-Test. A slide of each situation is presented into 3 sections: the prompt scenario; the speech of a simulated hotel guest; and the slot provided for the test taker’s speech to respond to the simulated hotel guest. The test takers gave responses to the prompted scenario, by saying aloud what they would respond to the simulated hotel guests, relating to
the given situations. The test takers’ speeches were recorded, transcribed and finally rated. (See the Appendix for a sample of the FOP-Test).

3. The pragmatic knowledge questionnaire was expected to provide information about the test takers’ background knowledge in pragmatics in general, speech acts, and politeness in language used. The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part was a true or false questionnaire which included 15 statements concerning background knowledge of pragmatics in general. The statements were knowledge of pragmatics relating to the context of a hotel Front Office department. The second part was composed of five scenarios, representing five speech acts assessed in the test. There were five responses to each scenario. A five point Likert scale was given to the test takers, to rate the appropriateness of each response statement under the situations. The rating ranged from “very inappropriate” as “1”, to “very appropriate” as “5”, on the scale. The rating scale could be made just once.

**Data Collection**

The test was administered to the students in three universities under supervised conditions in the university’s computer laboratories. The administration of the FOP-Test took about one hour including the practice session (to check the test takers’ understanding of the steps in doing the test). The test takers’ responses were recorded and saved into the Sound Recorder program. After the FOP-Test was completed, the questionnaires of pragmatic knowledge were distributed. For the collected speeches, the sound files were transcribed and scored by two trained raters. The FOP-Test scoring scale was adapted from the holistic scale of Hudson et al (1995). It was developed into an analytical rating scale of four descriptors with five level bands assessing the effectiveness of language use. The four major descriptors are: the correct speech act; expressions and vocabulary; amount of information given; and degree of appropriateness (levels of formality, directness, and politeness). To investigate the reliability of the scores from the two raters, the inter-rater reliability was estimated by Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients. It was found that the consistency between the two raters, for the total scores and each variable,
Data Analysis

The data was collected and analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. Descriptive statistics were carried out to examine the pragmatic ability assessed by the FOP-Test. One-way ANOVA was conducted to test if the means of each of the three language ability groups of the test takers were significantly different. After that, a Scheff’s post-hoc test multiple comparison test was carried out; to locate the significant differences among the means of the three groups. Content analysis was employed to examine the similarities and the differences of typical linguistic features found from the test takers’ responses. The result was analyzed by comparing the frequency of the pragmalinguistic features that were correspondingly related to the FOP-Test rating scale. In addition, content analysis was used to examine the major features of inappropriateness of responses, which could lead to pragmatic failures in the context of a hotel Front Office department. Finally, the answers from the pragmatic knowledge questionnaire were analyzed to obtain the mean scores.

Results

The findings from this study provided answers to the following research questions:

1. Can the Front Office Pragmatic Test (FOP-Test) differentiate students’ pragmatic ability into different levels?

It was found that the total mean score, and the mean score of each component (the correct speech act, the expressions and vocabulary, the amount of information, and the degree of appropriateness) of the FOP-Test differed significantly among the three groups. The mean score obtained from the test takers with the high language ability was more than those of the average and low groups, in the total score, and in all four components. This finding revealed that the FOP-Test could distinguish the test takers into
three pragmatic ability groups using both the total and component scores.

2. Do levels of English proficiency affect students’ pragmatic ability and what are the similarities and differences of the pragmatic ability of students with different levels of English proficiency?

Regarding the first part of the second research question, the findings were found to support the hypothesis: that there were significant differences in pragmatic ability of the students with high, average, and low language ability in all components assessed (i.e. the correct speech acts, the expressions and vocabulary, the amount of information, and degree of appropriateness) at the .001 level. The F values were, 21.630, 24.669, 23.717, and 26.328. More specifically, when employing a Scheff’s post-hoc test, to examine the differences among the means of the three different levels of English proficiency, it was found that all the p values were highly significant. Thus, the students’ pragmatic ability, from the high, average, and low levels of English proficiency, differed significantly.

According to the second part of the second research question, the responses of 10 test takers from each language ability group were randomly selected: so the data collected from 30 respondents was examined. The major linguistic features performed from the test takers could be grouped into seven categories: routine patterns; formulaic expressions of regret; politeness markers; adverbials; affirmation markers; address forms; and the use of the “we” form. These features were categorized based on the actual responses to the five speech acts assessed by the FOP-Test. The frequency of occurrences of linguistic features are shown in Figure 1.
Figure 1 revealed that the use of politeness markers and the use of address forms were two distinctive features which appeared to differentiate the students’ pragmatic productions of all proficiency levels. The former was highly performed by the high proficient students only, while the latter was more frequently used by both high and average proficient students. The other five linguistic features: routine patterns, formulaic expressions of regret, adverbials, affirmation markers, and the use of the “we” form were performed similarly in all groups with just a small difference. Comparing the frequency among the similar features, the students in all proficiency levels highly exhibited the use of formulaic expressions of regret. The use of routine patterns and affirmation markers were moderately produced while the use of adverbials was less than the others. The use of the “we” form, which was not in the routine patterns and formulaic expressions of regret, was used the least. Apart from the major linguistic features, minor linguistic ones were also analyzed. It was found that the high proficient students preferred to use the pre-closing marker “(xxx) thank you (xxx)”
differently from the average and the low groups. On the contrary, the low proficient students tended to use “(xxx) okay (xxx)” to terminate the conversation more often than the other two groups. Little evidence of the use of pre-closing patterns like “It's all right (okay)/Is that okay with you? /Are you okay?” was found. They were used by the high and low proficient students, but not in the average ones.

Another minor feature that remarkably distinguished the students’ pragmatic production in all proficiency levels was the use of direct refusals in the low proficient students. The expression letting the interlocutor off the hook “Don’t worry (about that)” was more frequently used by the low proficient students. Moreover, the strategies applied in handing complaints and apologizing were also observed, together with the observation of linguistic forms produced by the students. When comparing the frequency counts, it was found that the students in all proficiency levels similarly applied strategies needed when handling complaints and apologizing. However, the strategy of offering a repair was remarkably highest performed when compared with the strategies of giving an explanation, acknowledging the responsibility, giving compensation, and promising of forbearance. These strategies were produced to a very low degree, and with a small difference, in all groups.

3. What are the errors that interfere with the students’ pragmatic knowledge?

The findings revealed that test takers from three English proficiency levels did not differ significantly in pragmatic recognition assessed by the questionnaire. It showed that the recognition of pragmatic reflection from the questionnaire was not related to the production of pragmatic ability assessed by the FOP-Test. Due to the differences in the means reported from the questionnaire, pragmatic failures produced by the test takers in all groups were analyzed qualitatively: in order to investigate the interference or pragmatic failures that could lead to misunderstanding, or communication breakdowns, between hotel staff and guests. The data was drawn from the same group of the test takers who were randomly selected
to answer the second research question, and the scripts were analyzed qualitatively before the frequency counts were made. From the analysis of inappropriateness of language use in the context of a hotel Front Office department, the errors were grouped into seven failures, based on the descriptors of ineffectiveness along with the inappropriateness of the FOP-Test rating scale. The report for each error was analyzed based on the frequency of occurrences as shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2: Pragmatic errors produced by Thai students in the hotel Front Office context**

From Figure 2, the first observation was the deficiency in giving the correct speech act. The second to the fourth observations report the failures in information given. The fifth observation was the deficiency in the usage of words and expressions. The last two observations were the failures in terms of degrees of appropriateness. The report for each error was analyzed with regard of the frequency of occurrences. From the errors made in the context of a hotel Front Office department, the failures in giving correct speech acts, complete information, correct information, necessary information, and
formulaic expressions were perceived as pragmalinguistic failures, due to the lack of linguistic and contextual knowledge. The failures in using appropriateness in politeness strategies, and the use of phrases or verb forms, were considered as sociopragmatic failures. These two failures were also perceived as being impolite, leading to the end of hotel staff-guest relations.

**Discussions**

The following section presents discussions based on the three research questions.

**Research question 1:** With regard to the first research question, “Can the Front Office Pragmatic Test (FOP-Test) differentiate students’ pragmatic ability into different levels?" It was found that the FOP-Test can differentiate the test takers’ pragmatic ability into three levels: high, average, and low; and the mean score obtained from the test takers with the high language ability is more than those of the average and low groups in all four components. Thus, it can be said that the high proficient students could apply their grammatical knowledge and politeness strategies to their speech production, under time pressure in the test; while the low proficient students had difficulty in constructing their utterances to fit the given situations; due to the lack of linguistic knowledge. One possible reason for this difference is that the test takers in this study were divided into three proficiency groups according to their GPA in English; therefore, the resemblance of the three groups of English proficiency affects the pragmatic ability. So, it could be concluded that the oral elicitation method, by means of the computer mode, the FOP-Test, could elicit the students’ pragmatic ability in the hotel Front Office context.

When using the scores obtained from each component, the students’ pragmatic ability can be differentiated. This agrees with Hudson (2001) who reconfirmed that five pragmalinguistic components of: correctness of linguistic expressions; the amount of information; formality; directness;
and politeness can be used to evaluate the speakers’ actual responses. Considering the scores in each speech act, it was also found that the mean score of the correct speech act was the highest, while the mean score of the amount of information was the lowest. This can be interpreted as follows: the ability to give the correct speech act is regarded as the easiest, while giving sufficient amount of information is the most difficult. This indicates that the test takers from the different language ability groups could recognize what speech act was called for. On the contrary, the scores of giving the sufficient amount of information were rated the lowest. This can be explained as follows: giving utterances in length required syntactical, or grammatical knowledge to a certain extent, or elaborating the utterances could lead to hotel-guest satisfaction.

**Research question 2:** Do levels of English proficiency affect students’ pragmatic ability and what are the similarities and differences of the pragmatic ability of students with different levels of English proficiency?

For the first part of the second research question, it was found that English proficiency is a variable which has a great effect on the test takers’ pragmatic ability. This agrees with Taguchi (2007) who supports that language background and English proficiency have influenced L2 pragmatic processing. The findings of this study also confirm the studies of Bardovi-Harling and Dornyei (1998) in that EFL/ESL learning content, and proficiency levels, affect the ability in pragmatic and grammatical awareness. Besides, the findings of this study correspond with some previous studies (Matsumura, 2003; Roever, 2005) in that the high language proficient participants had better performance in pragmatics tests than low language proficient participants. This is similar to the findings of Matsumura (2003) who reveals that the overall level of proficiency in the target language plays an important role in the acquisition of pragmatic awareness.

The second research question also examined the similarities and differences of the responses collected from the test takers from the three language ability groups. The most significant differences among the students from the different levels of English proficiency were the use of politeness markers...
and the use of address forms. The highly proficient students exhibited more politeness markers than the other two groups. Some markers such as “Would you mind...?”, “Can you possibly...?”, and the hedge markers like “I’m afraid that …” and “I think…” required the syntactic structures to lengthen the utterances and complete the sentences. The highly proficient students employed more linguistic knowledge to realize politeness patterns. The less proficient students tended to use markers like a single word “Please” or “Please + VP” when they felt they needed to be polite. There are two possible reasons for the apparent high frequency in the use of politeness markers produced by high level test takers. First, the high level English proficiency test takers may have awareness, and be more comfortable to make their speech more polite than the average and the low groups. Secondly, the English proficiency of high level test takers enables them to make their responses more polite: by applying their grammatical knowledge to lengthen their intentions in English; while the low level test takers might have difficulty due to the lack of grammatical knowledge to express themselves. It can be seen that the test takers from the high group commonly applied politeness markers in their responses to the stimulated hotel guests in the situations given in the FOP-Test. Thus, proficiency is seen to play a role in the frequency of the use of politeness markers in this study.

Moreover, another difference among the three groups appears in the use of address forms to the hotel guests. The test takers called the guests by addressing them with a title like “Sir, would you …?” which is considered polite and appropriate in the context of hotel service encounters. The test takers from the high and the average levels of test takers performed the use of Sir” or “Madam” to a high degree relatively; while the low language ability group used it the least. This indicates that the high level and average level groups have power-hierarchy consciousness towards being formal in hotel staff-guest transactions in English.

Regarding similar linguistic features, performed in all proficiency levels, the number of frequency differed, but the degree of differences was rather
small. The high frequency of the following strategies ranged from the use of formulaic expressions of regret, routine patterns, affirmation markers, adverbials, and the use of the “we” form respectively. The features of occurrences depended on the types of speech acts, and the given situations in the test. Owing to the retrospective semi-structured interview made in the pilot study, the students revealed that they had no opportunity to be exposed to English in actual hotel practices. They only learned and practiced from teacher instructions, textbooks, and the typical simulated activities of role playing in hotel settings. Thus, classroom instruction is key in affecting the students’ choice of a particular word, expression, or even realization of the structure, in a certain function activity in hotel circumstances. Besides, it is very typical to see the test takers tended to use one form of routine pattern repeatedly in their responses in a certain speech act. A possible explanation for the apparently high frequency of routine patterns in the low group is that those forms can be learned easily through the list of possible utterances provided in their textbooks; so they possibly rely on the rote memorization of formulaic phrases. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the high occurrences of formulaic expressions of regret, including the use of routine patterns, might not necessarily represent the students’ pragmatic comprehension. Scarcella (1979) concludes that L2 learners seem to use politeness features before they acquire the rules that they need to govern their speech in real-life communication. Regarding the strategies applied in handling complaints and apologizing, all groups of English proficiency applied each strategy to a greater or lesser extent, but could not distinguish the differences: except for the strategy “offer a repair.” The high occurrences of “offer a repair” found in this study were obviously influenced by classroom practice and available textbooks related to English for hotels. However, the evidence of low occurrences of other strategies, in handling complaints and apologizing, does not suggest that students could not perform those strategies in real-life communication: due to the lack of negotiation of the test method.

**Research question 3:** *What are the errors that interfere with the students’ pragmatic knowledge?* The findings from the pragmatic knowledge questionnaire indicate that the test takers in the three groups did not differ
significantly in pragmatic recognition, as assessed by the questionnaire. The major features of inappropriateness in language used, collected from the test takers’ responses, were grouped into seven types of inappropriateness. The degree of seriousness in hotel-staff and guest communication depends on whether it is pramalinguistics or sociopragmatics. The error arising from the first one can be more easily forgiven because it is perceived as a linguistic problem; while the latter one is most serious because it relates to the inappropriateness of the linguist behavior. The failures were grouped into seven features: based on the descriptors of ineffectiveness along with the inappropriateness of the FOP-Test rating scale. Ineffectiveness of giving correct speech acts; irrelevant or unnecessary information; and inappropriateness in the use of formulaic expressions appear to be less serious because they do not really harm host-guest interactions. The first two failures apparently reflect their lack of grammar, vocabulary, and include inexperience in real job performance. These incompetencies appear to impede the students from giving the correct speech act, and informative responses, relating to a particular given situation. Blum-Kulka (1982: 53) states that “failure to mark speech act can be another source of pragmatic inappropriacy.” With regard to inappropriateness in the use of formulaic expressions; it may be a result of learning from previous classroom instructions, particularly from textbooks. In addition, most of the language from textbooks relating to hotel services are too explicit, overly polite, and often simplified (Williams, 1988; Blue & Harun, 2003). This agrees with Scotton and Bernstern (1988: 53) who state that textbooks provide “lists of over-polite, over explicit, one-sentence long exponents for function”. Boxer and Pickering (1995) reveal that the patterns presented in many ESL/EFL textbooks generally rely on the authors’ intuitions; and those patterns greatly differ from the actual speech behavior in spontaneous interactions. Those predictable patterns could not help the students to communicate in real life communication. As a result, the errors in giving the correct speech act, precise information, and appropriate formulaic expressions might not really damage the hotel staff-guest communications; but they could highly affect the guest’s perception
towards an individual as an unprofessional or incompetent practitioner.

Besides, the failure to give complete and correct information may potentially cause misunderstanding. The students were expected to give the information relating to the given situations only, not from other sources; however, they still gave incomplete and incorrect answers. From the scores obtained from the FOP-Test, it is interesting to see the scores for giving a sufficient amount of information was rated the lowest; and the less proficient students tended to perform these errors. It can be said that their lack of syntactical or grammatical knowledge might prevent them from elaborating or lengthening their utterances in English fluently. Besides, the lack of familiarity or ease with the given situations in the test may affect their test performance. Blue and Harun (2003) mention that the characteristics of hotel encounters are informative and purposeful; thus, giving insufficient or incorrect information may not end the transactions, but it might create undesirable effects if the complicated problems, in difficult situations, have been unsolved; particularly in complaining.

Regarding the inappropriateness in politeness strategies, and the use of phrases or verb forms; these two errors are perceived to lead to the most serious misunderstandings, and could end the customer relations. One possible explanation for this failure is the lack of pragmatic awareness. From the utterances collected, there are fewer expressions of indirectness. Generally the examinees exhibited their grammatical knowledge and were able to use syntactic patterns in their utterances, especially in the high language ability group. However, they lacked knowledge in applying politeness strategies to save the hearer’s face, the hotel guest; which is indeed important in the hotel context. Since the communication of the hotel staff-guest involves a cost-benefit relationship, the knowledge about what is appropriate depends on much more just linguistic knowledge. This problem was raised by Trosborg (1987: 147) who states that “proficient foreign language learners may fail to communicate effectively because they lack social appropriateness rules for conveying their intended communicative acts.” Besides, the imperative verb forms such as “must” and “have to” were highly used, especially in making requests. This is opposite to Levinson (1983) in that the imperative
is rarely used in requests in English. Native English speakers tend to make sentences indirect when a request is made. This failure is perceived as being rude in the hotel industry. There are two possible explanations for this occurrence. First, according to Blum-Kulka (1982), imperatives are the first request forms taught in L2. The learners acquire the use of imperatives easily because they are direct and a clear strategy in requesting. As a result, the learners might use them without being aware of taking a risk of high imposition to the guests, who generally have high needs/wants in services. Secondly, it is clear that the examinees had no tact maxim; one aspect of politeness, which plays an important role in a scale of cost-benefit to the hearer (hotel guest) (Leech, 1983). This scale of politeness is the preference in the hotel service context where “benefits to guests” is required, but “cost to the guests” is to be avoided. Indirectness tends to be more polite because it increases the degree of options and decreases the force to the hearer (Leech, 1983). Leech (1983) views that tact is used to avoid conflict which apparently comes with experience in social communication. The lack of real work-oriented communication in hotel services can be one of the factors that makes the test takers unaware that the lack of tact brings a high cost to the hotel guests.

**Conclusion**

This study attempted to elicit and assess the pragmatic production of Thai students majoring in hospitality services, from different levels of English proficiency. The findings indicated that the FOP-Test could distinguish the students into high, average, and low pragmatic ability groups; and there was a significant main effect of the students’ levels of English proficiency on their pragmatic ability. As regards the students’ production in pragmatic linguistic forms; the most significant differences, among the students from different levels of English proficiency, were the use of politeness markers and the use of address forms. The findings also revealed that the test takers in all groups produced pragmatic failures in both pragmalinguistics and sociolinguistics. These errors were perceived as ineffectiveness and inappropriateness in hotel staff and guest communication. From the study, it can be seen that the FOP-Test allowed the students to
perform to the best of their pragmatic ability, and the students’ pragmatic behaviors could be observed from their various responses. For further research, it would be beneficial to specify types of speech acts which differ from one another; and to examine different politeness strategies, in different types of service encounters, because the success of many important businesses depends upon mastering the maxim of politeness. This study may contribute to test developers and researchers in the testing field; to develop other methods which require more authentic oral productions, that would give more insightful data of both pragmalinguistic and sociolinguistic features. Thus, the FOP-Test has the potential to be further developed and applied, to investigate students’ pragmatic ability in ESP/EOP, in different contexts.

References


Appendix: Sample of the FOP-Test